



HISTORICAL



# Denise Lynn

## The Warrior's Winter Bride

# **Denise Lynn**

## **The Warrior's Winter Bride**

### **Аннотация**

**A MARRIAGE BUILT ON VENGEANCE AND DESIRE!**  
Isabella of Warehaven is the key to the revenge that Richard of Dunstan craves. And now he has her securely in his arms he won't let her go. With Isabella as bait, he'll lure her betrothed – the murderous Glenforde – back to the scene of his crime and deliver justice. When the harsh winter traps Isabella on Richard's island fortress she has no choice but to become his bride. Unable to deny the stirrings of a dangerously seductive attraction, can Isabella ease this fierce warrior's torment and wipe the darkness from his soul before spring – and rescue – arrives?

# Содержание

Praise for Denise Lynn:	5
‘Dunstan is no friend of Warehaven.’	6
DEDICATION	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	83



## Praise for Denise Lynn:

‘Lynn captivates readers with a rich, intense romance.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on **PREGNANT BY THE WARRIOR**

‘Lynn weaves an intricate tapestry full of royal intrigue, slavery and revenge.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on **BEDDED BY THE WARRIOR**

‘Lynn carries on her tradition of producing love stories full of suspense, romantic characters, humour and a can’t-wait-to-read-it happy ending.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on **FALCON’S HEART**

# 'Dunstan is no friend of Warehaven.'

She explained what he already knew.

'Why would you deliver me to him?'

Her tone rose with each word.

He heard her inhale sharply before asking, 'Who are you?'

He tightened his hold round her, lifted her feet from the ground and resumed their walk towards the beach. He was certain from the tightness of her voice that she'd already guessed the answer.

Dipping his head, so he could whisper into her ear, he responded, 'Who am I?' He brushed his lips along the delicate curve of her ear. 'Why, fair maiden of Warehaven, I am Richard of Dunstan.'

She trembled against him. 'Why are you doing this?'

'Glenforde must pay for his crimes.' Richard hardened his voice. 'And you, as his intended bride, will ensure he does.'

Award-winning author **DENISE LYNN** lives in the USA with her husband, son and numerous four-legged 'kids'. Between the pages of romance novels she has travelled to lands and times filled with brave knights, courageous ladies and never-ending love. Now she can share with others her dream of telling tales of adventure and romance. You can write to her at PO Box 17, Monclova, OH 43542, USA, or visit her website: [www.denise-lynn.com](http://www.denise-lynn.com)

The Warrior's  
Winter Bride  
Denise Lynn



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

# DEDICATION

For Mom, with love.

Contents

Cover

Praise for Denise Lynn

Introduction

About the Author

Title Page

DEDICATION

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen



[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Warehaven Keep—*autumn 1145*

*Men were no better than toads, hopping mindlessly one way and then the next without warning.* Before, she'd only wondered about it, but now she knew for certain it was true.

The cool night air did little to soothe her raging anger. Isabella of Warehaven shouldered her way through the throng of people crowded in her father's bailey. She needed some time alone before returning to the celebration about to take place inside the keep.

Her betrothal and upcoming marriage to Wade of Glenforde had been painstakingly planned for months. Each detail had been overseen with the utmost of care. Every line of the agreement had been scrutinised with an eye to the future—her future.

And in a few moments' time she would toss all of her father's planning into the fire. Her parents would be so upset with her and she hated the idea of disappointing them, but she just couldn't, she wouldn't marry Glenforde. He could wed the whore she'd

seen him kissing while he pulled the giggling strumpet into a private alcove.

Thankfully, her mother and father had given her, and her younger sister, Beatrice, the rare blessing of choice. And while she'd dragged her feet until her father, out of impatience, took it upon himself to find her a husband, Isabella was certain he would not force her to go through with this betrothal or marriage. Especially when she shed light on Glenforde's unseemly behaviour.

Isabella picked up her pace as the recent memory renewed her rage. It was one thing for him to have a whore, but it was another entirely for him to so openly flaunt the relationship inside her father's keep. And to do so on the evening of their betrothal was beyond acceptable.

Adding this indiscretion to the way he'd pushed her to the ground in anger earlier this afternoon when discussing her sister was more than Isabella was willing to accept.

If he acted in such reprehensible ways now, what would he do once they were wed?

She had no intention of discovering the answer to that question. She was certain that once she explained all to her parents, they would understand her misgivings about this arrangement and she'd never have to worry about the answer. They would more than likely be upset that they'd been so duped into believing he was a suitable choice by her aunt. Her father's half-sister, the Empress Matilda, had insisted Wade of Glenforde

was not just suitable, but the perfect choice all round: he was young, wealthy, available and, more importantly, supported her claim to the crown over King Stephen's. To sweeten the pot, the empress had promised to supply Wade with a keep, demesne lands and a title worthy of Isabella. How could her parents turn down such an offer?

Fisting her hands, she lengthened her stride in an effort to get clear of the guests milling their way to the keep. Isabella nearly choked on the urge to scream.

The sound of a splash and the ice-cold wetness seeping into her embroidered slippers made the scream impossible to resist. 'My God, what more ills will this cursed day from hell bring me?'

She slapped one hand over her mouth, lifted the long skirt of her gown with the other and then ran at an unladylike pace towards the stables at the other end of the bailey. No one would hear her curses there.

Quickly gaining the privacy offered by the stables, she ducked to the far side of the building. With her chest heaving from the effort and speed of her escape, she lowered her hand from her mouth. This far away from the keep no one would hear, or see, what was about to be one of her finest bouts of temper since she'd gained adulthood.

Isabella closed her eyes and took a deep breath before parting her lips. Only to have a large work-worn hand slapped firmly over her mouth.

She opened her eyes wide in shock as she swallowed the

scream she'd been so eager to let fly.

'My, my, what have we here?' the man standing behind her asked softly over her shoulder.

He ignored her struggles to free herself to ask, 'Why, I wonder, would Warehaven's whelp travel this far from safety in the dark?'

He leaned closer, his chest hard against her back, his breath hot across her ear. 'Unescorted and unprotected.'

The deepening timbre of his voice acted like a bucket of ice-cold water sluicing down her body, making her tremble as she suddenly realised the danger in which she'd placed herself.

She'd been a fool to have flown the keep so rashly. Alone, without protection, she had foolishly risked her life. Her family had repeatedly warned her about her rashness. They'd gone to great lengths to frighten her with terror-filled tales of what happened to headstrong maidens who cavorted about in such a thoughtless manner.

Was she now about to be killed—or worse—for paying no heed to their dire warnings?

His deadly soft chuckle served to increase her tremors. 'Do you smell that?' He inhaled deeply. 'It's the scent of fear.' Pulling her closer against him, he stroked the flat edge of a blade against her cheek adding, 'Are you afraid, Isabella of Warehaven?'

Of course she was afraid. It was a time of anarchy and unrest, when no one could truly be safe. With the great number of people who'd been invited to Warehaven for this betrothal ceremony, countless criminals—men who had no sense of honour or

decency—would surely follow.

Cut-throats and pickpockets alike would flock to Warehaven simply to take advantage of the opportunity to line their pouches with gold, jewels and any other item that might garner them a goodly sum.

Her breath caught in her throat. Would not the lord's daughter gain such a man much wealth?

The ground beneath her feet seemed to sway. She desperately tried to gasp for breath, but his hand over her mouth and nose prevented her from drawing in the air she needed. And his arm, now wrapped so tightly around her waist, made even normal breathing nearly impossible.

Isabella kicked back, frantic to free herself from his hold, and more frantic not to swoon. She had to escape. There was no telling what this unchivalrous knave intended.

\* \* \*

Richard of Dunstan did his best to ignore the misplaced bit of guilt pricking at him as he held tight to Glenforde's betrothed. He tamped it down, squashing it as one would a bothersome gnat. Useless things like morals and guilt were best left to those who still cared about the niceties of life.

Guilt had provided him with nothing more than a way to avoid doing what needed to be done. And morals had only held him back from exacting vengeance for what had been done to his family.

The only thing Richard cared about any more was satisfying

his need for revenge—Wade of Glenforde had seen to that by his murderous actions on Dunstan.

With that solitary end focused sharply in his mind, Richard and one of his men had slipped into Warehaven's bailey with the throng of arriving guests, intent on discovering a way to kidnap Glenforde's bride-to-be after their betrothal ceremony.

He and his man Matthew had quickly stepped away from the throng to take a position alongside the wall and survey the lay of the bailey. That was where Richard had overheard two of the guards, on the wooden walkway above them, talking to each other about the bride-to-be. It appeared that the lady in question was currently alone in the bailey and the two men were debating if they should be overly concerned for her safety or not.

To Richard's relief the older-sounding guard had set the other man's worries at ease by asking what could possibly happen with so many of Warehaven's armed guards on duty. Who, he had asked, would be daft enough, with so much manpower in evidence, to harm Lady Isabella?

Who indeed?

However, he'd never seen either of Warehaven's daughters, so he'd paid close attention to the guards' discussion, hoping they'd supply the information he needed. It was imperative he seize the right daughter. Thankfully, it didn't take long for them to provide enough detail for him to realise the richly dressed young woman rushing towards the stables was the woman he sought.

This had been an opportunity he couldn't afford to ignore.

And once the guards broke apart to go their separate ways, he'd put his hastily revised plan into action. With his prey so near at hand that very moment, it had made no sense to wait until after the ceremony. Certainly not when it had seemed to be divine intervention. It was as if God himself had blessed his quest for vengeance by placing this woman neatly in Richard's hands.

Eventually, Glenforde would get the death he so deserved, but first he would suffer. He would be outraged that his bride-to-be had been taken. If he cared for the woman at all, he would suffer torment as he thought of the horrors his beloved might face.

And if Glenforde didn't hold any feelings for her, he would still be in agony at the lost riches Warehaven's daughter would have brought with her into their marriage.

Lord Warehaven possessed land and gold aplenty. He was aligned through blood with the royals on both sides of this never-ending war. There was little doubt that his daughter would bring not just wealth, but also political advantage to a marriage—the combination would be too much for Glenforde to willingly set aside.

Yes, Glenforde's pride and greed would draw him to Dunstan. He would come intent on rescuing the woman and retaining a secure hold on his future. But success would be far from his reach. He would arrive on Dunstan to find his beloved already wed and instead would be greeted only by the sharp blade of Richard's sword.

By luring Glenforde back to the scene of his heinous crime,

the spirits of his innocent victims would have the opportunity to lead the blackguard's worthless soul to the gaping mouth of hell.

The woman in his arms struggled yet again, drawing Richard's attention back to his captive. Her apparent youth almost made him regret the future she was about to begin, but a fleeting memory wove through his mind. The vision of a perfect blonde curl resting against a lifeless, blood-streaked cheek chased away any regret.

Warehaven's daughter would accept what fate decreed for her—or she would perish. That choice would be up to her.

He hadn't come this far, or taken such a risk, to turn back now. For months he had set aside duty and responsibility, existing solely for vengeance.

Now that the key to his revenge was securely in his arms, he wasn't about to let go. At this moment she likely thought him nothing more than a knave seeking to take advantage of her. Little did she know exactly what type of advantage he would take.

Against her ear, he warned softly, 'We are leaving the keep and if you scream, if you so much as think to draw attention to us, I will slit your throat.' He paused, allowing his threat to settle into her mind, then asked, 'Do you understand me?'

Richard waited until she nodded before moving them slowly back towards the shadows behind the stable where his man waited.

A hand touched his back, bringing him to an instant halt. Light from a torch fell across them. Richard tensed, prepared to defend



himself and somehow still retain his unsuspecting captive.

‘Lord Richard, all is ready.’

He relaxed his defences at the sound of Matthew’s voice. However, the woman in his arms stiffened. Richard tightened his hand over her mouth and placed the edge of his dagger against her throat. ‘Your betrothed thought nothing of killing an innocent, defenceless six-year-old girl. Rest assured, I can easily even the score if you so much as sneeze.’

He loosened his grasp over her face slightly, relieved that she kept her lips together. ‘You will live as long as you remain silent.’ He waited a moment to let his threat take hold, then ordered, ‘Nod if you understand me.’

She nodded. But something in the stiffness of her spine warned him that she wasn’t going to be as compliant as he’d hoped. He would deal with that later—for now he only required her silence.

Matthew held up a hooded cloak. ‘For the lady.’

As Warehaven’s daughter, she would be too easily identified. The long, dark woollen garment would conceal her form and features. Richard uncovered her mouth, grasped her shoulder and pulled her further into the shadows, away from the glare of Matthew’s torch, before releasing her. ‘Stand still.’

He draped the cloak around her shoulders, secured it in front and pulled up the hood. After tucking her hair inside the fabric, he checked to make sure there was nothing visible to mark her as Warehaven’s daughter.

Richard held his blade up, pointed towards her face and explained, ‘You are feeling unwell and as your concerned brothers, we are escorting you home. If you give warning of any kind, you will forfeit your life before the guards can take mine.’

To his relief, she nodded her understanding without being told to do so again. With one arm across her shoulders, he motioned Matthew to her other side. Richard pressed down on her shoulder. ‘Slump over as if you are ill.’

He could only hope she feared him enough to follow his orders. But when they took their first step, she tripped over the excess fabric of the cloak.

With a soft curse, he slid the dagger back into his boot and then swung her up into his arms.

She gasped, jerking away from him.

He held her tight against his chest. ‘I won’t warn you again. Rest your head against me and be silent.’ With a nod towards Matthew, he ordered, ‘Lead on.’

\* \* \*

Isabella wasn’t sure who deserved her curses more. While she knew that Wade of Glenforde was far from a gallant knight, she didn’t think he’d stoop low enough to harm innocent children. But for whatever reason this man thought he had. So, Glenforde also deserved a portion of her curses.

And she was most certainly deserving of them—it was her own rashness that had got her into this situation. Or did the unkempt lout holding her deserve the curses more?

His man had called him *Lord Richard*. So, he was not a lowly cur as she'd first feared. He didn't lack status, nor did he lack the ingenuity to be armed.

Most of the revellers—invited or not—had left their weapons in the tents they'd erected outside the walls of the keep. Since it was easier to control an overlarge crowd when they were unarmed, those who hadn't stowed their weapons were relieved of the items upon entering Warehaven.

From the dagger in this man's possession, at least one guard had lacked thoroughness with his given task. A serious lapse in duty of which her father should be made aware.

The man holding her tightened his grasp as they neared the gate. She understood the silent warning and hoped they wouldn't be stopped. Not for a single heartbeat did she think the man wouldn't carry through with his threat to kill her.

Isabella took a deep breath to keep her fear at bay. She knew this warrior—this knave—would interpret any tremors on her part as a weakness he could use to his advantage. She could only pray that he released her before she could no longer suppress the need to quake with dread.

To her relief no one paid them the least bit of attention. Yet, as they passed beyond the gates and towards the open field now littered with tents and larger pavilions, the man didn't release his hold.

She thought he would hold her captive in one of those tents until Glenforde, or her father, came to claim her. But he kept

walking and seemed to gather her even closer—impossibly close. His heart beat strong beneath her cheek. She felt the steady rise and fall of his chest with each breath he took.

His fingers pressing into the side of her breast drew an unrestrained gasp from her lips. Even through the layers of her clothing and the cloak, the heat of his touch seemed to scorch her skin before it skittered along her nerves, escalating her need to escape.

She twisted away and shoved at his shoulder, trying to lunge from his hold. ‘Where are you taking me? Put me down.’

Richard stopped at the head of the trail leading down to the beach. If she screamed now, they would be close enough to board his ship before anyone from the keep could come to her rescue.

And that was the whole point of this unorthodox kidnapping—he wanted Warehaven to know who had taken his daughter, but he did not want to get caught. More importantly, he needed Glenforde to know who had possession of his betrothed. Otherwise, if they didn’t know where to find the lady, this entire task could prove a waste in more ways than one.

He relaxed his hold on her legs and let her slide down the length of his body until she stood on her feet. But he had no intention of releasing her. ‘Where am I taking you? You are going to be my guest for a time.’

She frowned, rightfully confused by his statement. ‘Your guest?’

Anxious to be away, he ignored her to motion Matthew ahead

with the torch. Then Richard turned the woman around so her back was against his chest and, with his arms wrapped about her waist, bodily forced her down the path.

Only then did he answer, 'Yes. You are going to Dunstan.'

He wasn't surprised at her cry of dismay or at the way she dug her heels into the ground in a feeble attempt to halt their progress. He'd expected some type of struggle from her, especially after he'd divulged the first part of his intentions.

'Dunstan is no friend of Warehaven.' She explained what he already knew. 'Why would you deliver me to him?' Her tone rose with each word. He heard her inhale sharply before asking, 'Who are you?'

He tightened his hold round her, lifted her feet from the ground and resumed their trek towards the beach. He was certain from the tightness of her voice that she'd already guessed the answer. Dipping his head, so he could whisper into her ear, he responded, 'Who am I?' He brushed his lips along the delicate curve of her ear. 'Why, fair maiden of Warehaven, I am Richard of Dunstan.'

She trembled against him. 'Why are you doing this?'

'Glenforde must pay for his crimes.' Richard hardened his voice. 'And you, as his intended bride, will ensure he does.'

She jerked her head back, most likely to slam it against his nose. He was quicker and easily dodged her attempt to injure him. 'Come now, you can do better than that.'

However, her heels drumming sharply into his shins and

kneecaps was a distraction he feared would send them both crashing to the ground. Unwilling to take a chance of either of them being injured, he lowered her to the path, with the intention of taking her hand to lead her to the beach.

Her scream, loud and piercing, changed his mind. By her glare of mutinous rage and fear, he quickly realised there would be no leading her anywhere. Instead, Richard hauled her over his shoulder and ran down the narrow path. He shouted at Matthew just ahead, 'Move faster, before Warehaven's men catch up to us.'

He was fairly certain they were far enough away from the keep that while her screams would be heard, just as he had planned, her plea for rescue would go unanswered long enough for him to reach his ship. But it was a risk he didn't want to take.

'Lord Richard, here. This way.' Bruce's voice tore through the darkness ahead. A younger man from Dunstan stepped out from the cover of the overgrown vegetation. After lighting his torch from Matthew's, he held it aloft, illuminating a winding, narrow path down the face of the jagged cliffs.

'It's steeper than the path we climbed up.' He glanced at the burden slung over Richard's shoulder, adding, 'But quicker, if—'

Richard waved off his man's unspoken concern of him falling with his wildly fighting bundle and ordered, 'Go.'

Just before they reached the beach, Richard paused at a sound behind them. Apparently the woman's desperate screams *had* been heard. However, Warehaven's men were closer than he'd expected.

He swallowed a curse, then barked an order at the men in front of him. ‘Move. Faster.’

‘There they are!’

At the shout from Warehaven’s guards, Matthew and Bruce dropped their torches and scrambled over the final sets of boulders. Richard none too gently lowered the still struggling woman over the last boulder.

Just as her bottom hit the wet sand, he flung himself over the rock to land beside her.

But when he reached down to haul her back over his shoulder she quickly rolled away, shouting, ‘No! Help!’

Determined to get away safely, without losing his captive, he tried to grab her again.

Slapping at his reaching arms, she shrieked, ‘Warehaven, to me!’

Richard could now hear the jangle of mail and weapons from the men racing to their lady’s aid.

Out of time and out of patience, he stomped on the length of cloak he’d wrapped around her, effectively holding her still long enough for him to reach down to grab her.

Still screaming, the lady had enough sense to curl her fingers tightly and ram her fist upward towards his nose. Richard turned his head to avoid the contact and the force of her punch caught him in the eye.

He cursed, chagrined that he’d let this slip of a woman plant him such a stinging blow. Without pausing to wipe the watery

blur from his sight, he pulled her up and once again slung her across his shoulder.

His captive somewhat secured, Richard shouted to his men in the small rowing boat that would take them out to his ship anchored further offshore, ‘Shove off!’

Bruce and Matthew nearly dived into the boat as it bobbed in the water. Bruce manned an oar, while Matthew notched an arrow in his bow and let it sail.

Richard splashed through the knee-deep water, dodged the sweeping oars and unceremoniously flung the woman into the boat before scrambling in behind her, ordering, ‘Put some muscle in it, men.’

When she tried to sit up, he pushed her back down. ‘Stay put, lest you want one of Warehaven’s arrows to accidentally end your life.’

He grabbed his own waiting bow, then turned towards the beach. Another curse escaped him at the sight of her father amongst the men shooting at them. Warehaven’s death might delay—or prevent—Glenforde from coming to Dunstan.

An arrow whooshed past his ear. Richard ducked. His own life and the lives of his men were at stake, he would do what had to be done. He notched an arrow and let it sail towards the beach along with another volley of arrows from his men.

‘No! Oh, dear Lord, no!’ the lady cried from where she knelt on the bottom of the tiny boat as one of the arrows found its way to her sire’s chest, dropping the man on to the wet sand.



She screamed again and wrapped a hand around Richard's leg. Before he could free himself, an arrow from one of Warehaven's archers pierced his shoulder. Richard jerked back in pain, only to trip over the woman still clinging to his leg.

## Chapter Two

'Hold him down!'

Isabella stared at Dunstan's rough-looking soldier as if through a heavy, thick fog. They had killed her father. The tightness building in her throat and stomach intensified. She could barely imagine the pain and agony her mother must now be suffering. What would she do?

'Help me!'

Help him?

He wanted her help with his commander? Isabella shook her head, brokenly whispering, 'No.'

She couldn't—she wouldn't help any of them. They'd stolen her from Warehaven, killed her father before her eyes and had forcibly dragged her from the rowing boat into this ship as if she'd been nothing more than a sack of grain.

And then, when she'd tried to climb back over the high side of the vessel, intent on reaching the beach to help her father, this man—this filthy, ragged-haired, scar-faced knave—had bodily carried her into Dunstan's small cabin beneath the aft castle.

'Damn you, woman, help me.'

'No. Get one of your men to help.' Dunstan's well-being would be better trusted to one of his own men than to her.

‘They are all needed on deck.’

She knew that. Of course the men were all needed on deck—to man the oars in the hopes that rowing would lend the ship enough speed to get away before her father’s men unleashed flaming arrows.

Isabella hoped a few of those arrows found their mark and set this flat-bottomed oak ship blazing. The single square-rigged sail alone wouldn’t be enough power to get this cog away fast enough.

Maybe, if she were lucky and God saw fit, she along with these men would find themselves back on Warehaven’s beach in a very short time.

‘Get over here and help me or I will send you to your maker.’

‘Then do it and be done with me!’ She would rather die than make landfall at Dunstan.

The dagger in his hand wavered briefly before he tightened his grip on the weapon. As quick as a darting snake, he reached out with his free hand and grabbed her arm. ‘You are far too eager. I’ll not grant you such an escape from what Lord Dunstan has planned.’

‘He murdered my father!’ She tore her arm free. ‘Do what you will.’

‘Murdered? We were defending ourselves. Besides, you don’t know if your sire is dead or not. He could simply be injured the same as Lord Dunstan.’ He tipped his blade towards the man on the pallet. ‘However, if his lordship dies you will belong to me instead.’ He narrowed his eyes to mere slits. ‘And rest assured, I

will make every remaining moment of your life a living hell.'

Could her father still be alive? A tiny flicker of hope sprang to life. A flicker she quickly doused in fear that her relief would be short-lived. No. She'd seen the arrow pierce his chest. Had seen him sink lifeless on to the beach. Since he'd not been protected by chain mail—he'd been dressed for a celebration, not battle—he couldn't have survived. Isabella choked on a sob.

'Is that what you want?' The man leaned closer to her, crowding her in the already small confines of this cabin. 'Do you value your life so little?'

When she didn't answer, he warned, 'If the thought of becoming mine doesn't frighten you as it should, don't forget that there are over a dozen more men on this ship who would gladly make you suffer unimaginable horrors should Lord Dunstan die.'

The deadly earnest tone of his voice made her realise that his threat was not an idle warning. But it was the cheers from the men on the deck and the sound of oars scraping across wood as they were pulled into the ship that dashed her hopes of freedom. The sounds of a sail being hoisted and unfurled as it caught the wind to take her far from her home made his threat even more deadly.

Self-preservation overrode her desire to give in to uncontrollable tears and wailing, prompting her to join him near the bed built into the side of the ship.

Dunstan's man had used the dagger to remove his commander's clothing. She stared at the blood covering

Dunstan's chest and bedclothes. Like her father, Dunstan hadn't worn armour either, making his body an easy target for the arrow to pierce. If they did nothing, the man would likely die from loss of blood.

The thought of his death did not bother her overmuch, since he deserved nothing less, but if he died while aboard this ship...what would happen to her?

No. She would not worry about that. Instead, she would assist Dunstan's man in caring for his overlord. The knave would heal. She would ensure that he'd soon be hale and hearty. Otherwise, how would she gain her own measure of revenge?

Swallowing the grief threatening to choke her, and willing her resolve to stand firm, she asked, 'What do you wish me to do?'

'I have already given him a sleeping potion.' The man wrapped his hand around the shaft of the arrow still lodged below Dunstan's shoulder. 'Now, I need you to hold him up.'

Isabella shivered. No matter how many times she'd watched her mother employ an arrow spoon to remove the tip, shove the arrow the rest of the way through one of Warehaven's men, or break the shaft leaving the arrow tip in place, the operation had never failed to make her ill.

Even though she knew the answer, Isabella asked, 'Can you not simply pull it free?'

The brief grunted response required no explanation. The arrow was nearly all the way through Dunstan's body. Without an implement to dig the tip out, they could try working the shaft free

of the tip and leave the tip inside for now. The other option was to shove the arrow the rest of the way through his body, while hoping everything stayed intact, then either snap off the shaft or the tip at the tang and remove the weapon.

Either option meant someone was going to have to hold him up and try to keep him from thrashing about if the pain seeped through the fog of his drugged sleep, while someone else worked the arrow free.

She doubted if she was strong enough to hold him, but she preferred that task over the other more gruesome one. Besides, there was no one to protect her and God only knew what the crew would do to her if she bungled the procedure enough that Dunstan died.

Isabella shivered and set aside the dark images forming in her mind. She took a deep breath and then knelt on the bed to support Dunstan's body. Between the two of them, they rolled Dunstan on to his side, his stomach and lower chest propped against her bent legs.

The man poured more liquid from a small bottle into Dunstan's mouth. If he was using the juice of poppies, he could very well send his master into a deep, permanent sleep. And the blame for his death would be placed on her.

‘Are you ready?’

She nodded, then leaned over Dunstan's body to hold him in place and answered, ‘Be quick about it.’

To her relief Dunstan jerked only once when his man took a

firmer hold on the arrow's shaft. He immediately relaxed, as if he knew it would help make his man's task easier.

Isabella, however, couldn't relax. She tensed, fully expecting Dunstan to thrash about at any moment, fighting the pain he surely must suffer.

She hoped the pain was unbearable—hoped he suffered as much agony as she did. It would be so much less than what he deserved. After killing her father, nothing short of Dunstan's death would even the score.

But somehow, he managed to withstand the pain as his man shoved the arrow tip through, broke the shaft and pulled both parts of the weapon from his body. While she could feel his muscles tense and go lax beneath her, and could hear his ragged, uneven breaths, he offered no resistance. She was unable to determine if he slept, if the medicine was working this fast or if his self-control was stronger than most.

The procedure was over quickly, but as Isabella shifted to get off the bed, Dunstan's man stopped her. 'Stay there. I still have to sew the wound.'

She snatched the needle from his hand. 'Are you seeking to kill him?'

'He will bleed to death.'

Isabella studied Dunstan. She had originally thought the same thing, but the arrow had hit him high—just beneath his shoulder, closer to his arm than his chest or neck. Using the skirt of her undergown, she wiped at the blood covering him and then shook

her head. ‘The bleeding has slowed, so I doubt he will perish from loss of blood.’ Pinning his man with a stare, she added, ‘But if you close the wound now, it could fester and that very likely *will* bring about his death.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’

She had a few suggestions—all of them uncharitable, so she kept those to herself. ‘Do you have any wax?’

At the shake of his head, she stated, ‘Surely you have some wine and yarrow or woundwort available. Some cloth would help, too.’

These were fighting men. Hopefully, more than one of them would carry yarrow or the wort in their pouch. Both were common ways to staunch the flow of blood from a wound and promote healing.

He left her side to rummage through a satchel in the corner of the cabin and returned with a skin of wine and a clean shirt.

Isabella hesitated. ‘No herbs?’

He shrugged.

‘You could go ask the others.’

Her comment provoked only a raised eyebrow from him. Isabella frowned a moment before the reason for his hesitation dawned on her.

‘As much as I’d like to...’ she nodded towards Dunstan ‘...I am not going to harm him.’

When the man didn’t budge, she added, ‘Besides, I would prefer he be whole and completely alert when I cut out his

blackened heart with an old crooked spoon.’

Even though her words were true—to a point. When the time came, she would use his own sword, not a spoon—she’d been seeking to lighten the mood.

Her ploy wasn’t very successful. While his lips did twitch, he only shook his head.

Now what would she do?

Isabella knew that her mother would use the wine to wash the blood from the wound and then make a wax tent to hold it open, allowing any further drainage to run free. Once there was no more seepage, she would remove the tent and then sew, or cauterise, the wound closed.

However, from the smell of the tallow burning in the lamp she should have realised that there wasn’t any wax at hand. And she didn’t know what else to use.

‘What are you going to do?’ Dunstan’s man drew her back to the task at hand.

‘The only thing I can do is bind his wound after I clean it. For that I need some water, please.’ When the man reached for a pitcher on the small table, she amended her request. ‘From over the side of the ship.’

She didn’t know how they did things on Dunstan, but her mother preferred seawater when cleansing an injury, claiming it helped to heal and dry out the wound.

The man studied her carefully for a long moment, then left the cabin.



While he was gone, Isabella poured the wine over Dunstan's shoulder and used the clean shirt to wipe away the rest of the blood and the wine.

'Here.' A bucket hit the floor beside her. Ice-cold water sloshed over the sides, soaking through her already sodden shoes and making her shiver.

Once the skin around Dunstan's wounds were as clean as she could get them, she blew on her near-freezing fingers, asking, 'Is there another shirt or anything?'

'No.'

She glanced at the weapon now strapped to the man's side. 'Then I need your dagger.'

His eyes widened briefly before narrowing to mere slits. 'For what?'

She'd already told him of her plans to wait until Dunstan was healthy before killing him. Did he not believe her? Isabella sighed, then explained, 'I need to bind his wounds. To do that I need strips of cloth.' She plucked at the hem of her undergown. 'From this.'

Frowning, he hesitated, but finally, with obvious reluctance, slowly extended the weapon towards her.

Isabella rose and lifted her skirts, only to drop them at the man's gasp. She glared at him and ordered, 'Turn around.'

Satisfied that he did as she'd ordered, she paused. With his back to her, it would be an easy thing to run him through. Isabella sighed, knowing that the other men would hear the commotion

and rush to his aid.

She gave up her brief dream, pulled the hem up and cut through the thin fabric. Wincing at what she was about to do to her finest chemise, Isabella took a deep breath, then tore a good length of cloth from the hem.

‘Now, you hold him up for me.’

Once his man had him upright, Isabella cross-wrapped the cloth around Dunstan’s chest and back. ‘I’m finished. All we can do now is wait.’

After placing him back on the bed, the man suggested, ‘You might want to add prayer to the waiting.’

She shrugged. While it was true, for her own selfish reasons, she did want him hale and whole, praying for this man’s health would seem more blasphemous than holy.

Isabella straightened, preparing to get off the pallet, but Dunstan wrapped a hand around her wrist and pulled her down next to him. She gasped at his unexpected strength. Nose to nose, she stared into the blue of his now open eyes. His pupils were huge, his eyes shimmering from the effect of the medicine he’d been given.

It was doubtful he knew what he was doing, or was even aware of doing anything, but when she tried to pull free, he only tightened his hold, trapping her hand between them, against his chest.

Behind her, she heard his man gathering up the discarded cloths and the bucket. ‘I’ll return shortly to check the wound.’

‘Wait! You cannot leave me here alone with him like this.’

‘It is not as if he can harm you. But if any further harm comes to him, you will be the one to suffer the consequence.’ On his way towards the door, he paused to douse the lamp before leaving her alone on Dunstan’s pallet in the dark.

The warmth of his breath brushed against her face. Even in the utter darkness of the room she could feel his stare.

‘I cannot harm you.’ His deep voice was low, his words slightly slurred.

His heart beat steady against her palm. The heat of his body against hers nearly took her breath away. She couldn’t remain on this pallet with him. ‘Please, let me go.’

‘Too late.’ Dunstan rested his forehead against hers. ‘You had better be worth all this.’

Worth all what? Being wounded? Isabella opened her mouth to ask, but the steadiness of his light breathing let her know her questions would go unanswered.

She rolled as far on to her back as his hold would allow, stared up into the darkness of the cabin and tried to ignore the man so close to her side. Before she could stop it, a tear rolled down her cheek, followed by another and yet another. The need to cry, to sob aloud her grief at losing her father and being taken forcibly from her home was overwhelming.

No matter how hard she fought, her wayward mind always came back to worries and questions—each more heartrending than the last.

Who would assist her mother in the lonely, sad tasks that must now be completed to lay her father to rest? Who would stand by her side at the service, or lend a hand with those attending the wake? Who would be there in the middle of the night to soothe away the tears and the fears for the future?

Her sister? No. By now Beatrice would have locked herself into her chamber to give way to her own grief. It would be days before she'd think of their mother.

Jared? No, her brother would be too busy amassing a force to come after her—and the man who'd torn their family asunder.

While Jared's wife, Lea, would no doubt try her best, she was too new to the family to know that if she tried to do too much, in the mistaken belief that her mother-by-marriage would welcome the respite from duty, she would be unwittingly angering the Lady of Warehaven.

The first time Lea instructed a servant not to disturb the lady, or if she greeted a guest as the stand-in for the lady of the keep, she'd find her help met with near uncontrollable anger. Isabella knew how closely her mother oversaw every aspect of running Warehaven. It was her keep, her home, her domain and she'd not brook any interference, not even if it was offered in the most well-meaning of manners, lightly.

And what would now happen to Beatrice and her?

Beatrice was also of marriageable age. While she had her mind set on Charles of Wardham, Isabella knew her parents disliked him and would never permit Beatrice to wed the lout.

But would Jared let Beatrice have her way?

What about her? She hadn't had the opportunity to tell her parents about her decision not to wed Glenforde. Would her brother, who would now be the Lord of Warehaven, take it upon himself to sign the documents and force her into an unwanted marriage?

Under normal circumstances the answer to that question would be a resounding no. Her brother would never force her into anything.

However, these weren't normal circumstances. If he wasn't thinking clearly, there was no way for her to know exactly what he'd do.

Which meant Jared might either see her wed to Glenforde or someone else of his choosing.

*His* choosing. Another shudder racked her. Why had she not listened to her parents?

None of this would have happened had she not been so determined to always have her own way.

When her parents had first given her the rare gift of choice they'd done so only because they'd known full well that it would be easier than trying to force her into a betrothal she would fight no matter how perfect the man was for her.

An odd arrangement to be sure, but one her father had chosen because of his own marriage. As one of old King Henry's bastards, her father had been forced to wed the daughter of a keep he'd conquered. And while, yes, her parents had learned to

deeply care for and love one another over time, he wanted his children to at least know of love before they pledged their future to another. Even though it went against everything considered normal, he wanted them to have the choice.

She knew that—his wishes for his children had never been a secret. Just as she knew that had she simply gone to him about Glenforde the betrothal would have been called off.

Instead, she'd let anger at Glenforde's behaviour with the strumpet get the best of her and she had stormed from the keep.

And now...

Isabella clenched her jaw until it hurt, in an effort to keep a sob from escaping.

Now her father was dead and her mother alone.

Her chest and throat burned with the need to cry, but she'd not let the murdering lout next to her know the level of suffering and grief he'd caused her.

She'd sooner throw herself from this ship and drown in the depths of the black icy waters than give him the satisfaction of witnessing her pain.

If anyone was going to suffer it would be him. Richard of Dunstan thought he'd steal her away from her home, kill her father and get away with it?

No. Not while she had breath in her body.

Oh, yes, she would ensure he recovered from his wound—and then he would learn the meaning of pain.

[Chapter Three](#)

The creaking of wood, the swaying beneath her and the sound of waves crashing nearby dragged Isabella from her fitful dreams. *Where was she? Why was her bed moving? What was that sound...?*

Consciousness swept over her like a racing storm, bringing her fully awake with a heart-pounding jolt. She was still aboard Dunstan's ship, heading towards his island stronghold. A keep that would become her future prison.

They'd been at sea for nearly three days now. She struggled to draw in enough breath to fill her chest. Three days—three of the longest days of her entire life. She'd done penances that hadn't seemed as arduous as this forced journey.

Sleep had been her only escape from the fears and worries chasing her, threatening to tear reason from her mind and send her screaming with misery and anger. She'd sought its comforting embrace as often as she could.

Isabella knew what caused her heart to race, her breathing to become laboured and her palms to perspire. She was well aware what brought about the darkness tormenting her.

It was more than just having been captured and witnessing her father's death. And it was more than the over-warm body next to her on the bed. She stared into the pitch blackness of the cabin. Even without the benefit of sight, she felt the walls closing around her, suffocating her, stealing her ability to think, to employ any rational measure of common sense.

This airless cabin was far too small, too confining and more

of a cell than a cabin. It was a constant reminder of what she had to look forward to on Dunstan.

And the unconscious man next to her on the narrow bed didn't help lessen the feeling of being trapped in an ever-shrinking cage.

Isabella closed her eyes and conjured the image of her airy, open bedchamber at Warehaven. She concentrated, bringing the vision into sharper focus. When the memories of fresh-strewn herbs floated to her nose and the softness of her pillow cushioning her head, along with the warmth of her bedcovers surrounding her, she willed her pulse to slow.

She drew in a long, deep breath, filling her lungs near to bursting before letting it out ever so slowly, over and over until the trick her father had taught her so many years ago when she was a frightened child cleared her mind and calmed her spirit.

Once certain she could function with some semblance of reason, she sat up.

The door to the cabin opened, letting in a glimmer of evening light and air—icy-cold blasts of frigid air, along with Dunstan's man... Matthew, Sir Matthew as she'd discovered yesterday when she'd overheard the other men aboard the ship talking just outside the cabin.

'Are you hungry?' Without waiting for her answer, he handed her a hunk of dry, coarse bread and a skin filled with what she knew was wine so sour that it rivalled any verjuice she'd ever encountered.

Shivering, she frowned. It had been so hot beneath the covers



that she'd been unprepared for such a cold, bracing wind.

*No.* Her heart nearly leapt from her chest.

Setting the offered meal on the floor, she turned towards Dunstan and jerked the covers from his chest.

'What is wrong?' Sir Matthew was at her side in an instant, crowding her, hovering like a mother fretting over her sick child.

'I'm not sure.' She placed her palm against Dunstan's forehead and then his cheek. Biting back an oath at the unnatural warmth of his skin, she ordered, 'Bring the lamp over here.'

To her surprise he did as she'd requested and held the lamp over the pallet, allowing the light to fall on a flushed, sweat-soaked Dunstan.

Sir Matthew cursed, before asking, 'How long has he been like this?'

'He was fine when last I checked.'

'What are you going to do?' Tight concern tinged his question. Isabella raised a hand. 'Give me a moment to think.'

'His wound is most likely infected.'

What she didn't require were statements of the obvious. The need to get Sir Matthew out of the cabin prompted her to make him useful. 'Get me a knife and have someone heat some water. Find something I can use for new bindings. And if no one aboard this ship has any healing herbs, then you must make port immediately.'

'We will be at Dunstan in another two or three days.'

She turned her head to glare at him. 'He could be dead by

then.’

The man tossed her his dagger, placed the lamp on a stool near the pallet and then thankfully left without another word.

Isabella turned to the task at hand—making sure Dunstan lived so he could die by her hand at a time she deemed appropriate and in a manner that suited her. Kneeling over him, she slipped the dagger beneath the bandages, prepared to strip them from his body, then hesitated, fearful of what she might see. What if...?

‘Can you not decide?’

Startled by hearing him speak for the first time in three days, she jumped, nicking the tip of the dagger against his chest.

Fingers closed around her wrist. ‘I would prefer death by infection, thank you.’

Isabella lifted her gaze to Dunstan’s face. ‘You are awake.’

He stared at her with bloodshot eyes that never once wavered. And for a moment—the very briefest of moments—Isabella wished they might have met under different circumstances.

With his squared jawline, slightly crooked nose, even teeth and full lower lip, the man needed only a bath, a change of clothes and a razor to be what her sister, Beatrice, would call a very fine figure of a man. A description that would have drawn a soft, agreeing laugh from her.

Neither the fading bruise from the black eye she’d given him, nor the small gash running across his cheek from when he fell, lessened the more-than-pleasing appearance.

And his voice... Oh, how that deeply rugged voice brushed so easy across her ears before flowing deeper to touch her soul. Even the most pious of women would throw all thought of morals and chastity into the breeze just to hear another word fall from his mouth.

Dunstan's eyebrows arched as if he somehow sensed the direction of her thoughts and Isabella felt her cheeks flame with embarrassment, shame and not a small measure of self-loathing.

Sweet heavens, where had her mind flown?

The man was nothing more than a savage beast. He'd captured her, taken her from her home, from safety and caused her father's death. And here she sat like some besotted girl mooning over this murderer's looks and the sound of his voice?

'You are still here.'

Isabella blinked at his statement. 'Since Sir Matthew stopped me from jumping overboard, where else would I be?'

Instead of answering her, Dunstan tugged slightly at her arm. 'What is this?'

*It was her arm. Was he seeing things? What did he think...oh...he meant the knife.* 'I need to remove your bandages.'

He released her wrist, then nodded.

'Does that mean I should continue?'

'If you want.'

'Well, no. I don't *want* to do anything for you.' A quick glance towards the still-open door assured her Sir Matthew was not standing there. 'I wasn't given a choice.'

‘No, of course you...’

His words trailed off and Isabella realised he’d once again fallen prey to the beckoning spell of the sleeping drug. It was to be expected since very few people could resist the siren’s call of poppy juice.

She cut away at the bandages, peeling them back as she did so. Holding her breath, she focused on the wound left by the arrow.

To her relief, while it was an angry red and puffy, there weren’t any telltale dark lines of advanced infection.

She’d need only to reopen the wounds front and back, let them drain and after cleaning them out, pack them with some herbs—if Sir Matthew found any. And if not, perhaps that verjuice they called wine would be strong enough to burn away any evil humours.

The bigger concern was his fever.

‘What worries you so?’

And once again Dunstan was awake. As much as she’d like to rail at him for killing her father and kidnapping her, she knew that within moments he’d only fall asleep again and not hear a word she uttered.

In hopes that he might be alert enough to assist in his own recovery, she said, ‘You have a fever and it seems there is nothing aboard this ship to help banish it.’

‘Beneath my chainmail.’

She looked around the cabin. Not locating his mail, Isabella asked, ‘And where is your armour?’

‘Why would you want my lord’s armour?’ Sir Matthew asked, walking into the cabin carrying a bucket of steaming water, a length of linen and another skin of wine.

‘He claims there are some herbs beneath it.’

Without voicing anything more than undecipherable grumbles to himself, Matthew put down the items he carried and headed out of the cabin once more.

In his absence, Isabella went to work on Dunstan’s injuries. By the unevenness of his breathing, she assumed he was floating in that twilight region between sleep and wakefulness.

Hoping her assumption was correct, she pushed at his shoulder, asking, ‘Can you roll on to your side?’

Thankfully, even though he groaned while doing so, he complied. By the time Sir Matthew returned, she was nearly finished.

He tossed a pouch on the pallet. ‘Here. This is what I found.’

Isabella shook off a thin coating of sand before opening the small leather bag. She didn’t need to ask about the sand since her father and brother stored their armour in barrels of sand when out to sea. Although, the herb pouch would have been in their cabin. The all-heal herbs inside were wrapped in waxed leather to keep them dry.

She tossed a pinch into a cup, then extended it to Dunstan’s man. ‘Could you pour a bit of the wine in here?’

While he did that, she put a larger pinch into a second cup and used the pommel of his dagger to grind the herb into a powder.

Adding some of the still-warm seawater, she made a poultice, then applied it to his wounds, holding it in place with the bindings she'd made from the linen.

When they had Dunstan situated once again on his back, with the covers over him, she tipped his head up to give him some of the herb-and-wine decoction.

'No more.' He tried to push the cup away, but was too weak to do much more than try. However, he was strong enough to tightly clamp his lips together.

Sir Matthew stayed Dunstan's hand. 'My lord, you need to drink this.'

'No more.'

She'd seen other scars, ones more gruesome than Warehaven's arrow would leave behind, on his body. So it wasn't as if he'd never been injured before. However, Isabella wondered if maybe this was the first time he'd been given poppy juice.

After her brother's first time, he'd refused to take the brew. He'd rather pass out from the pain than ever swallow the liquid again. Perhaps Dunstan had come to the same decision.

'It's not the sleeping draught,' Isabella explained. 'This is for your fever.'

He turned his head way. 'Stinks.'

'You will either take it like a man, or we will force it on you like a child, the choice is yours.'

He shook his head at her threat. 'No.'

'Listen to me, Dunstan.' She tightened her grasp on his head.

'You *will* take this medicine. You are not going to die until I decide it's time, do you hear me? And it's not yet time.'

'Very poor wife.'

His words might have been slightly slurred, but she clearly understood what he'd said. 'I am *not* your wife.'

'Will be soon.'

Isabella froze.

Cursing, Matthew grabbed Dunstan's face, forcing his lips apart, and poured the liquid into his mouth.

*Will be soon?* She released her hold on the back of his head as if he were suddenly made of fire and scrambled from the bed. Isabella staggered backwards until she hit the side of the ship.

Shaking with fear, dismay and anger, she clasped her hands to her chest, as if that would offer some measure of protection, and asked Sir Matthew, 'What does he mean?'

He remained silent, seemingly intent on settling his commander more firmly under the covers.

'Answer me!' Isabella shouted. 'After all that has been done to me, I have still helped save his miserable, worthless life. I deserve an answer. What did that miscreant scoundrel mean?'

Sir Matthew lowered his head, his chin nearly resting on his chest, he turned away from the bed and said, 'Dunstan's priest awaits his lordship's return—with his bride-to-be.'

Isabella's choked gasp nearly stuck in her throat. 'His bride-to-be?' She feared she knew the answer, but hoping she was wrong, asked, 'And who would that unlucky lady be?'

As he quickly headed for the door, Matthew answered, ‘You.’

#### Chapter Four

Richard groaned as the surface beneath him heaved to and fro as if being pitched by a windswept wave. The motion let him know that he was aboard a ship. Hopefully, his own.

Outside of a strange dream about Warehaven’s daughter leaning over him with a knife to his chest, the last thing he clearly remembered was vaulting into the small rowboat, grabbing a bow and turning to face Warehaven’s men just as a hand grasped his leg. Distracted, he’d glanced down and fire had sliced through him, sending him head first against a cross-brace.

He raised his arm and half-swallowed a gasp at the pain lacing across his shoulder.

‘Warehaven’s archers rarely miss. You took an arrow.’

He opened his eyes, squinting against the flicker of a lit lamp and stared up with relief at the crudely drawn map he’d nailed to the ceiling of his cabin.

‘What a shame they hadn’t taken aim at your heart.’

Richard raised a brow at the barely suppressed rage in her voice. If anyone should be angry, he should be. ‘Then perhaps, instead of being vexed, I should be grateful for your timely distraction.’

‘Distraction? I was kneeling on the hull.’

‘Which didn’t prevent you from grabbing my leg.’

‘Should I have done nothing while you took aim at my father and his men?’



‘They were aiming at me and my men.’

‘I owe no loyalty to the men of Dunstan and had little concern about the arrows aimed at them.’

Valid as it was, he wasn’t about to concede her point. ‘You should be grateful the men of Dunstan didn’t toss you overboard.’ She didn’t need to know that his men would never treat his bride-to-be so harshly.

She’d been pacing at the other side of the cabin, but changed direction and approached his bed. ‘They would have, but you fell atop me.’ With a toss of her head she turned to take a seat on a nearby stool, adding, ‘So I’ve nothing to be thankful for.’

‘I would think you might be thankful for your life.’

‘As should you.’

Richard knew that she would find a contrary response to anything he said. At another time, under different circumstances, this verbal sparring might provide an entertaining moment or two. Right now, however, she was his captive, not his guest, and her contrariness did nothing but make his head throb even more.

Unmindful of his shoulder, he sat upright, shouting, ‘Matthew!’

The man entered the quarters immediately. ‘You are awake.’

‘Could you find no other place for—?’ Try as he might, he couldn’t push through the fog still swirling about his mind to remember her given name. Richard settled his gaze on her long enough to say, ‘I can refer to you as she, or her, or that woman, but a name would be easier.’

‘Isabella.’ She ground out the answer between clenched teeth. ‘Isabella of Warehaven.’

Richard turned back to Matthew and asked, ‘Could you find no other place for *her*?’ Her hiss of displeasure whipped through the small cabin.

Matthew shrugged. ‘Since she was caring for your injury, I thought it better she stayed in here, rather than on the deck with the men.’

‘*She* cared for my injury?’

Her gasp and wide-eyed stare spoke of her surprise at his lack of memory. ‘You remember nothing?’ She looked at him, questioning, ‘Who do you think cared for you?’

He ignored her to ask his man, ‘What did you threaten her with?’

Matthew flashed him a crooked smile. ‘My tender loving care, with the men’s assistance, should you die.’

That she hadn’t thrown herself overboard at such a threat was interesting. Most women would have done so or fallen dead of fright when confronted in such a manner by any of his men. They were an imposing lot who hadn’t been selected for their good manners or refinement. Warehaven’s daughter was either braver than most, or possessed not one ounce of common sense.

He did owe her his gratitude. ‘I do thank you—’

‘No need,’ she interrupted him, but then frowned as if debating what to say next. Finally, after pursing and then unpursing her lips a time or two, announced, ‘I am not going to marry you.’

Richard swung his gaze back to his man. Why had that information been divulged? Matthew tripped while making a hasty exit. Over his shoulder, he said, 'We'll be home within a day or so.'

A day or so? Depending on the winds, it was a five or six days journey back to Dunstan. That meant—

'Did you hear me?'

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. If they were docking at the island in a day or two, that meant he'd been unconscious—

'You'll get my hand in marriage only if you remove it from my dead body first.'

Obviously she wasn't going to give him a moment of peace. Her acceptance—or lack of—hadn't been a consideration in his plans. He wasn't about to let her thwart his quest for vengeance.

'It is truly simple, Isabella of Warehaven, you'll do as you're told.'

'I...I will do what?' she sputtered, staring at him as if he'd gone mad. 'Killing my father does not grant you his place in my life.'

Richard paused at the bitterness of her voice. He frowned, thinking back to the day he'd taken Warehaven's whelp from her home. Scattered scenes rushed in swiftly filling in some of the holes of his faulty memory. Her father had taken an arrow on the beach. Since he'd also taken an arrow, why would she assume her sire had died?

'You don't know if he died or not. Like me, he might only

have been injured.’

‘I saw him fall to the beach with an arrow piercing his chest. He wore no armour for protection, so I...I can only believe he was killed.’

The catch in her voice warned him that she was already emotional, as was to be expected, but the last thing he wanted was for her to become hysterical over some imagined happening.

‘Is believing the worst your attempt at logic?’

Her eyes widened briefly before narrowing into a fierce glare. Obviously his insincere question had the intended effect—she’d set aside the need to grieve a father who might or might not be dead for anger directed towards him.

‘I guess we’ll find out how valid my logic is when he or my brother come to pay you a visit.’

‘That was the whole point of being seen. Otherwise they wouldn’t know where to find you.’

She waved off his answer, to order, ‘Turn this ship around.’ Her eyes blazing, she informed him, ‘They’ll have no reason to find me as I am *not* marrying you, nor am I spending the winter on Dunstan.’

Since he had no intention of turning this ship about and every intention of marrying her within a matter of days, she would be spending much longer than just the winter on his island.

The crash of another wave sent the ship pitching dangerously. Without thinking, he quickly reached out and grasped Isabella’s shoulders to keep her from being tossed from her seat on a stool

to the floor.

She shrugged off his touch and leaned away. 'I can see to myself.'

He didn't get a chance to respond before the ship danced wildly once again, sending Isabella flying from the stool. The thin metal band confining her hair slipped from her head to spin like a top before it then clattered to the floor. On her hands and knees she glared at him as if daring him to give voice to the comments teasing his tongue.

To his relief, instead of trying to scramble back on to the stool, Isabella snatched her hair band from the floor, then crawled to a corner and wedged herself securely between the timbers.

From the ire evident on her face, she would be grateful if he took it upon himself to fall overboard. How high would her anger flame when she realised the depth of her predicament?

Isabella leaned forward and warned, 'You had better hope my family comes for me soon. Because I swear I will not be forced to marry you.'

'What makes you think you have a choice in this matter?'

'My family—'

'Is not here. The deed will be done long before they arrive.'

The blood appeared to drain from her face, leaving her pale and, from her trembling, more than a little shaken.

When she finally found her voice, she asked, 'Why would you wish to wed me?'

'*Wish* to wed you?' Richard shook his head. 'You

misunderstand. I have no *wish* to wed anyone. You are merely a means to an end. One that our marriage will help ensure.'

One finely arched eyebrow winged higher. 'It matters not what petty grievance you seek to avenge. With my family's wealth, they will assume marriage was the reason for this madness of yours.'

*Petty grievance?* The murder of a small, defenceless child was far more than a simple grievance. Richard studied her carefully. The hazel eyes staring back at him appeared clear. Still, to be certain, he asked, 'Did you hit your head?'

'Are you asking if I have my wits about me?'

'Do you?'

'Of course I do.'

'That is up for debate if you think murder is nothing more than a petty grievance. I couldn't care less what your family thinks. They can rant and demand all they want, it will avail them not at all. My concerns are with Glenforde. I long for the day he comes to your rescue.'

Isabella frowned. 'You kidnapped me for some crime Glenforde committed?'

'What better way to get him to come to me on Dunstan than to kidnap and wed his bride-to-be on nearly the eve of his marriage?'

'You assume much since you can't be certain he will come.'

Richard slowly trailed his gaze from her wildly disordered, burnished gold hair, across the purely feminine features of her

heart-shaped face, over the gentle swell of her breasts, past her bent legs, to the toes of her mud-stained shoes.

He dragged his gaze up to stare into her speckled hazel eyes. She quickly turned her head away, but not before he caught a glimpse of her flushed cheeks. 'Oh, rest assured, Isabella of Warehaven, he *will* come.' And when he did, Richard would be waiting.

'Brides are easily bought.' She leaned forward to wrap her arms round her knees. 'I am certain Wade of Glenforde will find another with little difficulty.'

Her pensive tone and response surprised him. Richard wondered what Glenforde had done, or said, to cause Isabella such doubt of her worth as a bride, or as a woman.

'Perhaps, but you forget what else he stands to gain in this union. Glenforde is greedy. He will not throw away the opportunity to secure his relationship with royal blood.'

Isabella shook her head. 'Now *you* forget, my father was never recognised. King Henry might have been his sire, but his mother was little more than a whore.'

'That's a fine way to speak of a blood relative.'

'Relative? She was a servant who sold herself for nothing more than a warm bed and a meal. Once my father was weaned she was never seen or heard from again. What would you call her if not a whore?'

She stared at his naked chest and then turned her flushed face away.

Richard retrieved a shirt from the clothes peg near his bed. ‘A woman who sells herself for a warm bed and food isn’t necessarily a whore.’ He knew exactly what a whore was—a bed-hopping liar with not a trace of honour.

Something in the bitter tone of his voice caught her attention. What reason had he to sound so...resentful or cynical? Isabella turned to look at him. His shirt hung around his neck and he frowned down at it. He was no doubt trying to determine how to get dressed without using his injured shoulder.

As far as she was concerned she’d already helped him enough—more than enough. The obvious fact that he didn’t seem to remember clearly was just as well. It was better for her if he had no reason to see her as anything but the enemy.

She didn’t want Dunstan to think that she cared for his welfare—she didn’t, not in the least.

It was imperative that he not misconstrue her actions. Because if he went through with this farce of a marriage, she would make his life miserable.

Not only would this marriage never be consummated—doing so would tie her to this knave for ever and she was not about to spend the rest of her life wed to a man she despised—but he would soon learn just how little his wife cared for him.

By the time her family came to rescue her, Dunstan would be glad to let her go.

Her family rarely used their connection to either royal—Stephen or Matilda—but in this matter she would use every



advantage at her disposal to gain an annulment. However, freedom from this marriage would never be granted were she to let this man have his way with her.

No, she fully recognised the need to keep him at arm's length and to repel him at every turn.

Dunstan glanced in her direction and she held her breath, certain he was going to ask for help. Instead, he clenched his jaw and managed to get the shirt on by himself.

A sheen of sweat beaded his forehead, but she refused to acknowledge his pain and weakness—not when his actions thus far would cause her much more than a moment or two of discomfort.

Her whole world would now be turned upside down. Her mother would be distraught with worry and fear. Her brother's rage would know no boundaries, his anger at her kidnapping and their father's death would surely make Dunstan's world tremble. But Glenforde was another story... Would her betrothed set aside their differences to come to find her, or would he think himself better off without her?

After all, there was another heiress still living at Warehaven—her sister, Beatrice. If Isabella's newly forming suspicions were right, Glenforde had formed no tender feelings for her. He was concerned more with the land, gold and regardless of what she'd told Dunstan, yes, Glenforde would also be concerned with the connections that would come with marrying a daughter of Warehaven. Once he learned that the daughters shared equally

in Warehaven's wealth it was possible that either daughter would suffice.

The knowledge that she alone would pay the consequences for his actions with the whore that night at Warehaven made her head spin. How would she find the strength to do what she must to survive? And even when she did gain an annulment, would she be able to salvage anything of her dignity, her future or of her worth?

To take her mind off of the dark thoughts gathering in her mind, she asked, 'So, you think it is appropriate for a woman to sell herself for the necessities of life?'

Isabella truly didn't care what he thought. She just needed something to distract her.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hard stare making her far more than uncomfortable. Her belly tightened at his single-minded focus.

It wasn't that he frightened her, even though a part of her mind whispered that she should be afraid. After all, her well-being was completely in his hands.

But had he wanted to cause her harm, would he not have already done so? There'd been nothing to stop him—except for the simple fact that he'd been drugged, unconscious and unable to cause anyone harm.

She swallowed. Perhaps questioning him on his thoughts about women of loose morals had been unwise. Especially considering the assessing look he'd given her when trying to convince her that

Wade would come to her rescue for her features alone.

His smouldering stare had left little doubt in her mind that he found her physical form...pleasing. His perusal then had sent a heated flush from her cheeks to her toes. Much like it did now.

Isabella shook off the unwanted warmth and mentally chastised herself. The narrowing of his eyes warned her that she'd held his stare far too long. He knew full well what his pointed gaze did to her and she'd just unintentionally made him more aware of her response.

‘Appropriate?’

She pressed her back more firmly into the corner, but it did little to stop the tremor lacing down her spine. She should be afraid—needed to be very afraid of what the deep timbre of his one-word question did to her senses.

He had kidnapped her—stolen her away from her family and home, taken her from everything she knew and brought death to her father. It made no sense for her to note the blueness of his eyes, or the way his overlong ebony hair fell across his face.

It was wrong, near shameful to let the mere sound of his voice set heat racing along her spine and loosen tiny wings to flutter low in her belly.

The walls closed in around her, making her nearness to this man more acute, bringing their privacy more into focus. She raised a shaking hand to her chest, pressing it over her wildly pounding heart and struggled to draw in breath.

Oh, yes, she should be very afraid of him, but more so of

herself.

One dark eyebrow hitched over a shimmering sapphire-hued eye, giving her the distinct impression that he somehow knew where her thoughts had flown. Horrified of what that might mean for her continued well-being, Isabella forced herself to look away.

‘I cannot judge whether her actions were appropriate or not. People do what they must to stay alive.’

He rose and she felt his stare as he loomed over her. The very air around them crackled with tension. When she finally met his gaze, he suggested, ‘That is something you might want to remember.’

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if he was threatening her, but she held her words inside. She wasn’t completely witless, of course he was threatening her, warning her that some day she, too, might need to do something dire to save herself. So she kept her thoughts and questions to herself, fearful of forcing his hand this soon.

‘I need to see to my ship and men. You stay here.’

When she didn’t respond, he nudged the toe of her ruined slipper with the side of his foot. ‘Did you hear me?’

‘I am not deaf, you lack-witted oaf. I heard you.’ The moment the words were out, she winced. There was a time for mockery or name-calling, but this wasn’t the time to give her tongue free rein.

He bent over. Then, unmindful of his shoulder, grasped her beneath her arms and hauled her up from the floor. When they

were nose to nose, her feet dangling in the air, he asked, 'Do you think it wise to bait an enemy when you are the prey?'

'No.' Thinking quickly, she reminded him of his obligation as her captor. 'But as your hostage you need to keep me safe.'

'I will soon be your husband and while I may be honour bound to keep you alive, your tender feelings concern me not at all.' He dumped her on to his bed and came over her, resting most of his weight on his forearms. 'Keep your wits about you, Isabella of Warehaven. Not all injuries can be seen.'

While it was easy to ignore the beads of sweat on his brow attesting to the strain he'd placed on his body, it wasn't as easy to ignore the evident strength in the hard muscled thighs trapping her securely on the bed.

And even harder to ignore the implication of his threat.

'Honour? You killed my father, that proves you have little honour, Dunstan.' She turned her head away from the heat glimmering in his eyes.

He drew her head back so she faced him and Isabella fought the dread overtaking her shaking limbs.

His breath was hot against her cheek, his lips trailed flames across her skin. He paused, his mouth a hairsbreadth above her own, pinned her with his stare and asked, 'Why should I show you more honour than Glenforde did when last he visited Dunstan?'

Her chest tightened even more until her breaths were ragged gasps for air. His nearness, the physical contact of their bodies made thinking almost as impossible.

‘I am not Glenforde.’ It was the only answer that could find its way through the confusion and fear casting a fog over her thoughts.

He rose to stand over her. ‘No you are not Glenforde. But you were to become his wife and you are here. Forget not your place, Isabella.’

Silently, she watched him exit the cabin. Relief washed through her, making her limp with near exhaustion.

Even though he’d told her that Glenforde had murdered someone on Dunstan—someone young, a child—she had no way of knowing if the crime was real or imagined. She couldn’t help but wonder what had held Dunstan’s temper in place. Had it been her reminder that she wasn’t Glenforde? Or had he somehow sensed her confused fear and relented?

This was not a man to take for granted. He was more of a threat than she’d first thought. This man, above all others, seemed to have the power to reduce her to a mindless muddle with little more than a look.

She couldn’t begin to imagine how she would have reacted had he carried through with his threat. Would she have fought him with every fibre of her being?

Or would she have followed the whispered longings of her traitorous body?

The only thing she knew for certain was that she needed to take charge of her wayward emotions before *she* became the greater threat to her well-being. Otherwise, she would bring

about her own downfall.

## Chapter Five

Richard leaned against a timber beam long enough to catch his breath before climbing the ladder to the open aft deck above. The hardest part of this venture was to have been the actual kidnapping and making a hasty retreat towards Dunstan unscathed.

His throbbing shoulder reminded him that he hadn't escaped unscathed. But at this moment, his injury was the least of his concerns. What bothered him was the uneasy feeling that there was more to his fragmented dreams than he could fathom.

He knew from the unquenchable dryness of his mouth that Matthew had drugged him. The lingering bitter taste meant the man had probably broken into their limited stores of opium. While the concoction was a pain reliever of miraculous proportion, it left the patient's mind foggy for days afterwards.

Still, the memory of a soft, warm body next to him on the pallet was too vivid to have been only a dream. Why would his mind have conjured gentle hands and a hushed soothing whisper to ease him when the pain grew close to unbearable?

His past experience with women hadn't led him to believe they were gentle or soothing with any except their offspring. Not for one heartbeat could he imagine Agnes easing anyone's pain but her own.

Yet in his dreams it had been a woman. There was only one woman aboard this ship—Isabella of Warehaven. Had she

soothed him, gentled his need to rage against the agony chasing him?

*Impossible.*

None of it made any sense. And it was that unexplained senselessness that had him worried that marrying this woman would prove more difficult than the act of capturing her.

Why couldn't she be a few years younger or a great many years older? Either one would have made her less attractive in his mind, drugged or not.

Unfortunately, she was a woman full grown and too obviously aware of the untried desires teasing her body. Going into a battle without armour and weapons would be less dangerous than being in her company overlong.

When he'd loomed over her, threatening her, he'd hoped to see a glimmer of fear. Even though that had been his intent, it wasn't fear shimmering in her wary gaze—it had been an awareness of him, followed by curiosity and then confusion about what she felt.

Once he'd recognised her emotions, his body had threatened to betray him. The vision of their naked limbs entwined as he brought her across the threshold into womanhood had nearly been his undoing.

Nobody would have stopped him. They were soon to be wed. Had he been physically able, he could easily have taken her, shown her the pleasures of the flesh and then called it revenge for what her betrothed had done to his family. And no one would have faulted him.



But Isabella of Warehaven was not the object of his revenge. She was only the means to an end. He needed to remember that.

This desire, this unbidden lust for her was nothing more than a drug-induced torment that could and would fade with time. He would simply need to keep a tight rein on his desires until that time came.

Richard sighed and leaned on the rail for support. If he was this breathless and shaken from what little physical exertion he'd performed since rising from his bed, reining in his desires should prove an easy task.

Boisterous laughter from the men on the deck drew his attention. By the nods in his direction it was apparent that he was the focus of their conversation.

Richard straightened, squared his shoulders and then stepped away from the railing. Regardless of his injury he was not about to appear weak, or incapable of command, in front of his men.

He pinned a hard stare on Theodore, the largest in the group. When the guffaws ceased abruptly, he asked, 'What amuses you?'

Theodore shuffled his feet, batted at one of the other men, then answered, 'Nothing, my lord.'

At Richard's raised eyebrow, he added, 'We are simply glad to see you up and about.'

While they might be relieved to see him up, he resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the obvious attempt to garner his good graces. Richard doubted if his health had been the sole topic of their amusement.

If he knew anything about his men, it was that they enjoyed a good gossip almost as much as they enjoyed fighting. At times they were as bad—if not worse—than the women of Dunstan's village. There was little doubt in his mind they'd been making assumptions about him and Isabella.

Assumptions that might have been on target had he not been unconscious.

He bore her no ill will, but neither did he care overmuch about her feelings. For the most part she was unknown to him, he knew very little about her, something he needed to resolve since she would become his wife in a matter of days.

Richard frowned and gingerly moved his shoulder about. The men aboard this ship knew little about mixing potions or salves, meaning the woman had probably saved his life. Regardless of his hatred for her betrothed, he did owe her something.

His gaze settled south, towards the Continent for a moment, and then with a heavy sigh he climbed down the ladder to speak to his men before heading back into his cabin.

\* \* \*

Isabella flicked her thumbnail at the dried mud on her slippers. They were ruined beyond repair, but she hoped the pearls could be salvaged.

Her father had given her and her sister a bag to share. Every night for a week she and Beatrice had painstakingly attached the small pearls to their slippers. She'd formed hers into the shape of a flower, while her sister had spiralled hers around the edges.

The stool beneath her shifted slightly, just enough to make her reach out to keep from falling on to the floor. The thin slivers of light came into the cabin from the port side of the ship. The sun had been behind them, meaning the ship had changed direction. A glimmer of hope sprang to her heart.

The cabin door banged against the wall, making her jump as Dunstan pushed through. He spared her a brief glance before dropping on to his bed to stare at the ceiling.

Eager to know if perhaps he'd changed his mind, she asked, 'Are we turning about?'

'No.'

Her newly borne spark of hope flickered out as quickly as it had formed. 'But the ship has changed direction.' She paused to get her bearings straight in her mind. Warehaven was off the south-east coast of England. Her little knowledge of Dunstan Isle was that it lay north-east towards Denmark. 'We are now headed south instead of further east.'

His soft chuckle grated on her patience. 'Don't think for a moment you are going anywhere but to Dunstan. I simply had the men adjust the course for home.'

She'd been aboard her father's and brother's ships enough to know how often the currents and the winds set them off course. 'Oh.'

'Tell me about yourself.'

Isabella blinked at the sudden request. 'What?'

Still staring at the ceiling, Dunstan repeated. 'Tell me about

yourself.’

‘Why?’

He turned his head and gave her a pleading look. ‘Because I am injured, I don’t feel well, I want a distraction.’

Dear heavens above, he was using the same tactic her father and brother had when they were unwell. That sad two-year-old’s *feel sorry for me* gaze that always had her mother giving in to their whining with no more than a sigh. Well, she wasn’t about to feel for sorry for him, not when he’d brought all of his misery on himself.

‘Please.’

She crumpled the slipper in her hand and sighed. ‘What do you wish to know?’

He stared back up at the ceiling. ‘I should know something about you since you will soon be my wife.’

If he did anything that foolish, he would soon learn to rue the day he forced her into a marriage. However, between the lingering effect of the opium and the paleness of his face, arguing with him now would be pointless. If she read his features correctly, the drooping eyelids and downturned mouth signalled he would soon fall back to sleep.

To humour him in the meantime, she said, ‘I have an older brother, a younger sister, a mother and no father.’

‘And again you assume he is dead. Do you dislike your father so much that you secretly hope the worst?’

Isabella gasped at his insinuation that she would wish such

foulness for her father. 'I love my parents dearly.'

'Love?' He shook his head. 'Of what use is love? I would think they'd rather have your respect and obedience.'

At this moment, he was most likely correct. Had she paid heed to her parents' warnings, she wouldn't be on this ship heading to Dunstan.

Although she found it interesting that he had such a lowly opinion of love. 'Did you not care for your parents?'

'I did not know my mother, she died when I was a babe. And my father did his duty by me.'

'Did his duty?'

'A roof over my head. Food in my belly and a suitable place to foster once I was old enough to hold a weapon.'

'Oh.' She felt no pity for the man, but found herself aching for the small boy. Had he had no one to offer him any gentleness? No welcoming arms to chase away the childish nightmares and hurts? She could not fathom such a life. She'd had both a mother and father who'd cared for their children dearly.

'You sound surprised. Did your brother not foster elsewhere?'

'Of course he did.' But he'd done so with their mother's family until he gained squire status and then he'd joined Matilda's court.

'What about you and your sister?'

'No.' Isabella wrinkled her nose, waiting for what would be disbelief on his part.

'No?' Dunstan turned his head to look at her. 'Surely you spent time at Glenforde's keep?'

She smoothed out her crushed slipper, brushing the caked mud on to the floor—busy work to keep from returning his gaze. ‘No.’

‘You expect me to believe that King Henry’s granddaughter, Empress Matilda’s niece, did not learn how to be a lady at the knee of her future mother-by-marriage?’

‘My mother taught me how to be a lady. Regardless of acceptable convention, she would not surrender such a task to a stranger. Besides, I was betrothed to no one, so there was no future mother-by-marriage.’

He sat up on the bed and swung his legs over the side. ‘Is there something wrong with you?’

Isabella paused. Since it would be normal for her and Beatrice to have been betrothed at a very young age, of course he would wonder at the reason for such a lack. She should lie and tell him that there was something drastically wrong with her.

It had to be something that would make him think twice about forcing a marriage between them. Something—gruesome. Some terrible thing that would make him shiver with dread. Perhaps something that would convince him to turn the ship about and return her to her family.

*But what?*

‘Too late.’ Dunstan leaned forward. ‘It has taken far too long for you to answer.’

She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin a notch. ‘Perhaps my...condition is so severe I’ve no desire to sicken you with the

details.’

‘Other than a smart tongue and lack of common sense, there is nothing wrong with you.’

His smug certainty nipped at her temper. ‘You can’t be sure of that.’

‘Actually—’ he rose from the bed and stepped towards her ‘—I can.’

She held her slipper out like a shield, as if the scrap of fabric and pearls would protect her from his advance. ‘What are you going to do?’

Dunstan snatched the slipper from her hands, tossed it across the cabin, then slowly circled her. He passed by her side, touching her ear as he kept walking. ‘I know your ears are fine.’

He brushed a fingertip across her lips as he crossed before her, making her lips tingle. ‘It is obvious you are capable of speech. And I know you can see, so nothing is wrong with your eyes.’

Isabella silently cursed her own stupidity. He’d accepted her statement as a dare—as a way to intentionally trap her in her own lie.

He stopped behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Isabella fought the urge to shiver beneath his touch.

Patting her shoulders, he lowered his hands, running them down to her wrists. Leaning over her, he commented softly, ‘And if I am not mistaken, these two arms seem to be normal.’

He trailed his hands up to caress the back of her neck, asking, ‘I wonder what else needs to be investigated?’

She tried unsuccessfully to pull away from him. ‘Nothing.’

‘No? Then how can I be certain you are whole?’

Isabella ground her teeth before answering, ‘I am fine. There is nothing wrong with me.’

‘Ah.’ With his thumbs still on the back of her neck, he snaked his fingers to encircle her throat and with his fingertips beneath her chin tipped her head back, forcing her to look up at him.

While the placid expression on his face warned her of no ill-conceived plans to choke the life from her, the gentle, deadly warmth of his hold silently threatened her in a way no brandished sword ever could.

This hold was more personal than the tip of cold metal against flesh. The heat of his fingers belied the damage he could cause.

‘So, you were seeking to lie to me?’

She stared up at him. He knew full well she’d lied. He had only been mocking her, baiting her, and she’d stepped into his trap with little thought.

If she kept up this ruse, she knew he would follow through with his examination until she cried off. Unwilling to be humiliated any more than she already was, she whispered, ‘Yes.’

‘What?’ He stroked the ridge of her throat. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

‘Yes.’ Isabella reached up and grasped his wrist. ‘Yes, I lied.’

He slid his fingers lower to circle the base of her neck, but did not remove his hands. The less-threatening hold did nothing to ease the trembling of her limbs.

‘You are being forced into a marriage you do not want. There



is nothing you can do to prevent it.'

His hands, gently rubbing the tension from her neck, might be welcome another time, another place. Now, however, his caressing touch was an unwelcome reminder of what was to come. If they wed, and unless she could convince the priest on Dunstan to not perform the rites, it was becoming a certainty that they would, he would own her body and soul.

'Rest assured, Isabella, that I expect little from you as a wife.'

Her breath caught in her chest. Did that mean they would not share a bed? Once his business with Glenforde was complete, would she be able to petition for an annulment?

'We will wed. You will share my bedchamber.'

Isabella's heart sank. Sharing his bed would dash her hopes for an annulment. What would she do, how could...? She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out in surprise at the sudden clarity of the devious vision springing to life in her mind. If all else failed, her family could make her a widow.

'As long as you do not seek to lie to me, I will treat you well. Deal with me honestly and you will want for little.'

His statements gave her pause. He would not say such things unless someone, at some point in time, had deceived him. A woman most likely—a wife, or love interest, perhaps?

The irony of this moment was not lost on her. Now, as she plotted his imminent demise, he swore to treat her well if she did not lie to him.

A tiny pang of guilt grew deep in her belly, twisting its way

towards her heart. Isabella swallowed a groan, refusing to let misgivings rule her future.

Dunstan stepped back. With his hands no longer on her, she was able to tamp down the guilt.

‘I am weary and need rest.’ He headed to the bed. ‘Come.’

She stared at him in shocked dismay. ‘I will not join you in that bed.’

‘You have done so these past nights.’

‘When you were incapable of doing anything more than sleep.’

‘That is all I intend to do now.’

His intentions didn’t matter, he was more than capable of doing whatever he wanted, should she agree or not. She shook her head. ‘No.’

Dunstan sat on the edge of the bed. ‘My bandages need to be changed.’

Isabella narrowed her eyes at his subterfuge. He was giving her that sad *oh, woe is me* look again. The same one her father had used on her mother when he wanted something he knew full well he didn’t need.

She wasn’t yet Dunstan’s wife and she didn’t care for him, his wants or his well-being in the least. ‘Your man Matthew is quite capable of changing the bindings.’

‘His touch isn’t as gentle as yours.’

She shrugged. ‘Then perhaps you need to speak nicer to him.’

‘I rest easier with you at my side.’

Again, she shook her head. ‘We are not wed yet. Until that day

comes...' Because she held tightly to a slim thread of hope that Dunstan's priest would see reason, she silently added, *if it comes*. 'I will not share a bed with you.'

'Then where do you think you will sleep?'

She didn't know. But she was certain of one thing—she was not sharing his bed.

He'd been correct—she had done so these last few nights, but she hadn't felt threatened or in any danger. However, the situation had changed. Dunstan had already proven he was more than capable of forcing her to do his will.

Feeling his hard stare, she answered, 'Since I am not tired, it doesn't matter where I sleep.' At his frown, Isabella rose from the stool and plopped down into the corner of the cabin, wedging herself tightly against the hull's timbers. 'This will do fine.'

Dunstan shook his head and rose from the bed. 'It is cold. Permitting you to develop the chills and a fever will not suit my plans.'

*His plans?* What about the plans she'd had? 'What do I care about your plans?'

He ignored her question and motioned towards the bed. 'Join me of your own free will, like an adult, or I'll carry you like a child. The choice is yours.'

She clenched her jaw at having a version of her own words tossed back at her, but refused to move.

He rubbed his forehead as if seeking to ease the throbbing of an aching head. Then he shouted, 'Matthew!' When his man

hastened into the cabin, he held out his hand. ‘Give me your dagger.’

Matthew did so without question and, when waved away, left the cabin without a word.

Isabella gasped. He would kill her for not sharing his bed? She turned her face into the timber beam to avoid witnessing her own death.

‘Oh, for the love of—’ He broke off on a harshly snarled curse and grasped her wrist. ‘If my intent had been to kill you, I would have done so at Warehaven. Open your hand.’

She did as he ordered, but kept her face averted.

‘What is wrong with you? I thought a Warehaven would be braver than this.’ When she turned her head to stare up at him, he slapped the dagger’s handle on to her palm and tightly closed her fingers around it. ‘Now, get in the bed.’

## Chapter Six

Finally. After endless weeks of searching for Glenforde’s whereabouts and these last six days at sea, this journey was nearly at an end.

A cold wind raced across Richard’s face, bringing a chill to his cheeks and reminding him of the narrow margin in which they’d beaten the turn of the season. With the onset of winter at hand, this venture home had been a race against time. Another week at sea would have found them in dire straits. Strong winds, enormous waves and deathly cold water could have spelt doom for any foolish enough to set sail.

Yet he'd intentionally detoured this journey home by a day—long enough to set one of his trusted men ashore on the Continent with orders to return with the information he sought. The man would return to Dunstan on the last of his ships that would hopefully soon leave Domburg. Once that ship and this one reached Dunstan's harbour his entire fleet would be safely careened during the long winter for repairs and general maintenance.

Richard directed his attention towards the fast-approaching coastline. The quickly setting sun behind them cast shadows on the rock face of the cliffs. Soon, night would fall and they would be unable to safely enter the harbour until daylight.

A quick glance assured him that Matthew had the men and ship well under control. The sail slid down the mast as oars splashed into the water.

It was imperative that the ship be manually steered through the narrow inlet into Dunstan's harbour lest she be smashed to pieces against the jagged boulders hiding beneath the surface of the water on either side of the inlet.

Once again he looked shoreward, relieved to see the torches flare to life in the towers flanking the entrance to the harbour. It was necessary to have those lights as guideposts.

Richard positioned himself at the centre of the aft deck, noting that the bow of the ship was just off-centre of the torchlights.

'Hard to port!' he shouted down to the men on the rudder.

When the bow pointed dead centre between the lights, he yelled, 'Hold!'

While steering the ship past the boulders, then between the cliffs wasn't as easy as it might appear with a crew not as well trained as this one, he was grateful for the natural protection Dunstan's unwelcoming coastline provided.

Most of the island rose up from the sea like a rock-faced mountain and needed little protection from unlikely intruders. Those who were brave enough to try either gave up in frustration, or drowned after their ship broke apart against the boulders.

The short, narrow strip of beach on the other side of the island existed only at the whims of the tide and wind. If a ship anchored there, it risked being either blown against the cliff face, or left high and dry on the exposed sandbar.

The other danger, as he'd learned, was anchoring just off the beach, only to later watch his ship sail away without him when the tide unexpectedly turned and the anchor failed to hold against the rapidly rising water. Chasing the unmanned ship down had proven far easier than bearing his father's wrath.

Even with the dangers of anchoring at the beach, his grandfather had determined it the weakest point on the island. Which is why a stone-fortified keep had been built at the highest point above the beach.

If a force did manage to make landfall there, they would be unable to gain entrance to the keep without suffering the loss of many lives.

And still, even with all of this protection—natural and manmade—Glenforde had broken through Dunstan's defences. Richard knew the man had not done so unaided. Someone on the island had to have offered assistance.

Who? And why?

A sharp gasp caught his attention. He turned to see Isabella's head appear over the edge of the forecastle deck. 'Go back inside.'

But instead of doing as she was told, she scrambled the rest of the way up the ladder to stand beside him. After planting her feet for balance, she tipped her head back to look up at the sheer rock cliffs flanking them.

Richard swallowed his groan. When his wife had first witnessed this sight, she'd been terrified, claiming that he'd brought her to the entrance of hell. Agnes had hidden her face in her hands and cried with fear.

Since he'd expected the same reaction from Isabella of Warehaven he'd ordered her to stay below. Following orders was obviously not one of her strengths—a lack he would see remedied quickly.

From the way she easily fell into the rhythm of the slightly rolling deck, it was apparent that the Lord of Warehaven hadn't cosseted his daughters inside the keep on dry land. This one at least had been aboard a ship or two in her life.

Without looking at him, she said, 'The rocks are close enough to touch.'

‘No. It only appears that way.’ Although they were close enough that men were stationed along both sides of the ship with long, sturdy poles in hand just in case they did get too close to the cliffs.

‘Has this always been here?’

Richard frowned. Did she think he built it? He could hardly imagine the feat. ‘Yes. Of course.’

‘Does it cut all the way across the island?’

‘No. The cliffs will become lower and level out. After the curve ahead this inlet will open into the harbour. Beyond that is a small inland river that leads to the shipyard.’

‘Oh.’ So fascinated by the towering walls of rock, she barely glanced to the curve ahead. ‘Is this the only way into the harbour?’

‘Why?’

‘I just wondered.’

He knew exactly what she wondered. Half-tempted to let her worry, he left her to stew a few moments before he finally relented. ‘Your father and brother have both been here before. They know how to gain safe entrance to the inlet.’

‘I thought perhaps...’

When her words trailed off, Richard laughed. ‘You thought what? That I would lure your family here only to watch their ship crash against the rocks?’ He shook his head, adding, ‘Since their death is not what I am seeking, doing so would not serve my purpose.’

She closed her eyes, shivering a moment at the memory of



watching an arrow find its mark in her father's chest, before asking, 'Then it is only Glenforde's death you seek?'

'As I said before—I am not interested in your family.'

He hadn't answered her question. 'I know you think Glenforde will come for me.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'I am still not certain.'

'And I say you are wrong.' He leaned closer to warn, 'You might want to pray that he does come.'

Isabella understood the unspoken warning—if Glenforde didn't come, she could very well bear the brunt of Dunstan's revenge. Instead of telling him the reasons Glenforde would never come, she stepped away, assuring Dunstan, 'I will.'

As the ship eased out from the gentle curve, the harbour opened up before them. She blinked at the sight before her.

An entire town seemed to appear from thin air. The harbour was alight with countless torches. People—women, men and children—lined the full docks and streets. Some laughed, some cried, but all waved and shouted their welcomes to those aboard the ship.

Ropes were tossed to men waiting on the nearest dock and the ship swung easily about as it was wrapped and tied around the mooring post. Beyond were numerous, large storage buildings.

From the looks of it, Dunstan did more than kidnap unsuspecting women.

'You look surprised.'

She nodded, admitting, 'I am.'

‘Did you think me nothing more than a brigand committed to mayhem on the high seas?’

Isabella couldn’t help herself, she ran her gaze down his body. With his overlong near-black hair, dark looks and recent actions, how could she think him anything else? ‘Apparently, looks are deceiving.’

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.