



SWORDS OF PASSION

AT HER SERVICE

CERISE DELAND

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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*.

Swords of Passion

AT HER SERVICE

Cerise DeLand

Dedication

For Desiree Holt, my friend and mentor, thank you.

Chapter One

Winter, 1207.

Cumbria, The Marches, England.

The smoke from the tapers made her guests' eyes water, and though she brushed a finger under her lashes to rid herself of one tear, Elise Dumond could still see Simon de la Poer at the back of the great hall. God preserve her, she would see him if her eyes were closed. If she were blind. Indeed, if she were dead, she would see him in hell. And, oh, would it not be sweet succour to die and know she would remain in his company forever and end this torture of being parted from him for all these endless years?

She fiddled with the stem of her goblet and drank back more red wine. Then drank again, unnerved by the sight of the man who had taken her in his arms as a youth and put his firm, hot lips to her own with sweet promises of a lifetime of love.

Who had he delighted like that these past twelve years?

Ha! She took another draught.

Who had he *not* ravished in his bed? In Londontown, the fabled knight Simon de la Poer was reputed to have bedded any woman of noble birth desirous of spreading her legs for him and paying him her weight in gold to compensate him for his services. Elise caught back a sob of jealousy for all those women he'd touched, for all those he had kissed and to whom he'd whispered pretty words of devotion as once he had to her.

She put forth her cup for the maid to refill. The girl scurried over, understanding her mistress was in the mood to drink. *Drink myself to distraction. Drink myself to oblivion.*

Unbidden, her eyes drifted towards the back of the hall, past the tiny man and the tall, dark Oriental who were Simon's odd companions. Her gaze locked on the man she wished she did not see.

Christ in His Glory, this man was unmistakably the warrior they called Knight Divine. Simon de la Poer, who had earned his moniker attacking the Infidel in Jerusalem with his

lord King Richard of England, possessed all the imposing aspects of a man with whom any woman would desire a night in heaven. He had matured to a massive build. Tall as the sconces, broad in the chest as two men, muscular in his black velvet tunic, his grey hose hugging his bulging calves, he seemed Herculean.

She wished she could tear herself away from eating him up with her eyes. Wished she could ignore his quicksilver stare that met her own. Wished she could refuse her husband's order to offer up her immortal soul to keep what was hers here on earth. Yet she had no choice but to obey her husband and strip herself bare then lie down with her noble lord in their marriage bed tonight – and invite Simon de la Poer to join them.

Her future depended on her cooperation. Her ability to continue to live here until she died, in the grand keep with retainers and serfs to do her bidding, required it. Aye, she had ranted and raved against her husband and his plan these past two months. Still, Alphonse, earl of this estate and master at Atherton, brooked none of her objections. He had written to London, summoned Simon here to the wild, frozen north-western climes. And now tonight, she faced climbing into bed with her husband of twelve years, a randy but dying man, then giving herself to the famed knight, who once was her childhood friend fostered in her father's castle.

For temporal gain, she would now relinquish her integrity. And her marital devotion.

"And to gain my blessing!" Alphonse had yelled at her more than once. "Do so while I still draw breath. Get yourself with child before I go to dust and can do naught for your protection."

"To save your name and lineage," she had shot back at him. "Vanity!"

"Nay, necessity, and well you know it," he had sputtered then and given way to one of his coughing fits. "Once I am in the vault, buzzards will come to feast on the bounty of Atherton. I will not have you fight a battle against the ravening Crosbys."

"A baby cannot fight for me, my lord."

"But King John will."

She had scoffed at that, as well. Their royal monarch's greed and mismanagement of state affairs made him more ravenous for land and coin than inclined to keep his royal word.

But neither John Plantagenet nor the voracious Crosbys hold sway tonight. My fate is sealed here and now.

Best to get to it.

She rose with a start. Her huge wooden chair clattered backward to the floorboards of the dais.

"My lady!" Her husband's owl-like steward lifted his bald head to scowl at her. "What will you?"

"I will retire, Cleve," she told the retainer whom she least trusted in her household. Cleve Faulk had advanced from serf to chief steward in the past decade, and she suspected he had his meaty hand in her larder as well as her husband's coffers. God knew, Cleve Faulk wanted to put his hand on her, too. And she shuddered at the thought.

"You have not eaten, milady," the gluttonous man objected, grease of the roast boar coating his fleshy lips.

"Give it to others here, Faulk. We must not allow any to waste."

"Thank you, I will," he replied with a greedy smile, reaching for her trencher. She hurried from the main hall, gliding past the kitchen serfs, lifting her skirts to climb her bower stairs where, in a cosy alcove adjoining her husband's bedroom, she had slept for two years now, gratefully and blissfully alone.

Circling up, up, up the winding tower that was the back entrance to their private rooms, she heard no one behind her. She breathed deeply in relief for that. Simon would not dare to come to them in full view of Alphonse's retainers and servants. Simon might be under her husband's thrall, but he would not leave the hall after her and, thus, make the servants aware of what his mission was.

She pushed open her husband's bedroom door. It creaked, an eerie sound that sent shivers up her spine. But the warmth of the hearth fire, always blazing in the winter's snow, rushed out to bathe her face and welcome her inside.

"Close the door, Elise."

At the distinctive husky tone she could still identify after all these lonely years, she paused with one foot upon the threshold. She watched in amazement as Simon unfolded himself from the chair nearest the door and stood to his ungodly height. Anger flooded her at Simon's impertinence of speaking to her before her husband bid her enter. Her gaze shot to Alphonse who lay beneath a pile of woollens and silks, snoring, his thin face grey, his mouth lax, his once manly frame reduced to a skinny child's.

Simon took a step forward and extended his hand to the chair opposite his. "Come." His rough bass voice flowed across the expanse of the chamber like thick molasses over her senses, her body warming to his sensuous tone. Simon's merest words could entangle and enslave her.

Against his allure, she braced her spine. "How did you get in?"

Mere feet away, she noted how his silver eyes shown like the hard coin he would take for his service to her. "Your husband gave the order to his steward."

Cleve knows about this pact?

"He should have told me, asked me," she objected without regard to wake her husband, clenching her fists in fear at Cleve's knowledge. Her voice bore her outrage that she could not countermand the great earl of Atherton, even as he lay dying in his bed.

Simon strolled forward, his head high, his expression earnest and pleading. Beneath his breath, he spoke to her alone. "The steward put me in the room below." He nodded towards her alcove and the private winding stairs down to his tiny room. "We must talk."

"No." What good was talk? She was chained to Alphonse's bargain and bound up in a torment wanting Simon de la Poer but knowing she should not have him. Yet she would take him to her to please Alphonse. Aye, and in the taking, she would also surely please herself. She snorted, stepped fully into the cosy apartment and shut the door to the world below.

"You need to know —"

"I want to know nothing."

"That," he whispered as he stepped close to her and threaded his long, supple fingers under her wimple up into the coil of her hair, "is a lie."

She flinched backwards, wrenching to escape his reach. "You must do as I say. Agree or this will not happen at all."

He clamped her flush to his loins. His dark features went so hard, she almost wondered if a mason had chiselled them to stone. This close, she saw how the years had matured him from a tall, reedy lad with sculpted cheeks and brows to this brute who stood before her. Square faced, high cheeked, broad in the brow and wide of eye, now he was a black-haired warlord, a warlock, a satyr and legend from the deep end of hell. No longer was he a boy to laugh with and love with. Now he was a giant of unbearable male beauty. And her loins

flooded with such wet desire for him that she braced herself with hands to his rock-hard chest.

He clamped her to him so tightly that his fiery body burnt her flesh and enflamed her to ripe longing. "What would you have of me?"

Your manhood. All of you. Inside me. Groaning at her rebellious body's desires, she pushed at him to no avail. "Only I give the orders here."

Slowly, he nodded.

"But I will countermand you, lady mine," came a rasping baritone from the bed.

She spun towards her husband.

"I am the master on this night," declared Alphonse. "For you both."

She swallowed back her trepidation. Worse, she froze with expectation. To have Simon, his body and his passion, once and for all time, had been her fantasy for years. Long years of marriage to a man who was moderate in his marital demands had been comfortable but somehow lacking a glory her mother said might be. True, Alphonse was a rich man whom many women—and yea, most wives—would give their teeth to call their own. She had honoured him, loved him, kept only unto him. And now, at his order, she would take unto herself this other man. This one man whom she had craved in her bed, in her arms and in her life since she'd been a girl.

"Come stand here between us, wife." Alphonse beckoned her with a bony finger. "Stand here in the centre of the room. Good girl." He licked his cracked lips. "Give me my cup for another bit of wine." She did and he drank, droplets dribbling to his thin chest. "Now," he grinned salaciously, "remove your veils."

She opened her mouth to object but snapped it shut at once. To delay was useless. And in compliance—and without a glance at Simon, she reached for her combs to pluck them out. In defiance, she dropped them to the floor with a clatter. Lifting her headdress, she released it too and swirled her wealth of hair about her shoulders. Alphonse smiled to soothe her. But she heard Simon de la Poer suck in his breath at the sight of the hair he had often brushed against his lips and praised for its golden purity.

She caught back a cry. Such tender reminiscences held no place in this scene here tonight. She turned her back on the memory and on Simon. "Unlace my girdle."

His footfalls sounded on the stones as he advanced on her. His body heat engulfed her. His fingers picked at her laces, swift and sure, but she felt how his fingers trembled and fumbled with the thin threads. Still, he did his work quickly, and she felt the thick wool leave her as he lifted it away from her stomach.

"Your gown, my love," Alphonse ordered, his rheumy eyes a mix of pride and lewd desire. "Quickly."

Aye, the best way. She whirled about, her movement sending Simon's eyes wide, his hands out but yet not quite touching her. Inside, she smiled. And with two crossed arms, she grasped handfuls of her gown and dragged it over her head. Before Alphonse could venture another order—and before she lost her courage—she grabbed her thin tunic and whisked the linen over her head. Save for her sandals, she stood before Simon naked.

His expression melted as his brilliant silver eyes fell down her form. "Elise—" He swallowed so hard she heard him then he reached out for her.

"Nay." She side-stepped his grasp. "Alphonse?" She sought her husband's help. What should she do when the only act she craved was Simon's hungry eyes upon her?

"Come to me, Elise." Alphonse beckoned with a shaking hand.

Eager to take it, she stepped forward to him.

His brown gaze, red, watery but warm, approved. "Turn around and let Simon admire your charms, my sweet."

She gulped. But she obeyed.

Simon's eyes locked on hers, searching for her feelings, which she kept from him with a stony glare.

Her husband's hand crept round her waist and hooked on her hip bone. "Lovely, is she not, de la Poer?" Alphonse's fingers stroked her belly. "The gold hair. The sky-blue eyes. The lush mouth. The long column of her throat. The skin here under her navel where pleasure is born for man and his wife, ah, here, I tell you, the skin is soft as a peach."

Simon flexed the muscles of his cheek, the glitter of his eyes unmoving from hers.

Alphonse's hand trailed upward to cup one of her breasts. "These apples are full and ripe. They have grown much bigger, double mayhaps, as our girl grew to a woman. The large nipples," he found an areola and pinched it between thumb and forefinger so that she

wincing and her cunt watered at the compliment, “are soft as down and when you take them in your mouth, she yearns to have you roll them with your tongue.”

She clenched her thighs on the intimate knowledge her husband imparted. Such frank talk always made her cunny pulse with need, and she fought to keep her expression bland, her eyes on Simon’s, while her bawdy mind whirled towards bed sport that tingled her every nerve.

“And better yet is this.” Alphonse’s hand came round to brush the curls of her bush. “A froth of pale blonde hair to hide the glory beneath.”

She blinked and bit her lower lip. Her nether hair, Alphonse had told her often, was a pretty pelt of fur he liked to nestle in. She trembled deep inside her cunny at the prospect that Simon might like to play in there, too.

Her husband lifted his hand, and she inhaled in anticipation. In a moment, she felt him insinuate his fingers from behind between her buttocks to rest at the seam of her labia. “And here—ah, do spread your legs to let me in, my pretty.” Alphonse stroked her lips with his thin thumb as she complied. “Here is the moist prize. She does not let you in at once. Nay, you must work for this lady to let you have a piece of her.”

Betrayed by her own fondness for fucking, she felt her insides let down a gush of liquid at his touch. And in frustration, she moaned.

“Hear her,” Alphonse whispered. “She likes to be handled. If I had been a younger man when I wed her, I might have had the energy to make this cunt vibrate for me every night—”

“Alphonse!” she objected, her head falling back as he outraged her and delighted her with his words and his insistent petting.

“But, alas, de la Poer,” Alphonse stopped his teasing and reached around to take one of her hands, “I was too old to romp often with her. Yet, I know she was a good girl and never let another take her—or even lick her cunny. She has been a good wife, I tell you. And now I give her what I can. You.” Alphonse tugged at her hand while Simon bared his teeth at his words. “You in bed with her—and me, too, of course. I want to be close, you see, when she comes for you. When she screams for you.”

“Once!” Simon growled, his outburst jolting her, his gaze bright as a thunderbolt on Alphonse. “That was our bargain, Atherton. That I would take her to your bed once.”

Once? Elise closed her eyes as her body let down more liquid at the ribald insult that she could have this splendid lover only once? And only in sight of Alphonse? She stiffened, opening her mouth to object when Simon strode forward.

"You will honour this between us," Simon raged at the thin heap of bones in the bed.

"I will," her husband agreed on a thread of sound and dropped her hand. "Come, my pet, lie down here beside me." He threw aside the covers towards the middle of his huge bed and patted the bedclothes. "On your back. Simon, you will observe what a pretty prize she is laid out for you."

Her gaze shot to Simon's, and what hers said, she prayed, was *help me*.

Simon's sensuous expression was already melting to pity as he nodded at her.

So assured, Elise circled Simon and strode to the other side of the bed. She climbed in, arranging herself as stiff as a dead woman next to her husband and wondering what next he might do to excite her.

With a sigh, he rolled to his side, cupped her head, turned her face and kissed the tip of her nose. Then with a licentious look no dying man should muster, he ran his hand from her earlobe to her throat, one breast, her waist and down to her hairy little bush. "Let me feel your juices flow, my pet."

She relaxed her thighs and allowed his fingers to move in and out of her slit. And she could not resist rocking her hips to his rhythm as she detected Simon moved towards her side of the bed.

"Inside her here," he said to Simon as he thrust two fingers far up into her wet core and made her arch, "is a fiery furnace Elise made most nights I came to her. I was always grateful, even if I had to pump her and myself to get inside her. But I was still thankful to be so complimented by a lovely woman half my age." He removed his fingers, inserted one in his mouth, licked it delicately and turned his face up to Simon. "She is a succulent beauty." He smacked his lips. "She always did taste like sugar, de la Poer. I want to see you eat her. She always loved my mouth on her though I must admit that way, I could never make her pulse. I want to see you kiss her cunt until she quakes."

Elise swallowed at a wave of excitement that Simon might lick her cunny, suck her pulsing nether lips and let her taste herself on his mouth.

"Do you hear me, de la Poer?" her husband insisted.

"Aye, Atherton," Simon ground out.

"I want her to be so well bedded she never craves another."

Oh, Christ. Elise's eyes closed. *Another reason to recall Simon until I die.* "Alphonse..." She did not know what she would beseech him for, save respite from this anticipation of Simon's possession.

"Come hither, de la Poer."

She heard Simon breathing in hard, rampant sighs, and she pressed her thighs together, wanting his hands there between her legs and shoved up high and hard inside her hungry channel. She licked her lower lip, undulated her hips and committed to the inevitable wonder of mating with Simon de la Poer.

"Hear her. She moans in need, Simon. Come," Alphonse whispered and turned away to cough once. "Climb into bed with us."

She heard no sound, no movement and after checking her husband's gaze for his permission to assume control, she turned on her side, away from him and towards the man who would now join them. Simon stood, his nostrils flared, his mouth set, his gaze on her bush. Alphonse curled an arm around her waist and threaded his fingers into her cunny hair in a lazy sign of possession. She shifted and bucked, allowing him greater access for the ministrations she needed and wanted to lure Simon to them.

"Listen to this, Simon," Alphonse crooned. The sound of lush liquid flowed into the silence as her husband's fingers swirled inside her and drove her up to a spiralling need. "She is ready for you. Come join us. The night is long, and she is most eager to spend it with you, aren't you, my pet?"

For answer, she looked into Simon's eyes and there she found an answering need that had her whispering to him, "Remove your clothes."

Bold and brazen now with her husband nestled at her back, she let one hand stray from her throat to one breast where she circled a nipple with one finger and led Simon's gaze to her navel and her blonde bush. Raising high one thigh, she let Simon have a glimpse of her pounding lips that she knew were now coated with her cream.

"Come," she encouraged him, her body throbbing to be filled by his. "Hurry."

His gaze lost in hers, he untied the belt atop his outer tunic. In deliberate jerks, he stepped out of his slippers and removed his black velvet tunic. In a sweep over his head, he

stripped away his linen under-tunic and dropped it to the floor. His braies hung about his prominent hip bones, and she noted that his penis grew inside them into a huge erection she hoped she could fit deep inside her.

Impatient, she wagged two fingers at him to remove the rest of his clothes.

Instead, he licked his lower lip and narrowed his gaze at her. At her pouting mouth. Her pebbling nipples. Her pale hair on her mound where he would soon claim her and mount her.

Wild to have him, still enraged that she was, she sought to tantalise him more and spread her thighs out, allowing him a fuller view of her aching labia. She raised her hands, so soft and white, the envy of so many of her women, and beseeched him with a sweet, beguiling motion. In a flick of his hands, he brushed his braies to the floor.

She caught the gasp in her throat. His size was twice her husband's. She swallowed audibly, unable to take her gaze from Simon's thick, red length and two huge balls. Her eyes met his.

And in answer, he took his impressive rod in one large hand as if offering it up to her.

Aye. She'd take it. Make it her own. She yearned to reach out her hand. But for her husband to see that she appeared too eager to absorb this impressive shaft, albeit with his permission granted, was not a good idea. Alphonse was a proud man, even if his manly treasures were small ones.

Watching her, Simon continued to roll his thumb steadily over the bright tip of his head. There, drops of his desire glistened and his breath quickened. She bit her lower lip, thirsting to be so bold as to taste his seed and measure his girth with her mouth. But he leisurely rolled his member as if he had time for the entire world to view him.

Mad to feel that long brute caress her cunt, she groaned and darted her hand out towards him.

He grabbed her wrist, his eyes warning her against hasty actions. Then he drove one knee to the bed, and under his weight, the straps groaned as the mattress dipped and jounced. She rolled towards him, but he stopped her momentum by laying down beside her. And with his free hand, he reached out to cup her head and hold her in his iron grip as his lips descended and devoured hers.

This kiss, this claim was like no other she had ever known. His lips were wet, rough and insistent. He pushed his mouth to hers in a fierce claim such as she had never known. Not from him as a boy. Not from her husband as a man. This kiss, this demand that she open herself and give over, was the plunder of a knight. The prize of a mercenary who had fought for goods not his own. This kiss, this ravaging of breath and flesh, was a conquest won by surprise and strength. But then as his demand met surrender, as his force met her moaning joy, as her hands embraced his face and her lips opened and returned an ardour she had but glimpsed as a fifteen-year-old, she felt his lips leave hers. She saw his eyes question her own. And she knew that as his mouth once more met hers, he came this time in tenderness and apology for what now they both would do here together on this bed.

His hand took hers and led it to his penis. She jumped at the heat and the size of him. But he held her to him, leading her to run her palm over the length of him and to curl her fingers around him. She sobbed deep in her throat, and their kiss broke as he nipped her to leave her staring up into his eyes. Encouraging her to pump him harder, he lifted his hand and trailed it over one breast and brushed her areola with rough fingertips. She shot up in his arms at his stroke. But he gentled her and, with a splayed hand, pressed her body once more to the mattress. His fingers spread into her cunny hair, combed it and tangled it, tugging it and leaving her panting for more.

He did not disappoint her but sent one blunt finger down along the seam of her labia. In one swift move, he pierced her with two fingers high up into her wet and wilful channel. She arched. Her hands clutched for him, and with a wordless muttering, he shifted his body, grabbed her hips, tilted her body up and rammed himself inside her.

A mute O of pleasure formed on her lips as she stilled and felt Simon de la Poer possess every iota of her being. She paused there on the edge of her ageless dream and knew that no night-time fantasy had ever compared to the reality of Simon in the flesh. He filled her totally, his thick rod stretching her to generous proportions, pressing his long, hot member deep into her womb where the pleasure of his presence made her whimper. And gasp. And clasp him closer until the pounding of his manhood inside her and the friction of his length against her brought her to a good, hot place that made her groan and throb in completion. But in one glide he slid out of her, his eyes averted. He had left her, and once more, she

questioned if the mindless passion her mother had told her might occur with a lover was a tale of her mother's experience, a morsel of that lady's imagination or a troubadour's fiction.

Bereft that she'd experienced little more than the same completion she'd known with Alphonse, Elise felt cheated of what she might have had with Simon. Bewildered at the lack of some expected glory, she lay, panting, watching Simon rise to walk to the sideboard, bend and splash water to his face.

She knew he had not given her his seed, and she yearned to see if he was still up and full. She had learned from Alphonse how to pull a man's rod and give him relief. God help her, she wished to handle Simon, wanted to feel his giant member fill her palm again. Her own hands lay atop her wanton bush, and she fought the wicked urge to let them do something she had never done and wander to her juicy lips and bring herself a small, quick delight. Aye, she wanted more of him. What folly had it been for her husband to believe that Simon would do as he commanded and give her one lay *and* his seed? What folly to ever assume one claiming could make a child? What folly had it ever been for her to think that after once abed with Simon she could ever let him go?

Her husband struggled up on one elbow. "I did not see you taste her, de la Poer!" he sputtered as if he were a child denied a treat. "You were too fast. I tell you, I need to hear her scream."

Wanting that, too, Elise covered her face with two hands. "Alphonse, stop this."

"Nay!" her husband croaked and fought a spasm. "Nay! You want my wife, de la Poer, you do as I tell you!"

She heard Simon curse as he whirled from his task and strode towards them and bent over her. With two hands that felt like iron grips on her waist, Simon hauled her up and flung her over his shoulder, her bare ass in the air. Her breath fled as her heart pounded in anticipation of new delights with him. He strode towards her alcove, one hot hand around a thigh then whirled to growl at her husband, "You've had what I promised you, old man. One time with her in your bed—and now it's done. She did what she did, scream or no. Now in her own bed, without command from you, she will do as she wishes."

Simon turned and strode towards her alcove, secluded from Alphonse's sight and nearly private, save for the lack of a door. Once at the edge of her own mattress, Simon paused. Despair loomed as she feared he would put her to her bed and leave her there alone.

She groaned, wild that she had to endure such a huge loss now after her conflicted emotions about their reunion.

Then in one swirling motion, he laid her gently to the softness of her bed. Arms braced to each side of her head, he peered down at her, his eyes hot and ravenous as they trailed over her tender mouth to her peaking areolas and down to her swollen cunny lips. "What will you, Elise? Is once enough for you?"

Words jammed in her throat. She wanted him completely, as men and women were designed by God to join. Had not Alphonse sanctioned this union with Simon, demanding a child of the bargain? Had not Alphonse known that once tempted with Simon, she would lose the war with herself for taking him inside her? Her husband had given her to Simon for his own purposes. Now primed to mate with Simon fully, she would accept the gift and welcome him to her for a few more moments of hot bliss.

She lifted her arms to him and let her body receive him as now her mind fully did. Her fingers danced from his shoulders to his massive throat, his commanding jaw, his cheeks, his eyes. She sank her fingers into the wealth of black silk that dipped over his brow. Needing to burrow into him, she reached around to his nape and loosened his leather tie. His long hair fell around their faces like a dark curtain. With it came the aromas of strong soap, sandalwood and anise. She stroked his cheekbones as she combed his hair back from his face. His beauty, now fierce as some dark angel's, stunned her and stoked her fire to mate with him—aye, to consume him. On a small cry, she curled up off the bed and enfolded him totally, her arms capturing him for one more time. One more bout. One lusty romp.

To lure him, she put her lips to his throat. His musk filled her nostrils, and his essence scalded her mind with need. All fear, all manners burnt in the fire of her desire, she brushed her mouth over the tip of his straight nose, his straight brows and his long full lashes. "Simon," she crooned, "Simon." *How long have I been without you. Yearned for you.* "Simon."

"My dear one," he whispered, rose up and caught both her wrists. "Look at me. Tell me. Tell me truly now, here, whilst we are away from him. Will you let me have you without care and sorrow for your soul? Because if you will eat your heart out for this act then nothing I do here will make your life easier. And I—"

"Simon." She cupped his nape to lead him down to the bed with her and trailed her hand along his torso to his fully standing manhood. "Do be silent and give me this. All of it."

“And what of your soul?”

“I will worry about that on the day I die. But tonight,” she rolled her thumb over his pulsing rod and spread the thick dew of his seed, “I want this. You. Now. And not just once.”

“Once?” he scoffed. “Hear my vow, my lady. I have waited twelve bitter years to have you. And what you’ll get before I leave this castle is once each way I know.”

Chapter Two

Thrilled to the quick, Elise fell back into her sumptuous bed and spread herself out as if she were a pagan prize. For the first time in her guarded and demure life, she undulated in the ivory linens from Egypt and the ruby silk coverlet from Venice. These priceless payments for her decade of service to her wealthy, decrepit lord, the earl of Atherton, she now used as her backdrop to show her bare body for her lover's pleasure. Such decadence she had never contemplated, but oh, did she rejoice at the discovery that she possessed a wild and ribald nature.

"Teach me," she ordered on a thread of sound. "Teach me all the ways to delight us both. Life is long and memories are such cold companions."

"Not these delights," he objected and pressed his body over her, crushing her in his passion. "These burn you up and melt you down." He seized her mouth in a fury that drove her into the shallows of her bed. His tongue invaded her lips, traced the lining of her gums and the edges of her teeth. One hand crept beneath her back and brought her up. He cupped one breast and, on a growl, sucked her into his warm wet mouth.

She bolted up into his arms as his tongue swirled her areola, his teeth nipping at her, her channel pulsing as he licked her pointed little nipple.

"I will have the other, too," he grunted as he turned his head and captured her other breast. "Say you want me to have all of you, Elise," he ordered her as he tongued her nipple and pressed kisses round the globe of her breast.

"Aye, my lord!" She sank her fingers in his hair and arched up. "Every bit."

He laughed triumphantly. "I take the challenge, my lady." He caught her thighs in two strong hands and pressed her knees out beneath him. Then settling back on his legs, he spread her wide for him to view. "A lovely sight," he crooned and blew gently at her wealth of cunny hair.

She wiggled, proud of her pale bush.

"I claim this as mine tonight." He thrust his fingers into it and tugged, his expression falling to sensuous darkness. "I am jealous of he who has had you."

She sent one hand to his penis and wrapped herself around his girth. "No need to feel anything now but my desire that you fill me. Here." She cupped one hand over her swollen mons.

"Ah, but such pretty pink lips deserve a grateful homage, don't you think?" His silken tone made her cunt gush with welcome.

"I do, and I give you leave to pay it with full ardour."

"Full ardour like mine you have never seen." He ran both hands through her nether hair, covering both labia with hot palms. "I want you on my mouth, Elise. On my tongue. In my body." He fingered her heavy folds wide. "All my life, I have hungered for you – and *this*." He bent to lick her with long swathes of his tongue.

Her mind left her. Her thighs quivered. Her hollow channel pulsed. Her fingers dug into his shoulder muscles. "Simon!"

"Aye, my lady." He placed his mouth to her tender flesh and sucked her with a loud lascivious sound that made her let down more cream. "Like you this?"

"Aye!" she cried and fought to keep from keening lest her husband hear their fervour.

Simon sent two blunt fingers inside her throbbing core and swirled them inside with cunning skill. "And this?"

"Oh," she ground out, "aye, my lord."

"And this?" He sat back on his haunches and rubbed his thumbs round her swollen nub in torturous circles.

She moaned and thrashed her head upon the bed.

"How like you this, my lovely?" He spread himself out to lay between her legs and hold open her cunt so that he feasted on her with maddening nibbles.

She whimpered in praise.

"This pearl is mine to polish," he growled and plumped her lips together in such a way that her little nub was exposed fully to the cool night air – and the moist ministrations of his talented tongue.

"No," she pleaded as she felt some mad demand building inside her loins. "No more, no more." She reached to cover his mouth with her fingers.

He nudged them aside. "Aye, my lady, much more." And he proved it with quick hot kisses to her nub that had her beating the mattress. Yet he held her down and tasted her, drank from her and nibbled at her with ceaseless skill until she demanded more.

She arched up into him, her head flung back, her body pounding in such sweet convulsions that she gasped and clung to him. That was what she yearned for. That was what she deserved. That was what she needed – and wanted more. Yet as the pulsing passed, she rejoiced to feel his fingers dip deeply inside her again, stroking her, loving her, twisting and turning her to his desire.

"Your wet *chat* is a hungry animal." He kissed her nose as he rhythmically stroked her core. "She wants my fingers."

Elise caught his gaze with one demand. "She wants your rod."

His eyes narrowed, and the silver light in them shown like lightning. "She'll have it, too. But first," he rose high, caught her under the waist and flipped her over to her stomach, her ass in the air, "we will see if she can make cream for me this way."

"I liked what you did there. Fill me again and stop this!"

He covered her with his hot body then reached around her stomach, plunging his splayed fingers into her bush and rubbing her swollen labia with a dexterous roll. "Nay, my lady. You had but a small piece of me. And this silky little *chat* of yours might not take my full sword unless I pet her in new ways."

And at that, from between her legs, he sent two fingers of his other hand up into her cunt.

"Ah," she moaned and arched like the cat he compared her to. "How big can your manhood be if you seek to amuse me with only frail fingers?"

Her insult had him flipping her on her back and yanking her thighs apart. "You torment me?"

One corner of her mouth lifted in mirth. "You delay for a reason, my lord?"

He seized her and sent a hand to the back of her neck. "You think I play with you?"

"Oh, Simon," she whispered, ravenous for his possession. "No more delays."

And with a wicked smile, he drove himself up inside her and held them both in silent suspension.

She could not speak. Could not move. Aye, she had felt his possession minutes ago, but this, this glory, this mating, this fulfilment of her yearnings was far more than she had felt before. His iron rod once more stretched her, but now he claimed her to the hilt. He lingered to pump his hips to hers in a ritual she'd thought she'd known, but never had. The need she knew was base but undeniable, and she ground herself into him, never daring to let go. He drove her to the bed, his loins joined to hers, his rhythm as fierce and steady as the ocean's beating surf. And to her surprise, they strained towards some heaven together, their bodies perspiring, blending, pounding. As the frenzy mounted, he feasted on her breasts and spoke in some wordless wonder as she gripped him and spun with him to some new and oh so daring plane.

She rose up, her head flung back, her body given to the rapture of a hot and hard release. And as she floated down into her linens, she knew new truths.

The name of this was ecstasy. With Alphonse, she had never glimpsed it. She had known Alphonse only to push at her and grind his hips on her. She had known him to take long minutes to get hard and finally inject her with his seed. But she had never known the dance of a long, slow, molten mating. And the joy that built within her as Simon sent his length inside her, over and over again, drove her up and made her pound once more. This time, she met his lunges with a fervent clasp of her legs and groaned in madness as he pumped his engorged staff into her. He pressed his fingers to her pearl and brought her to a pounding precipice with a loud and lengthy scream.

Simon's groans of consummation tumbled out a moment later, the room at once so silent. He rolled to one side and pushed her hair back from her brow and cheek. Elise stared into her lover's half-lidded eyes as he placed a finger to his own lips and turned his head to listen. In the solemn quiet, they heard Alphonse loudly snoring, and Simon smiled, sweet succour to her fear that their passion had been overheard and thus sullied by the man who had arranged it.

And for all the beauty of the past few minutes' ardour, Elise felt an arrow of truth hit her sore heart. She rose, a hand out to Simon to waylay him from another caress, another kiss, another moment of bliss.

For all her longings these past years for passion like she'd just known, she had to admit her own responsibility for it. Lust had brought her to accept this night, this act. Lust for

money, security, a home. Lust for a man who should have been hers, by God's justice, years ago. But lust for Simon's body had been just as much a beacon to her madness on this bed as was the bargain that Simon de la Poer had made with her husband. To bed her. To possess her. To sire a son by her. And claim it was her husband's.

To admit that, she had become a more mature woman. Hopefully wiser.

Her problem now was what to do with her maturity and her responsibility for her choice. Surely, she would take Simon de la Poer to her bed again and again to ensure she begot a child. But could she do that, over and over again, and not take him once more to her heart?

Simon rolled from Elise and planted his feet on the cold stones. Cold as her heart. And could he blame her?

Nay, she has been a victim of her station. But by Christ, after I right this wrong, no more shall abuse her.

He rose to cross the room and felt beneath his feet the deep nap of her Abyssinian carpet, noted the damask cushion of her gilded chair and acknowledged how rich the Countess of Atherton was—and how far she would go to keep her wool and silk and gold. He could fault her for her love of wealth, but then he must do the same for himself. After all, he had accepted the terms of this scheme, had he not?

He approached the hearth, grabbed the poker and stirred the logs in the same way he could stir her, raging fire or smouldering ember. He knew now that with sure ease, he could take her in bed, on the floor, up against a wall and in the mating, she would leave behind her morals for a spell. In her supple little body, her big pouting nipples, her syrupy cunt, she panted for him. Creamed for him. Cried for him with juicy welcome to his rod.

He glanced down at that long, lax tool that now hung at rest. He snorted. The manhood that was legendary for its length and girth had finally invaded that one precious *chat* that should have been his. His only. He had loved her since he was sixteen when, in all innocence, he had kissed her lovely mouth before he'd been sent away to Richard, eternal war and wandering. Aye, this woman should have been given to him in flesh as he felt God had given

him her in spirit. Yet, poor knight that he was, no others in this earthly realm would have vouched he had any right to the only daughter of the wealthy Lord Cordelier.

But he did now. Only he had the right to bed her. Alphonse had promised him no other man would ever touch her to plant his seed. Simon had demanded that stated in their written agreement, and he would live and die to see the clause observed. Henceforth, from the day Alphonse had committed to this, only Simon could mate her. Only he, in the taking of her and the claiming of her pretty cunt, could make her life inviolate. Make her powerful.

Christ in his grave. At the mere idea of laying her down, his rod was rising to claim her again. The very thought of her engorged him like a bull. For twelve years, he had thirsted to suck her nipples, taste her milky *chat* on his tongue and treat her to a night divine buried in her body. It mattered not what woman he viewed, what woman he was given, what woman he took, the one woman he claimed was Elise Cordelier. Now, the woman he had vowed he would have one day by any means, fair or foul, the noble and renowned Elise Dumond, the Countess of Atherton, was his to tutor in the arts of love. For her education, he had stored up a treasure trove of tender nuances he would teach her.

He ran a hand through his hair and turned his back on the fire to enflame again the one woman he wanted. Now.

And this time, the coupling would be his way. His way. He had never forgotten how she loved to kiss. Now, he would reawaken those lessons and teach her how to please herself—and how to entice him in the bargain. Poor pretty girl, he could see that she had forgotten many of his kissing lessons. And as for pleasuring a man or herself, she knew nothing. Her lack of inspirational company was the fault, and he rejoiced in that. And to celebrate, his penis stood up higher with the knowledge that she was his to initiate.

He smiled like a fiend. She lay on her side facing him as she rustled beneath her martin fur and silks. Slowly, she opened one eye, then another. To alert her and, true, to enjoy himself, he palmed himself up and squeezed the tip of his rod. Drops of his seed came forth to acclaim his prowess. He would give them to her. To both their advantages.

She licked her lips. He'd teach her how to use them on him.

She spread out her arms. He'd show her how to welcome him into more than one embrace.

On cat's feet, he padded across her little carpet and knelt on the bed. It rolled beneath his weight. Yet, she lay there quietly, waiting for his lead. His shaft stirred. He had never been so painfully hard. He had to sink himself inside her soon again or die of her lack. With a flick of his wrist, he peeled away the fur. The pale ivory of her skin had him pausing, fighting down a compliment to the beauty before him. He did it mutely, quickly, running his palm over her shoulder, her shapely arm, her long fingers, the indentation of her waist and the swell of her hip to the curve of her calf and the delicacy of her toes. Ah. He would begin with those.

He shifted to the foot of the bed—and with his move, he detected she gave a shiver of expectation. He had fine plans in store.

With one giant hand to her left foot, he wrapped his hand around her arch and bent to suck her little toe. She jerked in surprise, but he was ready for her and held her to the ticking. She froze. He smiled in triumph and set his tongue along the ridge of her other toes. In objection or delight or mayhap both, she rolled to her back. The glory of the Countess Atherton was spread before him once more, and this time, he had the patience and the presence of mind to absorb the sight of her perfection. Fingering her big toe on one foot, he grasped the other ankle and held her to the bed. For conquest's sake, for his own delight, he forced her feet apart to view at his leisure now that most vital place that was solely his to lick and suck, to savour and to claim.

Her cheeks grew pink. She grunted and tried to loose her feet from him, but years of training in the lists and scores of battles in the East, had built strength his delicate Elise could never match. Still, she tried to kick him off. To no avail. She sat up to pummel him. He yanked her ankles with such force, she fell back on the mattress with a yelp, the bedclothes and her glorious breasts bouncing in the effort.

He slid his hands up her calves. The skin was so soft he almost wept. Her knees so rounded, he kissed their flawlessness. Her thighs, so plump but firmly muscled, he squeezed the indentations in admiration for the way she must have held her horse as she rode the beast. The way she would now ride the beast in him.

His hands reached her bush. The wealth of hair that had covered her mount of Venus when he'd glimpsed her in the pond years ago as they'd swum together had blossomed like a forest in these twelve years. Her cunny hair was a whiter hue than the gilding of the hair on

her head. But this—he splayed one set of fingers into her froth of curls—this was his to tease and please, to part and claim.

He fingered her labia apart. She moaned but did not thrash, her duty to let him have her converging with her old and new desires for him. Her glistening cunny lips were drenched in rosy colour that made him narrow his eyes. The smell of her—the meld of her liquid spice and her delicate soap—flared his nostrils. And he bent to spread her fruit and feast on the meal spread before him. He had always enjoyed eating a woman, but Elise was his one true love. The brew she created intoxicated him better than the finest wine. He could feast on her forever and never grow tired of her sugary fare.

In one long swath, his tongue laved her from her cream-covered core to her tiny pearl of love. His fingers holding her open for him, he kissed her jewel, and with the tip of his tongue, he circled her and gave her tiny little licks of love that drove her to a mute keen. She arched in delight, but he ran one hand up to her stomach to gentle her.

“I give you more than any man, Elise,” he soothed and caressed her skin down to her groin then plunged a finger inside her liquid walls. “I always have.” He pulled her heavy lips open with one hand while he stroked inside her with the other. But he could tell one finger was not enough to abrade her and so he shot another inside her. And in approval, she growled deep in her throat. He returned to her rosy, hard button to kiss it, lick it and press loud little sucks against it and make her whimper with delight.

He grinned as she ground out, “Have me, Simon. End this torture.”

But for the desolate years that he had dreamed of this, her plea coupled with these two brief bouts of love was small recompense. Torture, she called it, torture, she deigned it. She had not one inkling of the meaning. He would show her. He would make her acknowledge him. He’d make her talk to him sweetly. He’d make her linger with him for hours. Before he lifted a finger from her fabulous form, he’d make her sing in mad delight and beg to keep him inside her cunt forever.

So he ran his hands up to her ass cheeks, nuzzled her curly little mound once more, licked her navel and with one swift move, lifted her and flipped her over in the bed. The air left her lungs as she fell face down. She moaned in protest, but he hovered over her, giving her no time to rise, as he scooped her up under her waist, pressed her buttocks to his groin

and reached down to invade her thick lips once more with determined and demanding fingers.

"You think you know torture? This is it, Elise." He swirled his fingers over her tight, dew-soaked nub and swept down into her flesh to gather more of her love liquid and bathe her lips and cunny hair with it. "This is what torture is, my countess. To want. To need. To need one special one, but to have none. To be caressed." He demonstrated with deft fingerings. "To be rolled and petted into a frenzy and to yearn for the only hand that can give it you—but to find no relief." He pulled away his hand.

"No! Simon!" She panted, trying to grab his retreating hand.

He eluded her.

Instead, he forced her hips back against him while he inserted his rod between her ass cheeks and shifted to get himself up higher near her flowing molten core. Then, as he had her where he wished, he stroked her slit with his long, aching member.

He groaned. The need to have her hot little walls surround him and squeeze him dry made him shudder. The night was long, was it not? And he was just beginning.

But to seize her face-to-face again when her mind was still so far from him roiled him. And he growled in his own frustration and ran a hand up her back to press her down. He bent and licked the perfect plump ass cheek that rose to greet him then claimed the other with a wet lashing of his tongue. She gave a small cry and tried to turn. But he wrapped a hand around one thigh, hoisted her higher and, with one open palm, tapped her slit. The yelp she made died into a cry of delight. Smiling at her joy in his wicked ways of love, he promised himself to spank her harder and longer another time. For now, he sent two fingers inside her channel to draw forth a thick coating of her white cream. She moaned, likely thinking he would further caress her there. Instead, he withdrew and slid one finger inside her tiny nether hole. And she froze.

"There is more to a night of love than you've learnt, my lady." He began to massage her little asshole with tender swirls.

She hummed in lewd approval then threw back her head in her pleasure.

He preened. With one lift of her hips, he pressed his mouth again to one curvaceous ass cheek and bit her there where he gambled no man had ever claimed her, marked her or tamed her.

"Mine," he growled and bit the other cheek. "This beauty," he whispered, thrusting his finger in and out of her tight little ass, "is mine." And to prove his largesse, he kissed her atop his love bite.

"Simon, Simon," she crooned as her hips pulsed in helpless tiny moves against his groin. "More, oh do give me more."

He could have screamed down the castle in joy. "Aye, my lady. There is even more than this. For your big nipples and your juicy cunt and tight ass. But for tonight, I have stretched you wide enough. And for reward, I give us both this." At that, he hauled her up, tilted her hips so that he revelled in the sight of her taut little asshole exposed to him and below it, her pouting lips, red and glistening in the candlelight, weeping for him and welcoming him. He fingered her succulent folds. "Pretty and sweet and all for me." Then he rose to his knees once more and in one ram, he possessed her hot, creamy core.

She shot forward, but he caught her. Forced her back to him as he twisted up inside her, braced himself with two hands to her hips and gave her the pounding fury of twelve years of want. With long, deft strokes that hit the top of her womb, he stroked her and primed her, plundered and seized her with a precision that gratified him for its force and deft execution. And this time, as he spurted freely into her lush flesh, he felt his seed give her what she needed and what he craved. He jerked her back against him, as her relentless muscles milked him dry. He smiled, his lips resting on her nape. His hands melding to her hips, he cupped himself over her perspiring body and clutched her close as the two of them shuddered in completion.

Surely, odds said, they could have already made a child tonight. If not, tomorrow. The next day. As long as Alphonse still breathed and sanctioned this unholy mating.

Simon prayed now, once more fervently as he held this woman impaled on his shaft, that her husband lived long enough that Simon might avail himself of every sensual talent he'd learned in the Orient. Seven years as Richard's loyal man, three years as a Templar's mercenary, plus one for the Order of St. John meant Simon knew sexual tricks and had objects to incite this woman to beg him for his iron rod and finally, for his love.

He fell sideways to the bed and took Elise down with him, both of them panting and sweating, wrapped together still in their ardour. He stroked her hair, kissed her shoulder, knowing he had the skills and the fortitude to make her cry and plead for him. Knowing he

could make her ache for him, even abandon reason for him. He prayed her husband remained alive for days, weeks, aye months, so that he had the lee to make Elise his devoted slave of love. And for the granting of that wish, he would rot in hell.

Then whenever his job was done and he left these cursed walls and left her to mother their child, he would know that each time she looked at their offspring, she would remember the hours of passion in his arms. And for her solace, he would teach her to love herself. He would teach her to fondle her ripe nipples and plunder her succulent cunt as she pined for the loss of the lover whom she adored and who had been sent back to the world once more without her, for the price of retaining her silk, her wool and her gold.

Chapter Three

Just as Elise would have fallen to sleep, pounding at her door shook her from her doze. She stretched and halted. Her body ached, her muscles crying from the exertion of coupling with the man whose massive arms and hands had wound around her like iron chains.

The pounding grew louder and more insistent.

"Simon," she whispered, trying to lift one of his arms, "let me answer the door."

Compliant, he released her suddenly with arms and fingers opening wide, as if she had contracted the plague. The gesture stung, and she stumbled as she rose on shaking limbs.

"A moment, please," she told her caller, walked to her wardrobe and pulled a heavy night rail from the neat stack. Tying the neck sash, she glanced at Simon who now sat up, the copious covers of the bed dishevelled in heaps about his naked body. He reached up and pulled a hanging between him and the alcove doorway then laid a finger atop his lips. His silence might help, but in truth, if anyone besides her trusted maid or Cleve knew that he had come here, if anyone suspected what they had done here, his life and hers might ultimately be forfeit, no matter what her husband had ordered.

She stepped through to her husband's bedroom towards the massive wooden door. Alphonse still slept, and that made her breathe more easily. She shook back her waist-length locks and swung the heavy oak wide. Boldness was the mode to keep her castle's serfs well away from the truth.

Cleve Faulk stood there—and at his feet, rising no higher than his waist, stood Simon's rainbow-clad little man. No taller than her waist, he stared up at her rolling stones in one hand and twirling a tiny sling in the other.

He grinned at Elise, and she stared at the bright line of his white teeth. Simon had posted him here as protection most likely. Elise wondered if the tall Oriental stood at Simon's door downstairs. That man seemed a stronger guard. This smaller one gave her pause. For at his size, what he could do with that sling to waylay someone?

Cleve must have him insignificant, too, because he glanced down at the tiny creature, disgust curling his lip. "I told you go away!"

But the dwarf gazed up serenely and silently shook his head.

"Cleve," Elise brought his attention to her. "What will you?"

His gigantic rounded eyes examined the room behind her before he focused on her.

"My lady, we heard a cry and sought to learn if you are distressed. Or ill?"

And what game do you play, Cleve, when you know who is here? "Neither, Cleve. I stubbed my toes and yelped."

Simon's little man folded his arms in satisfaction and shot a daring look up at Cleve.

"You may return to the hall, Cleve," Elise grumbled, "and take your pleasure as you wish." *Heaven knows, I did.*

"Your cheeks are red. Is your fire too high?"

She would have laughed but choked it back, knowing the price of that insulting mirth might be her undoing at this man's hands. "Very high. I like it well."

The small man nodded in agreement.

Elise scowled at both of them. "Good night, Cleve, and to you, too, little man."

She closed the door in their faces.

She turned towards her husband who had taught Cleve such boldness. Alphonse slept, like a child, deep in his dreams, but she noticed his face seemed more pale than before, his snoring more shallow. She stepped to him and felt his forehead. Cool. Ah, so then, healthy as he could be. And so it was time again to deal with this other man in her chambers.

She strode through the room towards her alcove and her rumpled bed. Simon lay there, head propped up against her many pillows, the splendour of his brawny, bronzed nakedness making her mouth water and drop open in frank admiration.

His lips, so full, so sure, so wicked on her most secret parts, now curved in a devilish taunt. "You have never seen such a big man." It was no question. "I am gratified."

He swept a hand down his furry chest, broad from battles, browned in foreign sunlight. His arms, great cords of sinew, rippled as he gestured downward. His loins were lean, his legs, hard lines of sculpture. And between them lay the part of him that lengthened at her perusal. The part of him she now had a right to, if only for tonight. A great, smooth, blue-veined rod that felt like molten iron in her cunt.

"My memory," she told him on a small breath of awe, "is very bad, I see. Your body has much changed since last we met and swam in the pond by the river."

"As has yours, my sweet."

At his compliment, she tore her eyes from his shaft to lock on his silver gaze. His words bore tender tones that could seduce her more, were she not careful and dedicated to her quest to remain independent of his charm. Yet she stepped closer, her fingers—unbidden—reaching to touch his forearm, where a long, pale slash bisected his darker skin. "This wound?"

He drew in air at her fingers on him. "A Saracen's scimitar."

"And this?" She traced a hollow in his lower chest above his ribs.

"A part of me festered there from the wound of an arrow. The Templar cut the flesh from me lest I absorb the poison on the tip which could turn my blood to dung."

She could not stop the pity from showing in her eyes. "Yet, for all your trials, you have grown so large, so healthy that—"

"That you love how I take you."

She gulped back shame, modesty and pride all at once. And she would have turned away, but he caught her wrist.

"Admit it."

She had her back to him, her arm still captive, as was she. "I would love it better if you took me with more affection. As we once were."

He tugged at her. "Look at me, then. There." His own eyes held sweet compassion now. "Shall I woo you with pretty words and recount, like a travelling minstrel, the glories of your golden hair and sky-blue eyes?"

He did not sound dedicated or convinced of the rightness of that, yet she answered him with a nod and an admission. "Aye, I deserve it." *Because I have not had it since you left me – and I expect it from no man, save you.* "I know your years of service in Ottoman lands must have allowed you to bed who you wished any way you wished. And you must have had great pleasure."

He snorted and dragged her to sit on the bed beside him. "How would you know what brings me pleasure?"

"I did once," she gave him back in angry kind. "Your devotion to make me smile was your highest goal."

"Bah! Tell me that you did not like what we did here." He dragged her closer still and sent a hand through her tresses to cup her head and bring her mouth a breath from his. "I felt your creamy cunt on my lips and on my tongue. Have a taste."

He kissed her with lips and tongue, and she fell into his arms, enchanted.

"You wanted me. Still do." He spoke on her mouth. "Admit that."

She stared up at him as her body betrayed her by giving down the wealth of her cream and his seed to coat her thighs. She clenched her legs and pulled to leave him.

Foiled, he shot a hand out to bunch up the night rail and press his hand to her curly mound. His fingers threaded into her wealth and tugged, eliciting the succulent sounds of their comingled juices. "Ah, there is proof of how well we loved!"

Her head lolled on her shoulders. "Aye," she cried out, "I wanted you! Wanted what you could give me." *Wanted what I was denied for sake of family, lands and country.* "Want you now again."

"To bear a son."

To hold you close inside me! "A boy, a girl, two, I care not!" She wrenched herself away from him to stand and wobble near the bed, spitting out her ire at her piteous lot, as their sweet love juice began to trickle down her thighs. "I come from female stock that bears fine boys who grow to strapping men. That's why Alphonse married me—and you well know it. After he had two young and sterile wives, he buried both, not a hint of a baby from either. But I have done my duty here by him. I have lain with him at his command, regularly and often, and I say this barrenness is not my fault. Alphonse knows this to be true. Try as I might to tempt him or stroke him, I cannot help that his poor rod is short and limp. A puny thing no bigger than a thimble! A rod I could raise with my nakedness, but he could never keep hard inside me for longer than a few minutes. Whereas, you—" She almost cried out at the heat and the jumping pulse of his penis in her hand as she leaned over and cupped him. "You," she whispered, "are the loving husband God should have given me, and now, instead, I am given the opportunity to lie abed with you and bring forth a son that my feeble, dying husband cannot ever give me."

"Elise," Simon's earth-deep voice permeated her despair as he gathered her to him on the bed. "Come, my lovely girl," he crooned and enfolded her in the massive cocoon of his care. "Do not cry."

She was crying? What outrage. She swiped her tears from her cheeks and pushed at him to leave.

He held her fast. "Elise, I did not know about Alphonse. His failure to pleasure you." Simon's huge hand fell to cup one breast and lift it up to meet the homage of his mouth. She writhed as he sucked her to a ripe point. "Ah, my heart, I rejoice at how you respond to me. How you need my mouth and my fingers and my shaft. In truth, I have spent my years in exile from your sweetness imagining how often and in what ways your husband would have you in his bed." He kissed her other nipple and titillated her with his hot, wet tongue. "With ripe jealousy, I have eaten my heart out and my guts. If I can now give you pleasure and my seed, I welcome the chance."

"Really?" She shrank from him and clawed her way beyond him on the mattress to stand and glare at him. "How kind of you."

"Elise, there is no need to insult me."

"Me? Insult *you*? My lord, be not so bold." She swept out a hand, seething fire at his affront to her. "What of how you gain from this?"

His brows flew high in alarm.

Would Simon believe her so naïve that she would fail to suspect some exchange for the favour he bestowed on the house of Atherton?

She whirled away and clenched her hands. For all her prodding of her husband on this matter, Alphonse would not reveal the benefits he would give to Simon. She'd screamed at her husband, scolded him, but he refused to tell her any details. Yet, what else could lure a fabled knight to a rich woman's dangerous bed, but one asset? "How much?"

"One hundred silver talents to bed you." Simon was quiet, lax in body. Was he therefore, wary at her new knowledge?

He should be.

Her eyes ran up to the roof beams. "How instructive to learn my true worth. I wonder what a harlot costs."

"Elise..." He rose up in an attempt to embrace her.

But she was faster and escaped him to stand out of his grasp. "One hundred for the bedding?"

He inhaled, resigned to her pursuit of the topic. "Aye."

Hands on her hips, she tapped her foot. To lie abed with him would not be the proof of the goods, however. So she asked, "And what for a baby in my belly? More?"

"Aye." He met her wrath with soft, silver-eyed empathy. "Two hundred more."

She blinked and licked her lips. "And for a birth?"

"Double the total."

Her knees buckled. She could not look at him, but she rallied and asked, "A girl?"

"Five hundred, should she live past five years."

"I see. And the son, the heir, the prize?"

"Double again if he lives to fourteen."

If she could flee the room, the castle, her life, her doom, she would have torn herself free though her hands go raw. "And who pays you? Alphonse will be dead and buried. Who will he give the silver to that we may all agree is honest enough to part with it when the time comes? King John will not. He'll steal the funds and call it his right. So who is the banker?"

"John's daughter."

"Joanna?" In a way, the knowledge that her dear young friend with whom she'd once lodged for a summer would offer to pay this wicked purse did not surprise Elise. "The one person in the world who loves John best."

"And you as well," Simon added. "She will not have you suffer."

"Joanna has a noble husband in her Prince of Wales who lies in her bed and gives her a child every year." *And thus she understands my peril to produce no heirs.*

Elise cursed and strode to her trestle table and picked up her jug of wine. This mating was well planned. But the deal still stung. "A drink, my lord de la Poer? I fear I need a large draught." She poured, sloshing the red liquid over the rims of two cups. She perceived his warmth behind her, and she spun against his chest, one cup in her hand. "Your drink. Take it. We shall both hail the child we shall make and the money you shall."

He replaced his cup on her table. His arms enclosed her. "Not I."

"Of course, you will. This way you will earn what you have needed from your birth. A fortune, eh?" she taunted him.

He captured her face between his hands. "What I have needed from the day I walked into your father's counting room and saw the smiling six-year-old who laughed and smiled at me is you."

"Yet you made this filthy bargain? To have me for lucre?"

"Aye!"

"A fairytale. A filthy tale. You want only me, but you will bed me for silver."

"I. Have. No. *Choice!*"

The two of them paused, toe to toe.

In a whisper, she ventured for another truth which she feared might strike her heart more violently than the last she'd heard. "Why is that?"

He hesitated, but his brooding eyes gave him away. "I owe King John my compliance in this matter. He is devoted to keeping Alphonse and his heirs in power in these upper marches. The Scots do harry John and his allies all along the border, and Alphonse is wealthy enough with sufficient retainers to fight the savages back into their lands. John knows of your intelligence and the fealty Alphonse's men show you."

"Nay!" she scoffed. "No fealty will be left if they learn I have been tupp'd by the legendary Knight Divine and thus soiled my husband's honour as well as mine!"

"No one will know."

"Do not be blind. My maid knows. Cleve knows." She pointed towards the door. "Your...your little man knows!"

"Katani has no tongue and cannot tell anyone anything. Your maid, however, I leave you to secure. Both she and Cleve can be bought."

"Cleve? Bought? You think he may not be welded to my husband's cause?"

"Best not to trust someone like Cleve beyond where you may see him. But in this case, Alphonse's cause can benefit Cleve even after the old man is dead."

"How?" she taunted him. "I see no one with the power."

"You do not credit me with much beyond raw brutality," Simon mourned.

"You mean to say you can pay Cleve? Ha! How is that? You have some of your new-found gain on your person now, do you?"

"Alphonse has given Cleve orders that I am to run the estate. My word is law."

Her heart pounded at the betrayal of her husband to her power. She stepped back. "Is that so? I am superceded in my own house? By a lover? By my husband's cuckold while he lies on his death bed?"

"Nay. You are superior here. But I am second."

"Fine and well then." This was small recompense, but she would use it. "Leave me."

"Elise, I warn you —"

"Aye, warn me well, my Knight Divine. I see what is at stake here. At first, I thought it was only my virtue. Only my body given to you for him. But now I see, it is my country, my king, my kinsmen who can die if I do not lie abed with you and make a child. Interesting that the reasons given to me to betroth me to my husband are the same as those that now demand I spread my legs for you." A sob rose in her throat, and she caught back its sorrow with a hand to her lips. "Leave me. We will resume our sport when I am ready. When I am willing. When I can do this with full mind to the cause."

She watched him back away towards her husband's room. There Simon picked up his tunics, his braies and his slippers. He yanked them on and strode towards the back stairs which led down to the smaller room beneath hers where he was lodged. He turned, fury lining his brow.

"I take my leave of you for my own quarters below where you may join me at your leisure. But heed me, do not let your anger simmer long, my lovely. The world is waiting for your baby. And we must be about making him, before your husband dies, and no one who lives in these climes can still claim their country is England."

Chapter Four

Snowflakes obliterated her view, but Elise trudged onward, a hand to her forehead. Ulred's hut had never seemed so far from the castle walls as it did on this day when she needed to see her old friend — and do it quickly.

The snow of this storm was not yet deep, but it laid a slick layer on the ice that caused Elise to slip and almost fall more than once. The wind cut through her cloak, and she tried to brace against it to no avail. She stopped, one arm out to steady herself and pant against a tree.

Something crackled in the forest. A tree limb falling under the weight of ice? She jerked her head around and surveyed the terrain but saw nothing. She shivered in fear. A family of wild boars had moved into these woods last autumn and attacked anything that moved. Before Christmastide, the male had chased Ulred and cornered her, slicing one of her ankles with his long sharp tusks. But Elise saw nothing that resembled the huge, hairy beasts. Still, a flapping of wings made her jump, and she looked up at a fat crow, high above her in a tall pine.

"Best you stay there in this storm," she murmured to him. Clutching her hood deeply about her face, she bent to the wind once more and headed for the thatched home of Atherton's only outcast.

Elise scurried towards the woman's hut near the creek where Ulred had lived since she'd been fourteen and Alphonse had banished her for predicting his second wife's death. No one in the castle's walls wanted Ulred's eyes upon them, claiming Ulred alone had put evil spells on all Atherton's countesses. But Elise felt no harm from the woman who, if she had a more pleasant demeanour and regular meals, might even have been lovely. Elise had often consulted her in the past twelve years, asking for potions to help make her fertile or aids to make her desire her husband. While none of those had ever worked, Elise knew Ulred had other medicinals that had cured coughs and headaches and other maladies of her, her husband and their serfs.

"Why won't your herbs help me bear a child, Ulred?" Elise had asked often, but Ulred had given her a weary look and dismissed her with some babble. "I cannot make a child blossom where no seed lives. The same I cannot grant your wish that your husband were a lustier man."

Thus, Elise learned and accepted that there were limits to everything, even Ulred's fame and talents. *Still, I come today, hoping for more.*

Scurrying to Ulred's door, Elise called through the hanging of animal skins sewn together by Ulred's artful fingers. "Ulred, 'tis Lady Dumond! Are you there?"

"Aye, where else would I be in this storm?" she called to Elise as she flung the heavy blanket hide aside and grinned at her with yellow teeth. "I expected you, I have. Get in here."

Elise ducked to let herself inside the place where Ulred had lined the walls with more hides from the wild beasts of the woods. The room was surprisingly warm as she went towards Ulred's fire in the centre of the earth-packed floor. There, the woman had hung a pot, boiling with a stew. "What do you cook, Ulred? It smells wonderful."

"My dinner and your potion."

Elise attempted to demur, one hand up. "Mine? Nay. I have no idea what you brew there, woman."

Ulred approached and leaned close, her breath sweet with mint despite all her dark teeth. She inhaled Elise's essence and closed her eyes. "You've been mating."

Elise's eyes flew wide. She had bathed, washing her nether lips until she had pleased herself with the rub of the cloth against her still swollen and tender cunny. "How can you tell?" *If Ulred could, might not others? Men. Cleve. Her servants.*

"I can smell it on your breath. Your flux was more than a fortnight ago, and your skin breathes with a fecund musk. Your eyes glow with it. Your man has appeared at last, has he not?"

There was no reason to deny it. 'Your man' had long been Ulred's term for a tall, dark warrior whom she had predicted more than five years ago would be Elise's saviour – and her tormentor.

Elise inhaled. "Aye. May I sit?"

Ulred squeezed her dark eyes in glee and clapped her hands. "I knew he was about. I could feel him." She leaned close and sucked in a huge draught of air. "He smells like sandalwood and anise. Am I right?"

Elise nodded. "That you are."

The woman dipped in close once more and shut her eyes, a look of bliss on her craggy face. "He mates with hearty appetite, too. How is your pretty cunny now that his giant member has stretched you?"

Elise could not restrain herself from putting a hand over her mound as it quaked for Simon. "I want him inside all the time."

"As you should. As I told you, you would. He is a strong goat, no?"

"Aye, a satyr."

"Whom you love."

Elise shot up. "Nay. I do not. Cannot."

The woman waved a gnarled hand. "Matters not. He is the man for you, my lady. He makes you a ripe woman, as he should have done long ago when you were both young and eager for a marriage."

"That was not possible then."

"Aye," Ulred muttered. "The foolishness of men to order how we marry, when how we love should be honoured."

Elise sighed. "I have come because I want you to read my palm again. Now that he is here and we are..."

"One."

"One," Elise agreed, pronouncing the word aloud with a glee previously foreign to her. "Now that we are one, I need to know how soon I will conceive, how long I must lie abed with him —"

"Why?" Ulred peered at her with narrowed, nasty eyes. "Why spoil your happiness with knowledge of its end?"

"I must know, Ulred!"

"Why? Are you so privileged that you must know all, when most women and men live only by instinct and hope?"

"I have neither good instincts nor hope, Ulred."

“Balls.”

“If I had good instinct, would I not have found a way to avoid this situation in the first place? God knows, it brings me more trouble than I have ever known!”

“And more joy.”

Elise stared at her.

“Admit it, my girl,” Ulred harrumphed. “You love the man, the art, the joys he teaches you. You can no more withdraw from him or bar him from your bed than I can live here without my herbs growing round me.” Ulred’s gaze grew black and dangerous as she approached Elise again. “Your fate is sealed, my lovely countess. In your man’s arms, he will teach you delights you have never imagined – and give you your heart’s desire.”

Elise caught her breath, seized Ulred’s hand to put it on her stomach. “Tell me, can you feel a child there now? Already?”

Ulred threw her head back to laugh. “What I feel here is a cunt well tended, fully ploughed, soft and begging. What I feel here is a womb well plundered. What I feel here is that you came not to learn how you can cut yourself from your man who pleasures you with the feast of his hands and his eyes and his shaft. Nay. You came here to learn how to keep him.”

Elise drew back, but there was no running from the hag’s truth. “Aye. I crave him. As much of him as I put inside me. As often as I can take him. I want him. I need him. Tell me how to keep him happy.”

“Do as any instinct tells you. He is a bold man in bed – and he wants to give you every drop of seed he has. Let him and take more.”

“But...how?”

“Take him in your arms. Into your wet channel. Put his shaft in your mouth, as well. His tool is an iron rod, but you will delight in how his heart softens when you lick and taste him on your tongue.”

Elise quivered with the pulsing of her cunny at the very idea. “This kind of joy is...good?”

Ulred chuckled. “Good? My lady, favour him with your desire. Do these things as they inspire you. You will delight him, and he will teach you the pleasures of the kingdoms of the earth. Are you not worthy of his glory?”

"Oh, Ulred, I am!" The truth rippled up out of her like a geyser. "I *deserve* him. The pleasure he gives. The joy of his manly form. I deserve to have him for what little time I might. I have been good and kind and wise to all. Why may I not have some joy from life?"

Ulred smiled broadly and moved to pat Elise on the shoulder. "Come, my countess, have this stew. I made it only for you because you need wild meat to build your strength. Your man needs to have you as a willing and wicked partner." She lifted a rough-hewn pottery cup and ladled some of her concoction into it. "Drink all of this, my pretty one."

With a new-found appetite, Elise sat and began to sip the steaming broth. "What have you in here, Ulred?"

"Roots. Dried rosemary and thyme. And the head of another boar."

"You shot another?" Elise asked between swallows, eyeing Ulred's bow propped against the far wall.

"Fiends. They breed almost as well you will with your man."

Elise paused and whispered, "Will I?"

Ulred nodded solemnly. "I have seen it for lo, these many years."

"Once?" Elise asked, using the word Simon had dismissed that first night when he had first taken her and shown her heaven.

Ulred tipped her head to one side in consideration. "How much can you bear to know?"

Elise licked her lip. "You mean how brave am I?"

"Aye, this is what I ask."

"You will have many children, my pretty countess. But my vision is clouded by who will sire them on you."

Elise pressed her thighs together. Her greedy cunny pounded at the idea of Simon fathering many babes inside her. But she balked at the idea that another might plough her field, too. Would he be friend or foe? "I need an herb to help me get a babe by Simon."

Ulred examined Elise as if she wore no clothes, and she snorted. "Simon needs no help from me."

"What if I cannot carry the child to birth? What if I bleed and lose the babe?"

"You will not."

"You are certain?"

"There is a tragedy to come in your castle's walls, my countess. That tragedy is not the death of any babe."

Elise grabbed Ulred's hand. "What then? Tell me."

"The night creeps forth when you will learn of a stranger in your bedroom. Make haste to discover who he is and where he gains his power."

Elise shook her head. "I have no way to understand you, Ulred. Your puzzle confuses me."

"It will not confuse you when you see it, my countess. But be bold when you do. Root it out. Cast out the man who did it, lest you lose your life, your baby's and your man's."

* * * *

Elise left minutes later, her cloak pulled low against the storm that now raged more briskly. Hurrying over the ice-packed land, she headed for the castle gate where her maid waited to open it and fool the guard to readmit her. That could not come soon enough for Elise who slipped and slid with every step over the rocks and stones of the barren earth.

A loud crackle in the ice had her twisting and turning to find the source. She froze. Something black and swift scurried between boulders, hiding from her. Her heart picked up a beat, and she began to run.

Snorts rent the air. She spun, a hasty move that sent her to the ground where she fell, caught herself on her hand and wrenched it.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried out in pain and scrambled up. A huge narrow-faced boar with beady eyes and long straggly hair headed straight for her.

To her left, another dark figure came around a large tree trunk, a bow and arrow in his hands, fully poised to take down the creature. "Run in patterns, Elise! Run in circles, for Christ sake!" He focused on the hairy brute careening towards her petrified body.

She did as he bid.

"Elise!" He shot the arrow, pierced the animal in the front leg and made him squeal in protest.

She picked up her skirts to better escape the pig and the slashing of her ankles by his keen-edged tusks. But the trees were dense, and she found herself running this way and that,

no circle possible. Crazed, she could not watch what Simon did, but she could hear the animal squeal louder once more.

"Climb that tree!" Simon yelled at her.

She glanced up at a pine with a low-lying branch, large enough to support her. Or so she hoped.

"Oh, please." She grabbed the branch and hauled herself up. Her feet dangled down and she yelped as the boar rammed tusks-first into the tree, jarring her and making her cry out in fright.

"Pick up your feet," Simon yelled at her as he ran towards her. "Up, up!"

"Simon! What are you —"

He ran forward, a short sword, long as his forearm, in one hand. With a giant leap towards her, he jumped up onto the limb with her. "Hang on, my pet," he commanded and bent double to the boar. With one sweep of his arm over his head, he came down with his sword and sank it to the hilt at the nape of the animal's head.

The pig dropped like a stone.

Elise clutched her throat, gaping as she stared at the animal and his slayer, who only for a moment sat still beside her.

Then he jumped down to survey his kill.

She swallowed hard. "Where did you come from? How did you know I...?"

"Came here?" Simon peered at her through angry silver eyes. "I followed you."

"You do not trust me."

He feigned amusement. "'Tis my job to keep you safe, my lady." He held out his hand for her to come down. "Let us return to the castle where you should have stayed."

She jumped down and stood before him, her chin up defiantly. "I do as I wish."

"You wish to kill yourself?" he scoffed as he yanked his sword from his prey's bloody head and wiped the weapon in the snow. "Nay. Not a plan that your lord and master nor your king would sanction, Madame."

"I have come here many times for more years than I can count and never have I had a problem." She knew she sounded petulant, but she couldn't resist her say.

"Until now."

"Aye. Until you come. Now I have more problems." She pushed him in the chest once, but her injured wrist smarted at the contact. She winced but still tormented him. "And you are the biggest."

He stood erect, smiled slowly at her but watched her massage her wrist. "Aye, lady mine. I am. But what did you do to your arm?" He grasped her fingers and pushed up her sleeves.

At his words, she would have turned away, but his hold of her meant she could not. Her wrist pained her too much. "Let me go, Simon. It hurts. When I fell as the boar came at me, I sprained it."

"Come," he said more sweetly now and drew her cloak about her hair. "I will escort you home."

"You cannot come with me."

"To the wall gate, I will, aye. Then I will wait while you enter alone. No one will know, save I, that you were almost killed for your folly."

She considered him, hurt by his curtness. "You like to taunt me."

"You like to pretend our circumstances are not as they are."

She bit her lip but nodded. "How right you are, my knight."

"Things would be better between us if you accepted that we must do as we are bound."

The advice of Ulred played in her head. "True. And so shall it be from this time onward."

Simon's silver gaze sliced through her, searching for honesty. "You are resigned then to our coupling?"

For long moments, she fought for the right words to reply. The snow fell on her face as she gazed up into his dear one, and she told him the truth he deserved. "For long years, my noble knight, I have yearned for your company. I prayed for your health and safety in foreign lands and wars. I longed to see you again. I even dreamt we were together, as one, on a bed much as we were the other night, though I must say, I never could have dreamt as well as what I experienced there in your arms."

He stepped closer, his gaze warm and mellow, his lips soft and oh so appealing.

"Nay, Simon." A newer emotion, a softer one, burnt in her brain. "I am not resigned."

His face fell to dark despair. "'Twas not my idea to take silver for this."

To hear that dulled one pain. To know he might be cheated of his compensation brought another. Yet she knew, too, that neither of them might live long enough to care about either. With one hand to cup his cheek, she flowed closer to him, and in the pristine beauty of a chilled land, she pressed against him and up on her toes. Against his lips, she whispered, "Today, tonight is all we have. We shall be about our duty to each other and this kingdom quickly. And this time, I vow to do it with a bit more joy to comfort us when days and nights are colder than these."

He crushed her close and lifted her up against him in such a sweep of delight that he spun her about. And when he set her down, she traced his mouth with one fingertip and stretched up to kiss him sweetly.

"Run home, Elise. Time is short, but my need for you is long and very hard."

For the first time in years, she threw back her head and laughed heartily. "I need to see the proof!"

He spun her around and gave her a whack on the ass with the flat of his hand. "Get you to my bed, woman. I'll show you proof such as you have never seen."

Chapter Five

Snuggling under his covers in his room, Elise revelled in the softness of the linens and martens she had ordered the servants to throw on his bed. An honoured guest deserved the best the Earl of Atherton had. He had plenty of it to share. Even Alphonse's serfs boasted of their comfortable pallets beneath the stairs and in the kitchen.

She rolled over to face the door. *What you do here, Elise, ensures they will live that way much longer. Phillip Crosby gives no regard to his servants. 'Tis said he beats them for the smallest discourtesy.* Worse, they were renowned in these climes for their greediness—and their interest in absorbing Alphonse's estate into theirs was one ripe evidence. *But I will not think of them now.*

The door opened, and Simon closed it behind him. At sight of her, surprise widened his features. He froze, his eyes on her face. "You frown, Elise. I thought you accepted —"

"I think not of us, Simon. But of the Crosbys." She tossed him a brilliant smile and beckoned him with an outstretched hand. "I will forget them now for the next hour. Come kiss me."

Simon's lush lips opened in a joyful expression. He lifted one long brow. "You order me about?"

"Very well, stay there then." She flung back the covers to show him her naked body. "Stir the fire, Simon. There," she whispered then tipped her head towards the one blazing in the wall, "and consider the one here." She ran two hands from her hair to her cheeks, her throat, her breasts, her waist and hips. Kneading the flesh of her thighs, she caressed her belly and thrust her fingers into her nest of hair.

Her cheeks flushed with her boldness, and as she shivered with enjoyment of her own touch, she watched him walk towards the fireplace. He stood in profile to her, but she could tell he narrowed his gaze, concentrating with too much purpose on the spark and flames of the logs. "Have you ever made love to yourself, Elise?"

Her fingers fanned out over her frothy curls. "Nay."

He faced her. "You have thought of it, though?"

She combed her curls, and the friction tickled and titillated her. "Aye."

He devoured her actions with his eyes. "Why never to do it then?"

"Why?" She caught his gaze and once more recalled Ulred's advice to do as instinct instructed with this lover. "Because, my Knight Divine, I have never had such manly inspiration."

He sucked in his breath. "I would see more then."

She smiled at him, her mouth watering to taste him, all of him. Purring like a cat, she spread herself out, arms wide in the luxurious bedding, legs brazenly dropping open to let him view his fill. Her body flared with excitement at Simon's regard, and the crackling of the fire stirred her appetite for his acclaim.

Simon advanced, walking to and fro to survey her at every aspect and at his leisure. He hovered over every curve as he had had no time to do the other night when first they had mated. This time, his eyes lingered and caressed and his mouth dropped open at the sight of her fingers sinking quickly in and out of her cunt.

"How do I look?" *Now that I am sworn to have you at all cost?* "How do I seem after all these years, my lord?"

His quicksilver gaze flew to hers. Therein grew a storm of need. "Like never before. Like no other, Elise," he declared in a low rumble of desire.

"Come closer then. The better to see what I have for you."

He took two steps to the foot of his bed and braced two hands on the iron foot rail, his knuckles white with want. She placed her hands over her bush and, with the fingers of one hand, spread her plump cunny lips. With the other, she inserted one finger inside her warm and ready walls. Tempting herself, she arched, sighing at the feel of her fingers. *God's breath*, she rejoiced, *already dripping and crying for this man. What can I do to make him take me all through the night?*

He gasped, strode around to her and leant over her. "Know you what you do?"

"I have a good idea." She smiled, a woman knowing she was capable of luring her man. "Listen." She stroked her cunt from deep inside to catch warm cream and bathe her lips in long languid stokes of her fingers. The sound she made was luscious, and she undulated on the bed. "My juices flow over my fingers." She rubbed her lips in deep circles and spread her thighs wider for his admiration. "Never have I been so wet, so full." Her gaze locked on his. "So swollen."

"This gratifies me. For in spite of all this," he said, waving an arm in the air to denote the castle and those elements that divided them, "you were mine first."

"Aye," she agreed on a whisper then lifted her knees and opened them wide, her feet to the bed. She let her fingers find her seam and gently pull herself open once more. There she found a tiny mound of flesh Alphonse often sought and rubbed. The same one Simon had loved to her distraction the other night. Now, she found the underside of it and circled her forefinger there, moaning at the beauty of the delight that swept over her. Suddenly, she knew she was too devoted to her own pleasure here to chastise herself any longer for her desire.

Simon gave an unintelligible sound, strode forward and put one knee upon the mattress. He reached out to take her wrist but halted, his hand in midair. "How is your injury from your fall?"

"Healed enough to pleasure you and me," she stated. Boldness now carried her onward, wanting to explore her own body, needing to display it for him and, in the rapture of her self-pleasuring, give him a joy as glorious. And for a man who had roamed the world, this ripe display, she would wager, was the way to build his desire. So she ran her forefinger down along one soaked lip and quivered, shifting slightly at the stroke. She closed her eyes and caressed her other nether lip in same such fashion. Her cunny grew fiery and gave off a sharp pulse of need. She cupped her bush, pressed herself and cried out for the fullness she was about to have. All her vivid memories of kisses from a fond and daring boy were about to be brilliant hours of sexual fantasy come true.

"Oh," she told that boy-made-man now, "how I have longed to have you here inside me, Simon. I have wanted to do this." She sent two fingers inside her core with such a demanding thrust that she rose slightly off the mattress. "And this." She pushed her fingers in and out, in and out, in such a rhythmic flow that she arched off the bed like an acrobat. "And this," she moaned, as she found her tiny nub with two slick fingers and pinched her little swollen button to fast jolts of delight. She whimpered, her need as great for her lover in fantasy as in flesh.

He tore at his clothes. His cloak. His tunics. His boots. His chain belt. His linen undershirt. And as he flexed his magnificent arms to climb in beside her, he pulled her hand away and sank to kiss the skin above her belly. "This is mine to kiss. Mine to plunder. Mine

to invade." He turned to open her labia delicately with two artful fingers and leant down to press a kiss to her needy, greedy little core.

The fiery touch of him made her moan and raise her hips to push against him. "I cannot have enough of you," she confessed on a small sob.

He slid his body down the bed and rubbed his jaw into her wet bush. "We must see you have so much of me that you are ever after filled with delight no other man can match."

His words sounded bittersweet but soon died as he growled in the fury of his claim. With iron grip, he wrapped his hands around her thighs and braced her open. He crooned over her plump beauty as his fingers parted her swollen labia and he kissed each mound with a hard suck. His tongue shot out to lave her one lip bottom to top then kiss her in loud and juicy draughts. His raving talent had her keening as he delicately ate at her little love button and delved inside with darting tongue to capture more sex cream to drink from her.

She bucked beneath him, but he held her to his mercy like a conqueror as he laved her other lip from top to bottom. Pulling her farther apart for his fervent tongue, he devoured her as if he were a starving man, circling her fiercely tender nub and licking its little base and top. "Your pretty cunny is the only food I have ever wanted." He put his lips to her again. There, he sucked her so delicately she thought she'd fall into a thousand pieces. He licked her so hard she thought her body was made of sugar. Then, he nibbled at her tender button and shot two fingers up inside her cunt so fast she thought she would fly apart at his possession. He built a raging fire in her, a violent tremor that made her keen in need as his fingers stroked her. She shouted and beat the bed with fisted delight.

"You must take me *now*," she shouted at him.

But he grunted at her, laughed without mirth then pulled her up to sit. Her pounding core pressed to the cool bed, empty and crying to be filled. Slowly, he kneeled before her, cupped her chin and made her look him in the eye. His were silver madness, hot and swirling over her mouth, her nipples, her thick bush. He glanced down, leading her eyes to his actions. There, he threaded his fingers into her pale, curly hair and ran one blunt finger along her juicy seam. She moaned, but with his other hand, he palmed his rod up for her to see. "Touch me," he commanded.

She shivered in delight at the size of him. He surely was longer than her hand. More, perhaps. And round, so full, that reaching out to touch him, her fingers could not encircle

him. She petted him once and groaned in need then shifted to rub her cunt against the sheets as he began to stroke himself to an engorged blue-veined rod. Drops of his cum appeared on his penis, and in her own joy at his homage, she bent to pay her own.

She licked him. Laved him. Bathed his entire length in her own sweet claim, over and over again. She had never done this, never wanted to. But Simon's rod she had to have in all ways that she could. She kissed his tip, ran her lips over the length of him and tried to caress him with one sure hand. She knew for the size of him, she could not embrace him totally. The lack drove her to do what she could to give him pleasure, and she bathed him with her tongue, as she prayed soon he would bathe her cunt with this fine rod. As she heard him moan in his delight, she revelled in the pace and strength of her pleasuring him. She could love him thus forever, and at the realisation, she sucked his bulbous end in one hard pull and declared her possession in one smooth pop.

He shouted, lifting her off him and pushing her down to the bed. "You do me well. But there can be more, my love. Feel." He fell over on his back. "Rise above me and put your pretty cunny near my lips."

His endearment thrilled her, and she trailed a hand down the rope-like muscles of his massive chest to his shaft. "This can be done?"

"Come, sweet one," he led her to place her swollen lips above his mouth, "and let me pleasure you as you do me."

The feel of his possession of her core, the strong pull of his fingers to spread her as he nibbled and licked and sucked at her was rapture as she endeavoured to lick him and lave his hard rod. But her thighs trembled in the effort, her knees on the bed wobbled and she cried out, angry at herself that this delight was one she could not finish.

He rolled her over, reversed himself and dropped a quick kiss to one pointed nipple and the other. "Do not despair, my sweet. We will perfect this art."

"Have me now, Simon." She wrapped her arms and legs around him. "I am going to pound with joy soon and I do not wish it without you in my cunt."

"Nay, beauty," he vowed and kissed her hard and fast. "Loving you is what I was made me for." He reached down between their love-soaked bodies, took himself in hand and rubbed his blunt head over her wet and tender lips. He took her with one swift stroke. "You are mine, only mine."

Then he proved to her that no man could ever possess her heart as this one had her body.

She did not know how long she slept, but when she awakened, she saw Simon walking to his door. She heard him exchange a few words with his Oriental in a strange language and afterward, he softly closed the door.

"What does your man say? Is aught amiss?" she asked Simon as he came back to her, a golden pagan god in naked splendour.

"Nay, my sweet. I told Omar to knock several times a day to ensure we are well. I will have no one intruding on our pleasure, least of all Cleve or any of the servants. My Omar is a devoted man, and you should feel safe with him near." Simon bent to cup a breast. "I want to love you without regard to others' intrusions." He laved his velvet rough tongue around her budding nipple. "Hard diamonds, aren't they?"

"For you," she told him, as happy for his care of their safety as she was for his devotion to their mating.

He bit her nipple lightly and her cunny vibrated with glee. "Shall I make these pretty points beg for me?" he asked.

"Oh, do, please." She squirmed on the linens in her joy. "Come lick me and suck me. I cannot have enough of your mouth."

"Only my mouth?" He pulled at her areola with his lips.

She gasped. "All of you."

"Wonderful." He smiled. His gaze caressed her while his fingers stroked her creamy depths. "I have a prize to display for your two pink tips." His brows arched high in a teasing arc. "Shall I show you?"

She clapped her hands, eager as a child about to receive a toy. "Do, please."

He strode to the cupboard on the far wall and opened the door. Reaching in to take his leather saddle pouch, he grasped crimson silk that billowed through his fingers.

She grinned at him as he approached. "What have you brought, my lord?"

His face grew sombre. "This I have carried with me for more than eight years." He sat upon the bed, his gaze upon his closed fist. "I bought them for you when I had no hope I would ever see you again. When I thought I would die soon and in a heinous land."

"My dearest," she whispered and reached up to kiss him on the cheek. "You are here with me now." She did not say, *all your fears are for naught*. For that was useless talk. "Show me, Simon, what you have."

He smiled again as he opened his fist to reveal a red silk bag with two draw strings. "I bought them from a caravan drover recently arrived in Jaffa from the Silk Road. The merchant was a leather-faced ancient, sans teeth and hair."

As Simon spoke, she began to grin – and so did he.

"He sat upon the buttery walls of Jaffa, crying at the top of his lungs for all men to come and view his wares. He declared he had the means to make a woman want a man and never leave him." Simon's silver eyes met hers, and his voice fell to a rasp. "I had seen my two friends die not days before, their bodies mangled, torn apart by scimitars of the Heathens. I felt for certain my day to die must be close. To buy these for you made me feel somehow eternal." Simon glanced away, and she knew he did so to hide his sadness.

She put a hand to his arm. "My darling, you bought these as a talisman to tell yourself you would one day come back to me."

He faced her, his mouth lifting from a tight line of despair to dawning joy. "How could you know?" he whispered.

She gripped his hand. "I know you."

Delight erased his melancholy. He bent to kiss her lips. "Shall I show you these?"

"Oh, please."

"Hmm. Very well, be still now."

"Like this?" She squirmed against the bedding and let her breasts sway a bit before him.

"Temptress," he scolded.

"Sorcerer," she countered and lifted her chin at him. "Show me, damn you."

He took from his pouch two silver pincers, encrusted with tiny stones of aqua and pink, purple and topaz.

"They are lovely. But what are they?" She touched one with a fingertip.

"They are for your breasts. Your nipples."

"But...how?" Her excitement made her breathless.

He cupped one of her breasts and bent to suck her nipple to a hard round point. She arched up into his hand and his mouth, speechless with his ardour. He drew away, took her

areola between his fingertips and clamped her nipple between the clamp of the jewelled silver.

"Ah!" she shot upward into his arms. "Simon!" One hand went to her breast, where darts of raging need pierced her to her oh so ready womb.

He examined her closely. "You like this?"

"Aye, *aye*!" She grabbed his hand. "I like the way it looks, too."

"Greedy witch."

She cuffed him. "Give me the other."

He hauled her up into his embrace and kissed her as if he would die now and be complete. Then he pushed her to the bed, stroked her other breast, laved her nipple with a sweet swirling tongue and clamped the other jewel on.

A shout sprang from her lips. Her hands plunged into her bush. He tore them away and dipped to put his mouth to her swollen flesh. "Quake for me, Elise." He nibbled at her tiny nub then kissed her and parted her and finally possessed her with his huge rod.

He sat back, pulled her ass cheeks up onto his thighs and rode her as if he were a man on a wild mare.

She reached for him, tweaked his brown, hard nipples and cried in wanton need. "Simon, Simon, be quick, quick because I—"

She had no more words for the fury that overtook her, pulsed through her from her tight little nipples, pressed into a raging delight by the clamps of the bejewelled silver. She could only quake and milk the glorious staff that Simon gave her with sure hard pounds of his hips into hers. Once more, she felt his eruption bathe her womb, and she rejoiced that she had come to accept him, his seed and his service.

For long minutes, he remained upright, eyes closed, fingernails digging into her hips, his body buried deep inside her. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "You learn quickly."

"I have an excellent teacher." She asked nothing of how he had learnt. It was best she never ask. For these minutes that must last her all her life, she would keep them free of the bitterness about the past and trepidations of the future. Ponderings would do them no good. "May we do this again?" she asked with bright invitation, squirming against his hips.

He chuckled. "Unsatisfied, are you?"

"If I say aye, then..."

He grinned and gave her a thrust from his still-engorged rod. "Then, I must give you new adventures, eh?"

She had barely uttered, "Aye," when he lifted her with a hand beneath her neck and sent his tongue stabbing inside her mouth.

"You are such a sweet meat, my lovely." He took her lower lip between his teeth and tugged at her while one hand covered her breast and twisted her nipple between two strong fingers. "I could eat all of you – and think I will."

She leant up on an elbow and took his lower lip between her teeth to nip him and taunt, "And if I devour you first?"

He growled. "Think you can outlast me?"

Her eyes narrowed, playing. "Shall we bet?"

"Nay!" He laughed again, more deeply in his throat. "But we shall proceed."

Another knock sounded.

"Omar," Simon told her, "with refreshment."

Simon pulled out of her with such slow precision that she groaned and covered her mound, now so empty, but so sweetly tender that she had to massage herself and sigh.

Simon closed the door, a tray filled with wine jug and bread in hand, and returned to watch her. "For a woman who never pleased herself before, you do listen to your body's needs. Open your *chat* and let me see you roll your fingers over your pearl of love."

She parted her lips with eager fingers. "I can't go slowly, Simon. I need more." She caught her breath as she touched her nub and circled it. Her cunt was so sensitive and so very full of their juices that her fingertips glided easily over her flesh. "Come back to me. My hands are poor substitutes for you, my dearest."

He seemed at first not to hear her, he was so devoted to watching her. But he shook his head then strode away. "We have wine and some bread. Later, we shall have some roast boar. The kitchen servants have butchered and dressed it for the spit."

"Our boar." She laughed triumphantly but was almost to the point of ecstasy again and mewled instead.

He poured himself a goblet of wine from the pitcher on the tray and walked back to her. "Go on, Elise. Give yourself the release you need." He winked and drained his cup. "I

promise to reward you for this lovely sight as soon as my rod fills up again. And you working at yourself does give me great desire."

She moaned and let her fingers fondle and pet her nether lips. Then she let her knees fall wide onto the bed. "Oh, Simon, this is lovely."

He pursed his lips, his brow wet with sweat as he focused on her fingers dancing over her juicy cunt. "I agree. Take yourself now, my lovely. I want you so wet for me you drip onto the sheets."

And so she took herself there to that demanding, pounding point where she lifted her hips off the bed in a carnal heat that had her delirious with thoughts of him twisting her nipples and slapping her slit and eating her very needy little cunt all at once.

She splayed on the bed, limbs askew, gasping for air and smiling at him. "Do I inspire you, my Knight Divine?"

Simon bent and kissed her knee then rose. He poured wine into his goblet and strode forward to hand her the cup. "Drink, my lovely. You need it for your next lesson."

She lifted on an elbow to take the earthen cup and drink. "There is more that is new?" She sipped, luxuriating in the bedclothes. "How much can you do in one afternoon?"

Simon winked at her and stripped himself of the tunic he must have donned to open the door to the Omar. His naked body stopped her breath. The ridges of his ribs and the valley between his hip bones made her mouth water. But the size of his manhood made her swallow and lick her lips.

"Want to know now? Or will you eat first?" He inclined his head towards the sideboard and the tray.

"Which would you prefer?"

"Ah..." He got a devilish gleam in his eyes. "I want you now."

"Well, then." She drained the cup, dropped it to the floor and wound her legs together in a coy coil. "Come show me."

He was over her in the flash of an eye. His hand delved between her heavy lips. "You are not sore?"

She purred. "Delicious to be sore from loving you, I say. Let us be about our business, my man."

He roared in laughter, throwing back his head and enjoying the mirth she could wager he had not had much of these last twelve years. But when he was done, he grew stark and serious. "Let us be about another way to give each other joy."

She pouted prettily, letting the fire of her desire sit in her eyes. "I am ready." She reached for his shaft again.

He batted her hand away but held her gaze with his hard one. "I have another piece I brought from the East. This is rare here, but used by pashas and emperors alike to ensure their women never hunger for another man."

"Well then I must see this," she invited him, though the very idea that these would excite her beyond what she had already experienced thrilled her—and made her anxious.

"If we use this, you must promise to tell me if you are hurt or outraged. They are tools of love and lust, but not pain and so—"

"So you must bring this out," she overcame her fear to say, while dismissing once more the urge to ask if him if he'd ever used this on another woman. Jealousy had no place in her bed with him. Not now. "Show me. Love me with all your ways."

But she could see in his liquid silver gaze that he spoke as if he took a vow, "With this one piece, you shall henceforth belong to me, in a new way that few men ever possess their women."

Without question or hesitation, she gave him her trust and so she said, "Come love me then, and let us thus declare that I am yours and you will forever be only mine." She did not say, *if only in our minds*, for that truth was a useless point to state.

Then, he wrapped her in his embrace and clamped her to his warm and musky body.

He caught her under her ass and spread her legs up on his thighs. He toyed with her little pearl, so sinfully tender and rounded, and pinched it until she shuddered and moaned. Softly, he traced the outline of her nub with his fingertip. "I make you ready for me, for this new way to love. I need you flowing with thick cream, my lovely. I want to ready you—here." He inserted his finger in her ass, and she groaned. "Here where I wish to come inside as I did the other night."

"Ah, Simon, you make me pant with eagerness."

He caught her chin and checked her expression. "For this, you must feel wanted but safe."

"I do," she affirmed and reached up to draw his mouth to hers for a long kiss. "I do."

"Good. Let me prepare you, my sweet one." He shifted and against her hungry cunny lips, she felt his sure fingers dip inside her then bathe his penis with her cream. "Beauty, I can smell your desire from here," he rasped as he reached around to massage her asshole, then coat it inside and out with her juice.

She had never felt such ministrations, and she tipped up her hips to offer him better access. "Oh, Simon, this *is* glorious."

"And more to come, my precious one." He pulled away and stood. "Don't move." He was gone to the sideboard to open his travelling pouch and back in three heartbeats to cover her lonely body with his own.

"Here." He kissed her mouth. "I return to you."

"I missed you." She wound her arms around his shoulders.

"Feel how I missed you," he whispered and found the entrance to her core to fill her up in one long drive to pleasure.

"Ah, I do." She welcomed him as she rose with the power of his thrust.

"And here." He pulled out to make her groan. "Let me bathe this in your ripe juice." He inserted it between her heated swollen nether lips, something large, smooth and cool, bluntly rounded at one end. In languid strokes, he ran it up and down each of her delicate folds. "Simon, what is this that warms with body heat?"

With one hand, he removed the object from her swollen flesh, but with the other, he inserted one finger, then two in her ass. "Take this token of my pleasure in your body. And revel in the joy." He replaced his fingers with the warm and liquid object. "Here will be your pleasure and mine."

She bucked at the size of it. The stretch of it. The exquisite smooth hot feel of it. "Oh, Simon," she ground out. "What is this that makes me need your rod inside me, too?"

He fingered her wet, swollen lips aside to bury his manhood deep inside her. "An emerald."

She could barely breathe with the fullness of his magnificent possession. The size of the emerald that filled her nether hole filled her loins with mad delight and she thrashed upon the bed.

He pinned her hands to the sheets. "I will take you now, pretty woman of mine. And in this claim, you will see that a man may claim more than a woman's sweet cunt."

If she had the breath, if he'd given her a moment, she would have told him she knew that. Knew that now more fully than she ever had with Alphonse. Ever could with any other man. For this man was her love. Her lover.

And as he plumbed her and gave her the sensations of his shaft and his other jewel of love, she knew not which to name the more enthralling. For she adored both. And as he pumped his seed into her greedy little body yet one more time, she milked him in her own ecstasy that must have shook the walls of the keep. Afterward, she lay back, his heavy flesh collapsed upon her, and asked if there could be more she did not know about the art he taught.

"Aye, my treasure," he murmured, "but first, we must rest. For I have more to show you, and you will never forget these next moments in my arms."

She claimed there could be no higher glory. Then she wound herself around him and would have fallen to sleep when Omar once more knocked upon the door.

Simon struggled to his feet and trudged to the door. This time as they stood talking in that odd language, she peeped around the hangings to note the tall dark man's sharp face lined with worry. His gestures were brusque as he pointed towards the guard house. As Simon closed the door upon him, he gave his man an order that had Omar smiling with evil delight.

"What is the matter?" Elise asked, when Simon returned to her and began to dress. "What has happened?"

"Omar tells me you have a visitor."

Simon secured his tunic and tied his belt then extended his hand. "Come, my dear one. You must have a bath and dress in your finest. You do not want this guest to smell upon you the joy we've shared."

She cupped her mound. "No matter who this is, I do not want to wash away our child."

"My sweet," Simon bent over her and brushed her wisps of hair from her cheek over her ear, "we have loved so often here that I wager you now could be carrying our babe." He grinned broadly, though Elise could see it was an expression that did not light his eyes. "If

not, we have many more days and nights to plant a child within your ripe womb. Come now, up."

She rose naked, enjoying the pinch of her nipples in the gaudy clamps, the smooth bulk of the emerald in her ass, the fragrance of their musky juices coating her thighs and the dreamy suppleness of her well-loved body. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Kiss me," she murmured to his lips, empowered by his loving to face all odds, "and tell me who is here."

He stared into her eyes for one long moment and finally relented. "Crosby."

Chapter Six

Rumour had it that Phillip Crosby had been a nasty youth. As a man he remained rude to his widowed mother and crude and cruel to his female serfs. "To belong to him as a wife or even have him as a neighbour," Elise confided in Simon as the man in question strode towards them, "was never my ambition."

Simon squeezed her forearm as they watched the blond-haired man approach them towards the dais of the great hall. "He has the pinched and greedy look of a man too well coddled."

"My lady." Phillip bent a knee in French style to Elise. "I am pleased you receive me and my men."

"I have little choice when you present yourself and your five men at my castle gates."

His tiny brown eyes bored into hers as he cast off her tartness with more pap. "I thank you for your hospitality." His gaze drifted to Simon's. "Since our hostess does neither of us the honour of introductions, I will offer you my greetings, sir."

"Offer me nothing, Crosby. Well you know who I am, else you would not be here."

"I am offended," Phillip declared with hauteur.

"I care not what you are, man," Simon growled. "State your business, then you may retire to the guard house."

"My business is with the Countess and her husband."

Elise could not contain the smile that curled her lip. "Pray tell, what is that business, Phillip? My husband cannot hear it, but I will."

"The earl is too ill?" Phillip asked.

As if he did not know. As if he had no spies in this house. Elise snorted. "He has been ill for some time, and well you know it. Again I ask, what is your business that you have the presumption to come to me here when my lord husband is abed and as added affront bring your retainers with you?"

"Bah! You know wild boar are about. Why, I hear someone recently took another here," Phillip flared his nostrils at Simon, "and did so with a dagger, no less."

Simon scoffed at him. "You brought five men in full mail over fifteen miles in a snow storm to tell us what we already know?"

"You are most unkind."

"And you," Simon seethed, "are most unwelcome."

Phillip inhaled and set his jaw. "I must speak with your husband."

"No."

"You then, Elise. Alone."

"That is not possible," she told him. "State your case now."

"I have come to propose an alliance."

Elise bit her lip to keep from laughing in his face. "That is unnecessary."

"You and I," he replied between clenched teeth, "know you need protection."

"Aye, that I do." *From you. From John. From the winds of misfortune once my husband is gone and Simon, too.*

"This man cannot provide it." Phillip tipped his head towards Simon. "He is here only to insult your honour."

"Ah," Elise crooned, "and you would save me from that blemish."

"You know I can. I have the power, the men. Joined to me, you will have a greater buffer from the Scots."

"Hmm. I would." She nodded. "But then who would buffer me from you?"

"You—you would need none from me!" he sputtered. "I would be your loyal friend."

"Phillip," she spoke softly and leant towards him, "I have known you since I first wed my lord and came here as his wife. You were then a young man of little calibre and have not yet grown in character or kindness. You have not the knowledge of what it is to be a loyal friend, and I have no desire to watch you promise what you cannot give."

"The Scots come closer, Elise. They assemble, I am told, a hundred miles from me. And they will care not for your need of loyalty or character."

"If they come," she told him praying she had the means to somehow keep the fiends contained in their homeland, "they will overrun you first, Phillip. And I will seek my sovereign's help before I seek yours."

"You will regret this," Phillip warned.

She smiled, serene in her own conviction. "I may regret that I could not thwart them, Phillip, but I will never regret the refusal of any offer of help from you."

"The least you can do is give us better quarters. In fact, I demand a better room than the guardhouse. 'Tis cold there with only one fire in a vast common room. I am your equal, and I deserve a room here in your keep."

"There are none available," she shot back with hot satisfaction. "Either sleep where we put you, or return home in the storm."

"I resent the insult."

"I resent you came to bully me." She waved him off. "Leave us."

Phillip surveyed her top to bottom as if she were a whore then narrowed his gaze at Simon. "Aye. I leave you to your rutting."

Elise felt Simon's body stiffen. "What we do is none of your business," she told him. "You may dine with us here in the hall tonight, but tomorrow I will send you homeward. At daybreak, you and your men be ready."

"Or?" he taunted.

Simon took a step forward to tower over the man by many inches. "Or we turn you out with what you have on your backs."

* * * *

Dinner was a sad affair with Phillip sullen on one side of her and Simon, silently furious, on the other. Never known for his brilliant conversation, Phillip harped in her ear about the Scots barbarism, their numbers and their arms.

"Elise, I tell you that you make a mistake to think too lightly of their threat. They have harassed my lands since my grandfather was a boy. Your husband knows this. He and my father led a foray years ago to ward them off. They pushed them back because they were quick and well armed. You and I can do the same. Permit me to come speak with you privately."

"I told you nay," she countered.

"I am far better than you have heard of me, Elise. I am not the boy I was."

She considered him, his pouting mouth, his lax jaw and his dishevelled hair he had not even combed to come before her tonight and dine. "Nay, you are not."

He leaned closer. "I am a worthy match for you. Once your husband dies —"

Elise stiffened at his effrontery. "Say no more, Phillip."

"You will consider me, then?" he whispered, his eyes eager with joy.

"Never."

He shot to his feet. "I must see your husband."

"He is incapable of seeing anyone." In fact, she had looked in on him earlier, and he was fitful, muttering of his first wife and thinking Elise was his mother.

"It is an insult for me to come here and not see him," Phillip seethed. "I demand to pay my respects."

"Very well. A few minutes." Elise rose and summoned her servant at the front table. "Cleve, take Lord Crosby to the earl and let him greet our master and no more."

Cleve walked to the dais and nodded at Phillip to show him the way. "Sir, I beg you the stairs here quickly."

Elise pursed her lips as she watched him leave for the back of the hall and the way to Alphonse's bed chamber. "He is a pestilence upon this clime," she murmured to Simon. "I wish he'd find a bride to keep him in bed awhile."

Simon snorted. "No right-minded lord would hand over his girl to that cur."

"As long as John does not hand over any more land or power to him," Elise told him with distaste, "I shall be safe. But John may fear the Scots more than he fears Phillip's inadequacies."

"Come now, my dear." Simon took her hand. "You and I have much to do to ensure John's future."

She grinned up at him, regardless of what her serfs would see or say about her loving look days or years from now. "Aye. You promised me another treat. And I am your most ardent student, my Knight Divine."

His silver eyes lit with the fires of heaven. "Come quickly, then. The night grows cold, and I am hot to show you new adventures."

* * * *

Simon asked first however for a bath for himself. Heaven knew, he needed the release the hot water brought his body. Dealing with Crosby had churned his insides, and loving Elise required more serenity than dinner in that man's presence had brought. Besides, Simon liked the way Elise eyed him leisurely from the chair.

"'Tis delightful to see you wet, sir."

He roared with laughter at her words. "Saucy woman," he teased and relaxed backward in the copper bath. "Come wash my hair."

"Mmm..." She shook her head. "What if I prefer to wash other parts of your body?"

He narrowed his gaze on her and pointed to his side. "Come here."

She licked her lips, rose from her chair and stood, gazing down into the copper tub. Her examination had his manhood thickening, and his balls tensing. "You are quite beautiful," she told him on a wisp of air.

"If you come here now," he rasped with hard need, "I will show you how your beauty strikes me."

She grinned and tossed her head. "Ah, what can you show me that I have not already seen?"

"How your loveliness strikes me at this moment," he whispered and grasped his rod beneath the water.

She stood her ground. "I will show you instead how your beauty affects me." And at that she began to work at the tie that closed her over-tunic to whisk the garment to the floor. Her under-tunic came next, and suddenly, she was naked to him once more. But instead of coming to him, she began to caress her breasts. Pinching her nipples, she sighed and let her head fall back so that the arch of her slender throat was laid bare to him. She reached up, removed the pins from her hair and let the wealth fall about her slender shoulders. The blonde curtain of her curls concealed one breast and cupped another.

"Elise," he breathed. "Come to me, my darling, and let me suck your pretty nipples."

Her eyes opened, and she smiled like a cat as she let her hands drift lower to her waist and her navel and her frothy little nest. She played in her nether hair, her fingers twisting and pulling at her mound. She moaned, and he did too when she delved into her slit with eager fingertips and parted herself for him.

"What do you think, my Knight Divine?" Her voice was husky with need. "Am I ready for you?"

Her lips were bright pink and glistening with her body's sweet syrup. "Nay," he forced himself to tell her. "You can do more to bathe that cunny for me."

"Oh, aye," she agreed with a gush of enthusiasm and spread her legs wider to tilt up her hips towards him. "I think a bit of this would be good," she crooned and sent her fingers up inside herself to bring down more juice and caress her nub. But when he would have guessed she had reached a point of delight, she groaned and pulled her fingers out. Then she turned and bent over to show him her pretty heart-shaped ass. "I need you to put your jewel inside me here."

Near to bursting with his seed, he almost choked in laughter on her double entendre. "My emerald or my rod?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him and let a sensual fire light her eyes. "My darling, I think it must be both."

He swallowed hard. "What have I created here?"

She spun to face him once more and ran her hands from her bush up her lithe and swaying body to her breasts then to her throat and lifted her hair to let it fall about her once more. "A woman who loves to love you, my lord."

"Aye," he breathed the affirmation and felt the pain of their coming separation as if a knife were cutting open his guts. He rose with a start, the water cascading from his body.

"Sweet man," she said on a bare sound. "You are a dream come true." Her eyes flew to his. "Love me again."

He left the tub, grabbed a towel to give himself a few swipes and reached for her. In one sweep, he caught her high up into his arms then he was carrying her to the bed. She wiggled in delight and began to tickle him.

"You torment me?" he asked with fake harshness.

She giggled and reached for his armpits.

He gripped her wrists and pinned her to the bed. "You want to play?"

"Aye!"

"I'll show you play." He kissed her quickly and left the bed to once more find his pouch.

"Ooh..." she murmured, rubbing her thighs together. "What more do you have?"

His nostrils flared. He had known she would make a good lover. For him and no other. But to see her delight and hear it drove him to mad joy. As he approached her, he wound the silken ties about his fists, cautioning himself not to bind her too tightly. "These are for you and me." He forced her wrists above her head and bound them together with a sailor's knot. "There," he said, sitting back on his heels and admiring the sinuous figure before him. "My prize to do with as I please."

She writhed in tortured delight. "I cannot bear the delay."

"Oh, you must, pretty lady." He ran a hand down the front of her naked body and loved the way she undulated at his touch. "For there is so much more to teach you." *And if I had all the time before I die, I might not have enough to show you all the ways I can delight you best.*

"Simon," she beseeched him. "You go far from me. Come to me now. No sadness here."

"Aye," he snapped back to the moment. Then he rose and went to the tub to snatch up a cup, the soap and his razor. "Lie still," he whispered, "and let me bathe this pretty cunt and bare it to me."

She oohed and ahed as he made soap suds, caressed her to make a lather and outlined her mound with his fingers. He could barely keep to his task, her cunny was so wet, so swollen and so red with want of him. But he held her down, kissed each bit of her lips he shaved then rinsed his hands to thrust his fingers inside her and give her some relief. She bucked high up from the bed and groaned loud enough to shake the rafters.

"Simon! Simon! Give me your rod!"

He looked at his throbbing shaft and bit his lip so hard he knew he drew blood. But he was determined to give her another new adventure that no other man ever would. "Patience my pretty." He rose, hurried to his pouch, withdrew his pincers and emerald and another piece that he had bartered for, one night, years ago in Acre.

She watched him with half-lidded curiosity. "Hurry. How I need you."

He bent to her and settled between her thighs. As before, he kissed her areolas, sucked them and licked them before he clamped the pincers to her rosy little buds. With a hand to her stomach, he gentled her, coating the emerald in her love juice. She squirmed and moaned and demanded he insert it in her ass. And he gave her what she needed. She gave a cry as he

sat the green gem into her little hole and arched her hips up to him. "You make me mad. Kiss my cunny," she demanded.

"I have something better, richer."

"Agh," she objected, wild with need, just the way wanted her for this next.

With an ease that astounded him, he sent the first stone of the long strand he held in his hand up into her succulent little cunt. "You are so wet, my sweet one. You take these like an eager lover."

"I am," she insisted. "Oh, Simon, what is this that fills me with smooth, round balls?"

He braced himself above her and took her lips in rich kiss. "Pearls. Each one perfection, as are you." He seized her mouth again and pushed another small round stone up inside her greedy little body. And for each pearl, he gave her a kiss until at last the strand remained with half or more of the pearls outside her lovely cunt. The sight of her flesh adorned by pale white orbs enflamed him now, as he had known it would, lo those many years ago. He sucked in his breath and positioned his rod to possess her.

Beneath him, strengthened by raw need, she heaved like waves upon the shore. "Simon," she whispered, "I am still empty without you inside me."

And at her supplication, he grasped her thighs, parted her slick plump lips and carefully took hold of the loop of pearls. Then he sank inside her to the hilt. The smooth, hot feel of her channel, studded with the pearls made them both groan in teeth-baring delight. At once, her walls pulsed around him in violent spasms and milked him mercilessly until, robbed of all control, he yelled again, a dying man in his own release. He had sworn only to take her, make her breed, make her safe. But in his claiming of her he had deceived himself. He had always loved her and so would he continue no matter time or cost or men who said him nay.

For with each mating, each loving moment, he had claimed her. Made her his more completely than ever he had fantasized. Removing his flesh from hers and the pearls as well, he sank to the bedding. Sighing, he released her tether, nestled her close and gave in to the euphoria and the restful assurance that now, every inch, every hair, every fold, every curve, every breath of hers inside and out belonged to him and him alone.

"Simon," Elise pressed her mouth to his minutes, hours later, "Omar is at the door again."

He raised his head and heard not only Omar's knock but another at the inside door to the chamber where Katani kept watch over Alphonse.

He strode to the inner door first and gazed down at the little man. "What ails you, Katani?"

The mute dwarf motioned up the stairs to Alphonse's chamber then plucked at Simon's hand.

Naked, panicked, Simon took the winding stone stairs two at a time. Katani sped at his heels.

When he reached Alphonse's bed, Simon halted. He had seen this look before on battlefields and in the filthy warrens of the Hospitalers inside the walls of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Corfu.

"Nay, nay!" Elise cried as she rushed around him towards her husband. She had thrown on her tunic, but her hair drifted about her face and form as she bent to the man who had been her master for twelve years. She rubbed his cheek and pressed her fingers to his nose. "How can this be? He was not so ill yet. Not on his death bed." She sank to the bed, her tears coming silently.

And Simon knew she was right. When he had arrived here, when he had first seen Alphonse, he knew the man was ailing and had weeks at the least, months at most, to live.

Why would he die now? Sooner than he should?

Unless someone had hastened him along to meet his maker.

Chapter Seven

Simon strode forward. "Stand aside, Elise."

When she blinked at him but complied, he tore the covers back from Alphonse's body. The frail man wore his night linen, his thin legs spread askew on the bedding. Simon bent over him, cupped his head and turned him this way and that. No marks appeared on his face or throat. But Simon, knowing there were more ways to kill a man than to beat him, opened the poor man's mouth wider and smelled his breath. No air came forth, but an acrid smell lingered.

Simon reared back and, with loathing for the deed so recently done, told Elise his finding. "Alphonse was poisoned."

"Nay." The shock sent her back a pace.

"I have no proof, save the fetid odour in his mouth. But he is gone by someone's foul hand." He spun to face Katani. "Did you see anyone come in here?"

The little man nodded. Then he made motions that two men had come, talked with Alphonse and bent over the bed.

"If ever I wished you had a voice," Simon told him, "it should be now. What else?"

Katani scurried towards the door that led to the stairs and Simon's chamber below. Then he made a few motions with his hands that had Simon scowling. "You saw this through the crack in this door." He pointed towards the door to his own chamber, and Katani nodded.

And at that moment, a shouting match erupted in the hall.

When Simon opened the door, Omar barred the portal with arms spread wide, but there stood Phillip Crosby and behind him Cleve Faulk with two Atherton guards from the gatehouse. "What is amiss here?" Simon demanded.

"You!" Crosby pointed at him. "Tell your man to move from the door. I understand the Earl of Atherton is dead and by your hand."

Simon lifted his chin to Omar to let Crosby pass the door. "How might you know that when we have only learnt it?"

"Cleve swears he saw you force the poison down the throat of the earl."

Simon sneered at Cleve. "Do you now?"

Cleve gloated. "I do." He gave a signal and the two guards seized Omar and Katani.

The serfs from the kitchen and the farmyard began to gather behind the Cleve.

Elise stepped to Simon's side, having swept a mantel from her husband's bed around her shoulders. "Cleve, unhand Lord de la Poer's men."

"Nay, my lady, I give the orders here."

"You ungrateful dog," she belittled him. "What gall to do this?" She spun towards the guards, noting their identities for the disposition of their miserable future. "Release those men, I command you!"

Simon stepped forward. "You act beyond your station, man."

"My station has improved these many years. My Lord, the Earl ordered it."

"He is no longer with us," Simon shot back.

"I am the power here," Elise strode towards Cleve.

He drew himself up in pride. "My lady, you went to the woods yesterday," Cleve announced to all in a snake's silken voice. "You visited Ulred, and we all know she makes poisons. Poisons," he lifted a vial, "that she puts in little pots like these."

The assembled servants gasped and nodded, eyeing Elise with suspicion.

Phillip Crosby stepped forward, and with a satisfaction in his countenance, he announced, "We have sent for the sheriff to tell him our tale. As the king's justicar, he will see we have the evidence to make you both confess."

Elise snorted. "You go too far, Phillip."

From the corner of the hall, five Crosby men in mail came forward and took Simon by the arms. Phillip sneered. "Give him some clothes and throw him in the dungeon."

Elise barked at him, "You dare to give such orders in my house."

"I do, for your guards are tied up in their own house. All unable to help you escape." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "You would not have me when you could have saved yourself and your household."

Cleve looked at one of the servant woman. "Take your lady to her bed and tie her to it." He sent Elise a look of evil pleasure. "We will see how she likes it without a lover to warm her." He glanced at Crosby. "Unless, of course, you would deign her fit to –"

Elise strained at the hands that held her now. "I would not permit either of you near me."

Simon broke free of his captors and pushed her towards her backwards towards her alcove. But the guards snatched at him, pushing open the door he would have closed against them.

Crosby yelled at his men, "For Christ sake, take him to the dungeon now! Get him from my sight." He strolled closer to Elise and lifted her chin. "I will visit you soon, Elise. Once we have washed away all traces of de la Poer and confirmed there is no child of his in your belly, you may yet beg me to take you to my bed. But do know, you will now come not as my wife but as my whore."

She spat in his face. "The king would never permit it. Nor would my father or my brother."

He wiped away her insult with his open palm. "They are far away and can only learn weeks after I have plumbed your ripe cunt and made you moan for me alone."

Simon struggled to remain in the hall as Crosby insulted Elise, but the numbers of Crosby's guards waylaid him and he heard her reply, "I would rather die than let you lay a hand on me, you swine."

The crack of Crosby's hand against Elise's delicate face had Simon's tearing like an animal at his captors' hands but to no avail. He trudged behind them to the guard house and the desperation of his and Elise's loss.

* * * *

The endless days and nights in confinement in the bleak, stone-cold guardhouse were no torture compared to his worry over Elise's fate. If she was with child and Crosby or Cleve hurt her, or if she was subjected to mating with Crosby, Simon agonised over what she might do to thwart them. For thwart them she would, he knew. She had been strong before he'd

come to her, but since laying in his arms, she had blossomed into an Amazon queen. Now he grew crazed with hate that tore his heart to shreds.

One night in turmoil, Simon created such a ruckus that the guard on duty came to bid him be quiet. "Else Crosby's men will come to beat me to submission, my lord."

This was the first word anyone had dared speak to Simon, and so he tried for more. "Tell me, man," Simon reached through the iron rungs of his wooden door, "what news of my two companions?"

"Gone, my lord. Escaped from Cleve and ran away like the wind."

Simon grinned. Omar and Katani's freedom gave him a spark of hope that some would survive this ordeal. Where they might have gone and how two oddities such as they might cope in this barren frozen land mystified him. But he had to ask, "And what of your lady Atherton?"

The guard glanced away in no hurry to reply. "Ill, my lord. Sick unto death. Bleeding, too."

Simon stiffened, racked with agony. "Does Crosby beat her?"

"Nay, my lord. But I must not be caught talking to you, sir. I will get a lashing."

Simon seized the man by his tunic. "I'll tell no one of this, you can be sure. But what ails her? Why does she bleed?" he asked but feared he knew.

"They say she loses a babe, my lord." The man gulped. "Yours."

Simon released the guard and sank against the wall. "Christ. I've killed her."

He roared in his grief and guilt. He had killed men, slaughtered them in the name of Christ to gain rocks of the Holy Land for his pontiff and his king. He had butchered men, women and children who stood in his path to gain a castle keep, a city wall or desert sands. Never had he wept for the blood he'd shed in those causes. But in the one true cause of claiming his beloved and freeing her from tyrants, he had gladly enlisted and fought. And now, he had failed.

At the thought of her death caused by the touch of his hand and the seed of his body, Simon recoiled and swore to the God whom he knew now had deserted him that he would find a way to destroy all who had abused Elise and used her to their own ends. Dedicated to finding the chance opening, the imprudent mistake, he sealed his mind from the agony of his loss and set his life in dedication to his survival and hot revenge.

The guards came with regularity to give him watery gruel. Why Crosby did not kill him Simon thought he knew. The fiend feared Elise's father or brother might saddle their own retainers and beset the castle. But leagues away as the Cordeliers were, Simon surmised that Crosby feared more the sheriff, a friend of the one all feared if they were wise—John Plantagenet, King of England, Ireland and France.

Two weeks later, the sheriff arrived. Simon's guard described him. Fat, short, bald, he had ridden in after the snow had melted and presented himself in the main hall to Crosby who now sat in the old earl's chair. What was discussed there, Simon could not learn a word of it.

"You must ask the house. Your lady's maid," Simon suggested to the guard who by now was sympathetic to his cause and hated the cruelty of Crosby and Cleve to the serfs.

"She will not talk to me, my lord."

"Why not?"

"She fears what Lord Crosby will do to her if your lady dies."

"Oh, Christ," Simon raked his hands through his hair and paced the earthen floor. He had to get out of here, see Elise, comfort her.

But how?

* * * *

The days crawled by. The sheriff did not come for him.

"He left this morning, my lord," his guard informed him.

"And my fate?"

His guard pressed his fleshy lips together and shrugged. "I do not know, my lord."

"You must help me escape," Simon pleaded with the gaoler who had over time become his confidante. "I must go to the King who will reward you for this."

"Oh, nay, my lord. Where e'er the king is, he cannot be here to protect me from the wrath of Crosby if I cross him."

And so it went. Another snow came and left, then another. The skies cleared, brightened and the winds that wafted through the draughty stone walls turned to gentle, fragrant breezes of spring. 'Twas on a day like that three horsemen arrived at the castle.

"Two wore the king's livery," Simon's guard told him. "The third we do not know."

"And what do the house serfs say these three came to do?" Simon asked because over time the household serfs had become loose-lipped about the comings and goings of their two oppressors, Crosby and Cleve.

"Come to parlay with the Countess of Atherton."

"She met them?" Simon asked, his heart in his mouth that she was up and about for the first time since his capture and her illness.

"Aye, she did," the guard beamed in pride. "She met them privately in her chamber. My girl says she wore a new tunic of red velvet adorned with a necklace of pearls and an emerald pendant."

"She lives." Simon pounded the wall in the joy of knowing she was well enough to greet guests—and that to do it she had worn his tokens of the love he bore her. That meant something, but only God knew what.

"The third man," the guard told him the next day, "is her brother, the Earl of Cordelier."

"And Crosby welcomed him?"

"As best we know. Crosby received him in private. No servants were permitted."

"And Cleve?" Simon pressed the guard.

The guard smiled broadly as if he were a bear with fish in his mouth. "Taken away this morning in chains by one of the two men from the king!"

"By all the saints, that is the best news I have heard in months!" Simon grinned at the guard. Only later, when alone again, did Simon wonder why Crosby still reigned in the keep, and why he, himself, still rotted in the dungeon.

* * * *

Summer came with bright rays of sunshine that pierced the darkness of his cell. His eyes, unused to brilliance, shut against the glare when his friend, the guard, would enter with his daily ration of thin news and thinner gruel.

"What, ho, this is not oats, my man," Simon objected one morning when he caught the aroma of roast pig and winter potatoes in his bowl.

The guard chuckled. "Eat up, my lord. You are to have more than that treat today."

"Oh, what will you? Catch the new louse in my threadbare tunic?"

"Nay, my lord. You are to have a bath." Two of his fellows struggled to bring in a copper hip bath.

Simon halted, one hand midway to his mouth. "My friend, last night I heard laughter amongst your friends. Did you drink too much beer?"

"Nay, sir. I have my orders to clean you up."

"Why?" Simon did not believe in miracles. "I see no saints come to save me."

"I do not know all, my lord. But late yesterday, one of the two retainers from the king returned here."

"And?"

"He spoke with the Countess."

"And Crosby? Where is he?"

"I have not been told that, my lord." He lifted the wooden bars that had closed Simon in. "Come out, my lord, and step into this tub. I was given no time to get you ready."

Chapter Eight

The bright light of the day blinded Simon in the courtyard. His legs wobbled as he took the first full steps he had had in seven months. He smelled sweeter than he had and his clothes became him better than the rags he had discarded. But his nails were still ragged, his palms coarse and his hair shaggy and hanging over his brow.

"There is a limit," he complained to his friend, the guard, "to how much a man who has rotted for months can be improved in minutes."

"Aye, my lord." His friend wrinkled his nose. "You still smell ripe, but I know they will welcome you as you are."

"You do, eh?" Simon teased him, even as he leaned on him for support to climb the steps to the door of the keep. *Wish I believed that. 'Tis not good to tell yourself fairytales.*

"Here you are, my lord," the guard swung wide the door to the main hall, and the brilliant sight inside blinded him, rooting him to the floor and driving the air from his lungs.

Elise sat behind her grand table in glowing good health. With hair wrapped in a pale gold wimple and her body draped in the crimson velvet his guard had described, she smiled a glorious welcome at Simon. "Come, my Lord de la Poer. All is well with us here. Do greet the Earl of Greystone."

Simon squinted in disbelief at the familiar giant who sat beside her and wore a black, leather eye patch. He had met the earl years ago in Acre in less than peaceful circumstances, when both of them had taken oaths in The Order of the Lily to aid each other in all endeavours for all their lives.

"My Lord." Simon inclined his head in deference to the man who held rank above him. "We meet again after six long years."

"Correct, my Lord de la Poer." The tall, blond man whom fable and lineage declared of Viking raider's lineage rose from his seat next to Elise. Simon noted that here in the hall, William Greystone had unstrapped his sword to leave it in the far corner. Fighting had not been his purpose here. "Permit me to assist you to the dais, Simon."

Simon rebelled to be treated like a weakling, and he objected in a booming voice. "Surely, sir, all of you will let me find my footing."

"Aye," Will stepped back, his hands in the air. "I meant no disrespect."

"I thank you, Will," Simon murmured to the man beside whom he had fought in Acre and Rhodes—and whose life he had saved from the thrust of Saracen's scimitar. Simon pulled back the empty chair and sank into the cushioned wealth, his bones creaking in the effort.

"Wine?" Elise asked and raised her finger to direct a serf to pour for Simon.

"Aye." He took a draught, the richness arousing his taste for more. As he put his cup out to be refilled, he let his eyes feast on the figure of the woman whom he had thought never to see again. But his vision blurred still, and to look at her hurt his heart, she was so rosy and round.

"The Earl of Greystone went to King John at my request and has come here from the king expressly to heal the wounds of our recent problems," she began in a small but steady voice. Her eyes raked over Simon, pausing at his mouth then his hands before returning to caress his eyes with her own serene gaze. "Sir, please tell my Lord de la Poer of the judgement of King John."

"Our sovereign has heard the charges of murder of the Earl of Atherton from the shire's reeve brought by Sir Phillip Crosby and your former servant Cleve Faulk. Our king has great faith in the service of his sheriff in this clime, and he is now satisfied there is no evidence to support the accusation. To the contrary, the sheriff heard the statements of this Cleve Faulk and concluded that if poison was administered, it was this Faulk who had done so. He has been sent to London to the dungeons of the Tower to sit before the king's judges who will examine him."

Simon sat spellbound for he knew the Tower was no place any man ever entered and subsequently left. "And Crosby? What of him?"

Will pursed his generous mouth and shook his head, even as he twirled his wine cup by the stem. "Crosby has been sent home."

"Home?" Simon spat the word. "How can that be?"

Elise answered. "'Twas not what I wanted. Not what I bargained for."

Simon gazed at her in astonishment, his eyes watering at the fumes from the tapers. "What did you bargain with?" He feared it was her marital status. If she had promised to marry Crosby, Simon would find him and kill him where he stood. Another man might take her, wed her, but over his dead body would he see her marry Phillip Crosby.

She smiled, easy and generous as a Madonna. "The only things I possess."

He frowned at the meaning of her words. Perhaps his mind as well as his eyesight was affected by the brilliance of freedom.

Will stood and bowed to Elise. "I take my leave of you, Madame, and I retire for the evening." And as he passed Simon, he clamped him on the shoulder. "Good night, friend. Sleep well."

When Will had left and Elise had shooed the servants from the hall, Simon rose and moved closer to her. This near, he saw her skin glowed, her cheeks bloomed and her mouth was a succulent berry he longed to taste once more. He reached for her hand. "No more riddles, my love. Tell me what goes here."

She leaned over and kissed his lips with tender care. "My beloved, you are free. Cleve will soon be charged for the murder he committed. Last winter, the sheriff ordered Ulred here, and she told him that Cleve came to her months ago to bid her make a poison. She never did, but Cleve then confessed that Crosby told him of a way to take the juice of a flower and create a liquid to close the throat. Whatever it was, this was enough to end the life of Alphonse. Crosby wanted him gone before you and I could mate, but when they were too late for that, they hoped to catch me before I could conceive."

"And blame Alphonse's death on me." Simon squeezed her hand and brushed a tendril of her hair back from her cheek. "And why is Crosby freed?"

"He goes on pain of death, charged by Will Greystone to add to his garrison to keep the Scots at bay—or he, himself, will die a traitor at John's order." The news she gave Simon had her raising a hand to cup his cheek and smooth back his hair from his brow. "If I could have freed you sooner, I would have. I have yearned for you and cried for you."

Simon caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "My love, no less than I longed to be with you to comfort you as you lost our child."

She stilled. "Simon, you think I lost a babe?"

He stared at her. "What was your illness then? The guard told me you bled."

"I did, but it was naught." She rose, one hand to the table to aid her balance, for she stood and the gown Simon had admired for its rich wealth, flowed around her in a billow. Beneath her belly, there was a round weight upon her loins. One of her blonde brows shot high in amusement. "Your mouth hangs open, my dear man."

He placed one hand to her belly, rounded with a child. "And why should it not be?"

She threw back her head to laugh.

He got to his feet and embraced her as best he could. "You are quite great with this child."

"Of course, he is huge. He is yours."

"Bah." He feigned irritation. "How am I to love you?"

Her laughter delighted his soul as she said, "The way you always have. From afar or near, with my welfare as your high most goal."

He swept her to him and captured her lips in a searing kiss. "I know not how you accomplished this miracle. But I must hear the tale." He settled her to her chair and held her hands in his.

"'Twas really simple once I realised I had more means to bargain than anyone thought. Even me."

"Which was?"

"My character. Yours. And your jewels."

"You do speak in riddles."

"Nay. When they carted you off to my dungeon that night, I knew in time my guards and my serfs would come to rue the day they followed Crosby and Cleve. Never had Alphonse mistreated our minions. And neither had I. The household staff would reverse their loyalties, I was certain. So I turned my attention to those outside the keep who would help me. I sent one of my maids out to Ulred with a note for the sheriff."

"But he did not come for months."

"True. I asked him to send a messenger to my father and my oldest brother. I told them of my plight and the need for their influence with the king. They did send messengers to John, and he was eager to support me. After all, my father and my brother hold his western borders without fail. But the one I needed to aid me more than others was Joanna."

"John's daughter?"

"Aye, she was my friend and proved it by agreeing to hold the money Alphonse would pay you for your service to me. She remains a friend with all she has done here to save us both. She wrote her father and told him how you and I were hostage here to Crosby's plan. How Crosby imprisoned you, the king's loyal servant. Joanna wrote to her father and begged him to release you."

"I am shocked, Elise. John does nothing simply because a retainer of his has been maligned."

"But he reacts to the daughter whom he adores, and he acts in his own interest when he sees something he wants."

Simon's heart pounded. "Elise, what did you give him? If you gave him your earldom or any small part of your land to save me, I will renounce the bargain. I will return to—"

"Nay, you will not." She smiled, and once more, Simon felt himself blinded by a dazzling beauty he felt in his bones. "You will remain with me and be my love."

"Not if you sold your—"

"I did not. I gave John the clips, the emerald and the pearls."

"What?" Now, Simon knew he was not so much blind as utterly mad. "He has the wealth of the kingdom at his fingertips, and he agrees to take a few stones and jewels as payment for a favour?"

"Aye." Elise winced then put a hand to the small of her back to rub at a pain that made her writhe. "He did! His courier saw me wear them, and after what I did, he demanded I give them over."

"Why?" Simon persisted, reaching round to help ease her discomfort.

"Because John is vain! Because he has a new mistress who evidently craves such items in abundance and demands our sovereign take her to bed with new and interesting toys."

"But...why John would ask for such things after a courier *sees* them on you?"

"Well, they were impressive, darling. And I told Joanna about them."

"Sweet Jesus. And did you tell her how we used them?"

"Of course! She was thrilled with the instruction."

Simon groaned.

"I told Joanna you had given me love gifts of no equal, and she wrote back to say that John would be interested in trading my jewels for my best interests."

Simon could not believe his ears.

"So you see, my dear man, I bought your freedom by surrendering the jewels that brought me to this state to begin with." Her hand swept down her form.

Simon shook his head. "And in the king's moment of greed, we are free."

"Free, aye. Free from Crosby and Cleve. Free from the dungeon. Free from the Scots as long as Crosby fights like a hound of heaven." She grinned. "Free to love." Her expression turned severe. "Will you stay, my Knight Divine?"

Was she mad? He had worked for this, dreamed of this all his life. To be with her as her lover was one thing, and to be the father of her child, another. "Only on one condition, my sweet love."

"And that is?"

"Would you marry me?"

She beamed at him. "And give this child his father's name? Aye, my darling. I would marry you, and this time, when we mate, I vow to never let you go."

He caught her to his heart and spoke upon her lips. "Well, then, my lady, I am forever at your service."

About the Author

Cerise DeLand believes great romances combine feisty heroines with men who adore them and cannot live without them. With a background in Chinese and European history, Cerise brings her knowledge of Chinese, German and a bit of Spanish, then blends it with her years living in Japan, Italy, Washington, D.C. – and Texas. She uses all her talents and experiences to write romances she loves. Published in e-format by Ellora's Cave and Wild Rose Press, she is thrilled to bring her stories to Total-E-Bound, too! Cerise has won awards for her 18 print romances and mysteries (under another name), many of which have become selections of The Doubleday Book Club and The Mystery Guild.

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