

In the Company of Men: Baymore's Heir

Lynn Lorenz



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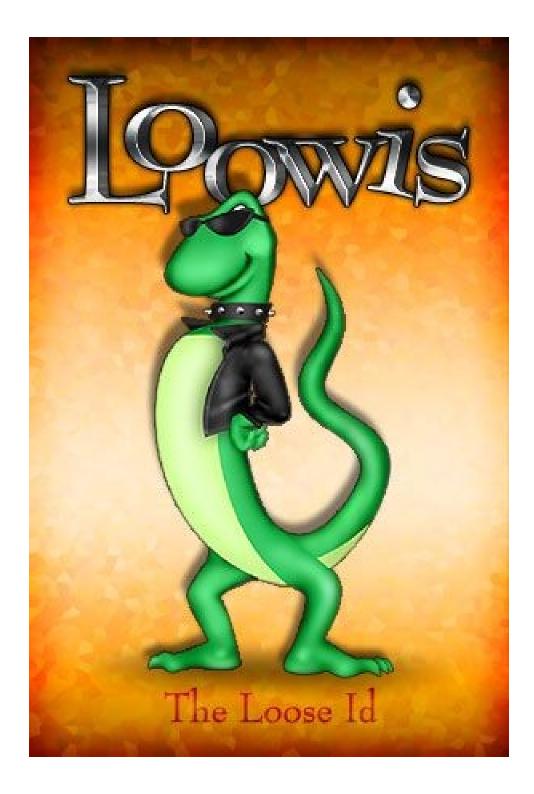
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Chapter One

Lord William Holcombe rested his head against his lover's chest and listened to the strong steady beat of his heart. The intoxicating scent of their lovemaking floated on the still air of the room and the low-banked fire in the hearth gave the room its only light. Will pulled the quilts tighter around them, keeping out the early morning chill of spring and keeping in the shared warmth of their bodies.

Jackson, Duke of Baymore, stirred beneath Will, then settled. His soft snore was just one of the multitude of things Will loved about this man. Will could speak of Jackson's merits as a mercenary, of his strength, power, and skill with a sword, of his bravery in the face of insurmountable odds, and of his cunning in the art of war.

Will could cite Jackson's towering height, the broadness of his shoulders, the strength of his arms, the power of his thighs, that wild mane of dark red hair that Will's fingers longed to get lost in, or Jackson's rugged features as what Will loved most.

But those weren't what wedded Will to this man as if he were bound by chains. It was Jackson's gentleness, his easy humor, his soft manner of speech. His tenderness when Jackson held him, his passion when Jackson took him, and his surrender when Jackson gave himself to him.

Last night, they'd reached Will's family's keep too late for little more than a hasty welcome, a quick meal, and a slow climb up the stairs to their beds. Jackson, being a duke and honored guest, was given the finest of the extra rooms. Will had returned to the room he'd occupied two years ago before he'd gone to Baymore and sworn his sword, his life, and his heart to Jackson.

And no more than an hour after his door had closed, Will had opened it and gone to Jackson. They hadn't spent a night apart in the last two years, and Will wasn't about to be without his lover, even in his own father's keep.

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Will smiled. He still felt Jackson's taking of him. It had been hard, fast, and against the wall. Will had had no more than a moment's time to untie his loose woolen trews before Jackson had stripped them from him, lifted him up, and impaled Will on his glorious spear. He'd clung to the big man, arms wrapped round Jackson's neck, legs wrapped round Jackson's waist, as if to let go would be the end of him, and when Will had released, his clenching tunnel and cries of completion had sent Jackson to join him.

Now hours later, they lay abed, cocooned like two lazy caterpillars waiting to emerge, changed beings. Will didn't care if he ever got out of bed, so content were the feelings that overcame him.

Jackson shifted his arm and found Will's nipple with his fingers. Will made a soft sound of encouragement. Jackson's finger became insistent, circling, scraping, bringing alive every nerve in Will's body.

Will rolled over onto his side, offering himself.

Now would come the slow loving. The tender touches. Jackson's whispered poetry, telling the depth of his feelings for Will. His naked, raw need for Will. The enormity of his love for Will. The completeness of his life with Will by his side.

Every time he and Jackson made love Will knew that everything they'd been through, all they had survived together, had been worth it. Will's long cold night left for dead and strung up in a field, Jackson's torture in the small foul cell of a madman, all the blood Will had spilled, and even the death of beautiful young Jon, had been worth it.

There was nothing Will would not do for Jackson.

Nothing Jackson could ask of him, no task Jackson could set him to that Will would not accomplish.

Nothing.

Jackson ran his hand over his lover's body. Oft traveled, it knew the way and yet each time there was a discovery of new territory. Each stroke, each glide, each pass of his calloused fingertips over Will's soft skin left Jackson trembling with the sheer beauty of the younger man.

That this lord, this fine, educated man of rank and noble birth, would want him always astounded Jackson. He might now hold the title of duke, but two years ago, when Will first met

him and gave Jackson his heart, Jackson had been no more than a paid mercenary, without land, without fortune, without title, merely the bastard son of a duke.

No equal, no match for Will.

Yet, because of Will and Will alone, Jackson now had everything.

He nuzzled the back of Will's head searching for skin, but Will's long blond hair hid what he sought. He gently brushed the silken tresses off Will's shoulder to reveal the pale smooth flesh that had tempted him since the very first time he'd touched it.

For a moment, he rested his lips against Will's back, warming Will's skin with his breath. His desire grew until he could no longer resist and he bit Will, determined to mark him, to claim the man he loved. Jackson held on, his lips clamped tight as he sucked, his tongue laved the flesh he'd captured, as Will moaned and hissed and whimpered.

Jackson released his lover and soothed the bite with a lick of his tongue.

"My sweet Will."

Will shivered, sighed, bent his leg, and moved it forward, using his body to tell Jackson that he was ready to be taken.

Jackson took the vial from the table next to the bed and uncorked it. He poured the thick scented liquid over his hand, and then over his rod, and spread the oil with a few long strokes to insure there was enough to ease his way inside. Then he slid his fingers down the crevasse of Will's ass until he reached that tight bud that opened only for him.

"God, Will, you inflame me. The touch of your skin, the softness of your crease, the firmness of your ass." Jackson drew circles around the opening. His cock, stiff and proud and eager, stood ready against his belly.

Will pushed back into his touch, eager, always ready for him. Jackson had never imagined willing and ready to be so exciting, but Will's enthusiasm only made Jackson's fire burn hotter, his passion soar, his longing for his lover rage through his body like a fever.

Jackson knew of only one cure for that fever.

With a small thrust of his hips, Jackson sank inside his lover.

Both men sighed and settled into their joining.

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Running his hand over Will's flank, Jackson waited for Will's signal. Will reached back, took Jackson's hand, and wrapped it around the shaft of Will's cock.

With a shudder, Jackson pushed in deeper, then withdrew in a long, slow, and effortless glide out and then back in, repeated with each lazy thrust of his hips. For Will's part, he was right there with Jackson, receiving, giving, taking with his own hips' motion.

Will's mewls, the soft rumbling in his throat, made Jackson's ardor grow until he had to resist his body's urge to go faster, deeper, wilder, to ride Will like the fine steed he was, to lose himself in Will's body, his fists in Will's hair, his soul in Will's eyes.

"I love you, Lord Holcombe."

"And I you, Duke Baymore."

Jackson matched the stroking of his hand along Will's cock to his thrusts in Will's tight ass. Even after two years of lovemaking, it never ceased to surprise him how hot Will's inner channel was, how tightly it held him, how deeply he could take Will.

And Will's response to him? Always excited, always asking for more.

"I love the way you feel, sweet Will. You're so hot. You wrap my cock in your heat and bring me to my sweet death each and every time."

Poetry. God, such poetry. The man had no idea what his words did to Will.

They burrowed inside of Will, found a place in his heart, and made their home. Jackson thought himself a coarse man, but Will knew the truth. Will knew Jackson's soul, that of a truly gentle man. Jackson could run a man through before the man had time to pull his sword and Jackson could lop head from shoulders with one swing of his broadsword; his skill was that great.

But Jackson's touch, his inner soul, his tender words, had told Will the first time they'd met that there was so much more to Jackson than just a rough, uneducated mercenary.

Jackson's firm grip on Will's shaft tightened, his tempo more insistent, and Will knew his lover was nearing release. There was nothing Will loved more than Jackson's cream shooting into his channel. Unless it was Will's cream shooting into Jackson's tight tunnel. That was worth dying for, those rare times when Jackson gave himself to Will. Will groaned as Jackson's thrusts came harder, faster, deeper. Will angled his hips and on the next stroke Jackson's cock raked his spot, sending waves of pleasure through Will, to land deep in his stones.

"So close, my love." Jackson battered Will's ass. "Close."

Will would join his love when the moment came. "I also."

Jackson nipped his shoulder then chuckled. "Not yet, my lord." His hand released Will's cock for a second, then encircled the base of Will's shaft and squeezed.

"Oh no." Will gasped.

"Aye. You will wait for yours while I take mine." Jackson's breath puffed against the back of Will's neck as his pumping hips renewed their attack on Will's body.

Will groaned. He'd been so damn close to coming. Now he wondered what Jackson had planned for him. Never did he doubt that Jackson wouldn't satisfy him, or would leave him unfinished.

Jackson took him, pressing him into the bed, riding him just as Will loved to be ridden.

"God Will, you're mine." Jackson pounded into him, then he stumbled in his pace, fell off rhythm, and with one last great thrust, pushed deep inside Will and released. Jackson's shudder passed through Will.

Will could only moan, only tremble beneath the huge man, his own release cut off from him by Jackson's tight circle around Will's rod.

"Don't leave me like this," Will begged.

"Leave you? Never. I'll never leave you," Jackson teased.

"You know what I mean. Unfinished." Will thrust his hips, but Jackson had control of him. His need grew painful, but such sweet pain.

"I plan on finishing you, my lord."

"Then don't make me wait, Your Grace."

"Forgive me, for I am selfish. I wanted to fuck you and to suck you." Jackson pulled Will onto his back, then shifted his position to kneel between Will's legs.

Will's lover looked down at him, all the fire and desire burning in that hot dark gaze of his. Will's stomach flipped and his balls drew up tighter.

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Jackson lowered his head and took Will in his mouth.

Will groaned as the beauty, the glory that was Jackson Baymore descended on him, sucked his rod, laved his sac with his talented tongue, and brought Will straight to the edge of insanity.

"Please. Let me. Come. Now." Will panted, struggling against the pleasure and pain of what Jackson did to him. It was heaven and hell and purgatory and Will wanted it to last, wanted it to be over, wanted Jackson to never take his mouth off his cock.

"Now, my love. My Will." Jackson let go, freed Will's cock, and as if a hundred suns exploded in the day's sky, Will came.

His sob echoed off the thick stone walls of the room, his body shuddered as it had never done before, his cream shot and shot and shot until there was no more to give. And for a long moment, Will's heart felt as if it had forgotten to beat.

Then with a mighty thud, it came back to life.

Jackson licked a lone drop from his lip and then collapsed next to Will.

"Was that good? Should I do that again?" He pulled Will's limp body against his side and Will's head onto his shoulder.

"Aye. Your Grace." It was all Will could get out, his mouth could barely form the words, his brain could barely think them.

"Good. I like it when you beg me." Jackson grinned, then took Will's mouth with a hard kiss. Will couldn't fight back, but opened to his lover and gladly gave himself up as lost.

Jackson broke their kiss, leaned back, and looked deep into Will's eyes.

"I love you, Lord Holcombe. Without you, I would be a dead thing. Breathing, moving, but without a soul, without a heart."

"You take my breath and my words away, Duke Baymore." Will buried his hands in Jackson's hair and pulled him down for a kiss. They lost themselves in the touching of their tongues, then parted. "It's early morn and I must away."

Jackson sighed and nodded.

After a quick press of his forehead to Jackson's, Will threw off his covers, found his clothes, and dressed. Then he strode back to the bed, grabbed Jackson's head by his hair, and pulled him up hard into a kiss so tender, chaste, and pure it broke Jackson's heart.

Will let him go, turned, and slipped from the room.

Jackson lay back on the bed. His love for Will never ceased to amaze and awe him. It was a gift. He had no idea why he'd been favored by God, or what he'd ever done to deserve a man such as Will, but he wasn't going to question it.

He would continue to thank God, as he did every night in a silent prayer before he closed his eyes and every morn when he opened his eyes, just as he would do this morn.

Will was as precious to him as his own life. Jackson would stand unflinching and ready before the executioner rather than hurt Will or betray Will's love and good affections. There was nothing on earth that could tempt him into such an act.

Nothing.

Chapter Two

Will paused at the bottom of the stairs and watched the quiet scene. In the great hall, his beloved brother Wallace sat on one of the four tapestry-covered chairs drawn close to the massive hearth and held his first son on his knee. The child would now be over a year and six months if Will remembered right and he was the very image of his father, having the Holcombe men's blond hair and fair complexion, but Ellen's dark brown eyes. Wallace and Will's father, Walter, Duke of Holcombe, sat next to him.

Will's heart stirred and warmth bloomed in his chest knowing that Wallace and his good lady Ellen's dream of a large family was coming true.

Today would be the christening of Wallace's second son, named after William, and the reason he and Jackson had traveled from Baymore to Holcombe, along with a small contingent of armsmen for protection and appearances.

Will stepped forward. "Two sons, brother. Was ever a man so blessed?"

"Aye. I was." Will's father leaned around his chair and grinned. "Will, my son. How was your night's rest?" He held out his hand for Will to take, and his unseeing white-filmed eyes stared in the direction of Will's voice.

"Well, Father. And how did you sleep?" Will's gaze flicked to Wallace. Wallace rolled his eyes and shook his head, knowing Will had most likely spent the night with Jackson. Wallace had known of Will's leanings since they were young men and it had been his love and acceptance of Will that had allowed Will to continue to live at Holcombe until he'd decided to leave and join Jackson at Baymore. Will's father, however, knew nothing of Will's preferences.

"Like an old bear in his winter den." His father chuckled as Will took his hand, bent low, kissed the back of it, and then fell into a nearby chair. "Where is the duke?" His father's head tilted to cock his ear to catch any sound.

"Roaming the keep, no doubt." Will laughed. "Without any battle to go to, he wakes early, then makes his rounds. He's probably on the walls, speaking with your men, or in the armory inspecting your weapons."

"And I'm sure you're up with the chickens and seeing to the needs of his lands." His father nodded and looked pleased.

"I am. That madman Hugh and his father Morris left Baymore in tatters. Full coffers mind you, but all goodwill gone and his people near starvation. There was much to do to remedy the wrongs done them and put things to right."

"From what I've heard, the Duke of Baymore is once again beloved by his people," Wallace added as he bounced his son on his knee. The child babbled and reached for his father. "He wants his grand da."

"Then he must come to me." Walter Holcombe held out his arms and Wallace rose and placed the child with him. With practiced hands, Walter gathered the child's loose linen gown and cradled him in his arms. "He grows each day, Wallace. A big boy he'll be, just like you." He gave the child his finger and was rewarded by being bitten. Walter laughed, scolded the child, and then gave him a quick kiss on the head.

"Indeed." Wallace turned to Will. "He walked at only ten months, brother. He may have my heft, but by God, he's got your cleverness, I swear it." Wallace's face beamed with his pride.

"He's grown much since I last saw him." No longer a shapeless, squirming tadpole, he was a well formed, squirming frog, bright eyed and alert.

"It's been over a year you've been away, Will. We all miss you." Wallace smiled at his brother. "When you have time, we must speak." The look in Wallace's eyes told Will his brother wanted a more detailed telling of his life at Baymore.

"Of course. And what of my namesake?" Will watched his father play with his grandson. His father's dream of grandchildren had come true, thanks to Wallace and Lady Ellen. God knew it would never have come to pass if he'd counted on Will.

"Ah, Ellen is feeding little William upstairs. He has a cradle in our room."

"And does this child favor your blond hair or Ellen's dark?"

"He's blond with blue eyes. Ellen tells me most babies are born with blue eyes, but they turn to their true color, as Walter's did, as they grow." "I have to admit, little Walter is a beauty, for a child." Will had never been around children, nor had Wallace, but it was good to see his brother taking to the role of father so well. It was a role Will had never seen himself in, whereas Wallace had dreamed of it.

"You think? Truthfully?" Wallace leaned forward.

"Oh aye. How could he not be with the fair Lady Ellen as his mother? Good thing her beauty alone was all that was needed to insure his fair looks," Will teased.

His brother sniffed. "I'm not half bad, I've been told."

"You shouldn't listen to the idle talk of scullery maids, brother," Will drawled.

Wallace groaned. "Damn you, Will. There is no hope of winning a war of wits, is there?"

"No. None." Jackson's voice interrupted and all heads turned to him. "He can take the words you say and twist them back and forth until you swear you never said them. I have long since given up that battle."

The Duke of Baymore crossed the hall, looking so good Will had to struggle to keep the look of desire from his face. Their gazes met, lingered, caressed, then broke apart.

"Your Grace, thank you again for the hospitality of your keep." Jackson came to the chairs where they all sat. "And who is this fine young man?"

"This is my grandson, Walter." Will's father grinned and held up the child for Jackson to inspect.

"He's a big, handsome lad, Your Grace. He does your name proud." Jackson took the last remaining chair.

"Thank you. And what of you, Jackson? I've heard no news about a marriage for you. Will, you must tell the duke he has a duty to continue his line."

Will stared down into the fire as his hands clenched the arms of his chair. His throat tightened so completely that he was unable to speak the words that formed in his mind. Words that would betray him to his father, announcing his and Jackson's love and declaring that no woman would ever come between them.

Jackson coughed and cleared his throat. "There has been no time for such matters, Your Grace. The state of my holdings has been my first and only priority."

"Of course. There will be time. You are still a young man and most men can father children well into their later years." Walter stood and held out his grandson. "Take him, Wallace. I must go upstairs now."

Wallace took his son, Will stood, as did Jackson, and they watched as the elder Holcombe made his way to the stairs, climbed them, then disappeared. Though blind, he knew the placement of every piece of furniture in the great hall, the count of steps to the stairs, and the number of stairs to the top.

Will leaned back in his chair and sighed. Jackson sat, reached out, placed his hand over Will's, and gave it a squeeze.

"Will, you really must tell your father." Jackson let his hand drop.

"And lose him? Never." Will shook his head. "His love means too much to me."

Wallace paced in front of the hearth, his son in his arms. "I think you should keep your secrets, brother. There is more at risk than our father's affection for you."

"Indeed. If Da knew that you and Lady Ellen had knowledge of my ways and that you allowed me to remain at the keep, his anger could turn toward you. And your children. I won't have that." Will shook his head.

Jackson nodded. "Forgive me, Wallace. I hadn't thought of that."

"It's a problem Will and I have dealt with for a long time. Secrets are best kept secret." Wallace wrinkled his nose and grimaced. "My son needs changing."

"Oh. I thought the wind had shifted," Will drawled and gave Jackson a raised eyebrow.

"Don't look to me, Lord Holcombe." Jackson shook his head.

Wallace laughed. "Go take seats at the table, call the servants, and break your fast."

"Will you join us?"

"No, Ellen had our meal brought up to us early so she could eat and tend to the new babe. I'll speak with you later, Will, at your convenience. Your Grace." Wallace gave Jackson a short bow and left, taking the stairs two at a time, his child giggling and bouncing in his arms.

For a long while, they stared into the fire, just content to be with each other. Then Jackson's stomach rumbled like an empty wagon going over a wooden bridge.

"Let's break fast before your stomach brings the rafters down." Will laughed and stood, slapping Jackson on the back.

They walked to the long tables at the far side of the great hall and sat. Jackson at the head as was due his rank, and Will at his right, in the place of honor, and on Jackson's blind side. Ever since Jackson had lost the sight in his right eye, Will never failed to put himself between his duke and any danger. No one but Will knew of the injury Jackson suffered at the hands of Jackson's half brother Hugh.

One of the servants brought bowls of porridge and thick slices of warm fresh bread and a carafe of goat's milk.

"How do you think life at Baymore proceeds without you and me there?" Will wondered as they ate.

"Marcus has the men doing close drills, most likely," Jackson said, a wide grin on his face. "You have to say this for the old duke, he picked the men in his service well. I've been most pleased with Marcus as master of arms. I'm glad he chose to stay on."

"Shame Morris couldn't have picked his son," Will drawled.

"At least in the end, he picked the right one." Jackson looked up into Will's eyes.

Will nodded. "He did. The best man ever to carry the Baymore name." He took a bite of his bread and chewed, enjoying the flush that rose in Jackson's cheeks at Will's affirmation.

"What time is the ceremony?" Jackson looked around the still empty hall. "Where will it be?"

"I'm not sure. After the noon meal and before supper." Will shrugged. "It's at the church in the village, then back here for a celebration."

"All day then." Jackson yawned. "If I fall asleep, you must nudge me."

"Can't. I'll be standing up at the altar with Wallace, Ellen, and my namesake."

"Oh." Jackson bit his lip. "I snore, you know."

"Do you? I hadn't noticed." Will winked. "Don't worry. I'll seat you with my father."

Jackson smiled. "I'd like that. Do you think he'll mind?"

"I'm sure he'll welcome you." Will knew his father would never give offense to another duke, much less Jackson, whom he considered a friend.

"Well, then, that will be good."

After they finished eating Will and Jackson took a tour of the keep. It had been two years since Will had been there, but little had changed. They checked on the men they'd brought along to see if their needs were being met, which they were. Then they stopped in the stables to make sure the stable lads would have their mounts ready with the others for the celebration.

The lads were getting the carriage and tack ready. A stable boy brushed one of the two matching black horses that would pull it as a young girl stood on a stool, braiding spring flowers into the gelding's mane.

That done, with nothing else to do, they returned to the hearth, to sit with feet stretched out to the fire, and took their ease until the others appeared.

* * * * *

Marcus, master of arms at Baymore Castle, strode across the bailey toward the barracks. His gaze slid around the courtyard at his men stationed on the walls of the stone keep. With the duke and Lord Holcombe away, the care and keeping of the castle had fallen to him once again.

And for not the first, second, or hundredth time, he praised God that Jackson Baymore had claimed his rights as Duke of Baymore and that William Holcombe had killed that bastard Hugh.

William knew how to run a keep and its lands, and Jackson knew how to run the castle's armsmen. And best of all, he knew how to let Marcus have control and command of their soldiers, something Hugh and his father had had no skill with.

"Captain!" One of the men on the wall yelled down to him.

Marcus halted and looked up, shading his eyes against the sun with his hand. "Aye?"

"Someone approaches, sir."

Marcus nodded and headed to the stairs and up to the catwalk. Taking position next to his man on guard, Marcus leaned out over the thick wall and his gaze followed the guard's arm as he pointed to the road.

A young lad made his way to the castle, having turned off the main road to the village beyond. Clearly, he was bound for the keep. Marcus observed the boy as he trudged closer, his steps determined but slow, as if he'd traveled a great distance. Marcus put him at about ten years of age. He was dressed better than most, but the clothes he wore were dirty, covered in black. Soot most likely. The lad's hair was black and he was tall and lanky for his age.

He came to the great closed gates and stopped. He carried a sack over his back and little more. Looking up, he brushed long straight bangs from his forehead. His face was streaked with the same black soot that stained his clothes, and his eyes looked dark, hollow, and weary.

"Is this Baymore Castle?"

Marcus looked down at the boy. "Aye. It is."

The boy nodded and then collapsed.

"Damn!" Marcus turned and bolted down the stairs. "Open the gate!"

The guard at the gate raised the beam that barred the gates, and pushed it open. Marcus dashed through the gap and fell to his knees at the lad's side. He rolled the boy over and picked him up, with only a soft groan from the child.

"Call the healer," he ordered one of his men. Followed by two of his guards, he carried the boy inside to the barracks and placed him on the nearest cot. Pulling off the sack, he laid the young lad's head back on a small pillow.

The boy roused, looked around him, fear widened his eyes. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"Marcus. Master of arms here at Baymore. And you?"

"I am Liam." His soft voice barely croaked out his words, as if he had no moisture in his mouth to ease his speaking. His eyes shuttered closed.

Marcus snapped his fingers at the bucket of water on the floor by the door and one of his men snatched it up and brought it to him. He lifted the ladle from the side and dipped it into the cool water, then slipped an arm under the child and raised him up enough to take a sip.

The boy drank until he could hold no more and the water ran from his mouth over his chin. Marcus laid him back down, covered him with a blanket, and stood.

"Keep an eye on him. When he rouses, if he's hungry, feed him. After that, bring him to me and we'll hear what he has to say." With those orders, Marcus left the barracks and made his way to the great hall of the keep. It would be another sennight before the duke and his steward returned. Marcus was positive that neither of them would begrudge his taking in the young boy. Once the child was well, there were enough chores to keep him busy.

Of course, all that might change once Marcus heard what the lad had to say.

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"Duke Baymore. Jackson!" Lady Ellen descended the stairs, carrying the new babe against her shoulder. "I'm so sorry I was not able to greet you last night on your arrival."

Jackson rose to meet her and gave her a half bow. "Lady Ellen. We arrived late and I did not expect you to attend us."

"Will!" Lady Ellen beamed at Will. He'd stood with Jackson and now he strode to accept her kiss on his cheek and place a kiss on hers.

"My lady. You look well." He took a step back to admire her. "I'd swear you'd never had a child to look at your trim figure."

She giggled. "Will. Your tongue is still as smooth as my baby's bottom and just as cheeky."

Will laughed. "I've missed you, Ellen."

"And I you, brother." She changed her hold on the child and cradled him in her arms. "Here. See your namesake, Uncle William."

Will stepped up to inspect the babe. Swaddled in a small cloth, his little face was all Will could spy. "He's tiny. And handsome. No doubt he'll be as clever as his older brother."

"No doubt about that. Walter is far beyond his age, the other ladies tell me." Her pride in her child showed in her loving gaze and in her soft sigh. "I'm so happy, Will. Two sons."

"That leaves only three more," Will reminded her.

"And two daughters," she added.

"Right. Now tell me. Are you able to stand another birth? I've heard they're hard, brutish things." Will shuddered and Jackson laughed.

"It was easy, both times."

"Then I'm glad and look forward to the rest of Wallace's legion of offspring."

Jackson motioned to a chair. "Will you sit with us, my lady?"

"I will. Wallace will be down shortly with his father. We'll have the noon meal then leave for the church." She cooed at the sleeping babe. "Here, Will. Do you want to hold your nephew?"

"Hold him?" Will sat back. Having the child at a distance seemed safer to Will. Children were small and fragile and Will had no want to get any closer.

"I'll take him, if I may." Jackson stood. Will stared at his lover and nearly choked.

"Of course, Jackson." Ellen smiled. "Now, you put your hand under his little rump like this, and the other hand under his head. Not too tightly."

Jackson took the babe in his arms with care. "I won't drop him." He glanced up at Will and Will had no choice but to smile back.

"I never thought you would." She looked up into Jackson's face. "Not for a moment. If your arms are strong enough for Will, they will hold the babe safe, too."

Jackson nodded. He'd never held a child before. "Little William. He's aptly named." His gaze caught Will's. "He's a beauty." He brought the child closer to his face and inhaled. "And he smells so good. Do all babies smell like this?"

"Only when they are fresh from the bath, Jackson. But it is a wonderful aroma and one that I dearly love to inhale." She stroked the child's cheek.

"Wallace is a lucky man." He handed the babe back to his mother.

Ellen stared at Jackson for a moment as if thinking, then nodded. "And I am a lucky woman. I have a man who loves me above all others, a father who dotes on me, a brother-in-law who treats me as his own sister, and two beautiful children."

"I envy you both." Jackson gave her a bow and returned to his seat.

Will stared at him, one eyebrow raised. It was Will's look when Jackson had done something wrong and Jackson knew it meant, "We'll talk later." For the life of him, he didn't understand what he'd done, but he was sure Will would inform him as soon as they were alone.

That moment came all too soon when Lady Ellen left for the kitchens to check on the food for the celebration.

"What did I do wrong?" Jackson leaned toward Will, but kept from taking his hand.

"Nothing, Your Grace. I'm just out of sorts today." Will rubbed his eyes. "My head aches." Perhaps Jackson had misread his lover's expression.

He grimaced. "Shall I get some cool water for you?"

"No. I'm fine. It will fade after I eat." He gave Jackson a brief smile meant to reassure Jackson.

For the moment, Jackson let it go. He glanced around to make sure they were alone, then placed his hand over Will's and gave it a squeeze.

"My lord, I hunger," Jackson growled.

"I'm afraid you'll have to do with what the kitchen is serving for now. I won't be served until later," Will drawled, the lazy look in his half-lidded eyes matching his voice.

"Then later it shall be." Jackson pulled his hand away and sat back.

When the others came down to the hall, they found Jackson and Will dozing in their chairs.

Chapter Three

The procession to the village church was a happy one, with the carriage and horses decorated with fresh spring flowers. Villagers lined the narrow road, waved, and tossed flowers at them as they passed. Jackson and Will rode on one side of the carriage that carried Ellen, the children, Duke Holcombe, and their driver, while Wallace rode on the other side. Many of the children skipped behind the carriage, laughing, and singing.

At the small but crowded church, the ceremony lasted forever. At least, it seemed that way for Jackson. He'd never been one for formal affairs, and that included his own claiming of Baymore. Thank God he'd had Will to guide him through that torturous event and in the same way, Will guided him through this one as well. Jackson had never been to a christening, although he'd been to church often as a child with his mother.

Will had arranged for Jackson to sit next to his father in the very first row of the church. Jackson couldn't help but watch his lover as Will's namesake, wailing as if being held upside down by his tiny foot, was christened. Jackson doubted there were many women, much less men, who could take their eyes off Will's beauty. Tall, well built, his long blond hair pulled back and braided, dressed in his finest clothes, Will was the very picture of nobility. Only Jackson knew how hard Will could fight, how completely Will loved, and how sweetly he moaned.

They shared many secrets, but none more dangerous to the both of them than their love for each other. But as Jackson's steward, Will was placed in the perfect position. His duties kept him at Jackson's side during the day and late into the evening. And Will's room adjoining Jackson's let them spend the nights together.

Once the ceremony was over, the priest paid, and Wallace and Lady Ellen had tossed out the coppers to the children of the village, the procession made its way back through the village to the keep, where another celebration awaited them. Wallace had spared no expense at his second son's christening. Barrels of ale, kegs of wine, almost more than Jackson had served at his own ceremony, decorated the tables of Holcombe's castle. Torches and candles lit the great hall as a small band of musicians played and the invited guests danced.

Jackson begged off the few women who had been either brave enough or drunk enough to approach him. In the past, Will had tried to teach him some of the simpler country and court dances, but Jackson had never been able to get his feet moving in the right direction or in time with the music. Will had eventually given up in exchange for sparing his toes any more damage by Jackson's boots.

Now Jackson watched as Will, graceful, effortless, every move coordinated and flowing, danced in and out of the torchlight and shadows. Aroused by Will, Jackson leaned his elbows on the table to hide his body's reaction to his lover.

For the most part, Will only glanced occasionally at Jackson, locked gazes, then skittered off, always aware of the people around them. Between dances, Will returned to sit at Jackson's right side, drank wine, and listened as his brother told stories about his children. Wallace was nothing, if not a doting father. Duke Walter, who listened and nodded agreement of his grandson's merits, was every inch a loving grandfather.

Once again, Jackson felt a flicker of envy for Wallace. He had a large well-sighted keep, a loving wife and father, and his children. As Duke of Baymore, Jackson now had a keep, greater even than Holcombe, and he had a man who loved him, but his father had been murdered by Jackson's half brother Hugh two years ago. Despite his lifelong denial of Jackson, in the end, before his death, Morris of Baymore had named Jackson his eldest and best son and rightful heir. That Jackson had heard Morris call him "son" would have to be enough.

And he'd done what his father had asked of him—restored Baymore's good name, kept the coffers filled, and kept his love for Will a secret. The only other thing his father had asked, Jackson couldn't do, and that was to provide an heir. He'd told his father that his heart was taken by a man and confessed his love for Will to the only man whose respect he longed to earn.

And as much as Morris had ranted, he'd still accepted Jackson as his legitimate son. Jackson knew the only alternative was his half brother Hugh, and no one, not Morris, not Baymore's old steward Withers, and most assuredly not the people of his lands, wanted that lunatic to become duke.

Jackson had won Baymore by default, and he'd known it. He'd been the lesser of two evils for Morris to choose from—Jackson, a sodomite who harbored a deep-seated honor and an innate sense of nobility, or Hugh, an insane sodomite, perverted and drunk with his own power.

And he'd sworn to himself that he'd prove to Morris, even as he lay rotting in his grave, that he, Jackson Baymore, had been the right son to choose. That despite whom Jackson chose to love, he was a man of quality, a man of honor, a man who could gain his subjects' respect and goodwill.

Jackson smiled at Will, who listed slightly in his chair, having certainly drunk too much. Will played in a teasing manner with his long braid as it lay over his shoulder. When Will's gaze lingered too long on Jackson, caressed Jackson's body, and landed on Jackson's lips, Jackson decided it was time to retire for the night before Will did something neither of them could explain.

"Let's abed, Lord Holcombe." He rose and pulled Will to his feet. Will swayed, laughed, and clapped him on the back.

"Aye. I'm the worse for the wine, I'm afraid." Will turned to Wallace and his father. "I must beg your forgiveness. The dance has gone to my feet and the wine to my head. I should go to my room before my duke has to carry me up the stairs." He grinned at them.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time you've carried him up, Jackson." Wallace laughed.

"This time I won't be unconscious," Will replied and took a last drink.

"If you don't stop now, I may be called to duty again," Jackson warned and took the cup from Will.

"Good night, son. I'll see you in the morn." Walter reached out and touched Will's arm. Will placed his hand over his father's and leaned down to brush a kiss on his cheek.

"Night, Da." Will turned to Jackson. "Up the stairs, Your Grace."

"Up the stairs, my lord." Jackson grinned and nodded his farewell to those seated at the table and walked Will away.

"Any more drink, and I think you would have made quite a fool of yourself." Jackson chuckled.

"Any more drink, and I would have been unable to keep my hands off you," Will muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Jackson's ears alone.

"My lord." Jackson pulled him tighter as they took the stairs. His cock stirred at Will's words and husky voice.

"My ass, Your Grace. It calls for you." Will sighed, making Jackson's rod ache with want.

Jackson laughed, bold and loud, as he pulled Will tighter under his arm. They made the top of the stairs, and then turned down the hall toward Will's room. Once at Will's door Jackson leaned him against the wall.

Will gave him a wicked smile, then grabbed Jackson's loins through his breeches and rolled Jackson's stones in his hand. Jackson groaned, closed his eyes, and pressed his hips into Will's touch.

"Seems we arrived at my room just in time," Will whispered.

Jackson tilted Will's head up and slanted his lips over Will's. Their kiss deepened as Jackson's tongue begged entrance and Will's lips parted. Will whimpered and squeezed Jackson's sac tighter. Jackson groaned.

"Will?" Walter Holcombe stood at the top of the hall. He faced them at the far end, brows furrowed over unseeing eyes, then his lips thinned and his face darkened.

Jackson broke from Will's kiss, as Will's hand slapped over Jackson's mouth. Will's eyes begged Jackson for silence.

"Aye, Father?" Will swallowed.

Duke Holcombe took a deep, ragged breath, his hands clenched tightly, and turned his back to them. He reached his door, opened it, and paused. "I will see you in my room. Now." Then he went inside, leaving the door open.

Will slumped against the wall, locking his knees to keep from falling to the floor. "Oh God, my father." He moaned. "God's tears. He knows." Everything in Will's world tilted, twisted, and gave way beneath him. The wine and food he'd taken in threatened to explode from his gut with that dreaded knowledge.

"You don't know that, Will." Jackson held Will up with a firm grip on his arms. "He can't see. How would he know?"

"Oh aye, he knows. My father may be blind, but he can hear and smell better than you or I. He knows." Will shook his head. "All is lost, Your Grace. All." Will's eyes filled with tears and he blinked them back. All his life as a man, he'd tried so hard to keep his secret from his father, and now the one person in this world he wanted to keep his proclivities hidden from knew. "I must go to him. Face him."

"I'll go with you." Jackson stepped back to give Will room to move.

"No. I won't involve you."

"Too late. If he can smell and hear, then he heard my voice and smelled me. I'm going with you. We'll face him together, Will. Perhaps we can change his mind, perhaps convince him—"

"That we're not perverted creatures? Damned? An affront to God?" Will shook his head. "No. I love my father, but I know him. This he will not forgive." Will straightened his clothing, tossed his braid over his shoulder, and gave Jackson a sharp nod.

Jackson followed him down the hall to the open door.

Will rapped on the door twice, then stepped inside. "Father."

His father sat on the chair next to his hearth, chin on his fist as he stared into the flames. Brows drawn together, mouth turned down, he wore the familiar expression that Will recognized as perplexed, as he struggled to work through some problem, and did not like the taste of it.

Will advanced into the room, Jackson at his back, and came to a halt in front of his father.

"Good. The Duke of Baymore is here also." Walter nodded as if he'd come to some decision. "William, I want you and your duke gone on the morrow."

"Gone?" Will croaked. Would he be given no chance for explanation, no chance to speak in his defense?

"Never to return to Holcombe." Walter sat back, his folded hands rested in his lap, his decision final.

Chapter Four

Will fell to his knees. "Father. Please."

"Not a word, William." His father turned away from him.

"But you have to understand. You have to listen to me," Will pleaded.

"For how long?" Walter shook, his grip on the arms of the chair so tight his knuckles went white.

"What?"

"How long?" his father roared. "How long have you been a-"

Will looked at Jackson. His father was lost to him, but he'd be damned if he'd fail Wallace and Ellen. Tears threatened again and he put his face in his hands. There was nothing for it but to lie and keep them safe.

Jackson stepped forward and put his hand on Will's shoulder. "Since he came to Baymore, Your Grace." Will's head snapped up and he stared at his lover.

"What?" Walter turned back to them. "At Baymore? Not before?"

"Nay. It was I, Your Grace. I seduced your son."

Will frowned at Jackson's attempt to take the blame and shame himself before another duke, thus saving Wallace. God, he loved this man. Was there no end to Jackson's honor or his love for Will?

"No, Father." Will got to his feet. "That's not true. It started before Baymore, but there was no seduction. No forced taking. I fell in love with Jackson when he saved me."

"Love? You love a man?" His father's head snapped back as if struck.

"Aye." A new strength flowed through Will, a power that filled him with the courage to take whatever came his way, as long as he had Jackson by his side.

His father fell silent. Closing his eyes, he clenched and unclenched his hands as his jaw worked. Then he opened his eyes and dashed away the tears that fell.

"I loved you, William," he whispered.

"And I love you, Father."

"Then leave Baymore. Come back to me, and our home. Stay here at Holcombe. Forget this madness, and marry." His father leaned forward, his hand outstretched for Will to take.

Will took a step back. "I can't do that. I can't. He is my heart. My soul. The only thing in this world that I need or want."

"And Jackson? Does he—"

Jackson moved next to Will. "Love your son? Aye. Will is life to me. He sees inside this rough exterior to the true man hiding there. I am all I am because of him and his love."

"Love," Walter sneered. "There can be no love between men. Only depravity."

"I don't know what to tell you, Father, to convince you of the depth of our feelings for each other. We are sworn, I to Jackson and he to me."

Walter stood. "This is too much to bear. Go away from me, William. Duke Baymore. Leave me." He straightened his back and pointed to the door, hand trembling. Will could only imagine the pain his father must feel. It had to match his own anguish, but Will had always known it would come to this if he were discovered.

Jackson gave him a short bow—"Your Grace"—and backed out of the room.

Will stood for a moment longer drinking in the last look of his beloved father. His heart hurt so bad he thought it would cease to beat. "Fair well, Father. I pray that one day you will forgive me for the hurt I've caused you." Then he turned and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

Jackson leaned against the wall. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing is right." Will shook his head and staggered down the hall to his room. He pushed open the door, fell into the room, and shut the door behind him, leaving Jackson standing in the corridor.

Jackson paced the length of the hall, his boot steps sounding on the stones. Duke Holcombe had banished Will; that was the worst of it. He'd said nothing of exposing them or disowning Will. Will still had his title, and thank God, no breath of blame had fallen on Wallace or Lady Ellen.

But his Will? Jackson stood outside Will's door, his hand raised to knock. He bit his lip, working the problem in his head, but there was no way out of this. Will wouldn't give him up and return to Holcombe. If Jackson thought everyone would be happy with that solution, he'd insist that Will stay. But neither he nor Will could survive that.

Jackson lowered his hand. Will could wait. Jackson needed to talk to Wallace. He had to be warned.

Turning away, Jackson strode down the hall to the other wing of the castle, to the rooms of Lord and Lady Holcombe. As he passed the stair, he paused, leaned down, and surveyed the great hall. The guests had all gone, the servants were cleaning, and the torches and candles had burned low.

Jackson went to Wallace's chambers and rapped on the door. A few moments later, Wallace appeared, still dressed, but bootless.

"Jackson? What brings you here?" Wallace frowned.

"I must speak to you. Now. It cannot wait."

"Of course." Wallace stepped aside and Jackson entered. The room was a study, with a desk, chairs, and table set before the hearth.

There was no point in wasting time telling the story or in planning what he would say, so Jackson just let the words tumble out. "Your father has found us out. He came upon us. Will was drunk and I wasn't thinking clearly and he looked at me with those blue eyes and I forgot myself and kissed him in the hall and your father heard us."

"Oh God." Wallace sat heavily in a chair and ran his hands through his hair. "He knows?"

"Of me and Will. Aye. Of you and your lady's part? No. I told your father it started at Baymore. That I seduced Will." Jackson stood a little taller.

Wallace stared at Jackson, his eyes raking over the big man. "I thank you for that lie. I know it came at great personal cost to you."

"I have no wish to hurt anyone here at Holcombe, Wallace." Jackson swallowed. "You are Will's family, and as I am sworn to him, I am sworn to you all, though some may not want or care for it."

Wallace stood, stepped to Jackson, threw his arms around him, and held him in a tight grip. Jackson stiffened, then relaxed and put his arms around Wallace to return the embrace. "And I to you, Jackson. I've never seen my brother happier. Never. He glows with his love for you and I believe in your love for him." Then he let Jackson go.

"Your father has sent Will away. Back to Baymore. We leave in the morn." He went to the door. "Please give Lady Ellen our farewell."

"Jackson. Before you go. About Will."

"Aye?"

"Watch him. If he slips into malady or melancholy, you must take care. I fear for his life." Wallace's concern was echoed in his blue eyes, so similar to the pair that Jackson loved.

"I will watch for it, rest assured." He nodded.

"Fair well, Jackson. Tell Will I love him. Nothing will ever change that. I can't offer hope for our father's forgiveness, but I'll set myself to that goal. Trust me."

"I do and I pray that one day, Will and his father will be reconciled."

With that Jackson left and returned to Will's room.

"Will. Open the door."

There was no sound. Jackson lifted the latch and pushed the door open. Will sat on a chair near the hearth staring into the fire. His bags lay open, clothes strewn about them as if he'd begun to pack and then given up.

"Let the servants do that in the morn." Jackson went to Will and knelt beside him. He put his hand over Will's hand. "Come to bed, my lord. You need your rest. It will be a long ride back to Baymore and we must start out early."

"Like thieves running away in the night." Will nodded and rose. "At least we aren't running from the noose."

Jackson took him by the arm and led him to the bed. After undressing him, and putting him between the covers, Jackson sat in the chair to wait until Will fell asleep.

For a very long time, Will lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, his hands limp at his sides. At last, he rolled over and closed his eyes. Jackson waited another hour until Will's breathing became regular and steady, then he left to the stables to order their horses ready in the morn.

That done, he returned to Will's room, pulled off his boots, and crawled onto the bed next to Will. They spent the rest of the night, Will in restless sleep and Jackson in deep contemplation.

* * * * *

Dawn came soon enough. Jackson had the servants pack their bags and bring them down to the stable to be loaded on the packhorses. He roused his men in the barracks, and had the entire group in their saddles an hour after the sun's rays warmed the cobblestones of the keep's bailey. They would take their morning meal later while they were on the road.

If there was one thing Jackson knew how to do it was get his men on their feet and moving, a skill he'd honed leading men on the battlefields over the last twenty years. He hadn't needed his rank as duke to get them going; his deep, commanding voice, his firm manner, and his intense glare were more than enough.

Getting Will up and moving proved harder, but Jackson, intent on being long gone before the rest of the keep woke, had him dressed, down the stairs, and on his horse, soon enough. By the time Jackson swung up into his saddle, he looked forward to the ride if for nothing other than to get some rest. Sleeping in the saddle came easy to a mercenary and Jackson had learned over the years to take his rest when and where he could find it.

He gave the command. The gates swung open, and their band filed through to the road, on their way to Baymore.

Only the stable lads and the guards of Holcombe watched them leave.

* * * * *

Liam woke, coughed, and found his way to the latrines at the back of the barracks. When he returned, the early morning chill bit his bare feet as he stepped onto the cobblestones and crossed the small yard back into the barrack's heat. Twenty-five men lay sprawled on stomachs, backs, and sides, their covers pulled over them. As Liam passed each cot, he listened to the unfamiliar sounds of men asleep. If he hadn't been so exhausted, he would never have gotten to sleep with this racket. He passed a man on his back whose snoring rattled the rafters and Liam stifled a giggle. His ma had never made such a noise. Amongst these men, Liam felt small and lost, a stranger in a strange place.

But a warm, safe place. He sat on his cot and looked around. Someone had placed his sack next to the bed. He picked it up and went through it, searching for what few scraps of clothing he'd salvaged. He stank from the fire, his hair singed, his face streaked with soot. Stripping off, he quickly changed, wiped his face, and shoved the soot-covered breeches, shirt, and vest he'd worn for the last two days to the bottom of the sack. Perhaps later, he'd wash them.

He rubbed his sore feet, unwilling to put them back in his boots until necessary, but he knew he'd have to get up soon. There must be much to be done in a great keep like Baymore, and if he planned to have an audience with the duke, plead his case, and ask to be recognized, he'd best find something he could do to earn his bread. To prove himself worthy of a title.

If the duke let him stay. He hadn't allowed himself to think what he'd do if Duke Baymore refused him and sent him away.

Liam's eyes filled with tears and he ground the heels of his hands into his eyes to keep back the great drops that threatened to fall. Like a frightened babe, he longed to call out for his mother, to feel her arms around him, comforting him. But she would never hold him again.

He sucked in a deep breath, his chest tight and aching. He was alone now. Best if he accepted it and got on with it.

As he pulled on his boots, a man wearing a tunic with the Baymore coat of arms came through the door banging on a copper pot. "Wake up, you lazy sots! Duty shift!" he yelled. The men of the barracks groaned as one, and someone threw a boot at the officer, but he ducked and it missed its target. Several others swore, using language Liam had never heard except once when the smithy had smashed his hand with the great maul.

He giggled and dozens of eyes fell on him. Liam clapped his hands over his mouth, his eyes scrunched, and he tried to make himself as small as possible.

"You! Lad!" The man pointed to him. "Come with me. The master of arms will see you now that you're awake."

Liam jumped up, making sure to be quick and not tarry. He didn't want to be beaten first thing. He had to do everything right. So much depended on it. He followed the man across the bailey to the keep itself. As his gaze swept the large courtyard, he took in the guards on the walls, the servants scurrying to and fro and the large carved wooden doors that they approached.

Baymore. Perhaps he'd see the duke himself.

Liam held his breath as he stepped across the threshold, said a quick prayer, and was brought to a man sitting at one of the long tables, breaking his fast. When the man looked up as Liam neared, Liam recognized him as the man he'd spoken to when he'd arrived. He struggled to remember the man's name. It wouldn't do not to have it ready.

"Master Marcus." Liam bowed.

"Young Liam, is it?" Marcus looked the boy up and down. Although his face was still smudged, his clothes were fresh. "You're looking cleaner this morn."

"Aye. I changed." Liam stood at attention as if he were on guard duty.

"Well and good. Now, what brings you to Baymore?" The lad had come to Baymore, not the town, so there must be some particular reason and Marcus meant to know it.

"Is the duke here?" Liam looked around the hall.

"No. He's away on business and won't be back for another sennight." Marcus frowned. "Do you wish an audience with him?" Now, what business could such a young lad have with the duke of Baymore? And where had he traveled from and why was he covered in soot?

"Aye. But I will wait for him, master." Liam bobbed his head. His gaze lingered on the bowl of porridge that sat in front of Marcus.

"Indeed. Join me, lad." Marcus motioned to a servant to bring another bowl. "Sit here and tell me your story." Perhaps food would loosen the lad's tongue.

Liam's sigh and his stomach's rumble were answers enough as he slid onto a chair at the table. "Thank you, master."

Marcus folded his arms on the table and sat waiting. "And?"

Liam swallowed. "I am Liam. From Barley Fields. Do you know it?" His brows rose.

"Aye, I've passed through. It lies on the very edge of Baymore's holdings."

Liam nodded. "I can work for my keep, master."

He still hadn't given Marcus any information about how and why he'd come to the keep. "Can you? What skills do you have, young sir?"

"I can work the fields, or in the stables. I have some experience with chickens, sir." The servant brought his porridge and Liam fell on it as a dog on a scrap of meat. There was scarcely a break between the spoon's scrape on the bowl and its finish in the boy's mouth.

Marcus waited until the lad had eaten his meal. There would be time enough for learning more. He observed the boy, whose sharp dark eyes never rested on anything, but flitted from one thing to the next, taking it all in. His black hair was thick and to his shoulders and all in all, there was something familiar about the child.

"Perhaps you could help in the barracks. I need someone to keep the place clean, swept, and the men's boots polished. The fire needs to be fed, banked, and ashes gathered." He tapped his finger to his chin. "Do you think you can handle that?"

"Aye, sir!" Liam's eyes shone. "You'll see, master."

"I will indeed. If you do not work hard, I'll have to send you on your way," Marcus warned.

"No sir. I'll work hard. I swear it."

"Good. Then off with you. The shift has changed. Gather the men's boots to polish, get the wood for the fire, and sweep the barracks out. I'll see how you've done with your work later."

Liam stood, bowed, and grinned. "Right away, master." Then he took off as if wolves nipped at his heels.

Marcus laughed and went back to his meal. The lad had managed to keep his story to himself. But that would change, Marcus was sure of it. He'd give the lad some time, then pose his questions again, and not allow the boy to evade answering.

Once he was satisfied, and Jackson and Will had returned, he'd bring the boy to them and let them decide what to do with him.

* * * * *

"Father, please." Wallace paced in front of the fireplace in his father's room.

"No. I don't want to hear what you have to say." Walter shook his head.

"But he's our Will. My dearest brother. Your beloved son."

"No longer."

"You can't just dismiss him. He's never been anything but good and loyal and the best of us all."

"You are my only son now. You are the best."

"No. I won't agree to that. No. Will is a part of me, of you, and of Holcombe. He is the best of us all, Father. No matter who he loves."

"Sodomites don't love. They are base, deviant creatures."

"Who are you talking about? Not Will. Base? Never. Deviant? Never. What he does he does from love, not some base desire." Wallace had to control his temper, but his father's stubborn behavior maddened him to no end.

"You believe he loves Jackson?" His father wavered.

"Aye, I do. You could not see his face, Father. How happy he is. How content in his life. He is changed."

"Changed, indeed. For the worse." Walter jerked his chin up. "I don't want to talk about this anymore." He folded his arms across his chest and his lips thinned. Wallace knew that look and knew that to continue to press would only push his father farther away.

"As you wish, Father. Just please, think about what I've said. Think about Will. You know him. We will speak again, and when we do I pray your stand has changed." He bowed to his father and left before he said more.

Ellen waited for him in the corridor, her hands twisting in her skirts. "Well?"

Wallace shook his head. "He won't move."

Ellen sighed. "It will take time, Wallace, but he will come around. He adores Will."

"That is what makes this so hard for him. And for Will." He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then a soft caress with his hand. "I'll return later." Then he strode off down the hall and disappeared down the stairs.

Ellen stood outside Walter's door for a moment longer, then turned away with a wicked smile. There would be time enough to change minds and hearts.

There were other ways than argument to convince her father-in-law.

Chapter Five

Will rode silently beside his lover at the front of the small band of men. They had made good time, trotting their horses down the better part of the road home. When at last they came to the lower lands and the road turned muddy with the many small streams that crossed it they slowed their horses to a plod.

"It will be good to see Baymore again," Jackson said. Will glanced at him and could not help a broad smile from spreading across his face. The big man had always brought him happiness, even during those dark days when they'd first met and Will had lay broken and ill on a rickety cot as Jackson tended him. At the time, Will had wanted nothing more than for Jackson to stay with him forever.

Those dreams had come true. He had Jackson. Jackson's dreams had come true. He had Baymore and a title. Will sighed. This turn of events with his father, though bad, wasn't as terrible as it could have been, and for that small mercy, he was grateful.

And he was grateful for the man who rode beside him. Will looked about him, judging where they were on their journey. Until that point, he'd ridden along, unaware of the road or their progress, just his body's rocking in the saddle and his horse beneath him. By the countryside around them, he could tell they had crossed into Baymore lands and would be home by dark.

He was grateful for Baymore's holdings. A fine castle, several good villages, and rich, abundant fields. People who had been quick to forget Hugh and Morris's ill treatment and to embrace their new duke.

Will straightened in the saddle as a single determined thought made its home in his mind and settled there.

As long as he had Jackson, he was the most fortunate man to take breath. With Jackson's love and steadying presence, Will had all he'd ever wished for and that was enough. As long as

Jackson rode beside him, let Will stand at his right side, Will could live without his father's good will and love.

"Aye. I long for the comfort of my own bed." Will flicked his gaze to Jackson's and smiled.

"Do you?" Jackson's brow rose.

"Oh aye. A warm bed, a good meal. Not that I didn't enjoy Lady Ellen's pastries," Will was quick to add. "But there is something about the cooking in your own home."

"I know what you mean, my lord. For the last few miles, I have been thinking about that venison stew our cook makes. The one with the small tender onions and sweet carrots." Jackson rubbed his belly and licked his lips. "And you? What do you crave?"

"Only one thing, Your Grace."

"And that is?" Jackson cocked a single eyebrow.

"Your Grace," Will drawled as he stared straight ahead.

Jackson felt the heat rise in his face and a matching heat filled his loins. Part of him was eased by this banter from Will, but Jackson still watched his lover, wary for any signs of the dreaded melancholy that sometimes overtook him. When that happened, Will would sit for hours, silent and brooding, staring at the fire, or he'd stand at the top of the walls, gazing off into the distance as if waiting for something or someone that never arrived.

It was even worse those rare times when Will took to his bed and refused to rise. Will's bouts seemed to worsen during the dark gray days of winter when there was little to entertain them and the ice and snow locked them inside the keep. But now, in the spring, Will's spirits soared like a falcon on the wind, and once again, he was glorious. Truly a creature of outstanding beauty and grace.

And Will was all Jackson's. To have at his right side, to take in his arms and in his bed, to love as he'd never loved anyone in his life.

"Once we arrive, filling your desire will be my only task," Jackson said under his breath so only his lover could hear.

"I will hold you to that, Your Grace." Will gave him a nod and a quick wink.

Jackson groaned as his cock swelled in his breeches, trapped and for now, unrelieved of its ache.

"Troubles, Your Grace?"

Will knew what he did to Jackson, and he took pleasure in it. The blond devil took delight in arousing Jackson at the worst possible times, as he had last month when Jackson had met with several of the village elders. Will had inflamed Jackson, touched him, promised heaven with his fingers and his mouth, and then announced the men waited for him outside the door. Jackson had just had enough time to scurry behind the desk and sit, hiding the huge bulge in his leathers, before Will had opened the door and invited the villagers inside.

"No. I can wait, my lord."

"Seems you'll have to, Your Grace." Will spared him a glance, then heeled his mount forward, as the group broke into a trot. The road had risen out of the lowlands and had become solid and firm beneath their horse's hooves. Beside the road, the open marshland had retreated and dense woods took its place.

Jackson gave his big horse a sharp kick with the heel of his boot and urged the gelding to catch up with Will's smaller mare. Ahead of him, Will's long hair danced in the wind, as if its strands were the finest silk. Its golden color caught the sunlight as it reached backward to entwine Jackson.

Jackson growled in his throat. Will would regret teasing him tonight. Once they'd made Baymore and found their rooms, Jackson would take Will. That thought merely drove Jackson's cock to strain harder, swell bigger, and set his stones to aching. Jackson rocked in the saddle for some little relief, but there was none.

Catching up to Will and the other men who flanked him, Jackson shouted, "Baymore awaits. Let's to home." He kicked hard and his gelding broke into a gallop as he passed Will and the men, leaving them behind to drink his dust.

With shouts, the men charged after him, including Will. Jackson glanced over his shoulder at Will's beaming face. He turned forward just as the tree branch hit him in the head.

Jackson sailed backward, his feet left the stirrups, his ass abandoned the saddle, and for a too brief moment, he floated as if he were a leaf on the wind.

Then his backside hit the soft dirt of the road, his shoulders and head followed, and all the air in his chest exploded out in a huge rush. As he lay in the dirt, Jackson's lungs refused to work. No air returned no matter how hard he sucked or begged God for a breath.

Just a small one would do.

After what seemed as if time had frozen, his lungs filled.

Jackson blinked and groaned. His good eye tried to focus on the face that hovered over his. An unfamiliar face. Voices shouted. Horses stomped and shook the ground Jackson lay on, each hoof's thud echoed in his chest.

"Out of my way. Move!" Will ordered as he shoved his way through the men.

Jackson groaned. "Let Lord Holcombe through before he pulls his sword."

Will fell to his knees and took Jackson's hand. He looked down, worry in his eyes, his brow furrowed. "Jackson? Are you hurt?" He ran a shaking hand over Jackson's forehead and temple, searching for injury. When he touched the spot, Jackson winced.

"See. You are hurt." Will sounded satisfied.

"Only my pride." Jackson pushed up to sitting and shook his head. "The stars still flash and twinkle."

"You have the beginnings of a goose egg on your forehead. A lesser man would have been killed."

"Or knocked senseless. And since I have so little sense in the first place, I am safe." Jackson chuckled, then grimaced as he rubbed the spot. A lump seemed to grow beneath his fingers.

"A moment then. Water! Pass me the water skin." Will snapped his fingers and a few moments later, he held a water skin to Jackson's lips. "Drink your fill, Your Grace."

Jackson downed some water, then pushed it away. "Will. I'm fine." He climbed to his feet, brushed off his breeches, and gave his men a sharp nod. "Thank you all."

The men gave bows and moved back to their horses. Will held the reins of his horse and stared at Jackson, his gaze searching for any sign of illness. Jackson's mount was returned to him by one of the men. Jackson took the leads and leaned against the saddle for a moment, still trying to clear his vision.

"Are you sure?" Will moved closer, placing his hand over Jackson's hand. Jackson glanced at the men, who stood watching. Jackson slid his hand from under Will's and clapped him on the back. Fear had shaken Will, or he'd never have acted so open in front of the guards.

"Aye, Lord Holcombe. I thank you for your concern. Just my head hurts."

Will looked up at the trees. "It was a large limb, Your Grace, but I think your head proved the harder." Jackson looked up but his vision still blurred and he couldn't see the poor branch.

"Damaged it, did I?"

"It's good for nothing but firewood, Your Grace. Can't you see it?" whispered Will. Jackson could hear the fear in Will's voice.

"I can, but it's blurry," he intoned back. There was no sense in lying to Will, he could always tell lie from truth. "It's clearing now. No fears, Will." Jackson grinned and rubbed his head. It ached as if hell's own demons danced on it.

"Climb up and let's away then." Will smiled back and moved to mount up.

Jackson gathered his reins, put foot to stirrup, and swung up into the saddle. With a sharp nod, he motioned for his men to move on. The entire troop returned to the road, but this time, at a more cautious trot, and his men encircled Jackson, as if to protect him.

Anger rose quick to his lips, but instead, the harsh words came out as a hard laugh.

"Are you all mother hens, and I your wayward chick?" he called.

The men looked at each other, then their gazes slid from Jackson to Will as if for confirmation. A few shrugged their answer.

A sergeant reined closer. "If you were lost, Your Grace..." One of the senior men who'd served Baymore under Morris and Hugh spoke. His brow furrowed. Jackson wondered what the man feared most, the loss of his duke, or the loss of his position.

"And if I were lost?" Jackson cocked an eyebrow at him.

The man swallowed. "Then who would protect Baymore and its lands?"

Of course, the man was right. Without a Baymore to hold the lands, all that was his would be fought over by neighboring dukes. War would devastate the holdings and lives would be lost in the ensuing struggle. "Never fear, sergeant." Jackson laughed. "It will take more than a tree to strip Baymore of her duke." The man nodded and looked only a little relieved as he dropped back to join the other riders. Will rode on Jackson's blind side, as ever.

They continued on to Baymore, but the man's question echoed in Jackson's mind as they made their way down the road.

Chapter Six

Marcus leaned in the doorway of the barracks. He'd come to check on the work the new lad Liam had done and was pleased to see one row of polished boots standing beside their owners' cots.

At the far end of the room, Liam sat on the floor, working on a boot. The brush moved in a blur of motion as he worked it over the leather. He paused, spit on the toe and again the brush flew. His long dark hair hung forward and his eyes were in shadow. Tall for his age, if Marcus hadn't seen him up close he'd swear the boy was older.

"Liam." Marcus called to him.

The dark head shot up and an intense brown gaze landed on Marcus. "Aye, Master Marcus." He made to stand but Marcus waved him back down.

"How goes your work?"

"I should be finished with the boots in a few hours. I've already swept the floors." His chin jutted forward as if to point with it. "I'll gather the wood for the fire after that."

"Well done. Well done." Marcus nodded. "Back to work for both of us."

"Aye, sir." Liam bent over his work, spit, and polished.

Marcus waited a moment more, his mind searching for something he needed to remember about the lad. Liam still hadn't explained why he had appeared at Baymore. He'd find out soon enough, and if the boy didn't tell him in a few days, he'd demand the answers.

He pushed off from the door, turned, and made his way across the bailey to the castle wall and up the stairs. Taking a position on the battlement, he gazed down the long road.

A rider approached.

"Rider!" The call went up before it could spring from Marcus's lips.

The man grew closer. Marcus recognized the colors he wore as Baymore's and his stomach tightened. A messenger from the duke?

"What news is this?" he muttered under his breath.

"Open the gate!" one of the guards cried out and the men below scurried to lift the bar and pull open the gate.

The rider crossed under the lintel and his mount's hooves clattered on the yard's cobblestones.

"Yo! Rider! What news?" Marcus called as he made his way down the stairs.

"The duke returns! Just a half day behind me." The man dismounted and tossed his reins to a stable boy. His mount stood, hard rode, head hanging, and nostrils blowing.

"That's much sooner than expected." Marcus frowned. "All's well with the duke?"

"Aye. The ceremony was only a day ago and this morn we woke to the duke's bellow to pack, saddle our horses, and get on the road. I was sent ahead." The soldier walked next to Marcus as he explained.

"Well, perhaps they tired of the visit." Marcus would keep his thoughts to himself, but it was odd that the duke had ended his trip so soon. Lord William had been so excited to see his namesake, his brother's newest son, that when they'd left the man had flown into the saddle.

Leaving the soldier back at the barracks with orders to clean himself and rest, Marcus turned and made his way to the keep to let the cook in the kitchen know his master would arrive in time for the evening meal.

With a shout and a wave of his ladle, the cook ordered his lads to start on a feast to welcome home the duke and Lord Holcombe. The scullery maids bustled about and Marcus left before he was pressed by the cook into duty also.

Duke Baymore and Lord Holcombe returned today.

Never one without the other, like paired hawks.

In his mind, Marcus could not separate them, as they themselves refused to be separated. He would never forget the first moment he saw Lord Holcombe, supporting the wounded and beaten Jackson, declaring him rightful Duke of Baymore, and declaring himself the duke's dearest and closest friend. Marcus knew without doubt that their friendship ran deeper than what the two men portrayed to the world. There was more between them, and he'd seen evidence of it in William Holcombe's eyes that day. It had been passion that had burned in his blue eyes, and nothing that strong, that bold, nothing less than love itself, could put such a fire in a man's eyes and soul.

Lord William Holcombe loved Duke Jackson Baymore more than his own life, of that Marcus had never doubted. And in all he'd seen from the duke, from shy smiles, glancing touches, to the one night Marcus had passed them in the hall unnoticed and seen Jackson pull Will into his arms and through his door, Marcus knew Jackson returned that love.

Physical love between men was punishable by death, that he knew.

Marcus also knew that Baymore had never had such a good ruler, such a man filled with honor, loyalty, and fairness. If Jackson were removed, where would that leave Baymore?

With no duke, the land would be forfeit to the strongest.

It would serve no purpose to accuse.

Marcus sat in one of the chairs before the hearth and stared into the banked fire.

As for himself, over the last year or so, he'd come to admire both Jackson and William, for their leadership, their wisdom, and their friendship. They'd brought him into their fold, as master of arms, and given him more responsibility and ability to make decisions than he'd ever had under Morris or that bastard Hugh.

He counted both men as his friends and he knew that his caring for them ran deep.

And if his friends loved each other, even in the physical sense, then who was he, who'd never known love from either man or woman, to find fault with their love?

No, it would not be him to accuse and destroy two men and a land.

In that moment, Marcus knew he'd do whatever he had to, to protect both men and keep their secret.

Chapter Seven

"Home." Jackson sighed as they crested the hill and looked at Baymore standing in the distance. He pulled his horse to a halt.

Will reined in next to him, glanced over at his duke, and nodded. "Aye." He'd longed for those walls as the miles had grown between him and Holcombe. Now, as he took in the sight of the great castle of Baymore, Will knew Holcombe was no longer his home and hadn't been since he'd fallen in love with Jackson.

"Let's go home, Will." Jackson's tired gaze slid over to meet Will's. The large nodule on Jackson's head had gone black and blue, along with the upper lid of his eye.

"Home it is, Your Grace." Will worried about Jackson's vision. "Can you see it clearly?"

"Good Lord, Will." Jackson laughed. "It's but a mile more to the castle and it's a very large keep. Aye, I can see it. Have no fear, my lord."

"Well enough, Your Grace." Will smiled at him and then motioned for the column of riders to advance. They started down the hill toward home.

Marcus stood on the wall's catwalk and looked down the road. His sharp eyes caught the plume of dust from the riders. They had made good time. He turned from the battlement and trotted down the narrow stairs to the courtyard.

"To your posts! Duke Baymore arrives!" Marcus called out. His heart thudded in his chest and he couldn't help the smile that grew on his face. His duke had come home and had kept safe while on his journey and for that, Marcus was grateful.

Men scurried about the bailey, and the stable boys came running, ready to take the armsmen's mounts and see to them and their tack.

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From the corner of his eye, Marcus spied Liam, standing in the doorway of the barracks, a load of firewood in his arms. His face darkened, brows furrowed, and if Marcus wasn't mistaken, the boy trembled as if he had a fever.

He strode over to the barracks. "Liam, are you ill?"

"Nay, m'lord." The boy shook his head, his eyes dancing from Marcus to the gates. Ill or not, Marcus couldn't tell, perhaps just afraid the duke might send him away.

"His Grace returns, along with the armsmen. You'll have to see to their belongings. Don't fear, I'll speak to the duke about you. Now, get along with your chores."

"Aye, m'lord." The boy lingered, then turned and disappeared into the darkened barracks.

"The duke!" A cry went up from the guards on the wall. "Open the gates!"

The men pushed open the gates and then stood at attention as Jackson, Duke of Baymore, with Lord William Holcombe at his side, galloped through the portal. Their mounts' hooves clattered on the cobblestones and the sound of creaking leathers, snorting horses, and the cries of the men's welcomes filled the bailey's air.

"Marcus!" Jackson called out as he dismounted. "Well met!"

William jumped from his saddle and tossed a groom his reins. "Well and good, Master Marcus."

Both men seemed in great spirits. Jackson and Will's horses were led away.

Jackson advanced on Marcus and with a hard clap on Marcus's back, Jackson spoke. "All is well?"

"Aye, Your Grace. Nothing but quiet since you've been gone."

"Good. Good." He grinned and started for the keep. "Attend me, Marcus. I'll want your full report."

"Aye, Your Grace."

William ordered, "Unpack the animals and bring the duke's baggage to his room. Mine, also." Then he turned and followed his duke as the courtyard broke into organized disarray, with grooms leading off horses, men dismounting and gathering their saddlebags, and servants rushing to unload the pack animals.

Marcus waited for William to catch up, then side by side they made their way to the castle. He pitched his voice low so Jackson didn't overhear his worry.

"All is well with the duke?"

"Aye."

"That is a great lump on his forehead, my lord. Is he hurt? Was there trouble?"

"Nay, nay, he's well. All went smoothly. There was a skirmish with a branch on our way home. The branch lost," William drawled.

Marcus nodded. "I was surprised to learn of your early return."

"The blame is mine. I tired of being away." William flashed him a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. There was more to the story, it seemed. And, it seemed, he may never learn it.

"The duke seems in good spirits."

"Glad to be home, as am I."

"Aye, my lord."

They stepped through the door and into the great hall. The fire in the hearth burned and Jackson had thrown himself into his chair in front of it, his boots stretched toward the heat. A serving woman rushed to bring them tankards of ale.

"Marcus. Now, tell me all." Jackson motioned to the chair on his left. William sat on Jackson's right. There had been no need for Jackson to direct Marcus, he'd learned within a few weeks of Jackson's arrival that William sat on his right. Always.

"Well, like I said, nothing much has happened. The village has been well, no conflicts, no disruptions. And we've only had one visitor."

"One?" Jackson's eyebrow rose as he took the tankard from the servant with a nod of thanks. She pressed one into William's hands and he took a deep pull.

"Aye. A young lad looking for work." Marcus tensed, unsure if he'd done the right thing. Positions in the keep were prized and not given to just anyone.

"Did you find him a place?" Jackson wiped ale from his chin with his hand.

"I did. He's tending the barracks, Your Grace. Keeping the fires, polishing the men's boots, and such." Marcus gave a dismissive wave of his hand as the wench offered him ale. He'd learned as a young man, ale wasn't for him. She gave a nod and scurried back to the kitchens.

"Good." Jackson drained his tankard in one long drink.

"We have a few lads to do the work, but he'd come here...the state of the lad..." Marcus fumbled his words.

"Spill it, man. What about the boy?" William leaned forward and frowned.

"He came to the castle. Asked if this was Baymore. Then collapsed at the gate."

"Poor lad. Had he been hurt?" Jackson gripped the arm of his chair, his eyes wide.

"Nay, just exhausted. I had him brought inside and cared for. He was covered with soot, as from a fire. And his clothes were better than most. His name is Liam, but more than that—" He shrugged. "I haven't gotten the story from him."

"A mystery!" William laughed.

"Indeed. Well, Marcus, you did well. Perhaps in time, he'll speak more freely."

Jackson settled back and the men spoke of small matters until their meal was served. They ate, and then Jackson and William left the hall for their bedchambers, claiming exhaustion.

Marcus watched as the two men made their way up the stairs. Somehow, he knew it wasn't sleep they needed, but each other. He sighed. One day, if he lived long enough and if God smiled on him, he would climb the stairs to a woman, and perhaps, a child of his own.

For now his bed remained his own, empty of wife and child. He sat until the night grew late as thoughts of family swirled round in his head.

* * * * *

Jackson left Will in the crowded corridor among the servants carrying the baggage. His belongings had been the first to arrive upstairs. As the last lad scurried out, Jackson closed the door to his room and strode to his chair, sat, and pulled off his boots. He let them drop to the floor with a tired grunt and leaned back. There was much he had to ponder and it weighed on his mind.

He never thought when he claimed his title, he'd have so much responsibility. Aye, he'd known there were duties assigned to being a duke—a castle to run, lands to tend, men to lead—but this new accounting, this sense of owing more to the land, to Baymore and all it entailed, had never crossed his mind.

He had a duty to insure his rule, his good deeds, his laws, and his actions were kept in place when he was gone.

As a mercenary, he'd had little. No home to care for, no one to answer to, just his weapons and his horse, and when he was dead, what did he care where they went? But this land, Baymore, was so much larger and weighed on him more than his meager possessions ever had.

He had sworn an oath to his people, knelt on the dais, his hand on his sword, and promised them he would care for them, keep them safe, hold them dear. And he meant every one of those words. But this was more than for now, this was the future.

A future that might not have Jackson Baymore in it.

Who then would tend Baymore?

Wallace had his sons and, although children, they were enough to hold his lands in good stead. If needs be, William could step in, be their protector until they came of age, or their mother Ellen, if the people of their lands allowed it.

Jackson had no son. No child, no brother, no one to hand over the keeping of his lands. Not that he'd ever wanted children. He hadn't. Hadn't wanted a woman either, although he'd bedded enough wenches and whores, he'd only ever just wanted one person, and that was William.

Jackson never wanted a son.

But now, he needed an heir.

* * * * *

Will opened Jackson's door and slipped inside. His lover sat in a chair staring at his woolen sock-covered feet.

"Troubles, Your Grace?" He shut the door behind him and slid the bolt home.

"No, just tired." Jackson held out his hand and Will crossed the floor, went to his knees, and grasped the offered hand. He kissed it and held it to his cheek.

Jackson was all he had left. His father was lost to him. He'd been banished from his family home with no idea of when he'd next see his dear brother and Lady Ellen. Now, Jackson was his family.

His lover, his duke, his brother.

"Then come to bed. We'll blow out the candles and sleep." Will stood and pulled Jackson to his feet. "Let me undress you." He reached around Jackson, loosened his sword belt, and removed it. Then his long vest, shirt, and at last, his breeches.

Naked, Jackson allowed Will to lead him to the bed.

Will turned to pick up the clothing and put them away, but Jackson's hand on Will's arm stopped him.

"Wait. A moment."

Will cocked his head to the side and waited.

"It is I who should be putting you to bed, sweet Will." Jackson gave him a sour smile and a dip of his head.

"We shall take each other to bed, Your Grace." Will stroked Jackson's cheek, his hand trailing down, over Jackson's throat, his chest, across a dark brown nipple, to wrap around Jackson's hip.

Jackson sighed, and leaned into the touch, his cock coming to life.

Will's lips twisted. "I can see sleep may not be the *first* thing we do."

"No, not the first." Jackson stepped back and sat on the bed. "Undress."

"Aye, Your Grace."

Will did as his duke commanded, removing each piece of cloth in a deliberate manner as Jackson watched, eyes narrowed and shining. Jackson's chest rose and fell with each deep breath and Will heard the short catches of the big man's inhales and the long almost-moan of his exhales as Will revealed his body. Once naked, he gazed into Jackson's eyes.

"Come here."

Will stepped forward until he stood at the bedside, wedging his body between Jackson's spread knees. Jackson's rod, dark red, swollen, and hard, stood straight at attention, his heavy sac resting on the bed. Will's mouth watered for a taste of the clear bead that hung from its tip.

Jackson reached out and ran his hands through Will's hair. "I love you."

"And I love you."

"Kiss me, sweet Will. I long for the taste of you. Your hands on my body, your weight laying over me, the heat of your channel as I fill you."

God, the man's words, the poetry of his soul, made Will's knees weak and brought his cock to full stand.

Jackson slipped his hand behind Will's neck and brought him close, until at last their lips touched. Both men sighed. Hands and arms wrapped and wove around and into lover's hair, stroked soft lover's skin, glided over reminders of lover's past pains.

Will knew Jackson's body as well as he knew his own. Perhaps better.

And yet, for Will, it was as if he touched Jackson for the first time. Jackson shuddered under Will's hand.

"You are all I have left, Jackson," Will whispered, struggling to keep the anger, loneliness, and desolation from his voice.

"I will always be here for you. Let me be your home, Will. Let me be whatever I need be to make you happy." Jackson pulled Will tighter, twisted, and then laid Will on the bed. Climbing on top, Jackson stretched his body over Will's and their cocks brushed.

Will surged upward, Jackson pushed down, then rose to his forearms and rocked his body against Will's. The friction burned as if Will's rigid member and the skin around his groin were on fire.

"God damn, Jackson." Will groaned, his rod, stiff and aching, his stones tight and full. He needed release, and until this moment, hadn't realized how much that need had grown.

Jackson knew.

The big man pushed Will's long hair to the side, and had his way with Will's neck, his throat, his shoulders—licking, biting, sucking, and all the while, whispering such sweet words Will thought his heart would break.

"My Will. Mine and no other's. You are my life." Jackson laved Will's chest with his tongue, then circled his nipple until Will thought he'd scream out his pleasure for the entire castle to hear, to know Jackson was his lover, his man, his duke.

"You bring me to the edge, my duke."

Jackson clamped his mouth over Will's nipple, suckled, and Will lost his control. His release tore through him, swelling his cock until he exploded, spilling his seed over both their bellies.

And still Jackson rubbed against Will, as he rutted in his own need. Loving the way Will's cream between their bodies coated his belly. Will's own sweet scent filled the air around them as Jackson dipped his fingers into the liquid and brought them to his lips.

"I love how you taste, sweet Will." He sucked his finger clean, then held another finger out for Will. "Taste."

Will took Jackson's finger in his mouth, and sucked it, swirling his tongue over and under, giving Jackson's finger what he'd given Jackson's cock so many times.

Jackson growled and sat back, pulling his finger from Will's grasp.

Then he pushed Will's legs apart, pumped his cock twice, spit and slicked his shaft with his own juices, as Will watched.

"Take me." Will pulled his legs up at the knees and opened himself for his lover.

"Christ, Will." Jackson's eyes grew dark, his lids lowered, and Will watched the lust and need burn in his lover's gaze. Jackson guided his cockhead to Will's portal, pressed as Will pushed and with a cry, Will's muscles willingly gave way.

Jackson took him.

As if Jackson were some animal, some great glorious male beast, taking what was his, what he had rights to, what he'd claimed for his own.

There was nothing in heaven, hell, or on earth as fine as this. Nothing. And Will would do this, let Jackson take him like this, anywhere and anytime he wanted.

The world be damned.

Jackson froze, his cock emptied in Will's channel, and the big man's body shuddered as he filled Will, panting his hot breath against Will's skin, the sweat of his body dripping onto Will's. Jackson collapsed, burying his face in Will's neck.

"Oh Christ, Will." Jackson's muffled voice a hot puff of air against Will's throat.

Will lay beneath the big man until the cock in his throbbing tunnel shrank, then slipped out. With a moan, Jackson rolled off and pulled Will to him, their bodies pressed tight together.

Pulling a quilt over them, Will found comfort in his lover's arms.

Chapter Eight

Liam dropped the last of the men's boots to the floor next to their owner's cot. He straightened and looked around the barracks. Half of the men were stretched out on their cots, some still speaking amongst themselves, others fast asleep.

He wandered down the aisle, listening, but trying not to look as if he were. Boys who were caught listening to conversations might be beaten for their impertinence. He'd learned some about Baymore the last few days, but not what he'd been searching for. Now, with the unexpected return of the duke, Liam's heart seemed to beat a quick march in his chest and his throat had grown dry.

The sight of the great Duke of Baymore riding through the open gates, the small column of men following and that younger man at the duke's side, had made a great impression on Liam.

So that was the Duke of Baymore.

His father.

Like a wraith, Liam had faded back into the shadows of the doorway, but stared at the man, taking in every bit of him, the color of his dark red hair, his size—good Lord the man was huge—and the way he'd handled his horse. Every inch of the man was impressive.

And the way his men looked at Baymore, with such admiration in their eyes. And Master Marcus had been so happy to see him returned. He was a duke much loved by his people. A good man, just as his mother had told him.

She'd filled his head with stories of his father for as long as he could remember. Tales of the duke's great deeds and adventures. Promises that one day, he would come for Liam and take him to the castle. He'd have a title and all the things they didn't have, fine clothes, warm beds, and servants. His mother's voice, soft, like music, had sent him off to sleep at night, to dream of the day his destiny arrived.

Until he grew old enough to ask questions and her answers weren't answers at all, but evasions. She'd never told him why they weren't a family. Why they didn't live in the castle with his father or why no one in the village must know their secret.

Most of all, why the duke had never come for him, never claimed him as his son.

Now, Liam was at Baymore. And all he had to do was step forward, claim his birthright and fall into his father's open arms, just as he'd dreamed.

Liam's heart had swelled with pride but, at his next breath, his blood had gone cold as fear washed through him. If he showed himself to the Duke, made known he was his son, although a bastard, would the duke acknowledge him or deny him and put him out?

What if his mother had lied? What if the Duke never intended on coming for him, of claiming Liam as his son? What if all his hopes were lies and he was no more than an orphaned bastard child with no family and no home. No future.

Liam shuddered and rubbed his hand on his thigh to calm his nerves. No sense in thinking the worst. Best to wait until he knew more. Lack of patience was something his mother often scolded him for, but not now. Now, if she were alive and hadn't died in the fire that consumed their cottage, she'd be proud of him.

Proud that he'd learned from her, learned to bide his time and wait. Proud that he'd come here all on his own, made the journey and stayed safe, and taken a place in the castle, heeding her final words to him before she died.

"Find your father. Go to Baymore."

His eyes filled with hot tears, but he dashed them away and picked up the broom. Sweeping his way back down the aisle, he continued to listen to the men.

"...glad he's dead and gone. Everyone hated him."

"Aye. He was pure evil, I tell you. Pure evil."

Liam slowed, all his attention on the conversation. They spoke of someone's death and from the tone they'd taken and the looks on their faces, all of them agreed about the worth of the man.

"It was a great day for Baymore when Hugh was killed and Jackson took his place as duke," another man declared.

Liam froze and his grip on the broom handle went white. Hugh dead? But he'd just seen the duke ride through the gates. Seen it with his own eyes. He swallowed a lump that formed in his throat and coughed. The men's gazes flicked to him. Liam ducked his head and forced himself to move the broom back and forth.

They turned away from him, lowering their voices.

It couldn't be. They must be speaking of someone else, certainly. His body trembled as he forced himself to keep sweeping, mindless of the motions, as his gaze darted to the men. No, they had spoken clearly and left nothing to doubt in Liam's mind.

Still, he wanted to shout at them, ask them a dozen questions, but he knew his place. Knew he had no right to speak unless spoken to by one of the men if he didn't want to have his ears boxed or feel a lash across his back. No, there was no one he could go to for information, was there?

Master Marcus. He could go to the master of arms, ask him.

Liam reached the end of the room. He leaned his broom against the stone wall, then with a glance over his shoulder at the men, he slipped out of the door. The fear and tears he'd held at bay rose to the surface and Liam ran.

Ran to the back of the keep, his legs and arms pumping as he sucked down air. All the way to the far wall, until he slammed into it, his chest heaving, his sobs no longer held back, but choking as they escaped his tight throat. His body shook as he slid to his knees, his arms cradling his belly, and he wept.

All hope for a future was gone.

His mother was dead.

His father was dead.

He was alone in the world. In this castle. In the place that should have been his home, he would not be welcome. Not once they discovered who he claimed to be. Liam's sobbing ebbed until there was nothing but a few choking gasps.

He knew what he must do.

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If he wanted to stay here, he had to keep quiet. No one could know his secret. Not even Master Marcus. To tell it was to court death itself. Surely the new duke would have him killed too, wouldn't he? Just like he'd killed his father.

But Liam wasn't sure if he wanted to stay. Where would he go and what would he do if he left? Much might befall him outside the walls of the keep. He was but a boy, too young to make his own way in the world. He didn't know much of the world, but he did know there were worse things for a boy to be than a servant in a fine castle.

For now, he had to stay here.

In the castle that should have been his home.

With the man who'd killed his father.

* * * * *

"Yo, boy!" a woman's voice called out. Liam uncurled, wiped his face with his sleeve, and got to his feet.

"Aye, mistress?"

"What are you doing there?" She came closer, one of the older washer women by the looks of her reddened face and hands.

"Nothing, mistress." He leaned against the wall. Perhaps he'd get that beating anyway.

"What's all them tears for? Get a beating, did you?" Her eyes softened with pity for him.

Best if he let her think that. "Aye. Too slow, I'm told." He ducked his head and stepped toward her. "Best if I get back. They'll be looking for me in the barracks."

"Right you are. You're the new barracks boy, aren't you? I seen you fetching the wood for the fire."

"Aye. Just come here." He started to walk past her.

She reached out and took his arm. "If you need a place to hide, lad, you come see me." She smiled at him and let him go. "It's quiet in the washing rooms and just me and Mary at work most days."

"Thank you, mistress." Liam gave her a bow and took off at a run, back to the barracks. He'd hoped they hadn't missed him. As he rounded the corner, he passed the woodpile. Halting, he went back, gathered an armload of wood, and made his way to the barracks. Better to look busy so no one would ask where he'd been. If anyone cared.

He came in the back door, and pushed it shut with his foot.

"Where've you been, boy?" snarled one of the soldiers as he held up a boot.

"Getting the wood for the fire." Liam marched to the hearth, knelt, and stacked the logs.

"This boot isn't quite good enough, now is it?" The man had a hard look in his eyes and Liam gulped hard.

"I'll fix it right away, m'lord." He held out his hand for the boot.

The man swung the boot, catching Liam in the head with the hard sole and heel. He staggered back, pain exploding over his ear, and fell to the floor. The man towered over him, the boot still clutched in his hand.

Another man rushed to the first soldier and took his arm. "Now, now, Clem, there's no need for such treatment." He cast a pitying glance at Liam.

The soldier shook him off. "I says there is."

"Well, if you beat him too much, he'll not be able to do your boots or ours, now will he?"

"Lad's got to learn." With a sniff, the man turned away as he tossed the boot at Liam. It hit the floor, just missing his head.

Liam gathered the boot up and got to his feet. Touching his hand to his head, he checked for blood, but there was none. Just a lingering sting and his ear sore to the touch. He'd gotten off lucky this time.

That never would have happened if he'd been the duke's son. If he were the duke's son, he'd have servants, not be a servant. This was all Jackson's fault.

Liam gritted his teeth and went to the corner where his polishing kit and stool waited, and got to work.

He'd rethink his decision about staying at Baymore.

Hard knocks and lashes waited for him no matter where he ended up. A boy alone, without family or the means to make his way in the world, would be at the mercy of those around him. He had to be smart about this and not let his emotions get the best of him.

It meant choosing the best place to be, that's all.

For now, it seemed, that place was Baymore.

Chapter Nine

Marcus strode through the barracks, inspecting what he saw. The men's cots were neat and orderly, the boots not on their feet stood at attention next to their beds. Liam had been doing a fine job of keeping the men's belongings and the barrack's fire well tended.

He nodded, feeling more confident in his decision to take in the lad, but as he scanned the large room, he realized something was missing.

Liam.

Where was the boy? It was nearly time for the evening meal and most of the servants were making the hall ready. Liam had no duties there that Marcus knew of.

Striding out the back of the barracks, he stopped in the midst of the courtyard. From where he stood he could see the closed door of the armory opposite the barracks, and the narrow passage to the rear of the keep, where the baths and laundry were housed.

His lips twisted as he wondered where the boy had gone to, then he headed to the baths. It wouldn't be the first time a lad had snuck off for a soak in the tubs in the quiet time before the last meal of the day.

The bathhouse tubs were empty, the shadows of the late afternoon washed the yard in cool shades, and the cobblestones had dried.

Singing floated on the air, a country ditty Marcus recognized from his own hometown's alehouse. He followed it, and stepped into the laundry.

Liam sat on a low stool, his chin resting on his chest, asleep.

The washer woman, without breaking her rhythm, looked up from her work and smiled at Marcus.

"Master Marcus," she sang. Her large hands were red from the hot water, and strands of her straw-colored hair hung in her face. Large breasts bounced up and down as she scrubbed the clothes in her hands back and forth across the washing stone.

"Good day, laundress." He gave her a nod, his gaze falling on the sleeping lad. "He been here long?"

"Not long. Sat down and fell fast asleep."

"Your sweet singing had much to do with that, I'll wager."

With a gap-toothed smile, she nodded. "Aye. I've sung many a babe to sleep." She stopped her work and sat back. Jerking her head at Liam, she said, "I reckon he's lonely. Far from home, without a mother to watch over him."

"Does he come here often?"

"Nay. This is the first time."

Marcus leaned down to shake Liam awake, then froze. The side of the boy's face was bruised. "Do you know what happened to him?"

"Those marks?" She shook her head. "Didn't have them last time I saw him, but any fool could see he'd gotten a beating."

Straightening, Marcus frowned. Beaten. How had that happened? Liam had been most eager to please, and from what Marcus had seen, the boy had done his work quickly and well.

"Liam," Marcus called softly.

The lad jumped to his feet, rubbing his eyes with his fists. "Aye, sir!"

"It's time to eat, lad."

Liam nodded and scurried out the door, throwing a hasty, "Thank ye, mistress!" over his shoulder. Marcus followed, his long stride catching the boy's shorter legs before he'd reached the barrack's rear courtyard.

"Liam. Hold." Marcus wanted more of an accounting of the dark bruise.

The young boy halted, then turned to face Marcus, keeping his face down.

"Look at me, lad." Marcus stood with his arms on his hips, waiting.

"Aye, sir." Liam raised his face.

Marcus took the boy's chin in his hand and turned it to the side. "Who did this?"

"I hadn't cleaned the boots as well as they should have been." Liam's dark eyes danced away from Marcus, a sure sign the lad lied.

"Whose boots?"

Liam shrugged.

Marcus squatted down to look Liam in the face. "Liam. I can't imagine you shirked your duties." The bruise had a distinct shape and it didn't take him long to recognize it. "He hit you with the boot, didn't he?"

Liam nodded. Marcus didn't miss the dampness gathering in the boy's eyes and at that moment, he realized that the lad had never been treated so sorely. This child hadn't grown up a servant but through some set of circumstances, some twist of fate, had fallen into this life.

Marcus had never held with the beating of anyone, servant or free man. Free men had the law to answer to, but a servant? They had nothing, no one to stand up for them, to insure they found a crumb of mercy or justice. And a child servant was more at risk.

He wouldn't stand for it, not in his barracks, not with his men.

"Come with me." He stood, took Liam by the shoulder, and walked him to the barracks. They entered, Marcus half pulling, half dragging the boy. Marcus scanned the room. Half of the men were coming off their duty and changing out of their tabards.

"Attend me!" Marcus growled, his hand still resting on Liam's shoulder. The boy shook beneath his grip. Marcus gave him a reassuring squeeze.

Every man snapped to attention where he stood.

"Liam—this boy—is a gift from Duke Baymore to his armsmen. A gift is *not* to be mistreated. A gift is not to be beaten whenever you've a burr caught under your belt. This gift can be taken away with but a word from His Grace." Marcus leveled his sternest stare at the men. "Be sure to spread the message. Any man who lays a hand on this boy will answer to me."

"Aye, sir," the group's murmur rumbled through the long room.

Liam glanced up at the master of arms, unable to keep the surprise from his face. Gaping, he swallowed hard, then looked back at the men. His gaze fell on the man who'd beaten him with the boot. The soldier stood, almost hidden, behind another man, with his face down.

If Master Marcus hadn't threatened the men, Liam was sure he'd have felt the soldier's boot again, and this time it would have the armsman's foot still in it. The master of arms' hand rested on his shoulder, a heavy but comforting weight.

Had he really been a gift to the men from the duke? He didn't remember anyone but Master Marcus assigning him to the barracks, and since he'd done it while the duke had been away, Liam couldn't understand the man's meaning. But he could understand that for now, whether he wanted it or not, he had the duke's protection.

And for that he said a silent prayer.

Perhaps his mother and father watched over him, even here in Baymore.

"Now, Liam. It's time to break bread. Attend me." Master Marcus let him go and Liam nearly collapsed as the big man's grip, its safety and security, left him.

Without a glance around the room, Liam followed the master of arms out of the barracks, across the bailey, and into the keep, all the while wondering what new events lay before him, what other twists his road might take.

Whatever they were, Liam was glad he'd been fortunate enough to arrive at Baymore, and to have found a master as good, as kind, as Master Marcus. For a moment, as he struggled to keep up with the long-legged stride of the man, he could imagine it wasn't Marcus, but Hugh, and he walked at his father's side as they crossed the main courtyard of their castle. He ignored the tightening of his throat and the water that stood in his eyes.

Once inside, Master Marcus ordered Liam to wait by the wall on the bench, then he strode across the hall to the duke's table. Several men, all of whom Liam had seen before, sat with the duke, including the beautiful man with the long blond hair.

Liam watched as his master took his seat at the table; a servant placed a trencher of food before him, and he began eating. Liam's stomach rumbled. Master Marcus leaned back, spoke to the servant girl, and her eyes flicked up, found Liam, and she gave a nod.

She hurried away, then returned carrying a bowl, passed the long table, and came over to him. "Here. Your master said you were to have your supper." She handed the bowl to Liam.

He looked down into the rich stew and then back up at her. "Thank ye, mistress."

She pulled a heel of bread from her apron and gave it to him. "Here, this goes with it. Mind you don't make a mess. When you're done, bring it to the kitchens and clean the bowl off." Then she gave him a wink and spun away, quick to her work.

Liam brought the bowl to his face and inhaled; the aroma of the stew brought water to his mouth. Using the bread as a makeshift spoon, he sopped up the warm, spicy liquid and pushed the meat up the side of the bowl to eat.

A tender morsel of pork sat on his tongue. Not knowing how long it would be before he ate this rich a meal again, Liam held the piece in his mouth, chewing it slowly, carefully, savoring its flavor and texture. With a reluctant sigh, he swallowed it and searched the bowl for another piece.

Between the bread and the bowl, Liam filled his stomach fuller than it'd been since...well, since before the fire. He gazed across the hall at the blaze that roared in the hearth, feeling its heat from where he sat.

This might not be his home and his mother might not be with him, but for an orphan such as himself, it was as good as he could dare wish. For the first time since he'd decided to stay on after learning of the duke's death, he thought he'd made the right choice, to stay at Baymore.

Bread gone, Liam tossed his manners to the side and licked the bowl clean.

* * * * *

"So, Your Grace, now that our meal is eaten, I wish to have a word or two with you." Marcus leaned forward, catching his duke's eyes.

"Indeed. Proceed, Marcus." Jackson sat back, crossed his arms over his massive chest and waited.

"It's about the boy."

"Boy?" Jackson looked at Lord William, to his right.

"The lad that collapsed at our very door," William reminded him.

"And?" Jackson's gaze flicked back to Marcus. "Have you learned more about him? Where he's from and why he came to us?"

"He's from Barley Fields, on the very edge of your holdings, Your Grace. But why he came to us, I haven't learned."

"That's a long way for a lad to travel on his own," Will murmured.

Jackson nodded. "What else?"

"I'm certain the boy's from a good family. If not a lesser noble, perhaps a merchant or tradesman. His manner of speaking, his clothes, and his entire carriage, tell me that he's no common boy. No servant." Marcus didn't know where he was going until that moment, then it came to him in a flash of inspiration.

"A good family? Then, where are they?" Jackson leaned forward, his elbow on the table.

"I have no idea, Your Grace. But whatever befell them, I'm sure it wasn't good fortune. When he first arrived, the lad's clothing was covered in soot, as if from a fire. I believe, whoever his family was, they are now dead." Marcus tapped the table with his finger to make his point.

"Dead? Poor child." Jackson shook his head.

Lord William seemed to have grown bored with the discussion of the lad, and he signaled to the servant to refill his tankard with wine. At the duke's last comment, William's lips twisted in a half smile.

"Now you've done it, Marcus. You've plucked at the strings of Jackson's heart, as a musician with a harp," William said.

"So what is it that you wish, Marcus?" Jackson held out his tankard to be filled, then took a sip.

"He's doing duty in the barracks now, and working hard, no doubt. I thought he'd be better suited to a page's work, Your Grace." Marcus held his breath, waiting for the duke to react.

"A page?" Jackson rubbed his chin. "Will, do I need a page?"

"Well, most dukes have a page or two, to run errands, messages, care for their weapons and boots and such. My father had lads at his disposal, and still does, now that he's completely blind. They move faster than he ever could, taking and bringing summons and such. Even Wallace keeps a page."

"Why had you never mentioned this to me before, Will?" Jackson's eyes glittered, his lips compressed. Even Marcus could tell the duke teased his friend and dearest companion.

"You managed quite well without one, Your Grace. But if you feel obligated to the lad, make him a page. If he does well, he could move up to squire in time." Jackson grinned and clapped Will on the back. "That's a fine idea, Will. Squire. I like that." Turning to Marcus, he added, "Have him moved into the keep, Marcus. He'll be my page, starting in the morn. Have him outside my door."

Will leaned toward the duke. "Not too early, Your Grace."

"Aye. Not before we break fast, Marcus," Jackson amended his orders.

"Aye, Your Grace." Marcus gave him a bow and then stood. "I'll see to it now."

"And Marcus?" Jackson stopped him. "Find another boy for the barracks."

"Aye, Your Grace. Shouldn't be too hard to find."

"Tell me there hasn't been *another* lad passing out at our gates," William drawled. "Once they find out we're giving swooning boys work, we'll have to sweep them away from the front gates just to come and go."

Jackson laughed.

"No, Lord William. Not that I know of," Marcus answered, then he crossed the hall to where Liam sat, eyes closed, head back against the wall, looking as content as a cat with its whiskers covered in cream. Next to him on the bench sat his empty bowl.

"Liam. Time to go."

The lad opened his eyes and leaped to his feet. "Aye, m'lord." He scooped up the bowl and dashed off to turn it in at the kitchens, then returned to Marcus's side, as if he were a well-trained hunting dog.

"Follow me." Marcus motioned with his hand, and the boy fell into step by his side. "Good news. I've spoken to His Grace about you."

"His Grace?" The boy gasped. "About me?" his voice squeaked.

"Aye, His Grace. Are you deaf?"

"No, master."

"He will take you as his page. You start in the morn." Marcus stopped at the door, pulled it open, and stepped outside.

Liam stood as still as the great stones, eyes wide, and mouth open.

Marcus barked out a laugh, grabbed Liam by the shoulder, and pulled him through the doorway. "That's right. You're the duke's new page."

Liam stumbled and caught the master's hand to steady himself. His heart beat so hard in his chest he was sure the master could see it.

"Me? The duke's page?" What twist of fate was this? He must wait on the man who'd killed his father, taken his place, and stolen his title?

"Don't look so frightened, lad. Jackson's a good man. He'll treat you well, and if you're quick and learn all you're taught, you may just find yourself a squire." Marcus clapped him on the back, then took off toward the barracks.

Liam swallowed down the stew he'd eaten as it tried to come back up his throat. He clenched his hands, and got himself moving after his master.

This was horrible. Unbearable. Working in the castle? He could work in the barracks, avoid Jackson, and never look upon him. It was a matter of survival. But this?

Liam looked back over his shoulder at the great keep.

Perhaps he could sneak out in the morning, before the keep came to life, and before he was called to duty serving the new duke? He glanced at the gates. Soldiers guarded it day and night.

"Liam!" Marcus called as he stood in the doorway.

Liam broke into a run; each footfall shuddered through his small body.

"I'm here, master." He slipped into the barracks. "I'll get the wood for the fire." Then he ran through the room, out the back door, to the woodpile.

He knelt and counted out six pieces of good dry wood to add to the fire banked in the hearth, letting the work soothe him. As he stood and turned back, he thought about his situation.

Tonight, he'd think over his decision to stay.

Perhaps he'd been too rash, too impatient, like his mother had always claimed.

Master Marcus had gone. Liam walked through the barracks to the center hearth, placed the wood on the stones, and added two logs to the fire. Using the iron poker, he pushed and prodded the logs into the best position, then hung it up and stood.

After trudging to his cot, Liam pulled off his boots, took off his breeches, and slipped under the thin blanket. The light from the fire cast shadows over the stone walls of the long room, as if demons danced around him, mocking him.

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He shivered, pulled the blanket tighter, and closed his eyes to the specters to block them out. Liam silently said his prayers and asked his mother what he should do but she didn't answer.

Chapter Ten

The last of the wine was gone, the jug empty, and the candles had burned down. Jackson's eyelids drooped as he fought off sleep as he sat in front of the great hall's hearth.

"Best to bed, Your Grace. I'll need two men to carry you up the stairs if we wait much longer," Will drawled as he leaned down and shook Jackson's shoulder.

"Aye, my lord Holcombe." Jackson pushed his chair back and stood. He followed Will up the stairs and with a nod good night, entered his room.

He sat on the stool to pull off his boots. Tomorrow night, he'd have young Liam to attend him in his preparations for bed. Perhaps that would work well, God knew he hated ordering servants about, but this lad, well, it was different. A page, merely in training for squire, would have many things to learn about serving a nobleman, about how a castle ran, how things worked both above stairs and below. No harm in that.

Still, there was an element of danger in the boy being so close. If anyone discovered Jackson and Will's relationship ran deeper than duke and steward, there would be trouble such as they'd never seen before. As it was, too many people knew of their love for Jackson's comfort.

Will's family, for one, and although Will's brother and his wife accepted it, Will's father had not. It might take only time and a building resentment before Duke Holcombe sought punishment for Will's transgression.

Jackson stood and moved to his window. Staring out at the deep, star-filled night sky, he knew he'd do what he had to do to protect his holdings and Will. But Holcombe would never move against Baymore, Wallace would see to that. And it could go the other way. Over time, the aged duke might forgive Will, and allow him to return.

Still, that time might never come.

A cloud passed the sliver of moon, racing its way across the sky, reminding Jackson of the fleeting chances in life, the times when the outcome of events could turn one way or the other.

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As when he'd hit that branch.

It had been fortunate he'd only done minor damage to himself. He'd never forget the fear in Will's eyes, or the worried looks on his men's faces. It was good that they cared for his welfare, and Jackson knew their regard spoke highly of him.

They never would have cared had it been that madman Hugh Baymore knocked off his horse and on his ass in the road. There might have even been a few snickers, if the men had been foolish enough to let them be heard. And if they had dared to do so, with Hugh there would have been harsh payment for that indiscretion. Payment in the form of hide taken off backs.

But what if fate had been against Jackson? If he'd been killed by the blow from the branch? Who would have held Baymore safe? Will, although steward, had no claim on Baymore, and would have to fight anyone to keep it, provided he could rally the men around him.

Many of the armsmen knew of Will's part in bringing Jackson to the title and rule of Baymore. They might stand with him. Or they might not.

But they were sworn to rally around a Baymore. A legitimate Baymore. An heir to the title. A son.

There were only two ways for him to obtain a son that Jackson knew of. He leaned against the stone of the window and scratched his head. There might have been a child in his past. But how would he know if he hadn't known by now?

He could scour the lands, retrace every path he'd traveled for the last twenty years, and search for a male child born from his loins amongst the many wenches and whores he'd bedded. Even a bastard son would do, as he knew full well. Although there hadn't been a great number of women, he wasn't sure if he could remember them all. And that would take a great deal of time, and he'd have to be gone from Baymore far too long. And didn't those kinds of women have ways of insuring they didn't catch a child?

There was one other way.

He could have his own son in the future. Or as soon as possible. It would be faster and surer than some elaborate hunt for an imagined son.

But that meant marrying.

And that meant... Jackson growled and pushed away from the window. He paced the length of his room, spun, and retraced his steps. Of course, he wouldn't marry for love. His heart belonged to Will. If he were to marry, take a wife and bed her for the sole purpose of providing an heir, he would only be doing just the same as every other nobleman who married for the sake of their lands.

Love would never have to enter the bargain.

A bargain?

Jackson halted, slapped his thigh, and laughed. That's what he needed. A bargain. An arrangement. A woman who would marry him and have his child. Give him a son, or maybe two, like old Duke Holcombe and Wallace.

With legitimate heirs, there could be no one to contest their claim if anything happened to him. And with Will watching over them, protecting them if he were gone, they would grow into the right sort of men to take his place as duke.

Jackson sighed, his mind eased.

A soft rap at his door turned him from the window's view. The door opened, and Will stepped inside, dressed in cotton trousers and no shirt, his hair loose around his shoulders.

Jackson couldn't stop the shiver of desire that ran through his body as all thoughts of marriage and sons fled his mind. The thudding of the blood swelling his cock drowned out everything but the overpowering need for his lover.

No words were necessary. Not between them. They were home, at Baymore, and it was in the safety of this room they came together, with all the force of two rutting rams, fighting for dominion with their hands, mouths, and tongues.

Jackson wove his hands in Will's hair and thrust his tongue deeper, as he held his lover in his powerful grip. Will hung, his body limp with surrender, against Jackson's assault. The seal of Jackson's mouth on Will's allowed only the soft moans from Will's throat to fill the room with sound.

Jackson's cock hardened, ached in its need to fill Will, to be inside the one place it called home. He lifted Will, carrying him to the bed and pushed him, belly first, down over the side. Then in one move, Jackson stripped Will's trousers from him, letting them fall to the floor around Will's feet. After a slap on Will's flank, Jackson slid his hand between the round globes of Will's ass, as Will, ever ready to be taken, angled and pushed into Jackson's touch. Oil painted Jackson's fingers.

"You readied yourself for me?" Jackson growled.

"Aye, Your Grace."

Jackson shuddered and slipped a finger inside Will's heat, and met more of the oil. Without the need to prepare himself, Jackson withdrew, aimed his cock at Will's sweet bud, and sank home.

Both men cried out, soft, hoarse, the sound blending into a need-filled song.

Will braced his body with his hands on the bed, spread his legs wider, and took Jackson's pounding. Jackson wrapped his hand in Will's flowing locks and pulled back, earning a sharp hiss from Will.

"Hurt?" Jackson could only grunt his question.

"More." Will gasped.

Jackson tugged again, his hand holding Will's hip tightened, his thrusting cock became a blur, like the beating wings of a bird, as he gave Will what he needed.

"Oh God." Will's body shook, the tremor vibrating in his voice. "I'm going..."

"Come for me, my love." Jackson twisted his hand in Will's hair, and leaned down, taking Will's shoulder between his teeth.

He bit down and tasted blood. Will cried out his name, his body stiffened, and he spilled. Jackson let go of Will's hip, pressed his body fully against Will's and grabbed Will's cock to capture the last shooting spurts, to feel the last shudder of Will's release, to hear the last sob from Will's throat.

Will slumped forward, his knees buckling, unable to hold Jackson's weight any longer.

God, he'd been fucked well and good. Jackson's taking of him had been just as he'd wanted, hard and fast. Will loved feeling the power of the big man, the strength of his grip on his cock, the absolute control Jackson had over him.

But his lover hadn't finished with him; that Will knew.

Jackson rolled off and turned Will over.

"I need to see your face, my lord. Look into your eyes, see your soul in their blue depths." Jackson nuzzled Will's throat, his tongue painting its way up to Will's ear, then taking the lobe between his teeth. A shiver ran through Will, and a soft echo stirred deep inside his loins.

Will gasped as Jackson nipped him.

It was too soon for his rod to stiffen, but he enjoyed the feelings that danced over the sensitive skin that sheathed it and in the slight tightening of his stones and the sac that held them.

Jackson crawled between Will's legs, spread them open, and pushed Will's knees up and apart, splitting him open.

"Fuck me, you're beautiful, Will." Jackson gazed at Will's ass. "See? Just there." Jackson touched his finger to the soft skin between Will's hole and his sac. "No. You can't see. Pity. If you could, you would be as taken with the sight as I am."

"What do you see, my love?"

"Your tight ass." Jackson licked his lips. "It's perfect. Pink. It resembles a young rose, closed tight to the world, not yet unfurled. I wish to open your rose. To make it bloom with pleasure."

Will's head fell back as Jackson's poetry washed over him, as rain from the sky, bathing him in desire.

"My rose awaits your staff."

Jackson leaned down, pushing up on Will's legs, and as Jackson dragged his tongue over Will's sac, Will cried out. Will's cock filled with blood, and it grew hard against his belly.

His lover didn't stop there. Jackson sucked a stone into his mouth, then pulled it away, stretching the skin until all Will could do was beg Jackson to release it.

God, the pain was so sweet and added to the strength of his erection. When Jackson moved to the other side, Will thought he'd lose his mind. The pain was so pure, so intense as it surged through his body, tingling in the base of his spine.

"Fuck me. Now. Please." Will moaned.

"Aye, my sweet William." Jackson pressed the tip of his cock into Will, Will pushed into it, and his bud opened. Jackson slipped inside, filling Will completely. After he let a few hammer beats of his heart pass, Will reached up and buried his fingers in Jackson's dark red mane.

"Now," Will commanded.

Jackson obeyed.

They rode their pleasure, each move reflected in the subtle shift of their bodies, the quiet intake of air, the harsh exhale of a cry gasped, the shared gaze in their eyes, as they built in the climb to completion.

Blue eyes bored into brown, hands clenched hair, skin, hips, neck. Jackson's breath in was Will's breath out, locked together, body, heart, and soul, as they coupled, mated, joined in their love.

Jackson cupped Will's cheek, and rested his forehead against Will's. "My life is yours."

"I am yours. Command me." There was nothing Will would not do for this man.

"Just love me." Jackson gave a final thrust, stilled, and spilled.

Will joined him, painting his own belly with ropes of white.

Jackson gave a final toss of his sweat-dampened head and pulled gently out of Will's ass, then fell to the side on the bed, one arm flung over his face.

Will settled into the crook of that arm, his head rested on Jackson's shoulder.

For a while, they dozed.

Out of long habit, Will woke before dawn, but unlike the times before, Jackson wasn't asleep. No soft snore filled the quiet of the room. Jackson lay awake, his gaze focused out of the window, at the night sky.

"Something troubles you, Your Grace?" Will whispered.

"Aye. I have had a thought and have not been able to escape it." Jackson sighed.

Will ran his hand over Jackson's broad chest. "Tell me. Perhaps I can help."

"You are the only one who can, my lord."

"Then name it and it is done."

Jackson fell silent. His lips turned down, his brow furrowed. All in all a most severe look. Had Will earned his displeasure? "If anything happened to me, Will, what would happen to Baymore?"

"Baymore?"

"Aye. This place. The land. The people."

Will fell silent. What would happen? "I suppose, it might fall to some lesser noble, if he dared to try to win it."

"You could not hold the land or the title."

"Nay. Not without the armsmen's backing and the lesser lord's oaths." Will frowned. "I might convince them, but it would take more than words to do so. I'd have to spend much from the coffers to ensure their loyalty."

"Aye, as I thought. But Will, if there were someone? A true Baymore? What then?"

"Well, that would be different. The men have given oath to Baymore and to you. That includes all who hold the Baymore name."

Jackson gave a slow nod. "Then what must be done is clear."

"What must be done?" Will wasn't sure what Jackson spoke of, but he knew it pressed heavy on Jackson's mind.

"I must have a son, Will. I must marry."

The bed Will lay on dropped away, and he hung in the air for just a moment, then plummeted, as a dove falls from the sky, an arrow struck through its heart. His stomach rose in his throat as his lifeless body tumbled away into oblivion. His vision narrowed and all he saw was the night sky in the window receding, stretching farther and farther away, until the moon and the stars were but points of dim light.

"And you must arrange it. As my steward, you must find me a wife." Jackson's words echoed, as if from very far away.

Will opened his mouth, but no reasonable sound escaped; only a cry of utter destruction gathered in the pit of his stomach and roiled, burning and hot, upward in his throat. When it reached his mouth, he clamped his lips shut against it, refusing to give it a voice.

This could not be. This was insanity.

He must be dreaming. That was it, he slept, and this was nothing more than a dream, some horrible nightmare. If he could just keep from screaming, he would awaken, still held tight in Jackson's arms.

Jackson sat up, took Will by the shoulder, and shook him. "Will. Did you hear me?"

Will stared up at his lover of the last two years. The man he'd killed for, the man he'd left his home, his family, his father for. The man he loved more than his own life.

"I said, you must find me a wife. I must have a son. I must have an heir." Jackson's words, as deadly as any sword Jackson had ever wielded, stabbed Will in the heart, leaving him dead.

Oh God, this was no dream. This was hell. Damnation. Punishment from God for his past sins, for the sin of lying with another man and for loving another man.

Of all the things Jackson could have asked him, nothing could have been more unexpected, more shocking, or more impossible for Will to do.

Will's hands trembled as he sat up. He got out of bed, found his breeches, and slipped them on, fighting back the burning in his eyes, the tears threatening to spill, the bleeding of his heart, cut out of his chest. Yet, he still lived. Dead, but alive.

He pulled the strings tight, straightened, and faced his lover.

"Is that what you truly wish, Your Grace?" His voice didn't shake.

Jackson smiled at him and nodded.

Will walked to the door, raised the bar, and opened it.

"Then I will do as you command, Your Grace," he whispered, then slipped out.

The door closed behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Will staggered across the hall and into his room. As he fell back against the door and locked it, the anguish he'd held inside burst from him. He slid to the floor as soundless sobs of grief racked his body and his fists pounded against the stones of the walls.

When there was nothing left but darkness and despair, Will lay curled tight on the cold floor of his room, alone and broken. Devastated. Destroyed.

Long after the sun had risen in his window, throwing streaks of light across his face, Will pushed himself upright, went to his desk, and fell into the chair.

He pulled out parchment and ink, quill and wax, and wrote the first letter in the search to find a wife for the man Will could not deny.

* * * * *

"Wallace. Have you read this letter from Will?" Lady Ellen thrust out a parchment toward her husband as she strode across the floor of the great hall.

Wallace looked up. "No, it was to you, not me." He waved his hand at her.

Her beautiful face frowned, brows knitted together, chin quivering. It was not good news that made her react in such a manner.

"What does it say? Bad news?" He stood and met her halfway, taking the parchment from her. He read it over, read it again, and then met her worried gaze.

"Find him a wife?" Wallace gasped. "Has Jackson lost his mind?"

"Oh, Wallace. Poor Will." She put a knuckle in her mouth and bit it as tears filled her eyes.

"This is..." Words failed Wallace.

"What must Will be going through?" She shook her head. "We have to help him; this is our fault."

"Our fault?" Wallace jerked back. "What mean you?"

"You saw Jackson. How he held the babes? It must have given him these thoughts of children, family. Now he wants one of his own."

"And why shouldn't he have one?" Wallace's father's voice boomed from the stairs. "He's the duke. He should be married and have an heir. Perhaps then, William will return home to us where he belongs."

"Father." Wallace sighed. "Will belongs with Jackson, you know that."

"I know nothing about that. But once Jackson takes a wife to his bed, I dare say there will not be room for more than two," Walter Holcombe declared.

Ignoring the elder Holcombe, Ellen turned to her husband. "Will must be devastated. But he's determined to find a wife suitable for his duke and asks my help."

"Good. Fair Ellen, find Baymore a wife and tell our William to come home." Their father gave a sharp nod, turned, and climbed the stairs to his rooms, leaving Wallace and Ellen alone.

"Will you?" Wallace took Ellen's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Do you know of someone? What woman of good family would be willing to wed into such a house?"

Ellen stared into the flames of the hearth. "A woman with no other choice." She gave Wallace a quick kiss. "I need to write a letter."

"To Will?"

"No, not yet." She shook her head and strode to the stairs. If she worked apace, she could have a messenger on his way within the hour.

"To who?" Wallace called after her.

She stopped on the stair and turned back to him. "To a woman with no other choice, of course."

Then she ran the rest of the way to her room.

* * * * *

"My lord! A messenger from Lord Holcombe," a guard called out.

Lord Basil Clayton woke. He'd been dozing in one of several chairs in front of the hearth, his hunting dogs at his feet as the late afternoon light fell through the windows of the great hall.

"Damn," Basil swore. He hadn't quite finished his dream. And it had been such a lovely dream. Bare soft skin over firm hard muscles tempted him. And he always gave in to temptation.

Now this interruption. What could old Holcombe possibly want from him? It had been years since their last meeting. This could only be bad news.

Basil rubbed his eyes, stretched, and waved his hand. "Show him in."

The messenger strode through the doors and across the hall. He bowed, presented the letter, and snapped to attention.

"My orders are to wait for a reply, my lord."

Basil nodded and ran a finger under the wax seal, breaking it, and opened the letter.

Neat, beautiful letters filled the page. Basil chuckled. Not old Holcombe after all.

Women always had such beautiful writing. Not like men. He'd never paid much attention to his lessons, unless they were about music or hunting, his two passions. Well, the only passions he's admit to or dared to be caught practicing.

My dearest cousin Lord Clayton,

I hope this finds both you and your dear sister well. Tell Lady Beth I do miss her company and that I remember with great fondness our time together as children those many years ago.

Oh aye, Ellen, their cousin. She had married the eldest Holcombe son. He searched his memory for the man's name, but came up empty, so he returned to the letter.

I was saddened to hear of the death of her husband, but I am sure you are happy to have her at your side once again.

Kind of Ellen to couch his sister's unceremonious return by her dead husband's elder brother in such a delicate way. But Ellen had always had a kindness and grace about her.

Cousin, I have been asked to inquire about a suitable wife for Duke Jackson Baymore. You and your dear sister came to my mind at first thought.

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Basil's eyes widened. Duke Baymore? Holder of some of the richest lands and the greatest wealth in these parts? He swallowed and read on.

This man is well known to me. My husband's brother William is his steward and we have met His Grace on more than one occasion.

Both Wallace and I think highly of this man. He is good, kind, and a fair man in all things.

"Ah, Wallace, that was his name," he muttered. And the younger brother was William. So, dear Ellen has found Beth a husband? And she vouches for him? He remembered Ellen as a clear-headed and sensible woman, as far as women went.

I will speak plain. His need for a wife is to fulfill his need for an heir and nothing more. He wants that to be clear. I have enclosed the contract for marriage drawn up by Lord William Holcombe, His Grace's steward in all matters.

Read it over. If it seems suitable and fair, please send your response to Lord Holcombe at Baymore Castle as soon as possible.

I think you'll find the conditions most fair and generous. Your cousin, Lady Ellen Holcombe

Basil pulled out the second sheet of fine parchment and looked it over. As he read, he sat up, brow furrowed, barely believing the terms. They asked for no dowry. How could that be? He scanned the contract again.

He'd read it correct. He recounted his coffers in his mind, knowing down to the last copper his worth. He wasn't without funds, but he didn't have coins to spare. His lands were not as rich as Baymore's, or his taxes so high he bled his people to death, either.

The terms were more than fair, and the lack of a dowry even better, because he'd paid all her bride's dowry to her first husband and the fool had used it to fund his disastrous attempt at fratricide. Generous terms, indeed. Any more so and Basil would have consented to marry the man himself. He snorted at that thought, then grinned.

At last, a marriage proposal Beth could not find fault with nor one that would cost him dearly.

"Wait here." Basil motioned to a servant. "Give him ale, food, and rest."

"Thank you, my lord." The man bowed.

Basil rose and searched for his sister. He found her in her rooms, stitching.

"Sister, I've received a letter from our cousin Ellen."

Beth looked up, the needle stilled in her hand. "Ellen? It's been a long time since I've heard that name." She smiled at some memory and he could see it had been a good one.

"I'm glad to see your joy at her name." He held up the parchments. "Perhaps what she has written will please you also."

"Written? To me?" Beth held out her hand, her finger wiggling for the letters like a child reaching for a sweet.

"Not yet." Basil withheld them. He wanted to broach the subject of marriage with the utmost care. If he knew Beth, and he did, she'd either fly into a rage at the suggestion and boot him from her chambers, or laugh him down the hall.

Now she stared at him with wide brown eyes. As always, a mask of quiet curiosity guarded her true emotions as he sat on the cushioned bench next to her.

"She inquires about your disposition toward a marriage."

"Marriage?"

"Must you repeat my words, sister?"

"I must. If you are going to utter such nonsense." She put down her hoop and needle and folded her arms. Basil watched her gaze take on a small glint of stubbornness and a large amount of wariness.

"This is not nonsense. Nothing to take as such either." He took a deep breath. "Ellen sends a marriage proposal to you from the Duke of Baymore. With most favorable and generous terms and conditions." He smiled at his sister. She meant the world to him, and if he could see her safely settled as a duchess, then he will have done his proper duty by her. "The Duke of Baymore?" She sat up. "The new duke? Well, he's not so new this last year or so, is he?" She glanced out the window and bit her bottom lip. "What has Ellen told him about me and my situation?"

Now came the delicate part. Basil took Beth's hands in his and rubbed his thumb across the smooth ivory skin. "She's told him of your marriage, the death of your husband, though not the details, and he is willing to take you as his duchess."

She sat back and exhaled. "Did she tell him of Anne?" Her eyes flicked to the small bed sitting next to hers where her daughter slept.

"She doesn't mention the child. Perhaps the news of her birth didn't reach Ellen."

He smiled at the young girl curled up in the bed. All blonde curls and pink cheeks. An angel of a child in both looks and temperament.

Beth sighed. "Once he knows, Bas, he'll rescind his offer." She shook her head. "No man will take on another man's child. And I won't leave her." Beth's gaze softened as she looked at her little girl, the sole joy of her life. The child held Basil's heart as well.

"Let us see." He gave her hand a squeeze. "Shall I write back?"

Beth stood and walked to the small bed, knelt, and brushed a ringlet of flaxen silk from the child's face. "It would break my heart to be parted from her."

"It would break mine to see you so parted, sister."

"But the dowry? I won't cost you another copper, Bas." She shook her head.

"He asks for nothing, just your hand."

Beth took a deep breath. "If I say no, refuse the offer, brother, what would you do? You have the power to force me to my bridal bed." She searched his eyes for the truth. They both knew without her own funds she was no better than his property, to do with as he wished.

"I won't force you, sister. All I can do is point out the benefits of such a union to all of us." He took a breath and continued. "I don't want you to agree if you don't want this, Beth. But if you think you could be happy..." He paused. "I want only what is best for you and Anne. I would have you here with me always; have no fear about that issue. But a duchess? I have seen Baymore Castle, and it is large and fine. Baymore's lands are rich, as are his coffers. You would want for nothing."

She seemed to think on his words, then drew herself upright. "Aye. Write the letter. Tell him of Anne. If he accepts her, I will accept him. What choice do I have?" She shrugged. "I would want for nothing."

"Is that such a bad thing, sister?"

She sighed. "No, it's not bad; neither is to be wed again. I would have preferred to choose my own husband, perhaps even find love, but those circumstances never offered themselves to me." She nodded. "I'll do my duty to you and to Anne."

He stood, took her hand, kissed it, and left to write the letter for the messenger to deliver.

At last Beth would give up her thoughts and hopes of love. Those notions had abandoned Basil years ago, when he was a young and naive man. Now, almost forty, he had no illusions that somehow love would ever come to him.

But if she believed, God bless her in her dreams.

* * * * *

Jackson watched as Will walked out the door of the hall, his morning meal uneaten, without so much as a word spoken between them. Jackson worried the heel of his bread, plucking at it with his fingers as he thought about last night.

Will had not joined him in bed for the fifth night in a row. Angered and puzzled, Jackson had placed himself between Will and Will's door, ready to discuss the problem.

"It's the boy. Your new page." Will jerked his head toward the stair. "It's best if we take care for now. Until we are sure we can trust him."

In the dim hall, Jackson had seen Will's point and agreed.

Now, in the morning light, Jackson wondered what exactly he had agreed to. Surely, Will hadn't meant to keep himself from Jackson's bed for much longer. Surely, Will suffered from the loss of Jackson's touch, the same way Jackson suffered. Jackson missed Will, missed Will's body next to his, beneath his, Will's sweet breath as they kissed, the taste of Will's skin, his cock, and his cream.

It had been five days and nights and still no sign from Will that it would end.

Jackson frowned, and dropped the rest of his bread on the trencher, his appetite gone. Without Will sitting beside him, there was no joy in a meal. No joy in anything, really.

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He didn't know if he could live much longer without his sweet Will.

If Will did not come to him tonight, he would go to Will. On his knees if needs be, begging for the favor of his lover.

There was a small cough at his side. He turned and saw the source of his problem. Young Liam, his new page, stood next to the table, head down, and hands clenched at his side, his knuckles white as if in anger. Or fear.

Jackson grimaced at the thought the boy feared him. He had never spoken harshly, had never mistreated the lad, or raised his voice at him. And yet, his page trembled as he stood at attention.

"Your Grace? Shall I polish your riding boots?" The boy's voice seemed to slip from between tight lips over gritted teeth.

"Aye. My riding boots." Jackson nodded.

The lad nodded and turned to leave.

"Liam?"

He froze and turned back, eyes still on the ground. "Aye, Your Grace?"

"Is something troubling you? Does something prey on your mind?" Jackson softened his voice.

The child gulped and he shook his head far too hard. "Nay, Your Grace."

"If there is, you can speak to me about it. I will listen."

"Aye, Your Grace." The boy nodded then ran off, up the stairs to Jackson's room.

Perhaps Will had been right. Perhaps the boy couldn't be trusted to keep secret anything out of the ordinary he might discover.

Jackson rose, emptied his tankard, and went to find his master of arms.

Chapter Twelve

Liam leaned against the wall of the upstairs corridor and sucked breath into his frozen chest. He didn't know how long he could keep working for the man who'd killed his father and denied him his rights.

But His Grace had been nothing but kind to him. In the days he'd worked for the duke, Liam had been shown a gentleness from the big man that belied his obvious strength and power. Soft spoken, not loud, never arrogant or cruel, the now duke of Baymore, the pretender, the murder of his father, had given Liam every evidence of his goodness and worth. Not only in his dealings with Liam, but in the way he handled all the people of his service.

His hearty laughter had even brought Liam to the brink of a smile on more than one occasion. His concern for his men was plain when he conferred with his master of arms as they discussed the soldiers late into the night while Liam nodded on the bench nearby.

This was madness.

The confusion Liam felt bubbled in his mind, torturing him as he teetered on all too fragile emotions. He was unwilling to say the words in his mind, to admit to himself, or anyone else, the most horrible of betrayals, the image of his father that his mother had created in his mind over the span of long years.

He feared to speak the truth. He liked, nay, admired, the duke. In every sense of the word, the duke seemed a good man.

So if he had killed Liam's father...

No, he wouldn't think it. It would mar the memory of his mother to think she'd lied about the man she claimed had been his father.

But the words he'd overheard that night in the barracks as the men spoke of his father haunted him now.

"Aye. He was pure evil, I tell you. Pure evil," the soldier had hissed.

It was unthinkable.

Liam's cheeks burned with the heat of his shame. If they'd spoken the truth, his father had been a bad man, unloved by his men and perhaps his people. A terrible pain rose in his gut, and he doubled over with a sharp gasp.

"Page?" A woman's sharp voice brought him upright.

"Mistress?" It was one of the chamber maids. She held a lit candle. "Here, take this and light the fire in His Grace's room. He'll be up the stairs before long and need his warmth."

"Aye." He nodded and took the candle from her. She put her hands on her round hips and stared at him.

"Are you ill, boy?" A hint of concern softened her voice.

"Nay, Mistress." He shook his head. "Mistress?"

"Aye, lad?"

"Did you work here in the castle, before. With the other duke?" He stared up at her face, afraid to give any of his secrets away.

"Aye." She wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered.

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. It ate at him, not knowing the truth.

"Was he as bad, as evil, as they say?" He prayed she'd tell him no, that his father had been a good man, unjustly killed, his life cut short.

"A right demon, he was. Count your blessings it's Jackson you work for and not Hugh." She tugged her shawl tight around her. "God smiled on the people of Baymore the day he died. Now, get along. His Grace will be up soon." She waved her hands at him and he turned away before she could see the tears in his eyes.

He rushed down the hall, holding his hand in front of the flame to keep it protected, and then pushed into the duke's rooms. Liam leaned against the door and forced it shut with a bang.

Tears formed a veil in front of his eyes, making all he perceived a shimmering shadow of reality. Pushing her words away with a hard shove that matched the one he'd given the door, he went to the hearth to light the fire.

Once the flames caught, he sat back on his heels, dropped the candle, and buried his face in his hands, sobbing.

His father had been the evil one.

Jackson had rescued his people from him.

Everyone was happy Hugh was dead.

Everyone.

"Father!" He sobbed, as the shame of having such a man as Hugh be his father. His da. The image, like a sacred painting, of the man he'd longed to see, to know, to become, ripped and tore like a banner in a storm.

Liam lay on the floor, curled into a tight ball, his fists mimicking his body, his teeth chattering as he shivered.

* * * * *

Will climbed the stairs and trudged down the hall, his feet dragging along the floor. He avoided looking at Jackson's door and turned to his, opened it, and hesitated.

If he went to Jackson, he'd only put off the pain to come. Best if he stayed his course and distance himself from his lover.

It would only get harder, that he knew.

Once the woman arrived, and the marriage was performed, Jackson would take her to his bed and drive Will from him forever. Keeping their love a secret from everyone in the castle was hard enough, but to keep it from a wife? A man could keep a mistress, by some it was even expected, but no woman would put up with her husband's male lover, that much he was damned sure of.

Either Jackson had lost his senses if he thought they could maintain their relationship or he had no plans to continue it. Jackson had chosen a wife and family over Will, his lover.

Will groaned with the pain of that knowledge and stepped inside his room, then shut the door.

He undressed, every movement slow and precise. For days he'd fought the depression threatening to engulf him like the black maw of some horrible creature that had crawled from the pits of hell. There were duties to attend to, farms and herds to manage, the castle to run. There was no time to give in to such foolishness. Such weakness. Such matters of the heart.

His heart might be broken, shattered by Jackson's request, but the life of the castle and all inside it went on. Will had his duty. And he would do it, no matter what.

He may have failed as a lover in giving Jackson all he'd ever wanted, but he wouldn't fail in his duties as Jackson's steward.

Will stumbled to the bed and fell, naked, on top of the quilts. His body burned for his lover, the man who held his very life and soul in his hands.

And had crushed them both.

A heat, familiar and unwelcome, flushed through Will's body. His need for his lover had burned in him these many nights as he'd denied himself and Jackson of their couplings.

Will's channel ached for the fullness that only Jackson could bring; he ached for the big man's strong arms around him and for the sweet poetry of his lover's words as they tickled his ears.

Now, denied all that, Will burned with the memories of him and Jackson. Their time in the hut on the side of the mountain. Their loving the night Will took Jackson for the first time. Their days of peace and happiness since claiming Baymore for Jackson.

Now it would all be destroyed.

"I need an heir."

Nothing could have destroyed Will more thoroughly than the request for a wife and that Will be the one to find her.

Was he no better than a procurer of women for His Grace?

No longer a lover?

No longer adored?

He moaned as he grasped his stiff, aching flesh. Damn, so long denied its pleasure, it seared his hand with its heat as he stroked it, coaxing the drops of pearls from it. Would Jackson ever touch him again? Ever take Will's staff in his mouth and pleasure him?

Would Jackson give up his quest for an heir?

Will knew the answer, as surely as he knew he'd never stop loving the big man.

Rapid, quick jerks brought Will to the edge of release, but without Jackson, it failed to resolve. Will hung, suspended over a black chasm, unable to reach that place where all his passions and emotions were fulfilled.

With a low groan, Will fell back against his pillows, his body taut and quivering, his rod long and hard, its tip full and aching, as his body hummed its emptiness.

* * * * *

Jackson came down the hall and paused at Will's door. He'd sent the page to bed, a pallet on the floor of one of the small rooms used by the upstairs servants. He stood alone in the corridor.

He rapped on Will's door as he cast about, searching for signs of life in the hall. Jackson's brow furrowed as he stared at the door, willing it to open. Will had to be inside. Why would he deny Jackson access?

Jackson brought his fist up to pound the door and the cry bubbled up from his throat, demanding to be let in, but he choked them both off. He rapped twice.

The bar slid aside, the door opened, but only a small way.

"Your Grace?" Will looked up at him through the narrow opening.

"Will? What is this?" Jackson didn't understand why Will hadn't thrown open the door, pulled him inside.

"It's late, Your Grace. Is there something you need?" Will's voice was cool, yet courteous. Shivers ran down Jackson's spine at the recognition of his lover's tone.

Will was angry, no doubt about that. But what had he done to cause such a temper?

"You know what I need." Jackson pushed against the door, but Will held it firm.

"Not tonight," Will whispered, and leaned just a bit forward into the gap between door and frame. From what little Jackson could see, Will wore only his night robe clutched around his body as if fresh from bed.

Jackson inhaled, longing for just a whiff of his lover. Even from where he stood behind the door, Will's scent carried to him. There was a sharp odor of sweat and sex in the air that flowed around Will.

Jackson glanced down, taking in his lover's body, looking as he had so many times when he'd come to Jackson's room prepared for making love. "Will?"

"Aye, Your Grace." There was no hint of play in Will's eyes, nor the usual smile on his lips. A shock of terror ran through Jackson with a single unthinkable, unimaginable thought— Will with another man.

Jackson swallowed, then forced the question out, knowing he didn't want to know if the answer was nay. "Are you alone?"

Will's gaze shot up to meet his and they held. Beautiful blue eyes searched Jackson's, but Jackson had no notion of what Will desired. He didn't seem to know Will at all these days.

"I am."

"Then why won't you let me in?" Jackson whispered as he leaned closer, pressing his body against the hard wood that stood between him and his lover. It took all his control not to smash open the door, throw Will backward, and take possession of the room and his lover.

"It's late."

"That has never stopped you or me before."

"I'm not well. I'm very tired." Will shrugged.

"What's wrong, my lord?" Jackson's stomach rolled. As much as Will denied it, something was terribly wrong.

Will closed his eyes, exhaled, and then opened them. "I can't believe after all this time you could ask me that question and not know the answer."

"But..." Jackson paused, gathering his thoughts.

"Go to bed, Your Grace." Will tried to close the door, but Jackson shoved his knee in the opening.

"Open this door now, Lord Holcombe. We must speak." Jackson used his best Duke of Baymore voice.

Will exhaled, stepped away, and Jackson pushed in. He closed the door and stared at Will, standing in the middle of the room. Jackson took in the chamber, seeing Will's rumpled bed, the hearth's low banked fire, his desk overflowing with ledgers and parchments. Nothing was different or out of place. No wayward lover. That he could see.

Jackson smothered the urge to search Will's room, fling open his chest, and get on his knees to peer under the bed.

"Tell me now, Will. I won't be put off any longer. Why have you kept yourself from me? And don't speak to me about the new page. He's nowhere to be found now. Nor was he here last night." Jackson advanced on his lover.

Will stepped back, his grip on his robe tightening. A fire burned in Will's eyes as they narrowed and glared at Jackson.

"You are a dolt, Your Grace."

Jackson's eyebrows shot upward. "Am I?"

"Aye. A dolt. Thick headed and thicker boned. Speak the truth, Your Grace. Have you no idea, nothing that comes to mind?"

Jackson held out his arms and shook his head. "Please tell me so I can make it right and correct the wrong I've done you."

"Correct the wrong?" Will straightened. "Make it right?"

"Aye. Tell me and I will set it right."

"As you wish, Your Grace." Will nodded. He gathered the gown and stalked to his bed. His chin jutted upward, his shoulders back. "If you ever loved me, if you do still love me, rescind your contract of marriage and abandon your quest for an heir."

Chapter Thirteen

Will locked his shaking knees and held himself up. More than his next breath, he wanted to go to Jackson and hold him in his arms. Throw off his robe and let Jackson have his way with his body. But he'd learned about begging lovers the hard way and he had some small bit of pride left.

"Will, how can you ask me to do that? You know I must have an heir to deliver Baymore to." Jackson took a step back.

"I know nothing of the sort." Will turned his nose up and burned a stare into Jackson's eyes. He didn't care how Jackson justified it; Will couldn't see the need, especially for a wife.

"You must know! It has weighed heavily on my mind for some time. I must have an heir. I am responsible for the lands, the people." He waved his arm to encompass everyone and everything. "I am Duke of Baymore."

"And have you forgotten it was I who put you there? It was I who fought Hugh to the death for you, freed you from that hell hole, and declared you rightful duke?" Will tried to keep the shaking that rattled his bones from poisoning his voice, but heard the betraying tremor.

"I have never forgotten that." Jackson shook his head. "Never."

"Have you forgotten then, that you love me?"

"Never."

"And that I love you? More than my own life? More than my family, my father, my birthright?" Will clenched his teeth and lips to keep them from betraying him again. His father's rejection had torn a hole in Will's heart that gaped and bled. To have lost his love and good favor had been a hard blow, the one that he'd dreaded all along.

"Nay, Will. I have not forgotten your sacrifices."

"Then explain to me how you plan to keep a wife, bed her, and bed me at the same time." Will crossed his arms over his chest and waited for the big man to answer. "Are you planning to leave her in the middle of the night and come to me? Or am I to come to you and ask her to leave? Perhaps a miracle will occur and she'll just roll over in bed and make room for me? Then you can have us both, as your whim moves you."

Jackson's mouth opened, then closed and then opened again, as if he were a fish on the bank, gasping for breath, and the color drained from his face.

And in that long moment as Will stared his lover down, he saw the realization hit Jackson as surely as the branch had hit him on their ride back to Baymore.

"Oh fuck." Jackson clutched his head with one hand and reached for a chair with the other, then sank into it.

"I couldn't have said it better, Your Grace," Will drawled. He sat on the edge of his bed, letting the robe fall open over his legs.

Jackson scrubbed his hands over his face, then looked up at Will.

"I am indeed a right dolt. Thick boned and thick headed." He shook his head. "I never once thought about the truth of it. All I saw was my duty to this land and a son to leave it to."

"And what about this poor woman? She's signed the contract and will arrive soon to wed you. She might put up with a mistress; most nobles keep several. But when she finds your lover is a man?" Will shook his head. "She has family. Her brother is bringing her here to see her safely ensconced at your side. I'm not sure he'll be pleased when she tells him what she's found here. We'll be killed, Jackson."

Jackson sighed, slumped even farther over, his elbows on his knees as he cradled his head in his hands.

Will didn't stop there, he couldn't. It was as if the dam had been opened and everything he'd held inside spewed forth. "Oh, you'll have an heir for Baymore, but it won't be you. With you dead, your wife will control the dukedom. She may marry who she will, or of her brother's will, with your money and lands behind her, with or without your child in her belly."

"What have I done?" Jackson moaned. Straightening, he gazed into Will's eyes. "And to you, my Will. I must have hurt you terribly." He shook his head and reached for Will, but drew back his hand before he touched Will's knee. "I'm so sorry, Will. Damn my stupid pride."

"Well, it won't be the first time your pride has gotten us into trouble, Your Grace, and I doubt it will be the last," Will said and pulled the robe over his legs to cover them.

Jackson stared at him with eyes so bleak and hopeless it stabbed at Will's heart. Jackson might have hurt him deeply, but he'd never hate the big man.

"Oh my sweet love." Will sighed and went to him. He knelt and ran a hand over Jackson's arm. "We'll find a way out of this. I should never have written the letters, I see that now. This is my fault."

"Your fault? I asked for the wife!" Jackson looked up at Will. "And asked you to find her for me. God, what an ass I've been."

"Aye. It's my fault and you've been an ass. We are well matched, Your Grace." He gave Jackson's shoulder a squeeze meant to comfort. "I was too distraught over your request. Too stunned to do any more than carry out your orders and feel my own pain, my mind murky and dark. I should have spoken of my feelings. I should have thought of the dangers before putting quill to parchment." Will pushed to his feet. "Now, I'll have to find a way to put a halt to this marriage."

"A halt?" Jackson shrugged. "Can't I refuse her?"

"On what grounds?" Will paced, needing room to move and think. If they didn't get out of this, surely both of them would lose their lives and Will's urge to protect his lover wouldn't allow that to happen.

"Perhaps she has a lover? Perhaps she might want to be freed from this contract more than I?" Jackson grasped at a thin ledge to hold his hopes on.

Will crossed the room, long sharp strides taking him the length and back as he pondered the situation.

There was little that would allow for the contract to be broken. He went to the desk and sifted through the parchments strewn across it. In the piles of papers he had a copy of the terms of marriage. He'd buried it to avoid looking at it.

Will pulled back the chair and sat. "Here it is." He leaned over the words, reading each section until he came to the end. "There is not much here. I write a better contract than I thought, damn me." He gave a wry laugh.

"What if I caught her with another man? Before we married?" Jackson's brow rose in hope.

"And ruin her reputation? I suppose I could approach her, get her in some compromising situation for you to discover." Will's stomach turned at the thought, not of just being with a woman, but of the depths of deceit they'd sink in that plan. Were they that desperate to label an innocent woman as indecent? To sacrifice another person for their own well-being?

Jackson looked up, his mouth downturned and his eyes bleary. They locked gazes. Desperation and hope burned in his dark eyes and Will feared Jackson would make a reckless and hasty decision. There had been enough of those made already.

"No. There must be another way. I would not forfeit both our honors in such an evil scheme." Will's lover shook his head.

Jackson may have doubted, but Will knew his lover was not the kind of man to destroy someone just for his own personal gain. A lover of men, a sinner against God, Jackson may be, but he was no deceiver, no liar, not such a low scoundrel.

Will stood and paced again. "Let me ponder this, Your Grace." He crossed his arms, gathering the robe around him and chewed his lip.

Jackson had something in his thought about her and another man. What if she asked to be released? Her reputation would remain intact, unsullied. But how?

They could tell her the truth and throw themselves on her pity and graces. If God was with them, Lady Beth might be kind and understanding, like Lady Ellen, but he doubted they could have such favor with the Good Lord.

It would mean a horrible and dishonorable death.

They would swing from the nearest tree, their privates hacked away. Will shuddered as a chill raced down his back at the memory of his night in an icy field. That would have been an easier death at least.

His lover watched with rumpled brows as Will strode back and forth.

The more Will turned the problem over in his mind, the more he doubted he'd discover a way out. Not without leaving bodies and reputations dead and destroyed.

At last, he halted his march and turned to face Jackson.

"My duke, I fear I am at a loss. There is nothing to be done with it. We must wait and see what occurs once your bride arrives. Let us see what kind of woman she is, and if her brother is a reasonable man."

"Perhaps we could pay them off, give her the bride's dowry?"

Will shook his head. "What excuse could we possibly give without telling the truth and sign the warrants for our arrests and deaths?"

Jackson groaned and shook his head, then looked up at Will. "Perhaps she'll be repulsed by me and refuse."

"Repulsed?" Will strode to his lover and corded his fingers through Jackson's great unruly mane. "By you? Never. My greatest fear is she falls in love with you and you with her."

Jackson pulled Will to him, brushing aside the robe that hid his lover's body from his touch. As he ran his hand over Will's chest to pluck at a perfect nipple, he shuddered.

"There is no room in my heart for anyone but you, sweet Will. My soul is yours."

Will looked down at Jackson. "That may be, but once you are wed, your body will belong to her."

"If that is so, we only have a few days more before she arrives. Let us not waste a moment of it, my lord." Jackson pulled Will tight in a possessive grip.

Will smiled, slipped off his robe, baring firm pale flesh to Jackson. "As usual, I am ready, Your Grace. You, on the other hand, are still dressed."

He pulled away, lay back on the bed, and spread his long hair over the pillows. "Remove your clothes, Your Grace."

"Aye, my lord." Jackson obeyed.

Chapter Fourteen

At midmorning Marcus crossed from the barracks, entered the keep, and made his way up the stairs to Lord Holcombe's room in answer to the steward's summons. He didn't dare to ask about the strange atmosphere that seemed to float in the air inside the castle, but knew that neither Jackson, nor Will, were happy. Some pall, some dread spell had been cast over them and for these many days and nights they were silent and brooding.

At William's door he paused and knocked.

"Enter."

Marcus pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"Shut the door, Master Marcus." William, seated at his desk, waved a hand at him without looking up from his work. A large ledger lay before him, as he bent over it with a quill in his hand. Marcus watched as William dabbed his pen into a pot of ink, wrote, then sprinkled powder and blotted at the words.

"Have a seat." William looked up and leaned back in his chair.

Marcus sat in the chair in front of William's desk. "Your lordship."

"I have a duty for you and a dozen of your best men. Lady Beth Mayfield and her brother Lord Basil Clayton are on their way to Baymore. I want you to ride out to meet them and escort them safely here. Make sure the men and yourself are well turned out."

"Aye, my lord." Marcus nodded. "Guests of the duke?"

William swallowed, his fingers worried the edge of the parchment. "Indeed. Lady Beth is coming to wed the duke, and her brother brings her to her betrothed." He gritted out the words between tightly clenched teeth and thin white lips. For the first time, Marcus was aware of the dark circles under William's eyes.

"To wed?" Marcus jerked back. "The duke? But...you...he..." He had no way to express his surprise at this turn of events. How could he admit his suspicions about Lord William and the duke? If they were false, William would have every right to dismiss him, or even pull his sword and run him through.

William's chest rose with the deep breath he pulled in. Then with a deep shudder, he exhaled and slumped in his seat, burying his hands in his hair. He looked up and caught Marcus's gaze, his eyes filled with absolute despair.

So, it was true.

"How did this happen?" Marcus leaned forward, concerned about William.

William stood, pushing the chair back and toppling it. "His damned pride, honor, and duty to Baymore." William waved his hand about. "My pain at his pronouncement blinded me to the possibilities. Before I realized what I had done, I'd sent the contract, and we'd sealed our fate." He paced across the room, each step quick and hard. As Marcus watched, he could see the distraction the steward had been driven to in the rumpled manner of his clothing, the unruly braid of his hair, and the sourness of his once beautiful expression.

"What are you going to do?"

"That's what I want to speak with you about, Marcus." Will stopped next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. It trembled.

William took a deep breath. "I'm going to risk telling you the truth. I pray I don't have to kill you over it," he whispered. "I'd hate to lose the best master of arms Baymore's ever had."

Marcus put his hand over William's and clamped it down. "You won't. Speak freely, my lord." He'd earned their trust the first time they met in the dungeon corridor two years ago and now it was time to earn it again.

"Then you know of Jackson and I? Our...bond?"

"I have suspected it from the beginning."

"And you never told? Never thought to accuse us?" William didn't pull his hand away and Marcus didn't remove his.

"Never, my lord. What purpose would it serve? I am not so minded to deny any person, man or woman, a chance for love." He shook his head. "It would only leave Baymore in peril, to be fought over by other lords perhaps not as fair, generous, or concerned about their people and their lands."

"Aye." William sighed. "We are blessed to have you Marcus."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have a plan, but it involves you." William pulled his hand back.

"Me, my lord?" Marcus's belly rolled over, as if he'd eaten bad meat. Knowing of their love and not telling was one thing, but to become involved?

William took his seat again, folded his hands together on the table, and held Marcus's gaze.

"The contract is stable. If there is any way out of it, it must come from Lady Beth. I've thought this over hard and for much time, Marcus, and I have no other solution. I want you to woo her. Take your time coming to Baymore once you've joined her caravan and present yourself to her." William waved his hand at Marcus.

Marcus's mouth dropped open. Had William lost his mind?

"Woo her? Why would she want me over Jackson? He's a duke. I am nothing, a lowly soldier."

"Come now, Marcus. I think you underestimate your charms. I've heard the servant girls speak of you." William cocked an eyebrow at him.

He laughed. "You think the wenches at the castle find me well and so the fine Lady Beth would also? You're mad!"

"I'm desperate." William's eyes burned.

"And still not thinking clearly." Marcus shook his head. "Look at me," he declared, holding his arms out for inspection.

"I have," Will drawled. "Trust me, you are a finely made man, Marcus. Any woman, any man, would find you pleasing." Something glittered in William's eyes and Marcus swallowed at his lord's appraising gaze.

"I have no words, my lord." He didn't. William's look and words spoke too much and he didn't want to go down that forbidden path. His path wasn't theirs. For a moment, a spark of pride burned in him that William, so handsome, so fair, would find him pleasing, but he let that uneasy ember die.

"None are needed. I am sworn to Jackson, both as his lover and as his steward." He shrugged. "You are sworn to him also. To protect his lands, his keep, and his person. He needs you now more than any other time. I know this is something terrible I ask of you, but we are in a terrible position."

"You want me to woo her, win her heart, so that she'll cancel the contract of marriage?" Marcus stared into Will's fevered eyes. "And choose me?"

"Right." Will nodded.

Marcus ran a hand over his face and sat back.

"What then?"

William frowned. "What do you mean what then?"

"After I've won her heart. She's in love with me, the marriage rescinded, the contract null and void. She just goes back home?" Marcus stared at the steward. "Am I expected to marry her? Stay here or renounce my oath, leave my post, and return with her?"

William groaned and closed his eyes. "Damn."

"Damn, indeed."

"We are doomed, then, Jackson and I. He will marry her and..." William seemed to collapse upon himself. "I will leave," he whispered. "Return to my father's keep." His face paled, his brow furrowed as if under great strain, and he lowered his head to rest it on the desk.

Marcus's heart went out to his lordship and to his duke. William was right; as master of arms he had given his oath to Baymore, to guard it, to protect it from attack, to hold it dear. They were under attack, or soon would be, if anyone found out about Jackson and William's love and it was Marcus's duty to protect them. After all, he'd sworn his life to Baymore.

If that sacrifice included wooing a lady, and marrying her, so be it. It wasn't how he'd dreamed of it happening, of the love he prayed he'd find, but a wife was what he'd longed for. Perhaps a family. Would it be so bad to get what he'd dreamed of, no matter what the means?

"I'll do it."

William's head shot up. "What?"

"I agree. I'll do my best to win her. But I want...I want a dowry. I have nothing, my lord, to offer her. I want a house for her. Land and livestock, perhaps. I want to stay on here, as master of arms." He bit his lip to stop his rambling, thinking he'd asked for too much.

William's gaze met his and Marcus held his breath. Fear that he'd overstepped his rank, demanded too much, shot through him as he waited.

"Done. I'll draw up the deeds now." William pulled out a fresh piece of parchment, dipped his quill in the ink, and began writing. "And Marcus? Jackson must never know of this deceit."

Chapter Fifteen

Lord Basil Clayton sat in a chair next to the fire burning in the pit and stared into the flames. His sister had taken the marriage offer well, and for that he was glad. Perhaps she could be happy at Baymore and her little Anne also. As her brother, he'd arranged her first marriage and she'd seemed pleased with that one.

Over the course of her brief marriage, she'd written to him of her new husband, that he'd been kind and good, and of her pleasure at the birth of Anne. All good things. She'd never spoken of love and had never expected it, but he knew now she would have preferred a love match.

Wouldn't we all? Basil snorted. Love? Women's foolishness!

Aye, there were some who loved each other, but among the nobility marriages were more of necessity and position, than of love. Still, it was true that over time, convenience had become love in some cases.

Basil had seen her married to a younger son of Mayfield and gone on living his life knowing he'd done well by her and his responsibility for her was complete.

Then her fool of a husband had been caught in some intrigue against his own brother, the Duke of Mayfield, and in the subsequent fighting he'd been killed. Beth and Anne had been returned to Basil, unhurt, thank God, but her husband's foolishness had tainted her good name.

The only thing that had saved her and her child from the same fate as her husband was that, before dying, her husband had declared her innocent of all knowing of the plot. Well, that and knowing that if his sister had been harmed in any way, Basil would have gathered his men and demanded justice, if not a small piece of flesh for taking the life of his innocent sister and her child.

He glanced at the tent. Inside Beth and Anne played on the quilts. The child was beautiful, and his sister just as fair.

Basil sighed and closed his eyes.

Around the camp, his men worked, brushing down the horses, gathering firewood for the evening meal, the cook and his helper making sure all was ready, and the guards patrolling the edge of the woods and the road.

"Riders approach!" a cry went up and Basil groaned. What now? Hopefully, some passing merchants, not a gang of thieves.

Beth stuck her head out of the tent. "Basil?" Her gaze searched his then darted toward the road.

"Have no fear, Beth. I'll see to it." He rose and straightened his cloak, his hand going to the hilt of his sword hanging at his hip.

After a quick nod, she ducked back in, pulling the drape closed, but he knew Beth.

She'd make her own preparations for safety.

* * * * *

"My lady, what is this?" Her lady-in-waiting, Martha, stood from her spot on a cushioned bench. The old woman had been with Beth since Beth was a child.

"We have visitors." Beth turned, strode to her trunk, and knelt. After throwing back the lid, she pulled out a dagger and slipped it among the folds of her gown in case she had need of it.

"Put Anne in her crib, Martha."

Martha moved to the baby, scooped her up in her arms, and placed her in the small crib. "Shhh, sweet Anne," she crooned.

Beth's gaze never left the tent's curtain as her ears strained to hear beyond the heavy canvas of her abode. Little Anne babbled and played with a small cloth doll but Beth focused all her attention on the happenings outside.

Every muscle in Beth's body tightened as she strained to hear her brother's voice call to her either in warning or in welcome. At last, voices raised in greeting, many hooves stomped the ground, and the snorting and whinnying of the horses told her there had to be at least a dozen riders.

It seemed safe, for now. Her grip on the hilt of the blade eased, but she didn't let it go.

She parted the canvas and peered out.

A large man dismounted, wearing a polished metal chest plate over a richly embroidered tabard, a great sword at his hip, and a helmet that covered most of his head. He removed it and shook out thick brown hair that fell to his shoulders. He wore a close-cropped beard, and his eyes were the oddest shade of gray.

Was this her duke?

Had Baymore himself come to escort her to his keep?

Heart beating an uncertain rhythm, she scanned him, top to bottom, while she had the chance to look without fear of being seen as too bold. All in all, he pleased her in his looks.

But looks weren't all, she knew that.

Her brother greeted the man; they clasped arms, then headed toward the fire. A chair was brought out for their guest and placed across from her brother's seat. The duke's men spread out among their men, tying their horses to a line, unsaddling, and setting up their own tents nearby.

So, he had come to greet her.

"Is it him, the duke? Come to meet you?" Martha whispered from her post at the crib.

"Shhh. I think it must be him." She waved her hand for quiet, her gaze still latched onto the man.

Her heart fluttered at the thought of his anxiousness and concern for his new bride. And at his good looks; she could not deny that so far he pleased her.

He removed his riding cloak, draped it over the back of his chair, and she got a better look at his form. Strong legs from riding, wide shoulders, and muscles in his arms from carrying a sword. He was no duke in name only, that much she could tell.

Her eyebrows rose as she reached the bulge in his trousers. If she judged right, he had a well-sized maleness. She bit her lips, but a soft giggle escaped.

Ye gods, she missed being with a man. Ashamed to admit to even herself, even though she'd never loved her husband, he'd opened her eyes to the joys of wifely duty. He'd been a kind and good lover, although she had no other experience to judge him by. For his part, he'd taken his time with her, hadn't hurt her, and had been most affectionate. She missed being held, being kissed and caressed. She closed her eyes and inhaled. She missed the smell of a man, of his sweat and taste and the feeling of his manhood entering her. Between her legs her woman's core clenched, and wetness gathered there.

What would Martha say if she knew her charge had such bawdy thoughts? Or Basil? He'd probably choke on his ale.

With a quiet shudder, she opened her eyes and stared at her next husband, Duke of Baymore. Her belly gave a little flutter, her pulse quickened, and she licked her lips.

He was a fine figure of a man; that she could not deny. And he'd come to see her, after all. She looked down and spied the toe of her slipper peeking from beneath the hem of her plain gray wool traveling dress.

"Oh hell!" With a sharp hiss, she spun away from the opening and rushed to her trunk. If he were to see her for the first time, she'd best to make it memorable. She pulled out all of her gowns, tossing them on the rugs laid down to cover the ground until she found the right one.

Holding up the green velvet gown, she looked it over and smiled.

"Martha! Quick, attend me. I cannot meet his grace in this dress."

Martha ran to her and helped her undress. Once the new gown was on and arranged, Beth sat on a stool.

"Hurry, Martha. I know we don't have the fire for the curling iron, but at least brush out my hair!"

Martha snatched the tortoiseshell and boar bristle brush from Beth's small trunk and went to work on her hair.

* * * * *

"So, the duke has sent you as an honor guard?" Basil regarded the man sitting across from him. He'd presented himself and his papers as soon as they'd sat. Basil passed them back to Baymore's master of arms.

The man certainly looked the part. There wasn't an inch of him that wasn't muscle. He looked like a soldier, but his manner and speech said this man was someone's second or third son, a nobleman by birth, but without lands of his own.

"Aye. His grace is much concerned for his bride's welfare. There have been bandits reported on the roads along this stretch. He wasn't sure how many men you'd have with you."

"I will thank His Grace when we meet. I had not heard of the trouble before we left my keep." Basil smiled.

"And her ladyship? Is she about?" The man strained his neck to catch a glimpse of her.

"She's in her tent with her child and her maid."

"Her child?" The master of arms sat up. "I had no idea she had a child?" He frowned.

"Is that a problem?" Basil asked. "His Grace was informed of my sister's situation and of the child and wrote of his acceptance of them."

"Indeed, I'm sure he was. It was I who was not informed." He grimaced. "I should have been told," he mumbled.

Basil chuckled. "I can see it may change things, Master Marcus. Number of armsmen and such." He waved a hand. "Indeed, a babe can be much to handle." He arched an eyebrow at his guest.

"Indeed." Marcus fell quiet, seemingly lost in thought. Basil wondered what plans circled in the man's head.

* * * * *

Holy hell, a child! Marcus would have to speak with William about this turn of events. He'd known she'd been married before, but news of the child shook him. He swallowed and glanced at the tent.

Wooing a woman was bad enough, he had little experience with that, but now to woo a woman with a child? Was that even possible?

The thought of his failure at his mission made Marcus's belly sink like a skipping stone under the surface of lake water. One, two, three, and then a great hard *plop*.

"His Grace bid me to ask if all is well and if there is anything you and your sister require?"

Lord Clayton tilted his head to one side, watching him through narrowed eyes. A sure sign of distrust. Not good. Had he done something wrong, made some misstep? Perhaps His Lordship saw straight through him to the deceit he and William had planned? "Your duke is most kind, but there is nothing. Our plan was to break camp on the morrow and make our way to the castle in two days."

"Break camp?" There wouldn't be enough time for him to woo the most willing wench in what was left of this day, nor in the morning before camp would be struck and they were on their way. He hadn't the skill with women for that. The wenches of the keep might have spoken about him, but none of them had led him to their beds.

"It would be a shame to arrive before the keep had been made ready, my lord."

"Made ready?" Basil shifted in his chair.

"For the arrival of Lady Mayfield, of course. The duke wishes to have the keep prepared to its best for her inspection and approval."

"Does he?"

"Aye." Marcus once again looked around the camp. "Where is your sister, Lord Clayton?"

"She will appear soon enough." His eyes narrowed. "Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?" Marcus swallowed.

"Aye. You seem anxious to see her, as if you were the husband, not the duke."

Marcus tried to keep his expression calm, not to betray his shock at being found out. He'd have to step carefully if he wanted to play this game. Basil of Clayton was no fool and if Basil suspected there was more to it, their plan would be finished and Baymore with it.

"I assure you, we are all, down to the lowest villager, anxious to see our duke's new bride." He gave Basil a full smile. "I cannot deny I haven't fallen prey to the suspense either." He shrugged.

"You are not married?"

"No. I am master of arms. A soldier in the duty of His Grace."

"One can be married and in service, can they not? Or does your duke forbid it?"

"He does not." Marcus shrugged again. "I've never found...the time. Or the woman." He looked up into Basil's eyes.

"Woman, eh? Pity," Basil muttered under his breath.

"What?" Had that been a trace of disappointment in the lordship's voice?

"Nothing." Basil waved his hand and looked away.

"And yourself? There is no Lady Clayton?" Marcus began to wonder if Lord Clayton had something in common with His Grace and Lord William other than his nobility. Basil had to be in his midthirties, if not nearing forty, despite his youthful looks. He should have married long ago.

"No." Basil's teeth snapped shut on the word, telling Marcus there would be no more discussion on that topic.

The two men fell into an uncomfortable silence as they watched the fire. As the sun set, the cook called for the evening meal. A table, carried by four armsmen, was placed near the fire, then benches placed alongside it, and two lanterns placed on each end of it to light the diners as they ate.

Basil stood and held out his arm toward the table. "It's time to sup. You will join my sister and me at our table."

Marcus nodded. "Thank you, Lord Clayton, for your hospitality." Due to Marcus's position, Basil didn't have to invite him, so he was fortunate, he supposed. It would give him some time to speak with Lady Beth and begin his attempt to woo her. Dread filled him, sitting in his belly as heavy as a block of stone.

The flap of the tent opened and a woman stepped through. As she straightened, and moved into the dim light of the lanterns and the fire, Marcus bit back his gasp.

She was so beautiful.

In that moment, his heart sang, then died.

Chapter Sixteen

"Come, page. Liam, isn't it?" Duke Baymore motioned for Liam to join him. "We've much to do. The servants are preparing Lady Beth and Lord Clayton's rooms, so I'm going to need you to help me."

"You, Your Grace?" Liam squeaked. What could the duke possibly want him to do? He'd already polished all the man's arms, oiled his leathers, cleaned out the fireplace, and laid new logs.

"Aye. I have need of your services, my young page." Jackson trotted down the stairs and strode across the hall toward the doors of the keep.

Liam raced to keep up with the big man as he crossed the bailey to the back of the castle, unable to tamp down the excitement bubbling up in his chest. There'd been so much talk of the new bride and everyone scrambled to make the keep ready for her arrival.

"Where are we going, Your Grace?"

"To the laundry."

Liam skidded to a stop. "The laundry?"

"Aye." Jackson continued on, then realizing his page wasn't at his side, he halted and turned. "Liam? Are you coming?" He grinned at Liam, his face warm and happy.

"Aye." Liam ran to his duke's side and looked up at the man. He was built like a mountain and to Liam he seemed just as tall. There was no denying it, Jackson Baymore was a huge man, and not just in size.

Liam had studied the duke and in the short time he'd been assigned as his page he'd learned much more about him. For one, he had a presence that, even while he dozed by the fire, filled the great room. And he laughed a lot. Especially with Lord William. They met many times during the day, conferring over papers, discussing the business of the castle and lands, and at every meal. Except of late, Lord William had been very busy. But the news of Baymore's bride had filled the keep, and that she was due soon, explained his prolonged absence. Still, it didn't explain the duke's sudden change of temperament, this seriousness that had come over him, as if something troubled his mind. A man about to wed should be happy, shouldn't he?

"Am I being sent to work in the laundry?" Liam wasn't afraid of hard work. It might be a relief not to be His Grace's page, to not feel the confusion he felt when he placed his father against his duke and found his father lacking.

"Nay, boy. I've a surprise for you." Jackson walked on, passing the courtyard that held the bathtubs, until they reached the stone laundry house. "Yo, mistress!" Jackson sang out.

"Here, Your Grace!" The laundress came out, wiping her red, chapped hands on her apron. "Have you brought him, then?" She smiled at Liam and he gave her a nod.

"A surprise?" Liam said. "For me?"

Jackson laughed and clapped Liam on the shoulder. "Are they ready?"

"Aye, and just as you ordered, Your Grace." She turned and went back inside, then returned holding a large, folded stack of clothing. She handed them over to the duke, then gave a quick curtsey and laughed at Liam's expression.

He shut his mouth and looked up at his duke.

"These are your new clothes. Can't have my page running around the keep not dressed in a proper uniform." Jackson held up a tabard, complete with the Baymore crest on the front, and handed it to Liam.

Liam stared at the pile of clothing. He'd never seen such fine work in his life, not even his ma's. The neck and wrists had silk ribbon ties, and the crest had been embroidered on the chest.

"Come on. First a bath, then you dress."

"But this is more than a uniform. There must be some mistake." There were several sets of clothing in the bundle, not just a uniform. Not even at home did he have so many fine things to wear.

"Well, you need some clothes for when you're not in uniform, Liam. This one is for special occasions. If you're going to be my page, I want you clean and well dressed, understand?" He looked down at Liam. Liam swallowed, nodded, and then looked away.

The duke had taken him in to his keep, given him a position fit for a noble's son, and now a new set of clothes the like of which he'd never hoped to own.

He didn't think he could speak without the duke knowing of his emotions.

Jackson went to the baths and ordered a hot tub of water, another treat for Liam. He expected his duke to leave him, but Jackson sat on a bench in the afternoon sun, closed his eyes, and dozed. From what Liam had seen of the man, he could sleep just about anywhere.

When his bath was over, Liam got out of the tub, dried himself off, and went to the bench. His new clothes sat next to the duke.

"Best put on the regular one," Jackson said as his eyes popped open.

Liam jumped back. "Gawds! I thought you were sleeping." He exhaled and put his hand over his heart to keep it from bursting out of his chest.

"A mercenary takes his sleep when he can."

"A mercenary?" Liam's brow furrowed. "But you're the duke."

"Now I am. Not long ago, I was a mercenary, a paid soldier." Jackson grunted as he stood and stretched.

Liam dressed and gathered up the clothing. A mercenary? What a life! Danger. Battlefields. Fighting the enemy and winning the favors of a princess. He and the other boys of his village, armed with sticks, had played many fighting games, pretending to be mercenaries, soldiers, and knights.

"But how did you come to be duke?" The question slipped out before Liam could stop it. He held his breath, waiting to be cuffed for his impertinence.

"It's a long story, boy. One that brings me great pain to recall. Forgive me if I don't tell you the tale just now. Perhaps some other time." Jackson's mouth twisted in a sad smile that reached his dark eyes.

"Of course, Your Grace. Forgive me for asking." Liam stared down at his feet.

"No harm in curiosity, lad. I was once like you, you know." Jackson laughed, back in his usual good move.

"Small and scared?" Liam whispered. And very alone.

"Aye. Small and scared." Jackson nodded. "For a long time, it was just me and my ma. Then I grew up, left home, and became a mercenary."

"No father?" Could it be Jackson didn't have a father, like him?

"Well..." Jackson frowned. "Just my mother and me."

Liam swallowed and nodded. Once again, the awe that had filled him at his first look at the duke of Baymore took its place in his heart.

Mercenaries were prized fighters, paid for their services and skill with a sword. That would explain the duke's large horse. Liam's eyes widened.

"And your horse? Is he a real warhorse?"

"Aye. He is." Jackson nodded. "He's trained in combat maneuvers."

"Bloody hell," Liam exclaimed, then clapped his hand over his mouth.

Jackson looked down, then burst out laughing. He placed a hand on Liam's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Liam grinned. "Can you show him to me?"

"Of course. I suppose I have time for a ride. It's a fine day and it's been a while since I've been on his back." Jackson changed direction and headed to the stables, with Liam jogging to keep up.

They entered the livery and Jackson called out, "My horse! Saddle my horse!"

A cry went up among the grooms and the entire stable came to life. Horses neighed and whinnied as they were tended to in preparation for the duke's ride. Liam realized that not only was the duke's horse being saddled, but several others were also.

Perhaps in among them would be a small pony for him? No, that was too much to hope for, a chance to ride with the duke outside the castle's walls. He'd never rode a real horse before, he'd only sat on the back of the old horse at the granary as it plodded around the stone grinding wheel, but that didn't count. Not really.

One groom scurried about, getting the saddle and tack, and the other brought the great horse out into the middle of the breezeway and tied him off.

Liam sat on a bale of hay, his bundle of clothing next to him, and watched as the boys, no older than him, move around the horse, slinging the blankets and saddle over, dodging the

massive hooves as they crawled under to fasten the cinches, dressing the animal in its finery. At last, the steed was ready and along with it, four other horses.

All too big for a lad his size.

Liam sighed and pulled his knees up, wrapping his arms about them. Of course, he wouldn't be going this time; still, it would be exciting to see them leave. In marched four armsmen, swords at their hips and crossbows across their backs. They took hold of their reins and mounted.

Jackson strode to his gelding and swung up into the saddle. After shoving the toes of his boots into the stirrups, he adjusted his sword and gathered the reins.

"Well, come on, boy!" he shouted.

Liam looked up and blinked. "What?" He stood, unbelieving.

"Aye, it's time to ride." Jackson kicked his horse forward, then reached down, grabbed Liam by the back of his shirt, and swooped him upward.

For a moment, he hung in the air as the ground dropped away and his stomach lurched, then the duke deposited him at the front of the saddle, between the reins.

"Hold tight to the pommel, Liam," Jackson's deep voice ordered.

Liam clutched it with both hands and clamped his legs as tight as he could. The hard leather of the saddle warmed beneath him, and he craned his head up and back.

Jackson looked down, grinning, and gave him a wink. "Shall we go fast?"

"Oh, aye, Your Grace!" Liam shouted.

Behind him, the duke's body tightened, his legs clamped to his horse's sides, and he leaned forward, surrounding Liam. From his perch, Liam could almost see over the horse's head, between its twitching ears, to the bailey beyond the stables.

With a great cry, Jackson waved his arm and signaled his men forward.

The horse seemed to bunch, then explode from the stable. The others followed, clattering on the cobblestones toward the gates of the keep, eager to be on their way, free and galloping.

"Open the gates! The duke rides!"

As they waited for the massive wooden gates to swing open, Liam held his breath, not really believing that he sat on a real warhorse in front of the duke, heading out for a wild ride. He

bounced in his seat, trying to keep his balance, as the duke's horse pranced sideways, tossing its head, anxious to be on its way.

Behind him, the duke sat firm in the saddle as if he and the horse were one great creature and Liam merely a small mouse clinging to it.

At last, the gates were pulled wide, and Jackson jerked back on his reins. The great warhorse reared up on its hind legs, with a long, sharp whinny that echoed off the stone walls and vibrated in the pit of Liam's belly.

He slipped backward, but Jackson's arm wrapped his waist.

"I've got you, lad!"

Then the horse bolted forward and they were through the gates and down the road, hooves thundering, the wind whistling in his hair, Jackson crouched over him, as Liam's heart rose in his throat.

He opened his mouth and gave his best battle cry, "To war!"

Above him, Jackson laughed and slashed his reins across the beast's hindquarters, urging it faster.

Chapter Seventeen

Beth gazed into the duke's steel gray eyes and found herself unable to look away. Such depths they held, and she lost herself in them. The smile on his face belied kindness and generosity, both evident in the terms of his marriage contract. She should thank him for that. And for his acceptance of little Anne. And for riding out to meet her.

Her brother spoke, as if in another room, and she nodded, not really hearing or caring about what he said.

She rushed forward, and dropped into a deep curtsey. "Welcome, Your Grace. I'm so very pleased to meet you. I've heard much of you since you claimed your title and I am pleased to see the stories told about Your Grace have been the truth."

His smile slipped, his brows came together, and his eyes darkened. The breath caught in her chest at the sudden appearance of unhappiness on the good duke's face. What had she done? Perhaps she'd made some terrible blunder or not addressed him as due his rank.

"Sister, this is—" her brother said.

"Forgive me, Your Grace. I should have thanked you first for your kind and generous offer of marriage. Both my child Anne and I thank you." She stepped toward the duke, fell to her knees in formal greeting, snatched up his hand, and pulled it to her lips.

As she pressed a kiss to the back of the strong warm hand in her grip, the duke gasped and pulled away from her, leaving her on her knees and gaping up at him.

Tears came to her eyes at the thought of displeasing him so much as to have him refuse to be touched by her. Her mind spun at what she had done to cause his reaction and her searching gaze shot to her brother for an answer.

"Sister!" Basil shouted and her last meal threatened to return.

The duke, eyes wide, stepped back and looked to her brother. He shook his head, and his body posed as if he were about to flee from their camp.

Had she chosen the wrong gown? Did her hair or eyes displease him? Perhaps she was too thin for his liking?

"This is *not* the duke of Baymore, Beth. This is Marcus, the duke's master of arms. He's come to escort us to the castle."

The man she'd thought Jackson, Duke of Baymore, her pledged husband, looked down at his hand, staring at the place where she'd kissed it.

"Oh," she squeaked, like a tiny mouse caught in a trap. A fire burned up her cheeks as she looked from man to man. Basil came to her and held out his hand for her to take. She used it to get to her feet. "My lord, I am so...sorry."

No one could have been more filled with regret than her that he was not the duke. Not her brother, and surely not this man. The rapid deflation of the happiness that had filled her body and heart left her weak and unsteady.

Beth slumped into a nearby chair. "Forgive me, Master Marcus."

The man swallowed, then stepped forward. He fell to one knee in front of her and bowed his head. "It is I who must ask your forgiveness, my lady. I should have informed you." The look in his eyes now was one of sincere apology. She'd never seen a man so sorry and contrite.

"No, it was my fault. I should have waited for introductions," she whispered.

"I should have spoken first," Marcus replied.

Basil snorted. "Well, if the pair of you have forgiven each other, I will take the true blame for being so slow. I should have gone to your tent, Beth, and explained who our visitors were. Master Marcus, forgive me for putting you in this situation."

Marcus nodded, and rose to his feet. "There is nothing to forgive, my lord, nor has your sister done anything wrong." He gave a sharp nod.

"And you gave no offense, either." Basil assured him. "Well and good. All offense is wiped away. Nothing to tell His Grace about, is there?" He looked at Marcus with one raised eyebrow.

Beth's blood chilled. If Baymore learned of this mistake, would he be one to punish, out of hand, his master armsman, her brother, or herself?

"Have no fear. I assure you His Grace would find this most amusing." Marcus gave her brother a quick smile, then sobered.

Beth's heart slowed its quick beating. She smiled at Marcus. His eyes held more than contrition and as she searched their depths, found only sadness and regret.

She much preferred the first look he'd given her, the one that set her body on fire. The one that told her he wanted her.

She knew well that look from her marriage days. A look Marcus wore well and had pleased her to see.

Now what showed in his eyes did nothing to stir her loins, but only served to dampen her desire as if cold rain fell on her. What a horrible mistake.

That she was so terribly disappointed in the truth confused and frightened her.

Basil cleared his throat. "The table is prepared and our food has arrived." He swept his arm toward the table, now laden with platters of meat and bread.

Beth rose. Basil held out his arm for him to take. She gave Marcus a soft smile, then laid her hand over her brother's arm, and let him lead her to supper.

Marcus's legs trembled as he sat on the wooden bench Basil had directed him to, on the left, leaving the right for his sister.

Across the table, Marcus faced the woman he'd come to woo. All plans, ideas, and reasoning fled before her beauty. Why had William not warned him? How could he possibly turn her head from all a duke had to offer?

This plan of William's had been conceived in desperation. Had any such plan ever won the day? He thought not. But despite knowing utter and complete failure awaited him, he had given his oath to protect Baymore.

And he'd do that even if it meant his death.

After a long silence, Lady Beth asked, "How is the duke?"

Marcus raised his head and looked at her. "He was well, last time I saw him."

"Good." She nodded, then her gaze flicked to her brother.

"What my sister means to ask is, tell us about the duke. We know little, other than what's been spoken, mostly rumor and assumptions."

"What do you wish to know?"

"For one, what does he look like?" Basil asked.

Marcus cleared his throat. He had to speak about Jackson without disparaging his own duke, yet drawing her favor to himself. This was work better suited to William's quick wit, than him.

"He's a big man, my lord. The tallest at the castle. And broad of shoulders. He was once a mercenary, that much is true. His skill with a sword is beyond compare."

"A mercenary!" Beth gasped. She frowned and looked at her brother. "Did you know this, Basil?"

Basil stabbed a piece of venison from the charger and bit off a bit. He shrugged.

"Have no fear, my lady. He hasn't killed anyone in some time," Marcus assured her.

"Killed someone?" Her eyes widened.

"In some time, aye. Which speaks highly of his temperament, does it not?"

"Indeed," Basil agreed. "And great restraint."

"And the servants are rarely beaten or the soldiers whipped."

Lady Beth paled as she listened to his words. "Beatings?" There are beatings?"

"Rarely." Well, it was the truth. Most of it. There'd been that armsman who beat poor Liam, and since taking the position of master of arms he'd never had to take a whip to anyone in his charge.

"So you're saying he has a bad temper?" Beth leaned forward, her mouth a thin line, her hands clenched into fists.

"We all have tempers." Marcus shrugged.

"Indeed we do." Basil laughed. "I seem to remember your temper, sister. And fear it."

"But my temper won't be levied against myself or my child." Now she wore a fierce frown, as if just the thought of a threat to her child angered her, making her, to his eyes, even more beautiful.

Basil stared at him, one brow raised. Perhaps he'd gone too far in his vagueness.

"I assure you, His Grace would never strike a woman or a child." There. It wasn't his duty to spread lies about Jackson; besides, his honor would forbid him from it. How could he woo the woman, if he had to speak about Jackson's good character and say nothing of his own? This was impossible.

"Have no fear, sister. I will speak with His Grace." Basil nodded and smiled at Beth. She looked down at her platter and nodded.

For now, Marcus would be better served keeping quiet. What he needed was time alone with the lovely Lady Beth. But with her brother in close command, that would be most unlikely.

Marcus cut a slice of venison, put it in his mouth, and chewed. He was sure it was well cooked, but it tasted like ashes.

He spent the rest of the meal speaking with Basil about his duties at the keep, and answering questions about the duke's lands. Basil seemed curious, and Marcus couldn't fault him for it; after all, his sister's well-being would depend on Baymore.

At last, the wine poured, Lady Beth rose. "Brother, Master Marcus. I bid you both a good night."

Marcus rose. "And a good night to you, my lady." He bowed deeply.

She smiled, and turned toward her tent. He watched as she disappeared inside, and the drape fell, blocking his view.

When he turned back, Basil watched him, one brow cocked upward, his chin resting on his fist.

"So. You find my sister beautiful?"

Marcus cleared his throat. "My lord?"

"Do you find my sister beautiful? It's a simple question." Basil stared into his eyes.

"She is a beautiful woman. Our duke is a lucky man." Marcus nodded.

"I think my sister was greatly disappointed tonight."

"Disappointed?" Marcus swallowed. "I'm most sorry if I have done so, although, I must admit to not understanding of what you speak."

"That you were not Baymore."

"Oh." Marcus stared at his platter. So it had not been his imagination. Lady Beth had given him looks of desire. He stifled the urge to grin like a fool. And fool he would be to let his feelings be known, especially to Lady Beth's brother.

"Oh." Basil snorted. "I will not hold it against you, Marcus. She is a beauty. And so is her child." He sighed. "With the death of her fool of a husband, Lady Beth was returned to me. I would keep her with me always, but I must look to her happiness."

"As a good brother should."

"And as a good brother, I must be sure that the man I choose for her is in her best interests. Well placed. Well appointed. With money enough to keep her and little Anne."

"I understand."

"The Duke of Baymore is such a man, is he not?"

"Aye, he is." Marcus nodded, wondering where this talk would lead.

"Do you know of another man to fit her needs?" Basil cocked his head to the side and waited.

Marcus stared into the dark beyond the glow of the lanterns and didn't answer.

"Of course, I would have preferred she have a love match, but it was not to be." Basil's gaze fell on him again, the weight of it pressing on him.

"I think most people would prefer a marriage of love over a marriage of convenience."

"And that is what this marriage is. Convenience." Basil leaned forward. "I want this marriage to happen, Marcus. For my sister's sake. Before her affections are stolen by some wandering minstrel or a second son with no title, no lands, or money."

"Someone like me?" Marcus looked up and met Basil's stare with one of his own.

Basil nodded. "Indeed." He leaned back and rapped his knuckles on the wooden table. "Let me make myself plain. Any interference in her marriage plans will be dealt with harshly, Master Marcus."

"Even if it's not what Lady Beth wants?"

"Beth wants the dream of love, but it's as elusive as smoke." Basil waved his hand as if trying to grab the air.

"What if she found that dream? What then?"

"If it was with a man of no import, then I would squash it"—he slammed his fist on the table, and the platters jumped—"like a bothersome insect." He leaned toward Marcus, his threat clear.

"And if the man had means?" Marcus cocked his eyebrow.

Basil regarded him, from toe to head. "Well, if he had means and she loved him, that *might* be different." He stood and Marcus followed. "I tire of talk, Master Marcus. I'm more a man of action, as I think you are. We shall speak again in the morn." With those words, he turned, strode to his tent, and entered.

Marcus stood at the table and scratched his chin. What had just transpired? What had Basil been trying to say to him and for that matter, what had he said to Basil?

And what action did Basil hint at?

His gaze flicked to Lady Beth's tent. A soft glow came from inside, a lantern no doubt.

Basil was right. Marcus was indeed a man of action. Give him an enemy to fight, a wall to breach, a field to cross and he was your man.

But women? Ye gods.

He swallowed, pulled his tunic straight, and headed toward the tent.

Chapter Eighteen

Liam's heart raced as they rounded the wood. Ahead stood the low stone wall that bordered the road back to Baymore. The duke's men surrounded him and Duke Baymore as they cantered across the wide field.

The group gathered speed as the wall approached. The duke's hand slipped around his waist, pulled him tight, then the great horse's hindquarters bunched, and it leapt.

For a moment, Liam was flying. He threw his arms out, secure that the duke had him safe, and he forced his eyes to remain open. They were so high in the air, the ground so far away. In the next heartbeat, the horse landed, Liam's body rocked forward and he let out a *whoop*!

"To Baymore!" the duke called out.

The horses slowed to a trot, and Liam bounced in the saddle. He looked up at the duke and laughed. "Ye gods! What sport!"

The duke laughed again. "Aye. Grand sport to be riding hard for the pleasure of it. Not so grand if you're being chased by men hell bent on killing you." He winked at Liam.

Liam's eyes widened and wrapping his hands in the horse's mane, he envisioned the excitement of a mercenary's life. One day, he might become a mercenary, fighting in battles across the land, perhaps even across the ocean in a foreign country, for his king. For glory and honor and a fortune in treasure.

The castle appeared over the hill. The pennants flew and the gates stood open to welcome them home. Liam imagined they'd returned victorious from a battle, and everyone at the castle would be waiting for them to arrive. There would be a great cheering crowd.

But only a lone figure stood under the lintel of the gates, hands on hips, long hair blowing in the breeze.

"Uh oh," the duke whispered.

"What is it?" Liam looked up at him. The duke's eyebrows had drawn together, his mouth down turned.

"I fear Lord Holcombe is not pleased with us."

"He isn't?"

"Nay." The duke chuckled. "It seems we must face his wrath."

The duke had been right. Lord Holcombe blocked their path. The men pulled their horses to a stop. The duke edged his closer with a tap of his heels on his steed's belly.

"Lord Holcombe."

"Your Grace." Any fool, even a small boy such as he, could see his lordship wasn't happy. Indeed, he fairly burned. Liam wondered if he'd feel the lash for daring to displease the man. And he puzzled as to why the duke feared the wrath of a lower-ranked man.

"I longed for a ride."

"With only four men?" Holcombe's gaze swept over the company, and then landed on Liam. "And a page."

"Aye." Baymore nodded.

"What if you'd come across bandits?" He squinted up at them.

"That would have been most jolly, eh, men?" Baymore pulled his sword and looked around at his men, a great grin on his face. The men imitated him, laughing and crying out, "Aye!" Liam joined them, raising his hand in the air as if it held a sword.

"No, it would not!" Holcombe roared, then wiped his hand over his face. "Your Grace. How many times have I asked you not to go outside the castle without a full guard to accompany you?"

"Many times, my lord." Baymore nodded as he sheathed his weapon. To Liam, he whispered, "I've lost count." Liam bit his lip so Lord Holcombe didn't see him laugh.

"Many times, aye." Holcombe stared at him, then sighed. "Come in, then. The horses need their rest and care." He stepped aside and waved them in.

The duke chuckled and kicked his heels, urging the warhorse forward.

Liam let out the breath he'd been holding as the duke's horse entered the bailey, sad that his marvelous ride had come to an end.

Grooms ran out to take the reins of the horses. The duke slid off his horse, then reached up and took Liam under the arms and hoisted him down. His feet hit the cobblestones and he wobbled, unsteady. His legs didn't seem to want to do his bidding.

"You'll be fine. Just walk about a bit, lad." Duke Baymore clapped him on the back. Laughing, Liam tried to walk a straight line, but veered off course. He tried a circle and did better.

Lord Holcombe approached the duke. "Jackson, really." He shook his head.

"My lord?" Baymore seemed to have won his way back into Holcombe's good graces with a smile.

"You know I worry." Liam listened to the two men as they walked toward the keep. He had to jog to keep up with them.

"I know." The duke rested his hand on Holcombe's shoulder. His lordship put his hand over the duke's hand for just a brief touch.

"My horse needed a run. And my page, Liam, had asked about my steed." Liam's head snapped up at the mention of his name.

Holcombe stopped and turned. His cool gaze flicked over Liam and in that instant, Liam wanted to run and hide, but he was frozen to the spot.

"Did he?"

"Aye. I thought what better way to show him my horse but to let him ride."

"That's true enough." Holcombe nodded, then he returned his attention to the duke. "Next time you are so moved, don't leave without telling me, Jackson," he muttered under his breath.

"I'm sorry, Will." The duke looked very sorry and again Liam wondered why the duke should seek his steward's forgiveness. Holcombe's gaze flicked back to him, then he cleared his throat.

"You know, if you leave without telling me, there may be some piece of business about the castle and lands I might need your say on. Or some document you need to sign."

The duke nodded. "You're right. The business of Baymore comes before pleasure. Right, Liam?" He grinned at Liam.

"Aye, Your Grace." Liam nodded, pleased the duke had asked him.

They entered the keep. The duke and his steward made for the chairs in front of the hearth. Baymore sat and stuck out his boots. "Lad, take these off me."

Liam knelt and pulled off the boots. "Yours also, my lord?"

"Nay," Holcombe said, and waved him away. "Go, take His Grace's boots and shine them. They look as if they've gathered all the dust from the road."

"Aye, my lord." Liam knew when he was being dismissed. He gathered the boots in his arms and left the men.

He'd climbed the stairs halfway, when he turned and looked back.

His Grace had his hand on Lord Holcombe's leg as they spoke in hushed tones.

Then both men laughed, and Liam smiled. He continued up the stairs to get his kit and work on the boots.

Humming with happiness, he held out his arms, a boot clutched in each hand, and closed his eyes as he remembered their ride and the feel of flying.

* * * * *

"She'll arrive tomorrow," Jackson whispered, as he stared into the fire. His fingers tightened on Will's leg.

Will patted his hand. "I know. Have no fear, Your Grace. I have been giving the matter great thought."

"So you've found a way out?" Jackson sat up.

"Perhaps." Will nodded once. Pinning their lives on his desperate plan had been insanity. Marcus's ability to charm and woo the woman intended for his lover had been a foolish mistake. He prayed it wouldn't be a deadly mistake.

"Out with it, then. What plan have you?"

"Nay, I cannot say. Not yet. Can you trust me on this, Your Grace?" Will looked into his eyes, seeking Jackson's belief.

"I can. I do. You know that."

"Then let's not speak of it. The evening meal will be served shortly, and worry has aroused my hunger." Will glanced at Jackson from under his half-closed eyes. Jackson knew what that look meant, and what hunger Will spoke of, and it wasn't for the cook's venison stew. "Truthfully, my lord, I had not wanted to cause you such worry. It's just the boy...well, his spirit needed the ride. Like me, he had no father and now I fear he has lost all. I was but a lad of ten and six when I left my home to make my way in the world. And I was a big lad." He shook his head.

"Liam seems a big lad also. At least for his age, if I judge it right." Will closed his eyes as he thought. "And he has a familiar look about him, but I can't quite place it."

"Perhaps someone you came across in your travels?"

"Perhaps. Where did he say he was from?" Will opened one eye and frowned at Jackson.

"From Barley Fields, I think."

"That's at the far edge of your land, is it not?"

"Aye." Jackson crossed his leg and scratched at his foot through his woolen sock. "I have a hole, Will." He chuckled as he pointed it out, sticking his finger into it.

Will glanced over. "So you do. Make sure Liam knows to bring it to the seamstress to have it mended." He paused, then asked, "Have you ever been there?"

"Where?" Jackson now inspected his other sock.

"To Barley Fields." Perhaps it was time to learn more about their new page. Marcus hadn't finished that small task before he left.

"Oh. Aye, many years ago. Passed through on my way to a hiring." Jackson shrugged.

"I've never been, that I can recollect." Will shrugged. "Is it pleasant?"

"Enough. Just like a hundred other villages I've passed through."

"Did you stay long?"

Jackson shrugged. "Don't remember. It was a long time ago, Will."

"When you were younger and your memory better," Will teased his lover.

"Aye." Jackson nodded. "Younger, more handsome," he patted his belly, "and much thinner." He laughed.

"Nonsense. You're still the man I first met, Your Grace." Will gave him a wink. "And you grow better with each year."

Jackson burst into a great laugh, warm and shining, and it echoed off the stone walls of the hall, filling the great room and Will's heart.

"You must want something to flatter me so, my lord."

"Only what is my due, Your Grace." Will turned away to look into the fire. "In good time, all in good time."

Jackson sat back and scratched his belly as it rumbled. "I hunger too." He stood and faced the door to the kitchens. "Where is my meal?" he bellowed.

A servant girl came out of the door, blinked at her duke, and then giggled. She ducked back in and a moment later, out came the old cook.

He waved a copper ladle at Jackson. "The meal is on the fire, Your Grace. If you can't wait, I can serve the chickens bloody."

Jackson made a face, and rolled his eyes at Will. "Can you wait a while longer, my lord?"

"And not eat bloody chicken? I think I can last without dropping," Will drawled.

Jackson waved at the cook, shooing him back into the kitchens, then he fell into his chair and stuck his feet toward the fire once again.

"Fine. But later, I want you to drop in front of me," he whispered, still staring at the fire.

"On my knees or on my hands and knees, Your Grace?" Will whispered back.

Jackson growled and ran his hand over his growing erection, wondering if they went upstairs right now, would he have time enough for Will on his knees.

"There are some papers upstairs that you should attend to, Your Grace." Will stood, one eyebrow raised, as he glanced toward the stairs, then back to Jackson's bulging leathers.

"Indeed. Let's take care of them before our meal." Jackson rose and without waiting for Will, strode to the stairs and took them two at a time, until he reached the top.

Will, who seemed in no rush, took his time climbing the stairs, no expression on his face other than a sly smile.

Chapter Nineteen

Marcus stood at the entrance to Lady Beth's tent and held his breath. He had lost his mind, of that he was well aware. To enter the good lady's tent, unbidden, would give her brother every right to kill him where he stood. If Lord Clayton found out.

Marcus parted the drape and stepped inside.

Across the dimly lit room, her maid lay asleep on a pallet in a dark corner. At least she wouldn't cry the alarm. Not yet, anyway.

Lady Beth sat on a low stool next to a child's crib, rocking it with her hand. She looked up, and fear flashed on her face as she stood, her hand flying to the hilt of a small knife at her waist.

Marcus dropped to his knee and bowed his head. "My lady," he whispered.

He heard her move toward him, quick steps, and the rustle of her gown on the carpets that had been laid to cover the ground beneath her tent. He didn't dare to look up. If she meant to kill him, so be it. He braced himself for the blow.

He would fail his mission; whether now or later, that much he knew.

She was beautiful, born to be a duke's woman, not the wife of a second son.

"Master Marcus, what brings you to my tent?" Her soft voice came from just in front of him. He opened his eyes and looked down upon the toes of her slippers peeking out from the green velvet gown.

"You, my lady." He swallowed. Where did he begin? How does one woo a woman? He looked up.

Lady Beth held her blade at his throat.

How did one woo a woman who held your life in her hands?

She waited.

He glanced toward the pallet where the nurse still slept. "Forgive me. I could not stay away." It was true. He had to come, had to do something to begin his mission, even if it were this badly thought out act. And even if before he'd only wished for success for his duke's sake, now that he'd seen her, he prayed for success for his own sake.

"Indeed? And why is that?" The blade never faltered. She was brave beyond his hopes. Everything a true duchess should be, in his mind.

"Your beauty and spirit amazes me, my lady." He gazed into her face, memorizing it. Blue eyes, blonde hair touched with pale red, a small splash of freckles across her nose as if painted by the fairies. And those full, pink lips. If it were the last thing he ever saw, he'd be happy it had been her face he'd take with him to whatever hell he'd earned.

"You are the duke of Baymore's man, are you not?"

"I am. Oath sworn. He holds my life in his hands, as do you."

"And he charged you to bring me to him?" Her eyes narrowed.

"He did, I'm afraid."

"Afraid, you? The master of arms?" She gave the smallest hint of a smile to him and his heart snatched up the crumb like the starving man he was.

"You have a blade at my throat, my lady. A man would have to be a fool not to fear."

"Well said, Marcus. You have no need to fear me." She removed the blade and slipped it back in its sheath. "Stand."

He did. She came just to his chin. If he held her, he could rest his head on top of hers, feel her breath on his chest, her body warming his.

"So, my beauty and spirit pleases you?"

"Amazes me, I said."

"So you did." She took a step back. "Come. Take a seat." She pointed to a nearby bench. "My maid is a bit deaf and sleeps hard, have no fear. We can speak."

She returned to her stool, sat, and checked on the babe. Marcus sat and leaned forward to peer inside the crib, his hands clasped between his knees.

"How old is she?"

"Almost three." She gazed with open love at the child. "Her name is Anne."

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"She's as beautiful as her mother."

Lady Beth's gaze flicked to his. "She has her father's eyes."

"She should have something of his." Marcus nodded.

"Have you a wife, Marcus? Children?"

"No, my lady." He shook his head.

"Does the duke like children?" She chewed her lip as she watched the babe sleep.

"I am not privy to his views on children, my lady. We've never spoken on the subject."

"Oh." She sighed. "But he wants a child of his own, does he not?"

"He does. To carry on the Baymore name."

"I understand. This is a marriage of convenience, you are aware of that?" she asked, as if his opinion mattered to her. "At the time, I had been offered no other choice."

"I am. I have no doubt that if you had fallen in love, you would have married. Your brother assured me of that."

"Did he also assure you that he has only my best interests, and of my child, in mind?"

"He did. Just as a good brother and uncle should. I cannot fault him there."

"No. The contract was most generous." She sighed.

"And the chance to be a duchess too good to let pass."

Their gazes locked across the crib and he was pulled into hers by some unknown power. He went willingly, without struggle. Then, she broke away, looking down at her child.

"Indeed. Made all the easier for my lack of suitors." She laughed a warm, gentle, sweet laugh that tickled his ears and made his heart sing.

"They must never have seen you, my lady. If they had, they would have done their best to woo you." Perhaps his tone had been too harsh, for she looked up at him.

Lady Beth stared into his eyes, and he melted. Gazes locked, the tent shrank to only him, and she, even the babe was lost.

Without a warning, as if a secret signal had passed between them, they stood and came together. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he enfolded her in his embrace and silent as a thief, he stole a kiss.

Could it be called theft if she gave it willingly?

The touch of her lips on his burned with the heat of her passion as she returned his kiss. He locked his knees to keep from taking her to the ground, stretching himself over her, burying himself inside her.

She didn't just return the kiss, but demanded more. She nipped at his lips, making resistance impossible. Gods, she brought him hard as a staff, the way she sucked, licked, and nibbled on his lips. He'd never been kissed like she kissed him and he never wanted it to end.

"Lady Beth," he whispered as he tucked her under his chin, just as he'd imagined.

"Marcus. What you must think of me." Her breath puffed against his chest where his vest splayed open.

"I think—" He bit off his words.

"Shh..." Beth didn't want to hear any more words. She wanted their bodies to speak, to tell the truth of their mutual attraction. She knew well that words lied, but she could trust the most primitive of sounds, the ones that came from deep inside.

She kissed his chest and he moaned as she nuzzled closer, inhaling the distinct scent of an aroused man for the first time in nearly a year. Every inch of her body burned, and the dampness between her legs grew wetter with each passing second he held her.

His hardened manhood pressed into her. She knew the feel of a man's member, the weight of it in her hands, the taste of it in her mouth, the heat of it in her tunnel.

She wanted him, God forgive her. She wanted to be taken by a man, this man. Made love to, made to feel like a woman again, not some used, discarded, husk of a body without emotions, without needs.

But she had needs. She needed Marcus. Right now, that was the only thing she was positive of and she knew it was wrong. She was promised, no contracted, to another man. If her brother knew, he'd call her a whore.

Whore. Wife. Woman. The only difference was who she belonged to at the time she spread her legs and gave herself.

Right now, she belonged to no man, so whore it was.

Once she reached Baymore, married the duke, and went to his bed, she would be called wife, made complete by a few spoken words, a priest, and allowed to live again.

She wanted to be neither whore nor wife. Right now, all she wanted was to be a woman, to choose who she gave her body, heart, and soul.

His lips kissed along the line of her hair down to her ear. His tongue rooted gently in her ear, then he sucked her lobe into his mouth and she moaned.

"Christ, what are we doing?" he breathed.

"What we've wanted to do from the first moment we saw each other." She couldn't deny it, why bother with such vanity? He must feel her heat, the hardness of her aching nipples and the passion in her kisses. Her body told the truth as she clung to him.

After a quick glance at her maid, still sleeping with her back turned to them, Beth ignored everything but her body's desires. She ran her hand over his trapped rod and he moaned.

She pulled him down to the ground.

If they were quiet, she could have Marcus.

Even if it were only for this one night.

Chapter Twenty

"I have the papers at my desk." Will opened the door and stepped aside for Jackson to pass.

"I'm sure they're in good form, my lord. A *quick* read, I'll sign them, and then we can take our supper," Jackson replied, in perhaps too loud a voice.

At the other end of the hall, a servant girl carrying a broom stopped at the top of the stairs, glanced their way, and then headed downstairs.

Will shut the door behind his lover and leaned against it.

Jackson strode to the chair at Will's desk, pulled it back and sat, his legs splayed open, the evidence of his arousal pushing against his leathers.

Just the site made Will hungry for the man he loved. And tonight might be their last night together. Free of the wife who would join them here tomorrow.

No, he wouldn't think of that. He'd think only of now, of taking Jackson in his mouth, making the big man lose control and then drinking him down.

And of Marcus's success with Lady Beth? He'd prayed over that ever since sending the man on the mission to save both their lives.

"Come to me, my Will." Jackson unlaced his breeches, pushed them down, and took his half-hard cock in hand. It rose from his dark red nest, thick and proud, its head just peeking out of its sleeve.

Will went to his lover and dropped to his knees. "Come for me, my love." He wrapped his hand over Jackson's and together they stroked until the full plump head had risen, reaching toward Jackson's belly.

Ready, it tempted Will. And Will did not refuse temptation.

He took the fat head of Jackson's staff into his mouth and sucked it. Jackson whimpered, his hands buried in Will's hair, as his hips arched off the chair. He wanted Will to take more, but Will had other plans.

"My love, do we have time for your teasing?" Jackson groaned.

Will licked the seeping fluid that beaded like the finest pearls on a necklace. "You'll take what I give you, your grace." He flicked the knob of flesh under the head, and traced the thick vein with his tongue all the way to the root.

His hands unfastened his own strings and he clasped his stiff rod, stroking it for relief, giving himself pleasure as he gave his lover the same.

"Oh God, Will." Jackson closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, lips parted in a grimace of pleasure.

Will laved his way back up the shaft, then with a quick lick at the opening, he took Jackson in his mouth until he buried his nose in the great man's nest. Between his legs, Will pulled and pushed on his own aching flesh, and the tightening of his sac told him it wouldn't be long before he spilled.

Jackson's fist tugged on his hair as he pushed upward, forcing his cock deeper.

Will swallowed and swallowed and swallowed as Jackson cursed himself, God, and his lover. Will worked his tongue around the thick member filling his mouth and pumped his own cock until there was nothing left for both of them but that sweet final fall.

"Will!" Jackson whispered and filled Will's mouth. The thick cream slid down his throat, and with a shudder, his own essence painted the floor under the chair with streaks of white.

Will pulled off, gave Jackson a final lick, and then surged upward to take Jackson's waiting mouth in a hard, claiming kiss. Jackson held Will's head firm, his fingers still enmeshed in the strands of Will's long hair, as if to let him go would be death.

"My sweet Will," Jackson crooned. "You are mine, now and always."

"I am yours." Even if he had to leave, abandon his love, Will would always belong to Jackson.

Jackson rubbed his forehead against Will's. "And I am yours. No one can part us. No one."

Will nodded, unable to speak, afraid he'd blurt out his desperate plan, and admit that he'd failed to save them, that the only thing left to do to save Jackson's life was allow the marriage and then leave the castle.

Go back to his father's keep. To admit he'd come to his senses. To deny his love for another man. To beg his way back to a life of ease, comfort, and complete emptiness.

The sour taste of his own bile replaced the sweetness of his lover's taste at the thought of living the rest of his life without Jackson.

Will would rather die than spend those long years in the never-ending, tormented agony of soul, heart, and mind which awaited him.

* * * * *

Marcus pressed his body down on Beth's and inhaled. Gods, she smelled of flowers and sweet soap, desire and happiness. Everything he could never have imagined for himself, until Lord Holcombe had put the dream of a wife and family firmly in front of him. And for his part, it had seemed a fair deal. Simply woo a woman, and have everything his birth order had denied him.

Until he'd met the woman, seen her love for her child, the fire in her eyes and the bravery of her heart, and felt the passion in her kiss.

Now it was all here for his taking. The woman, the lands, a house, and the coin. All he had to do was claim her, here and now, then convince her to break her contract with the duke. Could it be that simple?

Declare herself his, break the contract, and free his friends?

Standing on the edge of victory, he should be elated, thrilled with his conquest.

Beneath him, Lady Beth waited, her breath fast and hot, her body hotter, her legs open, ready for him. All he had to do was untie his strings, lift her dress, and plunge into the heaven waiting for him.

Why did he hesitate? Why could he not continue and take her?

He gazed down into her blue eyes, pupils wide and dark, her parted, pink kiss-plumped lips, that moist sweet tongue of hers, and he saw her desire. Perhaps even love. But above all, he saw her trust. Trust halted him, as if it had plunged a dagger into his heart.

If he did this, took her, and she learned of their plot, it would unravel all.

He did not think her the kind of woman to forgive lightly. She felt deeply, passionately, and he knew the one thing she'd feel above all would be—betrayal.

He had choices. Halt now, and leave his duke to his fate; continue to take her, betraying her trust, but succeeding in his mission, or tell her of their plan, throw himself, the duke, and his lover, on her mercy, and take what consequences awaited.

He liked none of them. Each of his options left damage in its wake, like the hard, bitter storms rolling in from the sea, destroying whatever they passed over.

"Lady Beth, I think I should leave." He pulled away from her and got to his knees between her parted legs.

"What?" She gasped. Her eyes spilled her confusion over him. "Leave?"

"Aye. I cannot do this." He shook his head. "You are not mine and I am no thief, nor am I a betrayer." But he was, of the worse sort. He'd betrayed his duke and Lord Holcombe by not completing his mission, and he'd betrayed his own needs and wants. But he wouldn't betray her.

She stilled, then bit her lip in thought. "You are right. I am not a free woman, as much as I would wish it so." Her eyes filled with tears, and he ached to see them.

"And I am not a free man." He might not even be alive for much longer, not when Lord Holcombe found out about this failure. He'd seen William's skill with a sword, seen his love and passion for Jackson burning in his eyes and his desperation at their situation.

Marcus stood, straightened his shirt and vest, and held out a hand to her. She looked up at him, then sat up and took his hand. He pulled her to her feet and she smoothed the folds of her gown.

"No. We are not free." She glanced over her shoulder at her child. "Forgive me. I should have sent you from my tent."

"And I should never have come here."

He stepped to the drape and pulled it back to leave, but she caught his arm, halting him.

"Marcus?" She looked up at him.

"Aye?" He forced himself not to touch her.

"If things had been different. If we had but met a mere month ago..."

"Shh... Speak not of it." Damn, it was too painful to hear. Her words twisted the knife in his heart. "It is forgotten. I shall never speak of it."

"Nor shall I." Her soft voice trembled.

He pulled away from her, scanned the empty campground, and then hurried away, blending into the night.

* * * * *

Basil watched his sister, her body outlined by the faint light from her tent, as the man left. Her soft sigh could be heard from across the silent camp ground. She turned away and the drape fell closed.

He dropped his hand from his sword and stepped back into the shadows of the trees. The trunk struck his back and forced out the breath he'd gathered to yell his discovery.

What happened here? She did not cry out for help. Not for the guards or for him. Her only sound a sigh, filled with regret and longing. What the hell did that mean?

He'd seen the way she'd looked at Baymore's master of arms at supper. Seen how he'd looked at her. It shouldn't surprise him to find Marcus going to her tent. The surprise was that his sister had allowed it and by the looks of it...

No, despite her looks of longing, no, he wouldn't believe she would let Marcus sully her reputation, and ruin her chances to wed a duke. Not on the eve of meeting her new husband. A powerful man who, if he wanted to, could destroy them with but an order. His hand gripped his sword again at the thought.

Beth could not be that reckless, that foolish.

That in love?

Basil groaned as he saw all their lives being destroyed by this madness.

Damn Marcus. Damn Beth.

And damn love.

Chapter Twenty-one

Basil parted the drape and cleared his throat. "Beth? Sister, may I enter?"

"Enter, Bas." She sighed.

He stepped inside, letting the drape fall behind him. Beth sat on the bench against the wall of the tent, her hands folded in her lap, staring at the ground.

"We must speak."

"Must we?" She frowned, but didn't look up at him. Perhaps more had happened than he thought. Perhaps Marcus had seduced her after all.

"Aye." Basil crossed the tent and sat on the bench next to her.

"It's late, brother, and I'm tired."

"But not too late for a visitor?"

She stiffened, and her hands grew pale from her grip. "What do you mean?"

Basil lowered his voice. "I saw him, so don't deny it. Marcus came to you."

"He did." Now she looked up, but still wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Did I miss your call for help?"

"I didn't need any help."

"Marcus is a powerful man, skilled with a sword."

"And I have my own skills, Bas." She touched the blade at her waist.

He chuckled. "So it seems you do. What did Marcus want of you?"

She exhaled. "To speak."

"Sister, speak plainly to me. What happened between you two? Do I need to fear the duke's wrath when he learns his master of arms has cuckolded him?" Basil turned to face her and took

her hand in his, giving it a squeeze. "Tell me all, for I must decide how and when I might need to defend you."

"You have nothing to fear. Marcus didn't betray his duke." Her gaze met his and he saw the sadness in it.

"He's an honorable man, then." He stared at his sister. "But something tells me you wished he were not." He touched his hand to her chin to raise her face to his.

"Aye. I wanted him, Bas. Still want him."

"It will pass. When you are married to the duke, you can slake whatever appetite you have for a man."

"My appetite is for one man, brother. Marcus. I want no other."

"Don't be foolish, sister. You are going to marry Jackson Baymore. Marcus has nothing to offer you, and do you really think his duke would let him take the woman he plans on marrying? Out of the goodness of his heart? Out of friendship to Marcus?" He shook his head. "He'd be more likely to kill you both."

"Perhaps." She tried to pull her hand away from his, but he held it tight.

"Sister. Think. If you are thinking of yourself and of little Anne, you must know to follow this misguided emotion is insanity."

"Misguided emotion? Love?" She snorted at him and with a hard jerk, pulled her hand free.

"Love? You've just met the man. Seen him for what, all of a few hours? That's the stuff of those foolish stories told by your old nurse." He jerked his head to the corner where Beth's maid slept.

"I wanted him from the first moment I saw him, aye. And he felt the same." She jutted out her chin and stood, then stalked away from him.

"You'd be wise to forget those feelings," he warned her. "They'll lead you into more danger than you're prepared for, Beth."

"Those feelings?" She spun and put her hands on her hips. "Have you never felt love for another? Do you not understand the power of it?"

Basil swallowed. "No. Never. But I do love you and Anne and want only your happiness and safety." Lust, desire, he knew. This love that the poets and minstrels sang of was unknown to him. He'd long since given up the hope of learning it for himself.

"If that is so, then you'll want me to be with Marcus. Only with him could I find true happiness."

"And certain death." He stood. "Beth, let me make myself plain and speak clearly. You are going to marry the duke. You are not going to speak of your feelings for Marcus. Trust me, once Jackson has bedded you, any confusion you might feel will be removed."

Beth laughed, hard and sharp and bitter. "So, once my husband has taken me, all love for Marcus will leave. How can you say that? How can you let me go to Baymore, and marry any man other than the one I want? The one I love?"

"Sister!" Basil couldn't believe his sister's words. "You shouldn't---"

"Speak of such things?" She snorted. "Have you forgotten, I've been married before, felt a man's hands on my body, his breath on my skin, his rod in my—"

"Beth!" Holding his hand out to ward her off, Basil dropped down onto the bench again, his stomach churning. "Stay your words."

She strode up to him, knelt, and took his hands in hers. "Please, Basil. If you love me, don't let this happen." Her blue eyes spilled tears down her soft cheeks and his heart tore a little with each one that fell onto his hands.

He closed his eyes. "This is impossible." If he broke the contract, if Marcus didn't claim her, if Baymore let them leave the castle alive...

"More so for me."

"Let me ponder this, Beth, but for now, I see no way out of this without us all dying, you, me, Anne, and Marcus. Is that what you really want?" he whispered.

She looked away, blinked, and washed more tears down her cheeks.

With a sniff, she shook her head. "No. I don't wish for death. I don't want to hurt any of you." She glanced at her baby. "You are right. There is too much to risk for my happiness."

The utter defeat of her words stabbed him.

He should feel relief; instead he felt as trapped as she must, as desolate as her heart at the loss for a chance at love.

He might never have felt love before, but he'd certainly felt its lack. To be so close to the dream and then have it snatched away, stolen from you by a piece of parchment and the signature of two men.

It was the only way.

"Go to bed, Beth. Get some sleep, if you can. Tomorrow we'll strike camp and make for Baymore's castle." He let her go and went to the drape.

"Aye, it's late. Good night, Basil."

He nodded and stepped out of the tent.

The temptation to go to Marcus and beat him senseless almost overpowered Basil. He turned and took off in another direction, away from the master of arms' tent, anywhere he didn't have to see the reminder that in his well-meaning for his sister, he had doomed her to a life of longing for a love that could never be.

* * * * *

Beth threw herself onto her cot and let the tears fall. Might as well get her crying over and done with. Once they reached Baymore and her new home and husband, tears would only bring questions that she had no answers to; at least, not answers anyone wanted to hear.

How could she do it? Marry Jackson, but burn for Marcus? And he'd be there in the castle, every day and night a reminder of where her heart longed to be.

Free.

Free to choose, free to love, just like any man.

Women of her rank had many privileges, but freedom wasn't one of them.

Oh, but that she were of humbler origins! She rolled over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling of the tent. That she were but a peasant, free to love the boy down the lane, the son of the blacksmith, or the brother of the baker.

She would have a small wedding, her hair wreathed in spring flowers, wearing the dress her mother had embroidered for her, maybe even a pair of fancy slippers bought from a shop in town. He would wear the wedding shirt his mother had made for him, finely embroidered and sewn. And he'd come for her with a small borrowed cart, the pony dressed in garlands and ribbons, with all their friends and relatives following along beside and behind them.

A simple wedding. A simple life. In a small cottage, with a man who loved her and her child.

Tears filled her eyes and spilled over, running down into her ears and hair.

There had to be another way out of this.

If she didn't think of something, she'd be sold again in marriage, to another man who didn't love her, but would bed her and put a child in her.

Only this time, he'd be a duke and not a second son. Whether he lived or died, at least she'd be valuable, as the wife of the duke, and mother of the heir, if not for herself.

She would have Baymore. A fine castle, lands, and wealth.

It should be enough.

But it wasn't. She was greedy, spoiled by the touch of a man, by his kisses, by the unspoken promises he'd given her. Promises of love and freedom.

Her hands clenched and she let the rising anger at her situation and her lot in life sweep over her. She'd gone happy and willing to her first husband, more than content with him and their marriage. She'd been young and it had been her duty. And when little Anne had been born, the happiness she'd felt rivaled any she'd ever known.

Why should now be so different?

Why should she be so hungry for love, when she'd been without it before in a marriage? This was nothing new, and she knew it. Women of her rank married whom and when their families decided. None were free.

She'd been fortunate Basil had found *any* titled man, much less a duke, to take her. With no dowry to offer, older and saddled with another man's shame and child, she was no prize, and she knew it.

She rolled over, wiped her tears with the sleeve of her gown, and then folded her hands under her cheek.

Tomorrow, she'd meet Jackson Baymore, and in three days' time, become his wife. Anne would have a father, and she'd have a grand keep, servants, and lands. Enough money to have any finery made for her that she desired.

And Marcus would be there, just outside her grasp, reminding her of all she didn't have and never would possess.

Chapter Twenty-two

The rays of the morning sun played across the floor of the great hall, giving some warmth to the stones. Jackson of Baymore sat in his chair in front of the hearth, as Liam sat on a small stool against the wall.

"Lad. Find Lord Holcombe for me. I need his opinion." The duke waved his hand toward the door. "He's about somewhere."

"Aye, Your Grace." Liam jumped up and trotted across the hall to the stairs. There was a good chance his lordship was still upstairs in his room, tending to the castle's business. He hadn't been at the morning meal and the duke had eaten alone, putting him in a bad mood. And he shouldn't be, because this was the day he would meet his bride.

Liam ran up the stairs and down the hall, skidding to a stop at Lord Holcombe's door.

He rapped on it twice. "My lord, the duke wishes you attend him," he called through the thick wood.

The door swung open and he looked up at William Holcombe. Not as tall as the duke, he was still a big man, and Liam's neck craned back.

"Liam, is it? What does he want?" Holcombe leaned in the doorway, as if in no hurry.

"He needs you to make a decision, he said."

"Probably which outfit he should wear to greet his new bride." Holcombe's lips twisted in a sneer. He didn't look happy at all.

Liam shrugged. It wasn't his place to speculate about His Grace's desires.

"Well, I must finish my work. Tell him I'll be down in good time." He straightened, then went back inside and shut the door.

"Aye, my lord," Liam said to the wood. He spun on his heels and headed back down the hall, took the stairs two at a time, and then raced across the hall to his duke.

"Your Grace! Lord Holcombe bids you wait until he's finished his work."

The duke frowned. He growled deep in his throat, but it wasn't a hard, menacing sound at all. It sounded warm and happy.

"He bids me, does he?" The duke chuckled. "Tell him I shall not wait. Tell him I command he attend me now." He winked at Liam and shooed him away, then settled deeper in his chair.

Liam nodded and took off. Across the hall. Up the stairs. Down the corridor.

He rapped again. "Lord Holcombe!"

The door swung open again. "What?" Holcombe clung to the door frame, leaning out.

"His Grace says you are to come now."

"Now, eh?" Holcombe grinned and scratched his chin.

Liam puffed out his chest. "He commands you." There. Let the man deny His Grace, if he dare.

Holcombe's eyebrows rose. "Commands, you say?"

"Aye!" Liam nodded. "Your duke commands you."

His lordship's eyes narrowed and Liam felt the heavy piercing weight of his stare. Holcombe leaned down, putting his face at the same level as Liam's. Liam's stomach dropped out with the sick certainty that he'd made an awful mistake.

"My duke?" he whispered, one eyebrow cocked up, then straightened. "Aye, he is my duke. Mine more than any man here. He is my duke, my friend, my companion. And now, it seems he will have a new companion." His eyes grew sad as he gazed across the hall at the duke's door.

Liam didn't know what to say. Even to his young mind, Liam knew Lord Holcombe wasn't happy about this wedding. Perhaps he feared being usurped by the new duchess in the duke's favor?

He bounced his toe on the floor. "Are you coming?" Liam whispered.

"No."

Liam jerked back. "What?"

"Tell Jackson if he wants to see me, he can come to my room." Then Holcombe disappeared behind the door, leaving Liam in the hall, confused and frightened.

What would the duke say when he repeated the message? Would he take his wrath out on his page? Just the thought of the duke's huge hands curling into fists and striking him made Liam's knees shake.

But the duke had never raised his hand to Liam, or anyone in the short time Liam had been there.

He turned away, taking his time as he went down the hall, his mind spinning through just how he would tell His Grace of Lord Holcombe's impertinence.

Another man might have beaten the bearer of such a message, but not Jackson Baymore. From the beginning, he'd treated Liam better than his own father had, and for that Liam was grateful.

At the bottom of the stairs, he halted and watched the duke. He sat in the chair, his head back, eyes closed. Liam approached and cleared his throat to make his presence known.

"Aye." The duke didn't open his eyes.

Liam cleared his throat again. "His lordship says..."

"Hmm?"

"His lordship says..."

"His lordship says what, lad? Spit it out." The duke tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"For you to come to him if you want him," Liam blurted out, then clapped his hands over his mouth.

"Come to him?" the Duke bellowed, sitting upright. He swung his head around and he stared at Liam.

"Aye." Liam nodded.

The duke opened his mouth, but instead of shouts, he laughed. A great roaring laugh, accompanied by several slaps of his hand on his thigh. Liam couldn't help but join in the laughter, despite not understanding the jest.

"William, you devil!" he bellowed, still laughing. "Come to you, must I? So it shall be!" He pushed out of the chair and took off, then halted. "Wait here, young page." He pointed to the chair and Liam sat in it. Then the duke strode through the hall, took the steps two at a time, and disappeared.

Liam at last let out his breath, amazed he'd come out of whatever game the men played unharmed. It had been a game, he could see that now. The duke ordered and Holcombe denied, back and forth with Liam caught in the middle, their go-between, as if they were a couple of courting...

Liam laughed, then clapped his hand over his mouth. That was so foolish. He looked around to see if anyone had seen him laugh, as if they would know his thoughts and call him on them.

The duke and his lordship were friends, old friends of good nature, teasing and rousing each other to vexation. Nothing more.

Liam sat back in the large chair and stared into the fire. His hand ran along the embroidered velvet cushion, worn from wear. Even so, it was finer than any chair he'd ever sat on.

If he were duke, this would be his chair. He'd order new fabric to cover it, something with birds embroidered on it, or maybe a stag. And stars. Bright yellow stars in a dark blue night.

But he wasn't the duke and it was all his father's fault. If Hugh Baymore had been a better man, like Jackson Baymore, then he'd still be alive. Still be able to come to Liam's village, ride up to his cottage, and claim his mother and him and bring them here to live with him. His mother would still be alive, not burned in a foolish accident. Liam's eyes filled with tears at the last memory of her, gasping, blackened, and struggling to tell him what to do.

It was all his father's fault.

* * * * *

Jackson leaned against the side of the door and knocked. What game was Will playing? This might be the last day they had together, without a woman standing between them, and Will chose to spend it vexing him.

"Who is it?" Will's muffled voice drawled, barely heard.

"It is I, the Duke of Baymore."

"Who?"

Jackson rolled his eyes. Oh, that game. He chuckled.

"The Duke of Baymore. Your duke."

"My duke?"

"Aye. Your most beloved duke."

"Beloved?"

Jackson looked up and down the corridor, and thanked God it was deserted.

"My dear Lord Holcombe, may I come in?" he whispered.

"My dear Duke Baymore, no."

Jackson swung toward the door, pressing his mouth to the crack. "Will, open for me." His hand caressed the rough wood as he longed to caress Will's smooth skin.

"You want me to open for you?" Jackson heard the tease in Will's voice, and smiled at the suggestion.

"Please."

"Do you entreat?"

"I do." Jackson nodded, even though Will couldn't see him.

"Do you beg?"

"If needs be." He growled. Will pushed so hard sometimes, knowing it only inflamed Jackson's desire.

"Needs be, Your Grace."

"Then open the door and I shall beg of you, my lord."

Silence. Then the bolt slid, unlatching the door. After taking a deep breath, Jackson lifted the handle, pushed, and the door swung open.

Will stood in the center of the room, dressed in only a loose robe wrapped around his body, his long hair falling over his shoulders and anger burning in his eyes. Jackson entered, then closed the door behind him, and threw the bolt home.

Christ, Will looked beautiful. And Jackson desired him for his beauty, for his spirit, and for his love.

"How will you beg, Your Grace?" Will arched an eyebrow upward.

Jackson unbuckled his belt and let his sword slip to the floor. He took a step forward, but Will held his ground, his blue gaze boring into Jackson's.

"As an unarmed man, my lord." He held out his hands to show they were empty. Then he slid his vest from his shoulders and pulled his shirt over his head. They joined the sword on the floor.

Will's gaze never left his, not once.

Jackson inhaled and flexed his muscles, his arms swelling in size and girth. His nipples hardened, as did his cock, pressing against his breeches.

He loosened his strings and slipped his hand inside, grabbing his cock. But instead of pulling it out, he kept his hand there, squeezing his flesh, denying Will the sight of it.

"Not completely without weapons, Your Grace." Will's gaze dropped to Jackson's groin, then flicked back to his face.

"You want me helpless? Vulnerable?"

"Aye, and at my mercy."

"So it shall be." Jackson didn't move, his hand stroking his aching rod.

"A man who wishes mercy asks for it on his knees, Your Grace."

Jackson went to his knees. "Mercy."

Will shook his head. "Oh no, Your Grace. For you, it shall be on hands and knees."

Jackson leaned over and placed his hands on the floor, then looked up.

"And bare-assed."

Jackson sat back and pushed his breeches down to his knees then stretched out on his hands. The chill of the room brought bumps up on his exposed cheeks, but his cock and sac hung heavy between his legs.

Will strode around him, his dressing gown trailing behind him, as he inspected Jackson as if he were a prize steer at the village market.

"Well and good." He stopped facing Jackson.

Will opened his hand. The gown slipped off his shoulders and pooled on the floor at his feet, revealing his naked body to his lover.

Jackson gasped at the glorious sight in front of him. On all fours, he was at the perfect level to take Will's erect, beautiful cock in his mouth and suck it until Will came. His mouth watered at the thought, and his cock rose to brush against his belly. But he knew the look in his lover's eyes, and it was not a cock sucking Will wanted.

"Ride me, my lord. I am yours to command."

Will threaded his fingers into Jackson's hair, then pulled his head back. Stretched upward, Jackson's mouth opened, waiting and willing to be filled.

"Aye, your back is broad and strong enough for a hard ride, Your Grace."

His lover bent down and took his mouth in a hard kiss, Will's tongue slamming into his mouth, plundering, taking. And Jackson, unable to close his mouth, could only hold himself up and submit to it. His sac tightened and he came close to spilling, but fought to control his body's need.

Will pulled away at last, and let Jackson go. Jackson hung his head and licked his lips to capture Will's taste. Between his knees, his cock's clear cream dripped onto the wooden floor.

As Will paced around Jackson, he ran his hand over Jackson's shoulder, down his back, fingers trailing over his spine, to the cleft between his cheeks, and buried them there, in the soft fur of Jackson's aching ass.

"If this is our last time together, my love, I will take you." Will knelt behind him now, and put his hands on Jackson's ass, prying it apart. His warm breath blew across Jackson's exposed entry, sending a shiver through Jackson. Will's soft rumble and the sound of a well-oiled hand stroking over a thick cock, filled the chamber.

"Aye, sweet Will. No matter what happens, I'm yours." Jackson shuddered, and his hole throbbed with the knowledge of what was to come. "Fuck me hard and ride me until I break."

Will's fingers dug into his hips hard enough to mark him. Heated flesh pushed against his opening, once, twice, and then as Jackson pushed back, his lover entered with a cry.

Chapter Twenty-three

Basil had watched his sister and Marcus all morning. From the breaking of their fast, to the packing of the camp, and as she climbed into the wagon and Anne had been handed up to her, she and Marcus never spoke, never made eye contact, never came near each other.

That was bad. There was no banter between them, no show of friendship, or anything else. Mere acknowledgement proved too much for the pair, it seemed.

Perhaps he'd been mistaken in the advice he'd given his sister to marry the duke. But there was no time for second guessing and certainly this was not the time to rescind the contract. Not with a dozen of Duke Baymore's armsmen in his midst and but half a day's ride from Baymore.

With the large wagon holding all of Beth and Anne's belongings, a fast escape wasn't possible. Baymore's men would run them down, and Basil couldn't afford to lose any men in a skirmish. Or chance that his sister and her child be injured.

No, the only course was to finish the journey.

He swung up into the saddle and spurred his mount to his sister's side. The wagon's driver sat next to her, and little Anne sat in the wagon behind them with Beth's maid

Beth nodded to him as she adjusted her gown, and he waved to the child, who waved back. At the front of the wagon, Marcus joined six of his riders. Baymore's other men would bring up the rear. The fact that Basil, the wagon, and his men were surrounded wasn't lost on Basil.

Basil gave the sign to Marcus to move out.

"To Baymore!" Marcus shouted, and with a wave of his arm, the entire column of men started out. The wagon driver cracked his whip over the team of four horses, and the wagon jolted forward, causing Beth to clutch the sides of her bench, and Anne to fall backward.

Instead of crying, she came up giggling, thinking this new way of traveling quite the sport, and the maid laughed also. Basil smiled at that bright moment, then his gaze met Beth's and the grin slipped from his face.

Her mouth was set in a hard line, her eyes somber, her brow furrowed. His heart ached at her unhappiness, but he told himself this was for the best. He'd done the best he could for her, made a fine match for his sister and her child, and he shouldn't feel guilty in the least.

But if that were so, then why did he feel he was bringing her to what might turn out to be a prison?

* * * * *

Marcus turned back to look at the procession he led. Two dozen armsmen, a huge wagon loaded with trunks and furniture, a child, and a bride to be. And her brother.

Right now, none of them, except the babe, looked happy to be there. He swung back around and stared down the road, as if that would make the journey go faster.

Or slower. He didn't know which.

And if he could see his own face, the list of unhappy people would probably include him. How had he let William Holcombe talk him into this disaster of a mission?

He knew how. He'd wanted it. Seen a way to make his dream of home and hearth come true, and he'd taken it. Wanted to protect and serve his duke, a man he owed much.

Only now, Marcus realized, he'd betrayed himself and his duke by taking the assignment and failing.

How could he have been so foolish?

No, not foolish. Desperate. It all boiled down to desperation-on all their parts.

What would William say when he saw that Marcus hadn't won the woman's heart or hand, that he'd even forsaken the mission, and left Jackson with a bride?

And William without Jackson.

Marcus stiffened his spine and his resolve. He'd faced worse situations, worse odds in battle, but this was a certain thing.

When William found out, he would kill Marcus.

* * * * *

Beth rocked along with the swaying of the cart, her mind on her upcoming wedding. She'd packed the dress she'd worn for her first marriage. Why not? No one here had seen it, other than

her brother and her maid. With their coffers running low, she didn't want to burden Basil with any expenses.

Behind her in the cart, most of her possessions had come along with her and Anne. Even her bed had been dismantled and loaded up. It was for Anne, when it was time to set up her home. Perhaps Jackson Baymore would pay her wedding dowry when the time came. If not, at least Beth had something to give to Anne.

Anne reached over the boards and tugged on her mother's hair.

"Aye, baby?" Beth cooed. The little girl looked up at her, happy as could be, her rag doll clutched to her travel gown. The maid, sitting on a cushion, held the child in her arms.

Anne held the doll out for Beth to kiss. Beth leaned down, gave it a quick peck on the top of its head, then laughed. "Are you having fun, Anne?"

Anne nodded. The wagon hit a hard bump and Anne's eyes flew wide open; she bounced as the maid's grip slipped and the child's backside hit the floor.

Beth held her breath, waiting to see if the child would cry or not.

Anne giggled, got back on her feet, and went back to her place behind Beth.

Well, she was fine, then. Beth exhaled, and she and the maid exchanged thankful glances.

In front of the wagon, past four soldiers, rode Marcus. Beth couldn't help but be drawn to him, letting her gaze sweep over his strong broad back, to his ass as he sat in his saddle, to his thighs gripping the sides of his mount.

A perfect man in so many ways.

She sighed.

It was pointless to keep harping on it. She needed to set her mind and her heart to her new husband, Jackson. The sooner, the better, for all their sakes. He must never know of her feelings for Marcus.

She resolved not to look at Marcus again. Never again.

"Beth?" Basil rode beside her.

"Aye, brother?" She glanced over at him.

"You seem quiet."

"Do I? I suppose I have much on my mind." She shrugged. With the driver beside her and her maid behind, Beth and Basil weren't free to speak openly.

"Excited? We'll be to Baymore before midday."

"That's what I understand." She thought for a while, then spoke, "I've been thinking about my arrival." She looked down at her traveling gown. "I wish to stop before the castle and change. I should be wearing a finer gown than this."

"Of course," Basil quickly agreed. "Do you wish to ride your horse, also?"

"No, I think I'd like to have Anne up here beside me. I want him to understand from the very beginning she and I are not to be separated."

"A good strategy." He nodded. "It will set the tone right off."

"Aye." She thought again. "And I want you to make sure that all of the contract is in place and upheld prior to the wedding." If she sold herself, she would be sure the agreed upon price was paid, down to the last coin, cow, and chicken.

She owed it to her brother and to her daughter to do her duty to them.

No matter what the cost.

* * * * *

Jackson strode across the courtyard, his page at his side, and climbed the stairs to the walkway that ran along the top of the keep. Ever since this morning when he and Will had made love, possibly for the last time, a sense of foreboding had risen in him, step by step, like a creek overflowing its banks, until the dread flooded every part of him.

"Will we see her? Is she coming now?" The boy's innocent excitement almost caught in him. Jackson clapped him on the back.

"Nay. Not yet. They won't make the castle until midday."

"Oh." The boy frowned up at him. "I hate waiting."

"Aye, waiting is hard, especially for one so young as you."

"I'm not young. I'm almost a man."

Jackson chuckled and reached out to tousle the boy's black hair. "A man, eh?"

"Aye!" He grinned up at Jackson, then added, "Nearly the same age as when you left your home."

Jackson should probably ask about the boy's family, but right now, he couldn't muster the interest. He had other, more pressing, things on his mind.

The sun stood high in the sky. At any moment, the caravan would crest the far hill, in sight of Baymore, and he would see them.

Not up close, but from a distance.

With only one eye, he'd have to settle for seeing her at a closer distance. Like when she came through the gates.

His stomach danced. Not even on the morning of his worst battle had he been this nervous. And those times, all he stood to lose had been his life.

Now he could lose Will.

He leaned over the wall, hands braced on the stones, as he stared down the long road. Minutes, hours, perhaps even a day, crawled past, and Jackson kept staring at the point on the horizon where his future would appear.

"Any sighting?" Will's soft voice came at Jackson's right side. If Jackson counted on anything, it was that Will would be at his side. Until now. This was a place Will couldn't go, and Jackson had never felt so alone.

"None. But then, my eyesight is not as good as yours, my lord."

Will leaned out, his hand just touching Jackson's. Jackson squinted into the harsh noon light and heard Will's sharp intake of breath. Jackson stared down at Will's hand, smaller than his own, yet strong, and he moved his hand to cover it.

"They come," Will whispered, and his fingers tightened in Jackson's grip.

A cloud of dust rose from the road, and the pennants of the first riders broke over the crest of the hill.

"Riders!" The call rose up from many of the men on the wall.

Liam spun around and shouted down to the bailey, "They're here! They're here!"

"God save us, Will." Jackson swallowed and looked into Will's blue eyes.

"If we're counting on God, I fear we're in trouble, Your Grace," Will drawled. "Boy, go on, give us some peace from your yelling!"

Liam nodded, and still grinning, he ran back down the stairs to the bustling courtyard.

How could Will be so unaffected? So bland about it? Jackson wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him until he felt as flustered and panicked as he did.

As if he'd read Jackson's mind, Will said, "There's nothing to be done about it for now. We'll wait and see. I have hopes something will change the course we find ourselves on, Jackson." Will patted Jackson's hand. "Come, they draw near. We must be down below when she comes through the gates." Will turned away and headed to the stairs.

"Aye." Jackson nodded and followed Will down to the courtyard.

Around them, everyone was skittering around. Last minute cleaning—shovels for scooping up the manure, buckets of water tossed out, brooms sweeping water over the cobblestones drove the activity, like bees around a hive.

Liam ran up to Jackson, almost bouncing in his shoes.

"How do I look?" Jackson held out his arms. He wore what Will had picked out for him, some of his best clothing, but not the garments they'd chosen for the wedding, if it happened.

"Most handsome, Your Grace. She'll fall in love with you at first sight," the boy promised.

Jackson turned to his lover. "Will?" Their gazes met across the top of Liam's head as fear, regret, sorrow, and anger flashed between them.

"Like a duke," Will said.

* * * * *

My duke. Will refused to add his emotions to Jackson's already strained nerves. Surely, the big man would break if Will showed any signs of distress. Will had to portray confidence, had to be calm and poised, if only to protect them both.

But, by God, he wanted to crawl into a dark hole and hide. Wanted nothing more than to sneak under the covers of his bed, blow out the candles, and refuse to answer the door.

When this was over, no matter what happened, he would seek some solace, whether here or somewhere else. As he stood there waiting for the gates to open, Will knew he would never return to his father's keep. He'd take to the road, travel the land, perhaps take passage on a sailing ship and go abroad.

"Open the gates! They're here!"

Will froze, as if his feet were mired in muck, unable to go forward or run away.

Jackson, however, had no such trouble. He stepped forward, put his hands on his hips and bellowed, "Open the gates for my bride!"

Will staggered.

Chapter Twenty-four

Baymore Castle loomed even bigger than Beth had dreamed and her heart thudded in her chest as if it wanted freedom also. Massive gray stone walls climbed high above them. The tall wooden and iron gates cracked open to swallow her and the wagon whole, as two men on each side pushed against them. Beyond the portal, a throng of people had gathered. Waiting for her.

Beth held onto the boards of the bench as if it were salvation.

Marcus rode under the lintel, and his men disappeared around the side of the wall, but he remained in the center of the bailey.

A huge man, sturdier than any man she'd ever seen, stood rooted like a tree and flanked by a younger man and a lad. He watched as her wagon rolled into the courtyard.

Around her, a cheer went up as it came to a stop in front of them.

Beth wanted to look around, but her gaze riveted on the man. He was handsome, in a rough way, clean shaven, but his hair stood wild around his head. To her, he resembled some kind of wild forest man, and the dark green velvet vest and black breeches and boots helped to add to that impression.

It could have been worse; he could have been short, fat, and repulsive. She stifled the shudder of that thought, kept her back straight, and her face serene.

Her gaze flicked to Marcus. She couldn't help it, but it seemed he could. He swung down from his saddle, dropped to a knee in front of the man, and pulled off his helmet.

Her brother edged his horse closer, then he dismounted and strode forward to stand beside Marcus.

Marcus stood. "Your Grace, I wish to present Basil Clayton. Lord Clayton, this is Jackson the Duke of Baymore."

The men postured and presented themselves, repeating titles and leaving Beth to wait her turn. To her it seemed all eyes except the duke's were on her, and she found that most odd.

Basil kept from gawking at the duke, the largest and most powerful man he'd ever seen, no doubt, but there was no trace of danger about him. His outward appearance was jovial, and he had smiling dark eyes and a wide grin.

Once the introductions had been made, Basil presented his papers to the duke. The younger man on the duke's right stepped forward to take the documents. He had to be the most handsome, nay, beautiful man Basil had ever beheld.

"I am Lord William Holcombe, the duke's steward." He bowed to Basil.

"Lord Basil Clayton, of Clayton Castle," Basil returned the bow. "Then it's you I must thank, for you drew up the terms of the agreement." Basil gave him a brief bow.

"The terms were His Grace's; I merely wrote them down."

"I'm sure you did more than that," Basil replied, his gaze flicking to the duke. The man was imposing, but one look told Basil that William Holcombe had planned and executed the contract. An air of competence and confidence surrounded the man.

The man had intelligence and beauty. A rare combination, one that pleased and excited Basil, and one he hadn't seen in many men.

He wanted to know more about Holcombe, but there would be time for that. The wedding would be in three days. More than enough time for learning what sort of man the duke's steward might be. Basil hoped he wouldn't be disappointed.

"Your Grace, may I present my sister, Lady Beth Clayton." He purposely substituted her married name, but no one called him on it. Perhaps they all wanted to forget her unfortunate first marriage.

The duke's gaze shifted and landed on Beth, still seated on the wagon, and he smiled. "Lady Beth. Well met!"

"And to you, Your Grace." She nodded. "This is my child, Anne." She pulled the baby closer to her.

The duke cocked his head at the child. "She's a beauty, my lady. Just like her mother."

Beth found herself blushing at his words, not that he had said them or that she'd never heard them before, but that they had been spoken in so honest a tone. Despite her initial misgivings about his size and looks, she decided for now she liked the Duke of Baymore. He did not stir her loins, but she didn't find him terrible.

Basil came to the side of the wagon and extended his hand for her to take. She took it and climbed down from the wagon. Her maid handed down Anne, and Beth took her in her arms. The little girl sighed, laid her cheek against Beth's shoulder, and fell asleep.

"She's weary from the journey, isn't she?" Jackson Baymore smiled down at Beth and the babe. He reached out and ran his hand over her little head. "Now, you must be tired from your long time on the road. Tell me, Lord Clayton, did you encounter any bandits? Come, sit by the fire and tell me of it." Jackson turned and walked toward the keep, the men following him.

Basil turned to her. "Are you coming?"

"No, go on. I must attend to our things." She waved him on, then turned to her maid. "Here, take Anne." She gave the child back to her. "Once I get the wagon unloaded I'll find where we are to stay and we'll put her down for a nap."

"Aye, milady. I could use a nap myself," the old woman muttered.

Beth turned to one of the several men unloading the wagon, who seemed to be in charge. She directed him about the luggage, trunks, and furniture. She was in no rush to sit with the men and pass the time, or anxious to learn more about her future husband. Mostly, she wanted to avoid speaking to Marcus.

"It's a fine keep, milady."

"It is." Beth halted and turned in a slow circle, surveying her surroundings. Clean, spacious, and the servants all well dressed. Baymore certainly lived up to its reputation for wealth and size.

Beth chuckled. So did Baymore's duke.

* * * * *

The men sat on the chairs gathered around the hearth, a low fire burning in it. A servant brought tankards of ale and passed them around. Basil sipped from his, then rested it on his knee. The pleasantries done, time to get down to business.

"So, Your Grace, what do you think of Lady Beth?" Basil began.

Jackson shifted in his chair, Marcus jerked his head up at the question, and Lord Holcombe frowned. Very curious, those reactions.

"She's a beauty." The duke nodded and swallowed.

Lord Holcombe brought his tankard to his lips and drank deeply. Marcus stared into the fire, a small muscle in his jaw jerking. Very odd. Something was going on, something they knew, but he didn't. He didn't like that, not at all. For his sake and his sister's he needed to get to the bottom of this.

Marcus's reaction, he could understand. But no matter how Holcombe tried to hide it, he was angry. But at what? He'd drawn up the contract. And the duke? Uncomfortable, he'd say. Perhaps worried?

"I'd like to discuss the terms of the contract." Basil leaned toward Lord Holcombe.

"Indeed?" Holcombe leaned away, an opposite move, as if in a mirror.

"They are all still intact, are they not?"

"Aye. There has been no change, and can't be, unless we all come to some agreement." His eyes narrowed. "Perhaps there has been some change on you or your sister's part?" Was that hope in his voice?

Basil looked into blue eyes the color of the summer sky. Eyes he could fall into without even knowing he fell. By the gods, the man stirred him.

Marcus coughed, and Basil's gaze slid away and pinned him. Marcus's gaze held his, and if Basil didn't know better, there was almost a pleading in them.

Now was the time, if ever, to bring up Beth's wishes to be free of the contract.

Basil glanced at Baymore, who had set his lips in a hard thin line; his brow furrowed and with that one look became, to Basil's mind, a very dangerous man.

"No, there is nothing."

Holcombe's hands curled into fists on the arms of his chair, Marcus glared at Basil, and the duke, whose eyes took on a wild look, seemed as if he would bolt at any moment. Or rise up and draw his sword to attack.

"Has there been a change on your part, Your Grace?"

The hall bustled with servants preparing the tables for the midday meal, but at the hearth, a silence heavier than velvet drapes descended, blocking out all the noise, and leaving only the heavy breathing of the four men who sat there.

No one spoke, just furtive glances between them all. Hell, something was afoot here, and Basil was determined to get to the bottom of it. It might mean him and Beth's lives if he didn't.

"No change," Jackson spoke, his voice a near whisper.

"Good, good." Basil nodded. He stood. "If it's not too much trouble, I'll see to my sister and her belongings now." He bowed to Duke Baymore. To Holcombe, he said, "Lord Holcombe, I wish to speak to you on a private matter, at your earliest convenience."

Holcombe stood. "I will speak with you in an hour. There are some matters I must attend to first."

"In an hour, then." Basil bowed to them all, and left to find Beth.

These men were hiding something. He didn't know what, but he would damn sure find out what and make sure his sister was safe before he let the wedding go on or leave her here.

"Marcus, attend me. Your Grace, take your rest here; I will return shortly." Will jerked his head and Marcus followed as he crossed the hall and climbed the stairs to his room.

Once there, he opened the door and motioned for Marcus to follow, then shut the door behind him.

"Tell me," Will ordered.

Marcus spread his stance, braced himself, and swallowed. "I failed, my lord." If he were to die right now, so be it.

Will stared at the man in front of him. He'd been loyal to Baymore, and to Jackson, almost to a fault. "How so?"

"I...she..." Marcus stuttered, his hands gripped each other.

"Come now, Marcus. I saw the looks you gave her, when you thought no one looked, and those she gave you. Don't try to tell me nothing happened. She's beautiful, even if she has a child."

Marcus cleared his throat. "I didn't say nothing happened. I said I failed."

"Failed, or refused?" Will narrowed his eyes. Something had happened between them. Lady Beth had stared blankly at everyone around her, except for two people. Jackson and Marcus. Jackson with interest, and Marcus? Well, the only thing Will could call it was regret.

Marcus straightened. "Refused, my lord."

"So you would betray Baymore?"

"I would not betray her, my lord."

Will's eyebrows rose. "Oh, I see. You do feel for her!"

"She is... I would not have her with a lie, my lord. I could have taken her, then and there, but if she ever found out...if she knew it had been planned, that I had married her for lands, hearth, coin..." He shook his head.

"And not for love?"

"Aye." Marcus looked at him with desperation burning in his eyes. "I would lose her. And to lose her after knowing her love and her touch?" He shook his head and fisted his hands. "That would be unbearable."

"So you will bear the never knowing?"

"Aye. It's better that way."

"It's a nice plan, Marcus. Only it leaves Jackson and me in the same place we were before. Fucked," Will spit out. He understood Marcus's thoughts, but it damned him and Jackson.

"If you wish payment for my failure, my lord, I willingly accept." Marcus loosened the clasp of his sword belt and it dropped to the floor. He dropped to one knee and held out his arms in surrender.

Did the man expect Will to beat him? Whip him or even behead him?

Will's stomach clenched. He'd only killed a very few men, and in self-defense, never in a cold-blooded rage. And he wouldn't start now.

"Get to your feet and put your sword on, Master of Arms." He waved at the weapon. "There can be no punishment for love. It's punishment enough." He strode to his desk and fell into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

Marcus retrieved his sword and stood. "William, I am truly sorry."

Will looked up. "But, she cares for you?"

"Aye."

"You're sure?" Marcus nodded. "Does her brother know?"

"No. We promised not to tell a soul."

Will smirked. "And yet, you told me."

"I owed you, my lord."

Will tapped his lips with his finger. Perhaps she owed her brother? Perhaps he knew nothing of Marcus and his sister?

Wild thoughts raced through his head. Impetuous, rash thoughts. He could take Jackson and they could flee. That he could do, but Jackson would never give up Baymore, not even for him. Will could kill the brother and sister, but he'd only forfeit his own life for theirs, and deep inside, he couldn't bring himself to that damnation, no matter what.

"Fine. You're dismissed." He waved Marcus out.

With a crisp bow, Marcus backed out of the room.

The door closed and Will slumped to the desk, his forehead resting on the warm wood. There had to be a way out of this. He could expose the love between Marcus and Lady Beth, force them to deal with it. But that might mean disclosing the deal he'd made with Marcus and incur the good lady's wrath. Ruining Marcus and her chances for happiness.

He could speak with her brother. Tell him the truth.

But that could get Jackson and he killed.

He could just leave. Go, say good-bye to Jackson, wish him well and many sons, and take to the road. He looked up and surveyed his room. He managed the castle's business here, took the occasional nap, changed clothes, and hid here when the darkness of mind and soul took him, but this is not where he lived.

That was across the hall, in Jackson's room.

He could pack what little he needed and be gone before the wedding, well on his way south to the coast and find a ship to spirit him away into the cold ocean mists.

The plan formed in his mind, and his heart died in his chest.

He would abandon the man he loved.

Chapter Twenty-five

Basil followed the servant down the hall to Lord Holcombe's door. The man knocked on the door. "Lord Holcombe, Lord Clayton wishes to speak with you."

A few heartbeats went by, then the door opened.

William Holcombe stood in the doorway, his eyes dark, his gaze menacing.

"Lord Clayton." He sounded surprised.

"Did you forget?"

He shook his head. "Come in. You wanted to speak to me?"

Basil entered and Holcombe shut the door, then went to sit behind a massive desk. Basil scanned the room. A large bed, dressed and ready for sleep, stood against one wall. The hearth had been well tended, the room warm, but not overly so. Other than the desk, the room showed little signs of having been lived in.

He took a chair in front of the desk and sat. "Lord Holcombe, I have a few questions."

"Indeed?" Holcombe sat back, eyeing him.

Basil returned the gaze, liking everything he saw, from the top of Holcombe's goldenhaired head, to his broad chest and strong arms. Could Basil dare hope the appreciation returned?

"I wish to speak openly, and I want your pledge to do the same." Basil knew he tread on dangerous ground.

"I will give you honest answers, if I can." Holcombe shrugged.

Basil stared at him, intent on seeing past the façade the man put before him. As he held Holcombe's gaze, the man's face reddened, and Basil let his own gaze heat. Holcombe swiped his lips with his tongue, and swallowed.

Aye, there was a flicker of interest, wasn't there?

Sitting back in the chair, Basil left himself open for further inspection. He spread his legs, and rested his hand on his thigh. To be too obvious might place himself in danger, had he guessed wrong about his lordship's inclinations.

"Honesty is all I want."

"Ask your questions, then." Holcombe glanced down at Basil's groin.

"Just what is going on here?"

"What?" Holcombe's gaze shot up to Basil's face.

"Something is not as it should be, Lord Holcombe. I sense something."

Holcombe shrugged. "Nonsense."

"So it's my imagination that the duke is uncomfortable with this marriage?"

"Certainly."

"And that you, yourself, are not happy. Angry, if I'm not mistaken." Basil narrowed his eyes, searching for any sign the man lied.

"Why would I be angry?"

"I'm not sure." It could be many things or nothing. But there was something there, something between the duke and his steward, something...oh.

Basil's heart plummeted to the ground.

"Perhaps you are unhappy with the thought of His Grace's marriage?"

"Why would I be?"

"Some might not like the thought of sharing the person they loved."

With great speed, Holcombe surged to his feet, pulled his dagger, and rushed around the table. He grabbed Basil's shirt and vest, and put the tip of the blade under Basil's chin, pinning him in the chair.

"What are you accusing me of?" His eyes burned a brighter blue. Stunning, if they weren't so frightening. Oh God, he wanted this man.

The heat pouring off him consumed Basil. He swallowed, and the point pricked him. One false move and he might just push the dagger home.

"Only of what I myself am guilty of," he whispered, and suppressed the desire to reach out and stroke the man's cock. That would surely earn him death.

Holcombe's eyes widened and the blade dropped. "Enough! Speak not one word more." He pushed Basil away from him.

"It seems my words have struck home."

Holcombe paced the room, the dagger still clutched in his hand. Basil watched, as ideas popped into his head, greedy, selfish, horrible, ideas. Could he take what he'd never admitted he'd dreamed of? Could he twist these circumstances to his own needs so long buried and forgotten? Could Will be his?

"The contract is unbreakable. There is no way out of it."

"I know," Holcombe spit out. "Unless your sister breaks it."

"Or I."

They stared at each other, the heat building between them. Basil stood and walked around the room as if inspecting it, only biding his time and letting his thoughts and words form.

"My sister wishes this marriage." He stood at the window and looked out. It was a fine day.

"Does she?" The tone of Holcombe's voice sent a ripple of unease through Basil.

"She understands her duty. She understands and wants what is best for both herself and her daughter."

"Really?" Clearly, Holcombe didn't believe it. Had Marcus spoken to him, told him of his interest in Beth?

"And I want it. My sister will not break the contract, nor will I." Basil faced Holcombe, daring him. "The marriage will take place. As planned."

Holcombe raised the blade to his waist, and for a moment, Basil thought he was done for, but the lord merely slipped it back into its sheath.

"My sister will marry the duke." Basil added, "And where will that leave you, Lord Holcombe?"

Holcombe stared at the wall, perhaps seeing something horrible and frightening, as the man's eyes gave him away. And as if Basil could see inside to the younger man's soul, Basil's

heart staggered at the despair and defeat he beheld. To love someone so much, to risk everything for that person, to suffer such a loss, would he ever know that feeling?

Basil turned away, strode to the window, threw open the latch, and pushed it open. He sucked in air, filling his chest, steadying his nerves and the pounding of his heart.

Could he do this? Could he destroy so many people for a chance to be with a man whose heart burned for another? Could he act on his selfishness?

He'd denied his own desires for so many years, only slaking his thirst for intimacies with a man on a rare occasion. Instead, he'd passed his time in hunting, and music, and in his lands, forgoing any companionship.

A pigeon winged around the courtyard, then flapped to a landing next to another of its kind.

Here stood another of Basil's kind. One that Basil wanted, respected, and perhaps in time, would love. If he left now, ended this game, took his sister and left, he'd never know that pain, that glory, that love.

"Honesty. We spoke of it, and yet, I have not been honest with you, Lord Holcombe." Basil turned and walked over to Holcombe.

He reached out and took Holcombe's face in his hand. "Gods, you are so beautiful and if I were a weaker man, a more conceited man, I would destroy heaven and hell to have you in my arms the rest of my life." He let the hand drop, but kept his gaze locked with Holcombe's.

"Any man you chose would be fortunate, my lord."

"Ah, but were that true." Basil sighed. "Above all my sister wishes to choose her own husband. I suspect she'd choose Marcus, your master of arms. He wants her. You want Jackson. I have a suspicion that Jackson wants you."

"And you, what do you want?" Holcombe whispered, as he caught Basil's hand in his, Basil glanced down. His hand and Holcombe's were about the same size, as were their bodies.

"Nothing. I want nothing."

"You would end all of this?" Holcombe exhaled. "I can barely believe it."

"Believe it. If you want, I will write the letter to break the contract now."

Holcombe let him go and rushed to his desk. He pulled out parchment, ink, and quill and sat down. Basil drifted back to his chair and sat.

A quarter of an hour later, they'd hammered out the terms of the new contract. Holcombe impressed Basil with his generosity, but then, he'd give away everything he had to keep his duke, wouldn't he?

Holcombe slid the paper across the desk for Basil to check.

"Perhaps I should have asked for more?" He scanned the document. He'd done well by his sister. All she'd wanted, her own house, a guaranteed income, land, livestock, and the right to choose her own husband. It would free her, not just from his rule, but to find her own way in this world.

Basil signed his name, blotted it, and handed it back. Then he stood and gave Holcombe a bow.

Holcombe came around the desk and walked with him to the door.

"Is there nothing you want for yourself, Lord Clayton?" The man tilted his head with a smile. It was a smile any man would bask in, and Basil treasured it.

"Perhaps only one thing."

"And that is?"

"A kiss, my lord." Basil glanced across into Holcombe's eyes.

Holcombe cupped Basil's cheek and leaned in. Basil's cock came to life as Holcombe's lips parted. Basil met him, open and ready. Soft lips pressed to his, gentle at first, then harder as they supped at each other's mouths, tongues exploring, tasting, delving deeper. Basil wished the kiss would never end, but at last, too soon, it did.

"The duke is a most fortunate man, Lord Holcombe."

Will smiled. "Is he? It's I who count myself most fortunate to have him."

Basil shrugged. He and William Holcombe were not to be. He could have forced the matter, but he didn't want someone who didn't want him, no matter how sweet his kisses. How long before that sweetness soured?

He'd waited this long, he could wait longer still.

"We'll announce the dissolution of the marriage contract tonight, at the evening meal." Holcombe opened the door and Basil stepped out. The castle's steward handed him the parchment; he took it and then proceeded down the corridor.

Beth would be most pleased at this turn of events.

Chapter Twenty-six

The midday meal was a quiet affair. Beth and Basil found themselves alone at the table. They waited, and at last, the duke's young page appeared.

"His Grace bids your forgiveness, but he has some business to attend to." The lad bowed and left.

"Well?" Beth arched an eyebrow up and her lips twisted. "So much for a welcome."

Basil shrugged. "As long as there's ale and good food." He surveyed the table. "And this looks and smells like good food to me." He filled his charger with meat and bread.

She picked up a piece of chicken and dropped it on her plate. "Good food, but the company is lacking." She licked her fingers. Basil was right, the food was good. Well seasoned and savory.

"You seem to be taking this well," she continued. "If I had known better, I'd say you expected it." She put her elbow on the table and her chin in her palm.

"Expected it? No. But there is nothing to do about it. Eat your meal, sister, then go to your room and rest. The running of Baymore doesn't stop for you, my dear."

Heat rose on her face. "I know that, but..."—she looked around—"we sit alone? No one to eat with us?"

"Don't let it worry or vex you, Beth. The wedding festivities begin tonight."

She sighed. He was right, as usual. She shouldn't take it as a slight. The rooms they'd been given were warm, inviting, and well appointed. Even little Anne had settled in, taking to her crib for a nap. Beth's old maid had stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes before Beth had even left the room.

Still, something was amiss, she just couldn't say what it was. Even her brother seemed odd. Sad, even. Well, sadder than usual. "I'll miss you, brother. You know that, don't you?"

He looked up at her. "And I will miss you. And Anne." He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. His warm smile reassured her.

"Will you come and visit once I'm settled?"

"Of course. I plan to attend the baby's christening."

"The baby?" She startled. "What baby?" Anne had been christened shortly after her birth.

"Well, you and your new husband's child, of course."

"Oh, that baby. After all, that's what I'm here for." She stared over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, sister. I see many days of happiness in your future." Basil grinned at her, cut a piece of meat from his chicken, and ate it.

* * * * *

Liam sat against the wall in the corridor outside the duke's room. Should the duke need him, he'd be ready. Earlier, the duke had sent him with the message for his new bride and hours had passed since then.

Across the hall, Liam stared at Lord Holcombe's door. Liam wasn't sure how he felt about that man. When he wasn't with the duke, he kept to himself, working in his room at that great desk of his. Liam had seen it once or twice when the door had opened.

Footsteps vibrated on the floor and Liam turned. Marcus came down the hall, gave Liam a nod, and knocked on Lord Holcombe's door.

The door opened, and Liam took the chance to peer inside.

"Marcus?"

"William, I must speak with you again."

Holcombe glanced down at Liam, who shifted his gaze to his own shoes.

"Of course. Come in."

The door shut.

Liam sighed and leaned back against the wall.

It looked like it would be a long, boring day. But, there would be a feast tonight, and his belly rumbled with eager anticipation.

* * * * *

Marcus slumped into the chair as Will leaned his hip on the desk. "Speak, Marcus."

"I wish to beg off from the feast tonight. Would you tell His Grace?" He couldn't bear to see her, sitting next to Jackson, knowing she would be his bride in a few short days.

"Beg off? Nay, I'll not have it, nor will the duke."

"But, it would be impossible. Have mercy, William." He groaned.

"You'll have to face it, just like I will. After all, you could have stopped this." William's lips seemed unable to decide if they would smile or frown. Perhaps William took pleasure in his pain, but then, William would suffer similar pain when Jackson married.

"Don't remind me." Marcus rubbed his face in his hands, then looked up. "I'm not sure I can stay here."

Will cocked his head to one side. "You'd leave?"

"Surely you've thought of it, also?"

"Aye, I planned for it. I just never thought you would."

Marcus laughed, bitter and hard. "A fine pair we make, William. Shall we run away together? Where were you heading?"

"Me? Over the ocean, on a fine sailing ship." William crossed his arms over his chest and smiled.

"I hadn't thought of that. I was going to head north, until I ran out of land."

"Perhaps neither of us will go far." William shrugged.

"You're right. What does distance matter? There would be no escaping your own heart." Marcus stood.

"You'll be there tonight, then? I insist on it." William stared at him.

Marcus nodded. "I'll be there." He'd choked down every bite of food and every sip of ale, even if it killed him. He wasn't a coward. "I owe much to Jackson and to you."

William walked with him to the door and opened it.

Marcus held out his hand for William to take. "I'll never regret the day you killed that bastard Hugh and brought Jackson to the title."

William frowned, then shook his hand. "Neither will I."

* * * * *

Liam's mouth dropped open and he stared at the door as it shut. Blinking, he replayed the exchange he'd just heard.

After shaking his head, he pushed to his feet. The hall spun around him, and he forgot how to breathe. He closed his eyes, then opened them.

Lord William Holcombe had killed his father?

Not Jackson?

Not the duke?

Unable to think clearly, Liam staggered down the hall to the stairs, then out the door of the keep. As soon as he hit the cobblestones he ran, straight to the one person he knew he could talk to and get the truth.

Weaving between the people he passed, Liam made for the back of the keep, past the baths, to the laundry house and slid to a stop. A sweet song floated on the air of the small courtyard, and the laundry hung out to dry danced to the tune.

He crept to the doorway and peered in.

"Mistress?"

The old woman stopped her song and looked up. "Why it's Master Liam! Come in boy, come in."

He entered and sat on the bench near her.

"What brings you here?" Her smile dropped. "Not beaten again, were you?"

"Nay." He shook his head. "I have to ask you something. Something important."

"Go on. If I know the answer, I'll tell you true." She started scrubbing the clothing she'd been working on. Without her looking at him, the words bubbled up in his throat.

"Who killed Hugh Baymore?" he blurted out.

"Who killed Hugh? Why it was that handsome young Lord Holcombe, the duke's steward." She chuckled.

Liam sprang to his feet and dashed out, ignoring her call. He had his answer, knew the truth, and now, finally, his father could be avenged, without killing the man Liam had come to admire, respect, and even love.

He held Lord Holcombe in no such esteem. He was merely the steward, although the duke's good friend.

He ran through the back alleys, but slowed as he reached the rear of the barracks and the armory. As he passed the open door of the armory, he paused, an idea blossoming in his mind.

Quick as a cat, he darted inside, and threw himself against the wall by the door. The place was empty of soldiers, but filled with their tools of the trade. Against the walls stood pikes, maces, crossbows, swords, and even on a shelf, daggers.

Liam crept to the shelf, picked out a dagger, and slipped it into his trousers, then covered it with his shirt and vest.

No one would know he had it until it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The great hall had been readied for the feast. All the lanterns and candles had been lit, and platters of bread, meats, and vegetables covered the center of the tables.

Will came down the stairs, with Jackson at his side, and surveyed those present. Behind them, the duke's page followed, dressed in his finest uniform. Several of the duke's liege lords were present, as were the other masters of the castle, such as the horse master.

Will and Jackson took their places at the duke's table and waited.

"I'm so nervous I don't think I can eat a bite," Jackson whispered to Will.

Will clasped his shoulder. "Never fear, Your Grace. You could go without a meal or two," he drawled.

Jackson shot Will a look and then rubbed his belly. "You're right, my lord. I should work out more on the practice field. I've lost some of my muscles."

"Not the ones that count, Your Grace."

"But"—Jackson's gaze danced to the stairs—"what will Lady Beth think?"

Will growled deep in his throat. "I don't think I really care." How could Jackson be so vain as to wonder what that woman thought about his body? And how could he mention it, remind Will of it? Good God, he wanted to punch the man in the belly.

Jackson pulled on his arm, dragging Will closer. "Forgive me, Will. I'm just so upset. I can't do this. I can't marry her." Panic bloomed in his dark eyes and Will's heart tripped.

"Fear not, Your Grace. It may not come to that. There is still time." He patted Jackson's hand, holding his arm in a crushing grip.

Marcus came through the door of the keep and marched over to them. He took his place at Jackson's left.

"Your Grace." He bowed to Jackson and then shot Will a look of such spitefulness that Will nearly burst out laughing. Oh, his men were in for quite a surprise tonight.

Jackson let go and exhaled. "We're doomed."

"Doomed," Marcus echoed.

Will shrugged. "We'll see."

A clamor, then a shout went up and all heads turned to face the stairs. Lady Beth, with Lord Clayton at her side, descended the stairs.

"She's quite beautiful," Jackson muttered. "I should be happy."

Marcus groaned.

"She's not my type," Will drawled. "I prefer dark hair and eyes."

She smiled at everyone she passed, giving them nods of acknowledgment, until she and Lord Clayton reached the table and the duke.

She dropped a deep curtsy. "Your Grace."

"Lady Beth." He bowed to her, then extended his arm to her seat. Her brother led her to it and got her seated, just on the right of Will, then went around the table to stand next to Marcus.

Jackson sat, and all of the men in the hall sat also and the feast began.

Will engaged in the chatter, all incredibly boring to him. It was far more enjoyable to share knowing looks with Basil Clayton, and watch both Marcus and Jackson suffering.

His heart went out to Lady Beth's plight. She picked at her food, speaking only when spoken to, and avoided everyone's gaze.

The meal had come to the end. It was time for him to reveal everything.

Will stood, and pulled the folded parchment from his vest and held it up.

"Quiet! Lord Holcombe speaks!" someone shouted.

The crowd grew silent, all attention on him. He opened the document and began to read.

"It has come to the duke's attention that Lady Beth Clayton's affections have been given to another, and that those affections are returned." He paused as Lady Beth sputtered and choked.

Marcus glared at him, his hands curling into fists. Will glanced at Jackson, whose color shaded from red to pale. Good. Well done so far.

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"Since Duke Baymore is a man of honest intentions, good will, and understands the meaning of love, he and Lord Basil Clayton have come to an agreement suitable to both parties."

Basil nodded and waved Will on.

Lady Beth glared at her brother and mouthed, "What did you do?"

Jackson glanced from Basil to Will to Lady Beth, and gave them a weak smile.

"The marriage contract between Lady Beth Clayton and Duke Jackson Baymore is rescinded. Lady Beth has been granted all the tenets of the previous agreement, and her brother declares her free to choose her own husband." He dropped the letter and smiled.

"Basil!" Lady Beth squealed.

Marcus slammed his hands on the table and stood, knocking over his chair. "Your Grace!"

Jackson burst into laughter and pounded the table. "You should see your faces!"

Will leaned down and drawled, "You should have seen yours."

"Never mind mine, my lord. I want an explanation," he whispered behind his hand.

"Later, Your Grace."

For her part, Lady Beth nodded. "But Duke Baymore, where does this leave you?"

Jackson shrugged. "For now, brideless and heirless. But have no worry for me; I have all I need."

"Marcus, now's your chance." Will nudged his master of arms. "If you don't ask first, you may not get the chance to ask at all."

Marcus colored, then nodded. "Lady Beth? May I have a moment?"

She smiled at him. "Of course, Master Marcus."

They put their heads together and spoke quietly for some time. Then Beth sought out her brother, motioned to him, and he joined the couple. They stood, hands clasps, grinning as if they had a secret.

Will didn't think the secret would stay a secret for long.

The celebration broke up later that evening, with everyone wandering off to their rooms, leaving Basil, Lady Beth, and Marcus to discuss their futures.

Jackson clapped Will on the shoulder, "I'm to bed, my lord."

"Good night, then." Will gave him a sharp bow.

He leaned over and said in a soft voice so none could hear, "I expect that explanation. Tonight."

"You are welcome anytime, Your Grace. My door is always open to you."

With that, Jackson signaled to his page and headed up the stairs.

* * * * *

Liam followed his duke to the stairs, then looked back over his shoulder, searching the last of the revelers for Lord Holcombe. The man was hard to miss, all that pretty, long blond hair and his beautiful face.

Liam sniffed, and reached into his shirt to touch the hilt of the dagger.

"Come along, Liam." Jackson motioned to him with his hand, and Liam trotted up the stairs.

They went down the corridor to the duke's room and entered.

"My boots, lad!" The duke fell into a chair and stuck out one foot.

Liam dropped to his knees and pulled the boot off, then did the other one. He placed them near the door so he could shine them in the morning, then halted. If his plan worked, he wouldn't be here in the morning, he'd be long gone.

Runaway.

With a price on his head, no doubt.

"Here, lad. Take my sword." Jackson held it out for him. He carried it to the wall rack and hung it up. By the time he returned to the duke, the big man had his vest off and had loosened the strings of his shirt.

"Is that all, Your Grace?"

"Aye, you can go. Get a good night's rest, Liam."

"I will, Your Grace." Liam went to the door, opened it, and stepped out. He pulled it closed then tiptoed to the stairs and crept down part of the way to see whether or not Lord Holcombe had come upstairs yet.

The castle's steward still sat at the table, speaking to another man. Good enough.

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Liam trotted back up the stairs, down the hall, and to Lord Holcombe's room. He opened the door and slipped inside.

* * * * *

Will finished the last of his ale, gave his regards to Lady Beth, a slap on the back to Marcus after the man thanked him again, and a quick smile to Basil Clayton. The man was indeed good looking, but more importantly, he had proven to be a man of honor, and that was far more important to Will than looks.

The trials of the long day took their toll and Will climbed the stairs to his bedchamber. His lover would be along later, and he had much explaining and perhaps a little celebrating to do.

Thinking of his duke, he opened his door and stepped inside.

The room was dark, and the light that shone in from the corridor only made shadows dance on the wall. The lantern on the table near his desk needed to be lit so he could see better, and he moved toward it.

From the side, he felt more than saw a movement. Will startled, jumping to the left and pulling his short sword, but a blade raked his hip and buried itself deep in his thigh.

"Christ!" Will cried out, as he tried to drag himself away from his attacker. Too dark to see clearly, he stumbled into a chair and nearly fell to the floor, but he found the edge of his desk with his hand and held himself up. "Who goes there?" he shouted.

A small dark figure moved across the doorway, then the door slammed shut, plunging Will and his attacker in darkness.

Will moved away from his last position to the back of the desk. The sound of a blade meeting wood, followed by a muffled curse, said his attacker had tried and missed.

Blood ran down his leg and into his boot, his sock soaked with it, and the pain of the wound now overpowered the surprise of the attack.

The man would soon realize where Will had gone. Time to move again. Circle to the door and get out. But that might be what he was thinking also.

Will froze, listening.

Shuffling footsteps and ragged panting came nearer.

Just there, to the left of the desk.

Will lunged to the right and hobbled toward the door, only to be tackled from behind, and pushed to the floor. He fell on his undamaged side, but managed to bring his sword up and block the blow, the tip of the blade just nicking his chin.

He inhaled with the sting of the cut. "Unholy bastard!" His free hand grabbed the body on top of him and he rolled, pinning the man beneath him. Man? If it were, he was small of stature and light of weight. Will knew of no such man in the castle.

Harsh panting, a sob, and his attacker went limp. Will squeezed the much smaller hand holding the dagger and it clattered to the floor. He brought his sword to the villain's throat.

"Don't move or I'll kill you where you lay."

A knock sounded at the door, then the room was filled with light, blinding Will. He blinked, squinting up at the dark shape framed in the doorway.

"What the hell? Will, in God's name what are you doing to Liam!" Jackson bellowed.

Will looked down into the red and sweating face of Liam, Jackson's page. Now the small size of his attacker made sense. Not a man at all, but a child.

"Good God!" Will cried out. "The boy tried to kill me." He rolled to the side, and sat up, his sword still holding the boy to the floor. "Have you lost your mind?"

Liam clamped his lips together.

Will shifted toward Jackson. "Give me a hand, Jackson. I can't stand without help. No, wait! Light the lantern first; we need some goddamned light in this room."

Jackson rushed to the desk, grabbed the lantern then took it to his room, lit it and returned, holding the light high over his head. He didn't know what had happened, but damn it, he'd get some answers before long.

Now he could see the damage, and the sight stabbed him in the gut. Blood ran down Will's leg, his breeches had been ripped and his flesh torn.

"Will, sweet Jesus, you're wounded!" He rushed to Will and helped him into a chair, then he turned to Liam and picked him up by the arm. "And you! What the hell were you doing? Did you not know it was Lord Holcombe?"

"Aye, I knew," he muttered, glaring at Will.

Jackson puzzled over these events. How did this happen? Could this really be his page? The boy he trusted, he'd taken on horseback, who shined his boots?

Will stared at his wound. "Get me some cloth so I can bind this and stop the bleeding. I think, when we get time, we need to call the healer and have this stitched."

Jackson put Liam in a corner, then pushed the door shut so he couldn't escape. He went to Will's cupboard, found a towel, ripped it in two, and then knelt at Will's side.

"Will, what happened?" Jackson wrapped one length around the damaged leg, then looked up at him, eyebrows furrowed. He longed to take Will in his arms, feel his heart beating, confirm his health, but Liam's presence made that impossible.

"I entered in my room. It was dark. I moved to the desk, and then he attacked me." Will pointed to the boy, standing against the wall.

Jackson tied off the knot, and stood. He went to the boy and knelt in front of him. The child shivered as if he stood outside in the snow, his arms wrapped around his thin body, and Will's blood splattered on his good vest and breeches. He stared down at his boots.

Jackson held him by the arms and asked in a gentle voice, "Liam, what is this? Why would you try to kill Lord Holcombe?"

The boy clenched his lips together and shook his head.

"Son, I need to know. Tell me."

"Don't call me that! I'm not your son!" the boy burst out.

Jackson sat back on his heels. There was something dark going on with the lad, and it was time he got to the bottom of the mystery of Liam.

"No, you're not. But if I ever had a son, I'd wish him to be like you."

"If you mean one who tries to kill me, then another reason I'm glad you didn't marry," Will drawled.

Jackson shot him a glare. "Will, not now." Will's lips straightened in response.

"Tell me, Liam. Why?"

The boy sniffed, and his chin quivered. Just when Jackson had given up on getting the truth, Liam whispered, "He killed my father."

Chapter Twenty-eight

"What?" Jackson's grip on the boy's arms tightened. "Killed your father, you say?" His gaze darted to Will, who shrugged.

"I've only killed a very few men, boy," Will said. "Have you a name?"

The boy straightened and looked Will in the eyes. "Hugh Baymore. He was my father."

Jackson gasped and Will groaned and swore. "How can this be? Hugh wasn't—" he paused, flicked a look at Jackson, then continued, "—married."

"He never married my ma," Liam whispered.

"Where is your mother, Liam?" Jackson asked.

"There was a fire in our cottage, and my ma was burned terribly." He struggled to remain defiant, but the child's lip resumed quivering. "Before she died, she told me, "Find your father. He'll take care of you." So I came here, but you were gone and Master Marcus put me to work with the soldiers." He shrugged. "I thought you were him." He gazed up into Jackson's eyes, sorrow and fear and hopelessness painted the lad's face. "Then I heard the men talking, saying you'd killed Hugh and I knew I'd never have a home, or a da."

"I understand, boy." Jackson shook his head. "You're his bastard."

Liam wiped his eyes with his sleeve, and his tears turned to fury. "Lord Holcombe killed my father and gave you his lands. I hate you!" he shouted at Will. "You ruined everything!"

"I didn't *give* Jackson the lands, boy. Jackson was the duke of Baymore's eldest son. His father named him heir before he died." Will sighed and rubbed his leg.

The boy's mouth fell open and for a moment, he looked as if he would crumble.

"That's right." Jackson nodded. "Morris was my father and I was first born, but he never married my mother. I'm a bastard also."

"Oh." Liam swallowed. "Oh."

"I don't think your father knew about you, boy," Will added. "I knew him well, and he never spoke of your mother, or that he had an heir."

"But if you knew him, why did you kill him?" Liam howled.

Jackson tensed, afraid his lover wouldn't spare the child the truth of his father.

Will dragged in a deep breath and exhaled. "He'd changed. He wasn't the man I knew many years ago. Even his father could see the changes and feared them. He called Jackson to take his rightful place to keep Hugh from destroying Baymore. There was a fight. I had no choice."

Jackson thanked Will with a caress of a warm gaze, then focused on the boy.

"I'm sorry, Liam."

Liam shuddered, took a deep breath, and looked up at Will. "What will you do to me, Lord Holcombe?" Jackson's heart broke at the brave face the boy wore and at the circumstances of his life, so similar to his own. Perhaps if Liam had told Marcus of his situation, this would never have happened. Jackson cared about the lad, more than just as a page.

"I have the right to demand your death for your attempt at murder." Will pushed to his feet and drew his sword.

Jackson gasped, "Will!" and moved in front of Liam. Will had rights, but if Jackson had to, he'd try to stop him from killing the lad.

Will studied them, then smiled. He slid his sword back in its sheath with a flourish.

"Your Grace. It seems this is my day for righting wrongs and for giving gifts."

"What wrongs? What gifts?" Jackson cocked his head and tried to understand, but too much had happened today.

"Once again your pride has gotten us into trouble and once again I must rescue you, Your Grace." Will limped to his desk and sat. "So, I will right a wrong with parchment, ink, and quill." He pulled out a sheet, dipped his pen in the ink, and began writing.

"What are you doing?" Jackson leaned over the table to see.

Will finished with a flourish. "Sign your name here." He turned the document around to face Jackson.

Jackson read it. Then he looked up to meet Will's gaze. He picked up the quill and signed his name. "Done!"

Liam shrank back against the wall.

Jackson looked at him and shook his head. "No, lad. This isn't a warrant for your death. It's a letter stating that I acknowledge your claim to Baymore, as Hugh's son and my nephew."

Liam gasped and clapped his hands together. "Is it true? Is it?"

Will nodded. "It's true. You are a true Baymore." Then he picked up the quill, dipped it in ink, and wrote another section on the document. He spun it around and said, "Sign here, Your Grace."

"What is this?" Jackson took the quill from him.

"Now it's my time to give a gift. Something I couldn't give you before, but you desired, so much you put us at risk."

Jackson read the new words. He pulled the chair to him and sat, then looked up into Will's eyes. "It is indeed a gift, my lord." He motioned to Liam. "Come here, son."

Liam shuffled closer. Jackson reached out and pulled him to the desk.

"Can you read?"

"A little."

"Try to read this."

Liam bent over the page and tried to make out the words, but then shook his head and straightened.

"It says," Will intoned, "that since you are without mother or father, and you are a Baymore, that if it is your wish, your uncle, Jackson Baymore, will adopt you as his own son and heir."

The boy looked at Will, blinked, then looked at Jackson, his eyes so wide the whites showed all around his dark brown irises.

"Would you wish it, Liam?" Jackson didn't want to hear no, but if he did, he'd still do what he could for the boy. "If you don't, I understand. You can still live here at the castle. As my nephew, I owe you certain protections, such as an education, training, and when you get older, lands. I don't want you to do this unless it's really what you desire." Liam closed his eyes and Jackson held his breath. Time slow marched with each beat of Jackson's heart. Would the boy agree? Would Jackson have a son and heir to Baymore? Had Will given him everything, once again?

The lad opened his eyes and smiled. "I want you to be my da."

Jackson laughed and threw open his arms and Liam fell into them.

Will groaned, and Jackson looked up at his face twisted in pain and his worsening color.

"Quick, Liam! Fetch the healer for Lord Holcombe." Jackson patted him on the back.

"Right away!" Liam bolted for the door, threw it open, and raced down the corridor. Jackson could hear his cries for the healer echoing through the keep.

"With the racket he's making, everyone will be here soon." Will smiled.

"I love you, my lord. Thank you for doing this for me." Jackson reached out and cupped Will's cheek in his hand, his thumb brushing away the thin streak of blood from the scratch on his chin. "I never meant to hurt you, Will. Never meant for this to happen. To lose you would have been more than I could bear." Jackson leaned forward, stole a quick kiss, and promised more with a quick bite to Will's bottom lip.

Footsteps pounded down the hall. They would be interrupted in a moment.

Will ran his hand through Jackson's wild mane and pulled him down, their foreheads rubbing as he stared up into his lover's dark eyes. "And I love you, Your Grace. I can deny you nothing. Not a bride, not an heir, not my love."

They parted just as Liam, followed by the healer, burst into the room.

"I've brought the healer, Da!"

"So you have, Liam. Well done." Jackson placed his hand on his son's shoulder and gazed down at him, hoping the boy could see his love. Liam's answering look, of love and happiness, filled a place in Jackson's heart.

"Happy, Your Grace?" Will asked.

"Happy, my lord," Jackson answered.

Liam looked from Jackson to Will. "I'm happy also!" he shouted.

Jackson laughed, grabbed his son to him, and tousled his dark hair.

"You know," Will drawled, "I quite see the family resemblance."

Jackson and Liam grinned at each other.

Once again, Will had given Jackson everything he desired. From now until Jackson took his last breath, he'd thank God for Will Holcombe, the man he loved.

And for Liam, his new son.

THE END C

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Lynn Lorenz

Lynn has been writing all her life, but only recently for publication. She writes a variety of genres besides historicals, including police procedurals, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary romantic comedy, but enjoys reading suspense and detective stories most of all and wishes more cops would fall in love between their pages.

Born in New Orleans, she has a strong affinity for the South, pralines and po'boys. She's never met food she didn't like, but finds it hard to beat the food she grew up with and constantly craves from N'awlins. Going back occasionally to visit her father who still lives there, her car is often laden with epicurean delights such as Hubig Pies, Barqs in the bottle, Central Groceries' muffalattas and Gambino's pastries.

Graduating with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, Lynn is also an artist whose still lifes, life studies, and landscapes are done in acrylic, watercolors, pencil, and pastels. She loves getting away for a week at a time just to paint outdoors.

She has a real job that keeps her busy nine-to-five, but in her spare time she finds it hard to stay away from writing. It keeps her off the streets and out of the bars.

Lynn has two incredible kids, a supportive husband of twenty plus years, and a black lab/Aussie sheep dog mix. She's lived in Katy, Texas, since 1999, where she discovered her love of all things Texan and cowboy, like big hair, boots, and blue jeans. Yeehaw!