

Wendy Stone

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First published in 2010

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### To Tame a Wolf

### A paranormal novel of erotic romance by

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Wendy Stone

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Also by Wendy Stone

A Fall From Grace

A Gamble Worth Taking

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Charisma

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\* \* \* \*

This is an explicit and erotic novel

intended for the enjoyment

of adult readers. Please keep out of the hands of children.

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#### To Tame A Wolf

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Edited by Richard Campbell
Cover Art (C) 2010 by Debi Lewis
First Edition July 2010
ISBN-13: 978-1-60659-990-7

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Published by: Phaze Books An imprint of Mundania Press LLC 6470A Glenway Ave., #109 Cincinnati, OH 45211

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### **Prologue: Rose's Beginning**

Screams filled the night air. Shrieks of terror mixed with yells of victory in the overrun village. No safe hiding place remained. Women and children, even the tiniest of babes, all were gathered in the center of the conquering horde.

The bedraggled group of women ranged from Grandmother Baia to Gaila, who had only recently left the school room. The children outnumbered the women. They included two babes nestled in the arms of their mothers. These women kept their heads down, hoping that respect would save their infants. Frightened girls huddled together, seeking the comfort of their elders. What males remained were toddlers or very young boys; not yet old enough to carry a sword.

Any boy of that age and strength had shared the fate of his father. Their bodies would slowly decompose into the soil.

"Gather them up," the leader of the raiders bellowed. "We have a long journey and I want them in good shape for the auction." He approached one of the women carrying a baby. "Are you nursing?" he asked, lifting her chin with his blood-covered glove.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, cringing back as the hand dropped to her breasts, pushing the baby out of the way to lift and knead the sensitive flesh.

"Yes, you have milk." He chuckled, slipping his finger into the front of her threadbare gown. Pulling slightly, he ripped open her bodice, exposing the creamy white, heavy mounds. Her huge nipples sagged slightly. "Beautiful," he muttered,

raising his hand for a man to come and take the child from her.

"My baby!" she screamed.

"The child will be returned to you... if you do as you are bid." He slipped off his gloves, folding them through the belt that circled his waist.

"What is it you want?" Her body shook with fear as he continued staring at her exposed flesh.

He reached out, lifting one heavy breast in his scarred and calloused hand, his thumb brushing over the engorged nipple. He played with it, surprisingly gently. The woman gasped in surprise as he teased her sensitive flesh. "Stand still," he ordered, his voice a husky grunt.

She closed her eyes. His warm lips feathered over her nipple, then the heat of his mouth covered her as he suckled her in, drawing hard. There came a heavy sensation, the not-quite pain that triggered the let down of her milk. He hummed his pleasure as the first thin stream filled his mouth with warm sweetness.

His free hand found her other breast, gently pulling at the sensitive nipple, twisting it slowly until she felt an unwelcome wetness of arousal between her slender thighs.

It tore her soul. She'd watched this man plunge his blade into her husband's chest moments before. He'd killed her Jared, the only man who'd ever touched her in this way, and now he was stealing the succor of her milk.

"No," she gasped, her feet moving in place as if she'd try to back away from him.

He lifted his head, a stream of milk still spilling from her nipple to spray his chin with watery blue-white liquid. He wiped it with one finger, plunging the glistening digit into his mouth and closing his eyes to savor the taste.

"Does it bring you to heat? Does my mouth on your teat make you long for a plunging cock?" he whispered coarsely. His hand slid to her skirt, lifting it even as she fought him, finding his way between her naked thighs. Forcing her legs apart, he dipped that same finger between her hairy lips. He chuckled as moist heat coated his finger.

Her hands pushed at him, grabbing his wrist in an attempt to pull him away, but he was too strong. He plunged his fingers inside her, fucking her crudely, dropping his head to her breast once more.

"No, stop," she moaned, though her hips twitched as his tongue flicked over her nipple. He suckled lustily, loudly gulping her sweet milk, his thumb rubbing at the taut nubbin of flesh between her thighs. She came suddenly, her cries a mix of horror and pleasure, her juices flooding his hand. He lifted his head, his green eyes laughing as they gazed into hers.

"You have no shame, rutting away on my hand. The hand that killed your husband. His blood mixes with your come, lady."

Sobs shook her shoulders and she gathered the torn edging of her bodice together over her breasts. Tears of shame and fear, of mourning and grief stained her face, reddening her cheeks as he watched. It made him laugh and he brushed his palm, still covered in her musky spendings,

across her face, lifting her chin to drop a hard kiss on her down-turned mouth. "I shall keep you for myself," he whispered. "I shall be your master and if you value the life of your babe, you will do as I say."

He moved away, signaling again to his man, who brought her the babe then took both of them to a small wagon. He leashed her inside, a thick leather collar round her slender throat, the leash chained to a small metal circle in front. "You are a lucky one, lady, for his pleasures are few and usually quickly achieved. The rest will be auctioned off, used as serfs or bedded for the joy found between captured thighs." The henchman gave a short, cruel laugh.

The woman did not respond. Her eyes remained blank, mirroring the emptiness she felt in her soul. She sat there, her babe laid across her lap, arms wrapped around herself. Only the lusty cries of her hungering infant woke her from her daze. She picked up the small lass, holding her to her naked breast, crooning a low, somber song until the babe had drunk its fill.

She watched as the others were tied together at the ankles, hobbled to prevent escape. They were warned that to fall would simply mean being dragged and she knew a moment of guilt over her own luck at being chosen by the leader. The other young mother screamed as her baby boy was plucked from her grasp and handed to another woman. Two men held her arms, tearing off her blouse, their mouths latching on to her leaking breasts. They drank hungrily until forced away by others, each man eager to drink. Her nipples stretched painfully as men fought for each drop.

The shocking scene filled her with dread. The poor woman wasn't molested in any other way; the men seemed more eager to nurse from her life-sustaining milk than to sexually abuse her. With a jerk, the wagon began to move. The last of the waiting men wiped his mouth as he moved away from the shivering woman.

She laid down in the wagon, unwilling to watch the village of her birth as it disappeared from sight. The women and children tried to keep up with their captors. Those who fell were dragged as threatened, until one of the men came back and roughly righted them. She closed her eyes, cuddling her daughter, her very own Adaira Rose, to her naked breasts. Eventually, darkness took her.

A huge hand rudely woke her from sleep, pulling her up by her leash. Her captor climbed easily into the wagon. He lifted her babe in one hand, staring at the small bundle with her curly dark hair and huge blue eyes that returned his interested gaze. "Is it a boy?" he asked roughly.

"N...no," she managed, her voice stuttering badly as she made a grab for her child. "P...please my lord, s...she's all I have I...left."

"What will you give me if I let her live?" he asked, gazing down at the comely lass, for she was pretty, even in fear and sorrow. She was too thin, for food was scarce in this season and the babe drained much from her. But her skin was fair and smooth, her eyes large and bright blue like her daughter's. Blonde hair curled under the rag she wore upon her head. Her teeth were white, straight and even, not black and broken as some of the women's.

"P...Please, lord. Anything you wish," she begged, holding out her hands for her baby.

"What is your name, wench?" he asked roughly, eyeing her breasts.

"Madelaine, lord. My h...husband called me Maddie."

"Maddie, aye it has a sweet ring. I tire of battles and of the travel. I wish to settle on my land, to erect a home worthy of the title and raise sons that will win the day for me. You've bred before, and while I'd prefer a woman known to breed sons, I find you a lusty enough wench. You shall become my wife. If you want this girl child to live, you will not fight me in this."

"Y...you wish to make me your bride?" Maddie's voice bore the strain of her surprise. She'd expected rape and death at the hands of her captor, not this.

"You find me offensive?" he sat back against his heels, bringing the babe to lie securely in the curve of his arm.

In truth, she found him far from offensive, despite the twisted scar that marked his wide forehead. His face bore the harsh results of a life of war and battle, but his eyes shone bright with intelligence. Dark green, they stared at her from under a heavy brow. He had a long nose, wide at the bridge and slightly crooked from being broken in one fight or another, his mouth too big, teeth white and slightly uneven. He was tall and heavily muscled, built for war, easily filling the opening of the wagon. His upper arms were as wide as her waist, their strength more than apparent.

He smelled good: male sweat mixed with the tang of the horse and the scent of leather. A heady aroma, so different

than her husband's. His speech indicated learning, articulate and well modulated. That held importance for her; before her marriage, she'd been the village teacher.

"No, lord," she answered truthfully. "I do not find you offensive."

"Then what is your answer, Maddie, for I do not have all day to waste. We must be to auction before nightfall."

"My daughter, she will be allowed to stay with me?" "Aye, this I promised before."

"Then I agree," she whispered, despite the tug at her conscience.

He brought his free hand to her face, slowly tracing her slender cheek. "It is good," he said softly, bending to taste her lips for the first time.

The kiss brought a flush to her face, and not one born from embarrassment. He was talented with that overly wide mouth, teasing her with a gentle swipe of his tongue that promised nights of passionate play. "Now, this foolishness is behind us and we must get back on the trail." He backed out of the wagon.

"Wait," she called as she gathered her babe back to her breast.

"What is it, Maddie?" he said, his tone half teasing, half irritated at the extra delay.

"I do not know your name, lord."

"Aye," he laughed, mostly at himself. "Would be a sad day when a wench married a man whose name she could not give to the priest when asked. 'Tis Hawkesmoor, Maddie. But most know me as the Black Hawke." He gave a tug at his inky

black locks and threw her a wink before disappearing from sight.

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### **Chapter One**

Rose ran through the hallways, her skirts flying and showing an indecent amount of trim ankle. Her blue eyes widened with excitement as she called to her mother.

"He is here, Momma. Come quickly."

Maddie, whose blonde hair showed no sign of graying and whose blue eyes remained as lovely as her daughter's, lifted her head from her sewing, disapproval upon her face. "Adaira Rose, what have I told you about running like a banshee and screeching at the top of your voice?" She placed her sewing in the small basket beside her chair, rising gracefully and beckoning to the servants to add wood to the fire.

The years had been good to her. Though she gave her Hawke four large and healthy sons, she'd retained her slender shape. She could almost pass as an older sister of her eighteen-year-old daughter.

Maddie had never expected to find such happiness after that day in the village so many years past, when the raiding party of men had torn it apart and killed her first husband. But find it she had. She'd found her Hawke.

She'd been terrified, watching as the men decided which women of the village they were keeping, and which would be auctioned off in the slave sales. She'd watched friends torn from the arms of their loved ones, mothers from daughters and sons. Hawke had chosen ten of the best, including three strong boys. He'd sold them for a huge profit, bringing a grin to his wide mouth.

When combined with all that he'd saved from his years of selling his sword arm, it had been enough to start their home. They'd lived in a tent until the time came to move into this huge, cavernous castle he'd built. It seemed to take forever, but before the winter came once more, they had stood before this hearth pledging their troth, her belly swollen with the first of his sons.

He'd kept his word, raising Rose as his own, treating her as a favored daughter, petting and spoiling her. He'd taught her to ride and to hunt with both bow and hawk, gifting her with her very own tiercel, very much against her mother's wishes. She'd believed the huge male falcon too much for her small daughter to handle, but the bird had bonded with Rose, very much at home upon her gloved hand or on the rest on the back of her chair. Woe to any who drew too near the bird and his owner for he was quick to protect Rose, screeching loudly in warning.

It was the same with her father's choice of horses. The petite beauty had received her first mount at but ten and two. No tamed mare, docile and easily ridden for her Rose. No, the destrier she'd been given was an offspring of Hawke's own mighty warhorse. Ungelded, the beast let none but Hawke or Rose near. She'd named the beast Hermes, for when she rode upon him she felt as fast as that winged messenger of the Greek gods.

Though she did not have her adoptive father's blood, she had his look, with hair the jet black of the darkest of nights, shining almost blue in the light of the sun. Her eyes were her mother's, a blue so true as to echo the larkspur that grew

wild in the fields left fallow of a season. Her smooth skin glowed with health, tawny with her love of the sun. High cheekbones and a stubborn jaw created an unforgettable face, framed by long dark curls that bounced as she walked or, more often, ran.

Petite, she barely reached Hawke's shoulder, and yet she curved in the most womanly of places. She drew the eye with her beauty and more than one castle retainer drooled into his cups at the sight of her. He'd cultivated her mind too, something few fathers thought of doing for their daughters. She could speak intelligently on a multitude of subjects, much more than the carding of wool or which flower was best for use in dyeing.

When she'd reached the age of betrothal, the contracts had come pouring in. Her beauty and intelligence were well-known, bandied about by the traveling entertainers who composed sonnets in her name, singing of her loveliness for all to hear.

A contract of marriage had been reached with a neighboring kingdom, the son a man of royalty and bearing who would make Rose his bride. A bride price had been decided upon and the date set. All that remained was for the two to meet and then the final preparations would be decided.

Geoffrey D'Arneaux was fair and stout, with brown eyes that looked disparagingly upon anything he deemed unworthy. He feigned indifference in all but the most exciting of things, waving a hand around as if offended even by the air he breathed.

But his lands were large, his coffers full to bursting and the price he promised more than enough to see Hawke's sons married with lands of their own. Rose was to be sacrificed, but Hawke would see that she was happy, for he loved his daughter and her bright ways and sweet smiles.

"Come, Mother, please. You must help me change, for I cannot meet my bridegroom in this," Rose begged, glancing down at the plain gown. She took her mother's hand, pulling her in an attempt to hurry her along.

"Settle, daughter. Your father will hold him up in the main hall, for there are matters yet unattended. You have time. You shall not meet him until the dinner hour." She moved a little quicker, smiling despite the dread in her heart. This contract hadn't set right with her, but Hawke would hear nothing else, happy that Rose would be close enough to visit and with such a dowry.

The high society connection would also benefit the family. Even the king had deigned to come to the wedding, a boon not often granted, busy as he was with his wars and the upstart pretender trying to claim his throne. Maddie could scare believe the honor being bestowed upon them, one unheard of for a villager's daughter.

She followed her chattering daughter, through the long hallways and up a circular stair, entering a spacious room. Brightly colored tapestries covered the walls, each telling a favorite fairytale. Lovingly sewn by Maddie's own hand, they would be taken down and sent with her daughter. When the time came, they would decorate her nursery as well. Light shone from the open windows; in front of one of the window

seats, a ball of colored yarn on the floor told what Rose had been doing when she spotted the procession.

Maddie forced the flighty girl to hold still, patiently unlacing the ties that held sleeves to the bodice of her dress. Then the dress itself was unlaced, falling to the floor with a small shimmy of Rose's hips, leaving her in a delicate chemise of the softest material.

It clung to her breasts, outlining their shape, tenting slightly at the ruby points visible through the thin material. The fabric hugged her lush hips, a dark triangle of hair noticeable at the apex of Rose's thighs. She had long legs for such a tiny girl, bared by the short material of the chemise.

Despite the healthy curves, she had an air of fawn-like fragility about her. As she rushed to the rough hewn chest at the foot of her bed to pull a bright gown free, she babbled about her intended, her nervousness and fear evident.

"Hurry, mother. I must pin up my hair. Geoffrey must see me at my best." She turned, her blue eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Will he like me, do you think?"

"He would be a blind fool not to, daughter. Now, settle. How am I supposed to do up your laces with you dancing about so?" Maddie couldn't prevent the smile that touched her lips.

"I cannot help myself, mother," she sang, tearing away from her mother's hands to dance around the room with her dress still half laced. She stopped at the window, staring across the courtyard at the horses being unsaddled and led into the stables.

Beyond the huge wall that surrounded the castle, a small movement in the woods caught her eye. She paused, squinting to see what it was.

A man stepped from the edge of the forest, blonde hair shining brightly under the midday sun. He was tall and well built, a knightly figure in stature. Yet he was no gentleman, for he stared back at her in an unseemly fashion. She couldn't see his eyes from this distance, but she could feel them upon her person. A flush of embarrassment rushed to her cheeks and she stepped back from the window.

"Mother, who is that man?" she asked, pointing towards the edge of the woods.

Maddie stepped to the window, her eyes searching the woods. "What man, daughter? There is no one there. Are you sure your exuberance isn't causing you to imagine things?"

"He was there," she said, rushing back to the ledge and leaning out far enough to cause her mother to gasp and grab for her waist. "He was tall, and blonde. He stared at me as no knight would dare to do, Mother."

"Well, he probably mistook you for some hoyden, dressed as you are with your hair just so. Come, daughter, we must make you presentable."

\* \* \* \*

Rose made her way down the stairs to the great hall, her sedate steps belying the rapid beating of her heart. She was about to meet her intended, the man who would be her husband, her lover. Just the thought sent a flush to grace her cheeks.

She entered the room, unaware of the stir her appearance caused amongst the visiting knights. Her hair had been braided, coiled around her head like a crown, tiny white flowers woven into the mass. The yellow of her gown complemented her perfectly, her skin and hair glowing in reflected warmth. With her hands clasped in front of her, she went to her father, bobbing a small curtsey in front of him.

"Good eve, father."

"My daughter," Hawke said, holding his hand out and drawing her closer. "We were just discussing you. Come, join us." He guided her to the chair next to his, between him and Lord Geoffrey. "Sir, allow me to present my daughter, Adaira Rose, though we call her Rose. Daughter, this is Lord Geoffrey D'Arneaux, our neighbor."

"Sir, 'tis a pleasure," Rose said softly, bowing her head and curtseying.

"Come, sit so we may eat." Geoffrey's low voice projected boredom and he did not bother to return her greeting.

Rose looked over at him, sizing him up and finding him vastly wanting. "Thank you, sir," she said quietly, her bright mood suddenly subdued. Geoffrey stayed seated as a servant pulled her chair out, though those around him rose. His eyes glanced across her gown, grudgingly accepting the color, fit and cut. But his gaze lingered on the unfashionable tawny color of her skin and the scratch across her hand from rescuing one of the stable's kittens.

Trenchers of bread were shared between seatmates. Yesterday's leftovers, scooped out to hold choice pieces of meat and tangy cheeses. Servants carried huge platters of

the stuff between the many tables. The Lord 's Table was graced by a tiny pot of sea salt. Salt was hard to come by, and thought a decadent treat to savor and delight.

Rose shared her trencher with their guest, her intended. She sat, hands folded meekly in her lap, watching as he liberally used the tiny pot of salt, heedless of the luxury. He rudely ate his fill, choosing the tenderest morsels for himself, with no regard to her hunger. He answered questions from her father, but spoke not at all to Rose, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Was this the way it was to be? Would she be delegated to a corner of his hall, brought out to grace his arm or to care for his guests, sating his lusts in the dark of night? No care paid to her wishes and desires?

"You'll do, I suppose," he said softly, leaning closer when her father answered a question from her mother, who sat on his other side. "You'll be comely enough when dressed appropriately, though I would have wished for someone a little less... ordinary." He waved his hand negligently in her direction. "We leave in the morning. Be ready."

With that he rose, bowing low to Hawke and lifting one of Rose's hands to his lips, though they never touched her skin. "We shall be leaving early. I should like to have this trip over, Sir Hawke. Will your daughter be ready to travel in the morn?"

"We had expected a somewhat longer visit, Lord Geoffrey. At least a fortnight."

"Oh, I could not be gone that long from my lands, Sir. We shall leave on the morrow and the wedding shall be held

within the week. That should give his majesty time to travel to D'Arneaux Keep." Before Hawke could say anything else, Geoffrey bowed once more and called for his man to show him to his room.

"My lord, a bath shall be prepared for you," Maddie said courteously, leaving the rest of her meal uneaten. "I shall attend to you myself. If my lord agrees?" she asked, staring at Hawke with a warm smile upon her pretty face.

He nodded his agreement and Maddie left the hall, calling for water to be fetched and heated, directing the copper tub to be taken to Lord Geoffrey's room. It was the position of the lady of the household to help attend a guest's bath, providing whatever succor was needed—within bounds. Maddie pulled a tiny pair of scissors from a pocket sewn in the front of her gown and used them to strip off her sleeves of the gown, folding them and handing them to her maid. Covering the rest with a simple white apron, she ran lightly up the stairs to see to the water.

Hawke watched his wife leave before turning to the daughter of his heart. "So, what think you of your bridegroom? Is he everything you wished?"

Rose glanced up at her father before once more studying her hands, lying upon her lap. "I...I'm not sure, Father. We've only met the once." She couldn't look at him, for she had a dreadful feeling in her stomach.

"You have your entire lives to learn each other. I knew your mother but one short day before asking her to wed. Look how that has turned out." His hand swept over the grandeur of his castle.

"Yes, Father. I am sure everything shall work out for the best. Might I be excused?" At his nod, she rose, bobbing a quick curtsey and leaving the hall, headed not for her rooms but slipping out a side door that led to the stables. On her way past the kitchens, she snuck an apple from the small basket of fruit waiting to be made into tarts for the morrow's breakfast.

Hurrying down the path, she tried to rid herself of worry. But it nagged at her like a bad tooth. She was still frowning as she entered the stables. The rich smell of horses, leather, straw and grain assaulted her nose. As always, the familiar scents lifted her spirits. She walked down the long line of stalls before reaching the very end, whistling softly. A delicate black nose poked out over the half door.

The nostrils flared and a sharp whinny pierced the air. Rose laughed, reaching out and patting the huge head of her horse as he snuffled at her hair, nipping lightly at the braids. "Hey," she said, pushing him back. "How would you like it if I bit your hair?"

Hermes shook his noble head, almost rolling his eyes, as if in disbelief of her words. Then he reached out and gently butted her with his nose, whinnying again, demanding the treat he knew she'd brought him.

"You are spoiled, my fine, fiery steed," she said gaily, holding the apple out to him. He lipped it off her hand like the gentlest of pets, not the dangerous animal that he was. "Did you allow Boyce to give you your brushing today, or did you chase him out of your stall once again?"

"He chased him out, my lady. He is the fiercest of horses. Are you sure you should be so close?"

Rose jumped, startled at the unexpected voice that came from the darkness of the stables. She turned, her skirts swishing through the scattered hay, her hands coming to her breasts as if to stop her heart from thundering away. "Who is there?" she called, trying to sound commanding.

"I am an admirer, lady, and no one for you to fear. My name is Wulf," he said, coming out of the shadows towards her.

It was the man from the forest, the one who'd stared up at her with such insolent eyes. She felt her heart leap once more, her pulse racing as she took her first look at him.

His bright hair was long, curling past his shoulders, three small braids at each temple keeping it out of his eyes. It was bound back with a thin black ribbon that matched his leather jerkin and breeches, making his hair appear even more golden in contrast. His eyes were green, true as emeralds, wide set under an intelligent looking brow.

He was tall, towering over her in a way that made her step back cautiously. His build was formidable, with wide shoulders tapering to a strongly muscled abdomen and thick thighs. He stood at ease in front of her, seemingly unaware of his effect upon her.

"Are you one of Lord Geoffrey's men?" she asked, letting her hand rest against Hermes stall. The animal stirred as Wulf approached, nickering softly.

"You could say so, Lady Rose," he answered, stepping closer to the petite beauty. "Is it safe for you to wander so closely to a knight's horse?"

"He is *my* horse, raised at my hand from the time he was weaned. He would no more hurt me than I would him." She stared up at Wulf, trying to be brave against the fear tickling her senses. Had he recognized her as the woman in the window? She knew she must look quite different in the finery of a Lord's daughter, but his impudent gaze focused not on the fine clothing but on her hair and skin. "He...He is very protective of me," she added quickly, hoping to deter him if he had thoughts of foul play.

"I shall have to remember that, my lady." Wulf stepped to the stalls edge and held out his palm to the beast. "What is his name?"

"I named him Hermes, for he runs with the passion of the messenger god."

Wulf cocked his head to the side, studying her. Not many young girls were classically educated and she had surprised him. Then he spoke softly to the animal, stroking the noble head with his big hand. "A fine and true animal you have raised, lady. I congratulate you."

"What are you doing here in my father's stables?" she asked him suddenly.

"I saw you leave the castle. I wished to make sure you were safe and perhaps to exchange a pleasantry or two. I plot no evil deeds, Lady Rose. Maybe I just hope that you might share one of your lovely smiles with a man far from his

home." He gave her a winsome smile and she felt a stirring in her stomach, one that made her breath catch in her throat.

"Your tongue is glib, Sir Wulf. If you are a visitor to my father's keep, how is it that I did not see you during the meal? My father invites all visitors to break bread with him."

"Perhaps you had eyes for no one but your intended, lady. I saw his rudeness and deplorable lack of care for one so gentle as yourself. But perhaps you don't wish for me to mention his treatment of you." He gazed down at her, his hand coming up to touch a small lock of hair that had escaped the braids. "It is rude of me to speak of such, if it will cause you distress."

"It was naught but our first meeting," Rose said quickly, trying to ignore the hand that held her hair in such a gentle grasp. "He might have felt hampered by the people watching us or by my father's presence." She turned her head so that she looked up into his face.

"Rudeness is inexcusable, no matter the place, lady. I wanted to take him to task for his abruptness and his tasteless actions." His hand slipped from the captured lock, the back of his knuckles brushing softly against her cheek, seeming mesmerized by the satin texture of her skin. "He should be taken to task, do you not agree?"

Rose was lost. His eyes, his touch, his scent, all wrapped around her, leaving her in a fog of new emotions. She wanted to preen under the admiration and heat of his gaze, arch into the stroking of his touch. She wanted to step closer, to be swept away. She wanted to feel his kiss...

"Oh," she gasped, her hand lifting to her mouth. The thought of his kiss, of those warm, wide lips touching her own, had jolted her from his spell. "I must go. My father will be searching for me." But she did not back away. She remained, staring up at him.

He lowered his head slowly, using the same easy movements he had with her horse. His eyes stayed on hers until hers fluttered closed. His lips were gentle, a mere brush against hers, returning again and again until a strangled moan rose from her center and she stepped forward, his arms coming round her petite form, lifting her so that he could more easily reach her lips. The brushing turned to rubbing, then they clung as his tongue swept out, pushing past the moist softness of her lips to taste her.

His growl mixed with her gasp even as her hands rose of their own volition, sliding up the wide muscled planes of his chest and over his shoulder, one tangling instinctively in his hair. His hands moved from her back, holding her easily against him, slipping down to cup the curve of her bottom.

Rose felt as if the fires of Hades blazed low in her belly, an insistent heat that drove her to press closer to its source. His mouth was no longer soft, but demanding and dominant, parting her lips further as his tongue investigated. She felt him take a step, his hand coming down to curve round her thigh, pulling it up so that her leg wrapped around his waist. Only their clothing prevented his conquest of her.

"Stop," she breathed against his mouth. "You must, please."

"Please? Yes, I want to please you," he growled, his eyes fiery green flames as they gazed at her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. "I will please you more than that lout ever could." He buried his mouth in her neck, his lips sliding down her throat to her shoulder, suckling against her soft skin.

She groaned at the pain-pleasure of his act, his teeth nipping as his hands kneaded her bottom, tugging up her skirts to try to reach her flesh. "No," she moaned, finally finding the strength to push against him, though it was the last thing she wanted. "No, stop."

He lifted his head, his nostrils flaring as if he scented her heat and knew that she didn't really wish to stop him. Then his eyes shuttered, turning cold and blank. He stepped back, holding her up until she caught her balance.

Rose's body was on fire for more of his kisses and caresses. Her breath hissed from her, a sob causing her breasts to heave under the low bodice of her dress. She stared up at him for one moment and then turned, running from the stables, her feet flying in her panic to be away from the source of the strange emotions flooding her body.

Wulf watched her go. With a slight smile, he lifted the tiny white flower he'd plucked from her hair, holding it to his nose before turning away.

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### **Chapter Two**

Maddie slid her elbow into the heated water pleased with its temperature. She added a few drops of the oil Lord Geoffrey's man had haughtily informed her was necessary in his bath. The somewhat spicy scent of sandalwood filled the air. She'd barely finished when the lord himself arrived, dismissing his man with a sly look.

"Lady Madelaine, I must thank you for this service. My man does not travel well and has gone to retire. Might I bother you for help with all these fastenings?" He smiled, sending a shiver down Maddie's spine. A sudden dread filled her.

She moved toward him slowly, reaching tentatively for the first fastening of his shirt. The small wooden toggle slid through her fingers and she fumbled for a moment before guiding it through its loop. The rest followed quickly and she slid the soft material from his body.

Averting her eyes, she knelt on the floor at his feet, lifting his shoe and slipping it off his foot. The other soon joined its pointy-toed mate. "Would you care for a robe, sir?" she asked softly, without looking up at him.

"No, my lady, finish. I find I grow chilled in the draftiness of this chamber." He glanced around, his disdainful gaze resting upon the well-made furnishings as if they were less fine than his normal surroundings.

Maddie lifted her hands to the fastening on his trews, her normally nimble fingers stumbling over the ties. She gasped in shock as the sturdy fabric parted and his thick cock protruded, standing hard and proud from his body.

Instead of trying to cover himself, Geoffrey smiled down at her, his hand stroking slowly over the length of his hard member. Maddie's face blushed red to the roots of her hair and she averted her eyes, grasping the material and pulling it down and over the hard muscles of his thighs. "The water is ready, lord," she managed to whisper.

"It is a convincing blush, Maddie," he said, dropping all pretense of respect. "But I know of your birth and the lowly village Hawkesmoor found you in. I know of women such as you and how you use your bodies to make your way." He laughed, stepping toward the tub and lowering himself. "Why not remove the gown, *lady*," he said, turning the term of respect into a mockery. "Join me. I will show what a young cock can do for you."

Maddie stared at him in shock, her eyes wide, her body tensed. She rose, wanting nothing more than to flee this foul man and his even fouler manners. "I am no slattern, Sirrah. I share my body with none but my husband. When he hears of this...this disrespect, I am sure he shall sever the contract."

"I think not, lady," Geoffrey laughed, leaning back against the inclined end of the tub. "He shall not find any willing to take his daughter if he refuses my suit." He laughed again at the mutinous look on her face. "Then what shall happen to his sons when they reach the age of marriage? No member of society will touch a contract of marriage with a Hawkesmoor heir, not if they value their positions."

There was a knock and Maddie breathed a huge sigh of relief when she saw the girl at the door. "Lord Hawke bade me come find you, lady. He is in need of your attentions and asked that I finished his lordship's bath, if it pleases him."

"Thank you, Molly." She turned to curtsey quickly at Geoffrey, her face paling as she saw his brow raise, a slow smile spreading upon his lips.

"Remember our conversation, lady," he said softly, turning his attention upon the comely maid who approached the tub. Before she could do more than blink, he'd reached out, grabbing Molly's arm and pulling her into the water with him.

The husky sound of her laugh followed her initial shriek and Maddie knew Lord Geoffrey would be taken well in hand. She hurried out of the room and closed the wide wooden door softly behind her.

What to do? Maddie's head spun. She didn't want to believe what Lord Geoffrey had said. Could he be so highly appointed that his word would influence so many?

When she reached their chambers, she entered slowly, hearing a splash. Her head lifted, her eyes roaming the room until she saw her husband.

"Come join me, wife," he called to her, stretching in the huge tub and holding out his hand. "You can scrub my back."

"Hawke," she began, carefully searching out her words.

"Are you sure of this bargain? Are you sure this is the best for our Rose?"

"Maddie love, Lord Geoffrey is well connected. He has the ear of the King. Our blushing Rose will go to court, where she will want for nothing. We cannot give her much better than

that." He took her hand, tugging gently. "Why all the questions, wife?"

She turned, letting him release the laces on her gown. It dropped to the floor. Her chemise fell next, leaving her bare but for her simple leather slippers. Kicking them free, she climbed the small wooden steps, her toes dipping into the water before she allowed her strong and handsome husband to draw her into the wide pool. "I wonder at his intentions, 'tis all," she answered as he drew her close, his skin slipping against hers.

"He is honorable, wife. You confuse me with this attitude." He frowned then handed her the small cloth and a sliver of hand-made soap, perfumed with the clean scent of lemons. He leaned forward in the tub, so that she might move behind him. The first touch of the cloth on his back made him moan, his head over his bent knees. "Must we discuss this now? I've spoken to Rose and she seems content with the match."

"Are you content with ours?"

His head shot up and he turned, grabbing her wrist in his wide hand. "I wanted you from the first, Maddie, you know 'tis so. Is there something amiss? Are you aware of something I should know?"

She tried to smile, staring into the dark of his eyes, shuttered by thick lashes as black as his hair. "No, my Hawke. I want for naught, but 'tis a mother's prerogative to worry that her children will be happy and healthy, is it not?"

"So I should blame this mood upon a mother's worry?" He wrapped his arm around her still slender waist, drawing her around until she pressed up against him. His eyes studied her

intently, as if trying to see inside her mind. "Is that all it is, Maddie?"

She nodded, smiling up at him, her fingers coiling in the wet length of his hair. "Foolishness, Hawke. It is just that she is the first to leave."

"'Tis not true, the boys have been fostered out and not once did you vex me with moods such as this."

"She is different," she said, shrugging, her blue eyes not exactly meeting his. "I will be fine when all is settled, my husband. Mind not my moods."

"You are certain? You know I will listen, Maddie."

She smiled, arching her back and pressing her breasts against his hard chest, something that never failed to draw his attention. "I am," she said, her tongue licking over her soft lips.

"Oh ho," he chuckled. "You work now to change the subject."

"I do?" she asked, feigning surprise at his words. Pouting her full lips, she gazed up at him beneath her own rich lashes. "I wouldn't do such a thing, lord."

"Yes, you would, and without a hint of remorse," he chuckled, his hand slipping over the front of her body. He lifted her heavy breast in his palm, his thumb rubbing over the wide tip. "I miss these since you weaned Garren," he sighed.

"So it is your desire to fill my belly once more with your child?" She laughed, knowing her husband's love of her milk and how he craved its sweetness.

He lowered his head, nipping at the taut bud. "It is a thought," he muttered around her flesh.

She reached between them, finding his cock hard and ready. A smile touched her lips as her sex grew wet with anticipation, her lower lips growing plump and engorging with heat. Moving closer, she wrapped her leg around his waist, aiming the huge plum-colored head into her heat. He split her flesh, filling her.

He groaned, moving into moistness wetter than water, her spongy walls gripping his cock. Her inner muscles moved over his flesh as if she clasped him in a hot, damp hand. His hands grasped her hips, grinding her onto him, amazed as always by how she took him so easily, every long hard inch.

Her moan made him smile. He loved her; he had from the first, when she'd stood so defiantly in the center of the village, her blonde hair shining in the bright light of day, her face hard as she tried to be brave. He never once regretted taking her for his bride, nor her daughter as his own.

The water sloshed around them, waving gently then more roughly as their movements grew frenzied. He thrust into her urgently, his hands roaming over her body, kneading the flesh of her breasts, finding her mouth with his.

Her sweet cunny clamped upon his rampant cock and she gasped and moaned as he brought her readily to her pleasures. Her eyes grew heavy, her panting breaths making him smile. "'Tis too easy, love," he growled. "You respond to my cock so lustily. Perhaps I haven't been fulfilling my husbandly duties?"

She gaped at him, for in truth Hawke was as randy after many years of marriage as he'd been from the first, seeking her out at all hours, throwing her over his shoulder to carry her away to their chamber, whiling away an afternoon in bed. The words were on her lips to accuse him of lunacy when he surprised her once more, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her easily. He stood, stepping out of the tub.

"What do you do, Hawke?"

He walked to the bed, caring little for the water that left trails on the floor, nor the sheets that grew wet as he fell to his back upon the bed. "Ride me, wench," he ordered, slapping her lovingly on her bottom.

"You've lost your senses," she accused, a giggle escaping her lips at the look on his face. He had the naughty smile of an incorrigible four-year-old caught stealing a bite of a treat. His eyes twinkled with green flame even as his hands grasped her hips once more, moving her over him.

"That just proves that I love you, Maddie," he drawled softly, his voice deepening as he gazed at her. "You make me forget myself."

She laughed, leaning down and letting her hands rest on the bed as she drew her breasts across his chest, hearing him groan. He lifted his head, forcing her back to arch as he buried his face between her damp breasts. His tongue licked at the drips of water, then found her turgid nipple. He suckled upon her like a babe, though the sensation he wrought inside of her had nothing to do with the maternal.

"Perhaps you'll make me pregnant now," she groaned, holding his head to her breast with one hand. "I think I'd like another child, Hawke."

He groaned at her words, his hips slamming her as she continued to whisper to him, promising him her breasts full of sweet milk. The thought grew in his mind, his head falling back to the pillow as his hot seed churned, spewing up through his cock in rapturous spurts, filling her cunny with his cream. Her cries urged him on, and he jerked beneath her, giving her all of himself. Finally he lay still against the bed, his chest heaving. Her head fell to his shoulder, her hair covering his face.

His hands held her close as he fought to control his breathing, stroking the softness of her back and down to her rounded bottom, squeezing those sweet cheeks fondly. "You'll be the death of me, wench," he growled in her ear.

"Never, my love," she sighed, lazily lifting her head to look down at him. "And if I do, I shall resurrect you with my kiss."

He chuckled, rolling her over, moving his slowly hardening cock inside of her. He flashed her that smile, the one that always let him get his way, cocking his black brow when she narrowed her eyes.

"Again?"

"While there is still life in me," he vowed, making her giggle and then sigh.

\* \* \* \*

Rose stood outside her parents' chamber, hand raised, indecision in her stance. Did she tell about the stranger she'd

met in the stables? Seeing him outside of the gates earlier, when Lord Geoffrey's party had already been welcomed to Hawkes Landing, seemed quite strange. Shouldn't he have already been through the gates?

Her mother's sudden giggle and the deep tone of her father's voice changed her mind. She knew they would resent the interruption though neither would make it seem so. Her hand fell to her side and she retraced her steps, turning up the winding stair that led to her chamber.

She would be leaving home tomorrow. The thought struck her suddenly and pain streaked through her. She would never again walk these steps after tonight, not as a member of this household. After her wedding, she would have her own home, her own servants to manage, accounts to keep. She sat at the top of the landing, her legs suddenly giving out as she realized the difference.

She would be married. She would be married to Lord Geoffrey, with his cold eyes and indifferent attitude.

The difference in the two men she'd met tonight was night and day. Wulf was heat; intense, searing heat, frightening her with his advances even as her body craved more. She could still feel his hands upon her bottom cheeks, the way they had kneaded her body, arching her against him so that she might rub against the bulge at his groin. She knew what was there, what caused that lump that had grown and strained at his breeches. She might still be virgin, but she'd grown up with four younger brothers, helping her mother care for them.

The difference though, of her young brothers to a man of Wulf's stature was...she buried her hands in her face as heat flashed through her, leaving her body aching.

"Rose?"

She lifted her face, desperately hoping the dimness of the stairway hid the blush she knew lit her cheeks. "Is aught amiss, Challen?" The oldest of her brothers came to stand beside her.

"I was about to ask the same, sister. You seem quite flushed. Are you ill?" He turned, sinking down on the step next to her, placing his wrist against her forehead.

"I am well," she said, slapping at his hand. "It is good to see you. I am glad you were able to take leave from Lord Damon."

"It is not every day that your sister marries, especially not to a man of Lord Geoffrey's standing and reputation."

"His reputation? What of it?" she asked, suddenly curious.

"He is a fierce warrior, sister. His prowess with the sword is well known. He shows no mercy upon the field of battle and gives no quarter." Challen's voice seemed to grow dreamy as he thought of the man his sister was to marry. He was a knight in every sense of the word. "Lord Damon is a true knight, but I would have killed to have been fostered to Geoffrey."

Nothing he said gave the young girl succor. She wasn't worried over Geoffrey's tendencies on the field. His battle strategies and prowess with the sword or lance didn't tell her how he would be with her. "Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you can say? You are marrying a fine knight, sister. You should be proud of the honor he is bestowing upon you."

"I...I am." She paused, but her curiosity would not be denied. "Challen, did you notice a stranger tonight, a man with blonde hair and green eyes dressed all in black?"

"Why do you ask?" he asked, suspicion in his tone.

"I took an apple to Hermes and he was in the stables. He...He talked to me, 'tis all," she said quickly as Challen stared at her.

"You should not have gone to the stables, not with strangers in the keep. Father would..."

"Father would have forbidden it, I know." She rose, frustrated. "Sleep well, Challen."

He stared after her, watching as she closed the door behind her. The light of her candle faded out under the crack of her door before he rose and made his way back down the stairs and out the side door to the stables. He would see about this strange man in black himself.

\* \* \* \*

The sun rose, shining brightly as if to greet her. Rose sat in her window seat, where she'd spent most of the night. She'd tired of rolling and tossing in her bed, unable to sleep.

She'd watched as the stars moved across the night sky, her eyes dreamy as she thought of Wulf, berating herself when she'd realized what she was doing. The moon had stared back at her, the face upon its surface chiding her for self-indulgence. She was to marry a good man; she should be

dreaming of him and their life together. Not a handsome blonde stranger who made her pulses leap with heat.

The sun chased the moon from the sky as puffy white clouds raced the winds across endless blue to some undetermined goal. Still she sat, dreading the day ahead.

"Good morn, my daughter," Maddie called, entering after a quick rap of her knuckle upon the hard wood door. "'Tis a beautiful day, is it not?"

"It is, Mother." Rose's eyes were far away.

"We must make you ready. Your intended wishes to leave soon. We have time to prepare but one trunk. Your father and I will bring the rest of your household necessities in our baggage wain. So come, my lovely one. Let us make you even more beautiful for your intended." She held her arms out to her daughter.

All too soon, she was dressed and her trunk packed. She wore one of the bliauts that her mother had sewn for her. Blue with a silken undertunic of the lightest purple, it made her dark curls seem even darker in the sun. The garment was studded with semi-precious gems and the undertunic shot through with silver thread, making it sparkle in the morning light. Her mother had demanded the trimmings. She announced to all that the residents of Lord Geoffrey's huge castle must not think of their new mistress as dowdy.

Nerves made Rose's cheeks pink and hid the circles under her eyes that looked like bruises. A thin cloak covered her shoulders, hiding the upper curves of her breasts, otherwise exposed by the low cut bliaut.

She heard a noise beside her. Her father strode down the steps of the keep toward her. Rose tried to smile at him, wanting desperately to leave him thinking she was happy with the match. In truth, her trepidation grew with every moment that passed.

Hawke reached her side, his hand sliding over her loose curls, a caress so familiar it brought a tear to her eye. "He will be good to you," he said softly.

"I know," she said, her lips trembling as she tried to smile up at him.

"I shall miss our nightly talks, daughter," he said as he bent his head to hers, pressing a chaste kiss upon her forehead. "But I will be happy knowing you are well looked after."

"Oh Father," she sniffed, trying to hold back the tears. She launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.
"I will miss you, also."

"And what of me?" Maddie asked, wiping away her own tears.

"Of course, Momma," she cried, wrapping her arm around mother's slender form.

"We shall arrive but two days after you. Geoffrey's mother and sister shall be there to greet you and take you in hand until the wedding," Hawke said.

"We must be on our way," Geoffrey announced coldly, walking up to the two women lost in their goodbye embrace. He reached out, wrapping his hand around Rose's arm. "Come Adaira, you shall see your mother again soon."

Rose felt an instant chill at the touch of his cold fingers. Revulsion coiled in her belly, startling her. She barely restrained herself from shaking his hand from her and running back to the safety of her room. It distracted her enough that she didn't protest as he drew her from her parents and to a dainty bay colored mare.

"Where is my horse?" she asked, staring at the strange mount.

"That war horse is not a suitable mount for a lady. I have sold him and bought you this mare. You will ride her." He barely glanced at her, lifting her easily in his big hands and settling her onto the side saddle.

"You...you sold my horse? He is mine, a gift from my father. How dare you sell him?"

"He was unsuitable and an embarrassment, Adaira." His eyes gleamed, a sly smile upon his lips as if he enjoyed this battle of wills and intended to win. "You *shall* ride this mare. 'Tis my last word upon the matter."

He walked away before she could regain her wits suitably to decide whether to slide from the mare or hurl something at his head. She turned in the saddle, staring in astonishment to where her mother and father stood. Her father's lips pressed tight, as if he were holding tight in anger. Was he upset with her?

Worse, was this what her life was to be like? No freedom in even the details of her days?

The tame mare moved without her even lifting the reins, following the horses ahead of her. Rose desperately wanted to turn her around, to ride away in the opposite direction. She

wanted to hide in the woods until they tired of looking for her. Let Geoffrey find himself a new bride, one willing to do all that he asked. "Asked?" she muttered. The man didn't know the word ask. He did nothing but demand and expect.

"My lady?"

She glanced up. The man asking was slender and fancily dressed in lace and silk. She shook her head silently, wishing he wore a knight's fighting leather and steel and would consent to rescue her from this betrothal. He continued to look at her, the question still in his eyes. "What?" she asked in return, her emotions in turmoil.

"Did you need something?"

"No." But behind the facade, her mind screamed *Yes!*She looked back one last time. Her mother waved as they entered the woods and then her home was beyond sight, lost among the towering trees under which they rode.

\* \* \* \*

Geoffrey kept a measured pace, stopping every couple hours to allow a short rest. But despite the frequent opportunities, not once did he inquire as to her welfare. He left her in the care of the lacy man; Wilmot was the man's name. He spoke with a pained lisp, raising his kerchief to his lips almost fanatically, blotting at any bead of sweat that might arise.

At first, she'd tried to question him about Geoffrey, hoping to calm her doubt that she'd find happiness in the match. But Wilmot was loath to speak of his lord, instead complaining incessantly of the rigors of the trip, of the ill temper of the

beast he rode, of his long suffering back and the pains that would be his constant companion for weeks to come.

He whined and whimpered until Rose had to choke back anger with his complaints, finally tuning out his words and trying to interest herself in the scenery.

They passed through the wide woods that surrounded her home through the tiny village at the edge of the woods. Geoffrey picked up their pace after it fell behind, claiming there were thieves afoot that would rob the unwary.

They rode through fields of waving greenery and then more woods. At the far edge of these, a halt was called. A small quilted pad was laid out for Rose's use, and she gratefully sank to the ground. Her legs ached from sitting side saddle, something that she was unaccustomed to doing for long periods of time. Had she been on Hermes, she would have been fine.

Instead, she was exhausted. The long trip, the sleepless night and her fears were taking their toll upon her and all she wished was to curl up into a ball and lose herself in the sweet nothingness of sleep.

The noon meal of bread, cheese and meat was more than disappointing. She refused the slimy slab of flesh and took a dainty bite of the cheese. It proved to be pungent and too sharp for her taste. Also, the bread was stale, and the water brackish.

She forced herself to finish the bread, offering one of the dogs traveling with them the cheese. It took it from her, backing away quickly and snarling at another dog that

threatened its treat. "I know the feeling," she said softly to the animal.

"My lady Rose?"

The voice behind her was one that had haunted her the night before. A flare of heat rushed through her.

"Might this be more to your liking?" he asked quietly, holding out a small meat pie that smelled heavenly.

"Thank you, Wulf," she said, smiling at him and taking the treat. "This is not your dinner, is it?"

"No, I've had mine, my lady. You didn't seem to find anything palatable in the feast that Lord Geoffrey sent you, so I thought you might enjoy this." He squatted next to her, the tree she leaned against hiding him from the rest of the camp.

She took a bite, savoring the flavorful beef and flaky crust that seemed to melt upon her tongue. "It is delicious."

"How are you faring?" he asked, concern evident in his eyes as he took in the shadows and her pallor.

"I am fine, Sir Wulf. I am made of hardy stock, do not be concerned." But her heart warmed considerably at the caring in his voice and the gentleness of his eyes.

"Adaira!" Geoffrey walked quickly up to her. "Come, we are leaving."

She nodded, amazed when he neither offered his hand to help her up nor asked after her welfare. She turned back to thank Wulf one more time, but he had disappeared as quietly as he'd arrived. Rising on her own, she wrapped the rest of the small meat pie in her kerchief, pushing it inside the small bag upon her wrist. Her legs hurt and every step caused pain,

but she kept it to herself, managing to make it to her small mare.

Wilmot helped her mount the horse with a very ungentlemanly-like grunt at her slender weight. Then they were once more on their way.

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#### **Chapter Three**

Before nightfall, they had passed through two small villages and one slightly larger one. Rose stared longingly at the small inns in each, thinking of the fare they would set before her and of how welcome a bed would feel. Yet Geoffrey showed no sign of stopping at any of them. She might have asked his plans, if she had a chance to speak to him.

But Geoffrey ignored her completely, speaking only with his men or riding ahead to scout the way, cutting a fine if cold figure upon his huge warhorse, his sword at his side.

By the time dusk had fallen, Rose was tired enough to sleep upon her horse. If not for the damnable sidesaddle, which sent pain riding through her thighs with every step, she might have. The smooth gait of the gentle beast would not have kept her awake otherwise.

Finally, Geoffrey rose in his saddle and waved a stop, pointing out a small clearing with a stream gurgling at its side. He announced his intention to make camp.

Fires were lit, the horses unsaddled, watered and then tethered where they might graze. A light bedding was laid out for Rose and a small fire started, as far from the men as the limited space would allow, but no tent erected. She stared down at the miserly blankets and then at the rich, thick robes that would cover Geoffrey and wanted to scream. But pain and exhaustion silenced her. She lay on the bedroll, ignoring the small bumps and lumps of the ground under the too thin mat. She wrapped her blanket around her, turning her back

on the majority of the men, and stared into her little fire. A sudden snort made her jump. Wilmot had laid his blankets near the same fire, most likely at his Lord's urgings. He had fallen asleep almost immediately, and in her fatigue she had quite forgotten his presence. Loud snoring began to come from his open mouth.

Tears crept into her eyes. She could not remember a time when she'd been more miserable. She heard the men settling down, the guards shifting as they kept watch over the slumbering camp and drifted towards slumber. But achieving it was a struggle, for the loud sounds of the sleeping Wilmot woke her every time her eyes began to close.

Suddenly, she felt a hand upon her shoulder. Wulf crouched above her, silhouetted against the night sky, his golden hair shining in the light of the fire. He touched a finger to his lips as she opened her mouth and held out his hand.

For a moment, she simply stared at it. Then Wilmot began to snore once more, thrashing about across from her. Escape tempted her and she reached for his hand, wrapping the thin blanket around her shoulders.

"I wish to show you something I found," he whispered, twirling his cape from his shoulders to add to the warmth of the miserly blanket.

"This late? Would it not be easier to see in the light of morning?"

"Lord Geoffrey will be up with the first light of dawn, my lady, demanding to be on the road once more. If you do not wish to go, still keep my cloak. It will stave off the cold and

allow you to sleep." He stepped back, his fingers beginning to release hers.

She tightened her grip on his hand, taking a first cautious step and wincing as the stiff muscles in her legs gave a shriek of protest. His grin changed to a frown as he stared at the pained look on her face. Then he nodded in understanding. With an easy movement, he turned, lifted her in his arms and carried her quietly past the single, snoring guard. For a man who had spoken so vehemently of highwaymen on her father's land, Geoffrey posted a light watch.

Rose felt her heart leap at his gallant gesture and at the ease with which he lifted her, holding her high against the muscled planes of his chest. Her arms crept around his neck and she rested her head against his chest, relishing the warmth and the comfort he gave. Closing her eyes, she reveled in this forbidden closeness.

No heavy perfume covered his flesh to disguise the scent of his skin. He smelled clean, with a hint of horse and leather, the slight tang of his sweat a pleasure after the cloying scent of Wilmot. That man prescribed to the ideal that too many baths would bring the devil's attention. He covered his odor with strong perfumes that mixed with his pungent aroma and made an eye watering combination.

So relaxed was she that she dozed, never noticing the direction Wulf took. She woke, unsure how much time had passed, when his voice called her name.

"Lady Rose," he said once more, in a voice that indicated he was loath to wake the sleeping beauty upon his arm. Her eyes flickered, then opened and she stretched once before

looking up at him. He chuckled as her cheeks pinkened. She sat up quickly, finding herself on his lap.

"How did I get here?" she asked, pushing her hair from her face.

"I carried you, do you not remember?"

"Oh, Sir Wulf, I fell asleep upon you. I must beg your forgiveness for my rude behavior." Her voice filled with horror at the inappropriateness of it.

"No, my lady, I considered it my honor to be your pillow." He chuckled as she lowered her head. "But come, you must see that which I brought you here for." He rose, standing her upon her feet and holding her for a moment as she steadied. Then he turned her away from him, his hand coming over her shoulder to point in the direction he wished her to look.

"Hermes!" she squealed, seeing her stallion tethered to a tree. "You bought him?"

"I bought him for you, my lady. I knew no other horse would do for you, nor would another master do for him."

Tears welled in the blue of her eyes. "You bought him for me? Sir Wulf, I...I do not know how to thank you."

"You just did," he said softly. His eyes gazed down into hers, his hand rising to brush one glittering tear from her soft cheek.

She lost herself in the heat of his green eyes, in the gentleness of his touch, the caring of his voice. So different from the coldness of her intended, with his demands and harsh looks. She found herself swaying towards him, wanting desperately for him to hold her once more, to kiss her again. Her hand reached out, touching his chest, her palm flattening

against the flesh covering his heart, seeking the rapid beat of that organ against her skin.

Wulf's body drew back, as a gentleman's should. But his eyes remained on hers for a moment, then glanced at the hand on his chest. He reached for her. "I shouldn't," he said, even as his head lowered toward her lips.

"It is wrong," she breathed, rising on the tips of her toes to press herself more firmly against him. "I am to marry."

"You should marry me," he groaned as his mouth met hers, tasting once more her sweetness and the heat of her passion. Her tongue tangled against his, her lips eagerly parting for more. The softness of her form molded to his. His hands eagerly sought more of her, his palms roaming the slender width of her back, sliding over her hips, lifting her against him.

His hand found her hair, tangling in the thickness at her nape, pulling her head back. Tearing his mouth from hers, he dropped it to her throat, tasting her skin. She felt his teeth for a moment, then he pulled back.

"I have branded you as mine, my lady," he groaned, planting a soft kiss upon that mark he had just made. "Go with me now. We shall ride away on Hermes, away from the cold lord who would keep you as a trophy bride." He stood tall, holding her at arm's length, staring down into her eyes. "Please, Rose, go with me now."

"I...I can't," she said, tears falling from her luminous blue eyes. "The disgrace to my family would be too much, Wulf. I could not hurt my father that way." She gasped as she saw his eyes harden.

"I'm sorry," he said, bringing her close once more, his mouth coming down hard upon her own. But it was a colder kiss, showing little of the heat that he'd given to her earlier. Instead, he seemed as if he waited for something.

"What is this?"

Wulf's head shot up, his arms holding her close despite her trying to push him away. She desperately wanted to see who the man speaking was.

"What do you want here?" Wulf growled, his hand upon the hilt of his sword. "Leave us in peace and I shan't have to remove your head from your neck."

"Ho, he is brave, is he not, laddies? Let us see the face of your lady, my brave gent and then perhaps we shall be inclined to let you be." The speaker was a huge fellow, rising head and shoulders above Wulf's own stately form. With him, she glimpsed the shape of six others, all well armed, all big and brutish.

Wulf growled his answer, thrusting Rose behind him, drawing his sword and swinging it slowly in front of him. "She is none of your concern. Leave now."

"No, please, Wulf. If they will leave us be, I will s...show them my face." Rose grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back, but his muscles defied her own strength. "Please," she begged. "I...I have no wish to see you hurt."

Ducking under his arm, she walked hesitantly up to the huge leader. "Y...you have s...seen me. N...Now leave."

The leader smiled, turning to glance at one of his mates. He nodded his head slowly, staring at Rose's appealing visage.

"Yes, 'tis her. That is the lady Rose."

"Then I am sorry I am to have to go back on my word, Lady, but I've come here for you." He grabbed her arm, pulling her up and over his shoulder.

A guttural curse and the sound of a blade pulled from its sheath and cutting the night air came from Wulf's direction.

"Do not touch her," Wulf growled, his eyes seeming to almost glow with his anger. So attuned to what was happening with Rose, he never saw the man who snuck up behind him. The hilt of a sword banged down hard upon the blonde man's head.

He fell as Rose screamed. The sound cut off suddenly as her mouth was covered by a cloth that was rapidly forced inside. Before she could spit it out, another cloth was tied over it, gagging her while her arms and legs were tied with rope. She was laid on the ground gently, next to the unconscious Wulf, similarly tied and gagged.

Horses were led into the small clearing. Wulf was tossed over the back of Hermes, who shied at the strange contact. Another rope bound the unconscious man's hands to his ankles to keep him steady. The leader of the men picked up Rose once more, gently laying her across his shoulder, one huge arm holding her in place.

"Now, my beauty, you can ride like the lady you are—if you promise to be courteous and not try any foolery. Or I can tie you to yon beast and let you ride like so much baggage. 'Tis your choice."

With the gag in her mouth, all she could do was nod, letting him know she would behave as befitted a lady of her

stature. She hated the thought of his body next to hers, his arm around her. But it was preferable to the alternative. Too, she worried about Wulf. The blow that had taken him had been a hard one, and blood dripped from the wound to his head. It would leave a trail, one that Geoffrey could follow come morn when he discovered her absence from the camp.

She could only pray he didn't find himself well bereft of her, considering his treatment of the day before. If only she had stayed in camp and not been tempted to go with Wulf when he'd come for her.

The big man took up his reins, stepping into his saddle with a comfort that spoke of long familiarity. Settling her in front of him, he pulled Wulf's cloak further around her, fastening the small toggles that held it closed and pulling up the hood. It hid her bound hands and gave only a hint of the curve of her cheek if someone were to look. At a glance, no one would notice the crude gag that cut into her face.

"We've followed you now nigh on four hours," the leader said, whispering above the sound of hooves as they started on their way. "I'd have taken you to one of the inns in the towns. We wouldn't have dared to accost you there. Too many witnesses." He chuckled, his chest moving and bouncing her around.

The men jested as they rode, making the trip a lighthearted one, full of ribald laughter and comments which turned Rose's ears red. But the man who held her was ever the gentleman, his hand holding her to the saddle, never straying beyond where it should. He ignored the lecherous jests, though an occasional snort of laughter burst from his

mouth. "Come, come boyos. There is no call for talk of the like. The lady is here for ransom, not for sport."

A loud moan broke out, a good-natured battle to change the big man's mind. For some strange reason, his words quieted her mind and she relaxed her posture enough for her eyes to close as she leaned back against him, letting him worry about keeping her upright.

She woke when he swung off the saddle, stepping down and picking her up in his arms. Wulf was dragged from Hermes, two men carrying him into a crude hut set back in the forest proper. Rose glanced around as she was also carried inside, seeing nothing but the hut and a small well out back. There were no stables, no other huts, no discernable paths.

"Welcome to your new home, my Lady," he said, settling her down upon one of two chairs in the one room dwelling. "You shall be staying here until your intended pays up, good and proper. But I promise, if he agrees to pay, you shall be treated fairly and with grace. If he doesn't?" His eyes grew hard, sending a tremble of fright through her. "Well, then, me and the boys will be compensated in other ways."

He pulled the cloth from her face, helping her to spit out the gag. "Do you understand me, Lady?"

"Y...yes. What of Wulf? Is he to be ransomed too?"
"Is he worth anything?"

"I...I do not know. We only met two days ago, sir." She felt her face heat again, thinking of the compromising position in which they had found the two of them.

He chuckled, understanding the reason for her blush. "'Tis not surprising, a girl of your innocence finding such a handsome rogue as your little knight irresistible."

"B...but my intended..." Rose ducked, unable to look at her captor.

"If he pays, he need never know in what circumstances you were found." He laughed as she looked up, gratitude and embarrassment mixed in the blue of her eyes and the pink of her cheeks. "I can understand his being enchanted with you, lass. You are quite the pretty piece." His huge hand stroked over her soft, mussed curls, his thumb wiping the traces of her tears from her cheeks. "I don't think your man will mind if I sample a bit," he murmured, almost as if speaking to himself.

Rose gasped, finding that big hand clamped against the nape of her neck, lifting her easily despite her bonds. He brought her up flush against his chest, her feet dangling inches off the dirt-covered floor. She kicked out at him as he dropped his head, his mouth seeking her lips.

"Do not!" a hoarse voice rang out.

Her captor looked up, but did not drop her back into her seat. "Ah, the little knight awakens and is as demanding as ever. You have a problem with me kissing this beautiful lass?"

"I do. Let her go or else face me." Wulf forced himself upright; his eyes squinted against the pain. He was still bound, seemingly helpless against the giant of a man who held Rose so easily in one hand. It deterred him not.

Their huge captor dropped Rose, who shrieked as she suddenly fell back into the chair. He threw his head back,

laughing uproariously. "It is too bad the sun rises soon. I should very much like to see what your man there would think to do to me, trussed up as he is. Perhaps tonight," he said, cocking his massive head to the side and gazing down at the two of them.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, my pretty. T'would not do for me and my men to be seen dallying around such parts during the light of day. But do not fear, you shall be well looked after." He knelt before her, untying her ankles before using that length of rope to bind her to a small hook in the stone fireplace. He wrapped the other end around one of her ankles, hobbling her to the fireplace. Then he loosed her arms, watching as she rubbed the marks of the ropes from her wrists.

"Food will be brought to you. A guard will be stationed front and back. There is no possible way for you to escape, even if you could undo my knots." He backed away, brandishing a courtly bow. "Enjoy the day, my lady. Perhaps tonight you shall be free."

"But what of Wulf..." she called to his retreating back. The slamming of the door was her only reply.

\* \* \* \*

"Missing? What do you mean, my bride's gone missing?" Geoffrey lashed out in rage, slamming his fist into the man's face. He fell to the ground, blood pouring from his nose. "Find her!" he shouted, angered beyond thought at the fact this one girl was disturbing his plans.

"She cannot have gone far, Lord Geoffrey," his man at arms said soothingly, backing away quickly as Geoffrey sent him a scorching look from beneath his stormy brow.

"I do not care how *far* she has gone. I want her found. Rally the men, send out riders, gather the dogs. She must be found—now."

"It shall be done, Lord." The man saluted, turning on his heel to fulfill his duty. He felt sympathy for the tiny girl, who had never once complained at the indifferent treatment since they had been on the road home. She had every right to complain, for while Lord Geoffrey and his men dined on the best, she'd been given stale bread and moldy cheese. While his Lord had claimed the softest bed and the warmest of robes, she'd been given a miserly blanket and a pad that should have been thrown away last season.

No, Geoffrey had done the girl foul. If she'd run from him, it would be his due.

He rounded up the men, purposefully taking just a bit longer than necessary to give the lady more time. But he could not dawdle long, for if she'd been spirited away by some mean force, she would need their help.

The dogs were given the pad she'd rested upon the night before. Their noses pushed against it to gather her scent, then they were off like a shot to the clearing's edge, stopping about six feet into the forest proper, their noses to the ground as if they'd lost the scent.

Trackers found a single set of footprints, too large to have made by the dainty feet of Lady Rose. A party was assembled and sent out to search the woods. For every second of

daylight that went by, Geoffrey fumed more. His schedule was completely ruined. She would be made to pay when she was found.

He rose from the fire, turning towards the forest, hand on his sword. A flash of color caught his eye. He ducked backwards as an arrow thudded into a tree not two feet from his head. A bit of parchment wrapped the quivering arrow and he reached for it.

"Find that archer!"

His growl turned to a snarl as he read the words upon the parchment. "My intended has been kidnapped." He looked up as Wilmot came to his side. "To get her back, I must pull my men out of D'Enington Castle, release the village and its people." His eyes blazed as he stared down at Wilmot. "You know who is at fault here, do you not?"

"Yes, Lord Geoffrey." The man sniffed as if he smelled something foul. "It is the Wolf."

\* \* \* \*

Wulf hung his head after the huge man had left, trying to control the throbbing pain in his temple. He wanted to vomit up his innards.

"What will we do?" Rose asked, cursing in a most unladylike manner as her fingers grew sore on the hard knots that bound her to the wall.

"Whisper," Wulf pleaded, lifting his head to squint over at her. "Can you reach me?"

She rose, stepping toward him. The rope halted her a good three feet from where he sat. "No," she whispered. "Can you roll to me?"

It jarred his head and he had to bite back the curse that wanted to spew from his lips. But he finally made it to her. She worked on his arms first, fighting the stubborn knots. Finally they loosened at the cost of a torn fingernail, ripped to the quick.

She pushed the wounded finger between her lips, sucking on the blood that welled from the torn flesh. Wulf shook his hands free of the ropes, turning and taking her hand, gently kissing her finger and giving her his kerchief to wrap around the bleeding finger. Then he reached down, pulling loose his ankles in half the time it had taken her to free his wrists.

"Let me look at your wound," she whispered, before he could rise.

"'Tis fine, Rose. Naught but a bump and nothing to concern yourself over." He started to turn away but was stopped by the look in her eyes. He sighed heavily and sat in front of her. Her slender fingers picked through the bloody matted mess of his hair, carefully untangling so she could reach the lump at the back of his head.

"It's more than a bump. You've a wide gash here that needs a good cleaning and sewing shut," she said furiously, her face growing pale. She took a deep breath and then another in apparent dismay at the sight and scent of his bloody wound. "You must look around, see if you can find a needle and thread. And water."

"We have no..."

"We do, Wulf. This wound needs stitching and I mean to stitch it."

He rose to his feet, muttering under his breath about bossy misses. "You wouldn't order Lord Geoffrey around this way," he growled.

"No, 'tis more than likely I'd be the cause of his wound than the one treating it," she snapped back. "Now hush and hurry. We must be gone before they get back."

He searched through the few shelves, finally finding what she wished, tucked away in a basket. A nice sharp pair of scissors was there as well. Staring back at her, he slid the scissors back on the shelf, well out of her line of sight. Then he brought her the needle and thread.

"Oh," she said, looking through the small basket. "I had hopes of finding some scissors as well, something that would cut these ropes."

"I found nothing sharp enough for that, Rose. I shall look again."

"No. No, come sit. Let me clean this and get it stitched. Then, if we cannot find something to free me, you can go and bring Lord Geoffrey to me." She held out her hand, urging him to once more settle in front of her.

Wulf felt a jolt of guilt at her words. He wouldn't leave here without her and he wouldn't go for Lord Geoffrey, even if she were free to go with him. That man would take her spirit and leave her naught but a broken shell of a woman. He wouldn't let that happen to Rose. He couldn't. Sinking down in front of her, he felt her tug on his hair, and then the softness of her

touch as she ran a wet cloth over the wound, cleaning away the matted blood and gore.

Her fingers were gentle as she finished cleaning, but shook as she took up the thread and needle, breathing deeply. Carefully, she held the two side of the wound together, taking her first stitch.

Wulf's eyes betrayed the pain, but they were not visible to her. He did not flinch, unwilling to let her know he felt her stitches. She tied off the last one, checking the neatness of the six tiny stitches before putting the needle to the side. Using her teeth, she bit through the thread as close to the wound as she dared.

"It needs bandaging to keep it clean," she said, mostly to herself.

"It will be fine, Rose. My thanks to you," he said, moving to his knees in front of her. His hand rose to touch the softness of her cheek, seeing the paleness of her skin. "You should rest, my love."

Rose let herself lean against his hand, enjoying the heat of his touch, the safety of his presence. "I don't know that I could. But you should be away, before they come back. Go to Geoffrey, Wulf. He will bring men to come and get me."

"I cannot leave you here alone, love. What kind of man would I be if I ran away, leaving a sweet lady such as yourself to face your captors alone?" He feathered a kiss across her eyebrows and down the straight, slender length of her nose before finding her lips. "Do you really wish to go back to Geoffrey?"

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#### **Chapter Four**

"I have no choice."

Rose looked down at her hands, unable to bear the disappointment in his eyes. She felt it herself, wishing with all her heart that Wulf had been the man her father had chosen. But that would be impossible. Wulf had neither the connections nor the coffers that her father found necessary in a husband for her.

"What if I gave you no choice?" Wulf whispered to her bowed head.

Her brows furrowed, but her face lifted to his. "What do you mean?"

His eyes grew heated, moving from hers to her lips and throat and then onward to the beauty of the curves of her breasts, visible in the low cut gown. "If I made you mine now, Geoffrey would repudiate any contract, Rose.

"Y...you mean if you were to...to make love to me..."

"Yes," he said huskily, his hands going to her hips, moving slowly over the soft fabric of her gown and the even softer flesh under it. "Would you like that, my love?"

"But my father..."

"...isn't here, Rose," he finished, his head drawing ever nearer her mouth like a moth to the flame. His lips parted to sear across hers, burning with need. She shivered against him, trembling with naive desire. A growl sounded low in his throat, an animalistic sound that betrayed his need for her, his urgency to part her soft thighs beneath the rutting of his

hips, his cock splitting the virginal barrier that kept her from becoming his.

His hand rose to the small fastening that kept her cloak together, pushing the thin garment from her shoulder, baring one sleek curve with his hand. His fingers traced that curve, brushing over and then down, slipping beneath the thick swing of her hair and tracing her spine as he slid his tongue into her mouth.

He toyed with her lips, with her tongue, tantalizing with sultry sensual strokes until she moaned against him, lifting to her toes to find more.

"You do want me," he groaned at the gasp of her breath and the erratic beat of her heart against his chest.

"Yes," she whispered, her fingers tracing over his high slashing cheek bones, the whiskered skin bristling against the sensitive tips. "You must not do this, Wulf."

"Why, when it is what we both want? Can you tell me you don't long for my hands to touch your naked form or to caress these frustrated peaks that beg for my attentions? You feel this thing between us, I know you do. Why should we fight it?" His hands rose, cupping her face, bringing her lips back to his before she had a chance to answer.

This kiss was different, filled with heated desire. He poured his soul into her, letting her know his passion, his need, his want. She clung to him, her hands fisted in the material of his jerkin, pressing her body ever closer to his.

"Yes, Rose," he growled, his fingers unraveling the laces that held up her gown. "I want you."

The gown slid from her arms, catching on her elbows, holding the gem-encrusted bodice so that it barely covered the tips of her breasts. The sheer undertunic, designed to be revealing, was a scant barrier to the heat of his eyes.

"You are so beautiful," he growled, his fingers sliding under the neckline, teasing one firm tip with a brush of his finger. He watched her shock displaced by pleasure, her beautiful blue eyes closing as he continued the playful caress. Her back arched, the gown sliding further down, her nipples pressing against the sheer fabric.

His fingers shook as he reached for the ties that held the tunic closed at her breast. He pulled them free, so that both gown and shift slid to her feet like magic, leaving her gloriously naked.

"Oh," she cried, covering her breasts with one slender arm, the other shielding the delicate triangle at her thighs.

"No, Rose," he whispered, his hands slowly guiding hers to her side. "Don't cover your beauty, don't hide from me."

"But..." she shivered under the heat of his gaze, her face flushing at the lust in his eyes. "It's a sin. What of Geoffrey?"

"Tis not a sin, my love. Not if I offer marriage, to contract with your father." His hand reached out, cupping one soft breast, his thumb rubbing gently against her hardened nipple. As she watched, his tongue slipped across his lips and his head bent, coming ever closer to it.

"Wouldn't marriage to me be preferable?" he whispered only seconds before she felt the soft brush of his lips, drawing her into the heat of his mouth. A gasp of shocked pleasure

left her mouth and her hands slid through the slick strands of his golden hair.

Rose didn't know whether to tug him away or draw him closer. The sensations he evoked inside her sent fire to her womb, a tugging impression that matched every move of his mouth. The heat grew, bursting into a ball of flames in her loins, a wetness to soak her thighs that had her strangely embarrassed. "Oh, what is this you do?" she cried, her head falling back as his arm came 'round her waist, holding her up to his mouth. "I feel so...so strange."

His teeth and tongue plied against her nipple, making it throb. Her limbs grew heavy, her body languorous—except between her thighs, where a counter throbbing cried out her need. "Please," she whimpered as he released one hard nipple only to lathe kisses across her satiny skin to the other hard peak.

"I am making you mine," he growled around that taut nub.
"I am making you ache for me, for me alone. Geoffrey could
never make you want him this way, not the way you want
me."

"Geoffrey sends bile to my throat," she cried, unable to stop herself. When Wulf looked up at her she was pleased that she hadn't. His eyes shone with need, the green gaze glittering like the hardest of emeralds.

"You say such, then think to deny what we wish for most?" His hands wrapped around her slender waist as he fell to his knees in front of her. "I want nothing more in this world than to feel your thighs clasp my waist as I make you mine in truth. I want it more than my next meal, my next breath, my

next instant of life. Will you deny me what I need to live, Rose?"

"I-I do not understand." The softness of his hair brushed against her naked belly. His hot lips slipped lower and lower, until she felt the first brush of them against the soft curls that hid her sex. She shivered and her knees gave way, her hands clutching at him.

He stood quickly, going to the small bed that sat off to one side. Moving it easily, he lifted her, laying her on the crude coverlet and following her down.

"I need the taste of you on my tongue, Rose, the scent of you in my nose. I want to bury myself in your softness and never leave. Please, my love. If you have any care for me at all, please, say me true. Let me make you my own."

His fingers trailed across her breasts, slipping over the hard pink buds of her nipples. His heavy body on hers did not frighten her, not even when her legs opened of their own accord and she felt the hard ridge of him pressed so intimately against her.

"You wish us to wed?"

"Yes," he groaned, then captured her lips with his own.

Her fingers clawed against his back, raking over the softness of his shirt, trying to find the skin beneath. He rose long enough to pull it over his head then was back, his naked skin pressing against her breasts. The sensation made them both gasp. She craved more, gripping him almost harshly in her need.

"Yes," she moaned suddenly, arching under him as his lips swept over her throat.

He lifted his head, staring down into her eyes. "You repudiate Geoffrey and his suit?"

"Yes," she cried, reaching for him.

A swift smile of victory covered his face, gone before she had a chance to see it. He kissed her with all the passion her words had inspired, reveling in the heat and taste of her. She moved under him, wishing she knew how to release the sensations burning deep inside of her. In her innocence, all she knew to do was hang on to Wulf with everything she had.

He reached between them, provoking more cries and whimpers of excitement, her nails scoring his back. His trews pulled free easily and his cock rested against her belly. He pressed it against her and she let her thighs fall open.

Rose felt the first gentle touch of his fingers between her legs and moaned her need, barely able to stand even the tenderest of touches against the tiny piece of flesh that throbbed with every beat of her heart. Her head fell back against the small, mean pillow, her curls freeing themselves of their confinements as she writhed under his touch. "Wulf," she begged.

\* \* \* \*

He smiled again, his lips tugging at her nipple, his hand stroking through the wetness between her thighs. He'd known she'd be a wanton, known it the moment she'd appeared in that window, her hair strewn, her bodice dipping open, staring at him with an unabashed curiosity that was almost hoydenish. When he'd found that she was his target, he'd begun to enjoy his set upon course of action on a new level.

Her tiny, flat belly writhed under his mouth. He slid down further, finding the top of her slit with his tongue, pausing there for one instant to hear her cries of need before parting those pink lips and tasting her most intimate flesh. Her musky arousal was a treat he explored to his heart's content. Her outer lips were plump, engorged with blood, her dark curls a perfect foil for the pink inner flesh. His tongue swept through her folds, finally finding her clit and suckling gently upon the hard nub of flesh.

When Rose cried out again, he lifted his head, pushing his hand across her mouth. "Quietly sweetling. We do not want his guards to come in because of your cries. When we are married, you may cry your pleasure to the four winds and I will gladly give you more."

Rose nodded, her face flushed and was tight. Her eyes met his, her blue gaze begging for him to finish what he'd started.

Wulf lowered his head, his lips finding the sweetness of her inner thighs, teasing her by kissing all around the spot where she desperately wanted him to touch. Her hips moved as she searched for what her body demanded. "Wulf..."

He peeled back her thick lips, gentle with her tender flesh. Wulf found her clit again, touching the tiny nub with just the tip of his finger, thrumming it while he watched her face. Her eyes shot wide, then half-closed while her fingers scrabbled for something to hang onto as he rocked the stability of her world with that tiny caress.

A harsh smile crossed his face as he brought Rose closer to her peak. Yes, she was perfect. She would be the perfect wife and with her father's connections...well, he'd finally have his revenge. It was time to make her his, time to start the next part of his plan.

Rising over her, he slid between her thighs, his hard cock brushing against her wet, hot flesh. "You're certain?" he asked. He wanted no doubt, no thought in her that she'd told him nay. Others would claim that, and she must deny them. "You want to be mine?"

"Aye," she cried, her hands sliding down his shoulders and over the long lean muscles of his back. She pulled on his hips, rubbing her sex against the hardness that teased her opening.

Wulf took his cock in hand, finding that tender portal. His lips found hers as he pushed inside, breaching the veil of her innocence. He wanted to shout his victory to the four winds. He wanted to take the proof of this mating and rub it in Geoffrey's face. He wanted to crow his success.

Rose's hands clenched suddenly, one going to his chest as the pain of her breaching shot through her. It was a quick pain, one easily forgotten as he began to move above her, slowly at first, short strokes that let him sink deeper and deeper inside of her until firmly set. Then, long strokes meant to pleasure.

Pleasure they did. She moved under him like the most practiced of slatterns, her body falling into the natural rhythm that would give him even more access to her throbbing sex. Her hands moved to his shoulders, her body arching, wanting to rub against his.

Her breasts jiggled with every hard thrust of his body, his cock buried inside of her. Her body tightened around him

harder and harder until, with a scream of pleasure that he muffled with his mouth, she climaxed. She shook as the pinpricks of fire ran up and down her nerve endings. Waves of moist warmth bathed her loins, covering his plundering cock with her juices.

When her eyes fluttered open, Wulf stared down at her, a very male smile upon his handsome lips. He was still hard, still buried inside of her. "Are you all right?" he asked smugly.

"Very pleased with yourself, aren't you?" she teased, though the flush that touched her pink cheeks betrayed the truth behind her words.

"Not as pleased as I've made you."

She moved under him and he groaned. "You haven't..." she asked innocently.

"Not yet. I enjoyed watching you. You are very beautiful, my Rose."

"I am glad you think so, Sir Wulf." She moved under him again, the top of his cock brushing against her very sensitive clit. She sighed, reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck and draw him down. "Kiss me."

Wulf did, enjoying her hesitant aggressiveness, the way her tongue pushed past his lips, the feel of her hands stroking over his skin. They moved lower, down his back, coming to rest on the globes of his ass, startling him by squeezing gently. When she pulled her lips away, her eyes sparkled up at him. "Can we do that again?"

Wulf grinned. "Oh yes, my love. Most definitely."

Rose met him stroke for stroke. Her fingers slid over the contracting muscles of his arse, slipping between the hard

globes, finding the puckered rim of his anus. He shouted his surprise when she ran her fingers over that spot, making him jerk into her. "Oh yes," he growled. "Definitely a hoyden, my hoyden." He grabbed her hands, holding them in one of his near her head. Rising up, he began to pound into her. Mewling cries told him of her upcoming orgasm.

He felt her shatter around him and then he joined her in bliss, spurting his seed into her womb with a prayer to the gods that she would be fertile. A child would seal the deal splendidly. The Black Hawke would never deny his daughter that which she wanted. Wulf would make sure she wanted him.

"Gods, Wulf," she cried, clutching at him.

"I love you, my Rose," he groaned, pressing fevered kisses against her brow and cheeks. "I love you."

After, she sank into sleep, surrounded by his sheltering arms. Wulf remained awake, his eyes hard as he stared off into the distance. He had hope now. He had to hang on to that, and this pretty wench in his arms.

When the knock came on the door, he rose quietly and pulled on his trews. It was the work of only moments to prepare his message. Rose barely noticed, deep in her slumber. Taking the small package, he slid it to the courier at the door, taking the food that he had brought. "Tell John that everything is working according to plan. Send the package to Geoffrey. He'll know what it means."

The messenger touched a respectful hand to his forehead, bowing. "Yes, Lord Wulf. It shall be as you wish. Lord Geoffrey hasn't sent any messages to her father as of yet."

"I hadn't expected him to. He'll not want the great Black Hawke to know he's lost his daughter in the span of only one day. It's too much of a blow to his ego. That ego comes first, before all else."

"Is there anything else, Lord Wulf?"

"Tell my mother I bring home a bride. Now go, and go quickly. Be about your duties. Do not despair. If all works as planned, I shall bring Geoffrey to heel like the cur that he is." Wulf shut the door as quietly as he could, but Rose stirred upon the cot.

"Was that the robbers?" she muttered sleepily, rising and holding the sheet against her bare breasts. The rounded shape of them could be seen peaking out and with her tousled mane of black curls and her sleepy blue eyes, Wulf felt renewed temptation.

"They've brought us food," he said, nodding toward where he'd left the fare.

"Food?" Rose asked, her stomach growling hungrily. She rose from the bed, dragging the sheet with her, yet doing little to ease her modesty. Going to the saddle bags, she drew out a loaf of bread and a hunk of bright orange cheese that had a sharp, tangy scent. Another package held slices of venison, pink and moist. A jug of honeyed mead and two mean, wooden cups provided drink. "Look," she exclaimed, laying it all out. "A feast fit for a king!"

Wulf chuckled at her play. "I'm just glad it's good enough for you, my lady love." He reached out, stroking his hand over the softness of her cheek. "You look better, not quite so peaked."

Rose looked up from where she'd been stuffing bread into her mouth. Her eyes gleamed with mischievous good humor. "For being kidnapped and held ransom, this has been a marvelous experience," she said after she swallowed. "I've never tasted bread so good." She pulled apart another piece and handed it to him, along with a chunk of cheese and slices of the meat. He took a hearty bite, closing his eyes in pleasure.

"A lusty wench, a good meal and sweet mead. What else could a man wish for in life?"

They laughed and teased until the gleam in Wulf's eyes grew serious and he pulled the sheet from her slender body, enjoying the blush that rose from her breasts to her cheeks. "Grow used to this, love. I plan to keep you naked whenever I can."

With that, he scooped her up in his arms, carting her back to the bed.

\* \* \* \*

Geoffrey paced the campsite, his temper rampant. He kicked at a slops bucket, turning to slap the servant who tried to clean away the mess. When the arrow came, his eyes went icy. He pulled the parchment free, read it and then handed it to his second in command. "Bring me the package he speaks of."

Geoffrey untied the mean knots that held it closed. It rolled open, a small coverlet falling to the ground at his feet. Lifting it, he shook it out.

He shouted his rage as he spied the stain of blood on the white material, his anger echoing in the trees.

"I'll kill him!"

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#### **Chapter Five**

Rose woke slowly. A weight lay against her breast. Her hand rose, touching the soft hair of the man who lay with her on the small cot.

Her eyes opened wide as the memories of the day and night before flew through her mind. She'd been made love to, thoroughly, taught things she'd never thought done and done things she'd never thought. All by this man, Wulf.

"You're awake early," he said, his voice gruff with sleep.

"Someone was hogging the bed." Rose blushed as she spoke, embarrassed by her own brashness.

"Hmm, I'll have him taken out and flogged for his impertinence." He kissed the breast he rested against, glancing at the covered window and seeing light around the edges. "Perhaps it is later than I'd thought?"

"What are we going to do, Wulf?" Panic entered Rose's voice as she thought of her parents. She knew they must be frantic with worry. Thoughts of Geoffrey were easily dismissed. It was her father's disappointment she feared. The thought of his reaction to her indiscretions made her cringe at the idea of rescue. As long as they were trapped here, she wouldn't be held responsible for the reprehensible things she'd done.

He rose, naked and beautiful in the light of morn. His cock thrust rigidly from his body. Her cheeks heated again as she watched. He turned toward her, unashamed of his nudity. "Shall I check to see if they thought to feed us this morn?" When she bowed her dark head and did not reply, he sank down next to her, lifting her chin with a gentle hand. "Come, come, love, there is nothing to be seen in the light of morning that was not there to be touched and fondled last eve. Besides, I find I enjoy the feel of your innocent eyes upon me." He took her hand, playing with her fingers while he watched her eyes.

They roamed everywhere but his lap, where the turgid proof of his desire waited.

"Maidenly ways are for maidens, my heart." He bent his head, finding her lips with his own. "Perhaps I shall make you my breakfast." His voice rumbled deep in his chest as he lifted his head, his emerald eyes glowing strangely as he stared down at her. He bent forward again, his hand coming up to touch her cheek, stroking over the satiny flesh and then into the beauty of her mussed hair. "I want you, Rose."

He cocked his head, waiting for something from her, an answer to his own desperate need. Green eyes met shy blue and he studied her intensely. There was a spark of desire there, beneath the shyness and the maidenly coyness. He lifted her easily from the bed, a low growl emerging from deep inside as he felt the warmth of her bottom cheeks slip against his cock. Pulling her across his lap, he tilted her head back, finding her mouth with ease. His tongue slipped into the heat of her mouth as she gasped with pleasure.

The emotions and sensations besieged Rose. The taste of him upon her tongue, the softness of his lips, the gentle caress of his hard, calloused hands. Especially the part of him that made him male, his cock as he'd taught her to call it the

night before. Pressed against her hip, it sent a swirl of pleasure into her loins.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, never wanting the bliss of his expert loving to end, arching her back so her naked breasts pressed against his chest. She could feel her nipples growing hard, rubbing against his skin. A shiver of lust spread through her.

He pulled his lips from hers, ignoring her moan of disappointment. With a grin, he let her head fall back against his arm. Slowly, he laved wet kisses upon her neck, inhaling the sweet scent of her, reveling in the musky undertones from their lovemaking the night before. His hand sought her thigh, sliding easily between the thin columns of ivory flesh to find her dark triangle.

Wulf heard his name escape her lips in a sigh of bliss that sent a stab of pleasure to his groin. He hated the fact that he had to deceive her. But it was too late now. He was in the thick of it and had no way out but through.

He found the hard nub of her nipple with his mouth, wrapping his lips around it and suckling hard. Then, he slipped one long, talented finger between her lower lips and into her heat.

His groan at the feel of her was lost in the sound of the door opening and slamming back against the wall. Rose screeched, trying to hide her body against his as their captor and his men entered the small hut.

"What is this?" the big man crowed, his eyes as keen as those of his men. They roamed over soft skin and pretty curves. He laughed as Wulf put Rose back on the bed, giving

her the blanket to cover her nudity. Wulf lifted his breeches, yanking them on and doing up the ties at the waist.

"Do you not know how to knock?" Wulf's unusual eyes glowed with his ire.

"You've just won me a bet, my boy, so I won't take you to task for your tone. So, does the girl still want to be returned to her intended... or is she to face your fate?"

"What is his fate, Sirrah?" Rose struggled with the blanket as she rose from the cot, pulling it around and tucking the end between her breasts. She stood as tall as she could, desperate to show she wasn't afraid of these brigands. But her voice shook despite her brave words.

"'Tis a man's business, little one, and not one for you to be fretting over. I'll let your man over there make his decision."

"But it is my fate that you discuss," Rose argued, stomping her foot in frustration. Did all men think she had nothing between her ears? Her father'd been one to ask opinions of Rose and her mother. "Since I am the one that must live my fate, I should be asked my wishes in the matter."

"Did your father ask your wishes, when he betrothed you to Lord Geoffrey?" It was Wulf that spoke, not their captor.

"My father would not have made me leave if I hadn't wanted to go." She turned to Wulf, surprised at the question. "I did what was best for my family."

"By tying yourself to that man? Do you not know his true nature?" Wulf nodded at the leader. "Show her, John. Show her the type of man she thought to wed."

"Laddie, do you know what you do?" John's voice was full of affection for Wulf and of the respect he had for him. He

glanced at the tiny brunette standing her ground in front of the massive warrior.

Wulf nodded at John. He knew it tipped his hand a bit, but he needed Rose to know. "Show her."

John stripped off his heavy leather vest. Under it was a shirt of soft lawn, finely stitched. He lifted it up, turning his back to Rose. She gasped at exactly what Wulf had wanted her to see.

"John worked Geoffrey's fields, Rose. He was beaten for any supposed indiscretion. If he protested his treatment, he was hung by his wrists until his hands were almost black. Geoffrey found pleasure in administering the beatings himself. He wielded the whip with vicious intent, as you can see."

Rose's hand went to her mouth in horror. His back looked like scarred leather, not living skin. The marks stretched from the nape of his neck to the waistband of his breeches. The pain of those beatings must have been terrible, and the scars on his soul even worse. Who could treat another human in such a manner?

Tears sprang to her eyes and she stumbled to the cot, turning her back on the sight. When Wulf dropped to his knees in front of her, a sob escaped her and she held a shaky hand out to him.

"Nay, little one. Do not cry over me. I've a thick hide and I'm beyond Geoffrey's reach now." John let his shirt drop and pulled on his vest. "Your dad would have never knowingly betrothed you to a man of Geoffrey's ilk. I've heard much of the Black Hawke." He nodded his big head in certainty, then crossed his arms the way her father did when a conversation

drifted from its focus. "But a decision must be made. Do you stay here and wait for Geoffrey to pay up, or do you go with Wulf?"

"You...You were part of this?" she asked Wulf, staring into his emerald eyes, pain shining in her gaze. "You planned this?"

"Rose..."

"Did you plan my seduction as well? Was that part of your revenge on Geoffrey, to send back his intended, spoiled and ruined?"

"Yes," he admitted, not dropping his gaze, "Until I met you, that was my plan."

"And now?"

"Now I'm going to keep you for myself," he said, holding up his hand for silence when she would have protested. "You promised me your troth with your own words, Rose. You are coming with me."

"How are you any better than Geoffrey?" She stared at the man she had thought so different. "You've taken my honor from me."

"Women have no need of honor." Wulf stood, grabbing his shirt from the floor. "Go, John, bring my mount. We will be leaving here. Geoffrey should have opened my gift by now and will know his bride-to-be is no longer chaste. Let us hope it leads him where we want him to go."

Rose stared at his back, unable to believe what she heard. She'd been willing to give this man her heart, her life... and all he wanted her for was to get back at Lord Geoffrey. She felt tears well into her eyes and fought them back. She

wouldn't give in to sobs, not now. She had to get away from Wulf.

"They hit you over the head," she said suddenly, remembering her concern for him. "They are your men and they hit you over the head."

"I had to gain your trust. The injury was naught but a farce to make you believe in me, Rose." He waved his men out and turned to face her as the door closed behind the last of them.

Wulf's voice was as grim as his demeanor. He'd never planned to have feelings for the girl. He couldn't afford any emotional burdens, not when all rested upon the success of his plan. "Get dressed."

"Not while you are near," she said, rising from the cot and glaring at him. She felt stronger on her feet, more able to defend herself against his charms. "You shall not see me naked again."

"Oh, but I shall. We will be married as soon as a priest can be found to do the deed. Until then, I plan to hand fast myself to you so that not even your father can break our troth."

"I won't agree to it." How could she have let him touch her? At least Geoffrey had been up front with his derision. This was worse. Wulf had been so gentle, so tender with her before this morn. The betrayal cut deep.

"You won't have a choice. I am law to my people and if I say you agree, then you agree." He picked up her gown and underpinnings, thrusting them out to her. "Get dressed or you will go to my people the way you are now."

"At least turn your back."

"And take a real blow to the head this time? No, I don't think so. You have a choice, clothes or go as you are now. Either way, you'll ride in front of me. If you try anything, you'll ride in front of me with your head low and your ass in the air. Now decide."

The look in her eyes would have brought him low. But she reached up with one hand, letting the blanket fall, watching his eyes roam over the curves his hands had traced so lovingly the night before. Quickly, she pulled her shift over her head, tying the laces tight. Then the bliaut, tucking the sleeves into a pocket sewn into the side. Snatching his cloak, she pulled it around her shoulders and glared at him, daring him to take it from her. She stared around the small hut, looking for her shoes.

He held them out to her. "Allow me, wife," he said, motioning for her to sit on the side of the cot.

"Remove the rope first."

"You aren't in a position to make demands, Rose."

"Please remove the rope first." Her sarcastic tone brought a smile to his mouth. "You find me amusing?"

"You are definitely a prickly little bundle." He retrieved his dagger and sword from where John had left them and sliced through the rope. She sat, rubbing a raw spot on her ankle. "I can put my own shoes on."

"Yes, but I find it is a job I am quite willing to do for you." He sank down on his haunches, lifting one small foot. Her toes were tiny and pink, her arch graceful. He rubbed his fingers against her skin, then bent and suckled one pretty toe into his mouth.

Rose jumped at the contact of his mouth, amazed and horrified to find she still felt desire for this man. A simple touch and she melted, completely against her wishes. "Stop. You disgust me!" She kicked at him, trying to deny the unpleasant truth.

Wulf gazed up at her, slowly letting go of her foot. "Someday, my life will be all to you," he prophesized. He dropped her shoes in her lap and left the building. The whinny of a horse came in through the open door.

Rose stared at the door as it shut behind him. She feared he was already right. But then her soft blue eyes hardened and she put her shoes on. She was the Black Hawke's daughter.

\* \* \* \*

Hawke stared down at his wife as she told him what had happened in Geoffrey's chamber.

"H-he said I was little more than a slut," she whispered finally, bowing her head, unable to meet his gaze.

"Why did you not tell me this immediately?" Hawke asked, lifting her chin. "You know I would not have blamed you. You have stood beside me faithfully for these many years, wife. I have no doubts of you."

"You said Geoffrey was the best we could ever hope for. That the price Rose brought would see our sons through. How could I let one happenstance ruin that?"

"I promised you and Rose that she would be happy, Maddie. Do you think she'll be happy with a man who treats

her like property? Would you have been happy with me, if I'd treated you that way?"

"N-no, but Hawke..." She sighed, bowing her head again, her hands clasped in front of her. "I am sorry, husband. I should have told you."

"Yes, but no matter. We can right this easily enough. We shall collect our girl and then try again."

"But his threats..."

"Wife, has it been so long that you've forgotten who I am? I wasn't given the name Black Hawke without reason. Geoffrey has little that can harm us." He reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Now come, give me a smile and a kiss and let's make the arrangements to leave."

Maddie smiled as he wanted and the kiss she gave made him groan and lift her in his arms, striding toward the wide staircase that led to the second floor and their chamber. She settled against his chest, her arms around him. "What of packing?"

"Later," he growled, kicking their door closed. He dropped her to the middle of their huge bed, pulling her gown open and filling his palms with her large breasts. They sagged a bit from feeding their babies and her nipples were wide and thick. He thought them perfect. His lips curved around one of those hard nubs now, suckling upon her and making her squirm.

He nuzzled one breast then quickly found the other nipple, flipping her skirts up so that he could reach between her thighs with one large hand. She was wet. She was always wet for him, he thought with a happy sigh. His finger slid through

that moist heat and pushed inside of her. She gasped as he slowly began to stroke.

She grabbed his head with her hands as he began to chew on her nipples, biting gently, in a way guaranteed to bring her pleasure. "Hawke," she cried, her hips riding his hand as his thumb moved to caress her clit. She ground down on him and he felt his cock throb inside his trews. He reached down with his other hand to untie his laces and let himself spring free.

"Do you want me in you when you come?"

Her thighs wrapped around his waist. "Yes. Fuck me, husband! Come in my cunny. Fill me with your seed!"

Hawke's lust took over and he jerked his hand from her and plunged his hard cock inside. He rode her fast and true, pinning her legs over his shoulders, pounding into her until she screamed his name and her juices flowed over his cock. Then he lifted her, putting her on hands and knees before him. He held her hips, lining up his cock and sliding it back inside slowly.

He used long, slow strokes, slowly letting her come down from her first orgasm. Then his thrusts came quicker, harder, until she cried out for him once more, the soft flesh of her ass jiggling at every hard plunge of his cock. His hand slapped down upon that ass and he heard her gasp of pleasured pain.

Then his head spun as his own climax forced his eyes shut. His cock jerked and throbbed, spewing hot cum inside his wife's womb.

He'd just helped her lie flat, his body curving over hers, when a loud knock roused him. "What?" he growled. All knew

not to interrupt the lord and his lady when they were in their chamber.

"Sir, a message has been delivered!"

"Can it not wait until the supper hour?"

"The messenger named it urgent, sir. He is to wait for a reply."

"Feed him and his mount. I shall be down shortly." Hawke growled as his wife chuckled softly. "You laugh at me?" he asked her, nuzzling her neck and nipping the soft flesh of her shoulder

"I would not dare do such a deplorable thing," Maddie said with a grin much like her daughter's. "Shall we rise and then see what terrible thing requires your attention now, my husband?"

In fact, the idea of an afternoon nap with his wife had been simmering in Hawke's mind. "Never a moment's rest," he mumbled, rising and feeling his cock slide from Maddie's warm flesh. He pulled up his breeches before helping his lady wife fix her dress. He watched as she brushed her blonde tresses, a little bit of gray just beginning to shine through. Her nimble fingers made quick work and she let the thick braid lay across her shoulder, hiding the mark of her husband's teeth.

When done, she rose from her dressing table and held her hand out to him, eyes shining with her love for the man who'd taken her so many years before. "Come, let us see what is so dire."

They walked hand in hand down the stairs he'd carried her up not an hour before. Any who saw them could see the love

in the master's eyes for his wife and hers for him. They seated themselves upon the raised dais at the Lord 's Table and Maddie nodded for servants to bring the meal. While they waited, another servant brought an unopened scrolled parchment to Hawke.

He expertly split the wax and rolled it open. Quickly scanning the missive, he cursed succinctly, then read it again while Maddie looked on with a worried expression.

"What is it?"

"Wulfgar of Red Thorn Hall has taken Rose from Geoffrey." His words left a stunned silence in the hall. All eyes fell upon the messenger, who looked up in concern.

"What do you know of this?" Hawke demanded.

"N-nothing, sir. I was but told to deliver this and wait for whatever reply you sent. Honestly, sir," he said quickly, seeing the disbelief in the much larger man's eyes, "I am naught but the messenger."

Maddie lifted the missive, quickly reading through it. "He wishes to marry our Rose, husband."

"I know that, Maddie. I can read also."

"But...isn't this just what we were looking for? A new husband for Rose?"

"Red Thorn Hall is under siege, Maddie. Geoffrey took it from Wulfgar years ago. The man is broke, and has no prospects for recovery as long as Geoffrey holds his hall."

"I am not one to propagate the idea of war, husband. But don't you think we might help this Wulfgar with the problem? You have the troops, and if he would make a better husband for our Rose..."

"You wish me to go against Geoffrey?" Hawke sat back, his hand stroking his chin in thought.

Maddie remained silent, watching her husband. She knew his mind. He was considering every angle and what consequences could befall them. A small smile started across his handsome mouth, then spread into a wide grin. "I haven't held my sword in battle in too many years. You are right, Maddie. We should help our new son reclaim his home."

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### **Chapter Six**

Rose sat straight in the saddle in front of Wulf, refusing to lean back against him, no matter how tired and sore she was. She'd had high hopes of being able to get away from him when she saw Hermes being brought round. He'd bucked and kicked against the unfamiliar hand until he'd caught his mistress's scent.

She'd demurely allowed Wulf to help her into the saddle, a small grin playing about her mouth. It vanished when he took the reins from her hands and swung up behind her.

"I refuse to ride with you."

"Then you will walk at my side. Either way, Rose, you will stay near me." He no longer spoke as if she'd had any choices except those he gave her, a tone that aggravated her immensely.

She briefly considered walking, just to spite him. However, Rose knew the sharp stones strewn across the road would soon make tatters of her thin, formal shoes—and then of her feet. She wished for her far more practical boots, but they remained at Hawkesmoor.

"I will ride, but you will keep your hands to yourself." She made the declaration in a haughty tone, nose lifted in the air.

He'd nodded, his arms circling her to hold the reins. She'd stiffened, but didn't speak and hadn't relaxed.

"You know, you only harm yourself with your contrariness, Rose. You and I will be wed and it will be a marriage in every way. I want sons."

"My father will make sure you will never be able to have them if you touch me without my consent," she hissed, her face red with anger. He made her sound like little more than a brood mare; a receptacle for his lusts. Not that she minded his lust for her, but she'd be damned to hell before she'd admit it.

"I'm sure he's thinking that very thing right now," Wulf whispered in her ear. He felt the shiver that went down her spine at the warmth of his breath and grinned. "I sent him a message stating that we would be wed and asking for his blessing. He should have it now."

"You didn't!" Rose gasped in dismay. "You wouldn't!"

"I would and I did. Rose, you will be mine as soon as I can arrange a priest. I need alliance with such as your father."

"So I mean naught to you then?"

"I did not say that. We do well together, when you aren't being so stubborn. We shall be fine as a married couple. Yet my first duty is to my people. With your father's armies, I will be able to regain my estates from Geoffrey and free them from his abuse."

"Ah," Rose sighed. "There's the rub. You are using me to get to Geoffrey. I hope you know, Geoffrey has as little care for me as you do, perhaps even less. He saw me as a possession, a brood mare to bare his children and an ornament to sit at his left hand. I held no value but for that. He didn't even need my father's might or his reputation." She sighed again, bitterly. When would she hold worth as herself and not simply for what she could bring to a man?

"No, he sees you as a prize, not a person. I know this. And all the while, he rapes the girls from the villages and the maids under his care. He has my people whipped for the least provocation and takes men's lives for doing little more than trying to feed their families. I will kill the man—if I can but get to him."

Rose turned her head, amazed at the amount of hatred in Wulf's voice. His eyes sparkled with bitterness and his face had hardened into stone. He waved his hand at one of the men that rode with them. He pointed and she noticed that one arm ended at the wrist. As he turned to survey the woods around them, she saw the patch that covered one eye.

"Dillard was my land manager. Geoffrey noticed a discrepancy in the incomes and decided he was stealing. He ordered Dillard's hand removed. The 'theft' turned out to be an error in the bookkeeping. Instead of forgiving Dillard and compensating him for the lost hand, Geoffrey declared that the manager should have seen the error first and ordered his eyes put out. I managed to rescue him, but not before half the deed had been done. Your ex-intended is an evil man. I will kill him, Rose. Have no doubt of that."

Rose turned forward once more, horrified. If what Wulf said had any measure of truth, he'd saved her from a worse fate than she'd thought. Her mind raced as Hermes plodded down the dirt road. Soon, she found herself leaning into his comforting arms. He surrounded them both with his heavy cloak, laying the edges across her lap so that she might share his warmth. Rose tried to protest, but he barked a command

for her to be silent and she complied. It had been only a halfhearted protest at best, for she was tired and cold.

Before she knew it, her eyes closed and she slept.

\* \* \* \*

Wulf studied what he could see of her face as she rested against him. Geoffrey had always had the best taste in women, and in this one, he'd exceeded his normal standards. She was gracious and lovely, with dark tresses that had his hands itching to bury themselves in the satiny softness and blue eyes that he found himself wanting to dive into like a clear mountain lake. He also sensed a regard for others that went far beyond a mistress caring for her people. Every emotion she felt was reflected in the soft blue of her gaze. Her cheeks flushed with sleep, her lush lips quivering with her soft breath. He wanted them again, under his own, willing and hot and full of desire. He wanted to taste the darkness of her passion, feast upon her silky flesh and soft bosom. He wanted to lose himself, rutting between the glorious columns of her thighs.

"Wulf, lad, you'd best rein in your baser thoughts. We meet with your mother soon," John called with a laugh, startling Wulf back to the present. "She is as tasty a wench as I've seen, lad, but 'tis best to keep those ideas for the dark hours."

"John likes those dark hours," one of the men called.

"Yes," Wulf said. "But only because of his face. No woman will look upon that ugly mug until the dark hours."

John laughed good-naturedly. "Be that as it may, you don't want your mother to see you looking at the wench that way. She expects more out of you than we do." He slapped Wulf on the shoulder as he trotted his mare past the man. "She told me more than once to take care of you."

"I don't see why you don't marry her and make an honest woman out of her, John."

"She won't have me, boy." John's words held a touch of bitterness, but he straightened his shoulders and shrugged it away. "And 'tis all the better because of it. What would a lady like her be wanting with a freeman like me? I couldn't give her what your da did. No, best we leave the relationship alone."

"She loves you, John." Wulf spoke the words softly, knowing how John felt about Wulf's mother, the Lady Liana.

"I know she does, Wulf. It's all that keeps me sane some days."

Wulf was one of the few aware of all John had gone through to gain his freedom. He understood the big, proud man and liked him. More importantly, he trusted him, something that was almost painful for Wulf.

"Have you told her Geoffrey is your kin?" John asked out of the blue, nodding at the small bundle of woman Wulf held in his arms.

"She is but a woman, John. She wouldn't understand."
There was a harshness in his voice that hadn't been there before and Rose, roused by the men's voices, forced herself to be still, wondering if he would say more.

"They understand more than you give them credit for, Wulf. This one is smart; I've seen her da and her together. He speaks to her as an equal."

"His mistake. Women are to be spoiled and treasured, taken care of and fawned upon. But speak to them as equals and they try to rise above their stations in life. Look at the Queen and how she speaks to her council, men of import, all of them. Yet she thinks herself their equal in intelligence. It makes me wonder if she wouldn't like to don a pair of breeches and lift a sword in combat as well. No, women need to stay in their place and let men worry about matters of government and the like."

"Don't let your lady mother hear you speak such," John laughed. "She'd take a stick to your ass or maybe a branch to your brain for spouting such nonsense."

In the distance, horns rang out. Rose felt Wulf stiffen under her slender weight. "He dares much," Wulf said bitterly.

"He dares more and more every day he is left as master of Red Thorn."

"His days there are numbered, John. I vow this upon my father's sword, the same sword that will split Geoffrey in two. Then, we shall have back what is rightfully ours, as well as the spoils of the day. This I promise." He glanced down at Rose, then dug his heels into Hermes side. "Come, we must get to the village well before Geoffrey."

Rose jerked forward and would have fallen if not for the strength of the arms surrounding her. "Do not fight me, Rose. We must ride swiftly if we are to be hidden in time."

"Hidden?"

"Yes. The village is loyal to me, but they must play the game and bow to Lord Geoffrey. We must hurry if we are to take our places before he and his men ride through. I thought they'd still be looking for you, but it seems they gave up the chase quicker than I'd believed they would."

"I told you, Geoffrey cares little for me." She spit the hair out of her mouth as it whipped in her face. Hermes ran like the god he was named for, as if he had wings upon his sleek feet.

"It matters not."

Rose sighed. It did matter; it mattered greatly. Once more, she was being treated as property. The wind whipped past her face and the ground flew by. They passed through a pair of wide gates and Wulfgar brought Hermes to a stop, tossing his reins to a young boy and grabbing Rose around the waist to pull her off the saddle.

"Where is the boy taking him?" she gasped, shocked by how fast the horses were spirited away.

"Hermes will be safe. Come, we must get inside. Now." He took her by the hand, dragging her into a small crofter's hut. He pushed open the door, startling the woman inside so that she put her hand to her throat.

"Must you barge inside like some kind of animal?" she scolded, hurrying forward and placing her hands upon Wulf's cheeks. "I worried." Her voice was soft and her eyes searched him for injuries. "You're not hurt?"

"No, mother. I bring you my bride-to-be." He smiled, drawing Rose forward. "Lady Liana, this is Lady Adaira Rose, eldest and only daughter of the Black Hawke."

Rose dropped into a small curtsey, her manners too strictly ingrained for her to fight with Wulf in front of his mother. "Lady Liana."

"Your bride-to-be?" Liana asked, surprised.

"John didn't tell you?"

"No. We haven't had time to speak."

They were interrupted by the sound of horses arriving outside. Wulf stiffened and he looked over his shoulder at the door.

When Rose opened her mouth to ask what he feared, his hand clapped over her mouth and he pulled her into his arms. "You mustn't speak." His words were scarcely audible in her ear, barely even a whisper.

The horses stopped in front of the small hut. They heard the sound of men milling around and orders being shouted before the men rode off again. Wulf slowly released Rose's mouth but kept his arm around her waist, pulling her back flush against him. She felt the hard ridge that pushed at her buttocks and knew what it was. That he could become aroused, now? In front of his mother? She gasped and pulled away. The smile upon his face seemed almost rabid.

"Your Lady Mother has it right. You are an animal."

"More than you know," Wulf grinned, reaching for her hand and bringing it to his lips, despite her struggles.

"Wulf?" Liana called, watching the girl struggle against her handsome son. "Is there aught I should know?"

"Your son had me kidnapped, my lady. He tricked me into coming with him, then your man John kidnapped us." Rose glared at Wulf.

"Oh, Wulf," Liana said, shaking her head, a smile touching her lips. "You take the tradition too far."

"Tradition?" Rose asked, surprised by the lackadaisical response to her revelation. She'd expected shock, perhaps outrage; not humor.

"Yes, it is a tradition amongst his father's people to steal away with the female they decide to have as mates. It's actually something the men demand. It proves the males superiority and determination. My son must have strong feelings for you to have gone to such lengths."

Liana patted Wulf on the cheek, then went to the corner of the tiny cottage. She lifted a small square rug to reveal a metal ring in the floor. Wulf rushed there before she could lift it, setting her to the side and opening the cellar hatch. "Come," he said to Rose, who still stared in consternation at Liana. "I will show you where we stay this eve."

"Underground?"

"Yes." Wulf came back to her, grabbing her hand. "Come, it isn't as bad as you might think."

"You don't know what I think." She looked up at him once then turned her head, determined to ignore him. "Take me back to Geoffrey, to my intended."

"What is this? You stole this poor girl from her intended? Wulfgar!"

"Did you hear who her intended is? Geoffrey, the man who stole our home, who mutilates and kills our people. I will not take her back to him, Mother. I will not let her be a pawn in any of his games."

"But you will make her a pawn in this war between you and Geoffrey?"

"What war? I plan to slice him in two. There will be no war."

"What of her people?"

"The Black Hawke is her father."

"I may be old, my son, but I am not deaf. I heard you identify her father before. I know of the Hawke. He and your father had dealings." She turned from her son to address Rose. "Your father is an honorable man, my dear, one of great integrity."

"Thank you, milady." Rose bobbed a quick curtsey, as low as Wulf's hand would allow. "When he learns I've disappeared, he *will* come looking for me."

"By that time, we shall be married," Wulf interrupted.

"I will not marry you."

Wulf looked from Rose to his mother, then surprised both by putting a hand on Rose's flat stomach. "But what of our child?"

"There is no child," Rose snapped, hearing Liana's gasp and knowing that any help she had hoped to find in that quarter had just vanished.

"There could be a child, my dove. Tell me, you don't remember the last night spent in my arms begging me for more?"

Rose and Liana both turned a bright shade of red. She lowered her head, unable to look at Wulf's mother. "Take me to my room," she said softly, humiliated.

"I knew you'd come around, Rose."

Rose ground her teeth, eyes glaring holes into Wulf's back as he led her to the hole. A sturdy ladder led past where the light reached, leaving the bottom shadowed.

"I will go down first to light your way." He disappeared into the cellar and she heard the hiss of a flame. A candle was lit, then another, until they chased the shadows back and she could see the bottom of the ladder and the dirt floor. "Come now, Rose. I won't let you fall."

Rose gave a very un-ladylike snort of derision. She lifted her skirt and stepped down onto the first rung, then quickly made her way down. She saw his face and rolled her eyes at him, not answering his unasked question. She looked up as the trap door thumped shut. She heard the rug replaced and then Liana's light footsteps going back to her rocker before the fire.

"Your mother isn't coming?" Rose asked uneasily.

"No, she cannot handle tight places. But Geoffrey leaves her be as long as she has foresworn me."

"She has foresworn you? What deeds must I accomplish to be given the same privilege?"

Wulf chuckled, enjoying her sharp wit. "You, my dove, are not allowed to foreswear any part of me."

He stared at her and she felt the pull of his charm tugging at her heart, making her wish she could turn back time, recover how she'd felt before she'd found out about his duplicity. "My room?" she asked suddenly. She wanted away from him, to catch her breath.

"This way, dove," he said softly, taking her hand in his once more. In his other, he carried a torch which he held in

front of them as he pulled her toward a doorway. Opening the door, he had to duck his head to continue. The tunnel was tall enough for the petite Rose to walk upright.

"What is this place?" The smoothness of the walls and the doorways that dotted the tunnel every few feet made it clear that it was man-made, not a natural formation.

"Many of my people have had to go into hiding because of Geoffrey's treachery. To their credit, they didn't want to leave. Thus, we set about building these. It was difficult, but has been well worth the effort. He stopped in front of one doorway and pulled a ring of keys from his cloak. Opening the door, he let her go first, coming in behind her and lighting candles from his torch.

Rose looked around the room. A soft rug lay under her feet, thick enough to keep away the cold. A four poster bed sat in the center, with thick bed curtains tied back and out of the way. A wooden wardrobe stood against one dirt wall. Against the other rested a floor to ceiling mirror.

The room smelled much less musty than she would have expected. A slight breeze touched her cheek, and she held up a hand to search for its source. "How?" she asked, turning to look at Wulf.

"Air vents," he said, pointing to one corner. There was a small hole in the ceiling.

The room was close but with the venting, it was palatable. At least, until Rose noted the clothing strewn on a chair in the corner. Men's clothing. Wulf's clothing.

"This is your room?" It was more of an accusation than a question.

"Yes. You will be my wife, Rose."

She glared at him. "I may have to become your wife. Until that time, I will sleep alone." She crossed her arms over her breasts. His eyes flashed, glowing dangerously. "I won't be bullied on this."

\* \* \* \*

Geoffrey strode into Red Thorn Castle, his sword clanking against the armor on his thighs. He yanked off his helm, tossing it to a young boy, who hurried out of the room with it. Seconds later, he returned, a tray almost as big as he was in his arms. He struggled under the weight of the food and drink, taking it to the Lord 's Table where Geoffrey sat. His foul mood was clearly visible upon his handsome face.

The tray set before Geoffrey, the boy moved to stand behind his Lord, ready to jump at the least command. He crossed his arms over his flat chest and stood with his legs spread, preparing for a long night.

"Where is my mother?" Geoffrey shouted to no one in particular.

"She is being told of your return now, sire."

"Inform her that I am desirous of her presence," he growled at the servant who'd answered him.

"Yes, sire." The servant bowed, walking backwards from the room, keeping his eyes averted from Geoffrey. He turned to hurry up the stairs, stopping when he saw the lady in question making her way down.

"Simon, my son has returned?"

"Yes, my lady." Simon bowed again, letting the pale blonde enter the great hall in front of him. She walked slowly, her every move languid and graceful.

"My son?" Lady Solana cooed. "I hadn't thought you would return so soon. Did you tax your poor intended terribly to get her here? Young girls deserve care and consideration."

"My intended has been stolen from me, Mother."

The harsh tone of the words caused Lady Solana to wince, but she didn't back down. She wasn't immune from her son's wrath or monstrous moods, but he was her son and she would not forsake him. "Who has stolen her, Geoffrey?"

"Who do you think?" He picked up a gauntlet from beside his plate and rose, throwing the heavy leather and metal glove against the wall. The resulting clang could be heard throughout the suddenly quiet hall, causing the servants to flinch in fear of his anger.

"Lord Wulfgar." It wasn't a question, but a statement.
"How did this occur?"

"Mother, now is not the time for me to speak. My anger is too close to the surface."

"This I can see," Solana said calmly, folding her hands in front of her with a serenity Geoffrey would never feel.

"I do not understand how you can speak of him so calmly, mother. He is an abomination. He should have never been born. His very name should make you pale."

Solana nodded, though her expression didn't change. Many years ago, dealing with Geoffrey's father, she'd learned that a calm expression could hide many emotions and help keep her

sane. "He is your half-brother, Geoffrey. Perhaps it may behoove you to make peace with that fact... and with him."

"Never," Geoffrey vowed, picking up the chalice set in front of him. He drained it, slamming it back on the table. "I cannot believe you would even suggest such, mother."

"What happened was not Wulfgar's fault, any more than it was yours, my son. Your father did the deed and he now lies dead because of it."

"I do not wish to speak of this anymore." Geoffrey rose to his full height, eyes scanning the people who toiled and leisured in the great hall. Spotting the fiery hair of the one he sought, he moved quickly toward her, watching his vassals scurry out of his way.

"Belle," he said softly. Her green eyes widened, then her head lowered and she curtsied before him.

Geoffrey grabbed the serf girl around the waist and lifted her to his armored shoulder. He heard her breath leave her lungs in a solid gasp and grinned, turning and leaving the hall. He called back behind him.

"Mother, please have a bath sent up for me. I wish to rid myself of the stench of horse ere I ride this wench." His hand came down hard on her padded behind and he laughed heartily at her screech.

"Yes, but Geoffrey..." Solana watched as her son disappeared up the stairs. She heard the heavy sound of his door close before she continued. "But what of your intended?"

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### **Chapter Seven**

Rose watched as the door closed behind Wulf. An anguished wave of despondency washed over her. How could she have gone from a man who treated her as if she didn't exist, to one who only wanted to use her?

What happened to the man who had so tenderly and gently taken her virginity, giving her such indescribable pleasure? He'd been wonderful, sweet and kind, understanding. Rose felt her cheeks heat as she remembered the things they had done to each other, the way she'd touched him. Even now, she could feel the heat of his chest under her fingers, the softness of the small line of hair that trailed from his navel to the wiry thatch that surrounded his cock.

She whirled around the room, looking for a way to escape her thoughts. A moan escaped her lips as she remembered his reaction to the first touch of her fingers against his sex. He'd gone mad, pulling her up and over him, cupping her ass in his hands and drawing her over his mouth.

She'd been so startled, she'd almost fallen. Her next instinct had been to fight, until his mouth found her clit. He sucked that hard nub of nerves into his mouth and she'd been lost. He'd wrung cries of pleasures and screams of release from her until she couldn't think and her body felt like a wrung out cloth.

Then he'd thrown her on the bed, lifting her hips in his hands and plunging into her from behind. He thrust over and over until she begged for mercy, coming again and again.

Her name dropped from his lips in a growl when he finally filled her womb with his seed. He'd held her against him and she'd felt him shaking with emotion, his lips sliding over her shoulder until she turned her head and kissed him.

It had been one of many bouts of passion that night. He'd been unable to keep his hands off of her. Even in his sleep he'd held her close, caressing her gently.

With the emotions of the day, the ride on Hermes and the unaccustomed activity of the night before, Rose was tired and sore. She wished for nothing more than a hot bath and a bed. Even the rumble of her stomach ran a dim second to the thought of clean soft sheets. She stared down at her shift and bliaut. They were rumpled and ruined, looking nothing like the beautiful gown her mother had helped her into what seemed so long ago.

With a sigh, she went to the wardrobe, hoping to find at least a robe she might slip on and perhaps a brush to finagle the mats out of her thick hair. It had barely stayed up, though she'd lost many of the pins upon the road.

Wolf's clothing filled the small wardrobe, his shirts and breeches folded neatly upon three shelves. Jerkins hung from pegs hammered into the back and his shoes and two pair of riding boots rested upon the floor. Everything was well made though not of a costly material. The stitches were fine and lovingly done, the seams made to withstand battle vigor.

Rose pulled a shirt and a pair of breeches from the lot. They would be big, but at least she would be out of her dirty shift. She wore only the shirt when she heard the door open behind her. She screeched, turning to see a startled Wulf. Steam rose from a pitcher he carried, along with a basin. He smiled at the sight of her in his shirt, the hem barely reaching her mid-thigh. The undone laces at the neckline showed a bit of rounded cleavage.

"You look good," he said huskily, kicking the door shut behind him. He walked to the dresser, setting down the heavy pitcher and bowl before turning to rake her with a stare. Red crept into her cheeks.

"You've had your fun," she said in a crisp voice. "Now go. I wish to dress and brush out my hair." Her hands fumbled with the ties on the shirt, hopelessly tangling them as the look in his eyes sent waves of nervousness through her.

"I don't wish to go." He picked up his brush, walking toward her slowly, as he would a skittish horse. "May I?"

"I-I can do it myself."

"I know, but it would be easier and much less painful if I did the deed, don't you think?" He reached up, plucking a loose pin from the matted mess. One after another found his hand, until her curls began to trail loosely down her back. He gathered the thick lengths in his hands, tugging gently until she sat on the edge of the bed. "There, that'll make it easier."

"B-but..." She gave up the fight, sighing as he began to untangle her tresses. The long strokes of the brush made quick work of her tangles. Soon, his hand smoothed over sleek curls as dark as night. She wasn't quick enough to stop

the moan of pleasure that escaped her lips. Having her hair brushed was one of her true joys, and had been as long as she could remember.

Rose caught herself relaxing under his hands and forced her back to stiffen. It took some effort. The day on horseback and the emotional struggle of fighting her reactions to Wulf had taken their toll. She wanted to let him take care of her.

When he took the long lengths of her hair in his hands and pushed it over her shoulders, baring the nape of her neck, she let her head fall forward. It gave him room to stroke her skin with his lips. Another moan was wrung from her and a sob caught in her throat. "No. You must stop," she whimpered, her head spinning from the caress of his lips.

"Why? Why must I, Rose?" He took her arms in his big hands, pulling her back against his chest, her hips cradled against his. She again felt the hard length of his cock.

"This isn't right. We aren't wed. I don't even want to wed you." She pulled away as far as he would allow, turning her head to stare up into his hard face. "I want to go home."

"And what would your father say when your belly blossomed with our child, Rose?"

"He would forgive me and he would let me stay with him forever," she said bluntly, though she knew differently. Her father's honorable reputation was earned. If she did become plump with Wulf's child, they would be married immediately, regardless of either of their wishes.

As if he could read her thoughts, he chuckled, pulling her back against him once more. "You do not lie convincingly, my dove." His hand slid from her arm, making quick work with

the laces that had so befuddled her fingers. Pulling them apart, he slipped his hand between, finding the soft curve of her breast. His thumb plied sensuously across the hard tip.

Rose gasped as heat flared in her stomach and pulls of sensation dug into her womb from his teasing caresses. Moisture bloomed quickly, and a throbbing pulse beat there in her sex, following the ever increasing rate of her heart. "You must stop," she gasped. "I don't want this... or you." Her hands pulled at his wrist, but only half-heartedly, doing nothing to stop him.

His other hand slid down, falling to her thigh where the hem barely covered her pale skin.

She felt his heat as he pushed her thighs apart, his hand lifting the hem of the shirt until it rested on her belly, leaving the sparse triangle of curls bare to his gaze. When his finger pressed between her sodden lips, she cried out, both pleasure and denial in her voice.

"Stop! Please, you must not do this again."

"Why? My dove, we will marry at the late meal. A priest has been found and he shall bind us together. What matters a few hours time?" He found her clit with his talented finger, torturing that hard bud with quick flicks and devilish circles. She arched under his hand, pushing against him, keening cries fleeing her lush lips.

"Yes," he husked, his cock like steel, more aroused than ever as the proof of her pleasure flooded his hand. "Come for me, my dove."

"No!" she cried as she did just that, her body convulsing, her hands digging into his thighs as she sought for more than what he gave.

Wulf lifted her easily, bringing her down as his other hand worked at the laces that kept his breeches tied. Her hips still moved, searching for the hand no longer there. Her body needed to finish the exquisite pleasure he'd started.

Then his cock slipped between her thighs and she reached down, unable to stop herself from fitting him to her, sliding down upon him easily. Her juices lubricated his cock, and he moaned at the way she felt inside, hot and wet, clinging to him as if made for him.

He lifted her face, brushing away the tears upon her cheeks. "Is it so bad to be mine?"

Wulf gave Rose no chance to answer, finding her mouth with his. He kissed her as if he couldn't stop, his lips hard, his tongue exploring her mouth, tangling with her own. When she rose to her knees, moving over him, his head fell back and he groaned in appreciation. "Oh yes, Rose. Don't stop."

The sweet aphrodisiac of his words fueled her hunger and she moved over him, her breath growing harsh. He pulled his shirt off her body, her arms rising to help him sweep the material over her head and off her hair. Naked, she straddled his lap, his hands on her breasts, cupping them together so that he might easily reach them with his mouth.

She arched against him, pressing her nipple against his lips, wanting his hot mouth to surround that hard point. He suckled upon her and she cried out, holding his head against

her as she rocked even harder above him. "Ah, I don't want this!"

Her words spurred him to greater lengths and he lifted her, laying her upon her back on the coverlet. Falling down with her, he thrust inside, his cock filling her with one stroke. His hand slid down her thigh, lifting her knee so that she wrapped one long leg around him. "You do, you want me," he demanded. "You wouldn't respond so lustily if you didn't. You'll be my wife, Rose. There is no shame in wanting what we have between us."

"I won't be wife to a man who only wants me because his enemy desires me as well." She gritted her teeth, trying her best to ignore the sensations rolling through her. "I won't be used that way."

Wulf looked down at her, his eyes showing the shock and amazement her words had wrought. "You think I want you only because of Geoffrey?"

"It is why you came to my father's keep, why you followed us. You wanted to foil Geoffrey, to keep him from having something he wanted as his own. Tell me it's not true." Challenge filled her words.

"Is this why you fight me so?" He sighed, moving off her to sit on the bed, his hand reaching to touch her even as he spoke.

"I was intrigued by the hoyden I saw in the window of the keep, her dress undone and her hair straggling wildly about her. Then, I saw the confidence of the woman who came to a warlord's horse. When it took an apple so delicately from her tiny hand, I grew further bemused. Such a contradiction. So

strong, yet so torn. There'd been such hope in your face in that window and such hopelessness in the stables. I couldn't help but kiss you." His hand stroked across her skin, the calluses of his fingers rough and irresistibly sensual on her flesh. "After that first kiss, I knew I had to make you mine."

"So it was pity then," she sighed.

"You aren't listening," He reached up to tap her on the nose. He took her hand and wrapped her resisting fingers around his cock. "Does this feel like pity?"

"Lust," she said, though when he removed his hand, she didn't take hers away. His cock felt so different to her, soft skin over steely hardness. Contradictions, as he'd said.

"Must I beat it into this lovely, thick skull? I care about you, Rose. I couldn't let Geoffrey take you. He would use up everything good inside of you, leaving you bitter and cold. He would take his mistresses to his bed in front of you, heedless of your wants and wishes, only coming to you to produce son after son until you were used up or dead. I couldn't let him do that to you."

"Perhaps we could have grown to care for each other," she said, realizing how little chance there was of that. This rogue had already taken her heart from her, those two days spent in the crofter's hut. Even the revelation of his schemes hadn't changed that. Otherwise, why would she be lying here in front of him, naked as the day she was born, her hand idly stroking his male flesh?

"Do you believe, after the amount of care he'd taken for your safety and comfort, that he could come to love you,

Rose?" He quirked one eyebrow up, and she couldn't help the giggle that escaped her at his tone.

"My father chose him...No, I would never have come to love him."

"What of me?" Wulf asked suddenly, his body going still. "Could you come to love me?"

Rose blushed under the scrutiny of his eyes. "I-I do care, Wulf, more than I wish to admit. But l-love?"

"Then, shall we marry, see what fate will hold in store for us?"

"You're asking now? Not demanding?"

"I asked earlier," he reminded her.

"But then I thought you only a traveler, not the misplaced lord of Red Thorn Keep."

"Misplaced?" he laughed.

"What would you have me call it?" She glanced up at him from under her thick lashes, teasing him now. "Would our life together be one of living underground, like pests from my mother's gardens?"

"No. I plan to return to the Lord's chair in Red Thorn, Rose. It will be a battle, but my men are nearly ready and with your father's backing..."

"Ah, so it is my father's troops you wish to wed and not me."

He growled and she giggled, an enchanting sound. He proved his enjoyment of it to her by nibbling on the flesh of her ribs to hear her giggle again. "No, they wouldn't be so soft, nor as accommodating in bed. I'll marry you, and keep them for the fighting."

"Me for the loving and them for the fighting. Seems a proper way to work things." She glanced up at him again. "Then I suppose I must marry you, for you have sorely used me. My father might decide to rid himself of his son-in-law if I am not kept happy."

"Then we must seal this bargain with a kiss, for I will not let you go back on your word now, Adaira Rose." He bent his head, finding her lips and kissing her far more intimately than the chaste kiss a bargain like this demanded. Her hands slid under his shirt, roaming over his bare back, drawing him back over her as she spread her thighs to welcome him. He slid home, her gasp echoing his own.

Her nails dug into the smooth skin of his back as he began with several quick strokes. He groaned, finding her lips once more. Rose felt the pleasure building inside of her and she tore her lips from his, crying out his name as it spilled over her. White hot bursts of ecstasy made her arch into him, holding him as the only stable thing in a world gone wild.

He roared his pleasure and she felt his body jump as he emptied himself inside her, filling her with his seed.

\* \* \* \*

Outside their door stood Liana, a gown in her hands for the lovely Rose. She smiled at the noise from within and decided to give them a few moments. As she waited, her thoughts returned to the fight ahead and worry began to creep back into her pale green eyes.

Liana had already made peace with her own ghosts. Her husband had taken the Lady Solana as his mistress many years before.

Solana had been a lady in her own right, widowed and childless. Her husband's death left her with property, a vast mansion and grounds, but no stable income. Until Wulfgar's father had come along, Solana had been faced with complete ruin. The men who had sworn fealty to her husband wouldn't obey her, despite their oaths. Some actually stole from her, further depleting her vanishing funds. When the lady confronted them and demanded they keep their sworn responsibilities, they laughed. A few did worse, staining their honor by abusing a widow to whom they owed allegiance.

During one such encounter Cedrick, Wulf's father, had been riding by the manse on his way back to his own lady wife, who was heavy with their first child. Liana didn't know too many of the details. She knew only that the Lady Solana had been at the mercy of guards with dire intentions. Cedrick had declined to say more, save that he was unable to honorably turn away from a woman in such need.

Solana had been only too happy to repay the kind lord for his help, sharing with him the only gift that she had left to give. Her body. Cedrick's journey had been long and his wife's pregnancy difficult. Though his love for his wife was strong, his flesh was, in this moment, weak.

Cedrick spent three nights at the manse, being entertained by the Lady Solana and helping her right the wrongs that had been done. He'd gone through her remaining vassals until he found a man able to run her estates, one that wouldn't cheat her. He'd helped Solana discover which of the guards would respect the lady of the manse and dismissed the rest. Then he made examples of those who had stolen from her.

He'd returned home to his own lady in time to pace the floor as she went into labor with Wulf. Liana's labor was difficult, for Cedrick was tall and wide and his son inherited these traits. For a few short weeks, no one knew if she would survive. But little by little, she regained her strength, taking over the care of her son with joy.

Some eight months later, a missive arrived. It informed Cedrick of the birth of his other son, by the Lady Solana.

It caused a huge fight between the lord and his lady, who threatened to leave and take her son with her. Cedrick capitulated, promising at the time to never see Lady Solana or the bastard she'd birthed. In turn, Liana promised to forgive him his "manly indiscretion."

Now Liana wondered if she'd made the right bargain.

She realized that she had been standing in the tunnel for quite some time and was no longer sure of the situation within her son's chamber. With a shrug of her lovely shoulders, she draped the gown on a peg outside the door, where it would surely be found, then headed for the ladder and her small cottage.

She was covering the trapdoor with the rug when a knock sounded on her door. Opening it, she stared in shock at the face of her visitor. "What do *you* want?"

Lady Solana brushed past Liana, gliding into the crude cottage. She glanced around, her mouth turning into a moue of disgust at the simple furnishings and lack of luxury. "I find

it hard to fathom that a lady of your background would stay here."

"I stay to help my people, who suffer under the guidance of your son." Lady Liana stood to her full height, ignoring the fact that she stood several inches shorter than the pale Solana.

"My son, and *his* people, are no longer your concern. You are no longer their liege." Spite filled the Lady's voice. "A just reward for your crime of making sure my son never knew his father."

"Your son is a bastard, begotten outside of the marriage bed. He counts for little. My son is the true heir, and will be reinstated."

"I knew you wouldn't forsake him. What do you think Geoffrey will do when he hears your words of treachery?' Solana grinned, but it had a malicious cast.

"What do you want here, Solana?" Liana asked wearily. The hatred the woman bore towards her had long ceased to be threatening. It now simply tired her.

"I want your son to return my son's bride to him. Lord Hawke made contract with Geoffrey for the Lady Adaira's hand. Wulfgar stealing her away does not alter that. She must marry Geoffrey, else the contract between the two lands will be forfeit."

"Solana, I don't even know where my son is, much less have a way to contact him. How do you know Wulf had anything to do with the disappearance of Lady Adaira? Perhaps she got tired of the way your son treated her and ran away?"

Solana drew herself up to her full height. "My son was taught how to treat a lady. He wouldn't abuse one of Lady Adaira's status, especially considering who her father is."

"Indeed? Where is your son now, Solana? Is he out with his men, hunting down my son, or is he out searching for the Lady Adaira?" The haughty expression on Solana's face faltered momentarily. Liana pressed her advantage. "Or is he perhaps ensconced in his bower with one of his many whores? I'm right, aren't I? That's why you're here, trying to threaten me. You think I know where she is and will tell you."

Liana laughed, her head going back as she enjoyed her triumph. "Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you anything, Solana. So you can just turn around and go back to the keep. Perhaps you can spend your evening hatching some plan to make your son less of a bastard, so to speak."

Solana gathered her cloak around her, pulling the hood back up over her pale hair. It wouldn't be wise for the lady of the keep to be seen wandering around the village. "My son will find yours, Liana. Do not doubt it. When he does, I'll be sure that you have a seat close by while my son tortures Wulf. Perhaps I'll ask for the first swing of the whip myself."

Liana just chuckled. "Good-bye Solana. I'm so glad we had this time to become reacquainted." She went to the door, holding it open and then shutting it gently behind the lady. With little haste, she slid home the bar locking the door and returned to her fire.

Atop the battlements, friend mixed with foe, the foe unaware of the traitors in their midst. The torches gave off very little light, flickering in a cold wind that had blown down from the northern climes. But little light was needed to see the force that made its way toward Red Thorn Keep.

A huge army, the Black Hawke at the head, rode steadily toward the keep. At Hawke's side, his lady rode a much smaller mare. She was completely surrounded by men that Hawke would trust with his life.

Leaving the main force to set up camp upon the hillside, Hawke and Maddie rode toward the village. Just inside the village gates, the voice of an old man halted them.

"Do you search for Lord Geoffrey or the true Lord, Wulf?"

"We search for our daughter, Adaira Rose," Hawke said.

"Do you know of her whereabouts?"

"Wait, husband," Maddie said, holding her hand up.
"Where is Lord Geoffrey?"

"He be at the keep, ma'am. Wenching, if you'll excuse me for saying."

"Our daughter, his intended, is missing and he's wenching?" Hawke's infamous temper, never far from the surface, fought his tenacious hold. "We will see Lord Geoffrey."

He rode past the man, heading through the village to where the gate of Red Thorn stood closed. When he reached it, he shouted to the men above. "I am the Black Hawke. Grant me entrance or I'll take the entrance. Your choice."

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#### **Chapter Eight**

The guards at the gate stared down in trepidation at the Black Hawke. Even outnumbered as he was, they knew he would not hesitate. Their fear of Lord Geoffrey and his torturous ways faded before their knowledge of the past exploits of this man. With little hesitation, they unlocked and pulled open the gates, allowing the men and woman to pass through.

Gaddon, the most senior of the guard, gestured toward the youngest. "Run to the keep, Carsden. Let Lord Geoffrey know that he will be having visitors." He shooed the young man on his way. The soldier raced across the battlements before descending to the cobbled ground below.

"My glorious Lord Hawke," he said, stopping the man and his group. He bowed low, holding up his hand to have them wait while he fought to catch his breath. "My pardon, sir. Youth is wasted on the young. Oh for those wonderful days before the wisdom of my seniority took me." He took another deep breath, bowing again to the mighty Hawke. "Lord Geoffrey has only just arrived home himself. Yet I know he will be glad to entertain you. You honor us with your presence and..."

Hawke cut him off with a growl and stared down at the man, knowing he was being stalled. "Tell me, sir knight, did Lord Geoffrey have a woman with him on his return?"

"Uh, no," Gaddon admitted. "His bride has been stolen from him, Lord Hawke, by the wolf of this land. Lord Geoffrey

returns to gather fresh men and horses to resume the search."

"Your loyalty to your lord is admirable," Hawke said. "Now remove yourself from our path. I would see if Geoffrey truly readies himself for the search—or if his time is being spent searching under a wench's skirt." He kicked his huge warhorse. The beast pawed the air inches in front of the man's nose. Gaddon quickly leapt to the side.

"You tried," another of the men said, patting Gaddon on the back as they watched the Hawke's party ride into the bailey.

"I don't think it was enough." Gaddon shook his head and then climbed to the battlements once more. His eyes searched the hillside. The campfires that dotted the black night were as numerous as the stars. "So many men. Geoffrey had better keep his glib tongue wagging."

\* \* \* \*

Carsden pounded on his Lord's door. A very drunk, very angry and very naked Geoffrey opened it. The wench he'd carried up to his chamber lay upon the huge bed behind him, her pale body exposed. She reached for the folds of her skirt, only to halt at a growled command from her lord.

"I didn't tell you to cover yourself." He scowled at the young guardsman. "What is it? If it isn't important, your ears and hands shall be forfeit."

"Lord Hawke is arrived, my lord. He has brought with him an army the likes I've never seen. It sits on the hillside, waiting his word." Geoffrey cursed, sobering at the news. "Find my mother and have her entertain Lord Hawke. I shall be down momentarily."

"Yes, my lord," Carsden said, taking his eyes from the nude woman on his lord's bed to bow and back from the door. He needn't have bothered. Geoffrey slammed the door before his bow had started. A woman's screech and other noises came from behind the wooden portal. Turning, Carsden made his way to the great hall, going to one of the cooking fires off to the side and sending a serving girl after her ladyship.

Solana hurried down the stairs in time to hear the banging of a gauntleted fist against the outside door. She nodded for one of the men to answer it, slowing her step and smoothing her gown over her slender hips. Her first glimpse of the huge Black Hawke almost had her scurrying back up the stairs she'd just descended. Instead, she forced a smile and stepped forward.

"Lord Hawke, you honor our humble keep with your presence."

"I wish to speak to your son, lady. Fetch him immediately." Hawke walked into the great hall, noticing the condition of its people with an angry eye. Most were too afraid to raise their faces and there was none of the constant chatter normal in his own hall. Geoffrey's men seemed more likely to bury their faces in their cups than to raise their eyes and meet his.

Hawke reached for Maddie's hand and pulled her to the fore. "What do you see, love?"

Her eyes flitted from the tattered draperies on the walls to the people, just as ragged. "I see a keep in need of a woman's hand and a people in need of a true leader, husband. This is...neglectful."

A young lad of about two summers got loose from his mother, rushing toward the doorway, that frantic lady hot upon his heels. Hawke leaned down and scooped up the young lad. "What's your name?" he asked the rambunctious lad.

"He's Darren, sire," his mother said nervously. "Please, Lord, it is my fault he was not restrained."

"Restrained?" Hawke asked, smiling at her to ease her fears. "Are your children not allowed to play and run?"

"Not when Lord Geoffrey..."

Whatever she was about to say was lost as she saw the Lady Solana standing behind Lord Hawke.

"Please, sire," she said softly, holding her arms out for Darren.

Hawke handed her the boy after whispering something in his ear that made him giggle. It was the only sound in the great hall. The servants and soldiers seemed discomfited by the sound, their eyes unfailingly tracking the Lady Solana as she stepped up to Hawke.

"My Lord, might I not offer you a repast after your long journey? Surely your lady wife would appreciate a bite to eat and rest for her feet."

"His lady wife wishes to know where her child is," Maddie answered. "Only your child can tell us that, Lady Solana.

Please, have him fetched before my husband loses his temper and tears your keep down stone by stone searching for him."

"That shan't be necessary, Lady Madelaine."

Solana took a step back in relief as her son came down the stairs behind her. "My son," she said in greeting.

"Mother, have a tray fixed and sent to my solar. I shall explain to Lord Hawke and his wife what happened to Lady Adaira." He bowed to Lord Hawke. "If you'll follow me?"

Hawke cast one last glance around the quiet room and fixed Geoffrey with a baleful stare. "I don't think so."

"Pardon me?" Geoffrey turned back, staring in consternation at Lord Hawke.

"I've come to do two things, Geoffrey, both of which can be accomplished right here and now." Hawke took two steps forward, his fist flying at Geoffrey. The punch landed just as he'd wished. The too handsome lord collapsed at his feet. Geoffrey's eyes blinked as he tried to clear the stars from his head.

"Lord Hawke!" Lady Solana gasped, shocked. She rushed to her son's side.

"That was for trying to make my wife into your whore. Be glad she talked me out of using a sword." He reached into the small pouch he wore at his waist, bringing forth a scroll. With great pleasure, he tore the thing into small pieces, letting them rain down upon the man at his feet. "That was the marriage contract. No man who would treat a woman the way you do deserves the honor of my daughter's hand. You couldn't even see her safely here."

"It was Wulf," Solana cried staring at the pieces of the marriage agreement resting upon her son's chest. "He stole Adaira away from Geoffrey while he slept. 'Tis not Geoffrey's fault."

Maddie knelt next to the woman. "That is Geoffrey's problem right there. You're making excuses for him. Let him grow up, Lady. Quit trying to protect him. He must take responsibility for his actions. I've given birth to four sons. Not a one of them is perfect and I wouldn't want them to be. I find them even more loveable for their faults." Hawke helped her up. "If you know the whereabouts of our child, Lady Solana, tell us now. My husband would not take it well were we to discover you knew her location from the first."

Solana glanced fearfully at the Black Hawke, wincing at his dour and forbidding look. "Wulf's mother lives in the village. Hers is the second cottage from the village gates. She might be able to tell you more." She wrung her hands fretfully. "Please, you must not hold Geoffrey responsible for your daughter's well being. He did his best."

"He lost my daughter. His best is clearly not enough. How he has kept this keep as long as he has..." Hawke's gruff voice trailed off. "Tell your son to prepare for a real fight, Lady. If he is smart, he'll tuck his tail between his legs and run. You might do better begging for my mercy than begging for mercy for him."

Maddie tugged on Hawke's arm, eager to be away from the sense of hopelessness in this keep. The people here were not just unhappy, they were inhumanly morose. "Please, Hawke, let us go find this lady."

He nodded, his black eyes leaving Solana and finding his wife's face. "Yes, I find the atmosphere here stifling." He took her arm, leading her out of the hall and into the bailey. Their horses were still saddled and he lifted her gently atop of her mare. "It surprises me greatly," he said softly, his voice sad.

"What surprises you, my husband?"

"I found you in the meanest of villages, yet you know more of how to be a lady then one born and raised to the part." He touched her cheek fondly. "I find myself giving thanks once more that you were put in my path, Maddie."

She leaned down, her lips caressing his cheek until he turned his head. Then his lips took hers and she sighed again. Her emotions were never far from the surface when he was near. She had once thought she knew love, until this man killed that man, Rose's father. She had wanted to hate him, only to discover a deeper and almost disturbing truth. Hawke was her true love.

"Let us go find our daughter," he said softly, cupping her cheek.

"Yes."

\* \* \* \*

Lady Liana hurried through the tunnels, her candle wavering and flickering. Her eyes still marveled over the sight she'd witnessed. The hillside seemed alive with campfires. An army bigger than any she'd seen before. If they were to attack...

With a little cry, she passed her son's bed chamber, the door wide open, the gown she'd left outside gone. Noise

echoed in the long tunnels and she could hear her people. They would be sitting down to eat the evening meal. Afterwards, Wulf and Rose would be married. At least, they would be if the men weren't out fighting for their lives.

The tunnel widened into a hall. Long trestle tables ran the length of the room, bench seats filled to capacity with the people who'd gone into hiding instead of working for Geoffrey. Liana stared around the room, searching frantically for her son. With a sigh of relief, she found him sitting at the Lord 's Table, laughing at something.

"Wulf!" she cried, her voice breaking through the conversations until the hall went eerily silent.

"Mother?" Wulf stood, taking two steps toward her before she'd raced around the edge of the table. "What is it?"

"A huge army is camped upon the hillside."

"My father," Rose stated, rising and going to Wulf's side. Her hand came up to rest against his forearm, an intimate touch that caught Liana's eyes.

"Things are well between you?"

"We will be married as soon as the priest has eaten his fill."

Liana smiled. "I've always wanted a daughter." She held her hand out to Rose. "But perhaps we should get your father's blessings."

Rose nodded, taking Liana's hand. "You left this gown for me?"

"Yes, it fits well. I'd thought it would."

"It was very kind of you."

"You will be my daughter." She said the words matter-offactly. "Come, we must get back to my home."

Rose took Wulf's hand, following him down the tunnel behind his mother. She smiled as she thought of being swept up in her father's strong arms and seeing her mother once more.

Wulf, on the other hand, frowned. He couldn't stand the thought of losing Rose, and he might. He wanted to turn, to head further into the tunnels. He wanted to take her to the other side of the mountains and run until they reached somewhere no one knew them. But he couldn't do that. He couldn't leave his people in Geoffrey's hands. They'd never survive.

They reached the ladder and Liana hurried up. As Rose was about to follow, Wulf stopped her.

"Rose...I..." His voice trailed off and he looked at her helplessly.

"What is it, Wulf?"

Wulf glanced up the ladder. He could hear his mother's footsteps, heading toward the door to her cottage. Panic settled into his stomach. He reached out, grabbing Rose around the waist and pulling her against his chest. His lips swooped down, taking hers in a kiss fraught with the frustration and fear he felt. Only when her lips softened under his did he gentle the kiss, trying to tell her without words.

When he let her go, her eyes were dewy and soft. She touched his cheek with her hand. "It will be fine, Wulf. My father is a reasonable man. You'll see."

"I hope so," he said. "I'd hate to have to steal you away again. Your father's keep would be harder to breach than Geoffrey's defenses." He shook his head ruefully. "I won't lose you now."

"No," she agreed with a smile. "You won't."

\* \* \* \*

Halfway up the ladder, Wulf heard Rose's cry. He burst through the trapdoor, sword in his hand.

It proved to be a cry of happiness, not fear. She was wrapped tightly in her father's embrace, her mother almost dancing in place, waiting for her turn.

A sigh escaped him and he lowered his sword, sliding it back into its scabbard. When he looked up again, the Black Hawke stood in front of him. Without a word, the man balled up his fist and slammed it into Wulf's face.

Rose cried out again, this time in horror as she watched Wulf fall. She pulled from her mother's embrace and ran, crouching beside him. "Why did you do that?"

"Because he deserved to feel some of my wrath for what he put your mother through." Hawke watched as she lifted Wulf's head and rested it against her breast. "Oh, don't coddle the boy. He knows he deserved it and more. He'll consider himself lucky I didn't do worse."

"I do," Wulf said, moaning a bit as he moved his jaw. "I'd have thought the Black Hawke would hit harder." He accepted his soon-to-be father-in-law's hand and let him help him to his feet. "That was a bare love tap."

"I couldn't maim my daughter's husband, now could I?" Hawke laughed, enjoying the younger man's wit. "She'd never forgive me."

"So 'tis your army that waits beyond the gate?" Liana asked, her hands clasped beneath her breasts.

"It is," Wulf nodded. "You must be Cedrick's wife. I've heard him rave of your beauty."

"You knew my father?" Wulf's ears perked.

"Aye, well enough to share a cup or two. He was a good man." Hawke watched as Rose stood and Wulf's hand came out to draw her to him. "You have feelings for her?"

"Aye," Wulf said, his arm resting on Rose's shoulders, pulling her even closer. "We are to wed tonight."

Maddie clasped her hands together and stared at her own husband, wondering what Hawke would say to that. He didn't take well to younger men and their brashness.

"With your blessings, that is," Wulf added.

Hawke smiled. The young man had recovered just in time. "I shall have to think on the matter."

Wulf nodded, expecting nothing less from a man like Hawke. He did not expect Rose's reaction.

"No!"

"No?" Hawke's face was impassive.

"You heard me, I said no."

"It is not your wish to marry this man?" Maddie asked, standing beside her husband.

"It is my most fervent wish, but I will not let Papa hem and haw over the matter, especially not when I could be carrying Wulf's child."

Hawke's eyes darkened and Wulf saw the iron face of the man who'd built an empire. "You've defiled my daughter?"

"Yes sir, though I'd never think of it as defiling her. But we have made love and she could be carrying my son. I love her, Lord Hawke. I will protect her with my life."

Rose stared up at him, hearing words she'd longed for spoken for the first time. The fact that they were to her father and not to her was an arrow to her heart. Once more, she was being treated as if she had no say in what happened to her. She stiffened under his arm, pulling away from him.

"Rose?"

"You love me?" she asked softly, her pretty eyes hardening. "When were you planning on telling me?"

"I did tell you." He held his hands out to her. "Earlier, before we went to dinner."

"No, you didn't. I think I would have remembered something like that." She walked to the fireplace and held her hands out, as if suddenly cold. A chill rose in her body, but centered around her heart.

"Rose, I told you I cared for you." Wulf glanced around the room, noting the interested faces of his in-laws as well as his mother.

"There is a great difference between caring and loving, son," Liana said softly. "Anyone can have a care. I care for my garden and I care that the meat for my dinner is not overly charred. But that isn't love."

Rose glanced back at the slender lady, giving her a small smile of thanks.

"Adaira Rose, if you've given this man your body, then it is his responsibility to make you his bride. This is not time for foolishness."

"Papa, is it foolishness to want the same thing that you and Mother have? I've seen you watch her when she doesn't notice. I've seen the look in your eyes. It's the same as in hers. Is it wrong for me to want a man who wants me for me, not for what you can give him?"

"Well, he certainly didn't say he loved me."

"No, but he told you how he feels before telling me. That's something a woman wants, to know that her husband holds her feelings dear and will treat her as more than just a warm body." Rose blushed to the roots of her dark hair, but she didn't back down. "I wish to know I have that as well."

"Lord Hawke," Wulf said quietly. "If I might speak to your daughter in private?"

Hawke nodded and Wulf reached out, taking Rose's hand, though she tried once to pull away. He tugged her gently along behind him, going out the door of the crofter's hut and around to the side. It was cooler now that the sun had set and Rose shivered in the night air.

Wulf pulled off his jerkin, setting the heavy leather around her shoulders. It was warm from his body and smelled of him, a combination that made her weak in the knees, though she stiffened them determinedly.

"What must I say, Rose, to prove that I do love you?"

"I don't doubt your love, Wulf. I couldn't. I love you as well. But I cannot bind myself to a man who does not see me as a person first. You see me as a wife, not as a woman with

a mind and spirit." She lifted her hand to touch his cheek.

"Perhaps it would be best if I went with my father. With time apart, perhaps you'll see for yourself what I mean."

"No," Wulf said adamantly. "I don't want you to go. It would be like losing my other half if you left me, Rose." He took her hands in both of his, bringing them to his lips. "Please, Rose, I will do whatever you wish, just don't leave me."

"And if my wish were for you to give up your fight with Geoffrey, to walk away from Red Thorn Keep and its people? What would you say then?"

"I would say it isn't you speaking. I've seen the horror in your eyes when you view the atrocities committed to my...to our people by that blackguard. You care more and give more than any three women I know."

Rose smiled, her lips parting in a wide grin.

"Was that the right answer?" Wulf asked, smiling also.

"It was the only answer," she said, throwing herself into his arms. "I love you, Wulf."

"I love you, my Rose," he said, spinning her around until she was dizzy. Then he stopped, letting her feet touch the ground before bending to find her lips.

"Well, well, isn't this a sight to behold. Take them."

Geoffrey's men came forward on his orders, pulling Rose from Wulf. Geoffrey took her, throwing her over his shoulder and striding away from the hut. Rose's last sight of Wulf was of him being beaten, fists and feet raining down.

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#### **Chapter Nine**

Rose struggled against the bindings. She was seated at the Lord 's Table beside Lord Geoffrey, her hands bound behind her so that her slender wrists caught in the slats at the back of the chair. No matter how much she pulled and twisted, the ropes held firm.

"My father will have your head on a pike. He will feed your entrails to his pigs. He'll bathe in your blood." She refused to flinch when Geoffrey raised his hand to her, staring into his green eyes with all the hatred she could muster.

It helped that Wulf had been chained to one wall of the great hall. She could see him, his head bent as he hung limply. Blood dripped from one of his wounds to land at his feet. He had yet to regain consciousness.

"By the time your father finds you, we'll be wed," Geoffrey said, looking up as the door from the bailey opened and two men hurried inside. "Ahh, here is the priest now, my lady, to say the blessings over us."

"I won't agree to it." Rose glared at him. "You need my words on the matter and I won't give them."

"Then someone else will. It matters little whether you agree to this union or no. I must have your father's backing. Being your husband will get it for me. You are of little consequence except for what you bring me."

"I will never willingly be your wife."

Geoffrey spat on the floor at her feet. "Do you think I have any desire to touch my half-brother's leavings? I look at you and see him slavering on top of you. It sickens me."

"But you would still force the marriage upon me? Why?"

"My coffers are close to empty. I must have an army to retain Red Thorn Keep. This manse must remain mine. Your father would never allow you to be hungry or homeless."

"What of the bride price you settled? If your coffers are empty, how did you intend to pay that?"

"Bah, 'tis of little concern to you. I shall marry you, then turn you over to my man so that he might conceive sons upon you. I'll raise them as my own."

"You'd raise someone else's sons?" .

"I cannot make them myself." Geoffrey glanced down at her and shrugged. "Perhaps before I turn you over to Ronnely, I shall try you out myself. You are a comely bit, even used as you are." He grabbed her face in his gauntleted hand, tipping it up so that he could find her lips with his own.

Rose struggled for a minute than let her mouth open under his. When his tongue pushed between her lips, she snapped her teeth down upon it. Geoffrey screamed, one hand going to his mouth, the other backhanding Rose. She sprawled limply against the chair, waiting for the pain to subside some before lifting her face again. With a slow deliberateness, she spit out his blood so that it landed upon her plate.

"That is the only thing of yours that I'll ever allow inside of me." Her eyes narrowed as he lifted his hand again. She met his eyes with fury, almost daring him to hit her. "My lord, the girl should be conscious for the ceremony," the priest called from where he stood before the fire, a chalice of wine in his fat hand. His robes and waistline suggested luxury, vastly unlike the poor priest that had been going to marry her and Wulf.

Geoffrey nodded and instead pointed his hand at Wulf.
"Wake that one, I want him witness when I take his lady as wife."

The bucket of cold water dumped over Wulf's head caused him to sputter into conciousness. His hands rattled the chains holding him and he lifted his face slowly, finding Geoffrey upon the raised dais.

"You cur. You should have been drowned at birth for the bastard you are."

"Bastard I may be," Geoffrey spat, bloody spittle flying from his lips. "But I am lord of Red Thorn Keep, our father's family home."

"For now," Wulf growled, his eyes glowing with emerald fire. "If you lay one hand upon her, it'll be the last thing you do, Geoffrey."

"You aren't good enough to say my name," Geoffrey snarled, pulling his sword and walking over to Wulf. "Perhaps I should just slit your throat now and rid myself of the problems you pose."

The priest scurried over as quickly as his small, fat feet could bring him. "My lord, blood spilled on a wedding day is bad luck." He made the sign of the cross, adding a ward against the evil eye at the end. "Perhaps you could just have him moved to your dungeon?"

The heavy doors at the far end of the hall banged open as one of Geoffrey's men ran into the room. The sound of men preparing for battle entered with him; shouted orders, the clanking of steel as men found their armor, booted feet running through the corridors. "Lord Hawke has brought his army to bear, Lord Geoffrey!"

"Reinforce the gates, get more men out there. Lord Hawke must not be allowed entrance until the ceremony is finished." He turned to Wulf. "You woke just in time to see me make the lovely Rose my own. Perhaps I'll even have you moved to my chambers so that you can watch as I really make her mine." He laughed as Wulf fought his restraints, coming within inches of Geoffrey's sword.

"Now," he said to the priest. "Come and marry me to my blushing bride."

"You're mad, Geoffrey," Wulf growled, his teeth grinding in rage. "I'm going to kill you."

"You might find that difficult." Geoffrey laughed cruelly, waving a hand at the heavy chains.

"You can't keep me here forever," Wulf rasped. "When I get free, you're dead."

"Well, there's more incentive for me to make sure you never get free. Shut him up." He watched with satisfaction as one of his men forced a leather strip into Wulf's mouth and pulled tight, biting into the corners of his lips.

He went to Rose, reaching behind her and easily undoing the knots that had held her captive. She sighed as the ropes fell from her skin, slowly pulling her arms free of the slats and rubbing the nasty burns on her wrists. "My father will not take this, Geoffrey. Perhaps if you release us and throw yourself upon his mercy, he may let you live."

"Your father wants you married. Married you shall be." He grabbed her arm, yanking her out of the chair and in front of one of the ragged tapestries that covered the rough walls. "Marry us," he ordered the priest.

The sound of a ram began to reverberate, felt as much as heard through the heavy doors. The steady banging seemed to send Geoffrey into even further rage. "Do it!" he screamed.

The priest scurried forward, reaching into a pocket of his fur-covered robes and pulling free a scroll. "This is a sanctioned union, one agreed upon by all parties?"

Geoffrey's grip upon Rose's arm grew tighter and she gasped in pain, barely able to hear his answer.

"Yes, now get on with it."

The priest began to intone his scripture, going on and on as the pounding of the ram on the gates of the keep grew louder. Every booming thud seemed to send Geoffrey a bit further over the edge. "I said, get on with it!" he shouted, looking up as his mother entered the great hall, her hand going to her mouth when she saw what her son was doing.

"Geoffrey," she gasped, hurrying to his side. "You cannot do this. Please, I know Lord Hawke. He'll kill you for this."

Geoffrey spun on his mother, hand flashing out, his gauntleted fist striking her upon the temple. Her head snapped back against the stone wall beneath the tapestry with a sickening crunch. She crumpled to the ground, an expression of surprise upon her face even as her eyes grew cold and empty with death.

"You killed her," Rose gasped, staring down at the poor woman. "You killed your own mother." She stared at the madness that covered Geoffrey's face and felt fear unlike anything she'd felt before. He'd gone insane. He stared down at his mother's body as if he had no idea who she was. "Finish this, priest. I wish to plant my seed in my wife's belly. My son will be conceived today."

"Do you, Lady Adaira Rose, daughter of the Black Hawke, take this man as your wedded husband? Do you promise to love him, honor him and obey him in all things as long as you both shall live?"

Rose's head was shaking a negative, even before the priest had finished her name. Geoffrey interrupted before she could say anything. "Of course she does. Now get to the end."

"The end?" the man asked, horrified by what was happening around him.

"Man and wife, say man and wife."

"Man and wife," the priest echoed.

Geoffrey grabbed Rose's chin, lifting her face. "Bite me again and I shall take an axe to your Wulf. You will watch me hack him into pieces, slowly." Then his lips pressed down against hers, letting her taste the blood from where she'd bitten him. She struggled, pushing at his chest with her fists, kicking at his shins until he finally let her loose, sending her stumbling backwards to hit the wall with enough force that her head struck the rock wall as Lady Solana's had moments before.

The world spun and turned black around her. Rose fought the blackness, knowing if she fell unconscious, she would be helpless against Geoffrey. She fought the nausea that threatened to bring the gorge to her throat, her stomach heaving as it wanted to empty itself. Terror and frustration, as well as pain, brought tears to her eyes, lending a luminousness to the gentle blue. She cringed away when he came toward her again, reaching out to grab her arm.

"Don't fight me, Rose, and maybe you'll find that we agree with each other. You might grow to enjoy our arrangement. You can take my sister in hand and teach her the ways of a lady."

"I'd rather die than let you touch me."

"That can be arranged!" He shouted the words into her face, drawing her up against his chest. "Take her to my bedchamber. Do not let her escape or it will be your hide next to his on the wall." He pushed her off to one of his men, then turned to the table to pick up his chalice. "A toast," he called as she was dragged from the room. "To my budding bride and the fortunes she'll bring us."

\* \* \* \*

Rose searched every wardrobe, every chest, hunting for some kind of weapon. She wouldn't surrender without a fight even if she was, in actuality, his bride. But it seemed the room had been stripped of anything she could use, as if he'd planned all this in advance. Rose shuddered at the thought, hugging herself against the chill. Even the fuel for the fire had been removed, as well as the poker for tending it. She huddled close to the dying flames, gathering what little warmth they could give her. She was loath to remove a

coverlet from the bed. She refused to do anything that might encourage him to think of her and that bed.

The lock clicked and she gathered herself, preparing for battle as she stared at the door to the hall. A creak over her shoulder alerted her that she was looking at the wrong door. She turned, amazed to see a portion of one wall slide open. A small face peered out. For a moment, Rose reviewed everything she'd ever heard of fairies. The tiny creature stepped into the dying light of the fire, diminutive but human.

"W-who are you?" Rose managed to squeak.

"Lucy D'Ambrose," the girl said. "Your Geoffrey's bride, Rose. He killed our mother." She promptly burst into tears.

Rose's kind heart overcame her shock. She hurried to the girl, pulling her into her arms. "Yes," she said softly. "It'll be all right Lucy."

The girl settled remarkably swiftly, surprising Rose again. "You don't want to be married to him, do you?"

"No, but he's holding my true intended prisoner and has locked me in this room. Can you help me get out of here, Lucy?"

"He'd kill me," Lucy said quickly, staring at the door to the hall. Her eyes were wide with fear and a tinge of anger at her mother's death.

"Not if you came with us. You could, you know. My father and mother would take you in, Lucy. My mother has always wanted another little girl. She has four sons and me. Would you like that?"

"But what of Geoffrey? Won't he come after us? He's a warrior. He's mean, and he doesn't like it when he doesn't get his own way."

"My father, or Wulf, my intended, will take care of Geoffrey, Lucy. Don't fear." She spoke the words with grim determination. "I can't help you though, unless you help me. Where does that take you?"

"Almost anywhere in the keep. Geoffrey doesn't know about it. I found it one day while playing in my wardrobe. Come," she said, tugging on Rose's hand. "Let me show you."

Rose nodded, eagerly following the sweet girl into the dark hole. Lucy pushed on a portion and the wall slid shut, sealing them in darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Geoffrey pushed past the guard at the door. "Stay alert at your post. I'm not to be disturbed unless they breach the battlements. Understood?"

The guard nodded, his face determined at the thought of fighting the Black Hawke's men. They were reputed to be as merciless as his lord. Geoffrey immediately returned to the door. "Where is she?"

"Who, my Lord?"

"My wife, you bumbling idiot!" He slashed out with one hand, his dagger cutting through the guard's neck like butter, sending a spurt of blood to cover Geoffrey's jerkin. "Rose!" he roared, rushing back into his room and tearing it apart. In his madness, he didn't notice the bed hangings he'd torn aside had landed in the fireplace, on top of the bright red coals.

They sputtered and smoked before catching, but Geoffrey was already gone. He hurried out of the room and down the hallway, throwing open doors and screaming Rose's name at the top of his lungs.

The hangings began to burn. The flames traced back to the edge still caught on the frame, catching the coverlet and sheets afire. Soon, the mattress and the wooden bed frame caught. It scurried along the rush covered floor, eating into the wooden floorboards. Smoke began to billow through the open doorway, obscuring the body of the guard

A serf, alerted by the smell and the smoke, rushed up the stairs. Immediately, he called for help. They sent up the alarm, forming a bucket brigade. The men reinforcing the gate hurried to assist. Holding the fortress would be useless if the fires spread and they feared burning more than an honorable death in battle. With a flurry of blows, the gate exploded open and the Black Hawke entered.

Within moments, he understood the situation. He barked orders for his men to help with the water while he searched for his daughter in the women watching. She was not among them.

"My daughter, Rose," he said to one woman, grabbing her arm to make her face him.

"His Lordship sent her up to his room. She was under guard, sir. I don't know anymore."

"What of Lord Wulf, woman? What happened to him?"

"He's chained in the great hall. Oh!" she gasped as something inside the keep collapsed, sending up a display of sparks.

"And he was just left there? And they dare to call *me* a barbarian." Hawke stared at the smoke billowing out the door that led to the bailey. He shook his head and then took a deep breath of clean air before rushing inside. He tried to remember the floor plan of the place from before, when he'd come to confront Geoffrey. If only he'd taken care of the younger man then instead of simply warning him, none of this would have come to pass.

"Wulf!" he shouted into the smoke. He tried not to choke, listening for any sound of the man. A raspy cough sounded from across the room, to his left. He hurried over and found Wulf struggling frantically against his bonds. He had a leather strap across his mouth and he was coughing harshly, trying to breathe through his nose.

Hawke quickly untied the strap, dropping it to the ground. Then he stepped back and unsheathed his huge sword. "Hold still, boy," he growled, his eyes watering as he squinted through the smoke.

"Just don't miss," Wulf coughed.

Wulf's curse was heard even over the clang of steel meeting steel. The first chain holding him fast fell to his feet and then Hawke swung again, freeing him from the damned wall.

"Rose?" Wulf yelled above the roar of the flames. He struggled away from the older man, trying to get to the stairs and the last place he'd seen Rose. "Rose!"

"No, boy," Hawke yelled, grabbing him. "You can't go up there. It's certain death."

"Rose is up there."

"I know!" Hawke shouted. "She's gone, boy."

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#### Chapter Ten

Hawke pulled Wulf from the roaring inferno that had taken over the house. It was only brute force that kept the man from leaping up the burning stairs. No one could have survived the inferno of the upstairs hall. As they passed the doorway, a loud crash came from within and the fire let out a roar that made those watching cringe.

"Rose!" Wulf cried, almost breaking free of Hawke.

"She's gone boy," Hawke said, grabbing Wulf to him.
"She's gone, my baby is gone." Tears started in his eyes, wending their way down his cheeks and for the first time, Hawke looked old.

Wulf fought a few moments longer than hung limply against Hawke. "She can't be gone. We were to be married."

"I know," Hawke whispered, his big hand patting Wulf on the back. "I'm sorry. I should have dealt with Geoffrey yesterday. Then none of this would have occurred."

Wulf looked up, his eyes meeting those of the man who would have been his father-in-law. "It's not your fault. If I'd taken the keep back earlier, it wouldn't have happened either. If you want to look at it in those terms, it's my fault." He pulled away slowly, turning to look as the only true home he'd ever known burned to the ground.

Soon only the rock walls stood, scarred with smoke and cracked from the heat. "Rose," he whispered., then turned back to her father. "You should have left me in there."

"You don't mean that, boy. Rose would want you to live. She wouldn't have wanted you to die as well, not if she loved you like I think she did." Hawke clapped his hand down on Wulf's shoulder .The boy shook as he forced down the sobs he couldn't bear to release.

"Hawke, where is our daughter?" Maddie's voice cracked as she panted the words, out of breath. "We watched from the village, Liana and I, both worried sick. The escaping servants told us of Wulf and your survival, but no one will meet my eyes when I ask for Rose..."

Hawke turned, taking Maddie into his arms and holding onto the back of her head with one of his big hands. "Maddie..." he began.

She looked up at him seeing the awful news in his eyes. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Not my Rose. Not my baby."

Hawke nodded, trying to be gentle in the telling. "She's gone, love. She was trapped upstairs. There's no way she could have lived through that fire."

"No." Maddie pushed away so she could see his eyes. They flickered eerily with the light of the flames. "No. No, I would feel it. I would know here." She pushed both fists against her stomach. "She's not dead, Hawke. She's not."

Liana arrived and went to her son, laying a gentle hand upon his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Wulf." He turned toward her, his eyes harried, his face a mask of pain. She opened her arms and he buried his face in her neck, finally letting loose his sobs. She could feel the heat of his tears against her skin and it broke her heart.

"What of Geoffrey?' she asked Hawke as she held on to her son.

"He's missing. His mother is missing too."

"No sir," one of the men close by said. "His lordship killed his mother, hit her so hard with his fist that she fell at his feet. He'd gone quite mad."

"Lady Solana died at her son's hand?" Liana shook her head as the man nodded. "The poor woman never could see what her son had become. But what mother would ever be able to admit such a thing?"

"We've got to find a way to get in there. I won't believe my daughter is dead until I see her body." Maddie sounded calm, though tears ran down her face and her hands were clenched tight enough that the knuckles were white

Hawke interceded and pulled Maddie close. "My love, there is no way for us to get in there until the fire dies. I won't ask a man to die searching for a lifeless body. I am so sorry."

Maddie nodded, running her hand over the soot that covered Hawke's face. "We should care for the injured and find room for all who have lost their homes." She wiped the tears off her face, stubbornly refusing to shed any more until she knew for sure.

"Where is Wulf?"

"He was right here," Hawke said. He turned his head, searching through the crowd for the younger man. "I don't see him."

Liana answered, her face growing pale. "He was so distraught over Rose's death. What if he..." She couldn't finish the thought.

Maddie returned the earlier favor and reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. "He wouldn't do something like that, Lady Liana. He'll be back. Have no fear."

"I've never seen him so in love as with your daughter."
Lady Liana hugged Maddie, then pulled her toward the village.
"Come, we should get away from this smoke. I will have baths drawn for you and a bed readied. By morning we will know the extent of the damage and how many have been lost."

Maddie nodded, though she found it hard to take that first step away from the fiery manse. "I feel as if I'm deserting her."

Hawke nodded, his hand resting with strong comfort upon her thin shoulder. He guided her away, following the trim back of Lady Liana away from the heat and the smoke. "I remember the first day, so long ago. You were so fierce, protecting Adaira Rose from me." He bent and pressed his lips against her temple.

"I had every reason to believe that you were going to kill her next. How was I to know you were our destiny?" Maddie sniffed, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "You made our lives worth living, Hawke."

"And you made my life more than just war and whoring." He squeezed her to him. "We'll get through this, my love. We'll find our way. I promise."

"How long, do you think, before we can get in to look for her?"

"Morning," Hawke said decisively. "We'll go back at first light. Before that, it would be too dangerous."

Maddie nodded, swallowing her sobs. "First light."

\* \* \* \*

Rose pushed through the passage door, barely stifling the cough caused by a funny tickle in her throat. A familiar smell filled her nostrils and she smiled. They had emerged in the stables. Peeking through the open top of a half door, she saw the rows of horses.

"Oh Lucy, this is wonderful."

Lucy nodded, closing the door behind her. "I love it here. The horses don't judge. They return whatever they are given. If you are good to them, they are kind back. They make me happy."

"Do you have your own?" Rose slipped out the half door, going to the first stall and reaching for the huge nose that moved to meet her.

"Mamma promised me a mare for my next birthday." Lucy sniffed. "If Geoffrey has his way, I'll be married first, for whatever bride price I can bring in. He won't care about my wishes. Mamma would have let me find a gentle boy that would love me and respect me."

"I'm so sorry, Lucy. If there is anything I can do, you know I'll do it." Rose coughed again, then sniffed at the air. "Do you smell smoke?"

"Smoke?" Lucy asked. She went to the stable's entrance, opening it and looking outside. "Oh my God! Rose, the manor is on fire!"

"Fire?" Rose hurried to her side, staring at the manor and the flames that flickered out the windows and crawled upon the roof. "Oh God. Wulf is still inside!"

The two girls watched in horror as the roof began to cave in, a huge whoosh followed by a resounding crash. "Wulf!" Rose rushed out the door. She had to get inside. She had to save Wulf.

Lucy raced after her, grabbing her around the knees so that both of them fell to the ground. "You can't!" She screamed the words in Rose's face. "It's too late! He's gone, Rose. He's gone."

"He can't be gone," Rose cried, tears falling from her eyes, sobs shaking her shoulders. "No!"

But she quit struggling, her hands fisting in Lucy's gown, burying her face in the girl's shoulder. "I love him."

Lucy nodded, holding on tight. "I know, Rose. I know."

\* \* \* \*

Wulf reached out and yanked the saddle off one of the rails. Taking it to a stall, he heaved it up and onto the stallion's back, reaching under him to grab the girth strap. He tightened it, digging his knee into Hermes ribs as he tried to hold his breath and keep the saddle loose. Wulf growled a curse, grabbing the reins in his hands and pulling himself up into the saddle.

"She's gone, Hermes. I can't stay here."

The horse's ears twitched, moving back as if listening to him. He took a couple of prancing steps before falling into his gait, obeying the reins in his mouth.

They headed out the town gate and onto the road. Wulf kicked Hermes into a gallop, needing the speed. He had to get Rose out of his head. Otherwise, her death would drive him mad. Pain, hot and bitter, gnawed at his insides, howling like a mad wolf, trying to escape. He swallowed hard, forcing it back. Letting the breeze blow into his face, he shook away the thoughts of her, of her sweetness, her passion, her intelligence. He couldn't let memories of her take control of him again, not and stay sane.

Miles passed under them, gone quickly as the last light left the night sky, filling the silky blackness with tiny pinpricks of light. Alone, under the stars, without the woman he wanted to wed, the woman supposed to share his life. How could he live without her? He could barely handle the next breath.

"Rose!"

He screamed the name, falling forward on the saddle and burying his face in Hermes' thick mane. Sobs racked his shoulders, tears falling to wet the horse's neck. A blinding burst of pain stiffened his back. No matter the speed, no matter the distance, he would never be able to forget her or get away from the pain of her passing.

It took a few minutes for him to realize Hermes had stopped moving, standing docilely as he wept. Lifting his face, he stared in confusion around him. They'd stopped at a crofter's cottage, a rough wall of stones surrounding a small stable and a coop full of chickens. Saucy white undergarments hung on a line, flapping in the soft breeze.

A candle glowed in the rough hewn window, as if the occupants were waiting for him to arrive. Just as he began to

lift Hermes' reins and turn him away, the door opened and a slight figure stepped out, silhouetted by the light shining behind her.

"Well, are you coming in?" a soft, melodious voice asked.
"I don't get many visitors and I've got freshly baked bread cooling, if you'd like some."

Wulf stared at the figure. Her voice was beautiful, almost captivating and he felt a part of himself wanting to respond. "W-who are you?" he stuttered.

"My name is Lyra. I'm a healer. Now if that answers your questions, I'd love to get out of this cool air and back near the fire. Please, come in. Maybe I can help you find your way."

"Lyra? 'Tis a strange name, but quite beautiful." He slid off the saddle. Hermes snorted as if disagreeing with his actions. "I've lived in this area all my life, but I've never heard of you."

"You've only to open your ears," Lyra said. "There is an empty stall for your horse and good feed in the stables. While you care for him, I've a thick stew I can reheat for you."

Wulf nodded his head despite his misgivings about the strange woman. She didn't look at him as much as through him and he felt as though she knew his thoughts before he did. The unnerving experience distracted him to the point he found himself following her orders and taking Hermes into the stable. Accepting the inevitable, he made the horse comfortable and fed the other animals inside before returning to the house.

Standing on the door step, he raised his hand to knock. Before his knuckles connected, Lyra called out, urging him to enter.

"Wipe your feet."

He did as bid, finding himself in a small but well-ordered cottage. Neat as a pin, with homey little touches that reminded him of his mother. A roaring fire warmed the room and gave off light. The faint scent of wood smoke masked another; there was something beneath it, something spicy he couldn't recognize. Embarrassed, he realized he was snuffling like a bloodhound chasing a fox and stopped. She seemed not to notice.

"Sit. There's no reason to stand on principle here. Be comfortable and I'll fetch your food."

Wulf's eyes grew thoughtful as he stared at the slender figure. Her beauty was unarguable, fiery auburn hair flaming in the light of the fire. A hazy film muted the colors of her eyes, and he found himself unable to decide on their hue. She had a small, heart shaped face with rosy cheeks and a pert, upturned nose. She walked with a gentle confidence, her hand in front of her in a manner that spoke of long habit.

"You're blind," he gasped in shock.

"Yes, I'm aware of that. I have been for years, Master Wulf. Sit please. The affliction that took my sight will not harm you."

She stopped at the fireplace, reaching for a small pad and using it to protect her hand from the heat. Lifting a small pot from the metal rod hung over the fire, she stirred it quickly before scooping up a goodly amount and filling a thick

wooden bowl. Setting the pot to the floor, she collected a hunk of bread and a wooden spoon, turning and walking back to him. Holding the food in her outstretched hand, she waited for him to take it before returning to the small rocking chair in front of the fire.

"Eat, please. You need to keep up your strength, Sir Wulf. You cannot let your mourning sap your will to live. You are too important."

Wulf sank down on the small bench that lined one length of the wooden table. He set the bowl and spoon upon the table, letting the bread drop into the bowl. "How do you know me? How can you be so sure I'm not here to hurt you?"

Lyra bowed her head, smiling. "You are a good man, Sir Wulf. You wouldn't hurt a woman unless she'd done you unforgivable wrong. I've offered you nothing but succor. There's naught wrong in that." She tapped the floor impatiently. "Eat."

Wulf picked up his spoon, deciding food wasn't as bad an idea as he'd first thought. They'd been interrupted before he'd been able to finish his dinner this night and now he realized he was hungry. He spooned the food into his mouth, enjoying the subtle nuances of the spices. "This is wonderful. Thank you."

"You are quite welcome, Sir Wulf." With that she began to rock, the chair squeaking quietly. Reaching down, she lifted a pair of knitting needles from a basket of yarn and began to knit expertly. The needles clacked in counter rhythm to the squeaking chair, creating a soothing melody of sound.

Wulf ate, devouring the stew and the hunk of bread. When he'd finished, he took the bowl and spoon and washed them in a bucket of water left for just that purpose. Drying his hands, he went back to the bench. "I thank you. I actually feel better, Lady Lyra."

Lyra laughed, letting the needles rest in her lap. "I'm no lady, Sir Wulf but you are most definitely welcome." She waved at him to come nearer, holding out her hands to him.

He went obediently, dropping his hand into hers. She closed her eyes and he felt a strange sensation, as if someone were pushing at his mind. Wulf shook his head, closing his own eyes to fight the invasion. Before he could, it was gone. She released his hand.

"A strong mind," she mused, seeming to speak to herself.

"A handsome man, with a broken heart. What could be more enticing?"

She rose, taking his hands once more. "Sir Wulf, I know of your loss and the pangs it causes your heart." She spoke slowly, carefully choosing her words. "There is power inside of you, a power you've left untapped. I don't know if it's fear or ignorance that has let this fall to the wayside. I have a question for you. I would like you to listen to me, just once and all the way through, before you make your answer, please."

She seemed to need that commitment from Wulf so he nodded yes, forgetting in the moment that she was blind. Now that he'd finished his meal, he found himself more heartsick than before. He wished he'd stayed at Rose Thorn.

He had family there, family that would have mourned with him.

His eyes dropped to the floor and he missed seeing Lyra reach up to her blouse and untie the chord that kept it on her shoulders. He didn't miss noticing her skirt and blouse hit the floor. His eyes widened, moving over the slender body of the healer.

"What is this you do?" Wulf snapped, jumping back as she reached out one slim hand.

"Please, Sir Wulf, you promised to listen to my tale without interrupting."

"Yes, of course, but put on your clothing." Wulf backed up until he hit the table behind him, halting his retreat from the blind girl.

"Am I not pleasing to your eye?" Lyra's hands caressed the beautiful curves of her body. "Can you feel no desire to touch me at all?"

"My desires are dead," Wulf growled, his voice hard. "They died with my Adaira Rose. I am little more than a hollow shell." He sank down on the chair, his eyes sliding to the fire. The flickering flames reminded him of home and the inferno that had taken his Rose from him.

"I want a son," the healer said huskily. Her hands roamed over her breasts, squeezing their lush fullness. Her fingers played with the hardened tips and made her moan. "For you, I could be a distraction, someone to lose yourself in for a few stolen hours. You could give me the son I long for, the child that is my destiny. I ask nothing of you but your seed." She moved closer, lifting one of his limp hands and placing it on

the smooth flesh of her hip. "Am I not soft? Do I not please? Please, Sir Wulf. This one thing is all I ask for the succor I have given your body."

Wulf felt locked onto the bench, unable to move away from the softness of her touch, the sleekness of her body. Her hand dragged his to her breast, felt the hard nipple rub against the center of his palm. "Rose..." he began.

"Is dead," the healer said harshly. She reached for his other hand and cupped it over the lush red triangle between her thighs. "Feel my heat? How wet I am? I am alive and I want you, Sir Wulf. I want you to be the father of my son, a son who will do amazing things. He is your destiny and mine, Sir Wulf. I've seen this." She moaned as she moved his long finger so it pushed inside her, the flesh of her pussy capturing it and begging for more.

"You've seen my son?" He tried to pull away from her, but her hands were like chains, binding him to her body.

"Yes," she cried. "Your son and mine. Take me Wulf." Her hand dropped to his lap, her fingers circling the hardness he couldn't conceal. "You want me too." Her fingers pulled at his laces. His cock sprang free, her hand jacking at him, causing his breath to block up in his chest.

"No!" he cried, trying to fight her off. "I'm as dead as she is!"

"This doesn't feel dead," she crooned, straddling his loins.
"This feels alive, and willing. You will give me my son."

Wulf grabbed her hands, holding her slim wrists in one of his. He pushed her away, getting up to follow her as he forced

her down in her rocking chair. He picked up her clothing and gave it back to her.

"Get dressed. The only woman who would have had my son is dead. She has my heart and my soul. Now, they are both as dead as she is. I thank you for your food and for the shelter for my horse, but I will leave now. I was mistaken to run away from my people. They will need me even more now." He turned and laced his pants. Even as he heard the first sobs, he refused to look at her again.

Hermes welcomed him with a low whinny and a push of his big head. "Yes, I know, boy. We'll go home now. We need to find her body so that I can give it a decent burial, some place for us to go to mourn her." He saddled the horse quickly, then led him out of the small barn. Closing the doors behind them, he urged Hermes into a trot, heading back to the smoking ruins of the manor and Rose's body.

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#### **Chapter Eleven**

Hermes seemed to know the way. This was good, for Wulf's mind focused not on his riding, but on the picture in his head. Rose and the look in her eyes when she'd told him she loved him. He couldn't stop thinking about her; he couldn't get her face out of his head. Tears streaked down his cheeks unnoticed and the road in front of him blurred.

The walls of Red Thorn emerged from that blurry distance. He could barely see the still-smoldering ruins of the old manor. Plumes of smoke blocked out the clear night sky. Wulf felt the horror of that night again. The knowledge that his one and only true love had died, coughing and hacking in the billowing smoke, captive of his crazed half-brother.

He choked back a sob, her name on his lips. "Rose, I'm so sorry."

Hermes flicked his ears back as if listening to his words. He whinnied, as if in answer, as if to say he missed her too.

Wulf patted his arched neck. A long sigh escaped his lips and he kicked Hermes into a trot. Riding through town, he thought of stopping at his mother's cottage, then dismissed the thought. He wasn't ready to face anyone. He turned Hermes down the wide road to the castle proper.

The gates to the bailey were open wide, the smoldering ruins clearly visible. He jumped down from Hermes' back, throwing his reins over a post. He ducked under Hermes' head, walking slowly toward the rubble. He entered the debris.

The ashes were still almost impossibly hot. He could not linger, but stepped back, his cheeks reddened and his boots smoldering. Letting his face cool in the night air, he resolved to try once more, determined to find his lady love and give her a proper service and burial. Closing his eyes, he sighed heavily, reaching into his jerkin and pulling out a soft piece of cloth.

He dunked the cloth into a bucket of water left from the brigade he'd started earlier, when he'd still hoped Rose had survived. A humorless chuckle passed his lips as he stared at the wreckage. The arch of the doorway, sans wooden panel, hung precariously in the air and he passed through it, walking cautiously through the remains. He used the wet cloth to cool the heat of the fire against his skin. "Rose," he called, hoping against hope that she could possibly be alive.

But until he found her body, how could he give up?

"Rose!" he called louder, then once again, walking toward what was left of the stairway that to the second floor and the master's bedchambers. "Rose!"

He couldn't stop calling her name, even as the smoke made him cough and every failed attempt sent more tears streaming down his face. Clean lines were left on his cheeks in their wake, his eyes wild as he peered into the burned husk of the manor house.

The staircase creaked, then shuddered, tipping precariously. He knew he was going to fall before it happened and he threw himself toward the second floor of the manor, shouting his mantra loud into the night air.

He grabbed the top stair, pulling himself up and onto the creaky floor. The center of the hallway seemed to be disintegrating under his feet and he quickly stepped backward, against the wall where the floor seemed a bit more stable.

"Rose!" he shouted again and again, carefully making his way towards the yawning doorway of the Master's chambers. "Rose!" Then he heard it, the sound he'd been dreaming of hearing.

"Wulf!"

\* \* \* \*

Rose stirred, a sound waking her from her restless sleep. Every part of her body ached with Wulf's loss and she found it hard to care about much, if anything. Consciousness brought back awareness and a sob shook her shoulders. She welcomed the tears, letting them spill unheeded from her eyes. "God, Wulf. I miss you so."

She heard Lucy rise from the pile of hay where she'd been resting and felt the younger girl pull her into an embrace meant to comfort. "I'm so sorry, Rose." .

Rose nodded, though her sobs continued, wracking her body until she thought she would be sick with the grief of his loss. She thought of the bards her mother had read to her as a child and their platitudes of love and loss. She now understood some of the lines her mother hadn't tried to explain. "Wulf!" she cried.

With shaking fingers, she pushed Lucy away, lifting her hands to her thick, dark hair. Finger combing the mass into

three manageable hunks, she braided it quickly and then lifted the knife they'd found earlier. She loped off the long tail.

"What are you doing?" Lucy cried, putting out a hand to stop her. "Your hair?"

"I want to find him, Lucy. I want to find Wulf's body and make sure he's given a proper burial, one to his status." She lifted the fat braid, "He will hold this in his hands for eternity."

"It was so beautiful."

"If I cannot have Wulf's eyes upon me, what point is its beauty? I will remain unmarried." She sobbed, tucking the braid into the pocket of her gown. "If Geoffrey remains alive, I will kill him."

"You speak blasphemy. Threatening the lord's life is treason." Lucy tried to sound mature but Rose was beyond being comforted.

"I care not. Geoffrey stole the only person I've ever loved. He is no lord to me." She took the hem of her skirt and wiped her face with it. Pushing away from the young girl, she pushed open the stall door and went outside, heading for the ruins of the manor. Her hands went to her hair, tugging on the now short curls. "Wulf!"

For a moment, all was silent but the crackle and hiss of the embers in the manor. Then a loud creaking broke the quiet. Seconds later, she heard her name called in a hoarse voice and her heart leapt in her chest.

"Wulf?" she called again, holding her breath as she waited for an answer.

"He's gone, Rose."

"No! He's not. I heard him call me." She shook her head emphatically, pulling away from Lucy's soothing hands.

"Wulf!"

"Rose!"

Her eyes went wide. "Tell me you heard that, tell me it isn't a dream," Rose urged, her hand fisting in the sleeve of Lucy's gown.

"I heard that." Lucy stared at the smoldering shell. "He's in there."

Rose was already halfway across the empty courtyard, ready to tear through whatever stood between her and the only man she would ever love. "Wulf!"

Her eyes met his as he leapt down the tilting staircase, his feet barely touching the ruined risers. She saw his eyes widen with wonder as they found her. Then he was in front of her, his hands encircling her waist, lifting her easily and twirling her around.

"Tell me I'm not dreaming," he said huskily, setting her on her feet. "Tell me you're really here."

Before she had the chance to say anything, his lips were on hers. He kissed her, holding her tightly against his chest, unable to stop.

Rose's hands caressed his face, fingers skimming over his skin as if she wanted to memorize him with her touch. "I'm here," she whispered against his lips. "You're here." The last words were spoken in awe. "I thought you dead."

"I thought you were dead," he whispered against her skin, his lips touching her face over and over. "Your father said you were in the master's chambers, with Geoffrey."

"No...no, Lucy saved me." Her hands framed his face. She leaned just far enough back to see his eyes. "She showed me a hidden passageway that got us out of the manor house." It was her turn to wonder. "Geoffrey had locked you in the great hall. I saw you there."

"Your father got me out." He ducked his head a bit, as if ashamed. "I'd wished he hadn't, when I thought you dead Rose. Not even the flames could have been worse than losing you."

Rose smiled, her hands lifting his face to see his eyes again. "But you're alive and so am I."

"You are," he breathed, his lips finding hers again.

Wulf bent and lifted her in his arms, holding her high on his chest. His mouth never left hers. His tongue explored the satiny texture behind her lips.

Her hands curled in his hair, holding him close.

His rose to her hair and his body went still as he felt the shorn tresses. "Your hair? What happened?"

Reaching into the pocket of her dress, she pulled the braid out and handed it to Wulf. "I-I thought you were dead."

He took it, running the smooth satiny hair through his fingers. He touched the ends before he kissed her softly on the top of her head. "I'll treasure this."

"Oh my. Lord Wulf?"

He raised his head. A young girl stood before them, hands twisting in front of her. "Lucy?" he asked, waiting to see the shake of Rose's head. When she did, Wulf took the few steps separating them, dropping to his knees. "You saved my life when you saved Rose," he said, taking her hands in his.

Dropping a kiss upon the back of one, he rose slowly. "I owe you much. You've but to ask, Lucy. I will do whatever it takes to get you whatever you want."

Lucy looked confused and a little awestruck as her eyes moved from Wulf to Rose. "I didn't do it for reward," she said slowly, her voice so low it was difficult to hear.

"Which only makes giving you one much more enjoyable," Wulf said. He held his hand out behind him, drawing Rose back into his arms. "I love her more than my own life."

Lucy smiled at the two. "Anything?"

"If it is within my power," Wulf added.

"Then I would stay here with you and Rose." Lucy stared at Rose hopefully. "That is, if you would have me."

Rose glanced at Wulf, then nodded at the girl. "How could I say no?"

"Then don't," Wulf added. "She'll live here with us and my mother. But it won't be easy at first. We will need to rebuild the manor. Until we do, we will have to stay in the crofter's hut."

"I can help," Lucy offered immediately. "I want to help." Wulf chuckled. "We will have to check your mettle," he teased. "Maybe she can haul stone from the quarry?"

"If that is what you need," Lucy said determinedly. She glared at the couple as they burst out laughing.

Wulf held his arm out, offering it to Lucy. "That's all well and good for now, young one, but we should seek beds for the night. It's been a long day."

Lucy took his arm, her cheeks growing pink as she walked beside the couple. Her eyes went wide as she heard Rose

squeal in excitement. A loud whinny sounded from the horse in front of them.

"Hermes!" Rose gave Wulf another quick hug before she hurried to the big horse. She heard Lucy call her name nervously and Wulf's soothing answer before she reached the big stallion, smiling up at him as he nipped at her gown. He nudged her, his nostrils twitching as he sniffed at her. "Oh, he wants a treat."

She patted his head, finding the spot that he loved to have scratched. "Later," she whispered as Lucy and Wulf finally reached them. "Settle down, Hermes."

The horse, smelling the stranger amongst them, pranced in place, his feet coming off the ground as if he would buck. Rose grabbed his bridle, pulling down and scolding him softly. "She's a friend, now. You behave and don't scare her."

Hermes turned, sniffing at Lucy. The little girl stood as still as one of the statues in the garden.

"He won't hurt you, Lucy." Rose reached out, taking Lucy's hand and placing it on Hermes muzzle. "Let him get your scent and he'll be gentle as a lamb."

Wulf laughed. "Big damn lamb," he teased, pushing Hermes head away when he turned to Wulf's voice. "Behave," he warned the horse. Then he lifted Lucy onto Hermes's back, making sure she was comfortable. He untied the horse and they started toward the village.

"You're going to have me wondering if you're more excited to see Hermes or me," he said softly to Rose, wrapping his arm around her again.

Her eyes gleamed as she put a thumb on her chin, staring thoughtfully between her two males. "Hmm, now *that* I'm going to have to think about."

Wulf turned her face toward his, nipping at her thumb before he kissed her hard.

"Mmm," she moaned. "You. Definitely you."

"Good answer." He kissed her once more before wrapping his arm around her again. He'd draped the reins over Hermes neck and the horse followed along behind them like the most devoted of dogs. Lucy, lulled by the steady gait, soon slumbered against the horse's wide shoulders.

The cottage was dark. Snoring came from one of the back rooms. Wulf got Lucy settled in front of the fireplace, wrapped in a blanket from his mother's favorite chair. He went to the small trap door on the floor and pulled it open. He lit a candle and held it high, carrying it easily down the rough ladder and positioning it so Rose would have no trouble seeing as she made her own way down.

At the base of the ladder, she turned, smiling up at him. "It feels like forever since we were here before." Her hand rose, touching the whiskered roughness of his cheek. "I thought my life was over but some miracle saved you. I think my life is meant to be spent with you."

"Fate," he whispered, bending and gently finding her lips.
"Destiny has declared us a couple. Who are we to discard its edicts?"

Rose breathed in his smoky scent, her thumb rubbing over a smudge of soot left from the fire. "I wouldn't dare argue. I love you so much, Wulf." His green eyes seemed to glow in the light of the candle, shutting just as his lips took hers again. Her warm mouth clung to his, her tongue searching out his to tease and rub. A soft moan escaped from her, the desire within her stirring to life. It seemed a miracle that she could feel it once again, that it hadn't been torn from her grasp by his death. She welcomed it, her hands touching his hair, holding him close.

His moan echoed loud in the earthen rooms under the village. She smiled at the sound as his hands pulled her even closer, his mouth twisting on hers. Her body pressed to his, her hips moving with an urgency based on what she had thought lost forever.

"I love you, Wulf," she moaned against his mouth. "Make love with me."

His hand was hampered by the candle he still held and he pulled away, handing it to her. Then he swept her easily into his arms, striding impatiently down the long hallway to his room. He set her down gently, lighting the two tapers within from the candle. By the time he was ready to face her, she'd stripped off her gown, standing before him in nothing more than the chemise.

"You're beautiful," he said, the awe in his voice bringing a rosy blush to her cheek.

"You're biased," she said, holding out her hand. "Your eyes are colored by the love you feel for me. If not for that, you'd find my poor shape lumpy and distasteful."

"Lumpy?" he said with a laugh, moving close to rub his hand over the curve of her breasts. "I think curvaceous would be a better word." He thumbed her nipples, which had risen

at his caress. "Of course, these might be considered little lumps." He caught each tip between his fingers, twisting them gently and smiling at her soft moan. "But nothing I see would ever be thought of as distasteful."

"What of the day when I grow fat with your child?"

One of his large hands slid down her flat stomach, teasing the sensitive skin below her navel.

"Then I shall have more of you to love." He dropped his head, kissing her with a tenderness that seemed like a miracle to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, rising onto the tips of her toes.

She pulled away only seconds later, tearing herself from his arms and holding up her hand to stop him from drawing her back. "But...what of this child?" she whispered nervously, her eyes on his face to gauge his response.

"You're with child?" His voice was soft but a smile bloomed upon his face, spreading from ear to ear.

"So you tried to claim, these past few days. And you have convinced me. Call it a woman's intuition, but I believe it."

"T-the fire didn't..." he stuttered, his hand sliding across her slender belly.

"No. We're fine." She held out her hands, waiting for him to take her in his arms. When he hesitated, she stared at him in question.

"I don't want to hurt you, or the baby."

Rose laughed. "Don't be foolish. The baby, if there is one, is perfectly protected inside me."

His hand touched her stomach with gentle care and she could see the hope in his eyes. "Make love with me," she said

again, tugging his hand up her body until it cupped her breast. "I need you."

He groaned, unable to resist her passionate request. "You have me." He sank down next to her, pulling her into his arms. His hands were incredibly gentle, pulling off the straps of her shift and exposing the curves of her breasts. His head dipped and he kissed the hardness of her nipple with his tongue, circling the pink bud.

He smiled at her groan, rubbing his head into her hands as her fingers stole through his hair. She arched her back, pressing him to her and he suckled a bit harder, loving how she reacted to his touch.

"Wulf," she groaned. "Love me."

"I do," he whispered, loud enough for her to hear. "I love you, Rose."

He toyed with her nipples, his mouth moving from one to the next, his tongue flicking over them. Her body moved under him, pushing into his. He tugged her shift lower, groaning as it caught on the curve of her hips, frustrating him. Pulling harder, he heard the fabric rip and he swept it off her legs. She lay beneath him, her legs parted, exposing the soft, wet pink of her pussy.

"Ahh," he groaned, his finger sliding over the slick flesh. He pushed inside her, her pussy clinging to him, welcoming him. "Come for me," he hissed, fucking her with one, then two fingers. She gasped, her hips moving in time to his thrusts, her hands grasping at him.

Her thighs tightened around his hand, pulling him even closer. Her body convulsed in pleasure, her voice crying out in

her bliss. Her nails dug into his arm and she arched wantonly. He used his other hand to turn her face, his lips finding hers, releasing with every wild impulse that flowed through him.

Pulling his hand free, he slid on top of her, his hips fitting into the cradle of hers. Her thighs opened for him, her wetness welcoming him. He quickly pulled the rest of his clothing from his body before moving over her. He filled her eagerly, groaning as her tightness was enhanced by her climax.

Wulf growled with pleasure, his mouth searching for hers. He kissed her wildly, his hands roaming her naked body. He stroked her skin, teasing every possible erogenous zone. Her moans and cries were as sweet as a siren's song; the quiver of her breasts as she tried to catch her breath spellbinding. He hovered over her, his thrusts pushing her ever closer to another intense burst of pleasure.

His breath was harsh, his hands rough on her body. He felt the grip of the first spurt of pleasure. It ripped through him with razor sharp talons, stealing his breath. His head fell back and he roared his bliss. He felt her pussy convulse and her hands dug into his back. She held him against her, gasping out her love for him.

It was almost more than either of them could handle. His heart thudded in his chest. Hers pulsed against him. He heard her sharp intake of breath and then he went blind and deaf with satisfaction.

Her hands stroked him. Her body melted into the softness of the bed. She laughed huskily as he relaxed against her.

Her laughter seemed to wake him and he rolled, pulling her against his side. His fingers moved over her face, lifting her chin.

"What are you laughing at?" he teased.

"It seems I've tamed the mighty Wulf," she laughed. She lifted his hand and then let it fall back to the bed limply. "Yes, he's now domesticated."

"If any woman could do it, it was definitely you, my love." He laughed along with her, bending his head to kiss her lips gently.

She let her palm rest against his cheek. "My Wulf. For now and always."

"Yes," he repeated. "For now and always."