



"Your life is forfeit if you open that door."

All her life, Lady Isabel Colven has followed the path laid out for her, content to look neither left nor right for excitement. Her future holds a dutiful, passionless marriage to some nice young man, and she's content...until the exotic and compelling Lord Rukh Hayle threatens her maidenly reserve. Rumor paints him as a wife-murderer; desire tempts her to look past his aura of danger.

Rukh refuses to let his family's curse kill a third bride, but Isabel awakens the Raven within him, compels him to take her to wife—and to bed—despite the secrets that live under his skin. That lie is locked in the darkest corners of the manor, waiting to be unleashed. Their lusty union arouses the curse, entangling Isabel in an erotic tug of war that can only end in her destruction. There is no escape for either of them. Not from his family's shadowy history. Not from demons imagined and real. And not from the choice Rukh faces to save his bride from a fate worse than death...

Warning: This gothic contains heady kisses that lead to ruin, passionate sex on a desk chair, a mysterious husband who may be a murderer, a cursed family of raven shifters, and an unspeakable evil hidden in the closet.

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The Forbidden Chamber

Ella Drake

Dedication

To my boys—the big guy and the munchkins—thank you for your patience and love.

Chapter One

England, 1823

The wife-murderer whirled Isabel Colven around the crowded ballroom while hundreds of candles blazed from sconces on the smoky amber walls. Lord Hayle's eyes, dark and mysterious, glinted with an emotion she could not name. Was it desire? Was it desire for her body or for her death in his bed—though he would have neither? Despite the cloying heat in the room from the pressed bodies twirling in mindless abandon, she shivered.

Lord Hayle clasped her against him and grinned down at her. The cream satin gown with a sheer layer of soft organdy provided no protection from his long, hard frame. "Are you frightened, little bird?"

Isabel's eyes widened. His voice burrowed into her soul to curl into a ball, lodging there to stoke a fire. Unfamiliar warmth expanded in her stomach and buffeted against her previously unassailable defenses. The resonance beckoned the eighteen year old, and she inched closer to whisper her reply, intrigued despite the tales of his past.

"Yes. Pardon, no, of course not." The breathiness was new to her, as well as the flutter of her heart. Scarcely able to reach his broad shoulders, her white-gloved hands trembled.

"Do not believe the rumors you hear, dove." The crisp black tailcoat outlined his masculine form and lent him a civility she wasn't certain he owned. "Your mother would not have brought you or your sisters if you were in mortal danger from me."

She doubted the assurance but kept that to herself. Even if she were not in danger of bodily harm, his chiseled features and handsome visage threatened her maiden's virtue. She'd never wanted to touch a man's face before or to run her palms over the bristly stubble and brush back the silky lengths of hair falling across his charcoal brows. Long enough to curl at the ends, the thick strands invited her fingers to smooth and tunnel through and cling.

"Why did you ask me to dance? My sisters are older. They have the entrée into society."

"You do not?"

His eyes mocked her. He thought her naïve. Yet, how could he know that her mother had delayed her coming-out for no other reason than oversight? Lady Colven disregarded the duty but still brought her along to functions when it suited her purpose.

"I have not had my debut, but you requested Mother bring us all. Or perhaps there has been a mistake?"

“No mistake.”

The small window of hope slammed shut in her face, but she tried again. “I do not understand why you asked for my attendance.”

“It is no matter.”

His cryptic remark silenced her. Her heart thudded with fear and the irrational desire that had slipped her bonds. Flustered and unsettled since her mother had received the invitation, Isabel held her heightened anxiety in check by a bare thread.

Late to the week-long event, Isabel’s trepidation had turned to dread when they’d left the lushness of Cornwall and crossed into the fog enshrouded lands of Hayle. The manor rose from the stark hills and struggled against the mist clinging to the stone spires and arches. Dark birds dotted the window ledges. Her family carriage had swept past the ornate gates. The drive curved to the grand, wide steps made of dark stone. Once there, they took no time to rest, but rushed into their finery in time for the beginning dance.

Shocked when Lord Hayle had chosen her for the first dance at his house party, and, at that, a forbidden waltz, Isabel had hoped he would pick a woman outside her family or, if not, one of her sisters. Shameful to wish them to be on the chopping block, but she dreaded being his chosen. That was their purpose here, to be displayed, lambs to sacrifice.

“More’s the pity,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean, sir?” Isabel hid her confusion and masked her expression. The few men she knew overlooked her. Happy to be quiet in the corner while fops chose her unreserved, worldly sisters, Isabel remained content on the edges of social gatherings at her brother’s estate.

With mysterious midnight eyes the same color as his too-long hair that swept the top of his white shirt collar and cravat, Lord Hayle kept his silence and led her through the dance. His muscular physique held lethal grace, fluid in his movements to the waltz.

The music throbbed through her, and her pulse kept time with the dizzying pace. The red lure of his quirked lips became her focal point. This, the only warmth to be found in his face, attracted her like a magnet for her scattered senses. She watched his mouth form the words.

“You are beautiful. Innocent, are you not? Would you mind your husband? Be faithful to him and his commands?”

The question had the taste of an order, from husband to wife, as if he owned her already. Almost as afraid of her wayward ardor as the rumors that he’d killed his first two wives, she craved his nearness to a fathomless depth.

“I would, sir.”

He smiled at her, and she found herself staring at his mouth again when his lips moved forward ever so slightly and parted. His tongue flicked over his full bottom lip, and butterflies tumbled through her stomach.

Isabel's mind whirled and her world skewed, but whether from the dancing or her attraction to the dangerous man, she could not determine. At once enjoying herself while suspecting he had some secret power over her or wove a spell to bind her, she abandoned herself to the tumult.

The dance ended all too soon, or not soon enough, and he led her back to her mother. Sweat pooled under her stays, and her lungs heaved, desperate for sufficient air. Despite her obvious difficulties, her mother snatched her to the side while beaming up at their host. The woman who spurned Isabel's repeated overtures for acknowledgement now peered up at the wealthy title standing before her.

"Why, Lord Hayle, you do honor us by dancing with our little wallflower."

Isabel inwardly cringed, but she remained stoic, schooled her features into boredom, and ignored the magnetic man who loomed over her. She gave her attention to the magnificent room rather than the man whose existence permeated her skin.

Gilded in gold, the ornate ballroom could have housed a battalion in the royal infantry. Cavernous walls held large columns. Buttresses, lost in the waning light from the candelabras, rose to the ceiling.

"The pleasure was all mine, I assure you Lady Colven."

His voice pulled at her, but she backed away and bumped into her sister Elizabeth who clucked in her ear. "Watch yourself."

"Would you like the next dance with my oldest?" Isabel's mother waved May forward. The undisputed favorite of their mother, the devastating beauty left lovesick swains in her wake. To their mother's consternation, May's greed to capture the wealthiest of lords left her on the marriage mart, surpassing twenty-one.

May batted her lashes and dimpled. Isabel had never cared before that her sister was striking, but tonight she barely overcame the urge to kick the fortune-hunter in the shin and pull the blonde ringlets down from her perfect coiffeur. Not to mention the urge to elbow her middle sister Elizabeth, who puffed out her chest and pushed past Isabel to ogle the lord.

What had come over her? Even with May preening for him, the darkly handsome man inspired Isabel's dress to tighten on her sensitive nerves.

Despite the simpering May and Elizabeth, Lord Hayle cast a lingering stare over Isabel, imprinting a trail from her slippered feet to her piled high ebony hair. He missed nothing, if the throbbing from her toes to the tips of her hair gave any indication. He bent over her mother's hand in quiet acknowledgement while he watched Isabel. Quickly dismissing the rest of the Colven women, Lord Hayle sketched an elegant bow to Isabel. He went back to his host duties and left her to recover from her lightheadedness.

His dark coat a beacon among a sea of dresses hued in soft pastels, Lord Hayle moved with a surety, like a man who knew his high status and expected all to pay their due. Tall and straight, he towered above everyone, but the aloofness Isabel expected had been replaced by a hunter's grace.

Moving more like a gamekeeper than an aristocrat, his agile movements mesmerized Isabel, though he guided young woman after young woman onto the dance floor to fawn over him. But in between the flirting, the bantering, the wide turns, he stared at her over the heads of blondes, brunettes, and one coppery redhead.

She should have been frightened. She should have run away, but she did not. Could not.

Did he have magical powers? Is that how he lured his brides before he killed them? Danger lurked here, she sensed it, but her body didn't care. She wanted him. She had never wanted another.

"Our host is more handsome than the others of his family, don't you think?" May asked with a breathy heaviness.

"I had not noticed," Isabel replied.

"There, that is his nephew Christopher dancing with the girl in the sky-blue. Do you see? He is handsome as well, but not so dreary," May said.

"Lord Hayle is not dreary," she replied, still drawn to watch the tall man glide across the room.

"Why does he dance with all of those others when I am the best catch here?" May broke Isabel's enchantment by whining in her ear.

Isabel did not answer, for she wondered nearly the opposite. How could Isabel, an unpracticed maiden, compete with all of these cultured beauties? And why did she want to do so?

May pouted and plumped out her bottom lip. "You don't understand. You want to be a good little wife to a good little man and live happily ever after with your hands folded in your lap. Do you ever want to kiss a man? Make him long to push up your skirts?"

Isabel blushed hotly, likely May's intention. "My place in life is to be polite, demure, and staid. Passion is not for a wife, nor for her husband. A mistress is for passion, but a wife is to bear children and maintain the house."

May waved her hand in dismissal. Isabel had made her usual reply to May's baiting, but tonight a stirring altered Isabel's conceptions, her safety, and skewed her notions of what it meant to be a woman, a wife.

"Have you ever had your skirts pushed up?" Isabel asked, surprising her gape-mouthed sister speechless. "Oh, I am aware that a debutante must not express passion. I wonder if your question implies that you yearn to be a wife, or a mistress?"

May floundered, shocked at Isabel's unexpected boldness, but not so much as she. Surely Lord Hayle was a bad influence on her, and they'd only shared one dance. A short acquaintance for such imprudent reactions. What would happen if he kissed her? Would she lift her own skirts?

Her heated face was the visual proof of her traitorous body.

She excused herself. "I need fresh air or cold punch."

Chafing to leave before she begged a murderer to take her to bride, Isabel floated across the room, paying no heed to the crowd. Despite herself, she anchored her assaulted wits on the man. The lord danced with debutantes while casting heated glances at Isabel. Her heart tumbled in havoc between stirrings of desire and stark jealousy.

Two men in bright vests and dark velvet tailcoats spoke over the din.

“What is his given name?” asked the man with a freckled pale complexion.

“Rukh,” replied his blond companion.

“Like the chess piece?” rejoined the first.

“I think of it more like rook, the bird.”

“Yes, crow would suit him,” started the first before he frowned at Isabel.

Prompted by his unvoiced censure, she continued on her quest for punch though she longed to stay and listen. Within herself, she chided her eagerness for gossip. Once awakened, her curiosity overwhelmed, thoroughly heightened by the whispers and the covert conversations around the punch bowl near the curtains of the tall doors.

“Did you hear about his first wife?” asked one woman.

“No, what happened?” replied another.

“She was gorgeous, an accomplished social climber. Smiled when spoken to. She was perfect in dress, style, and speech. Perfect delivering the cut if you were beneath her notice. Rather large dowry, they say. The servants heard screams a week after they were married. Only a week. Shrieking like you wouldn’t believe. Blood-curdling begging and all manner of horrors. Then, the servants were all let go the next day, and his wife was never seen again.”

“Really?” The greedy voice ate up the gossip as if it were life-giving manna.

These stories mirrored the overheard whispers between the Colven servants, when they’d overlooked her while packing the family for their week long visit to Hayle Manor.

Isabel’s middle hollowed and the burn left her face. Cold, now. Ever so cold. She put down her punch and walked the long way around the massive ballroom where the dancers talked and laughed, while on the edges pockets of darkness hid those who watched and took in the revelry. The mirrored shine of the floor scuffed by myriad Hessian boots reflected the green marble of the lower wall. She trailed along the edge with her hand sliding low against the cool stone.

Assuredly Lord Hayle could not see Isabel now, for she walked behind the line of people at the tables spread with fine food and drink. Like pigs at a trough, the society matrons stuffed their faces with canapés while their charges strolled the dark paths of the gardens away from their keepers. Isabel imagined kisses and more kisses upon virginal lips between the rose hedges.

What was she thinking? She never had such thoughts before. Perhaps the fantasies overflowed now because she wished herself in such shadows with their dark, dangerous host. After hearing of his first wife,

she did not aspire to tread that path with him. Or did she? Did the danger of death add to his allure? She was demented, of course. Should be locked away.

Another snippet of conversation caught her attention. Its words thrown by two chaperones between bites of food.

“And his second wife was just as perfect. What any man of consequence would want. The daughter of a duke, lovely enough to tempt the angels. But, I guess she didn’t keep her angels with her,” said a woman in garish taffeta.

Tinged laughter erupted in squeals. These women were pigs. They’d run their snouts in the troughs of cheese next.

“Oh, I know, she disappeared like the first, didn’t she?” the second woman responded in a low, hungry voice.

“She tried to be smarter than the first. She was here for two weeks while her brothers stayed to protect her. She told them of a forbidden chamber. She wasn’t supposed to open it, or she would die. Her brothers tried to take her away, and she agreed to leave the very next day, but wanted one more night to say goodbye to her husband,” said the first. Her head bobbed with her peacock feathered hat.

“Oh, I’d take a night with that brawny man, yes indeed,” the second woman said with a voice turned husky.

“Too, true. Too, true. Well, she should have left while she could because her brothers never saw her again. Even searched the entire house, top to bottom. And her brothers were changed. Different men. Claimed they had been attacked and chased away by giant ravens.”

With flushed cheeks rounded, the two matrons moved their mouths non-stop while their bright green and blue gowns ruffled around them. Like pastries to tempt, to whet the appetite, the women resembled the morsels they stuffed in their gaping orifices.

Perhaps there was something in the punch. What else to expect from a man who’d killed two wives?

A man who even now walked her way.

Her head spun. Isabel slipped out the doors behind her to the verandah and frightened a flock of black birds into the air. Their wings rustled as they called to each other. Rushing backwards, she shrank against the house until the murmurs of their flight died away. Trees rose above the fog. Their branches reached into the sky with skeletal fingers clacking in the wind.

Clinging against the dank, chilled wall, she realized her mistake. Pitch black, the night promised perfect cover for him to do all he wanted. The urges assailing her started their infernal burn again. The cold fear melted away.

A thrashing sounded ahead, perhaps several feet across the tile floor of the outdoor room, beyond the stone columns, and outside the pool of light streaming through the windows.

Lord Hayle was not the sole danger to a young woman in the dead of night. Thoughts bombarded, and her gut clenched. What if he didn't kill his wives, but some monster lurked here and preyed upon young women? What if the killer was a servant? That made more sense. They couldn't have all left between the murders of the two mistresses of Hayle House. Really, the magistrate should determine which servants worked here for both deaths. There was a killer on the loose. Perhaps in the bush in front of her, giggling.

Giggling?

Her panicked mind stumbled over the sounds. A woman, whispers, crinkling silk. Grunts. The apex of her thighs pulsed, a spectacular new feeling that astounded her. She stumbled back against the wall. Where was she? Why had she walked toward the noise rather than away?

Rhythmic rustling aroused her curiosity, but she stayed planted in place despite the compulsion to see. She hoarded the sounds to take out and explore later.

Wet slaps and heavy breathing culminated in a loud groan. And more giggling. Lured to stand close enough to make out the whispers, she crept forward again.

"What is it about this place that drives me wild with desire?" said a man's voice.

"I don't know, but I like it." The woman sounded as if she'd run a race.

"I couldn't even make it back to our room."

"You haven't taken me like that for years. Maybe since we were last here."

"Let's go to our room." The man groaned. "I want you again."

Sighs and moans interrupted the conversation and sent a tremor of longing through her. Afraid to move lest she be heard, Isabel froze, intrigued by her first lesson in amorous coupling, even if she were a voyeur listening to a private moment.

With an unladylike eagerness to see the couple, to determine their marital status, she locked her knees against the urge to move toward the covering foliage. If they shared a room, they would be wed and of a certain social stature. Perhaps passion in a marriage was allowed at times? At wild house parties?

At last the fear of being caught witness to forbidden intimacies forced her feet back toward the door. Before she reached the safety of the crowded hall, a brush of warmth and wind rustled through her hair.

"Who's there?" She whispered, voice down to allow the couple privacy, even though her heart sounded a rapid tattoo. Could they hear the blood rushing in her ears?

No answer except a patter to her left in the garden. The couple was still behind her. Isabel couldn't see who or what might be hiding in the dark. Decorum forgotten, she hustled toward the lit doors, almost running by the time she stepped back into the ballroom.

The stare on her back was as real as a touch.

Rukh, Lord of Hayle, watched the intriguing young woman run into his manor from the darkness of the garden. He hid from her for good reason. His raging erection would frighten the wits from the innocent. She was untouchable, no matter how beguiling.

In denial of his body's urges, he turned his back on the doors that closed behind her, and forced his reluctant feet forward. Down the garden path and around the stone walk to the servants' entrance, he stopped outside the solid oak door that did not hide the noisy bustle of his kitchen staff. The thick, damp air clogged his lungs, heaving from suppressed passion rather than the heavy air of the manor where the fog never cleared.

He gripped the handle, but stood silent. It wasn't too late to return to the party and seduce the sweet Isabel, but the lady in question would hold her purity hostage for affection or wedlock. He did not yearn for love, nor ache for a worthy wife, and as a consequence, he could not take an angelic creature like Isabel to his bed. He could not expose her to the lascivious Hayle Manor or expose his curse.

Rukh gritted his teeth and ran his hand over his groin. His family signet ring scraped against the rigid line in his breeches. He let out a frustrated breath.

He opened the door to the busy kitchen where servants worked diligently to keep his guests well fed. The room fell silent, and all eyes darted to the floor. The now quiet and still room served to remind him of the fear he'd seen in Isabel's eyes. The same response he got from all those who worked here, though they were all treated well.

He walked through, and the bustle started behind his back as soon as he stepped into the hall. The tight walkway crowded with servers cleared in an instant except for one.

"Sheila." He nodded when he passed the kitchen maid with honeyed hair and generous curves.

"My lord." She curtsied and dared to look into his eyes. Her moist red lips quirked in a sultry smile before she lowered her lashes.

Perhaps he should find a new woman to appease the curse. This one grew too bold.

With no further acknowledgment, he continued. Her displeasure whispered in his ear. "Oh, he spurns me now, but he'll be wanting me soon enough."

His sharp senses caught her mutters, unknowing that he could hear her.

The burning deep inside acknowledged she spoke truth.

The short way to the meeting chamber lay ahead, and he climbed the back narrow stairs to the top of the manor. He passed five levels. When he reached the sixth floor, he no longer fought for the air Isabel had stolen from him. The tightness in his crotch had eased as well.

Double doors flung wide, the cavernous room echoed with the warbling of the occupants within. He stepped inside and pulled the doors closed behind him. The room went still.

Glinting in the candlelight, the eyes of eleven family patriarchs turned to him from their positions at the long antique meeting table. Where was the twelfth?

One of the arched windows surrounding the stone hewn circular room filled with darkness. A giant raven dove from the ledge to land before Rukh, as tall as he at a handful of inches over six feet.

“Caw,” the black bird’s cry echoed.

Blue tinted feathers ruffled along the bird’s chest before he shook himself.

In a flash of light that blinded, though it was expected, the dark as night creature disappeared. A sinewy man with black hair and short-cropped beard stood in the Raven’s stead. The empty chair at the table held a luxurious robe. The unclothed newcomer wrapped himself in it and turned to Rukh.

“My lord,” he bowed deeply before he sat.

Now there were twelve.

Chapter Two

“We need a new mistress of Hayle,” urged Alfred, uncle to Rukh and his elder by one hundred years.

Since Rukh himself had seen two hundred and fifty summers, Alfred had lived with the curse long enough to be weary of the burden. But Alfred did not bear the brunt of the curse. While Rukh had lost two wives, Alfred had not lost his mate. Rukh’s shoulders tightened.

“Spoken by the man who arrived late. The man who flew into the Manor, risking discovery by all my guests, so that he may spend more time with his mate of these past centuries.” The bitterness in Rukh’s voice was answered by the lift of his uncle’s brow.

“You need an heir,” continued Alfred, the only one of the patriarchs who could speak with such forthrightness to Rukh. Alfred tightened the robe about his neck and dropped his earnest expression to stare at the table before him.

“I do not need another dead wife,” Rukh insisted, soft and low. Back straight, he strode to the head of the table to the ornate oak chair covered with red velvet cushions. He sat down heavily.

“Do any of the young misses appeal to you?” asked the patriarch to his right. The youngest, Ward had been under Rukh’s tutelage since his majority. Now the head of his own house, he held a place at this table.

“Appeal? That is not at issue.” Even now, Rukh wanted Isabel back within his arms, circling the dance floor with her pulse fluttering against his chest. “The issue here is that you all are frightened. If I die without an heir, the curse falls to one of you. Which of you will take it?”

Silence answered his question, and he laughed. The amusement soured in his mouth.

“I did not care for my wives, dearest uncle, and yet their deaths weigh me as a stone around my neck. What if the burden fell to you, how would you fare if you lost your mate?”

Alfred’s face drained of color, and his pale lips pressed tightly together. Hands curled into fists on the table, he hissed, “I will not lose her, and this will not pass to Christopher. Choose a wife. Beget an heir. It is your duty.”

Why hadn’t Rukh’s father protected him as Alfred now tried to do for Christopher? He feared he’d never know the answer to that question.

“No.” Rukh rose from the chair, weary of the same arguments he heard every passing of the season when the patriarchs gathered. “It is not my duty to allow harm to those under my charge.”

“You are like a son to me,” Alfred said. “I wish I could change your fate, but you are Alpha, and you have a duty. Can you let it pass to another? Can you harm another by your inability to fulfill your promises?”

Yes, Rukh wanted to answer. Instead, he replied, “I did heed your urgent request to invite the young misses here for my perusal, but my need for an heir is still not a pressing issue. Given that I do not plan on dying soon, I find I am still in no need of a wife.”

Several of the dark-haired family representatives pushed to their feet, and a heated debate erupted. Rukh sat back, unmoved as with all such meetings held over the last several decades. He could not bring himself to wed again nor bring a woman to live within Hayle Manor.

Depravity ruled him and this house. He knew the depravity well, and it sickened him. Tired of guarding the evil, of ruling the family, he longed to leave. But he could not. He could not take a woman, but if he did, he knew what type of wife he would want in his bed. She must possess onyx hair, searing blue eyes, lush red lips, and a creamy complexion. Her arms would entice with flawless, soft flesh and a smattering of freckles.

It was if she were with him even now. An alluring birthmark shaped like a crescent graced her delicate neck under her left ear, bared by the luscious locks piled on her head. Strands he wanted to tear down and grip in his fists while he tasted that mark. With Isabel’s voice, his bride would breathe his name, a name he’d not heard spoken in tenderness since he’d become Lord Hayle.

Rukh. Ghosting across his senses, Isabel tortured him and crumbled his resolve into shards of glass raked across his skin.

Rukh groaned aloud, frustration evident in the deep rumbling from his chest. He blinked his eyes open. Still in heated discussion, none had noticed his reverie. He slammed his fist on the table and pushed to his feet. The hollow thud brought all eyes to him. His hand throbbed, but he resisted the urge to shake it.

“I will wed when I deem it time to do so, which is not now. Enjoy my hospitality. You are all welcome here, and as usual I shall lead a juvenile hunt within the week.”

Rukh slammed the door on his way out.

Still taunted by his visions of the lovely and spent Isabel splayed on his bed with her sweat-soaked skin glistening in the dappled moonlight through his window, he descended from the heights of the manor back toward the ballroom. The heat from the crowded room seeped down the hall. The candlelight flickered over walls crowded with portraits of the descendants of Hayle. Passing the last of the line, Rukh tilted his head in respect to his father.

“How did you manage it, my sire?” His voice whispered low, beneath the currents of voices raised in hilarity and stoked passions. “Why did you leave such a legacy?”

Rukh would do the same. He had no choice but to live with the curse and after his death, many years from now, leave it to another.

Isabel did not see him when he slipped into the ballroom. Her back to him, she stood behind her mother who faced the dancers and chatted with her other daughters. Isabel studied a framed canvas of a windswept moor's leafless trees filled with Ravens standing guard over a swaddled babe lost in the woods. The dreary scene had been a favorite of his as a child. The graceful curve of Isabel's neck begged to be kissed when she cocked her head to the side and leaned forward for a closer view. That damned crescent birthmark made his mouth water.

Her intent posture captivated him. With her lush curves tempting his fingers to explore, he had at first overlooked her intelligence. He moved to the side to bypass the guests trying to garner his time and attention. Able to see her profile after agonizing minutes cutting through the crowded room, he smiled at her earnest expression and the critical slant to her lips.

What would she say if he told her the painting was by his father? And that the babe was him?

He started forward to ask but stopped in his tracks several feet away when a hand cupped beneath her elbow.

Rukh growled at the offending grip on Isabel and startled a nearby missus. The portly woman's skirts nearly tangled her legs in her haste to move away.

A young man spoke in Isabel's ear. She half turned and smiled at the boy.

Directed at another, her smile played havoc on Rukh. His hands clenched. The young couple moved to join the music starting anew. She danced with a Hayle, a nephew, Christopher. Of the same age, they fit together in a way he could never hope to achieve. He choked on a surge of red haze. A primal instinct to claim her and pull her from the boy bubbled from within. Perhaps for a taste of her, he could demand her sacrifice on his doomed altar of marriage.

Curse be damned.

Morning brought a temporary truce in Rukh's struggle. The pulsing in his loins abated with the dawn, the hours of tortured unrest at an end. The house was quiet. Since the reveling had lasted well into the early morning hours, he did not expect company for breakfast.

Custom at Hayle House, men and women dined separately to break their fast. The secret desire he hid from himself, to see the siren of his erotic dreams, would not be met this morn.

Alone with his much needed coffee, the rich aroma teasing his senses, Rukh sat in his library. He forced his mind away from diabolical planning to get his hands on Isabel's flesh and directed his attention to the paper he purportedly read.

The shelves full of books, the buttery leather furniture, and the faint scent of tobacco did not soothe. The textures and scents of his favorite room usually relaxed him when he retreated here. Today he welcomed the gloom, unrelenting though a splash of light fell through the lone window and the low fire in

the hearth cast a soft glow. Despite his threatening headache, Lord Hayle was thankful to be interrupted when the heavy oak door creaked open.

Until his visitor stepped into the filtered light.

“Ah, nephew. How do you like the festivities thus far?” The slight touch this young man had placed on Isabel’s elbow flashed through Rukh’s mind and punched him in the gut. Their turns about the floor had commanded his full attention while he’d stood in the shadows with fists tight at his sides.

Rukh relaxed his clenched jaw and leaned back in his seat. Though he wanted to lunge for the boy’s throat, he kept his reclined pose.

“They are quite entertaining, Uncle.”

Christopher stressed the last word. Dare he emphasize the age difference as a challenge? The boy would have to be taught a lesson for failing to respect his lord, his Alpha.

Rukh stood with deliberate, slow movements, nonchalant menace calculated to instill fear. Of course it worked. Christopher lowered his eyes, trembling, before bowing low and holding the position.

“Forgive me, my lord.” He spoke to the floor.

Rukh grasped for the affection he held for his nephew before the anger and feral need to claim Isabel tore it asunder.

“Rise, Christopher. Sit and break fast with me. I’ll ring for Cook’s scones. Your favorite, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, my lord.”

As he might have two days prior, Rukh did not ask Christopher to dispel with the honorific. Let the boy remember his lord and who held his life and future in his hands.

The great clock in the corner ticked loudly and heralded the passing of interminable minutes in the manor where time stood still and no man ripened past his coming of age. A lifetime could pass in this room filled with leather, smoke, and books. The brandy decanter had aided Rukh’s countless nights and obliterated any memory of his youth, of his innocence, and colored the world with a mist of brown to blot out the red and the guilt. Better to start life understanding the cruelty of Hayle Manor than to have a boy’s dreams crushed to dust.

Biscuits delivered, they ate in silence.

Rukh toyed with Christopher’s growing discomfort by glowering in turns at the boy and into his own laced coffee. After the great clock marked the half hour with a vibrating gong, Rukh acknowledged he couldn’t spend the day making the boy fear for his safety, much as he’d like to do so.

“Well, out with it.”

Christopher jumped when Rukh spoke and broke the uncomfortable silence. The boy leaned too much toward being a dandy. With a verdant green overcoat and a silk waistcoat embroidered with blackbirds and flowers, the younger man appeared slimmer, more fresh and jovial than his elder. A better match for a

young woman of today, Christopher had danced with all of the attractive and noteworthy misses the night before. Rukh's brows lowered. Most Hayle men dressed in somber colors like their lord. Rukh would speak to Alfred. Christopher needed time on his own for a while to learn to be a man. Keeping Christopher far from Isabel had nothing to do with the plan to send the boy into the world. Should he wish to do so, Rukh could win the girl without such subterfuge.

He overreacted. The boy had only danced with Isabel once.

"My lord, I request your permission to ask for Lady Isabel's hand."

A fluttering outside the window ended with a thud and the pecking of beaks at the glass. Christopher blanched. He looked over Rukh's shoulder to watch the bodies and wings thumping against the fragile barrier.

A great willow stood outside the window. The shadow of the hanging limbs covered in a menagerie of birds stretched along the floor, playing over Christopher's face and contrasting against the festive scene of gardens and lighthearted bliss on his waistcoat.

Rukh remained rigid in his seat rather than reach across his mahogany desk to lift the boy by his scruff and give him a beating he'd not forget. He kept his silence and let Christopher draw his own conclusions from the frenzied birds outside reacting to Rukh's mood.

Christopher nodded, tucked his chin, and stared at his shoes. "My lord, I did not mean to presume. Please forgive me for my mistake."

He looked up briefly and glanced at Rukh's nose. The young man did not quite meet his eyes before he stared at the floor. "I had thought the Lady Isabel worthy of our family, but if you do not approve, I shall court any lady you have in mind for me."

Rukh was taken aback. The birds in the window quieted but for an occasional rustling of unease.

"Christopher, I am pleased you interpreted the signs of my displeasure, and yet you disappoint. I will speak to your father. He seems to have neglected a full education on your own kind. However, if you believe you are ready, I shall think on a match for you. I was your age when I married my first wife. Perhaps you will be more prepared for the noose than I."

Rukh suppressed his amusement when the boy paled further.

"Thank you, my lord." The boy asked to be excused and hurried from the room.

Behind his desk, Rukh shut his eyes against a threatening memory of a woman, noose about her neck.

The wounds covering her lifeless body stained her silk dress red, destroying the coverlets of his bed.

Chapter Three

“Just look at this crystal, Maman.”

May’s pitch was not as low as Isabel would like, but then, her family could not be convinced to be circumspect.

“Yes, dearest. Lord Hayle will be a fine catch.” To Isabel’s relief, her mother used a conversational tone, conspiratorial, rather than projecting her speech for the world to hear. “Try not to lose this one.”

May’s perfect pout grew in evidence. Lord, Isabel tired of that plump lip curling out. May’s latest gown with its fine lace and expensive silks disgusted Isabel further. Most days, Isabel did not mind wearing a gown that had seen use by two sisters before her. Since they’d arrived at Hayle House, Isabel struggled to present her best, or better than her best, if possible.

Isabel shoved a savory pastry in her mouth, and stilled the fingers of her other hand tapping wildly on the exquisite china.

“Mother.”

Lady Colven ignored Isabel. Not surprising since the two rarely spoke. Her mother might not recognize her daughter’s voice.

Isabel cleared her throat and raised her volume, cringing to use the endearment preferred by May and Elizabeth. “Maman.”

“Isabel?” Her mother’s brows rose. Perhaps she was surprised Isabel had spoken in public. There were at least six other women around the long dining table, Elizabeth still abed from the revelry of the night before.

“May I be excused from needlepoint in the sitting room this morn? I should like to see the gardens, with your permission.”

Her mother’s dark blue eyes, so like May’s, narrowed. She looked down her nose at her daughter, as if at a bug, and huffed out a breath. “Do as you please, child. But stay out of everyone’s way so you do not embarrass me.”

“Yes, mum.” Isabel stood so quickly the chair screeched along the floor. Every pair of eyes landed on her with disapproval. Careful to avoid her mother’s glare, lest she punish Isabel for this infraction by dooming her to her room for the day, Isabel rushed to the door. Her haste bordered on a breach of grace.

The reprieve put a bounce in her step and a smile on her face. She hummed and strode the empty hall to the garden door. The large corridor echoed. The sound of her slippers tapping on the wood floor tempted her to skip despite the dark stone walls glowering down on her.

Outside, Isabel lifted her skirts a fraction, not that she could ruin the faded dress, and strolled the brick herringbone walk. Her gown had seen better days, but she was still expected to protect the heavy red muslin from being sullied.

Leaving the well-used main path to wander the meandering trails, Isabel avoided company. With a large, cleansing breath, she ignored the dampness in the air, and the tightness in her shoulders eased with the trees swaying in the slight breeze.

Black birds dotted the branches, highlighted in the overcast sky, and her good mood flagged when every last one cocked its head in her direction. Prickles of ice threatened to climb from her toes up her legs, but she stomped hard to halt the creeping chill. Her heels clacked on the slate path and set the birds aflutter. They took to wing into the gray sky.

Isabel put the birds and dreary weather out of her mind and refused to ruin her solitude with stray thoughts and paranoia. Remembering the tête-à-tête from the night before, she crossed to the verandah and searched for the bush that had concealed the lovers. The manor loomed with large slabs of marble and buttresses rising into the heights. The garish pinnacles cast shadows across the natural wonder of the garden.

The roses bloomed lovely and proud, the only ornamentals she could see along the path, but a few of the nearby bushes had broken branches. The mangled beauty of crimson petals strewn upon the ground and the heavy air of a threatening storm replaced the forbidden tryst of the night before. Why had she bothered to look here?

The same warm breeze from the previous evening caressed her face, warm despite the biting chill of the fog that had surrounded the house since their arrival.

“Lady Isabel.”

To her mortification, she jumped. The instant recognition of the sonorous voice turned her surprise into a scalding tremor. Deep flutters danced within her in time with her racing heart. Her gasp brought a taste of damp chill that heightened her reflex to run, to escape the predator behind her.

She turned toward him but kept her gaze to the ground, glued to his well-shined black leather boots. Like the man, they revealed nothing in their reflective surfaces other than the polish.

“My lord.”

“Would you like a turn about the garden? It is as lovely a day as can be expected this time of year. Winter approaches and I find I have a need to see the sweet fruit before it is plucked.”

His voice was low, sensual. Isabel thought he disguised his meaning, but she was at a loss for his hidden intent. Turmoil halted her mental capacity, a perpetual state since she’d arrived here. He did not

await her answer. Lord Hayle extended his elbow to her. She placed her white-gloved hand tentatively upon his black, crisp sleeve, and he led her along the dewy path.

This close to him, she basked in his warmth, not noting the chill that held her until he pulled her a little closer than was acceptable.

Isabel let him. What would it be like to touch, skin to skin? Her flesh prickled.

“Why are you blushing, my dear?”

The endearment deepened her discomfort. The blistering flush traveled from her neck to her breasts. He sucked in a breath and pulled her off the path to a bench under a low hanging willow.

Lord Hayle’s touch scorched Isabel through the fabric that should have offered protection. He whispered in her ear and directed her to sit beside him on the bench.

“How far does your blush travel? I’m intrigued to see the rosy skin and trace the path. I can see that it plunges past your décolletage and am duty bound to ferret it out. May I investigate?”

Isabel’s skin blazed. She couldn’t breathe when she squeaked. “No.”

He laughed, a feral sound as wild as the heather sprouting around them. Its fragrance intoxicated, blending with the hint of wood and sage from Lord Hayle. The lure of his smile beckoned her, despite the peril of weakening to this man.

“Lord Hayle, your garden is beautiful, most especially the roses.” She wished she didn’t sound like a love-sick chit.

“Anything my lady wishes.” He sprang from the seat and walked with fluid grace back to the roses. Already missing his presence, she wondered at his intentions at the same time she realized their seclusion, under a tree which blocked the view from the house.

With a small bow, he returned and held out his hand. The sweet smell of a deep red rose brought a smile to her face, and she took his offering. Even with her nose buried in the flower, the deep inhalation still held a hint of him, woody and strong.

After he settled beside her again, yet closer, he branded her skin, even without a direct touch. Her mind at sea anytime he neared, a bittersweet ache bloomed inside. She should run away from him, as fast as her legs could carry her, but she edged closer and squeezed her eyes closed to memorize the moment.

For long minutes, they spoke of inanities, of the house party, of her education. He led the dialogue, prodding her participation until she was comfortable, speaking with him as no other. When she turned the conversation to him, he stiffened, and she noticed his fierce and tortured face for the first time since he’d come into the garden.

“You want to know where I attended school. I suppose it fair since I inquired it of you. This may sound more mysterious than it truly is, but I will give you that answer after we are married.”

She jerked her gloved hand away, unaware he had been holding it, and her fingers closed against the loss. Vision blurred, she feared she'd swoon for the first time in her life. His face appeared as shocked as her own must be. Had he intended to make such a bold assertion?

"We cannot marry." She sounded frantic, but she was more. She was terrified.

His expression flashed from surprise at his own words to irritation at her response. "Why ever not? You are beautiful, well-bred, and biddable. Are you not biddable, my dove?"

"Biddable?" The terror left, replaced by outrage.

At her outburst, he recovered her hand and held it in a gentle shackle. She tried to tug it away to no avail. "You please me, my dear. There is a passion in you under the trappings of the debutante. True?"

Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. A fleeting beam of sunlight shone in his hair and revealed a blue cast to the dark slickness. In a flash, the light was gone and his sooty hair no longer gleamed. Had she imagined that second of illumination that tugged at her heart through its sheer wild beauty? His eyes questioned. What had he seen in her face? Not the truth; that she dreamt of being his lover, in vivid promiscuous detail. Something she should not have the imagination to do. She was wanton.

"You tease me, my lord. You would not marry one so young, only eighteen. What is your age?"

"My little impertinent one, I do not tease. At least, not over such a serious matter. But I shall tease you. In my bed. Mercilessly."

He did not answer her impolite question, diverting her from thoughts of his age with his own outrageous reply. Feather light, his thumb ran along her jaw. When he reached her chin, his fingers closed in a caress and tilted her head up. He held her captive. He lowered his head with excruciating slowness.

In expectation she waited for the touch of his lips. Her mouth ran dry for her first kiss. Instead, he licked her, a languid exploration of her jaw line, leisurely tracing the line of her face to her ear. Her body shuddered. Her tormentor blew hot air against her before weakening her further with his words.

"I will have you, dove. Soon." His tongue followed his words inside her ear, and her body melted against him. He explored the shell of that sensitive area. Fanning the simmering heat into an inferno, he placed hot, open-mouthed kisses on her throat and neck.

Closing her eyes, Isabel let him touch her intimately for a few erratic heartbeats, but then she stiffened. She sat bolt straight and put much needed distance between them. Her moist ear chilled in the slight breeze.

"We must not be seen together like this, my lord. I have never been alone with a man before and would not be ruined. I would marry a kind man, not be rushed in secret to the church before my name is sullied."

"Are you implying I'm not a kind man?"

She shook her head and clenched her hands in her lap. "Of course not, my lord."

"Ah, but I am not a kind man. I take what I want and do not apologize for it."

“Oh, no. Lord Hayle—”

He interrupted her. “You do not need to placate me, dove. I am comfortable with my *unkindness*.”

A wicked smile made her stomach plummet, and she did not understand the stress he placed on the last word of his pronouncement. Before she could deny his self-criticism, even though perhaps he told the truth, he continued, “I enjoy playing games, drawing out the chase.”

He eased toward her. Slow enough for her to stop the inevitable, but she stayed rooted next to him, unable to look away from his fathomless, darkening eyes. The glittery pools reflected her image.

When his mouth brushed hers, she absorbed her first kiss all the way to her toes, and everywhere in between.

This man, whom she’d met a few hours before, deepened the contact. Engulfed in dizzying passion, Isabel didn’t care that he held her tightly against him, even though she did not remember crossing the few inches she had put between them.

Lord Hayle pulled back. His lips brushed hers when he spoke, and his fevered breath seared her trembling lips.

“Open your mouth. Let me teach you.” He slanted his mouth across hers, and his fingers tugged her chin with the softest of touches. When her lips parted, he plunged his tongue inside, at first shocking her. His taste exploded inside her, spicy and exotic, a blend of wine and smoke.

She mewled before she could catch it, mortified when he chuckled, but not for long. His sensual spell wound her tight and left her expectant of something more that she could not fathom. Isabel’s world narrowed to his torrid mouth and the wicked craving consuming her. The scent of the rose teased her, crushed between them. Leaning over her, his dark form blotted out the dim light of the day.

His hand tightened in her hair, loosening the pins, while the other twined around her wrist and tugged on her glove. His sinful mouth trailed back to her jaw before he tilted her head, kissed her throat, and drew upward.

“This little moon behind your ear taunts me,” he whispered before he licked it. Her body tightened in response, all her being concentrated there, where he sucked gently. He lingered for a long moment before he nipped her blemish with his teeth. His mouth left a scalding line down to her heaving chest. She had to stop him, but the twinges between her thighs were too strong to ignore. The awakening pleasure, too new, too intoxicating. She would ask him to cease his attempted seduction after a few moments. A small taste would be enough.

Anticipation held her in its grip, and her breath caught. Bare fingers intertwined with hers. His contact buffeted her, and the headiness rushed through her senses as if she were the crushed petals between them, flung upon the wind and into the whirl of a summer storm. She forgot her naked hand when he kissed the upper swell of her breast.

Lost. She was lost. If he did not pull back from the edge, she would not.

Trapped in his fervent onslaught, Isabel understood passion, and welcomed it. Lightning coursed through her. In a small corner of herself, she struggled to find the strength to leave the bench and his embrace, to escape this licentious pleasure, but her body won. She was wicked, sure to be punished for this heady tryst which would lead to ruination.

Lord Hayle's mouth moved lower to demarcate the valley between her breasts. The languid path of his tongue tormented her before he jerked away with a moan that wrenched Isabel's entire body. The heat in her woman's flesh crumbled her last remaining reserve and created a thirst only he could quench. Still holding her shaking fingers, he put his hands around her waist, spanned her in their strength, and lifted her onto his lap. Turning her, he buried his face in her chest.

Sheer want filled her body. Her breasts grew heavy, tingling, driving her to beg.

"Please."

"Yes, you please me. I will please you," he rasped. Sultry air slid along her flesh.

Lord Hayle brought their meshed hands to the edge of her bodice. His heavy crest ring pressed between her fingers. The stark cold of the metal rested against the scalding brand of his digits. Feathery touches slid over her sensitive skin. He drew down the top of her dress, exposing her breasts and eliciting her own moan. The double pleasure rocked her, his forbidden, callused fingers and her own, caressing her mounds with scandalous titillation.

"Touch yourself." He brought her pliant hand to her hardened nipple, and she nearly fell from his lap when her finger brushed against the ache. "Pinch it."

When she did not react to his urging, confused at the order, he squeezed her. "You are so pink, here. Soft and lush. Hold the tip for me."

Following the direction of his movements, she pinched her nipple. At the light pressure, her hips bucked against him, and even through the layers of her dress and petticoat, the steely length beneath her prodded. She'd never seen a man without clothes, but from exploring the forbidden section of the Colven library and its scandalous books and pictures, she knew the purpose of that instrument. Anticipation of the forbidden heightened the thrill of the hardness pressing against the fabric between them.

Her modesty and vestiges of innocence took flight, and a maddening drive to alleviate the ache in her moist core led her to grind down on his lap. When he licked the hardened nipple she held, she almost screamed, but he foresaw her reaction, and caught her yell of pleasure in another heated kiss.

"Shh, my dear, or we will be caught." He grinned at her panic, but before she could leave his lap, he let go of her hand and held tightly to her, keeping her seated. His head bent to her chest again.

He licked, bit, and soothed her. Prisoner to her own desire, she didn't resist when he pulled the bodice further down. He spread his attention between the two pale globes and lapped between. When he engulfed a crest and drew hard upon it, pulling to a point shy of pain, a tension centered between her legs, awakening a

hunger for him she knew not how to appease. A taut line formed from the bosom he feasted upon straight to her womb, clenching and pulsing in time with the pull of his mouth.

Legs trembling, she wiggled on his lap, seeking more. More of what, she didn't dare admit to herself, but she thought she would die if he did not give it to her. He stilled her and drew back, grunting as if in pain.

"Isabel, hold still. If you move so on my lap, you will end on your back on the ground."

She stopped moving and longed for him to continue the sweet torture that had her fingers clenched in his hair, tugging him back toward her. Slick with sweat, his face bore tense lines, and his jaw clenched. Both Lord Hayle and Isabel panted, their irregular breathing loud, but not loud enough to cover the gasp.

"Oh, hell," Lord Hayle muttered, and his brows lowered.

Isabel forced herself to turn. A group of party guests arranged around them with varying expressions of shock and leering laughter.

Lord Hayle yanked her face against his neck, his broad body covering her exposed chest. It was too late, though.

She was ruined.

Chapter Four

“Maman, I cannot marry this man.”

Isabel beseeched, but the fruitless arguments fell on deaf ears.

With mouth rigid, her mother sat primly. Her cold eyes matched the pale blue silk dress she wore.

“Nonsense, child. I would have thought the lord to seek a wife a bit older, such as darling May,” her mother replied to the man behind the officious desk. “But, you played into his hands and are truly caught. Young fool.”

“Do not speak to her in such a manner, madam,” Lord Hayle said with quiet menace.

Isabel found no relief in his defense. Her fear escalated. Now that he couldn’t touch her and confuse her senses, she didn’t understand how she had played the wanton. Unable to face him, she studied the statue on his mantle of a hunter bird with unfurled wings and sharp beak.

He must have followed her stare. “It is a raven. My symbol, of a sort.”

Isabel ignored his remark and tried one last time to escape.

“He killed his previous two wives within the first month of their marriages. You cannot give me to this man,” she blurted.

Her mother laughed.

“You listen to gossip and tales told by bored servants. As a child, I heard the same stories about the lord of Hayle. Look at the man.”

Isabel’s heart leapt to do so. His dark brows slanted. Creases formed above his nose and on his forehead. The brooding expression made her want to run away. It also made her want to sooth the worry from his powerful and handsome face. Who would calm her own nerves? Her mother continued her lecture.

“Could he be old enough to have killed two wives before I was born? Nonsense. I even heard tales of giant bird men inhabiting the manor. You see the folly of idle chatter.”

The argument had merit until she braved a closer look at the lord. His twisted mouth held guilt, with the weight of it there and in his eyes. How had she not seen it before, mirrored with the worry? She couldn’t marry him. Never. Desperation crept into her pleas.

“I do not know, but—”

“Tsk. Enough, girl. The matter is done. If you hadn’t been seen by so many, or if your father were still alive for the negotiations, perhaps we could have made different arrangements. Your brother is too young to command the family, and I have made my decision. You will obey me, as you should.” Her mother lifted

one shoulder in a shrug. The gesture aimed to give the impression the matter was of little consequence to the lady, but Isabel could not mistake her mother's displeasure. To the woman who had never forgiven Isabel for being her father's daughter, it held much consequence that Lord Hayle had not compromised May instead.

Her mother turned her attention to Lord Hayle. "You have sent for the priest?"

"Yes."

The firm tone from the man sealed her fate. She was at the mercy of Lord Hayle, wife-murderer.

All the strength drained from her to waft away in the chilled room. She closed her eyes in defeat.

The fist in Rukh's stomach loosened the moment Lady Isabel relinquished her resistance to fate. His triumph left little satisfaction and not a little doubt.

Rukh despised the grasping older woman in front of him and would like nothing better than to remove precious Isabel from her mother's dubious care. However, the thorn in his side, his family's curse, doomed him to take no better care of Isabel than her aloof mother.

With his desk a barrier, he found himself in a quandary. No longer touching the tempting girl, he pitied her pale face and her clenched hands placed demurely in her lap. Lovely in a plain yellow frock, a more innocent choice than the seductive red gown she'd worn in the garden, she didn't seem to understand her allure.

In respect, the two women waited for him to continue the discussions, but he held up a hand. The family crested ring weighed heavily, unusually cold. "One moment. I may have a proposition that would suit."

Dare he give her a means to escape his possession?

Dare he not?

Isabel sat rigid, unmoving. A slight tremble gave away her unease. He wanted her, but he needed to give himself time. Time to see if he could let her go and do what was best for her.

Keenly aware of the two women following his every move, he stood and walked to the sideboard. He caressed a bottle of Scotch and perused the collection of decanters before him. The plan decided, he selected three wines. Glasses clinked together when he held them upside down by their stems. The fragile crystal glittered in the overcast light of the room.

He poured the wine, surprised that he trembled and some of the liquid ran down the side of the glass and onto the pads of his fingers. He licked the sticky elixir, the taste sweet and pungent. He steadied himself when Isabel, fixated on his mouth, squirmed in her seat. With the last glass filled, an oaky aroma filled the room. He arranged the three vessels on the edge of the sideboard with a determined clunk.

Before, he might have consulted Lady Colven, as was proper. Now, Rukh could not countenance her interference.

He directed Isabel, "Taste each wine, and choose your favorite, one white, one red, and one rosé. Each corresponds to one option, but you do not know which will be which. Your fate is left to chance, and to your own tastes."

"What is this nonsense?" Lady Colven demanded. She rose to her feet and pulled Isabel toward the door. "After the priest arrives, you may do as you wish. Until then, I refuse to stand for your whims."

"Unhand her." His voice pitched low, commanding, until he boomed, "Now."

Lady Colven dropped Isabel's arm and backed away, fanning herself as if she'd been burned. Rukh didn't regret his outburst, but he wished Isabel hadn't cringed and hunched her shoulders.

He continued in a moderate voice, "Your choices are these. First, we will wed. Second choice, you will warm my bed for a time before I set you aside." He ignored the sharp intake of breath and the scarlet blushes from both women. "I would of course give you a stipend and a nice country cottage for your retirement and support for any children you might bear. Last choice, you will marry a young man of the family." His mouth watered over the taste of bitterness in the back of his throat. "My nephew Christopher has offered for you."

The instant after the words passed his lips, he knew he had lied. He had given her no real choices, only false ones. Her face stricken, he regretted hurting her. Though tears threatened to spill from her lashes, he couldn't back down. Her situation was dour, damned for eternity no matter what course she chose for her future.

"If you wish to escape me." His mouth filled with sand and ash, and he whispered the last. "Drink the wine, draw your lot. There are two chances to avoid wedding a murderer."

Isabel gasped. "No."

Did she mean she would not drink, or did she defend him and deny his culpability? She shouldn't have wasted her precious breath for either.

"Drink. The priest will be here within the hour. Will he perform a wedding today? Or, shall we send him away and make haste to my bedchamber?"

Quaking, she obeyed and gripped the first glass with her fist, but she did not lower her eyes. She met his stare. Even so, her elegant movements became hindered in her desperation to hold the fragile stem.

He was cruel. But how could a Raven not be cruel? The emptiness in his chest lashed out. The inability to save her, to leave her to a better future, turned his intentions sour. He focused on Isabel and her decision. She drank from the first glass. The red.

The wine colored her lips, and he wanted a taste. The rosy temptations parted to drink from the second glass. The white. The motions of her throat worked when she swallowed. Did she force it down?

Delicate fingers tipped the glass back. She licked the corner of her mouth to catch a drop there, and his vision blurred. His cock hardened, snug against his pants.

It did not matter what wine she picked. She would be under him tonight and all the nights of her remaining life. The decision was made. He would marry her. For even if the curse prevailed and her time ran short, he knew her kind. She'd rather die, within the week, wed to the man who took her virginity, rather than live in sin, though it might allow her a longer life.

If she married another, such as Christopher, he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't kill the man in a rage. He'd like to think he was better than that, but he wasn't sure that he was. He could not ignore his Raven. It clamored to mark its territory and destroy any who trespassed. Alfred would be pleased, no doubt, but he wouldn't marry to pacify the patriarchs.

The taste of her in his garden had robbed him of choices. She tasted of spring, of fresh air, and of life. She'd awakened the long dormant Alpha, the flock leader, the long line of shape-shifters from the House of Hayle.

Undeniable, her taste sealed the trap she could not escape. She was his. She was his mate. At long last, he'd found the woman for whom he'd risk all. All, but the burden of his family's curse. To leave this house and turn his back on the blight on this manor would allow the curse free reign. That, he could not risk, even for Isabel.

Isabel's angelic voice interrupted his musings, "I prefer the red." She threw back her shoulders and lifted her pert chin. "But I do not care for casting my lot to the wind. I choose to wed you, no other. It is the best course of action. The only course."

The future matron of Hayle turned her back on him, marched to the door, and left him there. He stared after her. Helpless in his relief, he leaned on the table to steady himself. Her decision lifted a veil he'd been unaware existed. He laughed with a lightness he'd not had in centuries.

Red had been his decision as well. She would wed the lord of Hayle Manor.

Outside her wedding reception, Isabel stood at the bottom of the grand stairs in the main hall of her new home, Hayle Manor. She tried not to think about what would happen after she climbed those stairs, but the grip her husband had on her elbow wouldn't allow her to overlook him. Rukh had made his goodbyes, and now rushed her to leave the festivities, but they were caught, one last time, much to her husband's annoyance. His brows lowered, and he scowled at his relative.

Ward Hayle clasped Rukh's hand and shook it with enthusiasm. Ward's black hair softened with streaks from the sun. He appeared to be younger than most of the family men, but still older than her by many years. His eyes slightly blurred with drink, he grinned and elbowed his companion, Alfred, in the side. Alfred did not move.

"You have my most profound congratulations. I wish you prosperity and fertility," Ward said to Rukh.

What an odd pronouncement. No more odd than the following.

"You have taken the best course of action for us all, my son," said Alfred Hayle. Had he been like a father to her husband? She had so much to learn about him. And this family.

"I married her for myself, not for you."

The shock of the lord's answer rooted her to the spot. He'd taken a few steps away before he stopped and pulled her after him.

"And yet, you benefit us all," Alfred called after them.

Why would his family be glad their lord had compromised a girl into marriage? How did this benefit them all? Her dowry was not large.

They climbed the stairs and left behind the revelry and toasts for their future happiness. Raucous laughter and shrill voices mingled with drunken bellows and twittering. Day fought to peek through the clouds and shed light onto the outrageous deeds within Hayle Manor.

The party had surpassed propriety. A tension in the air had dissipated as the party progressed, and a certain relief claimed the Hayle family. Smiles and laughter accompanied overflowing goblets and cups.

Isabel wished to remain. The untamed nature of the couples around her didn't frighten her. Though the forthcoming night did scare her, she enjoyed protection from the merry-making by the broad body of her husband.

Her husband. Would she have time to get used to the idea? Had he really killed his wives? Would she be next? She didn't want to die. At times, in the few moments she'd had with him, he appeared fierce but gentle. Careful. Did he have it within him to take her life? The strong hand grasped her much smaller one and squeezed gently. The slight pressure steadied her.

They reached a large oaken door shut tight against the world in the wide hall where the sun never reached. Once that door opened, her world would no longer be the same. Being married had not changed her. The dry ceremony, though hurried, remained bereft of emotion. The congratulations, the toasts, those could have been described, scene after scene throughout time. Nothing new there, even if they'd been a bit more passionate than polite society.

Now she would experience a world she had never known existed. Like many before her, she had envisioned a marriage of congeniality. A wife should have her own chambers and her own life, separate from her husband. Already she knew enough of Lord Hayle to know he would not allow her an aloof, proper marriage.

The point could not be mistaken since they stopped before his chambers rather than the rooms for the lady of the house. Rooms her new lady's maid had shown her hours ago.

Lord Hayle pulled Isabel inside. Now he would fall upon her, hungry to finish what they'd started in the garden. Abashed disappointment filled her when he did not. Instead, he led her to a blazing fire with two wingchairs placed before it. A small circular table sat between the velvet-covered seats. A pair of wine glasses accompanied a plate of sweets decorated with three roses strewn across the top.

Holding her by the elbow, he guided her to sit and, with tender attention, knelt to arrange the skirts of the finest gown she'd packed, a plain pink muslin gown unworthy of a lord. Rather than move to the other chair, he pulled a footstool from before the fire and sat upon it.

He reached beneath the layers of fabric to grasp her ankle, and Isabel lurched in her seat. Her husband put her foot on his thigh, removed her slipper, and rubbed her arch through the stockings. Unaccustomed time on the dance floor had made her feet sore. He chuckled when she moaned. Even in her inexperience she was sure he did not intend to be provocative. His touch dispelled her tension, and a languid content stole upon her.

"Shh." He ran his hands up her leg. "I'm removing your stocking," he soothed as if to gentle a frightened animal. "To make you more comfortable."

Her skin pebbled under his touch on her thigh, and her breath hitched. Fumbling in his haste, he did not linger, and roughly pulled to remove the silk. A seam ripped, the tearing sound momentarily blocking out the crackle of the fire and her uneven breathing. He gave her other leg the same treatment. He huffed and sat back. Once again giving her foot his attention, his hands settled into easing her aching legs.

He continued his ministrations, first one foot and then the other. Except to remove her stockings, his hands did not move above her shin. Luxuriating, boneless under his spell, she sighed her contentment and forgot her worries until he cleared his throat. With care, he put her feet on the floor and looked at her with a serious expression.

"I would like nothing better than to remove your dress, put you in my bed, and fall upon you."

Had he read her mind? She gulped past the lump in her throat, speechless.

No longer puddled in relaxation, she held his stare though a blush burned her face. He nodded once and appeared satisfied he had her full attention. And he did. Every inch of her body charged with tension and waited. He stood.

Usual grace stilted, he moved across the room. He adjusted his pants before he walked back to settle in his chair beside hers. The cause of his discomfort could not be hidden. He ignored his body's responses and continued as if he spoke to her over toast and tea at the breakfast table.

"And, I *will* fall upon you. We both know what will happen before the night is through. Or do you? Your purity is the very reason we are married. Do you know what to expect?"

"Yes." Well, she didn't understand, but her answer was sure. He arched a brow at her, and his lips quirked. He didn't believe her.

"No matter. You'll understand before the day dawns."

She shivered, and his smile broadened to show all his teeth.

“Well then,” he purred and swayed toward her before he blinked slowly. His smile faded as he sat back. “It pains me to wait, but I must inform you of your status before we go further. Despite rumors you may have heard about me, I am an honorable man when allowed the choices to behave in an honorable manner.”

He took a deep breath, and Isabel kept her mind from conjuring stories, weaving the rumors in her mind. What was he saying?

“There are some things I must explain before the sun goes down.” His voice no longer unaffected, his ominous tone should have frightened her. He reached across the space to the small table, plucked a sweet pink confection from the plate, and placed it upon her lips. How could such an attentive man harm her?

She had her answer when he pushed the candy into her mouth. His finger followed. The sweet taste on the back of her tongue exploded, at odds with the salty digit touching the tip. A small blaze erupted beneath her skirts. Her lord’s dark eyes glittered with banked promise.

He ran his short nail across her lips. Once. Twice. She wanted more. So much more, but her new husband sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his waist. The crested ring reminded her of his status, a powerful man of influence. With his legs extended toward the fire, the bulge in his pants stole her attention. She swallowed the sweet confection that made her mouth water. Or was it the handsome man before her who whet her appetite?

His urgent voice opposed his relaxed outward appearance. His eyes bore into her, the dark eddies within lit by the fire.

“First, I must give you a commandment you will obey. Do not question it, but trust I have your best interests at heart.”

His ring flashed in the firelight when he raised his hand and pointed toward a red door she’d not seen before. Overwhelmed by the expectations of her wedding night, her mind fixated on the barred passage.

Red, a strange color for a door.

Absorbed in the tableau before the fire, she hadn’t noticed her surroundings beyond their fireside setting. Well, other than the giant bed on the far wall that she dare not consider. Pulled back in invitation, the bed drapes absorbed the light in the room. The dark black velvet matched the covers folded down to expose luxurious sheets of white cotton.

The entire room held rich appointments in colors of black, white, and red. With the nearly monochromatic design, the red lined chairs, pillows, and small appointments drew her eye, but the door remained ominous. She turned to her husband. The picture of the red barrier ghosted her vision and superimposed over the figure reposed in the chair. She blinked the harrowing image away.

“Never open that door. Plainly put, if you open that door, you will end as my first two wives.” Face chiseled stone, he waited in silence for her response.

She couldn't reply. Numbness took her breath. A blank wall of confusion, hurt, and terror blinded her. Her mind folded upon itself. How long had she sat in silence? After the blankness, a whirl of thoughts assaulted her.

He admitted he'd had two previous wives. They died because they opened a door. All they'd done is open a door. Had he said he killed them? No, he used precise wording. He'd said they'd ended, not that he'd committed murder. What was behind the door?

"I cannot tell you for now. Perhaps in time, when you are better able to understand, I will tell you what's behind the door. I'm afraid you would not be able comprehend it until you know me better."

He'd answered her unspoken question and watched her. What did he see in her face?

"You are right to be afraid, but not of me. If you obey me in this, you will never have a care, never a want I cannot satisfy with the greatest of pleasures. You will never have reason to question my devotion to this marriage. Never question this, though, your life is forfeit if you open that door."

Focused on his admission of having two dead wives, she could not comprehend the rest of his words. Danger threatened with an urgency she must heed, but her mind stuck on the one overwhelming question rather than give in to the fear.

"Did you..." She couldn't finish, so afraid of his answer.

The silence stretched, as taut as a corset lace, as thick as the smoke funneling up the chimney. She had her answer written in his face and stricken expression. In the pain. He'd killed two wives.

How much blood was on his hands?

He blanched, an unnatural expression for the strong man, and looked down at his hands. Had she asked him that last question?

No she hadn't.

Guilt. He knew his hands held guilt.

Lord Hayle spoke in a tone she'd never heard from the confident man before. With earnestness she knew he would never show to another, he continued. "It does not matter who held the knife that ended their lives. They were my responsibility. It is my fault they are dead."

"What does that mean?"

"You will understand, and soon. But to understand, you need to know more of me and my family. Otherwise, you will not comprehend the rest."

He sprang out of the chair in a svelte move, his bearing assured and no longer solicitous. He remained aloof, his form black and unreadable with his back before the fire.

"Comprehend?" she asked, unsure what he wanted from her. Too much. He asked too much of her. She couldn't think.

He did not answer. Instead, the lines of his body began to shimmer and wave. What was happening to him?

She jumped up and stumbled back, knocking the plate of sweets to the floor. The roses scattered beneath her feet.

A bright flash and Lord Hayle's form altered.

She couldn't believe her eyes. In his stead stood a large, man-sized Raven. It cawed and ruffled its wings.

She turned and bolted toward the hallway door.

And screamed.

Chapter Five

Wind buffeted her back. Before her hand closed on the door handle, a curtain of black feathers descended and entombed her in a cocoon of darkness. Isabel struggled against an unyielding torso, its plumage a deceiving contrast of soft down caressing rock.

A whirring hum filled her head.

Useless, her efforts were useless to open the door.

An all-encompassing frenzy enveloped her. She tugged on the handle, slammed her fist against the wood, and screamed at the offending barrier. How long had she stood there denied escape from her husband's chamber? Surrounded by cloying heat and terror?

When the useless pounding began to shock through her arms, she broke through her haze and the inevitable reality filtered inside.

She was hot, sweat trickled between her shoulder blades, and she panted with exertion. Limp limbs and numbness stole upon her to leave her weak and stumbling for an anchor to ground her against the surge. The man, to whom she'd pledged herself before God and family, remained immobile as a rock behind her. Would he be her island or crush her upon his unyielding strength?

In blind desperation, she chose to cling to the rock.

She had no choice.

Isabel closed her eyes to the bleakness and the darkness created by the strange bird form of her husband. She didn't question this magic. Somehow, it seemed right. It fit. Like his claim on her had been irrefutable as soon as he'd made his vows in the family kirk. He now owned her body and soul. He could do with her as he wished. There would be no escape.

A bright flash peeked beneath her eyelids. The arms of a man crushed her. In his embrace, tight against the rapid but steady beat of his heart, running through the door was no longer an option. The inevitability of her predicament settled into her.

Isabel must come to terms with her lot. She wanted comfort and assurance from her husband, the man who threatened her security while offering to be her protector. Determined to be a good wife, she willed her fear away. She could do nothing else. Could she? No. Her mother had taught her well. The duty of a wife was ingrained in her.

Shoulder muscles knotted in pain and tension, Isabel eased her body from its rigid state. Though it should not, a rumbling coo gentled her agitation. The rocking of her captor lulled her, and the scent of smoky brandy eased her mind. She relaxed in the arms that held her.

A nude man. Her husband's skin burned her cheek where he pressed her to his chest and rocked into her belly with his erection. On his request she'd not worn her stays, and the swelling of her unconfined breasts tingled and excited her. Fear deserted her, quickly replaced by anticipation. To forget her suspicions of him and to overlook the monster he'd become, made her a fool at best. A wanton, at worst.

A fine dusting of black hair tickled her nose, and his woodsy scent beckoned her. Her mouth watered, and she could not resist the temptation to kiss him there, where her lips rested against his skin.

So she did.

His groan pleased her, the power of her touch heady after the emotions of the past minutes, after his overbearing strength. She'd never known she could make a man want her so much that his muscular arms clenched and his hands shook against her back. She moved her mouth across his crisp hair, the rough sensation pleasant.

Lord Hayle's voice rumbled through her. "Many new and astounding events have been yours to absorb these past two days. Do not worry, I am your husband, and if you do as I say and stay out of that room, I will protect you with my life and never harm you. I would not have you fear me."

Isabel heard the truth of those words but dared not think what he might do if she disregarded him. She feared to follow his first two wives into oblivion. She would not disobey and stifled her curiosity. A dutiful wife did not indulge in fanciful imaginings. She would be obedient. She ought to be filled with dread over her lot in life, but she smiled. The corners of her mind began to grasp possibilities of the power a woman might hold over her husband.

Her smile deepened.

"My lord," with agreement and compliance she whispered against his naked flesh.

He bent to pick her up to cradle against his chiseled physique. Her skirt brushed against the door she had tried to flee. Moments ago, he had inspired mind numbing dread, but his smoky scent made her mouth water. She pressed her face against his perspiring skin.

Though she willed herself to submit, she tensed when he dropped her to the bed and quickly covered her with his large body. Before she could panic or struggle against his strength and weight, his large hands caressed the sides of her face and stilled her. Dark eyes peered into her. They reached into her soul and enveloped her in his power.

"I will try to be gentle, my dove," he rasped before he claimed her lips. Bruising force annihilated her defenses, and she parted her lips to his onslaught.

No, he was not gentle. He took her mouth and made it his.

He drew her bottom lip between his teeth and with little bites added flame to the fire.

His hands never wavered. He lowered her bodice to expose her chest, covered with the rash he'd given her in the garden with his roughly shaved face. His body weighed her down, as if she would escape. His knee pushed between her legs, dividing them against her urge to clench them closed. The compulsion to remain modest, the need instilled within her, crumbled in the wake of her mounting passions.

A sensual fog consumed her when his mouth covered her breast, tugging and sucking with moist pressure, and all reminders of his ability to change shape fled. Such a human, warming expression on his dear face, he pulled back and looked down at her. His expression pained and filled with resolve and smoldering heat, he put space between them.

"Let me help you with your dress." His words were clouded with a tight, gravelly tone.

He meant to remove her dress?

She swallowed hard and reminded herself that he was allowed to see her unclothed. Torn between mortification and wanton desires, she turned her head when he eased off her and stared at the carved bedposts rather than his nudity. The posts were carved in wicked images of angels and demons in compromising positions. She'd never seen the like.

Her trembling began anew, and her misgivings threatened to surface. Events unfurled at a dizzying pace. She could not gather her resources against the driving force of this man. He drew her up to stand tight against his steely body.

Practiced flicks of his wrist made short work of her gown. She remained upright though her legs threatened to buckle, and she waited, pliant. A small part of her still rebelled against the familiarity, but she couldn't deny the sparks dancing along her skin as his hands brushed against her. When her dress dropped to pool at her feet, she'd barely taken a deep breath before her camisole, slip, and bustle followed.

All movement stopped, and she dared not look at him and tried to keep her eyes riveted to the fire across the room. Like a schoolgirl caught skipping and running down the hall rather than walking in cool deportment, she swelled with the empowering air of forbidden acts.

With the space between them thick with molten heat, she gave into the urge to see the source of that intensity. Blushing hotly, she peered through her lowered lashes and nearly collapsed at the look on his face and the possessive sweep of his eyes, memorizing her, a thorough sketch from head to toe.

This time when he pulled her to him and swung her into his arms, she was prepared for the muscular bands that chained her to him. Hot enough to brand, his skin scorched the moment indelible in her memory.

This time when he put her on the bed, he pulled coverlets over her body and hid her fevered flesh.

This time, when he joined her, he eased by her side, unhurried but with barely masked urgency. His smoky scent overwhelmed, rushing through her senses. He was too much at once, enough to make her spin, enough to make her yearn.

"I should have combed out your hair," Lord Hayle said. He brushed an errant lock away from her face. With certainty, she understood he tried to gentle her as he would an untamed mare. Her husband had commendable control, unshattered resolve, but his effort was given away by the slight shake of his hands.

She chanced another look at him. His golden brown eyes were dark. His face not as fierce. His genuine smile showed his remarkably straight teeth, white against his unfashionably tanned skin. Head bent, tousled hair falling forward, he brushed her lips with a light kiss.

Despite all, she could not help but try to escape the coming rite of marriage. She answered, "Maybe I should brush it. It will be in a snarl if I leave it."

"It would be my pleasure to take care of it, later. Right now, I don't think I could let you leave this bed. My control is as fragile as one strand of your hair." He stroked her, lifting the freed lock to his lips. "Silky. Intoxicating."

He kissed her again, as hard and demanding as before. His tongue slipped inside to stir passions even higher. This man had but to look at her, and she melted. His touch incinerated. A touch that caressed her breasts and made them heavy with want. His mouth soon followed, to feed upon her. Though more prepared for the lightning coursing through her when he licked and nipped at her, the anticipation made her dizzy. She blinked several times against her blurred vision. She wanted to see everything, all of the joys and passion of her sensual awakening.

For she was awakened as never before, all hesitancy dispelled, and alive to the pleasures hidden from her until now. She took in the slight reddened smear on his cheekbones, spots of color revealed his passions. His dark blue-black hair fell forward, swaying slightly until he brushed it away from his lips, parted with his panting. He bent toward her, small freckles smattered across the tops of his shoulders. Lord Hayle was alive and wondrous.

Her husband bent on elbow and leaned over her breast to pull deeply on her nipple. His hand stroked and pinched her other peak before spreading featherlight caresses under the sheets to stroke her middle. Her stomach clenched, and his gentleness touched her. No one had ever treated her with such adoration.

Lower, lower, his fingers eased toward her maiden's bower. When she pressed her legs together, held tight against intrusion, his foot insinuated between her ankles. He pulled her leg and captured it beneath him. His knee nudged her other thigh. He slid it away from him and pinned it to the bed. He held her spread wide.

Giving no quarter, or time to breathe, he brushed over the fine dusting of hair between her legs. Her core pulsed hard, tight as a vise, and her legs struggled to close. Bound, unable to move, she was prisoner to his desire, and her own.

His kisses tamed her while the heat beneath his hand grew. Nothing prepared her for such sweltering yearning. When his finger slid inside her, she jerked and nearly unseated his hold upon her.

He chuckled into her mouth and stilled his hand. "Relax, dove. This will be pleasurable. You will see."

He rasped his words against her ear before he used his wicked mouth to torture her breasts again.

When she groaned at the pleasure of his suckling, he moved his finger inside her, a hot slide that tipped her world. He overturned that world with the feral look in his eyes as he looked up from laving her peaks.

"You are as smooth as velvet. As hot as a brand. And wet." His voice cracked. "Wet for me. Do you know what it does to me to feel that slickness between your thighs, for want of me?"

Throat tight, she shook her head, unable to form words, or even to utter them if she could.

"It makes me swell nigh to bursting. I want you so, I tremble with it."

All the while his words fanned her senses into an uproar, his finger stroked her. He moved as far as he could reach inside before he slowly pulled out to rub around her folds, painting her moisture around her opening.

Watching her face intently, her husband crooned soft words, enticing words, naughty words. Words she'd never heard before brought her more intensity, more wicked pleasure. He fed her senses, her thoughts, and her desires. He brought her to a new world and taught her to enjoy his caresses, his erotic weaknesses, and his lustful intentions.

By the time his second finger slid into her, she breathed as heavy as billows. He found a rhythm of give and take that had her careening. She clutched at his shoulders, and her fingers bit into his skin. His lips were swollen, his hair tousled, and he was handsome. Her heart nearly broke from his wild beauty.

Then his thumb slid to a spot that pushed her over the edge. She thrashed, but he held her down ruthlessly. Isabel grasped the joy of an amazing zenith while her husband stroked that pleasure point and brought wracking tremors up and down her body. Her legs and thighs quivered as he rolled on top of her and slid his masculine form along her sensitized skin. The head of his shaft nudged her entrance.

"Now," she panted, unable to last one more moment against his torture, a bliss that bordered on pain.

"Yes, now." His eyes still fixed upon her, he watched her carefully as he eased inside, his body shaking as much as her own. His hard frame tensed, slick with sweat, covered her with his unique scent of musk. Wood and sage with a flavor of smoke cocooned her.

She relaxed in his care. No longer understanding how she had ever feared him, she wanted the foreign thickness that filled her. Oh, she so wanted that pressure. Not quite the joy of before, but he'd described the delight to be had with his wicked words. She anticipated the return of promised bliss.

"Yes. Oh, you feel like heaven. Hot and wet. Tight. Heaven," he murmured.

Her throat clogged, and she wished she could tell him how the feel of his muscular body moved her to tears, but she could only groan, wordless. Eager to hold him, receive all of him. She tightened her arms around him.

The air in her lungs stuttered when the stretching became uncomfortable. When she tensed, he stilled. The concern for her plain on his face brought tears to her eyes even while she tried to push him off her. He did not move and leaned forward to whisper in her ear, ever so tender. He was no longer the intimidating man he presented to the outside world. “Shh, little one.”

Motionless, he remained inside her, patient while she flailed at him. “No, I can’t do it. It hurts too much.”

Muscles bunched with strain, he held off her. He bore the brunt of her slaps and cries.

“Wait, dove. You will enjoy it, soon. I will repay the pain with pleasure.” He remained above her. His cajoling stole inside and weakened her fear.

When the stinging and sharp pressure abated, she willed her body to relax, to accept him.

“Trust me. It will never hurt again.” He covered her body and held her tightly. He took her mouth in fierce possession as he pushed inside, hard and fast.

Isabel grunted into his mouth, and he clasped her closer. Their bodies hot and slick, they moved together in a dance that was exquisite. He broke the kiss and tucked his face into her neck. “I can’t hold back anymore. You feel too good, too tight. Too perfect.”

He released his hold on her long enough to guide her legs around his waist. Before she could miss his strength, he wrapped his arms back around her and began to pull his length out of her sheath. She clung to him, held him, needing to keep him there, deep inside her. She cried out at the loss.

She cried out again when he sank back inside her, even deeper than before.

They both sighed. His breath rained hot upon her neck. Hers stuck in her lungs as he began to move in and out of her, rocking against her.

His guttural voice filled her ear. He hurtled vulgar profanities in a tight voice. The forbidden thoughts and words added to the spell. His passion wound her tighter and tighter. He shifted her hips to position her in a way that forced her mind to quaver, eliciting grunts from her. She should have been mortified by her animalistic mewling and moaning, but instead she was filled with more passion from her uninhibited response.

He tensed above her. Then he lifted himself on his arms to thrust into her with a force that drove her into a blinding white light. Her body responded with a like tension, clutching, grasping.

His mouth formed a wordless expletive. He ground his hips hard against her. The heat of his release filled her, and the bed shook with the force of his final thrust. She closed her eyes, unable to bear the emotion blocking her throat at the sight of him.

He rolled to the side and folded her into his arms. Their legs tangled in sheets. He kicked off the coverings and held her. Their wet skin clung. He kissed her shoulder and licked the birthmark behind her ear before his body went lax along her back. His hand skimmed up and down her side and encouraged the lethargy weighing her to the mattress.

Whispering sweet words of thanks and compliments, he soothed her, warming her to dangerous thoughts. She could love a man such as this.

After the stresses of the past two days and the rigors of their joining, Isabel's eyes grew heavy, scratchy. Lord Hayle's deep breathing relaxed her toward sleep, but she lingered there, on the edge of oblivion.

When his hand caressed her still bound hair, his fingers became entangled, and caught strands wrapped around the Hayle crested ring he wore. He sucked in a breath and blew it out. "There was a misunderstanding with the house staff about our sleeping arrangements. Your things were taken to another chamber. I'll go get your brushes, and we'll have your other belongings moved tomorrow."

He rose from the bed, donned a long luxurious robe of red velvet, and left the room, pulling the heavy door closed behind him.

She lay with her face toward the ceiling. A fresco covered the plaster depicting a demon and angel embraced. Awakened to the sport she'd shared moments ago with her husband, the ecstatic expression of the angel bespoke of erotic bliss.

Muscles sore, but happily so, Isabel stretched in the large bed. A secret smile curved her lips, both with pride over the wonders she'd discovered with her husband's touch, and with the knowledge that she'd pleased him. Why else would he want her to share his room?

The sun had gone down. The fire did little to dispel the descending darkness.

Her core pulsed.

Isabel smiled, joyous. Her body might be well used, but she'd had the pleasure of the exercise.

A throb slammed through her, stronger.

Even with her inexperience, she knew this was unusual. She lay still and concentrated on her body. The muscles of her most private place squeezed, beating in time, as if her lord were still within her.

She turned on her side and stretched again. Her body was unused to the rigors of joining. She would adjust and anticipated her husband's tutelage.

The vibrations continued, her body grew languid, and moisture pooled between her legs. She smiled, content, until her eyes flew wide. Her gathering lust was unnatural. She jumped from the bed. With no robe, she quickly wrapped a coverlet around her.

Pacing the room, she gave in to an urgent pull, a need to move. She found herself in front of the red door. The forbidden door. A door that now breathed, pulling in and out, pulsing, in the same rhythm as the pressure between her thighs.

She stumbled, backed away, and fell into the arms of a hard body.

Her husband growled in her ear.

"Stay away from that door."

She turned in his grasp, and he kissed her with fierce ardor. Isabel rubbed her body against him with abandon. The ache grew, stoking the fire between them, and she forgot about the door.

Chapter Six

Rukh was torn.

The Hayle curse, locked away behind the red door, forced him to guard against its escape. If Rukh slept elsewhere, his prolonged absence tempted the evil that bided there. He didn't quite understand it, but his continual presence and his weekly visits from Sheila, and those before her, had appeased the imprisoned erotic hunger. His visits from the kitchen servant kept the curse in check and prevented its escape.

His previous two wives hadn't stayed in his rooms since he'd had no inclination to share his life with them, much less his bedroom. They had stayed only briefly for conjugal visits. With both, the first night spent in his bed had been the night they'd opened the forbidden door, and he'd vowed to never take another bride. That pledge scattered to the wind the moment he'd tasted Isabel.

Wicked desire hung like a cloud over this manor. All inhabitants and visitors fell prey to the heightened lust, but only his wives had been completely drawn to the hell he guarded against. Hadn't Sheila come and gone with no ill effects? It was clear that if he kept Isabel in this room, her life was in danger. Oh, he'd known, of course, but in his desire to have her, he'd hidden the truth from himself. A centuries old man should know better.

He'd found Isabel at the red door and taken her back to bed. She'd been wanton, despite the expected tenderness and the innocence of a new bride. They'd enjoyed repeated amorous delights, but he could not deny the truth. Not in the light of day.

The first time had been sweet, an emotional connection. Throughout the night, she'd shown increasing desperation, a wildness that he savored but was not true to her nature or her inexperience.

The lovely woman lying naked in his arms would have to stay in her own chambers. He stroked her bared leg, thrown over his own, and looked at her tangled black hair. He ached to run his fingers through it. They'd never gotten around to combing it out, and it would be a mess to straighten. No doubt she'd shed some tears over some of those knots.

His heart wrenched. Rukh wanted to spend every night this way, limbs entwined, his bride's sweet breath against his chest and her nose nuzzling into him. He wasn't sure he could let her go, even to go a few doors down. He'd told her she'd stay with him. She would want an explanation. Would she understand it was for her own protection?

He would have to tell her, explain the details of the curse, and so soon after her discovery of his Raven, his beastly other self. Could she handle even more horrors?

She would have to handle it. She was the Lady of Hayle Manor.

Reluctant, he slipped from her side, where she remained deep in sleep. Not surprising after the night they'd spent. She could well sleep the day away. Better to wake her soon, to take advantage of the daylight hours while the hunger waited in silence.

Before he turned from her pale beauty, the red stains marred across his vision. The beast of his Raven fluttered inside at the sight. Blood. Virgin's blood upon his sheets. Visions of that redness splattered on his walls, across his bed, threatened to rush forth.

He'd be sure the sheets were burned.

Like the others.

"Others," he whispered. His mind closed like a vise. He wouldn't let these dark moods alter his day.

After ordering a light meal and a bath drawn in the connecting sitting room, he rejoined his wife. His wife. He'd not held such pride, such hope, and such fear for anyone before. Not his first two wives. Not his mother, whom he'd never known. Rukh's father, previous Alpha to the flock, never spoke of his one and only wife. Had she been victim to the hunger? Or had the previous Lord Hayle sent her away from the evil? His father was dead, unable to answer the questions that now plagued Rukh.

Could Rukh send Isabel away? A pang shot through him. Could an Alpha live without his mate?

He nuzzled her ear and whispered soft words. His cock lurched when she stretched, a languid movement that stopped mid-stream with a pained groan and a wince.

Despite his fierce compulsion to drive into her sweet quim, he held himself under tight control. She needed time to recover, a reality that should control his ardor, but it did not. The rosy nipples beading in the air begged to be suckled. He'd yet to taste her cream, delve between her thighs and lap her to ecstasy. Perhaps he did not need to wait. His tongue could soothe the ache.

Before he could cover her half-asleep, unsuspecting, delicious body, her lids fluttered open. Guileless eyes entranced him, and his heart stopped. Compassion for her ravaged, well-used body gave him pause, and he wanted her to look at him with such clear interest for a bit longer.

Perhaps he had more than lust for the new Lady Hayle.

Overbearing possession was unavoidable where she was concerned. It was his nature to protect. Before she could protest, he gathered her in his arms. With her slight weight no hindrance, he strode to the connecting chamber where servants prepared her rooms. For her modesty, he gave a warning tap. The scurried shuffling and whispers ceased within a scant moment. He threw open the door to the dressing area between their suites and carried her with purpose to the steaming bath. Not that she protested.

The large vessel would fit them both. Relaxing into the hot water, he settled with her and heaved a contented sigh. The brushes and combs lay arranged on a side table for his use. The scented water was new. The sole fragrance in his toilet had been the sage soap he could see next to his lady's brushes, powders, and other sundries. He had no idea what they were, nor did he care.

The servants had been busy. Through the connecting entry, the lady's bedroom filled with hazy light. The ivory velvet drapery opened to the gardens. The large tester bed covered in silks she'd use rather than his own. The brocade chairs embroidered with roses created a feminine aura, but he preferred his dark, unembellished décor.

"I will be sure the water is unscented in the future," she said, her voice relaxed.

"Good." He was pleased. Isabel's intuition where he was concerned showed that their link could be strong. She would not be shy with him nor put up barriers to their growing intimacies. He wanted to be near her every minute of the day. If they had to separate, he would know where she was and how to protect her.

Rukh spent long minutes soothing the tangles and snarls from her hair. Despite the mess, she sat through his ministrations with comfortable silence. The tub was before the fire, but the water grew chilled after some time. He stepped from the bath to retrieve the kettle from the fire and added hot water. Steam rose between Isabel's flushed breasts.

His lady looked at him with blazing eyes and a quirk on her luscious lips as she ran her eyes over him. Stiffened in response, the burgeoning erection he'd had since he'd awoke with her in his arms stood out from his body in obvious interest. He ignored the unruly beast and settled behind his beauty to leisurely stroke her shoulders, arms, and upper chest.

Isabel leaned into him and squirmed against his prick with her lush derriere.

He groaned. He gritted his teeth against the first words that wanted to tumble from him at her provocation. He needed to prepare her for the carnality he wished to share with her. "Isabel, you have a penchant for rubbing your ass on my cock. Be still, or I'll forget that I'm soaking your fanny to ease your soreness."

Her shocked gasp was followed by a fierce blush. "Please, my lord, you must watch your language."

"You liked it last night, when my cock filled your quim." Her skin turned beet red. Satisfied with her response and intrigued by the strawberry stain across her chest, he prodded further. He leaned forward to rest his chin on her shoulder.

"Ah, now I can follow that blush all the way." He chuckled when she crossed her arms across her sweet bosom. "Too late for modesty now, my dove."

Trailing down, his hand skated over her silky skin and followed the deepening blush. Fingers found spots to elicit whimpers, palms caressed supple curves, and knuckles brushed rosy tips. He taught her how to find the curve of his jaw, the sensitive circle of his nipple, and the steely shaft begging for her attention. When he'd teased them both to the heights and tossed them over the cliff, the water had grown cold again.

After helping her from the tub, he wrapped a plush robe around his lady and drew her up to cradle in his arms. He strode back to his bedroom. No, *their* bedroom. He seated her in her chair before the fire and stoked the dying flames. The fire danced in mesmerizing flickers. He turned to her, and found her stare on

the red door, a frown upon her beautiful face. A face he wanted to see in joy and passion. Placing those comforts on her was his duty. Not the trepidation he saw there now.

“I thought I’d imagined it.” Her voice was low, questioning, but steady. Pride swelled his chest as she continued, showing a fortitude she’d need to be his lady. “But the rumors are true, are they not? You are one of the giant bird men?”

The phrasing was laughable. Damnable. In all, the truth. He watched her closely for fear, unease, or defeat. He saw determination.

“The House of Hayle is an Unkindness, a flock of Ravens who live as men, hunt as predators, and guard the family curse.”

Her eyebrows rose before they sank into an expression of concentration. She blurted, “Why cannot you answer in a straightforward manner?”

She’d surprised herself. Her blush gave her away, and her fingertips covered her lips momentarily as if she could will the words back. Marveling that it had been a scant two days since he’d first touched her naked hand, he reached for that delicate weight and enclosed it in his own. Mere hours before, he’d been the first man to hold the fragile hand and now he could do so at his leisure.

“I will answer your queries the best I can. As succinctly as I can.” He stood before her chair, but he needed to be closer to gauge her responses to his explanations. He sat upon the footstool at her knee, the subject before the queen. He held her feet and soothed her with his hands as he knew his words would not. Perhaps he held her so that she could not run. His gut roiled with a nervous twinge he’d never known before.

“Centuries ago, my ancestor Van Heer Halewign searched near and far for the answer to immortality. He was a gypsy. He came to England and delved into the mysterious. The magical. The demonic. The flock is uncertain of the exact history, but in the end he made a deal with a demon. The demon gifted him and his descendants with the ability to change shapes, to become Raven, and be immortal.”

He paused. Her look of concentration still there, and when she nodded, he knew what he’d said hadn’t really breached her mind, yet. It would of course. Clutching her feet, a chill snaked up his back, but he continued, as he must.

“A deal with a demon must necessitate payment. I do not know how he lived with his Raven shape. Did he hide it? Did he hunt? He probably did use it to garner his power and fortune, to build this manor.”

The house closed around him, his only haven the woman before him. The walls, his prison. He yearned to burst through them to freedom. But he could not.

“What was the payment?” Her voice held a hint of tremor but remained strong. She glanced at the proscribed door, her instincts honing in on the truth.

“The demon is an incubus named Bluebeard. His price was the wife of my ancestor Halewign. After she’d given Halewign an heir, he sacrificed her to the breeding of the incubus.”

Isabel paled. Eyes unable to rest, they flitted between Rukh and the portal. She whispered, “He gave her to a demon to become immortal?”

“Yes.” He couldn’t help the grimness that crept into his voice. “Through his many years, all of Halewign’s wives were taken from him. He made many descendants, built his flock, ruled as Alpha, but Bluebeard did not stop with the first wife. The incubus continued to take every wife in succession after Halewign bred a new member of the flock.”

Rukh studied Isabel. Calm, she listened intently. He feared she thought of this as a bedtime story, but he plunged ahead and hoped she’d understand the ramifications to the two of them.

“As I said, I did not truly believe the legend, and I am unclear on the details. After many years, the flock decided they needed a new Alpha and to rid themselves of Bluebeard. Van Heer Halewign was ruthlessly beheaded, a sure way to end the life of an immortal. The flock did not know how to kill an incubus, but they did find a way to lock him away. In a room. A room that was forbidden. And still the wives of every Hayle Alpha since the first have found their way inside, never to return.”

“Well, why not leave? Or, find a way to send him back whence he came?” Her voice pleaded, wanting him to have the answers. She did sense the danger to her, body and soul. Guilt, a feeling no Alpha could afford to entertain, threatened Rukh’s composure.

“I do not have the answers, but I saw the truth in the family tales when I became Alpha and brought my first wife into these chambers.” He stopped, not able to go into those memories. “Since I have gained power, I have not been able to leave the manor for long, or Bluebeard slips his bonds.”

“How old are you?” she asked, not looking at him.

“Two-hundred and fifty, give or take.” He watched closely and hoped she could bear the truth of her new position.

“Oh,” she exhaled.

“That is why I did not tell you more of myself before, even what school I attended. To tell you of my first wife, you might have deduced that I first married almost two hundred years ago.”

Rukh could not tell her more, not now. Maybe not ever. The horror of his past threatened to rend him apart from the inside. As for Isabel, she had enough to process for now, but he needed her to be aware of her peril and to understand his decision.

“You felt a pull to it? To open the door?” he whispered. He’d never had the chance to ask his first two wives that question. Nor, despite the urgency to understand, could he think on what had happened when they had opened the door. Dark and damning remorse insinuated its way into his soul.

“Yes.” She trembled, her strength clearly gone.

Though expected, her answer chilled him to the depths of his being. He fought the fear that threatened to send him into a deadly rage, to shift. He had to be strong—and human—to protect Isabel. “You will need to stay in the lady’s chambers, as all Lady Hayle’s have done. Stay away from these rooms.”

She nodded docile agreement until she looked at him with accusation, her voice cutting. “Why did you take me? You knew what would happen. Why did you marry me?”

The swift change stunned him as much as the venom in her words. He was compelled to give her the truth. “I had to have you.”

She flicked a glance over him in disgust. Her anger clearly climbed in ferocity. Her hands clenched in her lap, and this time she eyed the entry of the bedroom as if to flee his presence.

He gripped her knees to keep her from bolting. He would not let her go.

He growled at her. “I will not allow harm to you. You are mine. I will keep you. He will not have you. Not you.”

“Not me?” Her eyes blazed. “But your other wives? He could have them? That makes you a murderer, Lord Hayle. As guilty as your ancestors. All of them who stood by and sacrificed the mothers of their children. You’re trapped here by the curse as much as Bluebeard, aren’t you?”

He had no response.

“What were their names? Your wives?” her voice broke, and he closed his eyes against her pain. “What were their names?”

Agony swept over him with the force of a volcano, and he could not bear to think their names. Sharp lances stabbed through his stomach. Could guilt kill a man?

She shot to her feet without his answer. An answer he could not give. His mind numbed with an image of a blood soaked dress. Deep within, he acknowledged she spoke truth.

He was a murderer.

She stalked to the hallway door, opened it, and looked back at the red wood blocking the forbidden chamber. “You deserve each other.”

Without further pause and apparently without care that she was immodestly dressed, she left.

Long moments passed before he got up from the floor. He had knelt on his knees before his wife, and she had shown her complete and utter contempt for him. That did not go well. She should be curling into his arms, seeking his protection, but she had left, spine stiff, nose in the air. A true Alpha-mate.

Mate. The punch in his gut answered his unspoken question. He’d had wives but never a mate and was surprised he’d not fully recognized Isabel’s hold on him before. A wife could be had as easily as the coin for the certificate, but a mate was a once in a lifetime bond, permanent and unbreakable. He’d told her true, the demon would not have her.

He turned to the dressing room, the red door at his back mocking him.

Isabel deflated against the wall. The slammed door still reverberated in her ears. The plan to stalk with angry righteousness to her room, thwarted. She did not want to relocate to the chambers for the Lady Hayle.

Busy house servants freshened chambers, changed linens, and completed their chores with brisk efficiency. Rather than return to the marriage bed, Isabel borrowed a small, wizened maid tending the empty room across the hall to keep her company in the lady's boudoir.

The woman smiled knowingly at her. "We must get you dressed, m'lady. Wouldn't want the guests to see the lady without her finery."

She scoffed at the idea, until a petty thought snuck through her fear and anger. She wouldn't want her mother to see her like this. Lord Hayle's confession may have shown his disregard for her very soul, but Isabel could not show her weakness to her lone parent.

Despite her fear, she was still his wife. Lady of this manor, though evilness lurked here. She would dress herself, suitably impress her mother with her new station, and then rid the world of one incubus, named Bluebeard.

She needed to think. She needed a course of action.

The maid guided her into the room next to her husband's. The cream colors helped the room to be the brightest in the house, but it did not lift her spirits. Used to dressing without the full attention of a lady's maid—her sisters had always garnered more than their share of attention—she was mildly shocked to see the two women prepared to wait upon her. Assurances that the lord would soon fill her closet with the finest gowns showed the good will of the lady's maids, but rather served to underline her unusual situation. Did she belong here?

In little time, she was dressed, albeit in one of her usual well-worn gowns, and down the stairs to an empty dining room. She turned to the server who manned the buffet and raised her brows.

He answered her unspoken question. "I believe that the invited guests departed this morn. The Hayle family remain, but they have yet to venture down." He bowed and tacked on "m'lady."

Pretending that her pride didn't sting at her mother's departure, she told herself she could do without the pouting and false tears of a goodbye. But she mourned the loss of the familiar as well as her previous dreams of a quiet marriage and a mild husband. Lord Hayle was anything but mild.

Why had the guests left? The house party was due to end on the weekend. Had her husband asked everyone to leave?

And, why?

She ate in uneasy silence, unused to dining alone, even with the servants to wait upon her. Decadent, savory, and a divine smell, the food tempted the palate, but the enjoyment of it was lost to her anger and loneliness. The room was dark, her reflection on the polished oak table was dim, but showed her frown.

Smoothing her face, she hurried through the meal before she strode from the room and out into the grand, wide hall. The door to the library rested partly ajar.

Not wanting to see her husband, she was still drawn to the room, as if she couldn't resist his presence. Before she entered, she smelled his scent, woodsy brandy and sage. Lured into her lord's domain, she moved inside. The capacious room was at first too dark. When her eyes adjusted to the dim light from the window, she saw movement before the low burning fire.

The man in the library was not her husband, but his nephew. The man Lord Hayle had threatened to marry her to with his game of wine lottery.

Though elegant in dress, the younger Hayle wore more subdued clothing than when she'd danced with him ages ago. Was it scarcely two days past? Today he sported muted browns and a crookedly tied cravat. He was not as tall as her husband, and his expressions not as fierce. The smile he gave her was pleasant. It was not wicked, with the power to make her heart flutter.

"Congratulations on your marriage, Lady Hayle." Christopher kept a sincere expression. His eyes never left hers as he bowed.

"Thank you, Lord Hayle."

"No, please." He grinned at her. "I am not Lord Hayle. Call me Christopher."

"You must call me Isabel," she replied and relaxed with the ease in conversation.

"That would never do. I see a lady when I look upon you." He bowed again, lower, and his lips slanted when he straightened. Was there sadness there?

"Christopher, show me the library, if you please. I do enjoy reading a gruesome novel."

She'd surprised him. His eyes grew wide, and he opened his mouth, no sound pouring forth. More lighthearted by the second, she continued, "Perhaps there is something by Walpole, or Radcliffe. Mary Shelly?"

Still frozen in place, a startled look on his face, Christopher's eyes followed her as she walked around him to the shelves. The titles varied. Religious tomes in Latin. Greek plays and histories. And choices in newer works from Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake.

"I thought ladies read something more, shall we say proper?" Christopher said after he'd found his tongue. "Gruesome novels do not teach an elegant lady deportment."

"Oh, I learn much from these novels. Mainly that when trapped in a frightful manor with a ghost or demon, a lady must leave at once and not wait for the house to burn down around her."

With friendly laughter, Christopher moved beside Isabel, perusing the modern section with her. They spotted a copy of *The Castle of Otranto*, a horrid tale by Horace Walpole.

Both reaching for the copy, their arms collided. Surprised into a stumble, Isabel grabbed at the bookcase for support. The wood shelf came out of the case with the force of her weight. She slipped to the ground. Two rows of books rained down.

“Botheration,” she exclaimed. After the clatter of the falling books, and the stunned shock of pain by being pummeled by scores of volumes, Isabel remained an inelegant heap, legs splayed. Her dress barely covered her modesty.

“I am sorry, Isabel. Are you injured?” Christopher’s worried expression was solicitous as he reached to help her to her feet. She brushed his hands away.

“I am fine, thank you. We should clean up this mess.”

“Let the servants take care of that,” he replied and tried to take her arm.

She swatted his hand again and grabbed the book on her lap. The title snagged her attention and held it. The *Malleus Maleficarum*. Why did the Hayles have a guide for the inquisition, for witch hunters? The title translated to the *Hammer of the Witches*, a clear indication of its malevolence. What was this doing here?

She turned the volume in her hands. It seemed worn but with the outside skin well oiled. A bookmark held its position for the last reader. Protruding out of the book, the thick marker depicted a Raven etched in the heavy paper. She opened the page, and thanked her mother’s disregard for her youngest. Her inattention had allowed Isabel more time with the tutors. One instructor in particular, bored with Isabel’s siblings, taught Isabel Latin with great enthusiasm.

The book opened to a discussion of the incubus and succubus. Was this how Van Heer Halewign called the incubus? Was this a clue to the curse?

Christopher scrambled away from her just before a voice boomed in the library.

“Get away from my mate.”

She barely recognized her husband’s voice. She turned and stumbled up from the floor.

A screech pierced through her. The great Raven filled the room. Air flowed with the agitation of his wings. He lunged for Christopher. Sharp talons scraped the floor, and the deadly beak stopped a hairsbreadth from Christopher’s throat.

Isabel held tightly to the book, determined to discuss it with her husband despite his angry Raven form. She straightened to her full height and looked in the eyes of the fierce bird. She did not see the Lord of Hayle within.

She saw rage, fury, and death.

Chapter Seven

Deep in his chest, the Raven rumbled. He ruffled his feathers and parted his sharp beak. Book clutched in her hands, Isabel wrestled with the dread that overcame her short-lived bravery.

This is my husband. Lord Hayle. My husband, Lord Hayle. She repeated the words in her head and willed herself to walk to him and show her trust. Even though he housed a demon in his room, she had faith in him. Lord Hayle confused her senses, seduced her, wed her, and removed her innocence with conjugal bliss. At times domineering. At times tender. Forceful, willful, and arrogant, her husband was also gentle, protective, and in the end, honest.

She could love this man.

The man who now watched her through the eyes of a seven-foot tall fearsome bird. With wings black as midnight on a moonless night, he rustled his feathers like the wind blowing through fallen leaves. He stood unmoving though tremors ran the lines of his body.

Christopher dropped to his knee with his gaze to the floor. The younger man kneeled, deathly still, waiting.

The hush grew, and tension filled the air. The three remained motionless, a triangle formed of anger, frustration, and fear. Shockingly chilled, Isabel quaked. Terror ebbed and flowed along her spine. Her vision blurred. When she realized her fear was all for Christopher's sake, she forced the words past her lips, her voice weak and thready. "Christopher, please leave. I would like to speak to my husband, alone, if you would."

She held her breath. Christopher rose slowly. The dark bird watched his every movement. Sweat beaded on his brow, Christopher edged to the door with eyes cast toward his shoes. "Lord Hayle, I follow your lady's command."

The great Raven dipped his head and stepped back. The small feathers on his neck ruffled before straightening to lie flat on his back.

When Christopher left the room, her moment of hope that she'd found a friend was overshadowed with the realization that her husband may not allow her a connection, even friendship, to another man. He'd been angry and changed into a Raven when she'd only been speaking to Christopher. Why did he change? How did he become a bird?

Was Lord Hayle's ability to change a glamour? A trick of immense proportions? Or was he cursed? A blight before God? The cold ball in her stomach grew, and a spasm in her icy, clenched fingers reminded

her of the book. The force of her grip punished and sent cramps up her arms to fight through the dismay that threatened to fog her mind.

The bird moved closer, close enough that her breath ruffled the feathers on his face. She peered into the depths of his eyes. They were unrelenting black, his pupils wide, but she spied a small ring of the darkest amber. There, a small bit of golden brown held his humanity, his warmth. She appealed to it.

"The same for you," she said to the Raven. Pleased she no longer sounded like a small child afraid of the dark, she stood straight as an arrow. "I would like to speak to my husband, if you please."

He did not move. Or change.

The fear waned and anger took hold. He was lord. Yes. He was her husband. Yes. This putting her in danger, scaring the life out of her, was getting tiresome. She would go stark raving mad if he kept upon this path. Must she appeal to him again?

For the third time, she asked for his human presence. This time, she appealed to the man hidden by the trappings of a lord, chained by his responsibilities, and ruled by his unnatural abilities to change shape.

"Rukh." The word caressed her mouth, brought a smile to her face, and a tug on her heart. The intimacy of his given name reminded her of the erotic bliss of the night before. Heat flushed her face.

The turmoil of her emotions careened around her and left her adrift. Never knowing a time in her life when she was so undone, she sagged in relief when the blinding flash took her breath away, and Lord Hayle stood before her.

Focusing on the man did nothing to calm her nerves. He was fabulously nude and gloriously aroused. She wanted to run to him and run her hands all over his warm flesh. She wanted to run from him, the man who tempted her to behave as a jezebel. What had happened to the girl who wanted a stolid husband and a tame marriage bed?

Eyes closed against temptation, Isabel forced air into her lungs and turned her back on her husband. "My lord, I shall give you the privacy you require."

When she'd gathered her wits, she heard cloth rustle behind her. She dared to turn toward the sound. He was stunning. When he moved to cover himself, she was thankful to breathe again.

"The Hayle's are raven shifters, Isabel. I always have a ready supply of robes to make my guests comfortable. Besides, haven't you seen me in all my glory?"

She flushed.

Was the man unflappable? Isabel could find no sign of his earlier anger, his expression blank. Thankful he was partially covered, she couldn't help but stare at his chest. Skin taunted her from the deep vee of the cloth wrapped around him. His musky scent assaulted her, and before dizziness could overtake her, she sat in the chair behind his desk. Every sense on fire for him, attuned to him, she no longer knew what to say.

The memory of his careful ministrations to her tangled hair, and the soft caresses of her sore feet did not mesh with the straight-backed serious man before her.

To stabilize herself, she forced herself not to stare. The shelves lined with books and the velvet and leather covered furniture served to break up the unrelenting dark woods of the room. The warm decor could not hold her attention from him for long, though.

Lord Hayle, no, Rukh. Back to her, Rukh stirred the embers in the fireplace. His hair gleamed, blue tinged in the dim light. Without turning, he spoke to her and answered her unvoiced question.

“To see a man stand so close, touching you, brings about my change. I cannot control the protective instinct to kill any who might harm you. Perhaps in time it will become easier, when we have settled into the marriage. I am unsure. I’ve never had a mate, but many in my flock have.”

He turned to her, his dark eyes glinted with harsh determination, and a moment of doubt flickered across his face. Then, it was gone. Taking a breath to reply, she halted when he held his hand up. The crested ring flashed in the firelight.

“Many have had mates, and control their need to covet and hoard away their women. But I am Alpha, and you are now the Alpha-mate. You must watch yourself with other men because I may never master the territorial compulsion to protect you from another’s touch.”

Dark warnings from a dangerous man who even now closed the distance between them. Her heart raced. Fire flickered through her and set off a conflagration deep inside. He stood over her and slipped one leg to the other side of the chair. Straddling her lap, he leaned against his desk. His long legs did not quite touch her. The red velvet robe parted with his legs, and she blushed, her body hot and nervous to see his muscular thighs so near her face.

Last night, he had used this prime form to bring her to ecstasy. The power in his taut legs brought flashes of longing for the dominant thrusts he’d used to drive her into the bed.

She shook her head.

She wanted the simplicity of a dark bedroom and the passionless act of a wife doing her duty. She’d always been a good girl, perhaps straying from proper decorum at times, but the urges to fall into bed and spend the day were untoward, especially for a wife. She was no courtesan.

This yearning tore at her soul and made her wicked. The intimate details between a man and a lover had been a mystery to her all of her life, but now, with the mystery dispelled, the heat they shared was easier to contemplate than the long years ahead. A marriage to be lived in, not, as she’d thought, a uniting in church and a separate existence in the same household. But rather, Rukh’s every word to her implied they would lead their lives as one, enmeshed.

He sighed, and his breath blew through her hair. Long fingers, sure and strong, tipped her chin up until she had no choice but to face him, so very close. His sharp features had not softened, but his body

relaxed. He leaned further back and gave her much needed space. He murmured, as if speaking an endearment. “What is troubling that delightful mind of yours?”

The man may be powerful, strong, and definitely handsome, but did he purposely forget the turmoil he’d made of her life?

“What is not troubling me? In the span of three days, I arrived at a house party to find a wife murderer bent on marrying me. Then, caught out and ruined. United in a rushed ceremony to a man I do not know, but fear. Carted off to the marital bed. Told of an incubus behind a closed door who will kill me if I attempt to sleep in my husband’s chambers. Scared to death when my husband changes into a giant raven. And last but not least, exposed to my new husband’s jealousy and warned he may rend apart any man who may please to speak to me.”

“I believe that is the longest speech you’ve made to your wife-murdering, giant raven, jealous husband.” He chuckled, as if she wasn’t panting with anger and frustration, gritting her teeth, and clenching her fists.

Arms crossed over his chest, his pose inched his robe wider apart. Isabel choked. One full leg naked to her view, his muscles bunched when her eyes strayed there and remained. She couldn’t hide her colored cheeks, but she did try to dispel her disquiet.

“I found something,” she whispered. Voice hoarse with a tight throat, she clutched the nearly forgotten book in her lap.

“Did you now?” he purred, shifting his leg so that the robe fell away. The garment caught on his enlarged shaft, that obstacle being all that held the fabric from displaying his full nudity from the waist down. His smooth voice rumbled through her when he lowered his tone to a husky whisper. “What did you find?”

His nearness brought tingling in her tightened peaks, and she nearly reached for his tantalizing skin. When her fingers moved to follow the path of the precariously perched robe, the book in her hand brought lucidity.

Anger crashed through her. His teasing showed callousness over the lives of his dead spouses. She jerked back from him, but her shoulders hit the padded chair before she could move far enough away.

“Why don’t you sit in that chair over there?” she asked, exasperated with how his proximity threw her judgment to the wind.

“You are in my chair, dove.” He raised a brow at her but did not move away. Leaning on his own desk, he looked down at her, sitting in his chair.

She huffed but stayed in the seat and steeled herself against his allure. “I found a clue.”

“A clue to what, my sweet?”

“This book has a marker in it,” she held the proof toward him, inches from the beckoning naked flesh of his muscular chest. “On a page that details how a witch calls an incubus.”

Rukh recoiled from the book as if it poisoned the air he breathed. He retreated around the desk in a flurry. A haunted look upon his face, he sat down in the chair in front of her. He'd moved so quickly she was astounded. With a pale face, quiet and unmoving, he studied his family ring. The hollows of his cheekbones more pronounced, as if some of his strength and vitality had fled, he turned the signet around his finger with his thumb. The flirtation of a moment before, abandoned. Cold and harsh, his voice rang brittle, no longer the seductive timbre that warmed her blood. "Where did you get that?"

"Here. On the bookshelf." The bottom dropped out of her stomach, and she thought she might retch. What was bad enough to make such a strong man's hands tremble?

"That is my grandfather's symbol on the bookmark, the same as the family crest on my ring." He held up the jewelry in question, lodged on his left hand, as always. "I've never seen that volume before, and I've combed this library and spent many long hours reading book after book. How could I have missed it?" he asked, steady and sure once again.

"Well, I accidentally pulled the shelves down. That's when I found it. Perhaps it was lost behind other books?"

"No, I would have seen it, my wife. With two and a half centuries in the same house, I have memorized every title, its location, and its origin."

"But you recognize it?" Unable to fathom why it mattered where she found it, she was sure the tension in her husband's rigid posture did not bode well.

"Not directly, no. But I know what it is. My father described it to me, and we both searched this house for my grandfather's book. Neither of us ever found it. Hopefully, you are correct that it's a clue. Desperation for answers drove my father to hunt for it. I stopped my search over a hundred years ago."

"If you've looked for it for so long, why do you not want it now? Why did you back away from it?" She had dared hint at Rukh's fearful reaction to the book. Though she was surprised by her audacity, she had to follow through, to find the means to save her life and to live in peace with a man for whom she'd already formed an attachment.

Graceful movements regained, Rukh rose from the chair and paced before the fireplace. His robe swished with his sleek stride and left trails of sage and smoke behind. He snugged the robe around him and tightened the belt. Isabel waited for him to continue. She'd learned so much of him in a few short days, not the least of which was that he would get to his point in his own good time.

Next to the pile of books still on the floor, he stared at the empty space in the case. A hint of puzzlement edged his low voice, and he did not turn to her when he answered. "The book is said to have my grandfather's notes. I've searched for it to find answers, but it reeks of Bluebeard, of the taint I can sense even from outside his prison."

"It must contain what we seek." Isabel began to hope they could rid the family of the horrid evil.

“You are more than likely right. But it has the same repulsion attached to it as the door, a repulsion spell to keep the Alpha away, a need to back away and leave it be. Put it back, in a safe spot.”

Sighing heavily, Isabel couldn’t believe her husband could ignore the only clue they had to destroy the incubus. And why hadn’t he told her he was under an enchantment not to approach the pulsing door that beckoned to her?

“Botheration,” she muttered.

Not to be put off, she vowed to study the book on her own, because otherwise, she had no choice but to leave her husband. She couldn’t live with a demon who wanted her as his sacrifice.

Rather than return the book, Isabel steadied herself and crushed the book against her chest, wrapped her crossed arms around it, and walked to the door of the library. She paused at the open door. He had not moved since she left the chair. “Since we will not be sharing chambers, I will keep the book in mine, to study it.”

Isabel’s comment fell heavy in the silent room. She did not voice her inclination to leave. Despite it all, she held the hope she could find the answer, and thus, stay with her husband.

But if she found no answers, leave she must.

“Isabel, I’m sure we will find the answers. We have time.”

“Do we, husband? You may be accustomed to placating a bargain with a demon, but I am not.”

“Of course not...”

“And I will not wait until you get me with child.”

Angered that he’d forced her to use such frank language, she turned from him and left the room. She ignored his calls to return.

On unsteady legs, she climbed the stairs to her new room. Relieved to find it empty of the chamber maids, she strode to the escritoire in the corner. The ornate writing desk afforded cubby holes and shelves she’d yet to fill. She placed the book in the drawer to keep the offending tome from her husband’s sight. His paled expression still pressed upon her heart, and she wanted—no, *needed*—to keep that dread from his handsome features.

A knock on the door jolted her, and she jumped in unwarranted guilty surprise.

“Come in,” she nearly squeaked.

Lady Colven made a grand entrance. Her dusky blue travel dress flowed behind. Crisp snaps of fabric fell in her wake.

“I thought you were gone,” Isabel blurted. She swallowed at her own abruptness and tilted her chin up.

“We are packed and the carriage is readied. Since Lord Hayle has his bride, the young misses are returning to London for the season, as shall we.” Isabel’s mother sniffed and removed a kerchief from her sleeve. “I’ve come to bid you goodbye.”

The weary fondness for her mother took Isabel by surprise, and she sat heavily on the edge of her bed. Lady Colven surveyed the room in silence while Isabel's eyes clouded and words choked, locked away. What could she say?

"You will be quite comfortable," her mother said. She picked up a crystal sculpture of a winged angel and squinted at the bottom. "Yes, very comfortable. I suppose I should have spoken to you about your wedding night, but there was no time. I assume it is a moot point, now?"

She turned to Isabel and studied her as closely as she had the statuette which she now plopped back upon the display shelf. Heat prickled up Isabel's neck under the scrutiny.

"I see that you are now a proper wife."

Isabel contained the snort and did not ask her mother if a proper wife would have a demon in her closet. She contained her hysterical laugh when she responded, "Yes, mother."

"It is as distasteful a subject as the act itself, but I must caution you. Beget the heir quickly, and he will no longer impose upon you. I had three daughters before I produced a son. Luckily the first two girls were pliable. Unfortunately, you look too much like the man who subjected me to his sordidness until I produced your brother."

"Ah, so I am my father's daughter?" Isabel had always longed for more from her mother and instead had found a friendship with her father, who'd left her behind, alone, upon his death.

"Give him a boy and let him find a mistress. That's what they all do."

The coldness swept like a chill wind from her toes to the crown of her head. The words were lightly uttered, but they crashed through her hollow chest. "A mistress?"

Lady Colven flipped her hand as if at a fly. "Of course, my dear. You well understand that a lady does her duty, and a mistress slakes the demeaning lust. If nothing else, I've taught you this."

"My father had a mistress? And my husband..." She trailed off. The long repeated adage from her mother had readily come from Isabel short days ago. Why had she forgotten these teachings? Could her father, a man she adored, have regularly committed adultery?

The vision of Rukh above her, face distorted with passion, reminded her of her wanton behavior. She'd been insatiable. Had her passions for Rukh been a product of the evil demon? A wife should not have desire, but rather, a desire to fulfill her role. Besides, if a demon was housed in her husband's bedroom, should she really care if Rukh had a mistress? Anger burned bitter in her churning belly.

She found that she did care, quite a bit.

Her mother's continual barrage finally penetrated Isabel's thoughts. Obviously her mother had been lecturing her, but she hadn't heard the brunt of it.

"I am sure I do not know what your father did in that regard. He did not bother me again after he had his son, and he died not long after. Do not worry. Even now you might carry the heir."

The crater in the pit of her stomach turned hard. "Yes, even now I may carry the heir."

“What is wrong, Isabel? You’re white as a sheet.”

“I—” Isabel stopped to gulp in air. “I will go back home with you. I’m married, so the scandal is averted. There is no need for me to stay.”

Lady Colven turned her back to Isabel and crossed to the door. “No, you’ll do your duty. You’re the lady of this manor, and you will behave as such. Goodbye, and do not hurry for a visit. You still look too much like your father.”

Lady Colven’s back was straight when she left the room.

Tears streaked down Isabel’s face. She’d not cried since the death of her father five years before.

She quickly found her traveling bag and stuffed it for overnight. Removing the book from the desk, she determined to find the answers, but not here, where she was in danger of losing her heart and soul. She’d send for the rest of her things later.

She could not stay when even now she could carry the child who would inherit the curse. She could not stay and be victim to an incubus. The tight knot in her middle tightened more. She nearly staggered.

She could not stay and give her heart to a man who would find himself a mistress when he tired of her, as all men were wont to do, and sacrifice her to Bluebeard.

Isabel didn’t look back when she crossed the stone walk from the manor to the stables.

The family patriarchs joined the expectant Raven youth who waited for the starting horn outside the vast hunting grounds of the Hayle estate. The ash trees overhead shaded the dozen males disrobed in varying degrees. If clothed during the magic of the shift, those garments never returned when the Raven became man again. Better to leave the garments and sundries behind before a shift.

Barely contained aggression made the nearby tethered horses anxious, but the nickering mounts would not be used this day. Both dogs and horses were in attendance for show, to keep hidden the true nature of the Hayles from any outsiders who may chance to see the hunting party. On days when Rukh had guests, they used the horses and dogs as with any proper English fox hunt.

Hand on the cage for the hunt’s quarry, Rukh raised a brow when his uncle stopped beside him.

“Such a beautiful creature, the fox,” Alfred said.

“Yes, and cunning prey,” Rukh answered.

“I still say the urges to hunt could be appeased in less violent ways.”

“You are many years from your youth and do not remember the blood lust.”

“I have taught Christopher to manage,” Alfred defended.

“I see. Would that be why he does not understand the signs of aggression in his own kind?”

“How so?”

“He offered for Isabel’s hand.”

Alfred started. Fear flashed across his face before he hid it. "He will make amends, my lord."

"Do not fret. He offered before I had decided on her, but in our exchange over the girl, he did not respond instinctively to my Raven's reflexive challenge. You may have forgotten, my uncle, how an Alpha's territorial urges will drive our little brethren into frenzied action. When black birds and ravens flailed against the window at my back, Christopher did not understand his true danger."

Alfred moved toward Rukh before the Alpha tensed and growled. "Do not stand near me so close to the hunt."

Alfred stopped. With ill-timing, Ward and Christopher stepped into the clearing. Christopher hung back, but oblivious to Rukh's tension, Ward came forward.

"Well matched, my friend." Ward clapped Rukh on the back and grinned when Rukh growled again. "Your young woman is fresh faced and looks to be lively and fertile."

"Do not goad me." Rukh's voice turned feral. The obvious discomfort of Ward pleased Rukh's need to strike out. "Do not speak of *my wife* in such a manner."

"We're all relieved that you saw reason," Alfred said, attempting to deflect attention away from the audacious Ward.

"What reason would that be?" Rukh asked.

Alfred looked to Christopher who walked around the clearing and scanned his surroundings, standing out in his neat attire among the barely clad Raven males. He threaded through the hunting party toward his father. At his presence, Rukh balled his fists at his sides.

Ward did not heed Rukh's mood.

"Dear heavens, my friend. Don't tell me you spare any feelings for the chit," Ward said with barely contained laughter.

Rukh rounded on Ward. His fist struck across Ward's chin in reflex. He hit the ground before he could defend himself. Rukh shook out his hand while a red mark bloomed on Ward's chin.

Alfred motioned for Christopher to stop. With self-preservation, the boy heeded his father. The three froze around Rukh in a nervous tableau with Ward still on the ground. The Raven inside sensed the tension from the men and the fear emanating from the caged fox beside him.

"Rukh, do not let yourself feel emotion for her. It will come to no good end," Alfred said. The pity on the face so dear to Rukh only incensed him further.

"She is my mate."

Alfred blanched. Horror plain on his face, he reached to Rukh. "I'm sorry. Your father—"

Alfred's voice choked on the rest of the sentence, but not before Rukh understood. Everything fell into place like the last piece of a puzzle. Rukh's mother had been mate to the Alpha. With relief on his face, his father had relinquished the family crest and disappeared, never to be seen again. The perpetual sadness

in his father made sense to Rukh now. The former Alpha had lived without his mate until Rukh reached majority then followed his mate into death.

Rukh would not lose his mate to the same demon.

He shoved away from Alfred's outstretched hand, wrenched the door to the cage open, and shifted in a flash.

He took to the sky with a screech.

The fox below scrambled away, and the adolescent Ravens followed into the sky.

Rukh drove up until the thin air threatened his lungs. The hunting males circled far below and skimmed the top of the trees. The dogs were released, and the chase was on.

He plummeted toward the ground and, inches before slamming into the grass, swooped to the front of the others.

The much needed hunt did not meet its purpose, to ride out the pain, aggression, and raging desire that had threatened his bridled predatory nature. While the dogs bayed, the fox bolted through the brush, and the quarry's fear perfumed the air. The five Ravens accompanying him bristled for the chase. Their agitated caws echoed through the countryside. They soared in circles awaiting their Alpha and watching the action.

Rukh should be too old for this bloodlust, but he gave in to the pangs of hunger stabbing through his control. The juvenile hunters with him threaded through the trees. They followed Rukh's lunge but gave him space for the kill. Most of the flock outgrew the base urge to hunt by the time they reached maturity, around fifty years, but as Alpha, the compulsion never waned, and his battle frenzy needed appeasement. Under normal conditions, he fed the cravings by teaching the young to hunt, not needing to be the Raven to take down the prey.

A common urge to migrate plagued the adolescents, and the hunt was a release. Fortunately the Alpha did not suffer with the nearly intolerable urge to fly with the seasons once reaching maturity. Hunger for the chase was enough of an extra burden, not to mention the stresses of leadership and the intolerable hold on the reins of Bluebeard.

He remained point. Diving lower with each repeated lunge, he anticipated the kill. His appetite climbed to uncontrollable levels. The Raven savored the fear and panic from his prize. Croaking and diving at the hapless fox whenever it skittered too far away, the younger Ravens herded the animal onto the path of his death. When the cat and mouse game broke through his reined beast, he pierced through the air to strike.

Claws sank into the meaty haunch of the animal, beak tore into fur, and the muted squeals and thrashing of the doomed fox added to his frenzy. The blood did not soothe, did not ease his frustration. He needed more.

The Raven lifted his beak to the sky and let go a screeching cry. He called for another fox to be released and left the carcass to the flurry of adolescent beaks. He took to the air.

Chapter Eight

She was gone. The loss almost buckled his knees, almost brought Rukh to the ground as soon as he walked up the steps of the manor, not understanding until that moment how her presence resonated as a constant hum within him. Had his unprecedented cruelty during the fox hunt been a reaction to her flight?

If for no other reason, the screaming hollow thud of his heart proclaimed Isabel his mate. It struggled to beat in some semblance of a natural rhythm, as if a part of it were missing. He never made it inside, but turned on his heel, ran down the steps, and stopped cold. Clamping down on his need to shift and hunt, he struggled to think through the fog threatening to overtake his reason.

Isabel could not fly, so his skin that itched for change must wait until after he questioned the stable master. After he beat the man to a bloody pulp for allowing the Alpha-mate to leave, he'd take to air.

When he charged into the stables, all activity stopped.

"Where is she?" he boomed.

The short and wiry stable master cringed. His efficient and iron-fisted control had held the job for two decades, but he knew when to bow his head to the man in charge.

"My lord, I assume you mean the Lady Hayle?"

"Of course," growled Rukh.

"She ordered the carriage without giving her destination. She said the carriage would return by the morrow."

"And you let her leave?" He was being unreasonable, but he couldn't stop himself when the pit of his stomach turned to stone.

"I would not deny Lady Hayle a carriage or horse without my lord's express orders to do so."

"Which, I had not done," Rukh finished the thought for his employee. He tensed with frustration. Every muscle wanted to lash out, as he'd done with Ward earlier, but while Ward was a friend and a Raven, Rukh could not abuse this human under his employ and protection.

Moments wasted while he questioned every man in the stables, and Rukh still fought barely contained fury. He tromped from the carriage house. When he stopped at the barren road, desolate, not a traveler in sight, he did not remember walking, or running, the mile up the drive to the country lane that rounded his estate. His chest heaved with exertion, and moisture slid down his forehead.

His lady had run. She'd left him for good reason, and he was in hell. Unsure if his attachment indicated a biological response of a Raven bonded to his mate, or if his humanity had decided to take hold

of him again, he faced turmoil like none since he'd reached majority. He recognized his all encompassing lust for her, and his predatory claim upon her. Acknowledging his jealousy as a reasonable reaction to an Alpha guarding his territory, he still suspected he guarded a tendre for her.

Dangerous emotions for a woman he could lose to Bluebeard. If he reacted this way to her running, how would he react if the demon took her?

Now was not the time to delve into his blackened soul and throw his emotions upon the road to flounder. Prickling in his skin grew to a constant ache that insinuated itself into his already irrational planning. The change would come unbidden soon. In a grim upheaval that held desperation unknown to him until now, he threw off his clothes where he stood and let the shift take him.

Rukh no more.

He flew due east, to London.

The Raven's internal compass never wavered. His mate's unique scent imprinted across his soul and allowed him to follow her trail, still new enough to be strong and vital. The proof of her flight and her tangy fragrance gave strength to his wings, and he renewed his hunt with vigor.

Urges to find his mate and bring her home to nest hazed his vision. Shadowed by ever deepening anguish, deep inside, buried too far beneath the beast, Rukh feared he'd never again be human. If she were lost to him, he would remain the beast forever. His very life was at stake. He'd never let her go again.

Her alluring essence twisted and turned on the winding road. Air rushed through his beak, through the chambers that processed her fragrance, and down through his lungs in great gusts. Fierce demand occluded the joy of gliding upon the updrafts, winging through the fog, and soaring over the trees.

Nothing else mattered but following her, finding her. Nothing.

Far below, the day turned to night, and his eagle eye view tracked a traveling coach on the road. He focused upon his mark. With his mate in sight, the opposed internal drives to be near her and the pressure to hide his shifting abilities warred within.

The Raven swooped down. His first reaction, to peel back the top of the carriage and pluck her out, nearly halted his glide. The fear of harming her with his talons coupled with the threat of exposure of his flock stayed that urge. His talons clawed at the air. He forced himself to follow while he controlled his primal restlessness.

The carriage stopped at an inn, and when the driver stepped down to open the door, the Raven recognized the face. Rukh's driver. His own family coach, Hayle crest visible to his acute vision.

The humanity wrestled for control of the primal, to force the change. His more civilized nature, though not as civilized as it ought, held tight to the will of the Raven. Rukh nearly lost the reins of the beast when the figure emerged from the vehicle. Soft wisps of inky hair escaped from beneath her cape, the cloth no hindrance for his heightened tracking abilities.

Her spellbinding rose bouquet wafted over him. Despite the need to claim, her essence soothed him long enough to wait for the carriage to be brought to the stables. He circled above.

Once his driver stopped at the carriage house, the Raven landed. Rukh grappled with the shift and the base urges to hunt and mate. He changed back into a man, such as he was.

Soon clothed with an emergency stash he kept secured in the boot, he moved quickly. Rukh strode into the smoky interior of the Rusty Nail. He expected Isabel to be ensconced in a room above the tavern. Unpleasant surprise and anger threatened his control to see her arguing with the inn keeper, surrounded by the denizens of the local establishment. With intense interest and lust, men watched her every move and sized her up, weighing their chances. Rukh did not like their lascivious leering. Not one bit.

"There must be another coach tonight. This is an emergency. I need to get to London right away," she said to the owner. She pled in a way that made Rukh's hackles rise.

Lady Hayle does not plead.

Rukh moved toward the two, but remained behind Isabel out of sight.

"I'm sorry m'lady. Not even a mail coach, not this late." The portly man removed his cap and revealed a glistening bald head which he rubbed with his meaty paw. Obvious to Rukh, the man did not want to displease the Lady Hayle. Perhaps Rukh would not have to throttle the man senseless.

"Is there a hackney?"

"Not this far out, m'lady. I told you, I can have the Hayle coach readied for you in the morning with fresh horses."

"No, no. I must leave the coach here. Do you have a cart or wagon? I can compensate you for it, if you could find a driver."

The note of trepidation was the last straw. Even though he'd wanted to hear the extent of her plans, Rukh would not listen to his lady beg. When Rukh stepped into the light, the inn keeper's eyes bulged wide. Lord Hayle slid his hand under his lady's elbow and applied light pressure. She tensed and flinched to escape. He jerked her toward him. She tripped, but he caught her against him before she could stumble to the ground.

"My lady has arranged our room, sir?" Rukh quirked his brow at the man who trembled before him.

"Yes, m'lord." The man stepped back and ran into the oak bar that gleamed, an indication the owner took pride in his establishment. Assured the inn would do for the night, Rukh relaxed a fraction.

"Come, Lady Hayle. The trip was tiring, and I would like to retire."

Shock plain on her face, Isabel allowed Rukh to guide her to the stairs. Lights blazed from lanterns on the walls, another point in favor of the Rusty Nail. Clean and well lit, with appetizing smells coming from the kitchen, the comfortable setting eased all stress over his wife's safety, especially now that he had her within his grip again.

Skin warm through her long white gloves, rigid with the tenseness of the arm beneath, Isabel's obvious nervousness prodded his gentle affections.

"This is my door," she said with a whisper.

"Ours," he responded and cut off the softening toward her. She'd had the audacity to leave him. "After you, sweet."

He nudged her inside and closed the door behind them. The bed called to him like a siren. He quickly averted his eyes. The small room nearly suffocated him with her nearness and the temptation of a night on those sheets with her body beneath him. His cock responded, already at half mast, but her doe-eyed look of fear kept his lust in check. Despite checking his ardor, salacious greed lay there beneath the surface ready to erupt at her touch.

Rukh motioned her to the lone chair beside the door while he stayed an arm's length away, a difficult proposition since the room was barely wide enough for him to stretch out his arms between the bed and the door. Propped against the wall, he tried to keep his posture unaffected, but the bulge in his britches gave him away. When her eyes strayed there, his rod swelled fully erect and strained against the fabric. He would ignore it, even if she didn't. Her eyes widened. Wariness replaced by desire in a heartbeat, her back relaxed the barest fraction from the straight line against the back of the chair.

He inclined his head, and she understood the signal to explain herself. Isabel licked her lips, torturing his resolve, and cleared her throat. He'd hear her explanations first. Then he'd test those plump morsels, soft and wet, parted in a light pant.

"You cannot touch me." Her voice strong, she firmed her chin. Her dark eyes glinted at him. As quickly as her fear had turned to passion, her passion turned to anger. What had he done in the space of that second?

She continued, "Even now I could carry your child, but if I do not, it is best we not risk it again. I will not bear your heirs only to have them encumbered by a murderous curse. A demon, Rukh. Your sons would have their lives owned by a demon."

"Say my name again," he breathed. He'd heard her proclamation, and he meant to address it. He'd command her not to leave again under any circumstances, but the sound of his name dropped from her lips dispelled all other thoughts. The slight catch in her tone, the lilt as her accent caressed his name, sent a spear of possessiveness through him. "Say it."

"Rukh." Even with the questioning tilt to her head and the confusion in her soft voice, the word sighed from her.

He'd convince her to stay, later. Rather, he'd order her obedience. She couldn't disobey. She'd not deny his right to sheath himself between her willing thighs either.

Before he'd thought to straighten from the wall, he found himself on his knees before her, a frighteningly common occurrence since he'd met her, and buried his face in her lap. Arms wrapped around

her legs, he rubbed his head back and forth and nuzzled the juncture of her thighs. The several layers of fabric could not hide the heat and scent of her response.

How had she done this to him, inspired such longing and madness to have her? Possess her. Own her.

When her hands gripped in his hair he moaned, tightened his hold, and lifted her into his embrace. Arms twined about his neck, she leaned into him. Warm breath stuttered next to his ear. In a swift move he laid her on the bed and reached for the bottom of her skirts before she jolted away. She scrambled from the bed.

“No.” After determined steps back to the chair, she sat down and smoothed back the black silk strands that escaped from her coiffure.

“What do you mean, no?” His carnal impulses made him harsh, and he could not keep the edge from his voice. He should be inside her already, forcing her to submit to his possession, to his pleasure. And, to hers.

Her disgusted expression brought reality to him. He’d never force anything on her, but he wanted so much to be wrapped in her hot, slick velvet. That heavenly grotto had greedily clamped on his cock when he’d released inside her repeatedly on their wedding night. His britches dampened with his arousal. He huffed and suppressed his lecherous bent. Yet again, he slouched against the wall. A familiar position.

With a deep breath, he ignored the raging hard-on, and gave her a disgruntled look, an expression perfected upon his flock in his centuries of rule.

“Fine. No, for now. Only for now, but soon you’ll be on your back. On that bed and eager for me to fill you,” he growled.

“Is that all you think about?” Her disdainful voice was unconvincing. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath. Pink spots flamed on her cheeks, and her tongue flicked over her bottom lip. His wife’s obvious arousal heightened his.

“It would seem so.” The wonder in his voice gave him pause. He’d never thought to experience the unrelenting drive for copulation outside of Hayle House. His few brief excursions outside the manor had never involved a woman or erotic temptations.

For the first time in his two-hundred-plus years, his intense ardor was untainted, unaffected by the incubus housed in the Hayle Manor. Yes, he’d join with his wife and soon.

“I am sorry, but I will not lay with you again. I understand it is a wifely duty, but this uncontrollable passion is not normal. It’s proof that the demon has brought evil and corruption.” Her voice steadily rose through her impassioned speech. “If you would protect any of our future children, you will rid your family of the curse before you touch me. I will not live in the house with a demon.”

“My dove, if you have passion for me now, it is natural between a husband and wife. There is no incubus here to compel your hunger, to make you ravenous for my touch. You do yearn for my touch, right now. Do you not?”

“Yes.” Brows furrowed, her honest answer seemed to confuse her. To ease her mind he stayed away, back against the wall. He wanted her badly, but he wanted her willing.

“You are my wife, Isabel. You cannot leave me.” Those words were the most difficult he’d ever spoken. It took all of his control to keep his voice even, forceful, though it threatened to waver.

“I am your wife, but how can you allow me to live in a place that threatens me with death? You would have me murdered? Sacrificed when I’ve borne you an heir?”

“No!” he boomed. He ran his hand over his face and straightened from the wall. Nearly impossible, he still managed to pace the small room with his long strides. He could not stand still. “You’re right, of course. That is why you are in the Lady’s Chambers. You’ll need to visit me in my bed once a week to feed the incubus, otherwise he will escape.”

“Did you hear what you said? You would pay a demon with your lust as you use my body for evil. For immortality. This high price to pay is for your flock to keep their immortal lives. And you would have me bear you a son who would use his wife in the same manner. You are bound to the prison as surely as the demon. We cannot live elsewhere, can we?”

“No, we cannot stay here in the Inn for more than a night.” He was absurdly heartened that she’d said “we”. He refused to concede. He’d found his mate, and he’d fight hell to have her. “None of that matters. I’ll protect you, but we must return at first light.”

“You don’t understand. I will not live in Hayle Manor. If that means we annul the marriage, then so be it.”

Frustrated, angry, he controlled the urge to bundle her down the stairs, bound and gagged, and take her back to the Manor. His voice was frigid. “There will be no annulment. Even if there were, I do not care if we are married. I thought that was abundantly clear when I gave you the option to be my mistress. But, it is equally clear that you are mine. You are my mate. Ravens mate for life. There will be no other.”

“What happens when your mate is murdered by a demon?” Her chin hitched in stubborn resolve.

He would not convince her.

He would not abide her absence.

Forced to reason with her, he shackled the dominant Alpha and conceded to her own Alpha-mate resolve. A perfect match for his ironclad authority, his wife was strong. “My lady, what would you suggest, other than turning tail and running?”

“I cannot live with a demon. You cannot live away from the demon. If we are to be together, if we are to have children, then the demon must leave.”

“And how do you suggest we convince the demon to leave?”

“I will study your grandfather’s book. I’m sure the answers are there.”

“And if they’re not?”

“They will be.”

“If there are no answers there, I still cannot allow you to leave me.”

“You cannot make me stay.”

Perhaps this was true. He’d not harm her. But he had to keep her from running away from him. Today, her folly in leaving the manor could have ended badly. An unprotected woman on the roads could meet with violence. He understood the brutality forced on the defenseless too well.

“You may study the book at Hayle Manor, and we’ll discuss what you find. We’ll return in the morning.” If there were no answers, he’d have to make her want to stay with him. He’d find a way to bind her to him. Make her not want to leave. Make her love him.

Love?

What did he know about love? But he wanted it. He wanted it from her.

He’d managed on his own for two centuries, but now he couldn’t live a day without his lady. The first hundred years of his rule, Rukh had tried everything he could to dispel the house of the evil. He’d been physically repelled from the forbidden room, unable to enter. For the last many decades, he’d ignored the red door and lived with the hell left to him. He’d dealt with it, appeased it, but if it took banishing the curse to keep Isabel, he’d do whatever he could to please her. He’d finally find a way. Even if his heart told him it would be no easy road.

“We’ll find the answers. I know we will,” she said. Relief brought a smile to her face and to his own.

“Yes, my lady.” He gave her the reply she wished to hear, rather than the one he believed. He did not want to think of the repercussions of her studying a book dealing with witchcraft. He did not think on what might happen if she didn’t find what she needed there.

He crossed to the bed and held out his hand. The hand he always used when he reached for her, the left, heavy with the Raven crested band.

“Come to bed, dove. Let me show you the passion I have for you.”

Her smile tentative, she put her small hand within his. He gripped her delicate wrist and tugged her forward, lay back, and pulled her on top of him.

“I will show you how it is between a man and his wife.” He gripped the nape of her neck and led her to his lips. “Your hair will be tangled again.”

He crushed her to him. Fingers in her soft ebony strands and his lips on fire, he proceeded to ravage her.

He’d comb her hair in the morning.

And then he’d take her home, to face a demon.

Chapter Nine

Sunlight shone through the window and warmed Isabel's naked skin. The unfiltered rays nearly blinded her. She closed her eyes. The long day had been spent mostly in bed, but the light beckoned. Rukh had walked outside with her for a few moments, and only then did she realize how much she'd missed the sun at the Manor, where the fog seemed unrelenting.

Isabel turned from the window to her tousled husband asleep in the rumpled sheets of the tiny bed. It had taken only a seductive twist to her lips to convince him to spend the day here. A heady power, that. Though she'd allowed him to think she'd return with him through her silence, she did not like the guilt of lying by omission.

How could she return to be murdered? Her heart fisted, and she gasped. The pain of leaving nearly doubled her over, but she couldn't remain in the untenable situation. How could he tempt her so thoroughly to go with him to her peril?

Tall, lean, and sculpted, golden-skinned temptation covered the bed. She'd thrown the sheet across his middle to keep her hands from roaming there and waking him. Well she knew what rested there.

Stubble covered his chin. His dark hair glinted blue in the light, but the smudges beneath his closed lashes tugged at her. He'd suffered as she. How could their bond be so heart wrenching after a matter of days?

A cloud passed over the sun. She blinked against the fading light before she realized she'd stared at Rukh for perhaps an hour, long enough for the sun to begin its decline. He stirred and blinked awake while stretching his long, delicious frame.

"Come back to bed." His scratchy tenor rasped with sleep. She crossed to him. The warmth from the sun and the passion he inspired gave her hips a sultry roll.

What duty compelled a wife? Here, where the taint of Bluebeard did not reach, she'd begun to doubt.

Despite the intention to leave, she couldn't keep away from him, not an easy proposition in the small room in any case. Dare she think that though she'd no longer have a husband, perhaps she might already carry a piece of him inside? She should not want to have his babe under the circumstances, but the ache to have him, even through a child, flowed in her veins, too strong to deny.

She lay beside him. When he touched her, troubles fell away.

Rukh proved once again that their passion grew stronger each moment they remained together. After their bodies were spent, she drifted to sleep.

The bed shifted and brought her closer to awareness. Darkness greeted her upon waking. She stretched with languid content. Rukh's hushed tones nearly lulled her back to sleep with a smile on her face.

"Is the carriage ready?" he asked a man at the door. All her inclination to slumber fled.

"It will be, as you ask, within the hour."

"Good. Knock when you bring the dinner tray. Here is the letter. Be sure to have it delivered post-haste."

Carriage?

She nearly sat up in bed before she remembered her nudity. Modesty compelled her to remain still until the door closed.

"You're awake, dove."

She cleared her throat, but her words were husky, "The carriage, Rukh?"

Though she'd moaned his name many times over the course of the last night and day, it still held the power to make her glow inside as it rolled from her tongue. The glow dimmed in this instance.

He sighed. "I'd written a missive to Alfred. He sent a reply with his worry that we've not returned. I assured him we'd be back as soon as the carriage could be prepared."

Her easy manner with Rukh threatened to strain. Nothing had changed. What had she been thinking? Nothing. She thought of nothing when he touched her but his captivating diversions. A headache wavered behind her eyes.

"Isabel, we cannot stay. If for no other reason, I do not fit upon this bed." He chuckled. More relaxed than she'd seen him, he grinned at her with hair still awry. She'd never seen a sight more beautiful.

He scooped her from beneath the sheet and onto his lap. She squealed and pushed back under the blanket.

"'Tis not decent."

"What's not decent between a husband and wife? I've seen this lush derrière many times over the night, and it's a sight to see." He swatted lightly at her backside. She yanked the bedding over her more securely. "Come, wife. Dress. Much as I'd like to spend more time exploring your wondrous form, I do not want the kitchen boy to see it, nor the carriage driver. Up you go."

He pulled her squirming from her covering, and stood her before the lone chair where he'd draped her clothing. Careful and as attentive as any lady's maid, he helped her dress. Unlike a maid, though, he placed sweet kisses on her skin before he covered it. Shoulder. Forearm. Elbow. Wrist. The valley between her breasts. By the time he was done, she wanted to remove everything and start all over.

The bliss shattered with a scratch at the window. Squawking filled the small room.

A pounding at the door sent Isabel's heart plummeting.

"My lord," called a strong voice from behind the oak barrier.

“Alfred.” Rukh was neither ruffled nor surprised. With a calmness Isabel could not imitate, he opened the door.

Alfred bowed his head in a curt motion. He strode into the room. Rukh growled and stepped between her and Alfred while she blushed at Alfred’s near nudity covered in haphazard fashion with a stable blanket. An angry, bloody slash across Alfred’s upper chest caught her attention before she faced the window in the now crowded chamber.

“Pardon, my lady.” He didn’t sound apologetic, but harried.

A scuffling at the door preceded the booming innkeeper. “Milord, I will remove this intruder. The rascal slipped past me.”

“No need, my good man. The rascal bears a message from my estate.”

A tense pause filled the room.

“Very well,” the innkeeper replied with a dubious note. The door closed.

“What is the meaning of this?” Rukh asked and tucked Isabel to his back. “You will be clothed appropriately in my wife’s presence.”

“I do beg pardon, my lord. My many years in the company of Ravens have blunted my sensibilities. Might I speak with haste?”

“What is the matter?”

Two large birds circled outside in the bright moonlight. Another perched on a branch outside their window.

“The incubus dares much while you are away. He has possessed a victim, and Christopher was gravely injured in a rescue attempt. I beg your help with returning the fiend to his prison.” The strong man wavered. “I cannot get to Christopher. He lies crumpled against the wall in your chamber, but we can’t get near him. I barely escaped with my life.”

“Wait for me outside,” Rukh replied with curtness.

With her back to his, Rukh remained tense until Alfred retreated. He turned her into his embrace and held her tightly. Her husband nuzzled the top of her head and inhaled deeply before he spoke into her hair. “Remain here until I return. We will ride back together in the carriage. Bolt the door after me.”

He kissed her soundly then left her there, arms empty.

She locked the door and clutched the wooden arms of the chair. Poor Christopher brought low in this mess. He did not deserve such treatment. She hoped Rukh would fare better. She couldn’t bear to think of the pain if he did not.

Shattered glass from the window jolted her into flight. Unaware of the exact danger, she did not wait to find out.

Heart pounding in her ears, she backed to the door and slid the bolt open. A dark form filled the window. With a rustle, the figure lunged in the room. Isabel screamed and yanked the door ajar.

Before she could escape, sharp claws grasped her from behind.

“Help!” She screamed and was heartened by the thud of men running up the stairs.

She fought to keep her wits and grabbed onto the handle. A familiar bright light temporarily blinded her. A Raven had shifted to human form.

A man reached around and wrestled the door from her. Her arms burned with the force of his grip. The door slammed and the bolt slid shut. A hand covered her mouth. She struggled and fought against his grip of iron.

Unable to move, she stilled and tried to breathe around the beefy appendage that covered half her face.

“Milady, sincerest apologies.”

Ward?

Unsure of her circumstances, Isabel calmed her heaving lungs and did not have to wait long for him explain himself.

“Lord Rukh Hayle may be your husband and my Alpha, but he is also my friend. Please come along without trouble. I must return you to Hayle Manor or the entire flock is in jeopardy. Be sure he’ll repay any scratches on your person tenfold upon mine.”

He still had not loosened his hold on her arm or her mouth. Pounding on the door made her head drum with a dull ache. Shouts and threats of the Innkeeper sounded over the top of the cacophony.

“I’m going to tie your hands and gag you for your own protection. If you were left to your own devices, you might come to harm. Please don’t struggle. I have to lower you out the window to the carriage. I wouldn’t want you to be hurt.”

He bound her tightly but without pain, and though it wasn’t likely she’d come to harm, she could not stop trembling in fear and anger.

Ward picked her up and lowered her out the window by holding her under her arms. Steady hands grabbed her ankles and guided her to the roof of the carriage. Thankful both that Ward was strong and that they were on the second floor, she swallowed the thickness in her throat. Forceful, but careful, a man shoved her into the carriage. The door slammed, and the carriage took off.

When they removed this gag, she’d blister their hides with a few unladylike words. She’d learned several from her husband in their whirlwind relationship. Despite her plans not to return to the manor, she headed that way even now. She could leave again. They’d not keep her there.

She sat back and let the motion of the carriage soothe her.

With his utmost speed, Rukh pounded up the stairs to his suite. The entirety of the flock staying at the manor seemed to line the broad stone stairs. They moved against the wall to let him pass and cleared the hallway before him.

Outside his door, thrown wide, he stopped short. A deep compulsion to retreat threaded from his crest ring and spread like a rash over his entire body. The magic had never been so strong. He gripped the frame around the entrance but could not enter his room.

Muscles bunched with strain, he lifted his foot past the threshold. His leg ached as if needles pricked his skin by the thousands, and moisture covered him with the exertion. As if a solid wall of invisible thorns prevented his entry, he could move no further.

Inside the room Christopher lay in a heap under the window. Even as Rukh struggled to reach him, the younger man stirred.

Sounds bombarded Rukh. A woman's unintelligible words came from the other side of the room, but he could not see her.

Moans of ecstasy and sensual delight assaulted his ears. He knew the voice intimately.

Sheila, the kitchen maid, had made those sounds for him countless times, in that very same bed. He clinched his fists and tried to move inside to no avail. He did not want Sheila in his bed again. Not with him. And not with an incubus.

Bluebeard had Rukh's former lover in the throes of passion. The grunted responses grew more intense, but he was thankfully spared the sight of the copulation. Completely immobilized, he could neither move to their defense, but neither could he, in honor, leave them.

"Bluebeard, you have no right here," Rukh boomed.

A deep, raucous chuckle responded before Sheila's screams answered, between pain and orgasmic release. He'd have to burn that mattress.

From the floor, Christopher lifted his head in the direction of the bed. His face contorted and blanched.

Red hazed Rukh's vision.

From years before, the scene played out. To his horror, the long-buried memory surfaced as if he lived it again.

His second wife, splayed upon the bed with a larger than life man pumping between her legs. His blue beard accented the delighted grin of sharp teeth in his absurdly handsome face. With a noose about her neck, his first wife, long believed dead, stretched with arms outreached to the fiend but remained tethered inside the forbidden chamber by the rope about her neck. Her eyes were empty, and her face contorted with evil hate.

Both women were wed to him. Both women now played jezebel for a beast. Anger and savage instincts took him. The Raven defended its honor. He attacked, women and demon alike. They defended with violence. His wives were no longer human. The blood sprayed across the walls and into his eyes.

Time remained stuck, and the horrid scenes played over and over. Again and again, he relived the moment he'd ended his wives. He couldn't pull away from the mire. Rukh blinked away the night that had occurred so long ago. Guilt plagued him and brought a vicious sting to his eyes.

After endless agony, a flash of blue blurred before him. He struggled to bring up his fists, in aggression or defense he was unsure. Before he could move through the quagmire, a blinding blow struck him to the ground. His stricken body fell to the floor.

His sight blackened for a moment, or maybe hours.

The stings and pinches of the spell receded. The compulsion no longer kept Rukh stuck in helplessness. On his side, Christopher still remained in place, his eyes squinted closed, and his arms wrapped around his knees like a child.

Rukh got to his feet and inched into the room. The smell of spent sex with the taint of blood flooded him. Before Isabel, that scent might have made him rock hard in an instant. Now, he was disgusted.

With the reminder of his previous two wives and their rent bodies, he dreaded his duty to retrieve the woman on his bed. She breathed in heavy gusts with a smile on her face and her body lax in contentment. But Sheila's red cheeks were not rosy with pleasure, but spotted against a face pale from exertion. Her once blonde hair was stark white. Her smooth skin now lined with too advanced an age. She appeared sunken, drained.

Claw marks marred her nudity.

Sorrow for the once buxom maid halted him. He couldn't go to her. Not when she appeared satisfied and didn't yet understand the price that she'd paid by relinquishing her youth to the demon who'd absorbed it.

Instead, he crossed to Christopher.

"Are you well, nephew?"

"No, I do not believe I'll ever be well again." The young man's throat worked, and his eyes flicked between Rukh and the now closed red door of Bluebeard's chamber.

"In time, what you have seen will diminish. Trust me on this," Rukh replied. He understood, too well.

How could he have dismissed the danger to Isabel? He couldn't bring her back here. No matter the cost to the flock, how could he justify the sacrifice of her body and soul? Immortality given with such an evil price should not be born by one for the boon of the rest.

He'd not truly faced the crux of the matter but had kept himself away from the memories of his previous wives. Even now, he couldn't delve further. There was more there. He blinked the visions away to help Christopher to his feet.

“Where are you injured?”

His nephew replied, “I took a nasty bump to the head. I’m a little unsteady, but I’ll be fine.”

Christopher swayed a bit, and his eyes tracked to the bed. What he saw there forced his eyes closed again.

A carriage sounded on the pavers of the drive. Both men turned to the window.

“Oh, hell,” said Christopher.

A bound and gagged Isabel stumbled from the Hayle crested carriage. Ward stepped forward to untie her. Once free, she brought up both hands fisted together and struck him across the chin.

Ward stumbled from the shock of the blow.

Fury like he’d never known surged through Rukh. He powered through the glass, shards pierced long gashes through his skin. The ground rushed toward him. With a flash, the Raven took control. He dove toward the carriage.

His great wing flicked Ward back to the ground when he’d struggled to right himself.

The Raven swooped to his mate.

With infinite care, he gripped her around the shoulders, lifted her into the air, and flew to the Manor tower.

She barraged him with scathing curses the entire way.

Her feet touched down, and she righted herself when the claws let go. It had to be Rukh who’d held her. His smoke and sage essence breezed over her with the wind from his feathers.

Screeches filled the air. Rukh crashed into two great Ravens. He put himself between her and the two members of his flock. The two hit the roof hard and rolled toward the edge.

A small raised wall surrounded the circular turret, empty except near one edge where a railing surrounded an opening with steps leading down.

From Rukh’s push, one of the Ravens crashed against the knee-wall. Small stones crumbled with the impact. The delay before the sound of them hitting the ground made Isabel’s knees weak. They were a long way up.

The rush of flying with her husband returned for a scant moment. Wind whipped through the heights. Fog surrounded her, and the dampness seeped through her gown.

The tops of leafless trees dotted the landscape of the brown grasses of the moor behind the manor. Isabel gulped and locked her knees. She wanted to run to Rukh, still standing between her and the others. He scratched the masonry beneath his feet, cawed loudly, and jerked his head in aggression. He was angry and taunting.

The two Ravens moved toward him in a rush. Wings collided, but the birds kept their beaks and talons from the struggle.

Isabel could not help here. If she interfered, she'd only get hurt. A fall from the top of the tower would mean her death. The winged fantasy creatures could fly. She could not.

The three large birds crashed into each other. Ear-deafening caws rent the air. Aggression building in their tense bodies, their movement became more frenzied. The tangle of dark feathers was a blur she could not decipher.

Urgency overtook her. She had to get off this roof. Rukh could take care of himself, but it would be easier without her in the way.

The tower appeared to be a roost of sorts. Gouges in the flooring suggested years of landings here. The staircase on the side of the circular tower was the only way down.

She edged to it. All the while she kept back from the lunging beaks and talons. A wing brushed past her and sent her gown swinging to snag between her legs. She put her arms out for balance and ran to the stairs.

She stumbled down the winding stone steps on her way down, but steadied herself with the rickety wooden banister. Her shaking hands clutched the rail, and she balanced her rush to escape against the fear of falling down the steps.

At the bottom she stepped into a large circular chamber. Several men sat at a great table. Others entered and silently took their places. She forced back the urge to vent all her roiling turmoil at them. Their calmness while Rukh fought above made her teeth grind with frustration.

Shocked by his audacity, she shook her head when Ward beckoned. The coolness of the men surrounding Ward compounded the already strange night. They seemed determined to keep their seats and not lift a finger to halt the fighting above. If they would not help, perhaps one of the footmen would. With a gun. Alfred stayed her when she attempted to leave through the only door. She jumped when he touched her from behind where he'd been standing against the wall.

"My lady. Sit, please. The Ravens only seek to keep their lord at home, safe. They will not harm one another."

The strong grip on her elbow convinced her she could not pull away. He escorted her to the head of the table. The comfortable velvet cushion had the familiar woodsy, brandy scent of her husband. She sat.

"Lord Hayle will join us shortly," Alfred said with an even tone.

Shrieking calls filled the staircase from the roof. Grunts, fists smacking flesh, and curses rained through the tunnel. Two unclad men crashed down the stairs and landed at the bottom. They stayed prone on the floor.

Just as unclothed, Rukh walked behind them and kicked them out of his way. They groaned in response but did not move. Eyebrows lowered in rage, he glared at Alfred.

“How dare you?” His venomous whisper rolled through the space and echoed in the silence. “How dare you harm the Alpha-mate? How dare you defy me in such a manner?”

“We did not harm the lady. You can see that for yourself,” Alfred responded. He stood, back straight, and unable to meet his Alpha’s rage, did not look into Rukh’s face.

Isabel could not fathom meeting those stormy eyes full of violence. Despite his ferocious appearance, a dark thrill ran through her. He was angry on *her* behalf. He defended *her*. He desired *her*. He was *hers*.

Pride filled her nigh to bursting.

He looked at her with a searching glance that set her to quivering. She grew damp between her thighs.

An immediate backlash of reality washed over her. Was this her own primitive response to him? Or did the power of the incubus already taint her desires?

“You do not have to injure her person to cause her harm.” He snarled and stalked within striking distance of Alfred. He circled Alfred once, and faced the rest of the room. “Do you challenge me?”

Alfred sank to one knee and bowed his head. “No, my lord.”

“Explain why you have attacked me and my mate if you do not wish to challenge.” Tight and corded, the muscles on his shoulders and down his back stood out with the strain of keeping his anger in check. His body, nude from Raven form, tensed, ready for battle.

Isabel feared she’d become a heathen, wanton, a wicked, wicked harlot. Rukh faced the men who’d kidnapped her, and she wanted to run her hands over his taut rump.

Alfred stayed in place and spoke to the floor. “As before, she must stay here so we can keep the evil in check. Last night is proof the demon will hold us to the bargain. He hurt whoever was in his path. Christopher—” Alfred’s voice cracked. He remained quite still, not moving. Rukh glared with no reaction to his uncle’s distress except a quaver that ran the length of his taut physique. Alfred gulped audibly and continued.

“If my lord or lady leaves, then the fiend can leave this place and spread his vileness to your tenants, to the countryside, and to wherever his whims may take him. Who shall stop him from taking all the women in his path?”

“Nothing you have said gives you the right to touch my wife.” Rukh unfolded and clenched his hands. “You only care to keep your long lives. What price is too high, Alfred?”

“My lord, we bow to you as Alpha, but we will keep your wife by your side, in this house, with force if necessary.” Remorse plain, Alfred’s face softened.

“Lady Hayle will leave this house before nightfall,” he snarled. “I have made my decision. I will not lose another wife.”

At the thought of leaving Rukh, Isabel became dizzy. In denial, to remind herself, her lips moved to say “I want to leave” but no sound came forth.

They decided her fate without her, but she could not speak up. She couldn't force sound through her dry mouth to halt the words hurtling too fast around her.

With sadness in his eyes, Alfred lifted his head and looked at Isabel though he spoke to Rukh. "The Flock stands guard. We can't allow her to leave."

Rukh lunged at Alfred. His hands wrapped around his uncle's neck. Isabel put her hand on her throat. So much violence.

The room erupted in chaos. Rukh's hold was torn from Alfred. Men piled onto her husband to hold him down. She cringed and held her breath for his agony. He threw them off, all five landed in a heap. Before he could pull himself off the floor, he was surrounded, caught immobile by perhaps a dozen men throwing themselves on top of him.

He roared with pain and outrage.

Chapter Ten

The damn demon stayed put in his chamber, but time slipped through Rukh's fingers like stagnant water. It would only be so long before he'd have to face Bluebeard.

Three months of strained relations between Rukh and the watchful patriarchs would have been enough to keep him on edge, but three months of polite, surface conversations with Isabel over dinner had him fighting insanity. To make matters worse, the once a week perfunctory coupling that started with duty and ended in a cold bed, alone, had him seething. He snarled at the stable boy. He yelled at the cook. He was a boorish ass, and he knew it.

She resented his capitulation, his decision to abide by the patriarchs' decision to hold her here. After several attempts to break through the Raven's watch, he'd had to save face and give up his covert attempts to find a weakness in the guards. With grudging pride he acknowledged his flock held the Manor with impregnable diligence. With no immediate alternatives, he placed confidence in her ability to find the answers with her research, but she would not listen to his reasons.

Fresh from the hunt, he would remain calm and approach Isabel as he did every morn. Like clockwork, she'd deny his overtures and ignore him the rest of the day. He'd hide in the shadows of the library, again. He'd watch her pour over the old book, leaf through reference tomes, and talk and laugh with Christopher. Because of Christopher's repeated pleas to Alfred to let Isabel leave, Rukh had controlled the urge to throttle the young man. Rukh was pathetic. Never in his two hundred and fifty years had he been so lost.

Yet every day she softened a little to him. Perhaps today he'd convince her to take pity.

Outside, the day started as dreary as the others. He walked into the hall and waited at the bottom of the stairs. Not long after, perhaps ten minutes, her essence floated down to him. His nostrils flared, and his heart skipped a beat.

She glided down the steps, a soft expression on her face.

"Isabel," he breathed.

Her cheeks brightened with two spots of color.

"Would you join me for a walk in the garden?" he asked and held his breath like a school boy.

She sighed. His heart plummeted.

“Don’t scowl so,” she said. She brushed past him, and he gripped the banister to keep himself from crushing her to him. “Once again, I remind you. I remain here as prisoner. I will do as necessary as any prisoner must, but no more.”

This was as it had been, but today was different. She stopped a few steps from the library door. A sad yearning on her face, she turned and looked at him over her shoulder. When their eyes met, she whipped her head around, ran into the room, and slammed the portal shut behind her.

“Ah, my dove,” he sighed. “A chink in your armor.”

He’d see her tonight and divest her of the cracked, hard shell. He nudged her to be more daring with each of their erotic interludes. His mouth watered with anticipation of tasting her sweet quim. He grinned.

Perhaps tonight, he’d test her restraint when she came to him in duty. *His* restraint had been tested beyond bearing.

Long, teasing licks made Isabel squirm. Her legs closed around Rukh and held tight before he nosed against her thigh. A small nip warned her to relax before he wedged his shoulders between her legs to keep her spread before him. He growled before suckling Isabel once more.

“Too much,” she moaned.

“No, dove. Not too much, I can never get enough of your honey.” He purred before he looked up the length of her taut skin and pushed a finger inside her wet heat. “You smell good enough to eat, to lick, to savor.”

She bucked her hips and clamped tight on his finger, but she needed more. The time she could be close to him, to indulge with him, was too little, and she was greedy for it.

Rukh stilled. Quiet and unmoving while the dim light fell through the window, he inhaled deeply.

Hands clenched in the sheets by her side, she panted and lifted her hips in supplication. “Please, don’t stop. Or I’ll remember to be embarrassed.”

Her pleading received no response, and she struggled to hold onto the passion that had threatened to crest, that precipice where Rukh never failed to take her.

Her orgasm, out of reach, faded away when he didn’t continue his wondrous exploration with his talented mouth.

A strange expression crossed his face, but he did not speak to her. With her body tense and motionless, the room closed in upon her. They had enough worries outside the bed, most especially this particular bed in his chambers.

The night approached. Usually the insatiable Rukh hungered for her and drove her to exhaustion, but he always remained conscious of the pending darkness, the time when the demon prowled behind the door. Every week he bundled her to her own bed before the sun set.

He spoke, puzzled. "Your scent is different."

She let the joys of copulation slip away. "What do you mean?"

"Your last cycle was six weeks ago, yes?"

"You seem to know better than I." Constantly amazed at his ability to track her moods, her appetites, and her monthly courses, Isabel did not understand how he could do so. Most days they conversed briefly, but she knew he watched her. Then, in the evening, they dined with the patriarchs. Though the conversation would be described as stilted, she learned more about him everyday. He clearly knew her well and could predict her cycle better than she.

The implication hit her full force. "Do you think I am with child?"

Palming her stomach, he slid forward and kissed her there. He grinned up her length, a smile which beamed more happiness than she'd seen upon his face. "I believe you are."

Dread climbed up her spine.

She wished to be as excited, but while she had always wanted a child, the horrific circumstances of the Hayle curse weighed on her. "I am not ready. We've not rid the house of Bluebeard."

The door shuddered when she pronounced the name of the demon. She jolted and knocked Rukh's caress away from her body. This had never happened before. Not during the day, the only time she ever came to these chambers. They ignored it now, much as on a weekly basis she suppressed the pulse emanating from the forbidden chamber toward dusk.

"We took precautions." She tried not to whine, she truly did, but her voice had a distinct pleading edge. With an assurance that had lulled her into his keeping, he always knew when she was fertile, and when she was not.

"Yes, I know you wanted to wait, but no method is sure. The child will not live as I have and endure this pact with a demon. I will ensure it with my last breath. But, I cannot dwell on such when this child is such a gift. I am well pleased." His grin grew wicked, a flirtatious light in his dark amber eyes. "Your husband is virile, my lady."

Worried over the future, she still returned his smile. His teasing new and unexplored, she wanted that part of him to shine and grow. The glint in his eye made her heart swell and leap. Always so stern, he showed her his playful nature only when they were alone in these stolen moments, and she was afraid she might be in love with that side of his complex character.

"So quiet, dove?" He brushed his lips across her navel before plunging his tongue inside.

That fast, her mind slipped away from her concerns and centered on the pleasure from his sensuous fondles and his heated mouth sampling her secret places. Even knowing that her constant ache and fervor was enhanced by the incubus, she fell to Rukh's allure.

She gave into that allure when his mouth traveled lower.

Frenzied grasping, guttural moans of delight, and splendor, absolute splendor, culminated in a stormy flash of red behind her eyes. Her body crested and release crashed through her. They collapsed in a tangle of limbs. For a moment, she allowed him to hold her, spent and sucking gasps of air into her lungs.

Even with her satiation, she wanted her husband again, but exhaustion threatened. She could spend all day with him, if she could, and explore his magnificent form. Sleep beckoned, but she did not follow it. She stretched her legs and did not mind the soreness at the apex.

Rukh pulled the sheet over their sweaty bodies, and Isabel curled into his side. She inhaled his smoke and sage. Heavy lidded, she ignored the burn, the need to ride her dragon, and the muscular and hard body that always tempted her. Lethargy took her away.

Reliant on Rukh, who always watched the time, she dreamed of smiling babies, rounded red cheeks, drooling smiles, and white lace gowns. Safe. Protected from the fires that burned her to cinders, her baby watched as Hayle Manor took her into the ashes.

The dream played over and over until Rukh nudged her awake. She willed the harrowing images away and forgot them when her husband stroked the curve of her waist.

“Dark is closing. Do you plan to leave and spend the night alone in your bed?” His hand snaked between her thighs. The tip of his finger brushed across the small bud of desire that brought a rush of liquid heat. He chuckled when she groaned. “Or, will you bring me to bed with you?”

“Yes.” She opened her eyes and smiled at him through the haze of sleep.

“Now, sweet. Your bed beckons,” he insisted.

She blinked fully awake. His self-assured grin hung above her. “No. I meant, no. You are not coming to my bed.”

He groaned, flung himself to the side, and sprawled across the bed. He spoke to the ceiling. “Is Christopher going to help you with your search again, tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Get yourself dressed before he gets here.”

The distinct sound of his teeth grinding together almost made her laugh, but she shared his frustration.

“I’m going out. Release my wings and fly ‘til I drop to the ground. Maybe I’ll spar with Ward and pound him into the ground, again.”

Unclothed and ready for his change, he kissed her forehead and left.

She closed her eyes to savor the kiss and slipped away, back to the dreams of her baby.

The pulsing began.

Eyes opened to the darkness, Isabel realized she’d dozed until well past sunset. She stretched and luxuriated in her husband’s decadent bed. Earlier, when the candles lit the chamber, the creamy satin had enhanced Rukh’s dark beauty. Craving his presence and imagining him wrapped in the soft coverlet, she grew moist and hot between her legs.

A thrum enveloped her. Itching and sore where the blood rushed through her aching center, she longed for relief. Splayed on the bed thrashing, she restrained from touching herself, but ached to stroke the bud at the jointure of her spread legs.

Rukh could ease the yearning that bordered on pain, but he wasn't sliding his length inside her. Where was he?

On her feet, she grabbed the sheet twisted between her legs and wrapped it around her sweat-drenched nudity.

The door called to her on a primal level. No sounds, no rattling and shaking on its hinges as it had done earlier. It beckoned. Insisted. Breathed.

Unsteady, she shuffled to the door. Her feet dragged. One part of her tried to run the other way, but the larger part of her wanted soothing pressure inside her aching sheath. From her navel to her shaking knees and everywhere in between, sizzling ripples wavered along her skin. Images of cold, stark ice stopping the fire assaulted her mind while dark messages of terror and pain threatened.

Frigid needles pierced her hand, and she looked down, dazed, to find her fingers wrapped around the brass handle of the red door.

A beat thundered in her undeniably swollen and slick folds, that pivotal area now the focus of her existence. The drive to relieve the spasms grew harsher with every breath.

Hard, unrelenting hands gripped her shoulders before she could turn the handle. Agitation flooded her, her quest to quench her thirst in the beckoning room now thwarted.

But those hands belonged to a man.

One who could alleviate the craving.

Chapter Eleven

Isabel dropped the sheet wrapped around her nudity. A sharp inhalation brought her around to face Christopher.

Not Rukh, but she needed. She so needed the relief. Cupping her heavy breasts, she massaged the swollen mounds and tweaked her tightened nipples.

“No,” Christopher yelped, and pleaded with his eyes so like Rukh’s, deep amber darkened with concern. “You’re not yourself, Isabel. Let’s cover you and get out of here.”

He let go of her shoulders, but before he could reach down for the discarded sheet, Isabel launched herself at him. His young lanky body was muscular, a physique any woman would want, but she only needed that hard bulge in his trousers. She caressed the turgid flesh covered by heavy fabric.

With a startled squeak, he batted away her hand while his face flamed red. “I’m sorry, Isabel. I know you’re under the influence of the demon, but I can’t stop my reaction. Let me get you out of here.”

She didn’t understand why he talked so much, not with the pulses driving her to madness. When he scooped her into his arms, she panicked. Her guilt was short-lived. Lust overshadowed that little screaming voice inside that wanted no man to hold her but Rukh. She licked Christopher’s neck.

“Stop that!” Christopher’s voice trembled. He strode from the room, apparently no longer caring that Isabel was unclothed. Hugging him tightly, his coarse coat rubbing her sensitive skin, she waited for him to lay her across the bed and end her agony.

Isabel groaned, the sound laden with her frustration over Christopher’s denial.

The drumming grew more distant with each step, and Isabel recovered her senses, overcome with humiliation. She buried her face against broad shoulders, mortified she’d been a hussy. Poor Christopher. He was her sole friend, and she’d treated him so. Would he forgive her? Could she ever face him?

Once he’d ushered her inside her room and placed her in a chair, he backed away. His cheekbones highlighted with color.

“I’m sorry,” they both blurted at the same time.

Staring at the ceiling, Christopher cleared his throat. “Yes, well. I must go. Now. I leave you with good wishes.”

“No, it was my fault—” she began, but was interrupted by Christopher’s raised hand.

Mouth opened, his expression pained, Christopher remained silent. No further words came forth. He turned, bolted from the room, and left her to placate her own guilt. Her hands twisted in her lap, and her nudity shamed her. Then the panic slammed into her. Bluebeard had nearly ensnared her.

She couldn't stop shaking long enough to dress.

Tears stung her eyes. The hot wet tracks left a trail down her face. The overwhelming lust faded to a dull persistence. For three months, Christopher had helped her translate *The Witch's Hammer*. His eye became useful in deciphering the scribbled notes of Rukh's grandfather. Her husband's jealousy had taken weeks to calm. He'd finally stopped hovering over the pair as they worked, but he still watched from the shadows.

Now, that closeness with Christopher was irreparably damaged. He'd never work as her friend again after she'd played the jezebel.

Sobbing, her body shuddered with the effects of her close call. After the heaving calmed to occasional hiccups, she sprinted from the chair and into the bed.

She curled into a ball and tugged the sheet over her head. Covered at last. Alone with her thoughts.

Even if she could discount the pain over the damage to their friendship—which she could not—the night's events proved a major setback to their quest. They'd not found any clues on how Bluebeard had been called, nor how he'd been imprisoned, and without Christopher's help, the odds were not in her favor. With Latin translations abysmally slow, Isabel had fallen into a routine with Christopher. They translated every morning and evening while they combed the library for further sources.

She'd allowed herself to fall into the lull of complacency and ignored the guilt of feeding a demon, allowing an evil to exist in her own home. She'd had no choice but to do so. To free the demon would unleash him on the world, but now she had to consider her unborn babe.

Before the baby hindered her movements, Isabel would need to find an escape. To flee Hayle Manor. It was too late, though, to save the heart that would be torn from her chest. It would stay here, with Rukh.

After endless moments thrashing over the impossible decisions that gnawed her insides, she dozed between bouts of tears. Goodness, she'd shed bucketfuls this night, the first such torrential downpour since a girl at her nanny's knee. Even when her father died, her entire being hadn't been wracked with sobs since she'd been taught the necessity of decorum—to keep all emotions, grief, and passions bottled up.

No doubt sent by Christopher, Rukh came into her room uninvited for the first time in three months. He stood silently, as if not to wake her. She did not speak to him. What could she say?

Now that she could no longer hide from the truth, she loathed the harsh reality. The reality that she loved her husband, fool that she was. The proper wife did not love her husband or have any other such dreams and emotions. A proper wife ran a smooth household, performed at social functions, and spent her time apart from her husband's baser activities.

A blink of an eye later, he nestled behind her, curled into her, and asked with concern, “What is wrong, love?”

Did she hear correctly? The words so similar, perhaps she’d mistaken his usual “dove” for “love”. Unbearable to think upon, she held back a sob. “Nothing, Rukh. Nothing.”

Tension and a tear-clogged throat betrayed her state, and he pulled her tighter, his front to her back. Gentle hands stroked her sides after he’d tucked the top of her head under his chin.

Until the events of the night, she’d convinced herself the translation of the book and Rukh’s sheer determination would save their marriage. Intimately familiar with his large, sinewy body, she could almost imagine he could keep her from any harm. The sure knowledge that he could not broke something inside her.

“Tell, me. I will take care of whatever troubles you.” He sounded strong, vital.

Although he held her tight against him, her hands sought even more comfort from his strength. She reached back to caress his thigh and his delicious bottom. His skin pebbled as if cold, but he scorched her fingers. Muscles rippled beneath her palm. Her husband really did have a fine physique, and she loved looking at him front and back.

Isabel struggled to keep her mind from the temptation of ravaging her spouse. After her silence, he prodded. “Out with it, or I’ll have to torture you again.”

His reinforced his threat by feathering the pads of his fingers over her ribs. She struggled away and tried to flee his promise to tickle her breathless. He steeled his arms. No escape.

Her churning gut threatened to silence her, but she forced the words from her clogged throat. “I nearly opened Bluebeard’s prison.”

Tension climbed up her spine as the rigid body behind her struggled for breath.

“Rukh, you’re holding me too tight. I can’t draw air.”

“Did you stay past sundown?” Anger tinged the voice that had been so gentle before.

“I fell asleep after you left, and I woke to uncontrollable urges.” Blushes covered her body, but she needed to be frank despite the difficulty of speaking thus. “I was very feverish between my legs, painfully so. Part of me knew the demon used his evil to entice me, but I found myself at the door, craving an ease to the burn. If you’d found me, my skin might have scorched you.”

The grip of his fingers punished her, but she knew he did not mean to hurt her. “This is what happens? I’ve never known. How did you stop, when all others went inside to their doom?”

Isabel sensed Rukh’s restraint, a boiling rage he contained so that he might speak with her. He would no doubt erupt as soon as she told him the next, but she must.

“Christopher found me, and brought me here.”

He froze for a moment before he ran his hands down her body and left a shiver in his wake. Guessing the truth, that Christopher had seen her nude, Rukh grumbled low with unintelligible cursing and assaulted her back with his hot exhalations.

In an effort to calm, she raised her arm above her head to run her fingers in his silky hair. His groan of approval helped them both to relax their rigid postures.

“You are alright.” He hugged her and kissed her head. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

He surprised her. No vitriol, no promises to break Christopher, but a quiet acceptance. He ran his hand over her curves.

“I’ve attempted to bar the door, but any barrier I’ve created is burned away. Before I met you, when I tried leaving for a few nights, I had guards on the chambers, and they reported the door slamming wide on its own. Bluebeard stood in the arch of his prison while several of the female servants tried to force their way inside. The guards said he was as tall as the ceiling, with wings that could span the length of a dozen horses, nose to tail. The second night, he entered my room and lounged on my bed while a riot of household women clamored in the hallway.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? Why must you hide such imperative facts from me? Are we not trying to rid the Hayles of this demon? Together?” She still trembled, but his strokes settled her fright, even while his words tweaked her ire.

Botheration! Since Rukh entered her life, she’d had more trouble controlling her anger than any other time in her life. Exasperating yet compelling, the man holding her snug tried her patience as nothing ever had.

To further test her nerves, the blasted man chuckled. Held against him, she struggled to get up. She relaxed when he whispered in her ear and purred in the way that inspired a smoldering simmer. “Love, since you’ve come to this house, I’ve had a difficult time thinking beyond how to keep you in bed.”

She could forgive him for that, since she’d been having the same trouble, but their mutual desire still had the cloud of trouble hanging over it. Trouble named Bluebeard.

When he touched her, Isabel was inclined to overlook yet one more instance of her husband’s failure to elucidate a life-impacting fact. He continued to rub her igniting flesh, and she melted. Hands feathered—oh, so slowly—toward her tightened peaks.

No. He must not distract her. She shook her head to dispel the luxuriant passion engulfing her.

For a moment, her head cleared.

The desire for her husband threaded into her entirety, in opposition to the compulsion to enter the forbidden chamber. Rukh captivated her with an inexorable pull, but softer emotions made their coupling joyful, beautiful, and fulfilling for her mind, body, and soul.

Against her will, Bluebeard inspired a bodily torment that needed instant appeasement. No joy. Though this difference must be an imperative clue to the puzzle of Bluebeard, she could not pause in her determination to find the key to the demon's imprisonment.

She dashed from the bed to find her robe. The heavy material covered her vulnerable body, but the soft velvet did nothing to comfort her this night.

"Rukh, tonight has awakened me. I may have been denied freedom by the others, but I complied to find a way to rid the Hayles of the curse. I could have escaped. Now we have a child to consider. The draw to go to Bluebeard was too strong. I had no will and could not refuse his summons. It will be only a matter of time before he wins."

"You are right," Rukh whispered.

Isabel stopped her pacing, a new habit she'd formed since moving here. She turned to him. His glorious lines, uncovered in her haste to leave the bed, lay rigid. His face twisted in pain and longing.

"You are right," he repeated. "You cannot stay here with the curse hanging over your head. Hanging over *our* heads. But have you considered, love, that if you leave with the way things stand, I will have to appease the hunger? If you are not here, another woman must provide my release."

The words were like a blow to her stomach. Isabel made her reply, a faint echo of his and a parody of unity. "You are right."

Lectures of the place of a wife echoed through her. She winced inwardly at the sharp slap to her senses. Lady Colven's insistence that a lord must keep a wife in pristine splendor while spending his passions inside a mistress prodded her heavy heart. She shouldn't expect more from her husband than any lord, but she found that she did.

His reaction to his own words confused her. He did not appear to want a mistress. His expression clouded.

With fatigue in his features, stark furrows molded around his mouth and pulled in a fierce frown. He'd said he would need to feed the demon if she weren't here. Did that mean that if she stayed, he'd not take another?

He did not coerce her to stay by playing on her feelings for him, which he must see. Could she leave? For she admitted her love, if only to herself. This bond she would not shed with her dying breath. No, she would never survive the separation. How had he insinuated himself inside, become imperative for her survival, in only a few short months?

Unable to discuss the topic of Rukh with another woman, Isabel returned to the one problem that stood in the way of her happiness, and the happiness of her unborn child.

"The book has no clues to dispel the bond between Bluebeard and this family. I begin to fear the solution is in the death of the demon, but Christopher cautioned me against that avenue. He has deduced

that seeking the death of Bluebeard will end the gift of immortality for your flock. He thinks that neither you, nor the patriarchs, would permit such an action.”

Sitting across the room in a wing chair, Isabel could not see her husband’s reaction. The needed distance allowed her to think more clearly.

“My wife, I became mortal the day I dared touch you.”

“No, I will not cause your death,” she pled. She couldn’t cause the end of such a singular man.

“It is too late, love. I will never survive a separation from you. Not only do you possess my love, but as I’ve told you, Ravens mate for life. A mate is more than a wife, more vital to my continued existence. When you die, I will die. Be it tomorrow, or fifty years from now. Whether or not you take yourself away from me, I will feel that bond until you take your last breath. And then I will die.”

Pain lanced through her chest like an arrow.

“I’m so sorry.” She rushed to the bed and fell into his open arms. How many times in one day must she apologize?

“Why are you sorry?”

He smoothed her hair as if this news disturbed her more than he. How could it? Before she replied, he forestalled her by kissing her with openmouthed, steamy passion. He pulled back and his amber eyes glinted.

“I am not sorry. You are my life, and I would have it no other way. I’ve never been so complete, these past three months, even while I yearned to be closer to you. To hold you. I fear that if you leave, I will be unable to bring another woman to my bed. The demon stays within the chamber if he is fed with weekly couplings. Others have not been able to appease him. If I discontinued that duty, my hold as leader will fall.”

For a scant moment, Isabel allowed herself the cruel question. Who had Rukh brought to his bed before her? Where was she, this woman he’d enjoyed so frequently? Perhaps it was more than one. Of course it had to be. He was centuries old. She slammed her imaginings away. She had no time for this pettiness.

Rukh continued, “Bluebeard could escape without a clear path to the next Alpha. The resulting power struggle may give him time enough to become free.”

“What would happen to you if someone else became Alpha?”

All seriousness, he replied, “I’d be dead.”

“You must stay Alpha.” Determination filled her. They would make a stand against the demon. To contemplate the resulting chaos if they did not was too much to bear. “The answers must be somewhere in the library. Let’s go now. I’ll not sleep again tonight, anyway. And,” she paused with the weight of her next words and blushed, for goodness sakes. She rushed her request, “I’d like your company.”

Chin tucked with her ridiculous shyness, she moved to don a simple house dress, an old threadbare white muslin she wore when she was to sit for long hours studying the book.

“I like your company, too, my love.”

The words finally slammed into her beleaguered brain. He loved her. Lord, but her heart was going to bust out of her chest. The words couldn’t be contained, and they rushed out, no thought of catching them. “I love you, too.”

His spicy scent filled the air while his heat warmed her, head to freezing toes. The dress that she’d donned for a few moments went to the floor. Rukh brought her back to bed and dropped his delicious weight on top of her to settle between her legs.

It was a long while before they left her chambers.

After dressing again, Rukh held her hand and led her from the room. The interminable months of winter had clung to the mansion, and the hallway was cold enough to see their breath before them. Warm despite the chill, Isabel had her tall muscular husband to tuck her into his side. He radiated heat in waves like a furnace.

At the door to the master chambers Isabel stopped in disbelief. The door pulsed.

Not the red door to the forbidden room, but the oak entry to her husband’s chambers hummed with lurid promise. Compelled, she moved toward the closed barrier and reached for the handle.

The man at her side pulled her to him. His strength overpowered the persistent ache between her legs, throbbing to the beat of her rapid pulse. Hazed lust fogged her mind. She struggled against her captor. Why couldn’t she go inside the room? She needed to be in there.

“Damn.”

The guttural cry sounded behind her before he hoisted her over his shoulders and carried her from the door she struggled toward. The ice cold hall helped relieve the feverish agony, but she needed a man to fully ease the pain.

By the time they reached the library, she controlled her will, but her passions still roiled. When her husband put her down, she pressed against his stalwart bulk and brought suppliant lips up to him. She pulled the back of his head down to meet her kiss and plunged her tongue inside his mouth with no finesse or gentle mating. She broke away and pleaded, “Help me, it burns. I need you so much.”

In a whirlwind of motion, he had her bent over his desk and her dress flung over her head. He plunged into her. The stroke, brutal and exciting, filled her from behind. Hard, fast, and punishing thrusts thrilled through her. With her back to his front, her dress rubbed against her flesh. Her swollen sheath became so slick that the juices ran down her leg. The wet sounds added to her excitement. He shoved aside her hair to suck and nip the birthmark behind her ear.

She’d never met the wild and animalistic side of her husband, who had always treated her with gentle care. His guttural responses brought her to dizzying heights.

She reached zenith so hard and fast she bucked wildly and swept everything from his desk. The growl in her ear, decadent and intoxicating, came from deep in his chest. He lifted her fully onto the desk and climbed over her. He continued to pump into her over and over, his hips slamming against her backside.

His body tensed before he filled her with hot liquid, coating her insides, fulfilling her primal urges and sending her spinning into bliss again.

They held still for a moment, before remorse flooded Isabel. She trembled, and he mistook the reason. He helped her from the desk. Weak as a newborn babe, she slumped against him.

“Here, let me start the fire. Sit.”

After the fire blazed and she sat in the chair nearest the hearth, she still shook. The fear of the growing power of Bluebeard incapacitated her. The call had blinded her with lust, and from outside the master chambers.

Rukh came to her, lifted her out of the chair, and pulled her onto his lap. He held her until her tears dried.

They were out of time.

Chapter Twelve

Rukh skimmed his hand along the shelves and sought the sliver of magic, the biting sting of compulsion that might lead him to another spelled book. More clues. Anything that might answer the questions which held such power over Isabel and him. Anything to halt Bluebeard's escalation of power.

All two hundred and fifty of Rukh's years weighted his limbs. Though he now battled the gruffness of no sleep, the rough coupling on his desk the night before had given him a fierce peace. The primitive way he'd taken Isabel had stamped his essence on her. Desperate to protect her, his base urges and instincts remained on alert, at heightened awareness.

He would protect her at all costs. She was his. She carried his child.

His wife sat on the floor. Her weary head bent to the book on her lap. The finger of one hand tracked the lines to keep her place. She'd begun doing so a few hours before, after he'd had breakfast brought to them, but they'd been unable to eat, an event that worried him for her own sake as well as for the babe.

He suspected she was too tired to focus without her digit there as a guide. Sloped shoulders signaled her hope strained while she'd had no luck. Neither had he, but he took a moment to indulge his ever growing urgency, to look at her and memorize her features as if she might be taken from him at any moment.

Soft strands of her shiny dark hair fell into her wan, exhausted face. She pushed back the silk he liked to fist and tangle when they joined. The same lushness he smoothed and combed afterwards. The grooming relaxed him as much as her, and he wished to be in bed with the tresses corded around him, binding him to her. He did not think the indulgence would ease either of them now.

The plain white dress heightened her ample bosom. The high-waisted gown pressed her breasts above the fabric and created a deep valley for his enjoyment. He wanted to plunge his tongue into the crevice which moved easily with her breaths, unhindered with binding.

Her angelic face looked up from the book and forced a pang through his heart. How could a centuries-old man be brought to his knees by such a simple, wonderful, elegant creature?

"You're smirking, dearest. We are not going to bed until we make some progress." He opened his mouth to reply, but she deflated his efforts before they had even left his thoughts. "And not the desk, either."

Perhaps she knew him too well. He'd have to ruffle her feathers. He widened his grin, and opened his mouth to launch his riposte. She parried before he uttered a sound. "And no, not the bench in the garden, nor the tub in our dressing room."

"Damn." He chuckled. She'd closed the door in his face. Her attempt at humor despite the tightness at the corner of her smile gave him heart. They'd survive this intact.

Her trepidation spurred him to action again. He walked through the library for the fourth time. Each trip through added to his foreboding. If no answers came, and soon, the lovely start to their renewed closeness would come to a crashing halt, as disastrous as a curricule accident.

"I think I've found something," she said.

Animated chatter from his mate and the color spread across her cheekbones relieved him so much he almost didn't hear her words.

"I've found a reference to an exorcist mentioned by Flavius Josephus in *The Antiquities of the Jews*. It's the only notation by your grandfather that has to do with getting rid of the demon. It took me a while to decipher it."

"I am unsure where that text might be, although I do think it is here somewhere," he said. Instead of returning to the shelves to hunt for the tome she mentioned, he was drawn to her.

His skin prickled with *The Hammer's* repulsion spell when he stopped a step away. Until today, he'd have to nearly touch the book to get the biting, crawling rash climbing up his limbs. The spell grew stronger. Combined with the expanding power of Bluebeard's pull, now reaching outside the master chambers, these escalations made his hands tremble, his pulse pound, and his knees weak with dread. An apprehension like none he'd ever known seized him, and he had to concentrate on Isabel's words to control the elemental change that threatened to consume him. His Raven screamed in his mind.

Mate.

Nothing else mattered but his mate and their child. Rukh forced his beast to calm, to remain rational and focused. He clamped down on the instinctual shift and denied its fruition. Unaware of the war within him, Isabel continued with her exuberance and stood up to pace.

"We don't need the book. He copied the pertinent lines and made notes and diagrams. There are several inserted parchment papers here of his own. I can't believe I hadn't found them in all these months. They were stuck between the leaves of the volume," she said.

She stopped her anxious back-and-forth. Her arms akimbo, Isabel puffed out a breath to blow hair out of her face. "He's condensed his research on a special piece of jewelry. In King Solomon's time, a man named Eleazar used a ring to expel a demon from its host by pulling the demon essence out through the nose of the body. There are a few other notations about King Solomon's ring and its magical powers over demons. And references to *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, a demon grimoire."

Visions of a ring flickered through Rukh's mind. He used them to focus, to draw the attention of his Raven so humanity could maintain control. In his mind's eye, he pictured the ring, glinting in the sunlight in the palm of his father's hand. Even then his Raven wanted, craved the shiny object. The intense interest of his beast shifted to the glittery memory, and he answered his mate in a guttural voice, thick and scratchy.

"And the ring? What kind is it?" His hands closed reflexively.

"The sketch is here." She held up the book and pointed. "A crest with the Star of David and a winged Raven in the middle."

The ring, heavy on his hand, had always contained a sense of power, but the young Rukh had assumed the family crest contained the weight of honor and tradition. The much older Rukh condemned himself for the naiveté. Who better than he knew the Hayles had no honor, nor tradition of any worthy note?

Could he have held the key to his own freedom for nearly two hundred years? The idea staggered him. Would he pass the ring to his heir?

Isabel put the book on the nearby table she'd used as her desk and walked toward him. Her voluptuous grace flowed with confidence and unconscious magnetism. She approached him to take his leaden fingers to closely inspect the crest. How could she lift the burden which had him slump to the floor in weak shock?

She leaned down, not the least aware of his duress. She did not note his near collapse to the rich Persian rug. Her curiosity consumed her attention as she ran a fingertip over the raised design of the ring.

"It is the same," she exclaimed. Only then did she look into his face.

He fought a dizziness that threatened to tilt his world. But he righted himself by focusing on Isabel's dear face. Excitement returned to her features. She sat down next to him, and skirts billowed around them. The smell of rose bathwater on her skin made his heart skip a beat. She took his face between her dainty hands as he leaned forward, an instinctive response to her nearness. His heart lurched back into motion, beating a furious rhythm.

"You are so pale," she said, voice riddled with concern as she brushed a kiss over his lips. He savored the caress. Because, though she was free with her body during their weekly rendezvous, he relished the few kisses she initiated. Dominant and demanding, he always took. She rarely gifted him with her gentle advances. If he hadn't been on the floor, he might have fallen on his knees over the crushing waves of need, anxiety, and love.

Whether or not prudent in their precarious situation, his body reacted. Blood rushed to his cock. He slanted his lips over hers, invaded her with his tongue, and took control. To stake that claim and, in defense against the harrowing fear of losing her, he had to take her again.

Inside, his Raven bellowed with raw hunger and anguish.

Mate.

Before she could blink, Isabel's feet left the ground. Lord, her husband was strong.

Her bottom landed in the soft leather chair positioned at the end of the bookshelves, and her dress was pushed down her shoulders to pin her arms to her side. With no stays in the way, Rukh's greedy suckling had her keening before he'd completely knelt between her legs.

For a moment or two, she'd give in to her need for comfort. After today, she might never have that chance again. She might not survive, but she'd be damned if she couldn't save her child, or Rukh. No matter the cost to herself.

Strong steely arms held her in place, but she welcomed the bone crushing hold. Helpless to her own escalating need, she relented to the pleasuring torture and let the worry recede, but it stayed there, hovering. When she relaxed back into the chair, his hold loosened, and he gathered her skirts to pool about her waist. Arms freed, she struggled out of her bodice and grasped his head to pull his mouth to hers. Her fingers clutched in his hair. He crushed her lips in a bruising kiss.

Her bare bottom slid on the soft leather further and further until she hung precariously on the edge. All that kept her from hitting the floor was Rukh's tight grip on her thighs. Reluctantly, she released her hold in his luxuriant hair and gripped the chair. The teasing thumbs rubbing the creases at the top of her legs made her toes curl. Spread wide, she opened as he leaned into her. The hard length of him pressed almost painfully against her already swollen folds.

With finesse, he pressed against her slick moistness before he teased her by rocking forward and back. Her hips lunged to follow his retreating erection. She needed him deep inside with a longing that pierced. Her clinging seemed to help him recover his composure, and he grinned at her. He held back and brushed over her pleasure point lightly with his knuckles, repeatedly, until she panted.

"What is this, mate?" His deep, vibrating voice thickened with lust. He pressed his finger inside slowly. His face contorted, tinged with urgency. She'd never heard him speak with such emotion, the thread of which she could hear over the coating of passion. "I have taught you the pleasures of the flesh, and the pleasures of the mind. Put it into words, love, what it is you want. What is this hot, wet slickness? What would you have me do with it?"

Coaxing and wicked, he cajoled her as he'd done for weeks, to provide him the titillation of hearing the coarse words from her lips.

She blushed head to toe. His lips quirked, and his eyes tracked from her reddened chest to her navel. He bent and slowly swiped his tongue above her thatch of hair. She spasmed deep in her core.

"Please, Rukh."

"One word, please, love. I want to hear you say something forbidden. Where do you want my cock?" His voice lowered at her moan over the obscenity. With a thumb, he circled the point of pleasure that had her squirming.

"Rukh, we need to talk about the ring, focus on finding the solution." She reached for anything to keep from saying the words he wanted to hear. He would not relent.

“You want to talk about an old heirloom while I fuck you?”

She gasped, but not due to the language. He’d pulled his hand away. He denied her pleasure while holding her in place. That was the last straw, she capitulated.

“No talk,” she pleaded. “Fuck me.”

After quickly parting his breeches, he positioned himself between her thighs and canted her hips on the edge of the chair. Arms hooked beneath her knees. He roughly threw her legs over the armrests in a swift motion. His hard shaft bobbed between them, swollen and tipped with moisture. He entered her with one forceful shove.

Her wet sheath welcomed him in and held tight against his withdrawal. She needed him. She needed him to move, now. She needed him to hold her close, forever.

Barely one, two, three thrusts later they gasped together in sweet release.

After straightening Isabel’s dress and tucking himself back into his breeches, Rukh pulled away from his wife. Their frenzied joining satisfied his drive to claim, but he had been too urgent. Unable to prolong the pleasure, he hadn’t been able to draw out the fledgling closeness that might be damaged with the coming confrontation, an encounter that could leave them both dead.

Isabel stood next to him and fingered his ring. Of her own accord, she’d not stayed so near him in months. He put his arm around her and clung to her when she tilted her head against his chest.

“Can you get close enough to him to use it?” she asked the same question he’d denied asking himself. It’d been impossible to enter the same room with Bluebeard before. The magic was too strong. He’d find a way. He had to.

“I will,” he answered.

“Don’t you think that’s why the spell is there? Perhaps it’s attached to the ring. So it can’t be used against Bluebeard.”

“Makes sense.” He swallowed hard against the knot in his throat.

“What is it like, the repulsion?”

“Like hot needles puncturing my flesh.”

She shuddered. “I cannot ask you to endure that.”

“You don’t need to ask.” Rukh sat in the chair and lifted her onto his lap. “It is only in my mind. Have you seen any injury to my person when I stand near the book, or after I pulled you away from the door the first time? No. You haven’t. Besides, it does not matter. You and I both know it grows worse.”

“Yes.” She agreed with his assessment. She leaned to the side and tilted her head up to him. The back of her neck lay in the crook of his elbow. Eyes clouded in fear, she continued. “I can feel the pull to the incubus. Here, down the stairs and the length of the Manor away from the master chambers.”

He nodded. Dread threatened the control he held over his feral half. He steeled himself against the lure of the Raven’s rage.

He helped her to stand and followed her to his feet. He held his ringed hand out to her, and she gripped it. Her thumb ran over the edge of the band.

He drew her close and placed a tender kiss on her lush lips. Speaking into her hair, he clung to her while her scent imprinted upon his soul.

“What do we do with the ring?” he asked.

When she moved back to pace again, he wanted to whisk her away and hide her from the world. In a secluded cabin in the mountains that only he could reach. He’d keep her there, only taking her out of hiding for his enjoyment. The incredible fantasy would never work. If for no other reason, he wanted her every minute of the day, though she’d not allowed that closeness over the past few months. He sighed. She would not remain in a secluded, protected prison. He supposed he wouldn’t want her there, either.

She replied, pulling him from his daydreams, “We hold it to his nose.”

“That seems a bit simplistic.”

“The ring is magic.” She sounded sure, as if there was no other worry than walking up to a docile animal and holding an object to its snout.

She stopped short. Her face, now covered with a sheen of moisture, tightened in pain. With a small strangled groan, she bent forward a bit and placed a hand against her mound.

He rushed to her and squeezed her other hand. He couldn’t bear seeing her agony. He had to end this, tonight.

Entwining their fingers, he led her behind his desk to two crossed swords. The sharp blades hung on the wall. He opened a chest beneath the weapons, removed a scabbard, and belted on the sword. Rukh did not answer her queries but drew her from the room.

“On with it,” he said. “No point in delaying the inevitable. What do we have to lose?”

Everything.

His desperate laugh echoed through the cursed walls of Hayle Manor.

Chapter Thirteen

Several maids stood in the hall. Their cheeks pink, they laughed and whispered in roughened cacophony. The women stared up the stairs that Rukh pulled her towards.

With no reason to fight the inexorable pull to the lord's chambers, Isabel struggled to maintain her reasoning as she climbed the stairs. Her will weakened with the mindless lust building with each step. Groaning, she leaned into the masculine form beside her. His scent assailed her and heightened the methodical twinges between her legs.

They reached the landing. Between her and the room beckoning to her, figures moved in the shadows. They walked closer. A couple tussled, and Isabel's crushing passions cleared for a moment, long enough for her to understand.

A buxom, white-streaked blonde pleaded with Christopher. He held her with grim determination while she struggled and pulled against him. This must be Sheila. Christopher had mentioned her in his endearing, shy way.

When they passed the couple, the hollow within Isabel ached with renewed urgency.

All other thoughts fled when her powerful male stopped before the chamber. Tainted lust beckoned, promising to extinguish the fires. She wrapped her arms around his waist from behind as he shielded her from the door. She groped for his rigid length. The stirring of that instrument beneath her touch gave her the power to pull back into herself for a moment. A flash of guilt nauseated her.

"Rukh." Deep and throaty, her voice scratched her raw nerves. "I can't control this. I can barely see straight with the urge to—"

"I know, love." Relief that he understood was short lived. Waves of promiscuous intent flooded through her.

Through a red haze, she sensed the differences in her desires. What she had with Rukh was pure and loving, even when their play became urgent and demanding. This urge that now consumed her promised erotic fulfillment with a sharp edge of hunger that threatened her sanity. It promised bleak pain. It throbbed in tainted pulses in her engorged sheath.

Though she should not, she craved the incubus to cool the lava in her core. She groaned and tried to climb around her husband's body to get at the door. Rukh stiffened and drew in his breath as if pained. He blocked her from her objective with ease.

With a fluid movement, he ensnared her wrist. One-handed, he reached to his cravat and untied the knot with practiced ease.

When Rukh's shirt gaped open, Isabel reached for that sinewy golden chest thinly covered with dark hair and touched his hot skin. Her mouth watered. Lunging for his breeches, she struggled to get inside to the hardened shaft bulging the material. She nipped at his now exposed nipple.

He did not pull her away, nor did he participate in her frenzied overtures, but when she reached inside his pants, he slipped the cravat around her wrist and deftly knotted it before she could reach her prize.

He jerked her behind him again and turned. While he straightened his clothing, his movements tugged on her wrist. A realization rose to the surface of the haze swamping her mind. He'd tied them together with his cravat. Her heart swelled in gratitude. It was short lived. The throbbing intensified.

Rukh opened the door.

A cultured voice shot through her from the room beyond. An erotic, magical thrall coated her.

"Well, what took you so long?"

Rukh fought the blaze of fiery pokers covering him like bee stings. The hot white pain was excruciating, but bearable when he reminded himself why he was here. To save his mate. To save his unborn child. To leave this house, if only for a damnable trip to London.

The ring seethed like a living thing. The metal of unknown origin usually held constant coldness, but now the searing band throbbed with a reminder of its purpose. Though it added another layer of pain, Rukh enjoyed the sweltering brand. The smell of his own singed flesh signaled the ring was tied to the demon.

The sight in his room brought rage. The reclining fiend splayed across his bed. As he'd done the mattress three months before, he'd incinerate the defiled piece of furniture as soon as he dispatched this trespasser.

However, at the newest affront to his domain, his Raven clawed to be free. The feral response split him between battling his shift and watching the demon move from the bed.

The form unfolded itself, rising, rising. At full height, he had to be seven feet tall. When he flexed his leathery wings, the barbs at their apex touched the ceiling. The span of those monstrosities proved wide enough to touch either side of the walls. The creature hadn't even fully extended the appendages.

Bluebeard regarded them for long moments, smirking, and showed his razor sharp teeth. Bleached white skin tinged blue covered a body with hard musculature, a physique of a predator with no wasted flesh. He had no hair except for the dark blue goatee which must account for his name. Human in appearance, perhaps even handsome, the demon had the demeanor of a deadly, honed weapon. His phallus jutted straight out, its length rather impossible. Unable to believe his eyes, Rukh watched as a tail coiled around the phallus and stroked.

The maniacal laughter from the incubus snapped Rukh's anger and outrage to the fore.

“Hayle, give us your woman. We are hungry.” The seductive voice seemed to enliven Isabel, who pushed past him toward Bluebeard. Drawn up short when the cravat tightened around her, she pulled hard enough to make him stumble. Her uncontrolled frenzy, so unlike her demure nature, tugged at his heart and incensed the Raven further.

“You will not have her,” he stated as coolly as possible.

The demon laughed.

Rukh rocked backward, desperate to keep Isabel away from the fiend. Securely bound, she stretched toward the chuckling creature who hadn’t moved to take her.

Though Rukh’s flesh blazed as if it might pull away from the bone, he stood his ground. He drew Isabel against him even as she kicked and screamed to let her go. Amused arrogance in his sharp features, Bluebeard appeared bored and crossed his arms.

Why had he brought his mate into this room? Their plans had scattered, dispelled from his mind. He calmed himself and ignored the blinding agony of the repulsion curse.

Right. Now he remembered. She would be a distraction to the demon while Rukh used the ring against Bluebeard. The plan was doomed before it’d begun. Isabel was out of her mind. She’d be unable to aid him.

“You cannot have her,” Rukh said, again. The coolness dropped away, and his words dripped with venom and menace.

A sly smile replaced the laughter before Bluebeard responded. “She has made your heir.”

Fighting to keep the confusion and anxiety from his voice and face, Rukh answered and stepped back further while pulling Isabel with him. “The pact between my forefather and you does not apply to me, but if it did, she has not borne my son as of yet.”

“We have grown bored and hungry waiting. We decided the pact did not specify that Hayle wife bear the heir, just that she create it.”

The impossibly polite conversation confused Rukh, and if he didn’t hold a woman fighting to get away, pulling and tugging, mewling in pain, he could almost believe they were in no danger. But the rashes biting every swath of skin wouldn’t let him forget.

“Is that why you took Isadora and Constance?” He’d not said their names in years, and the guilt overwhelmed the needles prodding his overtaxed nerves. But then, his vision flooded with red. “They were pregnant?”

“Why, yes.” The demon’s face split into a smug grin.

A saw cut through Rukh’s gut. He’d been robbed of his children. He locked his knees, swallowed his gorge, and willed himself to see past the threatening tears in his eyes.

His Raven screamed. Mind clamoring with hate, the change crawled under his skin, nearly escaping its bridle.

“This one looks like a tasty snack,” Bluebeard added before Rukh had drawn breath.

No longer able to stem the flow, his Raven clawed and thrashed for freedom. With his last shred of broken-hearted humanity, Rukh drew the ring from his finger. Bluebeard’s eyes narrowed.

With only a moment to appreciate the cessation of the corrosive prickling spell, Rukh met his change.

The ring bounced on the stone floor.

The sword clattered and spun across the room.

Isabel threw herself toward the incubus, white cravat floating behind her.

Bluebeard remained immobile, not moving an inch when Rukh’s mate molded herself around the diabolical hellion.

The Raven screeched and lunged for the heart of his enemy.

Blood coated his beak as it plunged through taut hide. The demon hissed. Revenge did indeed taste sweet. More blood, he needed more blood.

His children were gone. Before they’d even lived.

Wrath would be met by his own killing strike. He thrashed toward his enemy. A punishing slap across his head threw him across the room. Rukh landed with a thud.

He shook his head against the rising dizziness and willed himself onto his legs. Spotted with his own blood, feathers fell to the floor around him. The smell of iron and brimstone filled his senses.

His wings extended.

He dove toward his prey.

He’d pluck the heart from this beast for taking his children.

Isabel knew she’d forgotten something important, but it wouldn’t quite shake free of her mired thoughts. The crazed heat at her core eased when she caressed the cold, hard man in her arms.

He was so tall. Taller than—

Her thoughts stuttered. A screeching thump resounded on dark translucent walls surrounding her. No, not walls, wings.

Instruments of flight enshrouded her. She circled her arms around the waist that was chest high to her. The wings were not soft and downy, as she’d expected, but cold and leathery. Someone else had wings of night, comforting and warm. Who was it? She couldn’t remember.

An impossibly long, bulky erection leaned between her heavy breasts. The hardened flesh did not throb with heat. It did not swell and bob with excitement as she was accustomed. It was cold and hard, like a statue.

His seductive voice filled her ear. A chill snaked through her with his icy breath. “Sweet morsel, we will slake our hunger, but first fetch a small treasure to give us. A boon for your pleasure.”

With a surge, he opened the dark enclosure. Another great thud resounded through the room. The chambers were familiar. Had she been here before?

“There, bring us the ring.” He extended one long wing across the room. The farthest tip pointed to a glinting object on the floor. After retracting his wings he lay back upon the bed with his erection standing straight out from his blue body.

Blue? A flash of golden skin with a smattering of black hair crossed her vision. She tilted her head, as if listening to a far off sound. There, in the corner. A crumpled black mass of feathers.

Memories assaulted her. A smile that touched her all over. A strand of black hair falling over amber eyes. A touch in the middle of her back as her love walked beside her. The sad expression when he watched from the shadows. Now, the stillness of the wild part of him, his proud Raven, on the floor. The pain of seeing her husband’s crushed body threatened to stop her heart.

She’d found love and now she couldn’t bear it. The experiences beneath Rukh’s touch were so joyful compared to the call of the incubus. With the reminder, the throbbing between her thighs awoke.

Then Rukh moved.

A slight tremor of feathers gave her hope, but she had to remain focused. Could she fool a demon? Could she feign compliance without retching when he touched her?

Shaking like a leaf, she leaned over and palmed the icy cold ring. She kept Rukh in the corner of her eye and reminded herself that she must live. She must give birth to the heir of Hayle, even if the Raven never rose again.

Why didn’t he move? Wasn’t he immortal? She grasped at the threads of her intellect. She refused to bow to the dread overtaking her. She must rid her family of this incubus.

Her home was here, with Rukh, not elsewhere.

She walked back to Bluebeard, slowly. Worry over Rukh’s condition threatened her focus on exorcising the demon.

The night she’d been kidnapped, Christopher had suffered a broken arm. It had taken weeks to heal. Though immortal, obviously Ravens suffered injury. Rukh said that to remove the head of an immortal would take his life.

Where was the sword? Could she get to it? Could she use it? Yes. She would to save her family. Would it even pierce that blue-tinged skin which up close seemed thick as hide?

The closer she got to the reclining fiend, the less she ached, and the less she burned.

Rustling behind her gave her warning. It also warned Bluebeard, who raised his voice. His timbre wracked her with animalistic urges to rut. She despised her reaction, but she continued to walk to him.

“Come, little one. We have pleasures awaiting us.”

The ring she held vibrated in time with the hammering in her sheath. She reached the bed and clutched her fist around the family heirloom. It grounded her and kept the vision of Rukh’s prone form before her.

“You want the ring?”

“We want it. Put it here.” His tail snapped between them. The triangular tip was flat and about the size of her hand. It curled convulsively, as if it would grip the ring.

She pretended to misunderstand and climbed onto the bed. The angels and demons engraved in the post writhed in pained copulation. Moving. The wooden carvings moved. Acts of depravity played out between the tiny creatures. What magic was this?

“Come, we will taste you, sweet.”

The tail slithered down the front of her bodice. The icy touch scraped against her skin. She shuddered.

Forcing herself to straddle high on his chest she stilled her quaking limbs. She covered him and threw her arms around his neck. The prickly beard brushed against her ear before he bit her sensitive lobe. He bore down harder when she whimpered.

“You are sweet, morsel,” he crooned after he licked her ear.

His tongue flicked repeatedly at the trickling blood. Undulating beneath her, he swept his frigid hands under her clothing to push them up. The cold length of him nudged at her quickly disappearing skirts. She rubbed against him. Bespelled, her body betrayed her heart and mind and ignored the horror of his touch.

A roaring screech filled the room, and she was at once relieved that Rukh lived, and panicked as his sharp talons scraped the floor next to the bed.

His beak descended toward her. She scrambled to the side. The razor sharp weapon sliced into the demon. Bluebeard bellowed at Rukh in a language she did not understand.

The demon rose from the bed. The deep gash in his chest closed with a hiss of steam. He grew even larger. His wings snapped at Rukh. The barbed ridges sliced through a black feathered wing.

The Raven drew back with a cry before he dove at his opponent. His beak narrowly missed the black eyes of Bluebeard.

Dagger-like claws grew out of the demon’s hand. He swiped at the Raven and knocked him to the floor. Feathers tore from his chest. The Raven’s wounds bled freely.

With the incubus distracted, Isabel’s senses were her own. At first frozen with dismay, she watched the nightmare unfold. Isabel spurred into action when the fiend loomed over Rukh, who struggled to rise from the floor. Deep warbling vibrated from her husband, his eyes full of vengeance and determination.

The sharp barbs of the demon sliced into the wings of the downed Raven. Rukh screeched and struggled to rise before Bluebeard kicked him back to the floor.

Easily dismissing her as a threat, the demon had his back to her.

Isabel pushed off the bed and ran with all her might. She flung herself on Bluebeard’s back between the two great wings that grew out of his spine. The cold leathery appendages were straight and hard on her breast bone. She reached around with ring in hand. And as the directions bode, she slapped it against his nose.

All motion stopped. Bluebeard bowed his head.

Too frightened to hope, Isabel clung to the frigid broad expanse of his shoulders until he shook her off with a flex of his wings. He turned slowly, anger and displeasure distorting an eerily handsome face.

At first, Isabel was terrified, afraid the ring had not worked. But he didn't move to strike.

The ring was hooked through his nose, like a bull.

To her shock, he laughed.

The seductive sound tweaked her passions. Her nipples tightened, and her bodice abraded the excited nubs.

She still responded to him. It hadn't worked.

A spasm below the vicinity of her heart seemed to fill her entirety. The fissure of her hopes and dreams nearly brought her to the floor in abject defeat.

Chapter Fourteen

Despite his weakened state, Rukh shifted into his human form and with an elemental and undeniable need to protect Isabel, pushed himself off the floor. Aches and pains that would soon develop into unsightly bruises covered his body. His chest boasted four long lines of gouged flesh, but the blood flow had stemmed. Though it would be quick to heal, his upper arm hung limply with razor-thin slices through the muscle to his bone. For a while, it would be useless. He didn't care about that, though.

Bluebeard backed Isabel toward the open red door. She whimpered, and it tore into Rukh's heart. The fiend no longer paid attention to him but focused on the Lady Hayle, whose dress was rumpled and torn. The white bodice barely contained her modesty. Unlike before, Isabel maintained her distance from the demon and apparently had found a way to resist the call to the incubus. Strain etched lines in her face. With furrowed brows, she chewed on her lip and fisted her hands in her skirts.

Rukh limped forward. His leg bled as profusely as a cut above his eye. He blinked to clear his vision.

Shouts and pleading outside the bedroom did not make him pause, nor did the pounding and frantic turning of the locked handle in the bedroom. The door to the hallway began to shake. Behind the shuddering wood, grunts of exertion grew more intense with each pounding. Someone rammed their body against the solid oak. Whoever wanted to get in would find it difficult to batter down.

He moved too slowly. Bluebeard nearly had Isabel in the chamber. Clearly enjoying himself, the demon crooned and laughed while Isabel paled. Shaking with fear, she backed toward the looming opening while her eyes darted toward Rukh with a plea for help. His heart twisted. He wanted to help her more than he wanted to breathe, but he couldn't seem to get to her. Even if he had her within reach, he had no idea how to save her. His chest twisted again into a painful knot.

The die had been cast. The ring had not worked. He'd seen Isabel's actions and mourned the failure. There would be no other way to save her except the dissolution of the Hayle agreement.

The death of the demon.

The end of Hayle immortality.

She stopped in the doorway. Bluebeard's wings lay down his back and trailed on the floor, but the set of his shoulders tightened when Isabel put her arms out to her sides and gripped the door arch.

"I'm not going in there." Her trembling statement held resolution. She tipped her chin up and stared the fiend in the eye.

Rukh drug his useless leg behind him and struggled to get to her. Rounding an overturned chair, he still had to cross five feet of eternity to get to his wife.

“We will have you,” Bluebeard purred. “We were promised.”

“No,” Rukh yelled over the sound of the hall door crashing open. “The agreement with the Hayle family is now null and void.”

Bluebeard looked over his shoulder and grinned. “We never reverse an agreement. Besides, we are hungry.”

When the incubus licked his lips, Rukh lunged forward, but too late. He hit the floor where, moments before, the fiend had stood. With wings spread, Bluebeard wrapped a struggling Isabel inside and propelled the two of them beyond the red door. Inside the forbidden chamber.

Rukh’s heart stopped.

Arguments and scuffling behind him did not matter. Neither did the woman running past him as he pushed to his hands and knees. Sheila.

Perhaps he should be grateful to the woman who endangered her soul by following the demon. The incubus had left the door to his prison open, no doubt to catch one more female with his lure. But though Isabel was his very life, and he’d protect her with all of his, he had a duty to save the kitchen maid as well. Hell and Damnation!

Before the door slammed shut behind Sheila, Rukh grabbed the bottom by stretching his injured arm forward, teeth gritted against the jarring agony.

Crack! His fingers made a sickening crunch when the red wood closed upon them. He didn’t care about the pain. Gut wrenching dread for his wife consumed everything.

He groaned, and sweat covered his brow. Kneeling before the red door, he pulled but could not relieve the pressure.

Behind him, he heard several patriarchs whispering, but so overwhelmed with the loss of Isabel, he couldn’t focus on them. Christopher crouched next to Rukh and yanked on the handle.

“Stop, boy,” Rukh hissed. “Find something to wedge inside. We need to keep it from shutting.”

Without a word, Christopher scrambled backwards. Within seconds, he’d returned with Rukh’s sword. He pushed the blade into the small opening.

“With all due respect, my lord, I had not intended to free you, but rather, I need to get inside,” Christopher said with gruffness. He gripped the sword handle and leveraged it in an attempt to pry open the door.

Rukh lent his strength to the effort. But no matter how much they pulled, the red door did not move. His chin sank forward, and he moaned, “Isabel.”

If he thought about what might be happening to her now, he might shift with primal rage and destroy any chance to help her. His Raven had proved unforgiving of his first wives, but he’d take Isabel back no

matter what she endured. He'd mend her. Even now she must suffer in great agony. Guilt over his inability to help his first two wives crumpled under the anguish of losing Isabel to the mindless possession into which they'd fallen. Not again. Never again.

Tears streamed down his face. He blinked back the sting and braced his good leg against the wall. Weakened from his injuries, he grunted from strain, but he pushed and tugged desperately, to no avail.

He turned his head for the first time toward the patriarchs who, to the last, stood immobile with impassive expressions. As Alpha, he'd never sought help. Never needed it, but he asked for it now.

"Help me pull! Now, move your worthless hides."

No one even blinked.

Damn them all to hell.

Christopher and Rukh both froze when sensual groans came from the other side of the door.

Isabel fell to the floor when the demon released her from his wings. His sexual pull pierced through her, but she clenched her skirts and concentrated on Rukh. She pictured him in her mind and held the image so strongly that it took a moment for her to translate the scene in front of her.

With a smell of smoke scented with an earthy primal undertone, the red circular room had shiny, milky translucent walls, like glass. A glow, flickering like fire, surrounded the outside. Pillows and mattresses of silks and other decadence, all in shades of red, surrounded her. Decoration covered every surface. She turned slowly and cringed to see a bed on one side with ropes hung like a noose from one post. Shackles hung from a ceiling, invisible far above in the darkness.

Behind her, Bluebeard held the buxom blonde in his arms. She licked the demon's chest while he leered at the woman. The crest ring gleamed, hooked in his nose. Frantic, Isabel turned around and around, taking in the entire chamber several times over. No door.

Tremors overtook her and replaced the burning lust that had consumed her. At first confused, she soon realized the demon's distraction alleviated the worst of his pull, as it had before she'd been taken here.

Trapped in the forbidden chamber, she had no idea how to get out. Even if she could walk through the door, should she find one, she'd not leave the other woman here. Besides that, she still needed to deal with the demon to keep her child safe. Her hand went to her stomach.

"We want both of you. Our hunger needs to be fed," Bluebeard rumbled.

Isabel's spine stiffened.

The woman had wrapped herself around the incubus. A streak of gray hair fell over her scowl when she nodded at Isabel. "I will not share with her. She already took Lord Hayle from me."

Oh. Though that answered Isabel's question on who she'd replaced in her husband's bed, she was surprised he'd chosen such an older woman. Crow's feet wrinkled the corners of her eyes and lines pulled the edges of her lips down. How long had he...

She turned away from such petty thoughts and replied with her chin high and her tone steady. “I do not share, either.”

Damn if she’d ever let a woman touch her husband, and damn if she’d let this demon touch her. She scowled in return.

“No need to fight,” he said with a smug leer. “Though, we would enjoy watching. When we take a new Hayle morsel, the old is sacrificed. The discarded female ages when we feed from her. For a short time, though, we have two.” He licked the woman’s neck with his dark, forked tongue. “We have to shackle them to keep them from scratching out each others eyes.”

His chuckle scraped frigid icicles up Isabel’s spine.

“We ride the used whore to hell with bliss on her lips.”

Isabel shuddered and fought the tears stinging her eyes. Unable to suppress her horror, she swayed on her feet.

“Tsk, ts. No need to fret. Now that you are here, we have much time together. Until we have a new Hayle gift.”

The bottom fell out of Isabel’s stomach. She couldn’t speak now, even if she’d wanted. Her mouth tasted of ash.

He stroked the woman’s hair with a tender expression before he continued, “You’ll hunger soon enough, then you’ll come to us.”

She blinked. The other woman had torn away her dress and sank back on the nearest pile of pillows. When Bluebeard jerked the blonde up to position her over his jutting phallus, Isabel turned her back.

To the tune of moans of delight mixed with strained grunts, Isabel searched the sides of the room. She dared to walk to the edge. The wall was smooth and warm, like a ceramic cup filled with hot tea.

Incredible. Door after door lined the wall beyond the glass. From her position, she counted at least six doors at her level, each touching the other on the sides. Above them, countless doors rose up into the heights. Terror threatened her even more when the erotic sounds behind her escalated. Even without the surety of her damnation for appeasing an incubus, her soul would not survive another’s touch.

Moisture beaded on her forehead and rolled down the tip of her nose. With hot and shaking hands, she wiped her face and walked the perimeter. Incalculable numbers of doors, around and around. Even if she could get on the other side of the glass, she didn’t know which door would take her home.

Home to Rukh. Home to Hayle Manor.

For countless moments, she searched to no avail. There was no hope. None at all.

She looked up and couldn’t see the ceiling with the hazy darkness hiding the top reaches. On her knees, she pressed her head against the glass. Warm as it had been, it now cooled her feverish forehead. She closed her eyes and wept.

When she'd cried her last, she fell to the cushioned floor and noted the quiet. The silence after the erotic sounds did not relieve her, but rather, made her dread the sight of the two behind her. Before she gained the courage to check on the other woman's welfare, she heard a whisper in the stillness. Her name, called with such anguish.

"Isabel."

Rukh.

Her heart in her throat, she listened intently, but nearly lost the sound in the thunder of her racing heart. To her left, one spear of light behind the glass did not flicker. Unlike the waves that swirled like smoke on the glass, this light remained constant. She edged toward it.

A door, open a crack.

A sword wedged in the opening. Through a cloud of fog, she made out a man's fingers clutched around the base.

Rukh?

Before she could decide how to interpret this, a book was pushed into the crack below the sword.

The Witch's Hammer. The Raven engraving on the bookmark brought a delirious smile to her face. Though she had no idea how to leave the chamber, she knew which door led home. Peace washed over her.

"Hmm."

Isabel jumped when Bluebeard purred in her ear. She searched for a way to mark her location. There, a standing candelabra to the left. She could find her door again.

"Intriguing." Bluebeard did not seem upset or worried about the open door. "Now that we have the ring, we are no longer bound to that one door. We can explore any of these, but their vain attempts amuse us for now. Shall we watch and see what they do? We have all the time in the world. Our agreement for the Hayle whores gives us endless feedings without your flesh wasting away."

He sat and yanked her hand until she knelt beside him. He dwarfed her with his large body. Wings folded behind him and legs outstretched, he remained nude and erect.

"The book, it has magic?" he asked.

When she turned to him, her mouth shut in a mutinous line, he quirked a brow at her. She'd thought he had no other hair than the beard, but he did in fact have blue brows offsetting his black eyes. His chiseled face gloated. He'd won, and he knew it. It didn't matter what her husband tried, she'd not make it through that door again.

"Perhaps you would consider speaking to us. The other woman has fed us well, but she has not weathered the slaking of our hunger. We'd not fed for too long."

Horror overwhelmed her caution, and she looked behind Bluebeard. The blonde lay motionless. Her lifeless eyes stared through Isabel. Her hair now completely gray and her features sunken, gaunt, and wrinkled, she still smiled with bliss.

Isabel turned her head quickly and lost the contents of her stomach on the pillow beside her. Luckily, she'd not eaten much in the past day.

Undaunted by her retching, Bluebeard continued. "We will get to know each other well, so you may as well speak to us. Is the book magic?"

"Yes," she whispered. With sullen doom, she looked back at her door. Homesickness washed over her. She missed the Manor. She loved her husband. She wanted his child.

She'd never leave.

Chapter Fifteen

“Bring me a candle,” Rukh growled at Alfred.

The patriarchs filled the large master chamber, now crowded with flock. Except Christopher, none of them had attempted to help. The boy had pleaded instinct and shoved *The Witch’s Hammer* into the crack in the door. Rukh’s crushed fingers tingled in relief when the pressure eased. Still, he did not remove his hand.

Every second without Isabel had dragged across Rukh. The Raven inside keened endlessly. How had his father lived with a mourning Raven for fifty years? Rukh’s humanity struggled to maintain his ability to speak, to command.

While he held a taper in one hand, Alfred stood behind Christopher and put the other on his son’s shoulder.

Rukh ordered Alfred, “Put the light to the door. Let’s see what’s in there.”

Alfred hesitated. Rukh could taste the rebellion in his uncle’s scent. Alfred tugged on Christopher. “Come away, son. This is how it’s been for centuries. I am sorry for your friend, but it is the way of the curse.”

If he could have moved from his place, holding the door from closing, Rukh would have planted his fist in Alfred’s disrespectful mouth. He hissed, “This is not the way. I will not lose my mate.”

Beside him, Christopher cringed but did not move otherwise. He quietly added to the heated exchange, “You so easily forget that Sheila is in there as well.”

“Sheila?” Alfred queried.

Before Christopher responded, Rukh snatched the candleholder from Alfred and shoved it to the crack. The flame flickered before it sprang back to life. On the other side of the door, the light reflected off a large pane of red glass.

Rukh shook his head. There didn’t appear to be anywhere to go.

“Isabel?” he roared, but his call bounced back as if muffled. No answer.

How could he get her back? He clutched the bottom of the copper candleholder. It crushed in his fist. The taper fell, but it didn’t hit the floor and sputter out. The flame caught on *The Witch’s Hammer* and immediately flared.

The fire swooshed high and fanned sparks onto his naked arm. Unlike normal, the blaze was not red, orange, yellow, or even blue. Sickly green flames began to spread wildly. Rukh flinched against the burn but did not budge. His frenzied yanks on the door began anew.

“What the hell?” Alfred yelled. “Come away, Christopher, my lord.”

“No,” both men returned in unison. They tugged with refreshed vigor.

In all the years Rukh had attempted to destroy the door, nothing had worked. Fire had not taken but had died out within seconds, even when he’d used fats and oils as fuel. Now, the green seared across the wood, burning the red door through.

Finally unable to bear the searing heat, Rukh fell back. The wood crumbled.

Emerald flames licked up through the doors, quickly spreading to the two beside Isabel’s and the three above. Bluebeard stretched out of his relaxed repose, and his face tightened.

When the blaze spread further, he growled and paced the edge of the room. Once. Twice.

He hissed and stopped abruptly. Absently, he toyed with the ring through his nose. He pouted, “We’ve waited too long to use those doors. They will not be taken away from us again.”

Isabel did not move. No longer under his erotic spell, she tried not to attract his attention. All the while Bluebeard cursed and muttered about ungrateful Ravens, she watched the scene framed by the door.

Fire spread through her husband’s bedchamber. Men fled the inferno. Ravens. Patriarchs. All but three. Rukh, Christopher, and Alfred remained. The younger men covered their faces with their arms and attempted to enter the burning portal. Alfred tugged on Christopher to keep him away.

The Witch’s Hammer lay on the floor. It shone with a green blaze, but it was not consumed.

Stopped in his tirade, his features twisted with hatred, Bluebeard reached toward the book as if the glass wall did not exist.

Isabel tensed.

His bright eyes expectant, Rukh looked through the fire and the smoky glass straight at her.

Christopher dropped to a crouch, his focus entirely on the demon who reached forward. Her friend grasped Rukh’s sword. The two men who held different parts of her heart were in danger, and she stood still like a scared child.

Heart fluttering wildly, Isabel ran toward the demon. He pushed through the glass which moved in his wake like water ripples from a pebble thrown through the surface. The demon stepped into Rukh’s chamber. Isabel leaped after him. Her arms stung where she brushed against the closing walls of the forbidden chamber.

She fell to the floor as chaos broke around her. A bitter taste coated her mouth as she breathed in the smoky air. She choked and gagged on the polluted breath caught in her lungs.

Claws now extended, a hissing Bluebeard swatted at Christopher. With an angry roar, Christopher rounded on the demon. Sword held high, he managed to cut across Bluebeard’s arm. The demon smiled,

not the least concerned, and extended his long reach. Before Christopher could bring the sword around again, the incubus closed his hand around Christopher's face. And pushed. With a grunt, Christopher crashed into the wall eight feet away.

No time to worry over her friend, she watched with horror as her naked husband approached the fiend from behind. Rukh cast an appraising look over Isabel and cocked his head toward the door. He wanted her to run. They should run. They should all run.

She placed her hand on her stomach and sidled around the edge of the room. Isabel stood at the door, but all three Ravens remained. Christopher struggled back to his feet while Rukh's body tensed to attack the demon. *Please run, Rukh. Our baby will need his father.*

The incubus lifted his great foot and stomped on *The Witch's Hammer*. The flames quelled but did not die out.

Frozen, she warred within. She wanted to run back and fight as her husband now did. He'd picked up the sword Christopher had dropped when he'd hit the floor. She wanted to flee and protect the child. A child who would never be free if she did not help end this.

Her jaw twitched from the pressure of her clenched teeth. Her husband hacked at Bluebeard's back. A long deep gash hissed with steam. Bloody, the wound gaped only a moment before it began to close.

Bent low over the book, Bluebeard spun in a crouch and slashed across Rukh's legs. Her husband crumpled.

Over the crackling roar of the fire, she heard Alfred yell. "Get out of here, Isabel! Christopher!"

Christopher looked at Rukh. The fire spread from the now demolished forbidden door around to the tapestries of the bed and windows. The entire room heated to unbearable levels.

Though she coughed on the polluted air, she wouldn't leave her husband. To his side in heartbeats, she gripped his hand when he gathered himself off the floor.

"Get out of this house. Now," Rukh commanded with fury in his eyes.

"You, too," she replied, tugging on his arm. His body, covered in slashes, already began to heal itself. Bruises that had to be new had already begun to turn brown from angry purple and red.

"I have to kill it, or you will never be safe," he said as he shook out his hand, marred with livid marks. Not waiting on her reply, he turned toward the demon.

She did not let go, but tugged all the harder. "I won't leave you."

Bluebeard picked up the burning book and screamed in agony. His giant wings unfurled, and he dove out the window. The glass crashed to the ground below.

"Alfred, Christopher, get out of here." Her husband's command brooked no argument.

Isabel was up in her husband's strong arms and carried out the bedroom in an instant.

The fire had spread to the floor below. Clamoring came from the steps behind her. The great hallway filled with smoke and people, but they all moved to exit in a wave of humanity. Ravens and servants

dashed out the great doors and into the night. It had been daylight when she'd entered the chamber. It seemed only minutes ago, but it must have been hours.

Outside, with wings spread high and wide, Bluebeard threw the burning book into a stone fountain. Several of the household women fondled him wherever they could reach and made a mockery of the fountain centerpiece of an angel playing upon a harp. Against a backdrop of lustful murmurs from the women pawing him, his feet trampled the barren rose bushes that surrounded the stone pool.

After he dropped the book, he ignored the women and took to the air, back toward the house burning bright in the black night.

Rukh put her down gently, stepped away, and flashed brightly to meet his change. She blinked her eyes. His Raven ducked his head to her and lifted off, straight toward the flying incubus.

"What is he doing?" Alfred stood behind her.

"Where is Christopher?" she asked.

At Alfred's startled expression, Isabel's stomach plummeted. He hadn't followed them out. He must be trying to save Sheila, but he was too late. He couldn't save her.

She rushed to stand below the broken window. Her foot caught a sliver of the glass. She ignored the cut.

"Christopher!" she screamed.

Beside her, Alfred stripped off his shirt. She looked to her husband, screeching and diving at the demon in the air above them.

Her husband struck out with a talon. The demon swiped back with his razor claws. She flinched in sympathy for Rukh's wounds and murmured silent prayers.

The Raven dove with wings pinned to his side. His entire body crashed into the incubus. They rolled in the air. Rukh's beak tore across Bluebeard's neck. The demon sank his claws deep into the Raven's back.

Isabel put her fist to her mouth to bite back her scream. She watched with dread when Rukh pulled away with a sluggish flick of his wing.

Alfred heaved from the ground. His bird form not nearly as big as Rukh's, he did not move toward his lord but went straight up to the window.

Christopher appeared behind the broken glass with the sword in his hand. Sweat and tears ran down his face.

"I can't get to Sheila," he shouted down to her.

"Christopher, you can't." She coughed. She needed to tell him he was too late, but the words clogged her throat as her eyes filled with unspent tears.

"I have to try again." He lifted a hand in salute to Isabel, a pained expression on his face, before he tossed the weapon to the ground. He made a motion with his hand. A slash across the neck.

She had to cut off the demon's head. Nervous and on edge, she giggled. Head shaking side to side, she willed herself to stop before she became hysterical.

Isabel's stomach burned and heaved. Tears streaked her face as the heat from the house grew with roaring crackles. Christopher backed away from the window and away from his father, whose screeching renewed. Alfred tried to dive into the window, but a wave of heat blew him back away from the total destruction of the manor. He fell to the ground next to her.

"Christopher," Isabel shrieked. The crumbling edifice took her friend, and while streams of loss coursed down her cheeks, the fire caused the tears to evaporate in steam, gone before they reached the ground.

A heavy thud resounded through her. She turned to see her husband's Raven scramble from the ground, shaking his head.

Bluebeard landed with a fierce expression on his handsome face. He'd ignored her since the battle began. Now his dark eyes fixated on her.

"Raven, leave us be, or we'll take your morsel back with us. We won't be gentle this time."

The Raven cawed low, deadly, in a repeated burst of sound like a snare drum. Cold ice traveled down her spine. The demon had access to all those doors, if they hadn't burned. Where else could he go and cause such upheaval and death?

The sword lay three feet away. She took a sideways step.

The Raven barreled into Bluebeard.

Isabel crouched to retrieve the sword.

Bluebeard knocked the Raven to the ground. He put his foot, claws extended, on the fragile chest of the giant bird, now on its back, motionless.

White noise filled Isabel's ears. She swung the sword, but it was so heavy. She missed entirely. Strong arms clenched around her and halted her return swing.

"No," Alfred insisted.

"This demon has to die." She panted from the heavy weight of the sword. "This family will never be free. What good is immortality if you harbor evil?"

"Christopher..." Alfred's voice broke before he could continue.

"Christopher asked me to do this," she said, all her conviction in her voice.

Alfred let her go. Sinking to his knees, his face crumpled into devastated tears, and he did not move to stop her. The gift of immortality had not saved his son, but Isabel had no time for his grief now, or her own.

Bluebeard taunted the too still Rukh, "Get up, Raven. We want you to watch us take your woman."

Rukh jerked as if the words were a physical blow. He struggled to rise.

Isabel swung the heavy sword up and aimed for the demon's neck. The difference in height proved insurmountable. The weapon crashed into his shoulder. The sword stuck there.

Bluebeard rounded on her.

With one step, his pale blue body nearly pressed against hers. The cold phallus near her face made her cringe. He flicked the sword from his shoulder.

With a surge of wing, he sent Alfred sailing through the air.

Behind Bluebeard, a flash heartened her, but it came too late. The demon clutched her to him and spread his wings. She tried to yank away from his impossibly tight hold. Clenching her eyes shut, she struggled in vain to escape.

A swoosh cut through the buzzing in her ears as wind moved her hair.

Before the incubus took to the air, he gurgled, and his hold dropped away. She let out a pent-up breath and wrapped her arms around her middle.

Isabel opened her eyes to the fury of her husband, covered in deep gashes and bloody smears, sword in hand. Bluebeard, body separated from his head, crumpled on the ground.

Rukh gave her a relieved look and collapsed.

“London is beautiful, Rukh. I wish you could come to the shops with me,” Isabel said with distracted joy.

Rukh doubted he’d want that nearly as much as she. He smiled at her when she crossed to the bed. The windows let in the bright sunlight and heightened her sparkling eyes. Eyes that had been clouded with grief over Christopher for so long.

“I will go with you tomorrow,” he said, and found that perhaps he would enjoy walking through every milliner, every haberdasher, and every confectionary establishment that caught her fancy.

“You’ll be off bedrest?” She perched on the edge of the mattress. Her fine dress and hat smelled of fresh air, but beneath he could scent her muskiness with a hint of rose.

He leaned up from the pillows and put his arms around her. Her breath caught when he smiled. She responded so quickly and easily to him. No doubts or inhibitions. His hands cupped her stomach, now protruding enough to force him to use more ingenious positions in their love-filled joinings. His smile widened as he curled around her and captured her sweet bottom against his groin.

“Perhaps one more day in bed will be better,” he purred into her ear before he licked that damned birthmark that still drove him mad. She shivered.

“We return to the estate next week. Before we go, I want to see that new diorama and go to the theatre. Oh, and we’ll need tapestries for the new house,” she said with a quiver. She rolled her neck to give him more access.

“Yes, love.”

With a breathy rush, she listed all she wanted to do before they left, but he didn't listen. He busied his fingers on her dress bindings.

"Don't buy any more stays, woman," he said when his impatience with the offending garment kept his fingers from her hot flesh.

She giggled when he pulled her down on her side with a growl, too heated to wait to rid her of the layers of her clothes. He pushed her skirts up around her thickened waist and ripped off her undergarments. Her giggles turned to her own impatient panting.

Rukh snuggled her back against him and lifted her leg back and over his. He pulled the sheets down his hips with an impatient motion. With one strong slide from behind, he sent his cock home as he kissed the moon shaped mark behind her ear.

They both sighed as one and lay motionless for several moments. He gripped her, arms around her chest. Her wet, hot sheath pulsed around him until his desire forced him to rock against her with slow, measured thrusts.

"We don't have to go back, love," he said.

When he pinched her nipple through her clothes, she clenched around him and twinged with each pull on the peaks of her breasts. "The Hayles may never forgive me for ending their Raven immortality and form, but I'd do it again, for the family and for you."

He cupped her protruding belly. It may have been sinful and wrong to adhere to a deal with a demon to pay for the magic of the Raven, but he'd not ended the deal for any rightness or morality. He'd done it for Isabel.

"And our child," he added.

"We'll go home." Her breath hitched. "I love you, Rukh."

She pushed back against his movements, eager for his cock moving faster and harder into her welcoming quim.

"You are my home," he gritted, holding his peaking lust in check to give her time for her own pleasure.

He reached under her belly to cup her mound as he thrust into her with more force. Intent on claiming her as his, he sucked hard on the alluring crescent high on her neck.

Knowing her passions and needs as well as his own, he ground his hand against her point of pleasure. She exploded around him and took him with her.

After his racing heart slowed he kissed the love-bite he'd left behind her ear.

"We'll go home, my love."

She held his hand tightly. "Your son should be born in the newly rebuilt Manor."

"Yes. And he'll bring his own mate to live there one day, without the fear of her loss."

She turned to him, struggling with her skirts and rounded belly. Isabel threw her arms around his neck, tears in her eyes. “No curse for our children.”

She kissed him soundly.

About the Author

As a child Ella Drake read books under the covers with a flashlight. There she found a special love of elves, dragons, and knights. Now that she's found her own knight in shining armor and happily ever after, she loves to write tales of fantasy, hot enough to scorch the sheets. No flashlight needed. To learn more about Ella Drake or to join her mailing list, please visit www.elladrake.com.

Seeing dead people is bad enough. Loving him could make her one of them.

Catch Me In Castile

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When the mother of all panic attacks prompts Erin Carter's boss to pass her over for promotion, her mind doesn't just crack. It explodes like an egg in a microwave, shattering her career along with the company car she crashes into the office building.

The death grip she's kept on her sanity slipping, she takes a friend's advice and flees to Spain. There she finds comfort in the healing arms of surgeon Santiago Botello—until a fifteenth-century ghost warns her that being with Santiago is dangerous, possibly even lethal.

Santiago has his hands full protecting his sister from a dark curse and his family from a very modern-day psychotic killer. The last thing he needs added to his plate is a neurotic American. Yet something about Erin tugs at his heart so hard he wants to wrap her in his arms and never let go. No matter the risk.

Erin's attraction to Santiago makes her the killer's next target. Survival means she must face her greatest fear, solve an ancient murder mystery—and hang on tight to the one man she's fallen crazy in love with.

Warning: This book contains a woman willing to lose her mind for love, a hot Spaniard with hands a girl could die for, deadly family curses, a ghost with memory disorder, and a really mad killer.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Catch me in Castile:

"You worked with Maria?" Santiago asked.

"I am...was...am a stockbroker." I laughed. "It's a little confusing right now. I'm taking a break from it all." I sat back. "Call it a vacation."

"Ah," was his polite answer. He probably suspected I'd been canned. I let him think whatever he wanted. Somehow being fired from my job would have been better than losing my mind, heart, and soul to it.

"It's a difficult business, especially for a woman."

My hackles rose. "For a woman?"

His eyebrows rose to match my tone. "It's not?"

"It's a hard business for many. A woman dedicated to succeeding in her career can handle it just fine."

"You're a career woman."

"I most certainly am—hey, watch out!" A fist to my shoulder blade rudely cut off my thoughts. Spinning around in my chair, I was ready to scream at the brute who had the audacity to sock a woman in the back. Oddly, no one was there.

Dear God, I'm imagining things?

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Facing him again, my hackles had gone down, replaced by goose bumps all over my skin. "Did you see who hit me in the—?" I closed my mouth.

His dark eyebrows hitched up in confusion.

No, I scolded myself, Stick to Plan 3 in my Get a Life Journal—don't go crazy.

"Nothing." The old fight to stand up for myself and my gender was gone. I sighed. "To answer your question, I'm trying to be all right. Sometimes...it's hard."

Emotion I couldn't decipher passed over his face. "I know."

He had his own hardships to bear. I wasn't about to drop mine in his lap. "Santiago, all I want to be right now is on vacation. I need a break from my life. When I get home, I'll try to sort out what I want to be when I grow up."

"Fair enough." He still eyed me suspiciously. "How long will you be staying?"

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I teased, but thought it might be true.

"No. How long will we be fortunate to have your company?"

"Ah, a charmer you are. My condo is rented out for the summer, so I have three months to play around. I'll probably travel Spain a bit. See the sights."

"Why don't you stay here the whole time?" His mouth opened in surprise as if he hadn't meant to say that at all.

"Here? In your home?"

His lips parted, but no sounds came out.

I kept my answer light. "That would be imposing. Something my mother tells me not to do."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. What in the world was he debating in that glorious head of his? Finally he said, "The house is big. I'd appreciate it if you keep Maria company while she settles back in. It will be good for her to look after you. I'm not here often. I have a flat downtown, closer to the hospital."

"Oh."

"Please consider staying. Here."

"You and Maria are very kind. I'll think about it."

Oh man, that devastating grin.

We switched gears and I asked him about his career, while the candlelight shimmered in his eyes. He had a general practice, was trained in internal medicine and elected to the position of Chief Medical Doctor at the Salamanca hospital.

I smelled modesty. "Impressive. Where'd you go to school?"

"I graduated from UCLA. Pre-Med. My graduate work was here, in Salamanca."

“You must know Dr. John Stapleton at UCLA,” flew out of my mouth before I had a chance to rein it in.

He thought a moment. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Which medical department is he in?”

Holy crap, please tell me I did not drop my psychiatrist’s name into casual conversation with the sexiest man on the planet.

I ran my hand up the back of my neck. “Um, not sure.” *Think, Erin, think.* “Hey, I almost went to UCLA too. USC has a better Economics department.” I drew lazy eights on the glass table with my fingers, trying to calm myself. “Too bad I can’t speak to you ever again.”

“What?”

“We’re rivals.”

“I hope not. You make me look good on the dance floor.”

Nope, did that all by himself. I wondered for a millisecond about Helena. Had she gone home? Could I be so lucky? “I, uh, noticed you dancing with a lovely lady over there.”

“With beautiful red hair?”

“That would be the one.” I resisted touching my own sandy locks. “Is she, are you two, you know?”

“Helena is a friend of mine who volunteers at the hospital.”

“Say no more.” I held up my hand. “Been there myself.”

He frowned, studying my face. “Been where? The hospital?”

I blushed. “No, I meant you don’t need to tell me about your relationship. I understand the need for—” I searched for the appropriate word, “—discretion at work.”

He smiled and leaned a little closer. “Helena and I are friends. You had male friends at your last job, right?”

Dry gulp. “Not friends, exactly. More like spiteful, vicious—Ow!”

“What’s wrong?”

I rubbed my shoulder. “Something pinched me. Do you have mosquitoes here?”

His face was serious “What happened in your job? Did someone hurt you?”

He seemed determined to make me tell him the gory details. I wasn’t going there. Not anymore. I looked into his sensitive eyes. “My life is…” I thought about Maria, “...littered. I’m trying to clean it up. And I will. For now, I’m seizing the day one moment at a time. Starting with this one.”

I flattened my palms on the round table and leaned closer. He watched curiously as I moved toward him until we were face to face. Softly, I kissed his lips. Calculating career woman would never dare do such a thing. The newly developing goddess in me was feeling reckless. Alive.

I meant for it to be a soft peck, a gentle caress. I had absolutely no intentions of flicking the tip of my tongue across his bottom lip, deepening the kiss, sucking his delicious bottom lip into my mouth, and running my fingers through his glorious black hair. None at all. But the best laid plans...

The attraction raged like a storm out of control, snapping and crackling under Santiago's skin. He couldn't help it. The dancing had warmed his blood and the fire roaring inside the woman threatened to consume him.

Erin was beautiful beyond words. She was also smart, sensitive, and courageous. But he saw something else behind those deep honey eyes that scared him. Every now and then he caught a flash of anguish, a twist of her pain, buried deep in her psyche.

It ate at him. He wasn't good at sitting idly by while a beautiful woman was tortured before his eyes. And why she kept looking over her shoulder was beyond him. Hallucinations? Post-traumatic disorder?

Damn it! What happened to her?

Don't get involved, he warned himself. *I can't fix her.*

Besides, he had more than enough problems to worry about. No, he had to squelch the firestorm spreading through his veins. For both their sakes.

But when her lips met his...

Dear God, when she kissed him electricity sparked through his nervous system and lightning struck his heart. It was as if he'd been zapped by the hospital's defibrillator. His mind was five seconds behind, trying to comprehend the situation. And when her tongue ran across his bottom lip, slowly, sensually...*mierda*, he had to learn how to breathe all over again.

Erin Carter was a force of nature, unlike anything he'd ever seen. Lord help him, he wanted to seize the lightning in his fists and dive headlong into the storm.

Gone without a trace...now danger tracks them to their one safe harbor.

Selkie Island

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A hundred years ago, her mother's plea gave Morag a second chance at life—but not as she knew it. Now she lives a mostly solitary life as a selkie, seal in winter, human in summer, barely aging while her family and friends pass away. As the lonely years become almost too heavy to bear, she clings to the memory of one intense summer affair with a young man who left her, as humans always do.

Nine years have passed since Clay hitchhiked to the Maritimes, where he embarked on a memorable if short-lived affair with a mysterious woman. Their enchanted time together called him back a few months later—but she had disappeared. Now, wounded and desperate, Selkie Island is the only safe harbor he can dredge from his feverish haze of pain.

When a strange boat plows onto the beach, Morag is curious—and shocked to discover her long-lost lover, unconscious and hurt. Nursing him back to health is the first thing on her mind...right after she convinces him she's real.

As real as the danger following in his wake...

Warning: This title contains explicit, intoxicating sex on an island!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Selkie Island:

She turned in his embrace, wrapped her arms around his neck and spoke into his throat. "I'm not lonely now."

"Strangely enough, neither am I."

He cradled her face in his warm hands, kissed her eyelids, her nose, and she lost all patience and surged up against him to kiss him full on the mouth. Like he'd been waiting, he received her, pulling her closer, taking control of the kiss, welcoming her. There was a patience there in his touch that she didn't remember and it made her feel treasured. It also made her feel crazy with need. Suddenly it was too much and she broke off the kiss, grabbed at her pants to pull them down.

"I want you inside me." She wanted everything he'd ever given her before and she wanted it immediately. Her heart was about to beat out of her chest and she needed him now after being deprived for so long.

He helped her with her pants, more slowly than she liked, then allowed her to help with his. They kept their shirts on because it was cold and besides, she just wanted him *there*.

He slid his hands down her thighs. "I'm not going anywhere, Morag. No need to rush."

Didn't matter that he wasn't going anywhere. There was need riding her. She rose on her knees, found him with her center and sank down on to him. As he entered, she felt like he opened her up, opened up

everything, and her chest flushed with something old and new and powerful. She bowed her head and he curved his hand around the back of her head to steady her.

She expected him to move but realized with his wound he might not be able to so she began to rise. His arm came around her ribs, immobilizing her against him.

Lifting her head, she asked, "What?" Not the most coherent question and he answered by nibbling at the side of her neck. Goose bumps ran over her skin.

"Clay." The demand in her voice, it didn't seem to belong to her but she needed him to move now, otherwise she might scream, or burst into tears. A tremor ran through her.

"Okay," he said, whether in agreement or reassurance, she didn't know, but he rose on his knees, lifting her and laying her on her back. "Look at me." His demand now and she answered it by staring into his dark, almost-midnight gaze. His face was mostly in shadow but his eyes shone. "Won't be long," he warned, but she didn't want it to be long, just *now*, and he moved.

She moved with him and the years fell away, they were back to when they knew just how to please each other's bodies, the rhythm their own and exactly what they needed as they rose and fell together. The tempo increased as something within her built, a pressure, a wave of intensity that crashed through her and she did scream. Upon her shore he fell, coming inside her, her longing sated by him, by Clay.

She clung and he didn't let go.

He was careful not to let all his weight rest on her, though it took more effort than normal. But he didn't want to move, to let go. Making love with Morag had been a homecoming of sorts when he hadn't known he'd needed to come home to her. Not until she'd found him again.

"You're mine," she whispered and he smiled into her hair. "For a little while," she amended.

"Longer than a little while." Sleep was claiming him and his words were in danger of being slurred. "Let's make this last longer than our first summer together, okay?" He slid to the side, maintaining full-body contact without smothering her with his weight.

"Don't go," she said and he didn't know if she meant he shouldn't slide out of her or if he shouldn't leave the island in the future.

"I don't want to go," he managed before sleep took him.

He woke hours later. The darkness was just beginning to lighten to gray so sunrise was approaching but still a ways off. Morag lay in his arms. A relief because he'd dreamed that she'd swum away, turning to light as he held her, the ocean rising to claim her. But here, now, her back was pressed to his chest, and he was hard against her beautiful ass. He palmed one cheek.

She pressed against him, arching her back, and he entered her from behind.

“God,” he muttered as she moaned, a low note deep in her chest. He didn’t move but bit down on the tendon running from her shoulder to her neck, tasting the salt, her own or perhaps the salt water’s. It didn’t matter, it still belonged to her.

“Move,” she demanded. Instead he lapped at her neck.

“Morag.” He just wanted to say her name.

“What?” Frustration filled her voice. He remembered this, how they’d been crazy for each other, going at it like rabbits multiple times a day and it had been glorious. He’d cared about his lovers since then, but it had been nothing like what he’d had with Morag.

He placed a palm over one breast, caught the nipple between thumb and finger.

“Clay.”

“Um-hmm?”

“Please.”

“You’re beautiful.”

She tried to roll onto her stomach and he clamped her to him, ignoring her cry of frustration. He understood that she wanted him to drive into her from behind, and God knew he wanted it too. Just not yet. Over the years he’d learned to appreciate a certain drawing out of the event and even if this was more making love than the sex he’d become used to, he still wanted to try for slow with Morag. Slow and rewarding.

He slid his arm down and found her clit, hard and engorged. Tracing a finger over it, he felt her crash into her orgasm as she let out a scream. He didn’t relent, working the nub as she flew and came down to earth. She panted in his arms, trying to catch her breath, a sweat breaking out over her body.

“Clay, please.”

“Please what?”

“Too much.”

“Come again.”

“I can’t,” she gritted out even as her body seized and she broke against him a second time. He was growing harder and harder inside her, likely to come by just feeling her around him, squeezing him.

So he pressed her down on the bedding, lifting her ass as he rolled, staying inside her. She was wet and welcoming and tight. Friction and feeling and deep, beautiful warmth. He drove into her and she screamed, “Yes, Clay.” His cock grew impossibly hard, his balls tightened and he wanted to stay there, just at that moment before he went over the edge, when the feeling was almost transcendent.



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