

A sunset scene over a body of water. The sun is a bright yellow circle in the center of the sky, casting a long, shimmering reflection on the water's surface. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a pale, hazy blue at the top. Silhouetted landmasses are visible on the left and right sides of the water. The overall mood is peaceful and romantic.

Forever,
My Knight

Lee Ann
Dansby

With special appreciation to
Robert and Elizabeth Cook

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



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To my mom, Pat Dansby,
who always believed in me,
and without whose encouragement
this book may never have been written.

And to my critique partners, Gerry Bartlett,
Audrey Compton, and Kimberly Rangel for
their unflagging patience and persistence
in helping me improve my craft.



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Chapter One



Ralston Manor, England, January 7, 1067

She prayed he would kill her.

Kaela stood in the center of the room, her hands lashed together, tied to a rope that hung from a center beam in the ceiling. She struggled to show no expression, trying to display a calm in deep contrast to the terror that filled her. She bit down on her lip to keep from begging for mercy and tasted her own blood. Her cries would only turn his rage to lust. Then the unthinkable would happen.

Dear Lord, deliver me from this torment. If only God would take her now, let the pain from the lash of his whip take her life. She welcomed death over the rape she knew would follow the beating. Kaela still heard Broderick's cruel laughter as the lash had ripped through the soft fabric of her bbliaut. He had remarkable skill with the whip, and stripped her to the waist without once cutting into

her tender flesh.

He stood in front of her, lifted her tear-streaked face, and said, "Ah, Kaela, tears I see, but no cries for mercy from thy lips?" He smiled, a cold vicious smile. "No matter, your screams will begin soon enough when I take your maidenhead. Did you really think you could hide behind Chaldron's walls forever? 'Tis the truth you escaped me three summers past with only a beating, but you are my captive now, milady. I offered you marriage then and you shunned me. Now you will pay."

Kaela fought to control the panic swirling inside her. *No fear... no emotion...* She matched Broderick stare for stare, and bit back the angry retort she knew would only provoke him. She had learned at a young age that to show this man anything save cold indifference was dangerous. Deadly.

Broderick's whip whistled through the air and came down against the wall with a loud crack. She flinched. He threw back his head and roared with laughter; a harsh, vulgar sound that scraped across her raw nerves.

"For three long years I've waited for this day. I practiced patience while you hid behind Chaldron's walls and Jacob's protection. There's no one here to protect you this time, Kaela," he said. He ran his callused hands possessively over her breasts. Pure enjoyment, though fleeting,

flashed through his eyes. Now, she knew he wanted more. He wanted her.

Kaela trembled with revulsion; her worst nightmare had come true. She would never forget Broderick's first beating. She carried the scars from his whip not only on her back, but also in her soul. He would have raped her if Jacob had not come. They had been hunting when Broderick separated her from the others and led her deep into the woods. He had proposed marriage and, when she'd scorned him, had gone into a rage. Now, once again, she found herself at the devil's mercy.

His whip hissed and cracked, the sound slicing through the air, and her soul; the stinging lash close to her flesh. Close... too close.

Dear God, deliver me from this madness!

As if in answer to her prayer, she heard heavy footsteps coming down the hall. The door crashed open. Walter, Broderick's second in command, rushed into the room.

"My lord," Walter said, "a legion of Norman warriors has been spied up on the ridge. They are preparing to attack."

"So, they are finally here." Broderick tossed his whip aside. "Aye, let the Norman bastards come. Call the men to arms, Walter. We will give them a fight they will not soon forget."

Broderick turned to Kaela, grabbed her chin and squeezed until she cried out.

"Alas, much as it grieves me, cousin, this little

tryst will have to wait. Once I've taken care of these Norman bastards, I will at long last take care of you."

Pulling his sword from its sheath, he reached up and cut the rope from the crossbeam. Kaela fell to the floor and curled herself into a protective ball to ward off the kick she knew would come.

He didn't disappoint her. His boot landed brutally in the small of her back. Pain splintered through her. A burst of white-hot light clouded her vision. She sent a silent litany to the heavens in thanks for her deliverance, then her fervent prayers ceased as she sank into blessed blackness.



East Ridge, Overlooking Ralston Manor

Cameron D'Abernon stood beside the campfire and assessed the warriors gathered round him. In full armor, they were a fearsome sight, one that would strike terror in the heart of a stranger. But Cameron knew them for their loyalty and strength of purpose. For the coming battle, there could be no better company. They seemed oblivious to the bitter cold as they discussed their plans. The full moon rode high in the sky, illuminating the perimeter walls of Ralston Manor in the distance.

Johnathan, a strapping man of six feet with hazel eyes and brown hair, looked to his leader,

towering over him by several inches. “What say you of Broderick of Ralston, my lord? Will this Saxon give us much sport?”

“Aye,” Cameron replied, fixing a steely gaze on his second in command. “’Tis said he is a fearsome warrior, but he lost over half his men in the battle at Hastings.”

“Much favored by King Harold, he was, and fought at his side in that bloody battle,” Patrick, another of Cameron’s loyal vassals, added. “’Tis also thought this bloody cur is one of the leaders of the Saxon resistance and was behind the surprise attack that nearly took Baron Lloyd to an early grave last month.”

The warriors looked up at the sound of a rider approaching. “Hail, Andrew!” Johnathan shouted. “How be the defenses at Ralston Manor?”

Andrew dismounted from his destrier, handed the reins to an eager page, and walked into the circle of men surrounding the fire. He looked directly at his brother, Cameron, and cast the cloak from his armor.

Johnathan laughed. “The dirty beggar turns once more into the fearsome knight.” Laughter echoed around the camp.

“My lord,” Andrew said, “their defenses are greatly weakened. The reports of Broderick’s losses at Hastings are true, and he lost several more in his attack on Baron Lloyd. I could count only sixty men left to defend the town. The

northern wall appears the weakest. I saw several places where the wood was charred from a previous attack, and has yet to be replaced. The tower guard is half what it should be.”

“What of their defenses?” Cameron asked.

“Four hoardings have been erected at the wall. They are well positioned, but their supply of boulders is low. They are working to remedy that, but to fully stock the galleries will take at least a fortnight.”

“How long will their present supply last?” Patrick asked.

“No more than a few hours,” Andrew said.

“What of catapults?” Cameron asked.

“I saw only one, and the supply of stones is less than half what it should be.”

“What of the gate?” Johnathan asked.

Andrew smiled. “Double doors-studded with iron. No barbican, or portcullis. Our battering ram will easily see its way through. They have plenty of water, but their food supply is low.”

Cameron acknowledged this information with a nod to his younger brother. The report confirmed his suspicions. He gazed around the campfire, looking each loyal vassal in the eye. Each met his gaze in return. Pride and affection welled inside of him for these men who had pledged their loyalty and their lives, and had fought so valiantly at his side.

“We attack. I am anxious to get this matter

taken care of. Our men have been in battle since we landed at Hastings in October, and the weather continues to grow bitter. This is the last holding William has ordered us to secure. I am eager to return to London and see our King. He has promised a large fief to me for our efforts and I am impatient to see our new home.”

Patrick laughed, poking Cameron in his ribs. “Possibly you are eager to see the wench who comes with the holding. Our William is eager to marry off the wives and daughters of the dead Saxon warriors to help secure the holdings and unite England and Normandy.”

Cameron scowled. “Nay, Patrick, you know I will not take a wife. William will not ask it of me.”

Lesser men would have been cowed by the cold anger in Cameron’s eyes, but his vassals knew him well, and understood his pain. Andrew stepped forward to take Cameron by the shoulders.

“Come, brother, put Elizabeth’s treachery behind you. ’Tis years past. You must think of your future and an heir to all that will be yours in this new land.”

“Nay, Andrew, I will leave the begetting of an heir to you, little brother. ’Tis happy I will be to bequeath all that is mine to a nephew.”

Cameron knelt close to the fire and sketched his plan on the bare earth.

“Thorsen, you will lead the attack on the

bastions. We will concentrate on the north wall. Patrick, you will move in first with the mantlets. Have the archers fire the wall. Once it's aflame, we will no longer have to worry about the missiles being dropped from the hoardings. When you've fired the wall, switch to arrows and aim for the men-at-arms. 'Twill give Thorsen the cover he needs to reach the bastions with the scaling ladders. Johnathan, Andrew, and I will lead the charge on the gate."

With that, Cameron stood and took his helmet from his page. Mounting his destrier, he raised his fist in the air to signal his men. His voice, like thunder, pierced the night. "We ride!"

Chapter Two



Ralston Manor, January 27, 1067

The nightmare woke her. Drenched with sweat, heart pounding, Kaela clutched the bed covers and tried to calm herself with several deep breaths. Eight long weeks had passed since Broderick abducted her and brought her to Ralston Manor. The nightmare had returned immediately upon her arrival, as if it had been waiting for her.

Shivering in the darkness, the nightmare still fresh in her mind, Kaela decided the demon in her dreams was worse than her real life nemesis. Thank God, the Normans had begun their siege over a fortnight ago. Broderick had been too busy with his defenses to bother with her. But her dreams she could not evade... not without the opiate. She had suffered the nightmare for months after the first attack, until she had finally concocted a sleeping draught strong enough to quiet the

night demons. But she had felt ashamed to need it, had told no one about her weakness. She had no draught here, and the Broderick of her dreams was even more tormenting than the Broderick who lived and breathed and held her captive.

At times she wished Broderick would come and be done with her. At least the agony of waiting, of facing the nightmare night after night, would end.

The door to her chamber creaked open. Kaela tried to keep her breathing slow and steady, feigning sleep. Her heart raced at the thought that Broderick might have come at last.

“Milady,” a soft voice whispered.

Kaela opened her eyes and smiled with relief at the old woman looking down at her.

“Oh, Maude, ’Tis you. I feared Broderick had returned.”

“There, there, milady,” Maude crooned, patting Kaela’s shoulder. “’Tis only Arik and I.”

Kaela looked past Maude to see Arik standing silently behind the nursemaid, his soft, childlike eyes peering into her own, a worried look on his face. Maude had been Kaela’s nursemaid since she was a wee babe. Arik, Maude’s simple-minded son, was ten years older than Kaela and never far from his mother’s side. They had played together as children. She had been shocked and relieved when Maude and Arik had appeared at Ralston Manor not long after she was taken. They had pretended to be strangers lest Broderick send the

old woman away. Fortunately, Broderick had been much too busy with the Normans to wonder about the old woman and her half-wit son. Kaela had Maude to thank for what comforts she had.

“What brings you here at this hour?”

Maude looked nervously over her shoulder and told Arik to close the door. She sat down on the bed next to her mistress and whispered, “’Tis time to make our escape, milady. The Norman troops have finally broken through the outer wall and will shortly breach the inner gates as well.”

Kaela bolted upright. “We must hurry then. Is everything ready?”

“Aye, mistress, just as ye requested. The mules are hidden in the forest aback of the west wall. I have brought clothing for ye to disguise yourself as a boy. All is ready. Ye have only to change and we can be on our way.”

“What of the guards at the west wall?” Shivering against the cold, Kaela quickly pulled the bed drapes and donned the boy’s disguise.

“There was only one. Arik knocked him out. The rest have gone to help with the attack at the north wall.”

“Then we must make haste.” Kaela pulled back the bed drapes and stepped forward. “What say you?”

Maude gasped. “Why, I wouldn’t know ye. Ye look like a lad, but you’re the cleanest lad this keep has ever seen.”

“’Tis naught to worry over. By the time we get through the secret passageway, I will be filthy,” Kaela replied.

Smiling to herself, Kaela watched Arik push the bed aside to reveal the secret opening in the wall. She would be forever grateful to her father for telling her stories of his childhood escapades within Ralston’s secret passageways. ’Twas apparent Broderick had no knowledge of the hidden tunnel, else he would not have given her access to this chamber. Kaela picked up the torch from the wall sconce and led the way into the dark and dirty passageway. The air was stale and musty and she knew what kind of creatures called such a dark damp place their home. She would not contemplate going into such a place if she had a choice, but this passage held their only means of escape.

They stopped just inside the entrance and Arik pulled the bed back in place as Maude and Kaela picked up the bundles of food and supplies placed there earlier. Holding the torch high above her head to help light their way, Kaela slowly moved through the damp passage. Maude and Arik followed close behind her.

“What of Broderick?” Kaela asked.

“He was in the North Tower securing his defenses the last I saw him. I overheard him tell William to prepare for their escape. The dastard will ride into the hills before the dawn. He will continue to hide out and fight the Normans.”

"'Tis foolish," Kaela replied. "He might as well resign himself to the fact the Saxon reign ended with Harold's death. William of Normandy has a legal claim to the throne. The deed is done."

"Aye, milady, but I am surprised ye take this news so calmly. After all, ye are heiress to Chaldron Castle. 'Tis a large and profitable shire and I know how much ye love the keep."

"'Tis true, Maude, the only happy times I remember were spent there with my mother and father. But they are long in their grave. Now that King Harold is dead, and England has been conquered by the Normans, it will make no difference that my father left Chaldron to me and to the husband of my choosing. Nay, all that has changed. I will be given in marriage to a man of the King's choosing. We can only hope we will be allowed to stay at Chaldron. As far as Broderick is concerned, I have known only abuse by his hand. He plans to ravish me. If he does not kill me, he will marry me off to one of his despicable friends, and my life will be a living hell. I will take my chances with the Normans. 'Tis said King William is marrying his barons to the Saxon widows and daughters. Mayhap, I will be lucky enough to be given in marriage to a very old baron, who will no longer want a maid to warm his bed. I can only pray 'Tis so, for I cannot abide any man's touch."

"Now lass," Maude replied, "ye have never

known any other's touch except Broderick's. Not all men are as cruel and brutal. That man has a black heart, always has. Even when he was a young lad, I saw his cruelty with animals and his father's serfs. I also saw the way he lusted after ye. And hated ye, too, he did. He resents the inheritance your father left ye. He always felt Chaldron should go to him, even though he had no blood claim. I fear ye are wrong that Broderick would give ye to another. Nay, the cur plans to keep ye for himself."

Kaela felt sickened at Maude's words, and whirled around in the tunnel to face her. "What say you, Maude?"

"Aye, mistress, the filthy bastard planned to marry ye himself to gain your inheritance and after he had tired of ye, he planned to kill ye. Doubt me not, for I heard these black words from his very own lips not a sennight ago."

Kaela felt the color drain from her face. She swayed against the tunnel wall, dropping the torch. Arik reached out his big hands to steady her and snatched up the torch.

"Worry not, Kaela, I'll not let anyone harm ye." Arik kept his warm brown gaze on hers.

"Thank you, Arik." Kaela smiled up at him, knowing in his child's mind he did not understand all Maude had said. She resisted the urge to sob out all her hurt and frustration. Now was not the time or place. With a swipe at her tears, she

straightened her backbone, and took the torch from Arik. She didn't know why Maude's words shocked her so. Since her parents had died, she had come to expect the worst and had yet to be disappointed.

"We must hurry now. We cannot be away too soon, lest Broderick catches up with us. From what you say, Maude, I am sure he plans to take me with him and will soon discover I have escaped. If we are lucky, he will be anxious to go into hiding and will not take time to search for me."

"Aye, but he knows ye will return to Chaldron, and he will come for ye there. His mind is twisted with hatred and he will not stop until he has ye."

A cold chill passed through Kaela's heart at Maude's words. "Mayhap by then I will be married to another, a man strong enough to defend my home, or Broderick will have already fallen to the Norman sword."

"We can only pray 'Tis so." Maude sighed. "'Twas by God's grace that ye have escaped Broderick's evil hands once more. 'Tis sorry I am that Arik and I could not have protected ye from him three summers ago, milady. Ye will carry the scars from his whip to your grave."

"I pray no man will want to bed me when he sees my scars. Then the nightmare I suffered at Broderick's hand would have been worth it," Kaela replied bitterly. "You did protect me,

Maude. 'Tis only because you have helped me these last two months that I have been able to preserve my virginity."

"'Twas your idea to rub the poison vines that cause the rash on your body, milady. I only brought them to ye."

"Aye," Kaela said and smiled at her. "It worked quite well, too. For more than a fortnight Broderick would not touch me, knowing how contagious I was. But 'twas your idea to put the herbs in the mutton that caused the severe stomach cramps. The fool never did figure out he had been poisoned."

"It took him days to get his strength back once the cramps finally stopped." Maude smiled.

They reached the end of the tunnel and Arik cleared away the cobwebs that covered the small hatch. Neglect made the hatch difficult to open and Kaela stepped back. Arik put all his strength behind forcing the small door open. Kaela doused the torch and waited while Arik cautiously stuck his head through the opening. At his signal that all was clear, they quickly climbed out into the dark, bitterly cold night. Arik shut the hatch, careful to make as little noise as possible, and covered it with dirt and branches, while Kaela looked to the outer wall for any sign that they'd been discovered. Once assured that no one was about, they hurried to the protection of the nearby trees.

Silently, they walked into the deep woods, to

the place where Arik had hidden the mules. The journey to Chaldron was only a night's ride and Kaela was eager to return to her home. The last eight weeks had been hell and she would never forget them. She had lost her innocence while keeping her virginity.

A bitter wind blew from the north, so strong the trees whipped in a frenzy. They made their way homeward, giving the Norman camp a wide berth as they circled around and headed south. Kaela wondered about the Norman warriors who stormed Ralston and wished them God's speed. Gossip said the Black Wolf, the fiercest of the Norman knights, led the attack. She had heard stories about him all her life, and although probably only rumor that it was indeed him, she hoped with all her heart it was so. Such an accomplished warrior would be able to stop Broderick's escape and slay him. Then and only then would she feel safe.

As they rode, she brushed against a tree branch and winced when it slapped against her back, a cruel reminder of Broderick's whip. A fortnight had passed since Broderick had so brutally tormented her, but she still felt the pain, still remembered his threats. She was lucky that the Normans had attacked when they had, keeping Broderick too occupied in battle to finish her off. Whoever the Norman knight storming Ralston Manor was, he had saved her life. Her own life she would gladly

give him in return for saving her from Broderick's hands, but her maidenhead she would give no man. At least not willingly. She would rather die at her own hand.



Cameron and his vassals rode into Ralston Manor. The battle had been over for hours now, and they had just finished searching the countryside for Broderick and his men. The coward had left the hall sometime during the night with his most loyal men. From what Cameron could gather from Broderick's steward, James, the men had escaped through a hidden passageway.

Cameron knew the Saxons would soon be wiped out. The resistance was not all that large. Many knights had been slain, and those who had lived had already pledged fealty to William. Only a few stubborn barons continued to fight. For now he must secure this holding and establish order. Then he could return to his king. He would deal with Broderick of Ralston later.



Dark, angry clouds hung heavily in the sky, threatening rain. Kaela, Maude, and Arik made their way up the hill to Chaldron Castle. They had been seen by the guards who lowered the

drawbridge with a loud rattle of chains. As soon as the bridge crashed into place, Windrey, the old gatekeeper, flung open the gates. The man wept openly, exclaiming over her return. Kaela nodded and smiled. He had been with her father since they were children and had stayed on to help her care for Chaldron after her parents' death, as had most of her father's people. Though old and few in number, her father's vassals served her well. All came out to meet them as they entered the outer bailey and a loud cheer rose from the crowd gathered there when they saw their beloved mistress return home safely.

Jacob came forward to help Kaela dismount, a look of relief on his face that quickly changed to a worried frown when he put his large hands around her small waist to help her dismount. Seeing the anxiety in his wizened old face, Kaela gave him a bright smile.

"'Tis not as bad as it looks, Jacob. All I need is some rest and a hot meal. Broderick was too busy with the Normans to pay me much heed. Besides, you know I am far too obstinate to stay down for long."

"Aye, Mistress," Jacob boasted, "I believe I know that only too well. Thank God ye are safe." He reached out and gave her a mighty squeeze, almost crushing the breath from her.

The man didn't know his own strength. She patted his arm affectionately as they walked

together through the inner bailey towards the keep. Kaela felt so good to be home; she had feared she would never see her beloved Chaldron again. She felt warmed by the greetings from her loyal people.

A delighted squeal greeted her when she entered the keep and looked up to see Brenna flying down the stairs towards her. Her impetuous cousin threw herself into Kaela's arms and hugged her fiercely, tears of joy streaming down her face.

"Oh, cousin, 'Tis glad I am that you are home. I have done naught but pray for your safe return. Are you all right? Did that devil harm you? Were you very frightened? How ever did you escape? Did you kill the devil?"

Kaela shook her head, laughter bubbling up inside her. "Nay, Brenna, I did not kill the devil and I am much too tired now to give you the story of my trials over the last two months. Right now I want a warm bath, a hot meal, and a long nap. I will tell the tale this eve whilst we sup."

"Aye, Kaela, of course you need your rest. God's teeth, you do look a fright dressed in those filthy boy's clothes, and 'Tis obvious by the dark circles under your eyes that you have not slept in days. A bath and a nap are just the thing," Brenna said.

"I'll prepare one for ye right away, milady," Maude said.

“Nay, Maude, you and Arik are as travel worn as I. You will both take to your beds immediately. Have Helen or one of the other girls take care of me.” With that Kaela made her way up the stairs and down the hall to her chamber.

After her bath, Kaela put on a clean shift and climbed wearily into her bed. She had barely closed her eyes when she heard the door to her chamber open and looked up to see a tiny figure running toward her. Kaela sat up and held her arms out to pull the little girl up onto the bed and into her lap.

“Ah, there you are, Mattie. I was wondering when you would show up. God’s truth, I missed you, sweet pea,” Kaela said.

Mattie wrapped her arms around Kaela’s neck and hugged her tightly.

“When I woke up from my nap, Nanny told me you were home,” Mattie told her in a high sweet voice. Mattie’s blue eyes were large and luminous as she gazed up at Kaela, a look of adoration on her chubby face. “I am so glad you are home, Kaela. Why did you sneak away like that?”

Kaela laughed and pulled Mattie close again, running her fingers through fat black ringlets. “I didn’t sneak away my little sweet pea, but I did have to leave suddenly. I’m sorry that I didn’t have time to tell you. I’m back now and I won’t leave you again,” Kaela said gently.

“Promise?”

“I promise, sweeting.”

Kaela loved her youngest cousin with all her heart. Mattie was only four summers, but she had been with Kaela since she was a babe. Mattie and Brenna had come to Chaldron to live when their parents had died of the plague. Kaela, Mattie, and Brenna had all lost their parents to that terrible sickness three summers ago. Kaela had come to feel more like a mother to Mattie than a cousin or a sister.

Thanking God she had been able to return, Kaela held Mattie close, breathing in her sweet baby scent. Tears pricked her eyelids, quickly forgotten when Mattie began to squirm.

“Did you help Brenna while I was away?” Kaela asked, tickling the little girl until she squealed with delight.

“She’s too bossy. I like you better, Kaela.” Mattie stuck a thumb in her mouth and snuggled against Kaela’s side.

Kaela laughed. “I think bossy is a good word for Brenna, but ’Tis not that she means to be so.”

Mattie snorted. “Hmph! She likes to be boss!”

“Why don’t you go and see if you can help her now, sweet pea. ’Twas a long journey home and I sorely need to rest.”

“All right, Kaela, but hurry. I want to show you the doll Jacob made for me.” Mattie hugged her one more time. She backed up slowly, scooted off the bed, and slipped quietly from the chamber.

Several hours later Kaela returned to the hall feeling much like her old self again. Thank God she had slept dreamlessly. Jacob and Brenna greeted her warmly and they sat down to a hearty dinner, obviously put together to please the long-absent mistress, as well as “fatten her up” as the cook said. Kaela briefly explained her ordeal with Broderick, skipping over the worst of it.

“We’ve heard naught of the siege, but there is no doubt the Normans will take Ralston,” Jacob said. He shook his head. “If I know Broderick, he will run like the coward he is before the Normans breach the Manor’s fortifications.”

Kaela nodded her agreement. An unease inside told her that Broderick was still alive and well. “Aye, Jacob. He will flee to fight another day. He leads the Saxon rebels.”

Jacob’s face was grim. “I will warn the men to keep an eye out for him. While that cur lives you are in danger.”

“You are right, something must be done about Broderick. I fear his mind has snapped. He will never give up.” Kaela clasped her hands to stop their trembling. The concern on Jacob’s face brought tears perilously close to the surface. She smiled tremulously. “Tell me, Jacob, how went your visit with William of Normandy? Did all go well?”

“Aye, my lady,” Jacob replied. “I was received cordially, and King William accepted my pledge of fealty and loyalty to the new crown. He was not

surprised that you wanted to pledge your loyalty and that of all Chaldron. He is familiar with the situation here. He knew your father. They met years ago in Normandy when Charles accompanied Edward the Confessor there. Your father preferred Norman ways, as did our King Edward, and recognized William's claim to the throne. Charles cared not that William was a bastard, and William appreciated his friendship. I am sure he will take this into consideration when he decides what to do with Chaldron."

"Did you explain to him my unusual circumstances?"

"I told him Charles had left Chaldron to you, and had given you the freedom to choose your own husband. God's truth, the King was greatly amused by this, as was Matilda, his wife. I believe they are most curious to meet you. As for honoring your father's request, I believe you know there's little chance of that, Kaela."

"I do not expect it, Jacob. That would be too much to hope for." Kaela sighed. If only she had been born a male. There would be no thought then of taking her home from her.

"Holy Saint Ambrose's bones, I don't see why not," Brenna exclaimed. "Your father was a wise and loving man. 'Tis natural he would want his only child to inherit his holdings. And why shouldn't you be able to choose your own husband? God's truth, no man will be choosing me if I don't

want to be chosen!”

“’Tis not for you to worry over, Brenna. No man in his right mind would tie himself to that mouth of yours,” Jacob said with a grin.

Brenna beamed back at him. “Aye, don’t I know it, Jacob. The tongue can be a mighty sword, and most effective. Since I have no holdings and only a small dowry left to me by my dear parents, I do not think I have to worry overmuch. Nay, I will be choosing my own husband, and of course the fortunate man will only hear honeyed words from these lips.”

“’Tis something I cannot wait to see,” Kaela laughed.

“Aye, it will be something to behold, our Brenna wooing a man to her bed.”

At that Brenna blushed deeply. “Jacob, such talk in front of ladies.”

Jacob grinned with a devilish glint in his eye as he looked at Kaela. “My apologies, Kaela.”

“Oh, you rogue,” Brenna teased, “you will not rile my temper tonight. ’Tis too happy I am to have our Kaela home.”

“William will let us know soon enough what his wishes are. Until then we will concentrate on running Chaldron the way my father saw fit. The future will care for itself.”

A dark shadow crossed Jacob’s face. Kaela met his gaze and saw the guilt mirrored there. She reached over and took his hand in hers.

“You could have done naught, Jacob. ’Tis over now. Let it be.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Let me speak, Kaela. This needs to be said.” Jacob sighed. When he spoke, his voice had gone soft and very gentle. Kaela felt her throat tighten, and knew without looking that tears streamed down Brenna’s face. He continued to speak very slowly, holding her hand tightly in his. “I was out of my mind with worry when I returned to Chaldron and Brenna told me what had happened. My guilt weighs heavy for leaving you unprotected. Had I been here, I do not believe Broderick would have been so bold. I am not a young man any longer, but I still have my strength, and I know Broderick fears me.”

Kaela started to silence him, but he raised his hand to stop her.

“God’s truth, necessity bade me to go to William, and I know it was your decision to send me, but I will feel guilty for the rest of my life that I was not here to protect you, nor was I able to go after you. We do not have enough men to protect Chaldron in these unstable times, much less mount an attack on Ralston. Nay, the decision Brenna made to send Maude and Arik after you was a wise one,” he said, smiling across the table at Brenna. “She knew Broderick would see the old servant and her simple-minded son as no threat and would allow them entrance into the

hall. Brenna is most clever, just as you are. Broderick has always underestimated you, but Brenna didn't. She knew that if it was possible for you to escape, you would find a way. Thank God she was right."

"Thank you, Brenna. I owe my life to your cleverness."

"Nay, Kaela, do not thank me. I wish I could have ridden after you myself..." Brenna shook her head and dashed away a tear. "You have not told all that you suffered at Broderick's hand. I questioned Maude extensively this afternoon, and she left nothing out of the telling. As God is my witness, Kaela, that bastard will never again touch you. Aye, the whoreson will pay dearly for what he has done."

Kaela felt her control slipping as waves of shame washed over her. She looked away, unable to bear their scrutiny. Fighting the sobs that threatened to escape her, she remembered Broderick's hands on her body, and heard again his cruel laughter. "I should never have been so foolish as to leave the keep unescorted. I'll not do so again." She struggled to keep the tremor from her voice and turned to Brenna, giving her a hug. "Come, cousin, enough of such laments. 'Tis past and I am safely home. Why don't you see if you can beat this stubborn old man at chess?"

"'Tis out of pity that I let him win," Brenna said, with a wicked twinkle in her eye.

“God’s bones, the girl is daft,” Jacob replied, snorting.

“I wager my coin on Brenna this round, Jacob. You said yourself, she is a very clever girl.”

“Why I am sure I never said any such thing about this brat.”

“I will leave you to it then,” Kaela said, as she walked toward the stairway leading to the third floor and her bedchamber. “This has been a very long day and I bid you good eve.”

Once in her chamber, she dismissed Sarah, her maid, and stripped down to her shift. She wrapped herself in a blanket and pulled her chair very close to the fire. So many thoughts whirled through her mind she almost felt dizzy. Her whole future was so uncertain. What would King William do? She was sure he would give her in marriage. Chaldron was a large and profitable holding. William would award her lands to one of his best knights. Her practical mind realized that Chaldron needed a strong man to hold it and strong warriors to protect its walls.

She and Jacob had done a good job managing the shire since her father’s death, but their freedom could not last. Her father had never intended for it to be so. She knew he had expected her to marry quickly. She had intended to herself... before Broderick’s attack three years ago. Then the nightmares had come...

When suitors came to call, she inevitably

found an excuse to send them on their way. Always she told herself she would soon take the time to choose a husband. Now time had run out and the choice would no longer be hers.

She wondered if she could use her father's relationship with William to help her cause, then sighed in frustration. King William did not know her at all, and she was a mere woman who wouldn't even be allowed to ask for an audience with her new king. She could only pray he would be kind to her.

Chaldron Castle, one of the largest holdings in England, and much advanced in its design and construction, had been built by her father, a man much before his time. He had started many new and innovative ways of farming.

King William would not give Chaldron to just any man, but to one of his most loyal barons, one fierce enough to hold it at all cost. Would he choose the Black Wolf?

He was certainly the fiercest of all William's warriors. The thought alone gave her cold chills. Perhaps he already had a wife. She had no way of knowing. And even if he did, she had no guarantee William would not give her to another knight and Chaldron to someone else. She would pray that did not happen. As much as she feared being given to a man in marriage, she knew she could not bear leaving Chaldron and the people she loved so dearly.

She hated this war. So many noble Saxon warriors had been killed, their holdings lost. King Edward had surrounded himself with his Norman friends, as had her father. They both had a great dislike for Harold, who had no real claim to the throne. William of Normandy did, even if he was a bastard. Harold had been crowned King by the Witan because he was the most powerful Earl in England at the time of Edward's death.

Her father would have wanted William on the throne. If Harold had held the throne, he would have taken Chaldron away from her. Neither man would have allowed her to choose her own husband. No matter who reigned, she would lose. Kaela agreed with Brenna—how terribly unfair that women had no rights. She wished her future to be **her own choice. Instead, the best she could hope for** was an amiable husband, or one who ignored her.

Kaela pushed thoughts of the future away as she rose from her chair and crossed to the bed. She crawled beneath the covers and closed her eyes in exhaustion. Surely tonight she would sleep.



He was closer. The footsteps more pronounced. She ran faster, stumbling in the dark passageway. She had to get away—up ahead a light beckoned her. She must reach the light. She must! Then she would be safe.

Her heart pounded with fear as she listened to the eerie sound of her name echoing down the passageway. She increased her speed once again, running toward the light. She stumbled and landed hard against the cold dirt floor. Something skittered across her hand and she screamed.

His laughter echoed back to her as she forced herself to her feet. She ran blindly now, searching for the light. Suddenly Broderick stood before her—his eyes, dear God, his eyes...

Kaela awoke with a start. Her eyes immediately searched the room. Alone. *The dream again. Sweet Jesu, would she ever be free of it.* She took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart. Her sweat-drenched body trembled violently and she swore an oath as she threw back the covers and crawled from the bed. She grabbed her cloak and made her way silently out of the keep. The moon lit her way to the drying shed where she kept her herbs and medicines. Once inside she crossed immediately to the table against the far wall and began to mix the sleeping draught, promising herself it would only be for tonight. She had controlled herself before, she could do so again. She would find the strength to overcome her nightmares. For now, however, she had to sleep.

She sent a silent plea to the heavens that God would be merciful with her.

God's mercy ran out one week later...

Chapter Three



Kaela stood in the great hall giving instructions to Maude and Sarah regarding their duties for the day, when Jacob rushed in to tell her that riders approached. Together, Kaela and Jacob climbed to the walkway atop the outer wall and watched the riders coming in from the west.

“They’re Normans,” Jacob said.

“Aye,” Kaela replied. “From the looks of the column, there is a whole army. What do you think this means, Jacob?”

“Mayhap they carry a missive from the King. Whatever it is, there is nothing to worry about, Kaela. William assured me all would be well. Take heart, girl, for we will know soon enough.”

Jacob turned from her and issued orders to open the drawbridge and prepare to open the gates. Climbing back down the ladder, Kaela turned to Jacob.

“I will await word from you in my chamber. ’Tis best that you greet these visitors first and

apprise me of the situation.”

Jacob smiled and nodded in understanding. Kaela would watch the Normans and assess the situation before showing herself.

Once in her chamber, Kaela stepped out onto the parapet where she could view the inner bailey. She wore her heavy cloak to protect her from the harsh cold, the hood pulled over her head. Her whole body tingled with anticipation and dread as she watched the warriors approach. Well over ten-score, they all wore battle armor.

They made an intimidating picture. Had they been the enemy, she would have no hope for Chaldron. She did not have half as many warriors as she saw before her now, their armor glinting so brightly it blinded her when the sun peeked out from a cloud. Kaela looked at the banner the army carried—a snarling wolf emblazoned in silver, on a black background. The Black Wolf, she thought, and searched the warriors for a glimpse of the legend.

Five men broke away from the rest and rode their massive warhorses across the drawbridge, entering the outer bailey where Jacob and his men stood ready to greet them. The men looked fierce and huge sitting astride their destriers. But the warrior in the center stood out above the other four who drew their horses in and lined up behind their leader.

The Black Wolf—Kaela had no doubt. Garbed

entirely in black, he rode a black horse draped in black. The warrior's chain mail gleamed in contrast and his shield depicted the snarling head of a wolf.

Kaela watched Jacob step forward to greet the warrior. The man dismounted and stood next to Jacob, towering over him. She noticed how he observed all the activity around him.

Suddenly, the warrior glanced up and his gaze met hers. Stunned by his piercing blue eyes, she took a step back and leaned against the doorway. Why did she feel as if he could see into her very soul? Ridiculous, yet her body trembled.

The door to Kaela's chamber flew open and Brenna hurried in with Mattie in tow. "Kaela, did you see? There is a whole army out there," Brenna announced, stepping out on the parapet and leaning precariously over the balustrade, her red hair flying in the wind.

Kaela reached out and clutched Brenna's bbliaut, pulling her back inside. "You fool, they can see you! Is that the kind of first impression you want to make?"

"Don't be silly, cousin. They're Normans. What difference does it make?" Brenna retorted.

"More than you realize, I think," Kaela replied.

Mattie tugged on Brenna's gown. "Hold me up, Brenna! I want to see. Is it the devil? Has he come back?" Her eyes were wide with fear.

Kaela swept Mattie up into her arms. "Nay, Mattie, see for yourself—these men are our new

friends. They come from Normandy and were sent by our new King. They will not hurt us, sweet pea.”

Mattie let out a squeal when she saw all the horses and warriors down below. “Look, look at the big man in black, Kaela.”

“Where?” Brenna stuck her head out again.

“Down there, see him,” Mattie said, pointing down and waving to the man. “He is looking right at us.”

Mortified, Kaela looked down and met the warrior’s gaze again. He looked astonished, then suddenly threw back his head and laughed.

Kaela whirled around, dragging Mattie and Brenna back inside her chamber. Her face burned with embarrassment.

“Take Mattie and change her gown, Brenna, and change your own as well,” Kaela ordered. “We want to look our best when we greet these Normans. Dress Mattie in her blue bliaut, and why don’t you wear your green one? It goes nicely with your hair.”

“’Tis naught to worry over, Kaela. I fail to see what all the fuss is about,” Brenna said, laughing over Kaela’s embarrassment.

“I have sworn fealty to their Norman King. He is now our King, Brenna. ’Tis no secret that the Normans feel we Saxons are a backward people. I am determined to show them they are wrong in their assumptions,” Kaela said, giving her cousin

a blistering look. “Just do as I say, and do not go downstairs until you are summoned.”

“Aye, your majesty,” Brenna retorted, then took Mattie by the hand and led her out of the room.



Cameron’s sharp gaze missed nothing while he admired the size and magnificence of Chaldron Castle. He had never seen anything quite like the design and wondered about the man who had built it. The creator had obviously been influenced by Norman building methods, but the design was even more impressive. He had first glimpsed the Castle over two hours ago, when he had crested the western ridge and seen the crenelated towers looming in the distance. He sat upon his stallion for several minutes, gazing down on the view before him, amazed. The village, larger than he expected, looked well kept and organized. The fields, as far as the eye could see, were being tilled and prepared for the coming spring planting.

A wooded area lay to the east and to the west with a beautiful meadow and a large herd of sheep grazing nearby. A small stream ran through the property, with a pond in the meadow’s center. A large mill stood next to the pond. Out from the village, the land formed rolling hills. Atop the hills loomed Chaldron Castle, large enough to discourage all but the most determined enemy.

The wall appeared to be over twenty feet high, with eight square bastions rising high above the outer wall. Two massive machicolated towers guarded the entrance passage, which was further defended by a drawbridge, a pair of iron studded doors, and two portcullises. A large moat surrounded the perimeter wall.

Now, standing inside the massive walls, he was appalled that so few knights had been retained here. Not even half the number needed to defend such a holding. He knew this must not have always been the case, for the castle could easily house at least three hundred men. The well-maintained garrison, located on the keep's first floor, had no more than sixty men-at-arms in residence.

Entering the great hall with Jacob and his men, he immediately noticed the cleanliness, quite a contrast to most keeps. Fresh rushes lay on the floor, emanating a most pleasant odor of fresh rosemary. The room was large, at least twice the size of the great hall at his home in Normandy. The castle rose four stories high. The barracks filled the keep's first floor with a long hall running down the center to divide the rooms. At the barracks' rear, a stone stairway led to the second floor and opened onto the great hall.

Whitewashed walls, covered with tapestries to help ward off the dampness, added a warmth to the large room. A massive hearth filled a large part of the back wall. The fire blazing there gave

the room a warm and welcoming atmosphere. A long trestle table with several stools stood in the center on a raised platform, and there were several smaller trestle tables and benches positioned along the walls. Several large, highbacked chairs stood in front of the hearth. A chess set topped a small table near the chairs. Cameron turned to Jacob and complimented him on the hall's coziness.

"'Tis Lady Kaela who is responsible for all that you see. She takes great pride in her home," Jacob answered.

"Where is this lady you speak of, Jacob? Why is she not here to welcome us?" Cameron grinned. He had seen the lady only minutes before when they entered the bailey. At least he presumed the woman standing on the parapet looking down at him to be Lady Kaela. He had no idea whom the other lady might be, but the little girl laughing down at him had tugged at his heart, and he wondered about the child's identity. He had been told that Lady Kaela had yet to marry.

"Lady Kaela thought it best if I greeted you first, Baron, and inquired as to the reason for your visit," Jacob stated boldly.

"I have a message from the King, which I prefer to deliver to Lady Kaela myself, if you would be so kind as to fetch her, Jacob."

"Aye, Baron, if you will excuse me," Jacob said. He bowed to Cameron and turned toward the staircase that led to the third floor and what

Cameron thought to be the sleeping chambers.

Cameron approached the trestle table and joined his men. A comely serving wench brought the men ale to quench their thirst, along with several loaves of warm, crusty bread, wedges of yellow cheese, and dried apples and figs. Andrew, Johnathan, Patrick, and Thorsen were devouring the food, and eyeing the wench.

“Save some for your Baron,” Cameron teased. He shouldered Patrick aside and helped himself to a piece of bread and ale.

“What think you of Chaldron Keep, Baron? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“’Tis most impressive, Johnathan, of that there is no doubt.”

“Aye, eight guard towers, and barracks large enough to house three hundred soldiers,” Patrick said. “I would have loved to know the man who designed and built this fortress.”

“So would I.” Cameron nodded. “His defenses are impressive. Aye, the man had the mind of a warrior, but what amazes me is that he left it all to a mere woman. What could he have been thinking?”

“She is his daughter, Cameron, his only child,” Andrew said.

“I’ll not argue that, Andrew, but ’twas madness to leave his holding to a woman. ’Tis a miracle this keep has been managed so well. I am sure that is mostly due to Jacob. Did you notice how few soldiers are on retainer here? There are not

enough men to defend even a small fortress. The wench must be mad to think she can defend herself with so few men. God's truth, a woman could not possibly know of defense and battle strategies. Nay, I think her father let softness blind him, to do such foolishness."

"What, you dare besmirch my father, you great Norman oaf?"

Kaela startled the men with her outraged cry. They turned, to see a woman storm towards them.

"How dare you judge my father? Doubtless you Normans are the devil's very own bastards. God's truth, you are not worthy to worship at my father's grave. He was a wonderful man, kind, caring, and considerate. He certainly wasn't so little minded as to think women useless as you Normans do. My father gave me the freedom he would have given a son. He encouraged me to use my mind."

"A grave mistake, that." Cameron replied with a tight smile.

"But, my lady, such a great mind as yours might also glean that we are hardly the devil's spawn, or even bastard born, though I'll grant you our Christian names do reflect our father's fondness for a foreign wench who he stole and made his lawful wife." His smile vanished. "Taking a foreign bride is not an uncommon practice among many a conquering lord, though doubtless such a fortunate woman should be chosen not only for her fair face

but a sweet tongue.”

“How dare you ridicule me or my lack of soldiers?” Kaela raged.

What a temper! Blasted female. She had literally spit her words at him, and in perfect French, too. Where did she learn to speak his language? Her incredible green eyes flashed with indignation. Although she was tall for a woman, he could see the hint of full breast and slim hips beneath her purple bbliaut. Her hair, long, thick, rich with coppery highlights, hung loosely to her hips. A tightness gripped his body and he forced his vision from her hips to her outraged face, her look still spitting daggers at him.

Try as he might to fight it, his body responded and clear thinking became more difficult. He noticed he was not the only one affected by her beauty. His men each wore a stunned look, and something close to adoration shone in their eyes. Except for Thorsen—the Viking always looked bored, a mask for his feelings.

“I sent five score knights I had on retainer to fight with King Harold at Stamford Bridge. They were brave Saxon warriors who fell in battle, you bloody Norman.” Kaela couldn’t remember the last time she had felt such fury.

Cameron arched one black eyebrow. “Are you finished, mademoiselle?”

“A... aye,” Kaela stammered. Dear Lord, she had shouted at this Norman knight who towered

over her. Now she looked up and really saw him for the first time. She gasped, and took a step backwards.

Her head barely reached the baron's shoulders. All the anger drained from her, replaced by fear. She trembled and had difficulty remembering how to breathe. She clasped her hands to stop their trembling and forced herself to meet his gaze. His eyes were mesmerizing, the blue so intense, with darker rings of indigo around the pupils. Kaela shook her head in an effort to clear it. The Norman was asking her a question.

"How is it you have learned to speak our language so well?" His voice sounded hoarse.

"My father traveled to Normandy several times with King Edward. He spoke your language and he saw that I learned the language as well. I was also tutored in Latin and write both languages as well as my own. Quite a feat for a mere woman, wouldn't you say, Baron?" Kaela asked, raising her chin.

Cameron realized this woman truly feared him, no real surprise since most women cowered in his presence. That she tried valiantly to mask her fear pleased him.

Cameron watched Patrick step forward, take Kaela's hand, and raise it to his lips. She flinched ever so slightly at his touch. Why? Patrick had always had a way with the ladies.

"Your French is perfect, my lady. You must

forgive our earlier conversation. 'Twas not meant to slight you or your father. God's truth, we are amazed at all you have accomplished here. Isn't that so, Baron?" Patrick asked, giving Cameron a sly wink.

Cameron grunted and glared at Patrick, noting he still held Kaela's hand.

Patrick released her immediately and stepped back.

"Allow me to introduce my vassals, Lady Kaela. The bold one here is Patrick," Cameron told her. Patrick made a sweeping bow, a cocky grin on his handsome face.

"'Tis pleased I am to meet you, Patrick," Kaela said. She took a step closer to Jacob.

Cameron noticed how her hands trembled and he suddenly wanted to take her hand in his and comfort her. Scowling, he attributed his reaction to utter weariness.

He watched as a smiling Johnathan took over the introductions. Cameron felt an emotion very close to jealousy. Finding his own voice, he introduced her to Thorsen. The Viking had been his friend since childhood. In those days Thorsen's father had been vassal to Cameron's.

Looking up at the Viking, Kaela tensed and gripped Jacob's hand. Cameron wondered at her reaction, then decided the scowl on Thorsen's face intimidated her.

"Don't mind Thorsen," Andrew told her. "He

always scowls, though he doesn't mean anything by it. 'Tis just his way."

Still, Kaela appeared very pale to Cameron, her trembling more pronounced. *What was wrong with her?*

Kaela felt dizzy with fear. Something about the Norseman reminded her of Broderick—perhaps his pale blond hair and light eyes. Instinctively, she stepped backward.

Jacob recognized her fear and gently squeezed her hand. "You said you have a missive from the King, Baron?"

"Aye, King William requests your presence in London, Lady Kaela."

Kaela's eyes widened in surprise. "William of Normandy has requested to see me?" she asked, incredulously. All thought of Broderick and the Viking scattered.

"Aye, William sent a missive to Ralston Manor in which he requested that I inspect Chaldron's holdings and bring you to London with me. He and Lady Matilda are most anxious to meet you," Cameron explained. He watched her face closely and saw myriad emotions. Amazement, fear, and a certain wariness that made him long to chase the uncertainty from her life. A foolish thought, he knew. Sweet Jesu, but this woman did strange things to his senses.

"So, it was you at Ralston Manor?" Kaela asked, catching her mistake too late. She had no

desire for Cameron to know anything about Broderick, and had demanded Jacob's silence on the subject.

Her words set Cameron aback. "You knew I was at Ralston?"

"Oh, I did not know you were there. You misunderstand me, my lord. I merely asked if you were there."

She dared to lie to him! He could see it in her face. How could she know of Broderick and Ralston Manor? Were they in league? If he found out the wench had aided the bastard... by God, he would strangle her! How like a woman to be devious and underhanded, the very reason he wanted nothing to do with the creatures.

Kaela's next question interrupted his thoughts. "What know you of Broderick of Ralston? Was he taken in the battle?" Cameron could see she was visibly shaken now, her face pale, tears swimming in her eyes.

Cameron saw red. No wonder she was so afraid. She knew of the battle at Ralston Manor and feared for that bastard, Broderick. Disgust surged through Cameron. This beautiful, intelligent woman could not care for such a snake. But then, he would never understand a woman's mind and did not wish to.

"The sorry bastard escaped before Ralston's defenses were breached. He ran away, like the coward he is!" Cameron roared at her.

Kaela trembled. The look on Cameron's face was one of pure hatred. Did he hate Broderick as much as she did? She didn't understand. Was he angry at her? Why? Had she not sworn fealty to William, and welcomed the Black Wolf into her home? Fire surged in her veins, momentarily blocking out her fear. How dare he treat her this way? She had done nothing to provoke him.

"Don't you shout at me," Kaela blazed. "'Twas not but a question. God's teeth, Norman, what is the matter with you?"

"Never mind, I have heard all I want to hear from you tonight, mademoiselle," Cameron said, sarcasm dripping from each word. "We will finish this discussion in the morning. I expect a complete tour of your properties, so I can give a full report to William. Jacob tells me you have been acting as steward since your father's death. You will ride along with us. My men are weary and in need of rest. They will be occupying the barracks for the time being. Prepare a chamber, and have a meal sent up to me, along with a bath," he demanded.

Heat rushed to Kaela's cheeks, outrage firing through her. How dare he command her? England may be conquered, but she would be damned if he would conquer her.

"I have work to do, Norman," she said tightly, then shot a glance at Jacob. "See to his needs, Jacob." She turned and stormed out of the room... the same way she had stormed in.



Fuming, Kaela spent the day in her chamber. She couldn't understand the change in the Norman. One moment he acted almost human, and the next he raved like a mad man. No wonder they called him the Black Wolf. She sent Brenna down to see to the evening meal and the men's comfort. A loudly protesting Mattie, she sent to the nursery. That heathen would never get anywhere near the little girl.

Moody and silent, despite Maude's attempts at conversation, Kaela took her meal in her room. Maude prepared her bath for her, bringing the wooden tub in and placing it next to the fire. Sarah and Eleanor brought up several buckets of hot water to fill the tub, leaving two buckets for Kaela to rinse her hair.

Finally alone, Kaela stripped off her clothing and eased into the tub. The warm water soothed her ragged nerves. God's truth, the Norman not only frightened her, he infuriated her. He also made her feel things she didn't understand. She had never seen eyes like his—so blue, and somehow so knowing. Kaela wondered if he could look into her mind and see her every thought.

He stood taller than the other men he had introduced her to, with the same massive proportions—broad shouldered, his chest incredibly wide, arms

and thighs bulging with muscle. Kaela had no doubt he could snap her in half with his large hands. She knew all about being overpowered and helpless to fight against a man's strength. She had unwittingly angered him. Would he harm her? Somehow she thought not. Nay, it was the admiration in his eyes that frightened her.

Going to London to meet the King worried her. She feared she might never see Chaldron again. She had barely escaped Broderick and returned home. Now she must leave Brenna and Mattie again. Tears filled her eyes.

Kaela snatched up the rose scented soap Maude had left for her and scrubbed her skin vigorously, working out her frustration. She washed and rinsed her hair, but the tension never left her body. She stepped from the wooden tub and stood close to the fire to towel herself dry. She was completely surrounded by men. The black wolf, Normandy's fiercest warrior, slept down the hall. She had seen lust in his eyes. What if...

Kaela wrapped herself in a fur and crossed to her trunk. Though her hands shook, she reached for a vile of the opiate and drank the contents in one swallow. *Just for tonight*, she promised herself. *Just once more.*

She crossed back to the fire to try and erase the chill that reached to the depths of her soul. After a few minutes the potion began to take effect and

she fell into a heavy sleep.



Cameron stood before the hearth in his bed-chamber, dressed only in his chausses, his chest bare. With his belly full and after a warm bath, he felt wonderful, but still tightly wound. That woman. Why did she affect him so? He had probably overreacted to her questions earlier. But Elizabeth had taught him not to trust women. A lesson he would never forget. Kaela had lied to him, damn it, and he intended to find out why. Obeying the King's command to see her safely to London would be a blasted inconvenience. Eager to return to London, he knew the girl would slow him down miserably. She probably couldn't even ride. Worse, he would have the very devil keeping his men from her. Frustrated, Cameron raked his hands through his hair.

God, he needed sleep for he had much to do on the morrow. Turning from the hearth, he started across the room to the bed when he heard a strange sound. He stood still and listened intently. Again, he heard a strange moaning sound.

Retrieving his dagger from the mantle, Cameron crossed to the heavy door and opened it, trying to get a sense of where the sounds originated. There, louder this time, the moans came from the chamber at the hallway's end.

Cameron crept down the hall and paused outside the door. The cries held an urgency, as if someone were in agony.

He tried the door. Unlocked. Quietly, he stepped into the room. His gaze flew to the big bed against the far wall. Empty. The cry came again and Cameron whirled. His breath caught in his throat when he saw her.

Damn. Lady Kaela lay on a bed of furs before the hearth. His heart pounded wildly, his loins tightened.

Naked, she had kicked aside the furs and curled on her side. The firelight bathed her body in soft golden light. Lord, she was beautiful. His body hardened painfully as he gazed at her breasts, full and softly rounded, with nipples a rosy pink that begged for a man's mouth. Slim waisted, her stomach flat, her hips smoothly curved... his mouth went dry. God, he wanted her, wanted to touch her soft woman's mound. Her copper hair fanned about her, highlights dancing in the firelight.

Cameron let his gaze roam freely, boldly. An image of her long legs wrapped around him as he plunged into her came unbidden into his mind, and he grew even harder. He couldn't remember the last time he had wanted a woman this much, so much he trembled. His shaft stood eager, aching, his breathing shallow and labored. He ran his hands through his hair. Frustrated, he forced

himself to move away from her. He could not have this woman. William trusted him to bring her to London, the virgin he had found her, long protected by her giant fortress.

Kaela cried out again in her sleep, obviously lost in a nightmare's throes. If he woke her, she would be mortified to have him find her like this. Perhaps he should cover her with the fur and leave her alone. Surely, the dream would pass and she need never know he had seen her. He swept his eyes over her once again. Her beauty would haunt him for a long, long time. When he tugged on the furs, Kaela screamed again. Instinctively, he knelt to take her in his arms, to comfort her. The moment he touched her, she cried out and began to thrash wildly. An empty vial fell from her hand and rolled toward the fire. Cameron picked it up and took a cautious sniff. God's teeth, she had drugged herself.

Kaela moaned again and he turned back to her. Tears streamed down her face as she begged, the sound piteous. "No, no, no, noooo... don't touch me, stay away, stay away."

Dear God, what had happened to her? What terror would cause her to drug herself into a sleep so deep he doubted she knew yet that he knelt beside her? Cameron stroked her hair, trying to soothe her, yet afraid to try to hold her lest she cry out again. He murmured soft words and ran his hands through her silken tresses. He took a deep

breath... she smelled like roses. How odd to smell roses in winter. Cameron watched her, a worried frown creasing his brow.

Kaela rolled over to her other side and curled her body into a tight ball. "No! No!" she cried.

"Holy Mother of God," Cameron gasped, horrified. Her back, her beautiful back! He couldn't believe his eyes. Ugly lash marks ran across her back from her right shoulder to her waist. The scars appeared deep, the edges smooth and shiny as if they'd been healed for a long time.

Sweet Jesu, a beating like this could have killed the girl.

Someone had whipped this beautiful, brave woman when she had been little more than a young maid. Rage at the unknown villain ran cold in his blood. Kaela... what courage she must have had to sustain her through such a beating. A deep respect began to grow within him, respect and something akin to tenderness. He reached out and gathered her into his arms, lifted her, and carried her to the bed. Ignoring her weak struggles against him, he placed her gently on the soft mattress.

She trembled with cold and Cameron lay beside her, pulling the heavy furs over them. Kaela didn't resist his touch this time, but sighed and snuggled closer to his warmth. Cameron wrapped his arms around her and held her gently to him, running his large hands over her smooth, shapely thighs and buttocks to warm her. He told

himself he meant only to give her comfort, but his loins hardened again, and he knew he must leave her soon or he would not be able to stop himself from ravishing her.

She didn't deserve that; she had known enough brutality in her short lifetime. Gingerly, he ran his fingertips along the lines of her scars. Kaela flinched slightly in her sleep and let out a soft moan. Cameron pressed a tender kiss against her brow and promised himself he would avenge her. Carefully, he lifted himself from the bed and left the room before he gave into the lust that would make him no better than the whorson who had whipped her.

Back in his own chamber, the turmoil in Cameron's mind denied him sleep. The girl had touched him, touched him deeply. But he didn't really care for her. No, he felt sorry for her, nothing more. Still, he made a silent vow to protect her from further harm. He owed that much to William.

He had his own wounds to heal, though they were not on the outside like Kaela's. The lashes against his heart had scarred him, closed his mind to women and the pain they caused. But something about her called to him. At the very least, he would find the bastard who had beaten her. When he did, the man would pay with his own blood.

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Lee Ann Dansby

The middle of five children, Lee Ann grew up in Alvin, Texas, where she discovered her love for reading at an early age.

Lee Ann started her own catering business out of her home in 1984. With a lot of hard work, creativity, and an eye for detail, she has watched it grow into a successful business with a reputation for excellence.

No matter how hectic her schedule, Lee Ann finds time to write every day. "I have always wanted to punch a button and go back in time for a day. Writing romance novels is my way of living in another time. In my books, I am able to experience life and romance in a way that is no longer possible in the modern world."

Lee Ann brings her belief that one should pursue excellence in all areas of life to her catering and writing careers. She is a member of Romance Writers of America and the Houston Bay Area Romance Writers for which she has served as chapter President. She also actively supports her community's literacy program.

Lee Ann's other passion is traveling. When she is able to get away from her hectic business she spends her time in Europe where the land's rich history inspires her to create stories and characters that bring the middle ages alive for herself and her readers.



Lee Ann Dansby

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Vivian Vaughan

Cameron D’Abernon came to England’s shores for one purpose only—to conquer. This fierce Medieval knight returns from battle to be rewarded not only with a fortress but with a wife as well.

Cameron finds himself wed to the strong-willed Lady Kaela, whose heart he quickly captures. But, for him, to love means to suffer insurmountable pain. Her unconditional love gives him the strength to look within his wounded heart and face his greatest fears. His new love for her grows so strong he would enter the very fires of hell to keep Kaela by his side.

And when Kaela’s life is threatened, Cameron realizes he just might have to.