

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Stairway
to *Heaven*
HEATHER
HOWARD

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

Stairway to Heaven

Heather Howard

Il baroni Adamo di Buioluce is ready to die, for real this time. He's been haunting the same tower for centuries, bound to follow each woman who climbs it in search of the one to whom he can be faithful. That one woman will lead him to the top, where he will be finally freed from the curse binding him to earth. But where could she be?

Jaina Temple is a scientist, and she doesn't believe in supernatural crap. Not even a little bit. But her sure faith in the universe is tested while vacationing in Italy when she comes face-to-face with the sexiest man she's ever seen—and can't touch him. The sparks between them, however, are as real as anything she's ever known. Can Jaina free a spirit she doesn't even believe in from his purgatory, or will Adamo's guilt tie him to the fate of a ghost forever?

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Stairway to Heaven

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STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Heather Howard

Chapter One

Jaina Temple stared at the crumbling tower jutting from the center of the cypress grove in which she stood. It was tall and haphazard, a jagged profile ending in a broken battlement at least four or five stories high. Gray stones, rife with cracks and coated in lichen, leaned against each other like old drunks sharing wine and a song outside a café. Jaina studied the tower in mounting horror, a crow took off from one of the many pockmarks in the façade and another tiny piece of the tower dislodged and tumbled, end over end, to the ground far below. It was the final surviving structure of Castle di Buio, and she was going to climb it.

"I am *not* climbing that thing," Jaina announced. Her Italian was a little rusty, but she was pretty sure she made herself clear.

Her guide smiled at her. "Most people say that," she remarked, "but the women always climb it."

"Oh, do they?" Jaina said, smiling back in spite of herself. "I'm not most people."

The guide gave a genial shrug, as if to say most people said that, too. Slightly annoyed, Jaina tossed her hair out of her face and stepped forward to inspect the perilous architecture. *Ghost stories*, she thought dismissively. As an astronomer, a woman trained in the ways of science, she couldn't believe the ghost story surrounding the tower. All things, she knew, could be explained within the bounds of the physical world, either through the laws of physics or the chemistry of the brain. She was Dr. Jaina Temple. Rational, reasonable, logical. She extended a hand to touch the tower anyway.

The stone was still warm from the morning sun, though now the sky was thick with clouds and the promise of a soft rainfall by evening. Jaina was enchanted. She loved to touch old things, things that had outlived those who built them, that had outlasted

kings and queens and even countries, for the nation in which it had first seen the light of day no longer existed. She could not touch the stars she studied, but she could touch the past.

Troubled, Jaina drew back and studied the tower again. There was no ghost in this tower—that was silly—but she still felt drawn to it nonetheless. She sighed, tapping her fingers against her thigh.

I'm going to climb it, aren't I? she thought, but it was a rhetorical question. Of course she was, if only to satisfy her own curiosity.

"So shall you climb?" the guide asked, as though reading her mind. Jaina could hear the smile in her voice. "Perhaps *il baroni* will find you acceptable and make you his bride."

Jaina rolled her eyes, though the tiny, romantic part of her heart—never quite successfully stifled—gave a small, anemic twitch. Stupid heart.

Resigned to the fact that she was probably going to take part in this silly ritual, even though she knew it would be fruitless, she turned back to her guide. "So, tell me the story again..."

* * * * *

Il baroni Adamo di Buioluce wanted to tear out his hair, and would have, if he technically still had hair. Since he only had the memory of hair, he had to content himself with smashing the memory of his head against the wall of his tower prison.

It went straight through. It always did. The first time he'd tried it he thought he was going to wet himself when the rock gave way as if it weren't even there. Luckily, his bladder was also only a memory, so he was spared eternity with piss stains down his thigh. Not that anyone had seen him in centuries, but he would have seen them. It was the principle of the thing. Once the surprise had worn off, he'd tried it again and again. It never worked. His head kept going straight through. Once, in a fit of boredom, he'd

decided to leave it there and subsequently spent the next three years with his head in the wall. It had been surprisingly peaceful.

Not like now. It was time for that story again. He'd heard that damnable tale a thousand times before. At least. And they always got it wrong. In hundreds of years, none had told the truth. It was enough to drive a man mad.

He'd tried going mad a few times. It was boring.

"A long, long time ago, five hundred, six hundred, maybe seven hundred years in the past the baron of these lands ruled them, and ruled them well. He protected his people and governed fairly."

That much was true. He *was* pretty great, if he did say so himself. It was worth it not to stick his head in the wall to hear that part. That bit never got old.

"However..."

There it was. "Do not countenance a thing she tells you!" Adamo shouted, even though he wouldn't be heard. He tried to stomp out of the tower, but the bounds of his imprisonment kept him just shy of the tower entrance, so only the crumbling paving stones a few paces beyond the tower, nearly buried in dirt and covered in lichen, knew his fury. Then, as with so many times before, he ran into an invisible wall. He clenched his fists, frustrated, and listened to what he knew would soon become a slanderous tale.

"The baron was not a faithful man. Rumor has it he carried on with any woman he could lay hands on, while his poor, sick wife languished alone in her bedchamber."

"Lies!" Adamo said.

"And yet each night he would enter her chamber and have his way with her, to beget an heir."

"I'll have your tongue for that!" Adamo snapped, which was an empty threat, but it made him feel better.

"But when his wife finally bore him a son, she weakened and died. Then, with her final breath she cursed him to roam the earth until he could find a woman who could tame him and keep him faithful."

Adamo's throat ached. A vision of his wife, Luiga, flashed across his mind, as vivid as if she were standing in front of him, even after all these years. Hatred and regret welled up within him, for as much as he didn't want to admit it, there was a grain of truth to the story.

"Not long after, the baron fell down the stairs of this very tower, it is said his ghost haunts the tower still, waiting for the woman who will calm his restless spirit."

He was a restless spirit, all right. Anyone would be if they'd been confined to a tower for hundreds of years. Adamo punched the insubstantial wall and stalked back to the doorway.

"So what will happen if I climb it and I'm—" Here she laughed, a rich, dark sound that set his skin tingling. He found it slightly endearing since it meant she had no expectations. "Er, the one to tame him?" He liked her voice. It was throaty and heavy and he wished she would speak more. He had to take his pleasures where he could find them.

But this other voice he didn't care for. "Supposedly as you climb, *il baroni's* spirit is bound to follow you up the steps. With each step his form becomes more solid, more defined, and the pale colors of a ghost slowly grow into the vividness of life. If the woman climbing the stairs is the one to capture his heart, he will be visible halfway up, and when she reaches the top step he will be able to ascend with her, solid and bright. Only then will the curse be broken."

"You mean he gets his body back?" She sounded horrified and what small amount of goodwill he bore her was erased.

"I do not know. The legend only deals with the curse. Perhaps his soul, having learned fidelity and found the woman for whom he would temper his wandering ways, will at last ascend into heaven."

There was silence.

“So what happens to him if I’m not the one? I mean, I assume lots of women have climbed the tower before and he hasn’t yet reached the top.”

“The legend says that once he reaches the limit of his fidelity he can go no further. Presumably this means he will go as far as he will go for that particular woman and then he can proceed no more. He must wait for the woman to reach the top and then come back down, so he may follow her to the base of the tower to await the next woman who will tempt her fate.”

There was another silence.

“That’s *awful*.” Adamo’s head snapped up. Had he heard correctly? Had someone, at last, expressed some sort of sympathy for his plight?

“I mean...” Her rich voice, brimming with sympathy, seemed to tug on him and he found himself leaning forward as if he could touch it. “How hard would it be to be stuck here for hundreds of years and have your hope dashed again and again?”

He *had* heard correctly! For the first time in years Adamo felt something other than boredom, frustration, loathing, or anguish. No one ever seemed to care how painful it was to climb perhaps two steps and then hover, straining, for the third, while his latest hope of salvation climbed out of his reach. It wasn’t a physical pain, but waiting there—on whatever step he halted on, the second, the tenth, or the twentieth—was pure torture, an exquisite agony he wouldn’t wish upon his greatest enemy. Not even Luiga deserved it.

Something stirred in the memory of his chest. He couldn’t identify the feeling, but he found himself hoping his visitor was pretty. But didn’t he always want the women to be pretty?

“How fortunate that you do not believe in ghost stories, isn’t it, Jaina?”

There was an agonizing moment wherein Adamo held the memory of his breath, waiting.

"So shall you climb the tower?"

Please, Adamo thought, then frowned.

That thought had been unexpected. He hadn't had an unexpected thought in at least fifty years. He frowned and looked towards the woman's voice, the familiar cruelty of yearning flaring in him.

"Well," she said at last, "I suppose I have to climb it now, don't I?"

"Do you wish to free *il baroni* from his purgatory so badly?"

"No!" The voice was suddenly louder. She was coming towards him. He stepped out of the tower and into the clearing, craning his neck. "I don't believe in ghosts, so it's not a problem if I climb it and he doesn't show up."

On the last word, she rounded the tower and he found himself face to face with his latest false hope.

Chapter Two

She was...not what he expected. But not ugly, certainly not. She had dark skin and eyes that were almost black. Her nose turned up at the tip and her cheekbones sat high on her face. Her bountiful breasts pushed against the confines of her clothing and her hips flared under the surcoat she wore. They swayed as she walked towards him with confidence, like a promise, and her trousers—made of rough blue fabric—hugged the delicious curves of her legs. She was plumper than the women who had climbed the tower recently and he found himself longing for the feel of pillowy flesh he only barely remembered. But what amazed him most was her hair.

It was astonishing. Wild and huge, thick brown curls flying every which way, floating like a cloud about her face. The locks of her hair cascaded down her back, held partially in check by the numerous pins she had stuffed into them, but for the most part it defied containment. She looked like a *fata*, a fairy, *driadi*. A lovely little dryad come to dance just for him.

There was a sudden stirring between his legs. It had been so long since he'd felt it he nearly jumped out of his skin. He glanced down, then, disbelieving, placed a hand on his cock, just to make certain it was what he thought it was.

His penis stood at half-mast.

He swallowed and licked his lips. "Saints alive," he whispered. It was the closest he'd come to a prayer in two hundred years. How he was able to get an erection when he didn't have any blood, he didn't know, but it was welcome. God, it was welcome. He looked back up at the woman, a whirl of irrational gratitude swirling in his belly.

She stared right through him, her focus on the doorway to the tower. He moved into her path as she squared her shoulders and started towards it. It seemed to take forever to bridge the gap between them, her full breasts and hips holding his eyes

hostage and when at last her solid body met his insubstantial one, a surge of searing heat swept over him as she passed through. It was like passing through a wall of fire and his cock swelled with need.

It was over in a second but the moment left him gasping and shaking, almost doubled over. He turned in time to see the woman whirl around, her arms wrapping around herself. The gesture pushed her breasts closer together and the urge to bury his face in that lush valley nearly overwhelmed him. She stared at the spot where he stood, her eyes huge as millstones. She backed away, shivering and rubbing her arms through her leather surcoat.

"I...I don't know about this," she muttered in that rich voice. Her words were weirdly accented, lending her an exotic air. It added to the illusion that she was an otherworldly creature.

Thinking had become difficult, as though a fog had entered his brain. It had been too many years to count since anyone had detected his presence, but he barely even noted it. He stared at her. Jaina, was it? A strange name. She must be a fairy-woman, but he found he didn't care. All he wanted was to be solid again, to dig his fingers into her hips and devour her. He was dizzy with desire, confused and needy. This had never happened with any of the women who came to him. It was painful that he could not touch her.

Her breasts swelled and strained against her shirt as she took a deep breath, then turned and stepped hesitantly into the tower doorway.

As always, he was compelled to follow her, but for the first time in a long time, he did not resent it. He went gladly.

She looked up the long, spiral staircase winding around the inside of the tower. The steps were narrow and perilous, as he knew too well, but she set her full mouth in a determined line and began to climb.

It was heaven, following her. Her full buttocks were a vision in her pantaloons, swaying and bouncing this way and that as she carefully felt her way up. The tiny

windows along the outside of the tower afforded her little light, but he could see her clearly. He wanted to bury his face in the cleft of her arse, wanted to move his hands over the lush flesh of her thighs as he licked his way down to her honeyed lips. In his mind, they tasted better than anything he'd ever known. He barely remembered what food tasted like, but she awaked in him long-dormant sensations and his hands floated just behind her as she climbed, aching to touch her.

Her shoes scraped on the stone steps, the sound echoing in the tiny stairwell, almost covering up her breathing. Adamo imagined that breath picking up pace as he ran his hands across her skin. He heard her gasp as he laid her down and folded her body beneath his, reveled in the cries she would make as he drove into her softness again and again. He'd make her scream and the tower would tremble and fall with the sound of their coupling—

Adamo was so preoccupied with these flights of fancy that he almost didn't notice how high they had climbed, but that changed when she stopped suddenly, jerking him from his reverie. He was astonished to find them hovering on step fifteen. It had been years since he'd ascended this far. His cock—now diamond hard—twitched, and something in his chest answered it. He groaned under his breath.

The woman whipped around and stared right at him, her chest heaving.

"Hello?" she called.

He couldn't say a word. His mouth went dry. Had she heard him? He tried to say something, then stopped himself. He wanted to live with this hope for a second longer before it was crushed.

He watched as her dark eyes darted back and forth, searching, and he imagined them heavy-lidded with passion, then sliding closed in ecstasy. She turned back and began to climb again, taunting him with her warmth, forever just out of reach. He followed.

They passed the twentieth step. His heart pounded. He could almost feel the blood in his veins again.

Twenty-one.

Twenty-two.

The *agony*. Step twenty-six was the middle of the tower. Would he be visible? He did not know. He had never made it that far. Sweet mother Maria, *please* –

Twenty-three.

Twenty-four.

Twenty-five. The highest he'd ever reached. He held his breath. Her hands trailed lovingly over the stone, steadying her, taunting him. She took another step.

So did he.

He was on step twenty-six. He'd made it halfway. He looked down at himself. Was he visible? Was the legend true?

She was breathing hard, from fear or exertion he could not tell, but it was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. He swallowed his voice, not daring to make a sound.

Step twenty-seven.

Twenty-eight.

Twenty-nine.

Thirty.

On step thirty-three he could not hold it in any longer. He moaned, full of fear and longing.

She turned.

* * * * *

The last thing Jaina wanted to do was look over her shoulder. Her heart hammered in her chest, her breath came quick and short and no amount of reciting physics formulae in her head would calm her down. Things she had known since high school seemed to flutter and fly around the inside of her skull, falling to pieces and getting mixed up with each other. Avogadro's number and Planck's constant mated and had

terrible, inaccurate babies. The speed of light lost an order of magnitude. The walls were closing in.

Then someone moaned.

Jaina nearly jumped out of her skin. She whipped around, fearful of what she would see, and got a nice surprise.

The hottest man she'd ever seen stood on the step just below her. How she hadn't felt his presence was a mystery, because he was practically breathing down her neck. Or...pants, actually. These steps were *dreadfully* steep.

He was staring at her as if she were the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. In the dim light his olive skin gleamed and his thick, dark brown hair fell messily to his shoulders. He sported a beard, which prior to this very moment she had never thought of as attractive, but right now she had a sudden, dizzying thought of what it would feel like to have that beard brushing over her inner thigh, what his hair would feel like running through her fingers. His full lips parted slightly as he gazed up at her with rich, brown eyes fringed in ridiculously long lashes. She stared in fascination as his lips closed and he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, sliding under his skin.

It was what he wore that dampened her sudden, alien surge of lust. A loose linen shirt hugged his shoulders and he wore what she could only describe as breeches, which left nothing to the imagination, except for imagining how far she could snake her hand down them...no, wait, that wasn't it. Except for imagining *why* he was dressed this way. Suspicion began to coalesce in her mind and she didn't like it one bit.

"You scared the *crap* out of me!" she snapped at him in English. Well, she meant to snap at him, but it came out as a broken, throaty gush.

He was still gazing at her. Slowly, he lifted a long-fingered hand, as though reaching for her. She leaned back, even though every instinct in her body urged her to lean forward and suck those fingers into her mouth.

They fluttered in the thick air between them, hovering, hesitating. Her heart was in her throat, and not just from fear. She was melting between her thighs.

"You..." the man said in Italian. His voice was like molten honey. It sent shivers down her legs. "You can...see me?" His language was oddly stilted, even to her unpracticed ear.

She stared at his hand, mouth dry, groping for the right words. Finally, she said, "Seriously? *That's* what you're going to say?"

He was a good actor, because his transfixed face melted into a look of confusion, but Jaina was not in the mood. She tossed a hand in the air, trying to cover her desire with righteous anger. "Oh *please!*" she said. "I don't believe in ghosts and you don't look like any ghost I've ever heard of. Is this part of the tour? It's cute, really, but I'm not that stupid." She pinned him with the best glare she could muster, which was hard when all she wanted to do was unhinge her jaw like a snake and swallow him whole. Maybe just deep throat him. Taste his skin and his cock, let it go all the way down. Don't look at it. *Don't look, don't look...*

Her face burned.

He seemed to be out of breath. Well, that made two of them. "I am sorry," he said. "I...you *can* see me, yes?"

Lust and disgust warred in her, and disgust won. But just barely. "Of *course* I can see you," she snapped. "Now move. This is dumb and I'm leaving."

"No!" Without warning, he lunged forward as though to grab her and his hand met the leather cuff of her sleeve.

Jaina felt something against her arm, just the slightest of pressures before it seemed as if her flesh gave way and she was rocked by a shock of cold as his hand passed right through her body, embedding itself in her stomach.

For a second neither of them moved. A scream bubbled in Jaina's chest.

Don't panic, the tiny part of her brain that still held onto all her rational thinking told her. *Don't panic or you'll bolt down those stairs and trip and fall and die.*

He snatched his hand away and for a tiny moment she was suddenly, deeply disappointed. It was subsumed by fear in the very next instant, and she shrieked. She couldn't help it.

It didn't do anything anyway. When she'd read ghost stories as a kid, the ghost usually disappeared when you screamed, but all it did was put an anguished look on his face. It made her feel bad, so she stopped. For lack of a better idea, she decided to hyperventilate.

Should I go up? she wondered. She certainly couldn't go down unless he went down first or she wanted to go *through* him, and she really didn't want to do that. Why the hell was he so sexy? Dead men shouldn't be that sexy. She wondered what would happen if she tried to peel him out of those breeches, and the thought made her giggle. The fear had made her giddy.

He stared at her as if she were insane. She was making a mess of things.

"I'd like to go please," she said between outbursts of snickers. Lack of oxygen to the brain, both from too much giggling and her still aching crotch, conspired to send her toppling against the wall, and quite by accident she stumbled down into him.

Except she didn't stumble into him. He took a step back, down to the next step.

His wide brown eyes stared at her, tugging at her heart. "Please," he said, his voice hoarse. "Please don't."

Her mouth was dry. "Are you really the ghost of this tower?" she asked, which was silly, since he obviously wasn't human. He nodded.

Dizzy, she went down another step.

So did he, and this time she saw him fade, ever so slightly.

"Oh God," she breathed. She couldn't help herself. She wasn't ready to do this. She *couldn't*. This couldn't be happening. The scientific part of her brain wondered if he would disappear if she went down far enough.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

In a strange, spiral dance, she lowered herself step by step, and he mimicked her actions. Three steps down and she could see the walls of the tower through his body. The seams between the stones crisscrossed his anguished face. Five steps down and he was just an overlay against the tower stone.

Six steps down and he was only a whisper of color in the air.

Seven steps and he disappeared completely. Jaina passed a shaking hand over her face. Had she truly seen what she thought she had? Her arousal had all but subsided, leaving only fear behind. She knew it was just a matter of reaching out to the air where he should be, to see if it was cold, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. If she found a cold spot, she was going to flip.

Very deliberately, too afraid to go back up, she descended until she reached the bottom. The instant she was clear of the tower, she ran.

Chapter Three

In the darkness, warm, long-fingered hands drifted over her feet, lingering at the tiny summit of her ankle before drifting to her calf. Where they went, trails of shivers followed. Her wrist was stuffed in her mouth as she tried not to cry out, but it was hard, so hard. Clothes moved against the linen of her bed and the mattress dipped as a weight settled at the end. Her clit stood at attention. Her nipples were hard as pebbles, rasping against the fabric of her shirt, her breasts heavy and full. In the small of her back was a squirmy, delicious sensation, urging her to open her arms. The air around her was heavy and dark, pressing her into the bed.

Her teeth sank into her skin as the fingers continued their wandering exploration, smoothing over her calves to the tender backs of her knees. Warmth approached and moist breath washed over her. She pressed her thighs together, hoping to relieve some of the mounting pressure, but all that did was make it worse. Her free hand, the one not getting bit to hell and back, wandered up her body. She pressed it against one swollen, aching breast and a moan escaped her.

He chuckled, a rich, sweet sound. She could feel it in her bones.

Heated lips pressed a gentle kiss to her knee, and two warm hands urged her legs to part. For a moment she resisted, but a hot tongue met her skin and she gave in. His tongue dragged damp fire up the inside of her leg.

It wandered and probed, teasing her, moving with agonizing slowness to the cleft between her thighs. She was slick and ready, humid as a rainforest. When the tongue finally parted her pussy lips and delved inside, hot breath curling in the dark space there, beard rubbing over her skin, one hand slipping beneath her and a thumb nudging at her other puckered entrance, she gave up and cried out.

“Don’t stop!”

She felt his mumbled answer against her skin, though she could not make out the words. Strong hands gripped her hips, pulling them up as his tongue wandered where it would. His hands moved in strong strokes over her thighs, first down, then up, cupping her hips as his tongue lapped at her. Then they were running over her stomach as he planted a hot, open-mouthed kiss just below her navel and her head filled with the scent of sweat and sun, of spice and horse and man. It was a wild, primal scent that washed over her as he planted a trail of kisses up her stomach, and his body rose over hers as his hands skimmed over her sides, fingers splayed against her ribs. She opened her arms.

His powerful form hovered over her in the darkness. There was no light, but she could feel him, trapping her against the mattress with his body. She swallowed and reached for him. Her fingers met the linen of his shirt and his skin burned through the fabric, searing her fingertips. Hardly daring to breathe, she followed the strong lines of his arms, the muscles hard and corded beneath the coarse linen. Her hands moved up, tracing the broadness of his shoulders, journeying to the solid column of his throat, outlining him, drawing him in her mind, sculpting him from the darkness.

His hair brushed the backs of her hands, and hesitantly, she wove her fingers through it. Her lover let out a shaky breath and she smelled the richness of it, tinged with wine.

He shifted above her. A touch alighted on her side and she jumped, but it was only his hand, warm and seeking. With the same care as she had showed, he followed the contours of her body, traveling over the soft curve of her belly, lingering in the valley of her navel before moving down, down, down to the dark space between her thighs. She cried out as one long finger delved inside. His thumb rubbed over her clit as he lowered himself to her, his mouth finding the sensitive spot on her throat where her pulse beat out of control.

His teeth scraped against the vein and her fingers bunched, fisting in his hair as he pushed his finger farther inside her and curled it. Her body bore down, her hips

thrusting, one thigh lifting to hook over his waist. The leather of his breeches was warm with the heat of his skin, whispering over her leg as she urged him closer. He nipped her throat and she squirmed as he drew his finger out and then pushed it in again, picking up a slow, steady rhythm as she cried out and clutched him to her. Blindly she turned her head, her lips pressing against the stiff folds of his ear. Not even thinking she opened her mouth, her tongue darting out to taste him.

She moaned as his flavor filled her head, musky and heavy, the taste of a man who had labored long and hard. Salt and spice and something uniquely *him* that she could not place. She arched, rubbing her breasts over his chest as he panted against her. His hair tickled her nose, his beard scraping her shoulder as she nibbled at his earlobe. She'd meant it to be gentle, but instead she bit down hard, feeling the vibrations of his grunt against her skin. The finger inside her stuttered in its rhythm and then he was pulling away, the finger inside her retreating, leaving her bereft.

"No," she begged, but he ignored her, instead tucking his hands under her knees and lifting her body, folding her up and opening her legs, spreading her before him like a feast. His mouth descended, devouring her and Jaina thrashed, her core coiling tightly under the gentle torture of his lips and tongue. His chest supported her ass, his arms wrapping around her legs, his hands trailing over her belly, inching toward her breasts and then retreating, teasing her mercilessly. The sheets twisted in her hands as he suckled and licked and she bucked under his ministrations, a thing wild and untamed, her need mounting higher and higher, cresting—

Like a fish on a line, she twisted and turned and she awoke with her arms held out, her body aching for her lover. But her arms were empty, and the room cold. Only the scent of him lingered on in her head. Her lover was nowhere to be found.

Or rather, she knew where to find him, but it wasn't *here*.

"Oh God," she groaned. She shoved her hand between her legs and worked her clit, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. She was full to bursting, but there was no way to satisfy herself. Each quick stroke just drove her higher, and yet the ache did not ease,

only intensified. She tried all the tricks she knew, from so many lonely Friday nights, but she could only writhe, panting, and her release eluded her. She was doomed.

At last Jaina sat up in bed, almost sobbing with frustration. All through dinner she had been completely distracted, thinking of the...the *ghost*. She had to face it, the ghost in the tower, who was definitely real unless she was suddenly showing symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, and frankly mental illness was not the soft option, so...ghost it was.

It had been cruel to leave him there, and not just because he had been waiting for hundreds of years and she might be the one who could free him. It had also been cruel to her. Now her whole body sang with just the memory of his burning brown eyes and plump lips that begged to be kissed.

She hadn't kissed him in her dream. *Really, brain?* she thought. *You leave that out?*

She had it bad. For a ghost. A not-alive man. A *dead* man. A dead man who was not, she had to remind herself, rumored to have been the nicest person when he was alive. He had not seemed particularly dangerous when she had met him halfway up the staircase, but then again, he wasn't able to interact with her in any meaningful way. On the other hand, she wasn't sure she cared what the rumors said about him, which was...something. The rational part of her brain was trying to figure out how a ghost could exist—right now she was hovering in the *multiple dimensions* realm of explanation—but to her endless chagrin she found she wasn't so much curious as to how he could exist and was more curious as to whether or not he could touch her if she ascended the tower farther.

It was purely professional curiosity, of course. Pay no attention to the hand down her panties.

She looked at her hand. It appeared strange to her. Jaina was not used to being ruled by the passions of the flesh. She was a *scientist*, damn it, and she would conduct herself as one, with all the detached interest that entailed. That was why she was going to go test her hypothesis. Professional curiosity, and nothing else.

With a sigh, Jaina removed her fingers from her crotch and got out of bed. She had settled in a tiny little inn in the village by the tower and while the accommodations were clean and pleasantly provincial, they were also rather cozy. Or cramped, more like it. She bumped several inconvenient limbs against the furniture as she dressed, quickly and quietly, in the dark. She strapped herself into her bra, pulled on jeans and a sweater, then shrugged into her jacket and pulled on her flattest pair of shoes. She would have to walk back to the tower, as she couldn't very well summon a guide at this hour, and the thought of driving on an Italian road, even in the daytime, filled her with fear and dread. Italians seemed to think things like lane markers were suggestions. Bad suggestions. Encountering an Italian driver in the dark was the stuff of nightmares for a woman raised in the staid Midwest, and the irony — that she was more frightened of the living people than the dead one she was on her way to, er, study — was not lost on her.

Pressing her lips into a line, Jaina laced up her pair of half boots and stood. She'd have to tough out the mile walk like a big girl so she could get to the bottom of this ghost business. For science.

Yes.

Slipping out into the tiny hallway, Jaina locked the door to her room, shoved the key into her pocket and tiptoed out into the cool, moonlit night.

* * * * *

A full moon hovered above his tower tonight, serenely sliding in and out of its shroud of clouds. Adamo used to like the extra light, since he no longer slept, but now that he had memorized every detail of the tower and its surroundings, he'd started to think full moons were made to mock him. He thought doubly so tonight, since every time the moon slipped from the grasping clouds, it reminded him that the woman who had taken him so far was not here.

It was a ridiculous thought, of course, but anyone would think it, given his circumstances. The world certainly seemed specifically designed to taunt him. Several

hundred years of haunting a broken-down old tower, watching his family and home, his *lands*, fall to ruin, and being able to do nothing about it...it was too much to bear. Even his thoughts taunted him, because they repeated themselves over and over, as if his brain had produced every original thought it was capable of and, once spent, could produce no more. He couldn't even hope for the release of death since he was already dead.

And then that damnable woman had waltzed into his life today, teasing and tempting him, and he'd discovered that not all his thoughts were repeats, and that perhaps his time here might be nearing an end.

He'd talked with her. Dear God, it had been so long since he'd exchanged words with *anyone*, he almost hadn't known how. He'd almost touched her. He'd been so terribly close, and he knew — *knew*, bone deep — that she could have led him to the top of the tower, out of this purgatory. He didn't quite want to think about the implications of that, as the curse specified he needed to find a woman to whom he could be faithful, but he'd lingered here so long that he found he was more preoccupied with escape than with love. Well, sort of.

His cock ached. While she herself had fled, his desire had not, and for hours afterward his fingers had wandered down to his erection, rubbing and thrusting against his inadequate palm. He could not remove his trousers, though, and his frustration had only mounted as he realized his curse had taken on a new dimension. If only she would return. It would be a small price to pay to be faithful for eternity to one woman if it meant he would be freed. And if the woman who freed him was his beautiful dryad, well, that was a bonus. Whatever happened at the top of the tower was secondary to actually getting there now.

It really was too bad that she'd fled, and with her, all chances of release, in more ways than one.

Adamo cursed and kicked the tower wall.

His boot met the stone with a resounding *thwack*.

And it *hurt*.

Adamo was too shocked to howl in pain. He stared at his foot, pressed firmly to the stone, and blinked.

He'd kicked this wall in this exact same spot a hundred thousand times before, and never had it met his foot. Something was different.

The crunch of fallen leaves reached his ears. Someone was approaching. His heart leapt and he turned—to see his fairy woman round the tower, her breath heavy from exertion. Her wild hair flew around her in the soft breeze. In the moonlight, she became angelic.

She stopped and stared at the tower doorway, worrying her delicious lower lip between her teeth. Adamo promptly forgot all about the curse and his centuries-long misery. He took a step forward, his hands reaching for her, even as he knew he could not touch her. The distance between them was infinitely small, and yet infinitely large, filled to overflowing with time, history, and regret.

And regret, the fissure between what one has done and what one has failed to do, was deep and vast. Adamo knew that more than anyone.

He reached for her anyway.

She could not see as he drew close, but he felt the heat of her breath on his fingers as it laced the frosty night. He reveled in the wide innocence of her eyes, ached for her softness and warmth.

Ever so delicately, his fingertips ghosted against her lips.

She gasped and stepped back and he felt the loss of her as acutely as he felt each stone step he hit on the way down the tower that fateful night long ago.

Yet she didn't run away as he had feared. Instead her breath caught and she seemed to stand up straighter, her shoulders settling back on her frame, like a man preparing to duel. That this gesture brought her breasts up in sharp relief did not hurt, either.

"You're here, aren't you?" she asked. Her beautiful, accented voice. From what faraway land did she hail from? What other world had borne such a beauty?

"Yes," Adamo said, though he knew she could not hear him. His voice scratched hoarsely in his throat, so perhaps that was for the best.

She stared at the space where she had felt his touch. His still outstretched hand tingled under her gaze. Other parts of him tingled, too, as, very slowly, she raised her own hand.

"Touch me, if you're here," she said.

He could hardly refuse such a request. Struggling to swallow around the sudden, treacherous lump in his throat, he let his fingers brush over hers. In the moonlight, he saw them meet, then pass through, as if he were made of nothing more than smoke, and a slow, delicious burn slithered its way into his veins. It oozed through him like warm syrup, heating the memory of blood inside him.

She seemed to be just as affected. Her wide, beautiful eyes fluttered and her breath came out short and sharp.

"Oh, *wow*," she whispered. "How is this...real?"

Under the moonbeams, their hands danced, slow and sweet. Gently, they passed over and through and out again, curling and grasping, yet never quite holding.

Words crashed against the back of his teeth, so many he couldn't keep them straight and was paralyzed by their weight. He wanted to tell her his name, his story, wanted to beg her to climb this wretched tower, wanted to whisper sinful things in her ear, but nothing found voice. Finally, she spoke once more.

"Do you want me to try again?" she asked.

He couldn't even *move*. He hoped she didn't want an answer, because he had no idea how to communicate to her his answer — *yes, yes, God yes*.

To his surprise, a sardonic smile flashed across her features, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just said. "Sorry. That was dumb. Of course you do. Right?"

"Yes," Adamo said again. This was torture. Exquisite torture, but torture nonetheless.

She appeared to be listening to some internal monologue, but after a moment she nodded, precise and sure, her wild hair bouncing with the motion. "Right," she said. "Let's...let's try it."

Adamo was so shocked he couldn't move, so when she stepped forward toward him he could only watch, helpless and wanting, as she drew nearer and nearer. Her icy breath hung in the air between them—he, of course, left no trace of breath at all—and when her beautiful, bountiful body met his, his heart gave a strange leap within his chest.

First her high, full breasts pressed through him, followed closely by a gasp as she closed her eyes. He felt her hesitation, her instinct to pull away, but after the barest of pauses, she continued. Her lips, damp and chilled, parted as she moved. As if possessed, or in some dim-remembered dream, he bent his head to hers. Their lips met.

A frisson of heat shuddered through him, blazing even against the backdrop of her warmth. It went straight up through the top of his head and straight down to the soles of his feet, as if he had been struck by lightning. His brain was on fire and so was his groin. He had never wanted anything so badly as her in his life, or his afterlife. Even the desire to see the top of the tower paled in comparison and it rocked him to the core.

Then she was gone, had passed through him completely, and he was compelled to follow her as she entered the tower door and mounted the first step.

This time the fear was both lesser and greater. Lesser because he knew he could make it to the thirty-third step, and greater because he feared he would not go farther. And he *needed* to go farther. If the legend were true only in this, that he could become solid as he ascended the tower, then he would be able to touch her. Now twin hopes warred within him—that he could reach the top and, if he could, that she would want him to be solid, too.

She bounced and swayed in front of him, muttering something under her breath he could barely hear. Straining, he was able to discern numbers. She was counting the steps, first in his own language, then in a different, harsher tongue, but still lovely falling from her lips. Her wild hair floated on the drafts seeping in through the tiny windows and broken stones. It looked like black fog to him. He longed to bury his face in it, feel its texture and inhale its scent. He had not smelled anything for hundreds of years.

Though he could not occupy the same step as she, he could still reach for her. She was shorter than he, and her hair was long. He let his fingers drift upward, and strands of her bountiful hair slipped through him, like tiny whips of fire.

His trousers rubbed against his erection as he climbed, making each step a pleasurable agony. He glanced at her ass, plump and inviting, and imagined his cock nestled between those amazing mounds of flesh. His skin dissolved into shivers at the thought.

After what seemed like forever, they reached the halfway point and she turned, squinting in the dimness.

"I can't see you," she said, and the disappointment in her voice made his blood sing. "Can you speak?"

"I can." Adamo waited, hoping she could hear him.

She couldn't. She just stared at the place where he stood, then shook her head. "We have to go farther." Her voice shook. She turned and continued.

Would they make it? His legs shook with desire and need. If she was at all affected the same way, it would be slow going.

It was.

Step thirty. She turned and squinted, then her eyes flew wide. "I can see you," she exclaimed. "Speak, if you can."

"I can," he repeated.

"I hear you." He saw her face flush in the low light. "It's faint, but I can hear you." As if gripped by a new excitement, she turned and mounted a few more steps, muttering under her breath.

Step thirty-three met his foot, the highest point he'd ever reached, just this afternoon. His heart pounded as she pulled herself up another steep stone riser.

His body followed. If he had been capable of fainting, he would have.

Thirty-five.

Thirty-six.

Thirty-seven.

Thirty-eight.

Thirty-nine.

Forty.

Ten steps from the top. So close he could taste it. His fingers itched, his cock pulsed, his heart lifted, filled with impossible, long-cherished desire.

On step forty-two she stopped and turned, staring straight at him.

"I can see you," she said, breathless.

Gingerly, Adamo placed a hand against the wall, steadying himself. "Beautiful lady," he begged, "please...continue."

Her lips parted and her tongue flickered out, wetting them. In the low light of the moon filtered through the windows, her lips gleamed with cold, blue light. "My name is Jaina," she said, her voice ragged and rough at the edges. The tower could have crumbled and fallen in that moment and he wouldn't have cared.

"Jaina," he repeated, his voice as hoarse as hers.

Her cheeks colored at the sound of her name. Her eyes wandered over him and where he felt her gaze, his skin flamed anew. "And you?" she asked. "Your name?"

"Adamo," he said and reached for her.

His fingers met her cheek. He was not fully solid yet but he could still feel the warmth of her skin. If he concentrated, he thought he could feel the thrum of the blood beneath her skin, feel the beat of her heart in her chest. She trembled at his touch, her eyes fluttering. Slowly, still not quite believing she was real, he traced the curve of her cheek, down to the corner of her mouth, and when his fingers at last brushed over her lips, she inhaled sharply.

He felt it. He felt the air drag over his fingertips, sucked into her mouth. Her living breath, on his skin. His eyes widened and for a moment he couldn't move, did not dare to move, for fear that this would disappear.

Then he strained upward, his hand traveling to the base of her skull to tangle in her hair, and pulled her down into a kiss.

Chapter Four

He wasn't solid. That was all Jaina could think, inanely, through the sudden, crushing weight of desire slamming into her. He was...lukewarm, and squishy, and not all there, and yet his lips on hers ignited within her a wanting so fierce she thought she would catch ablaze with it, spontaneously combust and burn to cinders. This wasn't possible and there were so many things she wanted to ask him—what did it feel like to ascend the tower, was he truly dead, what had he done for all those years—but the cool, calm logic, her detached curiosity that had governed her entire life shrank before his need like morning mist before the sun.

Her need was nothing to sneeze at, either.

She was shivery and scared, and so turned-on she might as well have been cranked up to eleven. His hand on the back of her neck was doing things to her she had no idea existed. She'd had boyfriends, and drunken encounters with frat boys, and that one-night stand with her thesis advisor that had been notable only for the fact that sleeping with a professor was a schoolgirl fantasy of hers...but nothing, *nothing*, compared to this sudden, all-consuming want. She itched with it. Her fingers felt swollen and restless, and all rational thought had been driven from her mind. Tiny thoughts flew about inside her head, unconnected, haphazard, as she tried to make sense of what was happening. But it was so hard. His lips on hers were insistent and desperate, if cool and insubstantial, and she just wanted —

She pulled away, bosom heaving, and was pleased to see she wasn't the only one so affected. He struggled for breath just as hard as she and their laboring lungs echoed in the tiny, stone space. With supreme effort, she tore her gaze from his and glanced behind her. His hand on her neck wavered, pressed insubstantially against her skin, sending delicious shudders through her.

They were close to the top of the tower. She was sure of it. Would he become solid if they moved higher?

She glanced back at him. His eyes were wide and pleading and the queer, urgent pressure of his fingers on her neck begged her to bend again to his longing. She held fast and they began to intersect, the boundaries between his body and hers becoming a blur, like a river border between countries changing its course. The sensation sent her stomach slip-sliding over and around itself, yet the slow, oozing burn in her clit only flared higher. Without removing a single piece of clothing, he had already been inside her. Or had she been inside him? What would it feel like if they went higher?

His hand tugged at her again, passing through her spine and her vision went strange and blurry. Giving in, she leaned down and pressed her mouth to his in an open kiss.

He surged up, against her, meeting her with equal vigor. She probed his mouth, and he tried to match her in kind, but his tongue was cool and giving and passed through hers like smoke. They grappled, each finding the other too hard to hold, and when she tried to nibble on his lip, her teeth slid through his skin. She tasted a ghost of flavor, something spicy and distant, like food eaten in a dream, or remembered, far off in another land.

With a groan, she broke away. "Come," she said, her voice ragged. She reached out, tugging on his arm. With her foot, she felt for the next step.

He released her hair and took her hand in his, kissing it while she climbed. He followed as she pulled herself up, dizzy and shaking with need. As they mounted the next step, and then the next, his lips against the skin of her hand grew hotter and hotter, more and more insistent.

As she pulled herself up another step, they passed together into shadow. Blinded, led only by what she could feel, Jaina groped her way forward while Adamo turned her hand over in his. Dampness touched the tender inside of her wrist. He was tasting her skin. Jaina stumbled and nearly fell. She was forced to pause for a moment, almost

sobbing with desire and frustration. She looked above them once more, squinting into the impenetrable darkness. How many damn stairs did this tower have, anyway?

Something touched her waist and she jumped, turning, but even as she did she felt the heat of his skin burning through the hem of her sweater. Then his fingers were slipping under the soft cashmere, brushing over her stomach, and she gasped.

“Oh—” she said, her voice a pale imitation of its former self. Her nipples stiffened, her breasts growing heavy. Pure need pooled in her groin. The folds between her legs were swollen and aching, slippery with desire for the touch of a dead man and it thrilled her. She could sense his presence in the dark, and it drew close. Breath—ghostly, but definitely *there*—whispered over her collarbone. The dream she’d had of him, not quite repressed, resurfaced with a vengeance and she remembered the feel of his fingers inside her. Sagging, she pressed both hands against the walls, trying to rally her mutinous body to the task at hand. She felt behind her and ascended another stair. His breath chased her, and then his lips were on hers again. He tasted of cloves and cinnamon and centuries long vanished.

His hands were under her sweater now, racing across her skin as if he could devour her with his fingertips. Flesh caught on flesh as he smoothed his palms over her stomach, spread his fingers over her back, one hand dipping below the waistband of her jeans as the other tugged at her bra. His mouth abandoned her lips too soon, only to move to her jaw, trailing down her throat a line of kisses so hungry and primitive she thought he might eat her. His moustache and beard against her heated skin set her nerves singing. She caught a whiff of him, and he smelled just like she imagined—sunlight and spice and horse and man.

He practically carried her up the steps now, and her hands had somehow found their way to his shoulders. They tangled in his loose linen shirt as she leaned heavily on him, trying to stay upright. His skin was firm and unyielding beneath the fabric and she didn’t like this barrier between them, not at all. Her shaking fingers plucked at the loose ties holding his shirt together and when at last her touch dipped below the linen and

met the hard, muscled planes of his chest, he groaned into her skin, his voice buzzing against her pulse. The world went spinning, and she sagged.

He did not let her fall. Instead, she found strong hands cradling her as he lowered her to a cold stone step—how many more did they have to go?—and then he was looming over her, his scorching breath in her ear as he struggled with her clothing.

“Please,” he whispered, hot and needy. She could only squeak and nod her head in assent as his hands suddenly discovered her breasts.

Eagerly, he shoved the lace bra aside. Hot, rough fingers scraped over the soft, revealed flesh, dragging against her nipples. She threw her head back and cried out, hips bucking.

“Adamo, yes, *Adamo*—”

“*Belladonna*,” he whispered. Sharp teeth nipped at her throat, finding a tender, sensitive spot just above her collarbone as his calloused fingers pinched first one nipple and then the other.

She was going to explode. Or melt. Explode and then melt, or maybe the other way around. Oh God, it didn’t matter. Twisting and turning she shrugged out of her leather jacket and let it pool on the step above her. She could see light and air above them. They were close to the top now, three steps away maybe, and he was as hot and hard as any man she’d ever had. Harder, to be honest. What on earth did they *do* in medieval Italy to get so in shape? Her curious touch met his skin as she worked his shirt off, his muscles jumping and quivering at each careless stroke. His fingers were at her back now, working away at the clasp on the back of her bra, and he made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat. Her bones trembled with it and her pussy melted.

“Infernal contraption,” he muttered.

She laughed shakily as she pulled herself up another step and he followed. Two steps to the top. “Let me,” she whispered, voice husky. He pulled back slightly and she saw his eyes glittering in the moonlight, watching her. His gaze was like a caress. She could feel it between her legs, on her breasts and stomach, on her throat. His long

fingers cupped her legs, moving over her denim-clad limbs in slow, warm, possessive circles. She almost forgot what she was doing.

Pull it together. Her thoughts were far away, barely coherent. She pulled on the hem of her sweater, yanking it over her head. Twisting under his watchful eyes, she unhooked her bra and let it fall.

The cold night air hit her heated skin. Her body prickled with goose bumps, but it was worth it to see the look on his face as he loomed above her, drinking in the sight of her heaving breasts in the pale gilding light of the moon. For the first time in a long time, maybe forever, she felt truly beautiful.

With a groan he fell against her, his mouth seeking her bosom, and when his lips closed around one aching nipple, she moaned. “More, please, more—”

He suckled and Jaina felt it all the way down to her toes. Her pussy was wet and tender, painfully confined in her jeans, pressed against the seam. It quivered when his tongue rasped against her nipple, and each draw of his mouth made it throb with need. Her hands had a mind of their own, already working away at his breeches, and, quite by accident she brushed against his cock. It was hard and seeking through the fabric. Wandering, she gave it a long, slow rub with the palm of her hand. He thrust against her touch, growling. His own hands were at her waistband, his teeth nipping at her breasts as he tried to free her from the horrible confines of her jeans.

She couldn’t stand it any longer. Abandoning the removal of his pants, she paid attention to her own, unbuttoning and unzipping them, and with a lift of her hips she worked them down over her ass. She took the opportunity to go up another step. He followed. The cold of the stone bit through her thin cotton panties and she shivered.

She was on the last step now. One more and she’d be at the top of the tower. Far away, her rational mind jumped up and down, shrieking at her. There was something important, something she needed to say...

“Wait!” she cried, though it cost her dearly.

He clearly did not want to wait, but after a moment he drew a shaking breath and drew back. In the light of the moon, his eyes were glazed and dark, drunk with desire, and through his parted lips he panted hot, cinnamon breath into the cold air. It fogged. She wanted to reach up and taste it, capture his lips again, but she was still grappling with the question that had occurred to her. What was it again?

"What happens?" she blurted in English, then cursed herself. Her Italian was abandoning her. She tried again. "Adamo. The top. When...what happens...?"

The dim, desire-dazed look on his face melted slightly as he frowned. "I...do not know," he said.

What if he disappeared? What if he ascended to heaven and left her here, body swollen and empty? She couldn't bear it and she guessed he probably wouldn't be too happy about that, either. She hoped he could postpone heaven for ten more minutes. She groped for words. "At the top...I'll stay there. You stay on the...last step. When we are done..."

Her hands fluttered before her, trying to tell him what she meant, but he seemed to get it. A smile tugged at his amazing lips and he inclined his head.

"Yes," he said. "First, we finish. Then we climb."

Relief bubbled through her but it was eclipsed by the flare of the furnace-hot need within her as he bent his head to her breasts again. As she leaned back, his long, rough fingers trailed up the inside of her thigh.

Hot fingertips probed her pussy lips through the thin cotton of her panties, feeling the heat and slickness gathered there. Then they slid under the fabric and his fingers pressed against her entrance. Her flesh parted, inviting him inside, and then he was filling her up.

It was not enough, not *nearly* enough, but good enough for now. "Oh—" she said, squirming at the welcome invasion. Her body clamped down, quivering around his finger as he scraped his teeth over her collarbone, his other hand working away at the fastenings of his breeches. She raked her fingernails across the hard planes of his

shoulders. He shuddered and whined at her touch. Her arms rubbed against his as she fisted a hand in his hair. He was kneeling on the step below her and any moment now he would thrust into her and she would shatter. His thumb found her clit and began slow, maddening circles. Her toes curled and she writhed.

“Up,” he said, indistinctly. “Up. We go up now.”

Jaina sobbed with frustration as desire roiled in her veins. She couldn’t get enough air. She was weak as a kitten, her entire body melting around his thumb on her clit. She barely remembered her name, much less how to climb stairs. She groped behind her, summoning the last bit of strength she had to pull herself up to the top floor of the tower. Above them the moon shone, lining their skin with silver light, and she finally surmounted the last step, falling back under the moon and the stars and his ravenous touch. She pushed at her panties, working them off her hips until they dropped, discarded, to the stone steps. He bent over her, his tongue dipping into her navel. The air stirred between her legs where he worked his breeches down, freeing his cock to the night air.

“Over,” he said. A hand on her ass helped her need-rattled brain understand what he was saying and she flipped onto her stomach. His hot mouth found her spine and she wiggled as he worked her legs up until she was kneeling on the top floor of the tower, beneath the moon and the clouds, perched precariously at the edge of the tower floor. He ran his tongue up her spine and her back arched, her ass perfectly positioned for penetration.

* * * * *

By the light of the moon, Adamo drank in the sight of her, her body placed before him, an abundant landscape, his for the taking. She quivered in anticipation and he did not want to deny her. His heart tossed and twisted in his chest, an ache that he could not deny, as he could not deny the ache in his groin. He needed to be inside her just as much as she wanted him inside her, and yet he wanted to make it last as long as

possible. He hadn't lain with a woman for hundreds of years. He hoped, vaguely, that he would not embarrass himself.

Wonderingly, he trailed a hand over her back, watching her squirm beneath his caress. "Please," she begged. Her accent was hard and harsh now, a signal that she was at the end of her control. Delicately, Adamo sucked his fingers free of her juices, savoring the musky taste of her, of her need and desire for him, then placed a hand on her hip. With the other, he gingerly grasped his throbbing cock and was startled to feel it pulse with the beats of his heart.

This was real. *She* was real, and she had made him real again. If there had been any doubt in his mind, any thought that this was just a wonderful, impossible dream, the feel of his rock-hard shaft against his palm would have banished it. This was no dream. She was the one to whom he could remain forever faithful.

The thought didn't scare him as much as he thought it would. It didn't scare him at all. Briefly, he closed his eyes. Then Adamo placed the tip of his cock against her slick entrance, the barest of erotic touches. He swallowed, need coursing through him, but she was not some tumble in the hay. She was his freedom. She was a treasure, and he had to treat her as such.

Slowly, carefully, Adamo pressed forward. Her body parted before his invasion, clamping down on his shaft and she moaned in pleasure. The cold night clashed with the furnace of their coupling, and in the long, perfect moment as he buried himself in her he thought he might very well be climbing to heaven without taking a step.

Too soon, he slid to a stop, deep inside her. She looked so beautiful, impaled on his body, that he could not help but touch her. Sliding his hands around her, he wrapped her in his arms and pulled her against him. With her back pressed to his chest, his lips found the perfect curl of her ear as he buried his face in her hair. She smelled like flowers and wine, a heady mixture of innocence and debauchery. The scent filled his nose and he hardened further still inside her. His vision blurred as her inner muscles

rippled around him and as he panted in her ear, she reached back and wove her fingers into his hair, holding him to her.

She writhed in his grasp and he groaned. "Please, Adamo," she murmured, and the tenuous tether of his control snapped.

Reaching down, he found the hard nub of flesh at the apex of her thighs. She cried out as he circled his thumb around it again. Rocking his hips, he drew out of her. The exquisite agony of leaving her warmth contrasted with the rush of pleasure as he buried himself inside her again. With slow, short thrusts, Adamo found his rhythm.

Beneath the moonlight, he traversed the landscape of her body, this woman who had stepped into his purgatory and taken his hand, leading him up to the light above. He thrust slowly at first, then faster and faster as her sharp, sweet cries filled the night.

He bit her throat, swirling his tongue over her skin, tasting perfume and the tiniest sting of sweat. She was soft and abundant in his arms, her flesh warm and safe, inviting. He wanted to curl up with her, here on the staircase and fuck her senseless, over and over. Quivering, aching, he clung to her as she tried to meet his urgency with her own. They slid together, a thin layer of sweat slipping between them, limbs tangling as he ran his free hand over her breasts, along her sides, across her straining thighs and stomach. His finger on her clit circled faster and faster, frantically pushing her towards the release he felt building in his balls. Her breasts bounced with each rock of his hips, her beautiful hair winding around them both, sending shivers across his body.

"Adamo," she breathed again, like a prayer to the night.

"Jaina," he whispered in her ear. All he knew was sensation, the feel of his cock tightly sheathed inside her, her delicate little fingers winding through his hair, her sweet bottom bouncing against his hips, her back rubbing against his chest, dragging over his nipples.

Her inner walls squeezed him tighter. He was turning inside out and upside down, about to pour his heart out onto the ancient stones beneath them, and if she didn't come soon he might just go without her and that would never do. Lightly he pinched her clit

between thumb and forefinger, rolling it over and over in a last, desperate bid to make her scream.

She screamed.

Her whole body shuddered in his embrace, the trembling prelude to her orgasm, and then she plunged over the edge, her tight walls rippling around his cock, grasping and milking, slick and hot around him, and finally Adamo allowed himself to follow her. He came inside her in thick, hot spurts, grunting out his release as she sobbed with pleasure in his arms.

It went on for what seemed like forever, until he was utterly spent, until at last he sagged against her, his heart shaking beneath the weight of something he couldn't even name.

Chapter Five

The aftershocks of pleasure rocked them for a while, until at last Adamo, his cock softening, slid out from inside her. Gently, he lowered her to the tower floor, though his own limbs shook as she turned in his embrace. Lifting her head, she kissed him and he melted into her arms gladly, his head coming to rest upon her breast. She was warm and living beneath him, a breathing monument to the reality of the moment.

She sighed and caressed his face, then raked her fingers through his hair, soothing him, and he thought that he could stay like this forever.

That thought brought him back to earth with a jolt. *Forever*. They were here, at the top of the tower. All she needed to do was advance to the center of the floor and he would reach the end of his long purgatory. He would go wherever the Lord dictated, and now that he was here, he didn't know which direction that was. He still had his sins to confess. Surely there were many, given how long he had lingered here.

"Adamo," Jaina murmured, breaking into his reverie. "There's something...I want to ask you, if that's all right. I know you've been waiting for a long time, but..."

Adamo smiled into her skin. He could linger here a little longer. "Ask," he said.

She made a move to sit up, and he let her. In the moonlight, she truly did look like a fairy, though with the loss of his warmth, she shivered. Frowning, Adamo glanced about until he found her clothes a step down.

"I was hoping you would tell me about the curse," she said.

Adamo stiffened, and not in a good way. The warm glow of contentment after their coupling faded a bit and he bent to gather her clothing. "What is it you wish to know?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

She gave a shaky laugh. "I suppose it's a little rude to ask you this *now*, but...is it true you treated your sick wife poorly? I just want to hear your side of the story."

Adamo hesitated. Did she not believe the tale? She had no reason not to. Then again, no one had ever been capable of asking him. Perhaps she was curious. Perhaps she didn't want to believe she had lain with a monster.

He passed her clothes up to her, then concentrated on fixing his own clothing. It *was* cold this night. He hadn't felt the changing of the seasons in so long. "She was not sick," he said at last. His words came out weird and direct, a side effect, he supposed, of having not spoken with another human being for so many years.

"Not sick?" she asked. He saw her tilt her head from the corner of his eye as she strapped herself back into her undergarments. He was sad to lose the sight of her breasts, but also hopeful. She honestly wanted to hear what he had to say.

"No," he said. "No, she was strong as a bull. And twice as capricious." He felt his brows draw down into a frown. Damn Luiga. She was not a cruel woman, she would not have wanted this for him, he was sure of it. If she had not been so rash...

"Was she?" He heard the smile in Jaina's voice. "Is that why she cursed you for infidelity?"

Adamo's fingernails bit into his palms as his fists clenched. He shook his head vehemently. "Our marriage," he spat, then paused, trying to arrange his words into the correct order. "It was a political match," he said at last. "There is no harm in dallying outside a match like that."

He stole a look at her, to see if she understood, but she looked sad. "I see," she said, and he had the feeling she was disappointed in him.

"Luiga did not think so either," he said.

She scratched her nose, a strange and rude gesture that nevertheless seemed familiar and intimate to him. He hardened a little against his breeches. The way she sat on the step above him seemed inviting. Her hips flared, and he thought how nice it would be to be cradled in her body again...

"Do you have proof that she thought so?" Jaina asked. He looked directly at her now and she met his gaze, clear and sure. Was it possible she believed him?

"I do," he said. "She gave birth to a son."

"I heard."

"Not mine," he added. "I was away on a pilgrimage for nearly half a year. When I returned..."

Her full lips formed into an 'O' of realization, which was both gratifying and frustrating, since he now wondered what those lips would feel like forming that 'O' around his cock. He certainly could not find out, trapped on this step below her.

"I see," she said again, and this time he thought she did. "She was unfaithful as well. But why did she curse you, then? Or did she?"

"She did," he said, and again he saw Luiga standing before him, her eyes blazing, her fists clenched, and, worst of all, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her long, black hair escaping its bindings as she shook with rage and pain. "I told her..."

There was a lump in his throat. Why? It had been so long ago. "I told her I was sending the boy away to a monastery. He would have been well cared for," he added quickly, still trying to justify it. He hadn't been wrong in that. "But she would not have it."

Adamo spread his hands, trying to show this beautiful woman, for whom his heart quickened, that it did not matter. Why did she want to know this, and why was he telling her? Years of solitude had surely driven him mad.

Instead of showing disgust at his open manner, she leaned forward. Her wild hair moved with her, falling over her shoulders, slipping over the leather of her coat with a sensuous slither. Her hand touched his cheek and he turned his face into it. "And she cursed you?" she asked.

He nodded. "She said..." Regret sat on his tongue like a lump of burning coal, making it difficult to form words. "She told me if I had cared for her the way she cared for me, she never would have strayed. I did not know. Her feelings, the depth of them...that she could have cursed me with the strength of her grudge..." He made a

helpless gesture. "She told me to rot here until I understood what it meant to need someone."

Was this what Luiga had wanted? For him to latch onto the first person who gave him hope? Had that been what he was to her? He had to admit, Jaina was magnetic to him. He seemed attuned to her as a compass needle was attuned to north, and all he wanted was to bury himself in her again and never part.

"And then she died?" Jaina asked.

He laughed, a short, sharp bark. "No," he said. "She pushed me down these very stairs. I was the one who died."

The look of shock and dismay on her face was satisfying and distressing. He wanted to soothe it away with kisses.

But still—at last he had told someone else what had happened. There was a tingling on his chest, where Luiga's hands had landed and she had shoved with all her might. Even now, he did not believe she meant to kill him, for the look of horror on her face as he toppled backwards was too real, but he had felt her betrayal and anger with every blow of stone against his body. Not a day had gone by that he hadn't thought of her with hatred, but in truth the one he hated was himself. He hadn't paid attention to her, not the way he did with almost everything else in his life. Damnation, but he had talked to the stable boys more than Luiga. No wonder her feelings had bound his spirit here. If he got a second chance, a chance to do it all over...

Jaina heaved a sigh. "How sad," she said, and her thumb stroked his cheek, sending a curl of fire through him.

"Why did you want to know?" he asked.

A shadow of a smile tugged at her mouth. "I wanted to know if you deserved it."

Adamo tried to return her sigh, but there was a weight in his chest. He tried to say that of course he didn't deserve it, no one did, but all that came out was, "And did I?"

There was a moment when even the tower seemed to hold its breath, and nothing stirred.

Then she shook her head. "No," she said. "No."

In the sudden silence, Adamo felt something snap. The ropes of pain and hatred tying him to this terrible tower broke and recoiled, and deep inside the fissure of regret within him closed in an instant, swept away in a wave of sublime forgiveness. The thing he hadn't even known he'd needed.

He reached out and kissed her.

* * * * *

It was a demanding kiss, a sad, hopeful thing. His lips on hers brought back the banked fire of their frantic fuck, but she felt as though her heart had been peeled, was now tender and raw. As he kissed her, she thought of the weight of years that lay heavy on him. He *hadn't* deserved this. The desperation of his kiss was enough to tell her that. Whatever transgressions he had committed he had paid for, a hundred times over.

At last he pulled away and they gazed at each other for a long moment.

"Are you well?" he finally asked.

Jaina couldn't help but laugh a little. *Well?* She was better than well. She was floating like a cloud, her body exhausted and burned out with the desire they had shared, and in a few minutes she was about to do the most karma-positive thing she'd probably ever done—free a tormented soul from purgatory. You didn't get much purer than that, white-hot ecstasy aside. "I am well," she told him.

"Good," he said, but his brows drew together, as though he were troubled.

"What's wrong?" She smoothed the hair along his temple, trying to soothe him.

"I..." He shook his head. "I have waited for this for an eternity," he said at last. "I do not know what to do now."

Jaina kissed his forehead. "You will ascend," she said, though there was a pain in her chest at the words. She wanted to stay here, to explore this with him, to see what it could become...

But that could not be. He must go on.

Her heart hurt at the thought.

She pushed lightly on his shoulders and he took the hint, sitting up. He still knelt on the stone step just beneath the top of the tower. With shaking limbs, they helped each other to their feet.

He was tall, so his eyes were almost level with hers as he stood on the step beneath her, and she could see every emotion dancing in them as he wavered.

Jaina bent, took his hand, and kissed him again.

"Ready?" she asked.

His Adam's apple bobbed and he nodded. "Thank you," he said, and she stepped back, pulling him up the final step and onto the top of the tower.

* * * * *

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then nothing happened some more.

Adamo felt his hand shaking against hers as he let out a shuddering breath. "Is that it?" he asked and his voice cracked as though beneath a great weight. "Am I still trapped?"

Jaina tugged on his hand as she attempted to draw him to the center of the tower. He followed because he did not want to discover that he had no choice in the matter.

"No," she said, but he could see she was not certain. "No, you made it."

"But I am still here," he said thickly. There was no white light, no choirs of angels, no sudden, sweet bliss of *nothingness*. Though after knowing a very different kind of

bliss just moments before he found himself rather relieved about that. He hoped there was memory where he was going. If he was going anywhere, that is.

In the light of the moon he saw a sheen of tears over Jaina's eyes and felt the urge to pull her to him. Unfortunately he could not find the heart to move.

"You don't feel any different?" she asked him.

Of course he felt different. He felt cold, and heat and a heart-slamming fear, a blood-simmering need to lift her magnificent hair and trail kisses down—

He shook himself. That was not what she meant. "No," he told her, his heartbeat picking up speed. Was he truly still trapped here? He couldn't stand it. It wasn't *fair*.

"Try going down the stairs," Jaina blurted.

His eyes narrowed. "I cannot, not without—" His mouth snapped shut as her insinuation caught up with him.

Of course. He was bound to her as a ghost. If he was no longer cursed, he could move as freely as she. His gaze darted to the steps and he licked his lips.

He felt her loss of softness and warmth as he moved away, but three steps out and he realized she was not following him. Five steps and he was at the stairs. He glanced at her over his shoulder.

She stood, painted in blue and silver beneath the moon and he wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back to her, pull her down to the floor of the tower and remain here with her forever.

Then she gave him a smile, full of encouragement, and he turned and inched his foot out over the first step. He let it drop.

It went, and he descended, on his own, the first step of the cursed staircase.

He broke open. A sob escaped him and then he was laughing and running, nearly tripping and tumbling as he raced down the stairs, for the first time in years letting their numbers fly by him. It didn't matter if he was on the top step or the bottom, he could go where he pleased.

At last. *At last.*

At the base of the tower he raced out into the small clearing. The cypresses loomed above him, reaching for the stars and the passing clouds, and he stared at them. He was free.

Had Luiga forgiven him? When had he started the journey back? Was it when Jaina had expressed sympathy for him, or when he found himself thinking only of her in the long, restless evening? Or had it been his own feelings tethering him to the earth until that glorious moment when *she* had told him he did not deserve this punishment and all his pain and regret had fallen away?

A ghost without regrets was no ghost at all.

He heard her footsteps as she descended the tower and moved into the clearing with him. For a dizzy, horrifying moment, he wondered if he had gone invisible again, and he could not bear to look at her for fear that he would see her gaze right through him.

"Can you still see me?" he asked the stars.

Another footfall. "I can see you, and hear you," Jaina said.

He closed his eyes, letting the knowledge settle. Then he looked at her and held up a hand. "Touch me?"

Her feet shuffled through the dead grass as she crossed to him. She placed her cheek against his palm, and she was warm and real.

"Yes," she said.

The clearing was spinning. He couldn't get enough air. His heart, buoyed up by hope and relief, thundered on his tongue.

"Understand?" Jaina asked, and he barely heard her through the hum of blood in his ears. "You're free. You're alive."

He kissed her, and she kissed him back. It was sweet and gentle and he ached for her.

To his dismay she pulled away and he saw her frowning in the moonlight. She took a deep, shaking breath. "You..." she said. "You need...papers. And a job. And a place to live. Food. Money..."

She was adorable as she pressed a hand to her face, seeming to fret about such inconsequential things. He could have died, in truth this time, and it would have been all right, but she was walking away through the trees, muttering under her breath.

"I'm supposed to leave in the morning, but maybe I can postpone," he heard her saying. "Um, maybe I can buy you some new clothes, too..."

"Jaina," he said, and her name was like honey on his tongue. He started after her and nearly shouted with joy as he passed over the invisible boundary that had kept him confined to the tower. For the first time in centuries he walked beneath trees. Trees! For a man whose eternity had been measured in a finite amount of steps, he now had an infinite number of them. He could go anywhere. Do anything.

He was free.

And she was here. "Jaina," he said again. "You are the one."

She turned and stared at him, then laughed nervously. "The one what?"

He spread his hands. "The one I need. Who I will wait for. Nothing else matters."

Her fists clenched at her sides. "You don't..." she trailed off. "You don't have to. And it does sort of matter if you starve to death."

He grinned at her. "I could not care less. Kiss me."

She trembled, then shook her head. "No, if you're really alive again, I need to help you. I have to...you know, keep you out of jail, and fed, and clothed..." Her hands flew to her cheeks. "Nuts!" she said. "Hang on, I have to think..."

But Adamo had spent lifetimes thinking, and waiting. He moved to her, freely, beneath the cypress trees. His last coherent thought as he pulled her to him and kissed her thoroughly was that it had been long, and hard, and utterly, completely, worth it.

He spared a prayer of thanks to Luiga, wherever she was, before pulling Jaina down to a bed of fallen needles. They didn't make it back to the village until well past dawn.

About the Author

Heather Howard lives in Texas with one husband, two dogs and an ever-proliferating garden, all of whom seem to require constant feeding and attention. When they aren't looking, she talks to herself on paper. Sometimes, a book comes out!

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