

1396



A.V. Arms



Chapter 10

January 13, 1396, Ravenshill, England

Jasper stared up at the high walls of the old keep. The surrounding land rolled in steep hills, bleeding over into the mountains and deep into Scotland. The air smelled of the crisp snow that fell upon his cloaked shoulders. The wooden bridge crossed the river from the village, the road climbing here, to the walls of Ravenshill. This was where Jasper was born, the second son to Reid and Rose Kirkham.

Throughout their childhood, his elder brother Callen lorded it over Jasper every chance he got. Ravenshill was his. Jasper wasn't overly concerned with his brother's threat to send him away when he owned the property. Until his parents died quietly in their chamber, in their bed. There were no answers to their deaths, but Jasper wondered if a thirteen-year-old boy could have a heart cold enough to kill his parents. Unfortunately, Jasper did not have time to find the right questions or the people to answer them.

Callen was true to his word and sent his eight-year-old brother away to the Benedictine monastery, Cluny Abbey, in Saône-et-Loire, France. But, no matter the number of letters Jasper sent in those four years to his brother Callen pleading for a chance to return to Ravenshill, he never got a response.

The walls surrounding the small keep were thick stone. But this was a sunny place, sitting atop its hill. It was not like the monastery. A place of thick brick walls constantly seeping with cold. Brick too thick for a boy to be heard screaming through chamber walls.

A scowl crossed Jasper's features. He had come home, and he would remain home, he determined. The road here had not been an easy one. His plan was only one of many through the years he tried using to escape from beneath the watchful gazes of the monks. He would stick here like the dried burs clinging to his tired horse's mane and tail. He was surprised the stolen mare made the fast journey south and didn't succumb to her age.

Jasper prodded the animal between the tall wooden gates. His head roved back and forth, scanning the walls, the tower, and the great hall. People moved about, and only the guardsmen took note of him. No one recognized him now that he was a man of sixteen.

It was his penance. It was his duty to God to go down on his knees. By doing so, he was taught he became a vessel for God, as could any boy. Entrance into his body forced the sins from the holy men when they released their carnal pleasures into him. The lashes they lay across his back drove those very sins from Jasper. He wondered nearly every time he withstood this penance why the monks did not have the lash lay across them and drive the evils away from themselves and leave him out of it.

But he accepted his place in God's purposes. He had one of the most essential tasks a boy could be given. That came into question when Sir Jehan le Meingre came to Cluny Abbie. After Meingre's ransom from the Ottoman sultan Bayezid, the knight and some of his companions stopped at the monastery. Jasper remembered sitting at one of the knight's tables in his usual silence that night. They began a conversation about the sins of the flesh, and Jasper knew they were getting it wrong. He tried to teach them little boys were God's vessels. If a boy received his penance, he would grow to be a man impermeable to such sins.

The table had grown quiet at his words, and Meingre's face reddened. One of the knights yanked him from the table at his silent signal. He remembered being beaten, and he did not know what for. He screamed the question, "why," at them repeatedly. Finally, one monk was brought in and prayed and ranted over his broken body. The beating and prayers went on throughout the night. By dawn the following day, Meingre left the abbey believing the boy's punishment was light for his lies against the church.

Jasper remembered his terror as he watched the group leaving so long ago. Turning their backs on him with no questions or explanations asked of him. Left alone again in the care of men who insisted God spoke through him. These men of God had lied. Men who declared their piety had sinned. Not just with their lies but with their actions. Jasper wanted to set the monastery on fire. But not all the priests had taken part, and now Jasper knew it was not because the men were not as connected to God as they were. It was because they were indeed men of God. But they had no more power than he did.

Jasper left quietly one night and found his way home. He stowed away aboard a ship that took him across the channel, then stole a horse and prayed to God to forgive him for that and the life he had given to Satan unknowingly. And so he was here, at the walls of his home. He was a man and would not return to avow himself to God. He would not go back and one day be so tormented in his mind he convinced other boys they were vessels. He wanted to be out in the light of day. Feel the sun on his face, smile, and not devote his days to the dark chapel and a dower downturn of a constant frown.

The gates stood open, and Jasper rode between them. He dismounted in the bailey and felt a settling of his soul as he looked around him at the servants going about their daily tasks. Ladies crossed the walk bridge and moved toward the hall. Jasper's feet heading in that direction as the dinner bell clanged.

The hall seemed louder than he remembered it. Everything was louder and brighter than he remembered them. Halfway to the dais, the murmurs had silenced. His brother looked down the aisle at Jasper as he approached. Jasper saw the scowl.

“Why do you soil my keep by showing your face here?” Callen sneered. The malice dripped heavily in his voice, and he watched some gathered draw a cross over their chests to protect them from his evil. Jasper stopped in his tracks. He felt himself bristle under their scrutiny. These people, whom he grew up with and who were supposed to be his, had been told something. Jasper knew that something was not how Jasper was lied to and misled as an innocent boy. They looked at him as if he was evil. How long did it take after Meingre left the abbey that word reached Ravenshill of Jasper’s humiliation?

He felt his jaw clench tight. He would drive it into all of these people if he was trained to the sword. But first, it would go deep into his brother’s chest. But he did not have a sword as was given to his brother. He stared at him now, looking weak upon the dais as he hid behind his words of hate. It did not matter that he had a sword and was trained in its use. He was still as weak a man as Jasper was a weak boy. Callen was the older son, the preferred son. But it was the strong son cast out in favor of the weak. Because it was the second son who had God a step in front of him, leading him with bravery and wisdom, not fear and naivety.



Chapter 2

May 24, 1400 Ravenshill, England

It had been four years since Jasper saw his brother. He had grown into a young man with a confident bearing, but Jasper saw a weakness in his pale blue eyes. That weakness was hate and loathing. He was solid in his judgment of Jasper. His older brother was under the impression he knew him as the child he was when he was sent away. But Callen did not know him at all. He was not meek and would not be forced from his home again.

“Do not bring the Devil into my house!” he screamed as he pointed at Jasper. Jasper took a step closer rather than show fear for those men who moved across the hall toward him.

“You leave here now! You will not bring your corrupted soul behind these walls.”

Slowly, Callen stood, bracing his fists on the top of the table, and leaned over it, glaring down at his younger brother.

Jasper saw he had grown taller, broader in the chest, with thicker legs. His brother was a man now in not only title but form. Jasper thought perhaps the fire blazing in himself would be enough. His blue eyes glittered with loathing for the brother who forced so much upon him. The scorching hate transformed Jasper’s face into something frightening and evil.

Jasper widened his stance and gave the appearance nothing could move him, not even the lord of Ravenshill.

“Come no closer you. Do not taint us with your immorality.”

Jasper took another step closer to the dais. “Remove him!” Callen bellowed at his men.

Jasper moved quickly before Callen’s men could reach for him. He charged toward the table. His long legs ate up the distance. He leaped onto the edge of the dais, one foot landing to purchase while his other knee was lifting. He sprung, landing a knee on the table, crouched, then launched himself at Callen. The two men crashed backward. Their bodies knocked the chairs across the floor. The speed and violence of Jasper’s attack took everyone by surprise. It was a moment before Jasper was dragged from Callen. Jasper was screaming at his brother as the hands took hold of him and lifted him easily between them. Spittle flew from Jasper’s lips that curled back in a snarl of malice. He fought the arms of four grown men as they dragged him from the hall.

Bleeding, he was thrown into the rain outside the gate. Then, blinded by rage and foolishness, he charged back through the gates. His feet barely sank into the muddy bailey before he was forced back out beneath the driving fists of the men. After that, the gates were shut and barred.

The wooden doors were massive, rising over his head. Men on the walls jeered down at him when they should be in awe of his bravery and determination. He stared at those gates, followed the wet grain of the wood from the rain seeping into his clothes and washing the blood from his face. If he had men, he could storm the gates. With men, he could reach Callen without someone pulling him back. He needed men, more and better than those who stood on the parapets finding pleasure in his misery.

Finally, he took a step back and looked up at the men. "I need my horse."

One of the men laughed at him, "Come and get it, boy, or move on."

Jasper stared up at the man, memorizing his face in the distance so he would feel retribution when Jasper came again. And he vowed silently, staring at Ravenshill, that he would come again. Next time he would come with an army, smash the gate and claim what his brother held.



Chapter 3

September 5, 1402, Marseille, France

Jasper Kirkham was the stain upon all the houses of England. The story of Jasper's depravity only began in France with Meingre and his men. By the time it reached England, Jasper was a wanton of forbidden carnal lusts. His presence at Cuny Abbie debased the monks. By the time the story landed at Ravenshill, Jasper had more immorality than Satan himself. Every house down to the lowliest and most depraved members shunned Jasper, and he found himself too consumed to survive to be terrified.

England was unfamiliar to Jasper and inhospitable. How moved south and to the ports scattered along its coasts. He sailed twice as a cabin boy, but the chief mate treated him as the monks did, but he didn't hide behind God to do it. Jasper escaped at Port of Marseille, finding himself again in France and no better hope than when he was in England or on the ship.

His stomach never stopped aching with its emptiness. He lived in the streets of Marseille for weeks before standing in front of one of the many brothels. During his time away from the abbey, he learned the many weaknesses of man and where they were offered. One of those places was the brothels that catered to the sins of the flesh.

As Jasper knew, the flesh did not only include a woman's flesh but children, including boys. Boys were primarily slaves or those orphans so desperate they could survive no other way. Jasper found himself to be one of those boys. He had already been forced to do anything a boy in such a place would be expected to do. At least, when he stepped through those doors, he would be paid to do it. Yet, he hesitated. He had been innocent in all the interactions thus far. Knocking on the closed door marked him as the person all of England named him. But he had far more critical things to do than feeding himself.

This was not his first place to offer himself. Two could not afford what a boy child was worth. Jasper was grateful these men had not detected his naivety in what he could ask for his services. He was warned away from a brothel by one of its women warning him of "slaughterhouses." The brothels catered to the masses, and the girls were expected to serve sixty to a hundred men daily. The luxury brothels offered their women better compensation, the boys even more. After learning more about brothels, he learned of this one. Run by Madame Kira, Fleurs Douces, she actively built her customer base ever higher among the merchant class. The Madame's whores were

purported to be eager as well as beautiful. As far as whores went, Madame Kira's were treated fairly.

This was what Jasper needed. A brothel to make money in and one he could leave freely. He had more things to think about than just feeding himself. Jasper had a keep to take and a brother to destroy. He could work in other places to feed himself. But here, he could find connections and learn secrets that might pay off for him one day. So he knocked on the door and was firm in his decision by the time it opened.

"What can I do for you, boy?" the middle-aged woman asked in French when he stood speechless for a moment. At the monastery, Jasper learned French and Latin and read and spoke all three of his languages fluently. "Well, speak up."

"Do you need a boy?" Jasper asked.

The woman shook her head. "I have a boy to collect my wood and scrub my floors. I don't need another."

She swung the door closed, and Jasper slipped his bare foot into it before it could close in his face.

It opened back up, and the woman looked at him and waited.

"I mean...." Jasper stammered not with indecisiveness but lacked the term for what he was to become. Finally, Jasper cleared his throat, "I mean a boy for the men."

A smile creased the woman's face. Jasper already knew the brothel never had a boy to offer. "Come inside," the woman said, opening the door wider. Jasper stepped inside. Today he would negotiate the sale of his body to men so that one day he would be able to buy fighting men.



Chapter 4

Jasper sat on the stoop, his head tucked onto his knees drawn to his chin. The alley was quiet, unlike the loud street teamed with men in front of the brothel. This place was nothing like Ravenshill. Ravenshill was all that was quiet and peaceful. But here, neither of those things could be found. Instead, there was chaos and madness, cruelty and suffering. He didn't want to stay here. A week passed, and more were coming to see Madame Kira's boy. Jasper tucked his head behind his knees, and his shoulders shook as he cried on behalf of his misery.

The door behind him opened, and he quickly swiped the tears from his cheeks and dropped his knees from his chest so he did not look so pathetic. Then, he shifted to the side without looking behind him at who it was.

"Are you okay, Cédric?" Alida asked. Here only Madame Kira knew Cedric by his real name. She confided in him Kira was not her given name, nor did any of the other girls carry the names their parents gave them.

Jasper said nothing, and Alida stood watching him. Alida was about twelve, a young girl still but an old whore. She grew up among the slaughterhouses run by her guardian. So it was no surprise Alida was thrown to the wolves early. Because Madame Kira purchased her and gave her a place, a job, and a decision, Alida worshipped the madam. Alida could have walked away from prostitution but chose to rejoin it instead.

Jasper did not understand other men. With her lean body, Alida was the second most popular whore at Fleurs Douces. But, by far, the most popular was Lizzette, and Jasper understood that. Seductiveness flowed from Lizette as easily as the water flowed along rivers. Her dark eyes drew the men in, promising them knowledge of her deep dark secrets. Her long thin legs would wrap around a man's waist, and Jasper imagined many times what that would feel like if she had her heels locked behind a man's back so he could only drive forward and not pull back. Her long black hair shone like silk, and her olive skin gave her seductiveness an exotic flare.

"It will get better," Alida said.

"Okay," was all Jasper could say. He didn't want what he was doing to get better. It was a sin, something hidden away, the weakness of mankind with their craven desires. How many times had he had a strap laid across his back to make the monks feel better about their sins?

In the time he had left the monastery, each moment he spent behind its thick stone walls came back to him with a frequency that made him want to hate beyond

any hope of redemption. He wanted to tear the priests' eyes out, rip their hearts from their chests, sever their manhoods and feed them to the pigs. But he remained a weak boy going to his knees in front of men. It was as if this was what he was meant to do. The monks had conditioned him to it, the chief mate reinforced it, and now he was here. Like Alida, he took control of his life without changing their place, not even replacing sin for sin but choosing to keep drowning in it with their flesh.

After a moment, Alida went back inside. Jasper should bathe and prepare for the afternoon to begin. But he wanted to sit another moment in the relative solitude of the alley. When the door opened again, Jasper turned to see madame Kira coming through the door. He began to stand, but the woman put a hand on his shoulder and settled on the step beside him. She was a slight woman, barely five feet tall, with a fire in her dark eyes that scared the hell out of Jasper when he saw it. Two nights ago, one of his patrons had beaten him, and Kira demanded compensation for the money he would lose her the rest of the night. Her fury and threat to close the doors that evening had many other customers stepping forward to make financial amends.

Madame Kira had tended his cuts and bruises herself. No one had ever bothered to try to piece him back together before. Her hand fell to Jasper's knee and patted it before she held a folded piece of paper to him. "What's this?"

"It is the note on an account at the bank in your name. That is your earnings for the week. I can give you the money, but it is safer in the bank than hidden in a shoe.

Jasper unfolded it and nearly dropped the paper. "Can you read?" Madame Kira asked gently.

Jasper swallowed and nodded, "I can read."

"I only took out your rent for the room." They looked across the dirty alley together.

"I do not know or care where you came from. I hear accents in your voice, and I know it is not from here. I suspect it is not even France." Madame Kira pointed to the paper he held in his hand. "that is your way out. It is enough to buy you passage, get you a room, tie you over until you find another job."

"I need more," Jasper said.

Madame Kira nodded. "I suspected as much. How much more?"

Jasper looked at her, but instinct told him he should hold his secret. "Just more," he replied.

"I know how you can get more."

"How?"

"Make believe Cédric. Do what Lizette and Alida do. Pretend you want it from the customer you are with more than anyone else. Dote on them, call out their strength, and show them your weakness in the face of their power. Make-believe and fairytales are what these men really buy, not pussies and asses. One is no better than another. It is how you lead them to it, whether they believe it to be the best or worst. Pretend it is the best, and they will pay you well. Watch Lizette and Alida."

Jasper stared at the number on his paper. "Can I ask you something?"

"I don't imagine it would hurt anything."

"Why do you care? You never told me how much I would get, and I did not think I would get more for the other night."

"Does it make you want to get hit more often?"

Jasper had to give the question consideration. The two punches had been painful, terrifying, and humiliating, but not so much as he stared at its price tag.

“My mother was a whore, her mother before her, as far as I know. So what else was there for me to be?”

Jasper didn't realize it was a question she had posed to him. “I guess a whore,” he replied.

She smiled gently at him. “Do you want to be a whore the rest of your life?”

Jasper grimaced at the word.

“Of course, you don't. But you are like me and Lizette and Alida. All whores we might be, but whores we do not wish to stay. Lizette sears these men with her eyes. Her forked tongue convinces them they could truly possess a woman such as her. But no man could ever possess Lizette. She is cunning like a fox and slithery like a snake. She is a woman meant for jewels and fine gowns, but she spends not a dime of her money on such things. Instead, she is showered with expensive gifts and clothes, most of which she sells, and puts all that money into her earnings. I do not ask what her goal is, but I am certain it is lofty. Because of her appeal, Alida is not gifted with expensive gifts, but they pay extra for her innocent frailness. She cries over every bruise, and that girl bruises easily. I am sure some of the bruises she gets paid extra for are her own. Being fragile is her make-believe. There is nothing fragile or innocent about that one. She is more like to cut your throat than any man who walks through this door.”

“I had no one protecting what little money I made. I never wanted to be a whore, not from the first time I lay beneath a man to the last. The other girls or the master himself always stole the money I received. I had no say on who or how many. It did not matter if I was sick or had my flux. Nothing mattered. Where I began, I had no chance to weave lies for the customers. They lined up, and that was all any of us girls were. So I started stealing from those men and brokering my own deals in the alleys. No one got a cut but me. When it was discovered, Master through me out. But one does not need a bed to lie upon when a man does not care if he bends you over a barrel in an alley. It is all the same and makes the same coin. The dream of Fleurs Douces began in an alley much like this one, rising on the ashes of hell. What is your Fleurs Douces, Jasper?”

“My home.”

Madame Kira nodded. “Watch those girls. Learn your customers. If they feel guilty about a bruise or scratch, make them leave a bruise or scratch. Some men will reward you for your silence, some for your fight, some for your tears, and some for your blood. But they all pay in the end. Pay attention to everything here. Once you leave the brothel, remember the entirety of the world is a brothel, full of make-believe and false innocence. Here you will not learn the good side of man. Here are the lessons of the wicked. These are the ones you must know so you can have your Fleurs Douces.”



Chapter 5

The door to Jasper's room opened, and Lizette was in the doorway. Months he had spent here in this very room within the brothel, and Lizette had barely said two words to him in that time. Her sudden presence in his room made him want to cover his bare chest. She let the door latch behind her, crossed to his bureau without an invitation, and sat on its edge. She wore a white silk gown, plain and yet so elegant, with her contrasting olive skin, dark hair, and eyes. It was a gift from one of her men this past week. He had returned twice to see her in it and out of it.

Lizette had a level of confidence only a whore with wealthy men fawning over her could possess. She straddled the corner of the bureau, her legs splayed so Jasper could see the dark silhouette of her sex beneath. If he cared to look.

"Why do you watch me?"

Jasper shrugged, snatching his tunic off the edge of the bed and slipping it on.

She held mirth on her full red lips. They parted now, and her dark eyes roved over Jasper. He had the keen impression she was disappointed he had covered himself. That was part of her fairytale, and she was good. His heart hammered, he felt the blood rushing to his groin, and he felt shame. She was a whore, he was a whore, and the pleasure of their customers was not theirs to ever have. But Jasper wanted Lizette to pull the sheer white fabric higher so he might see between her legs.

"You do not know?"

Jasper felt frustrated. "Madame Kira told me to watch you so I will learn more about the ways of seduction."

Lizette laughed. Lizette's laughter had the capability of holding many falsettos. From a coy laugh to a reserved laugh as if she were too simple-minded to get a joke. He had heard her laugh like a child and like the bawdy wench she was. But this one sounded more genuine than the others because it was mirthful.

She hopped down from the bureau and circled Jasper. "You will not learn what you must know by watching me," she said. "A man does not seek a boy because he is like a woman. He seeks a boy because, in his mind, it makes him more powerful and wiser than the men he knows. If you begin to wear jewels, men will bring your jewels to reward you for giving them their power. If a man does not want his power, he will want you to take it, and he will reward you when you take all his power in a most sinful and carnal way."

Lizette came to stand in front of him. She was tall, but Jasper was growing quickly in the time he had come to Fleurs Douces and looked her in the eye. Her face

turned simpering, and she placed a hand on his chest and plucked at the fabric covering it. "why do you not seek any of our beds?"

"I um..l..." Jasper stammered.

"Have you ever been with a woman?"

Jasper swallowed and shook his head the slightest.

"Oh, you poor boy," she cooed, taking a step back. Then, with one fluid movement, her gown was over her head, and she stood before him nude. "To have had many a dick but to never give one." She stepped forward again and was before him on her knees in one fluid movement. She reached for his belt. He tried to pull away, but it was a halfhearted effort.

"Don't," he gasped when her hand found his penis.

"Don't what?" she asked, looking up at him. In that flash of her eyes, he would give her the world if she carried out her promise. "Don't show you how best to use a dick?" she chuckled before wrapping her lips around him.

Many lessons came from that encounter. Some brought more coin, and some brought great pleasures when Jasper lay in solitude upon his bed.



Chapter 6

2 years later

Jasper watched Lizette smile at the man. He was tall with a girth to match. However, he was far from attractive, and Jasper pitied the woman.

He had come to Fleurs Douce two years before. During that time, he had bedded every whore the brothel had to offer. Adding the women at the competing brothel down the street to the list. But Lizette always called him back with her sensuous smiles and knowing eyes. Lizette had enchanted him to the point he found nothing in any woman's bed except Lizette's.

When the man touched Lizette, Jasper wanted to go to them and rip his hand off his arm. The man trailing a finger down Jasper's bared chest did not notice he did not have the boy's attention. He did not feel him tense when Lizette made her way to the stairs with the man. Absent-mindedly, Jasper led the man up the same stairs a few minutes later.

In the early morning hours, after the brothel had said farewell to its last customer, Lizette came to him. He lay on his back, his arms behind his head, staring up at the ceiling when the door to his room opened. Lizette was the only one that entered his privacy without a knock and invitation. She moved toward the bed in the dark, and Jasper could see her grace without having to lay eyes upon it now. The blanket lifted from him, and her lithe body slipped beside his. She squirmed her way down, laying her head on his chest.

At fourteen, Jasper was beginning to grow from his boy's body. His chest was expanding, and his legs grew thicker. His voice squeaked, sometimes a deep baritone, before it cracked. He knew as he grew, his time here was running out. Jasper could appear feminine with narrow shoulders and hips, but he did not know how to do it when he looked like a man. He did not know if he could do it once he did grow into his own. But he knew it was not something that would happen overnight. Though he feared one day, he would suddenly become aware he was a man and had been for some time.

Jasper had a reasonable sum amassed, but it was not enough to buy troops the size he needed to attack Ravenshill. He had not spent a dime of his money thus far, but it could be two years or more before he had enough money. He could cry at the thought of two more years in this place.

“What’s the matter Jasper?” she asked quietly. She trailed a finger across his chest, and he wanted to snatch it away in irritation. It was hard to feel her finger when a man had done the same only a few hours before. But he left it. It was not her fault.

A year ago, after visiting her bed numerous times, he told Lizette his real name and, soon after, his plans to take Ravenshill.

“How long will I have to stay here?” he asked but did not want the answer if she knew it. “How long will you stay to get what you want?”

He felt her shrug as he dropped a hand to caress her back. “When I have enough.”

“Enough for what?” Though Jasper had opened up to Lizette, she had not returned the favor. She never offered her real name nor anything of her past. He assumed she was as scared as the rest of those who called the brothel home.

“I don’t know,” she said, propping her chin on his chest so she could look up at him. “What does it cost for a woman to live in luxury without a man?”

Jasper glanced down at her before she laid her head back down on him. “I think there is no amount of money in the world that can free a woman from men.”

“At least here I have some say, some freedom. Not like it would be with a husband.”

“What do you know of husbands?”

Lizette snorted. “I know what the countless married men have told me of their home life and how they treat me to know.”

“There are some men who will give you the freedom you want. I can’t think of a man who would not want to give you the world.”

Lizette chuckled, “You are so naïve, Jasper,” she whispered.

Jasper sat up, pulling Lizette with him. He sat beside her on the bed, clutching her hands. “I will marry you. We will go to Ravenshill together, and when I take it, you shall be my queen.”

Lizette laughed. “Your queen? Really, Jasper, that is a fairytale. How will Ravenshill make you king?”

“It will not make me a king, but regardless you will be my queen.”

“How do you plan to take Ravenshill? You say you save money for this, but what is it for?”

“For men. Good fighting men.”

“How will you ever earn enough here for that?”

“I can’t without help. You look for a way out, and I know the way out.”

“So you expect me to put my money into your army?”

Jasper was incensed at her tone. He dropped her hands and climbed from the bed. He moved to the table and lit a lantern to cast the night from the room. He turned back to her and leaned against the table, studying her.

“I don’t expect it, but I ask it.” Jasper drew in a breath to steady himself. If he learned nothing through the years, it was patience, and he called upon that knowledge now. He walked to the bed and sat down on its edge. Again he took her hands in his. “I am here for a reason. I sin and demean myself because I have an end game. That end is when I have enough good fighting men to get me through the gates and kill my brother.”

Lizette slipped her hands from his and reclined on the pillows. Jasper's lips pinched in frustration. Her arms went behind her head, pressing her breasts against her thin shift. The fabric was well woven, and he knew it was soft beneath his hands, her breasts firm.

"How many is enough? How many men and supplies will you have to buy before you can raise an army?"

Jasper shrugged and climbed to his knees over her. "It depends on the men I hire and how I plan to breach."

"How do you plan to breach?"

Jasper frowned. "It depends on the men I can afford."

"You do not know what you are doing. Why would I put my money in you?"

"Do you know how?" he snapped at her.

She scoffed, "No, but there are men who do."

"Men?" Jasper grabbed Lizette's ankles and yanked them quickly apart, sliding himself between her legs before she could close them. He seized her wrists in the same fluid moment and pinned them over her head. He held one hand while he yanked her shift up with the other. "Men, you know?" he asked, thrusting a finger inside her.

She lay still. Had it been one of her customers, she would have thrust herself anxiously into him as if it was the most wonderful ever done to her. But Jasper earned his reactions.

"Men I know well."

Jasper removed his finger and replaced it, thrusting deep. She had cleaned herself before coming to him, as she always had. "Men, you can introduce me to?"

"Men, I can get to gut you if it was the price I charge them."

Jasper laughed, "You are quite confident."

Lizette took it as a challenge, and she showed him why men paid a high price to bed the sensual Lizette.



Chapter 7

Lizette lay beside him in her bed. Jasper's ribs and back ached, and his head and scalp. He swore at himself repeatedly that he was a man and shouldn't cry. But a man would not be here, letting things like that happen to him. He was tired of abuses against his flesh and soul. He blinked, feeling the burn of a tear threatening the corner of his eye.

"Lord Benoît gave me a lesson on breaching a castle."

Jasper blinked and stiffened.

"It does depend on the men you get, as you say. He said there are mercenaries to be had with no loyalties to king or kin. Men who will bring a slaughter if that is what you pay them to do."

"I know of mercenaries. I can't raise a king's army," Jasper said with irritation.

"Do not treat me that way," she chided.

"Sorry," Jasper huffed. He was contrite. Lizette refused to allow him to treat her as anything other than an equal. And he took it beyond that, acknowledging she was wiser than himself.

"Do you know where these men can be found?" Lizette asked.

"No," Jasper replied reluctantly.

"I do. Some may be willing to take flesh for a discount in salary."

"You would do this?"

He felt her shrug. "I would rather do that than give up the coin I have already earned doing the same. We will go tomorrow." She rolled toward him and cradled her head on his chest. He placed his palm on the back of her head like silk beneath it.

Whatever the following day brought, it would be a move forward. If this was not the right avenue to take, he would find another. But what kept him awake most throughout the darkest hours of the morning was Lizette. She was willing to help him. At what level, he was yet to find out. He doubted even she knew. It was as if he held his breath, waiting for her to answer his marriage proposal. But they both moved forward, and it filled him with contentment.



Chapter 8

Jasper's horse shifted beneath him. At his elbow was Sir Christo gray, the commander of his army. An army of two thousand paid for by flesh and the place of darkness that resided within Jasper. It was not only Jasper and Lizette who paid with their flesh. Little girls and boys were easy pickings and easy to sell.

Lizette had planted the seed to steal children away to sell. Lizette had been taken and thrust into her place as a whore early enough that she could not remember life before. Jasper's flesh, too, was sacrificed. Both had been helpless children, and it made them strong. Strong enough to take Ravenshill if only they could earn more than they could with their flesh alone. So Jasper had and did not lose sleep over even one child.

Jasper and Christoff began the ascent from the river and onto the hill where the keep of Ravenshill sat. The head of Lizette's bay appeared on Jasper's other side. When they reached the crest, one side of the gates had stood open, the other suspended by a hinge.

The forces of Jasper's had decimated Ravenshill's guards. Like a nest of ants, his men swirled around the hill and inside the walls of the small keep. Screams echoed from within. As long as no one in the village raised arms against Jasper's passing army, which no one had, their lives and homes were left intact. Those inside Ravenshill were a different matter and were put to the blade. All except Allistare. He was dragged into the bailey as Lizette and Jasper entered.

The men thrust him forward, and he stumbled. His hands were bound tightly together in front of him. His brother had fought, and Jasper had expected nothing less.

Jasper took his time dismounting, watching his brother, who glared back at him. He stood erect, his giant chest rising and falling rapidly. Jasper could smell his brother's fear despite his aplomb.

"Hello, brother," Jasper said, reaching the man who was still larger than him.

"Get out of my keep," Allistair ordered.

Jasper smiled at him. It was a chilling smile given by a man with ice running in his veins.

"Look around, brother. Ravenshill is mine."

"A heathen like you will not hold it long."

Jasper laughed at him. The humor he found in Allistaire's words was more chilling than his frigid smile. "Do you think you will be the one to take it away?"

“I’ll burn it to ashes with you in it.”

“I think not. Though I admire your confidence in what you say.”

“Perry,” Jasper called to one of his men. The executioner took it upon himself to levy his judgments against a wealthy merchant. He was declared a murderer, and Perry fled. He was one of the men Christof recruited and a man Jasper had wanted near when the walls were breached.

Perry was skilled in his occupation. He knew how to secure a rope so it snapped a man’s neck or left him thrashing. He knew which blade to use and where to strike a man in the neck to sever a head cleanly. He also knew which sword and location to strike to allow the death to happen slowly. He was also well versed in the art of impalement, how to penetrate organs to expedite death. And he knew where to insert a pole, so it skittered up along the spine without penetrating organs. One of the men Perry impaled survived in agony for ten days. It was those skills Jasper needed now.

Jasper turned from his brother and remounted his horse. Men had Allistare by the arms, and Perry had moved to stand next to them. Christof had advanced to stand near. Jasper edged his horse closer to his commander.

Pulling his sword, Jasper raised it, pointing it toward the sky. “Today, victory is ours,” he declared. A roar rose around them.

“Baron Allistare Kirkham, I condemn you for acts of heresy.”

“Heresy?” Allistair asked with indignation. “By what grounds do you accuse me of such a thing?”

“Your crime against me. A crime against God himself.”

“How dare you, you....”

Jasper’s voice boomed across the bailey, drowning Allistair out. “And whosoever shall offend one of *these* little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.”

A struggle ensued between the men holding Allistair. Jasper sat beside Lizette as his brother screamed for Jasper’s murder. Then his threats turned to screams of agony as the pole was forced into the man’s anus, penetrating beyond. A stop was placed on the pole so Allistair’s weight did not force the pole out of his neck or chest, killing him quickly. Allistair screamed and passed out to wake screaming until all that was left of his brother was a dying man racked with sobs.

“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off.” Perry stepped to Allistair, grabbed a hand clenched in pain, and yanked it up to rest against the wall at Allistair’s back. Then, he pulled a knife from his belt and began sawing at Allistair’s hand. “It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.”

“Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” By the time Jasper had finished the words, Allistair’s screams had died again.

“And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off,” Jasper called forth again as Allistair’s eyes fluttered open. Jasper saw his brother’s remorse. It reached deep into Allistair’s soul and was genuine. But his repentance could be judged in the next life. “It is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.” Allistare sobbed. “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”

Jasper waited, giving his brother's body time to reject the punishment and pass out again. But his glazed eyes remained open, begging for mercy.

"And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." Again Perry moved toward Allistair. "It is better for thee to enter into the Kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to cast into hell fire."

Allistair struggled then. Violent moves ripped the pole through his organs and finally exploded through his chest as he screamed.

Jasper stared at his brother for the longest time, knowing the punishment that sent him to hell was nothing compared to what he faced there.

When Jasper was asked if Allistair's body should be removed from the post, he told them no, his corpse was to rot where it stood.

In the falling darkness, the extinguishing sun washed the stone in red. Jasper stood on the parapet looking across the river and the village beyond. He heard Lizette's steps climb onto the wooden walk beside him.

"I am sure you're proud to be standing here."

"As proud as you should be. I would not be here if not for you."

"A fair price to pay to be a baroness."

Jasper looked down at her and smiled. This was not the cold one given to his brother but one filled with the heat of love.



Chapter 9

“Do you have a choice?” Lizette asked.

Of course, there were choices. The easiest choice was to walk away and leave Stokesley to Baron Everett Barclay. But he had told Lizette of the man’s part in his childhood tortures. Jasper was wise enough to see what an oxymoron her concern for his childhood was when she played a crucial role in sending other children to the same fate or worse.

A small smile snuck across his lips, gone quickly. “If you would like Stokesley, all you must do is bid me bring it to you.”

Lizette looked up at Jasper and smiled. Her eyes sparkled as brilliantly as the sapphires of her necklace. The gold bands on her wrists, the brilliant blue stones sparkling in her ears. Looking at her, Jasper realized he didn’t have a choice. Ravenshill could not continue to support the spectacular life Lizette was enjoying.

“Bring me Stokesley,” she said.

He took her hand and leaned over it, kissing her knuckles as he looked up at her. “With great honor, I shall serve you Stokesley upon a golden platter. Lizette laughed at him as he swept her into his arms.



The day Jasper and his army marched for Stokesley, Lizette announced she would have Jasper’s son or daughter. The battle he launched at Stokesley was vicious, with his wife’s name on his lips. He tore through the castle’s defenses, laying claim and taking the title of a second barony with the prosperous property.

The pregnancy was not kind to Lizette, who spent much of her time suffering from morning sickness that hit any time of the day throughout the entire pregnancy. However, when the son was finally born, she forgot all that and declared she would do it again to give Jasper another son or daughter.

When Lizette declared herself fit enough to travel to Stokesley, Thomas was two months old. She left Thomas behind with a wet nurse so she could lay eyes upon Stokesley.

“Who is the surgeon here?” Jasper started, turning to his wife, who entered his chamber without announcing herself. No one else dared intrude so suddenly into his room. He smiled warmly at Lizette.

“That is Master Lewis. Are you well?” Jasper hurried to her side.

“I am fine. Some of the kitchen servants have become ill. I am sure it is some food not cooked properly..”

Jasper heard the absurdity of the statement. Infected food would not remain just in the kitchen. It would have gone to nobles or servants, depending on the food quality.

“I am sure that is all,” he agreed anyway.

Lizette nodded slightly. “I think I will lie down before dinner. I am feeling fatigued.”

“I do not doubt you only arrived two days ago. The castle will not fall if you rest,” he reassured her.

Lizette smiled warmly at him. It was the last smile his wife gave him. She went to bed, not rising for the day’s final meal. By the next morning, she blazed with fever, and two kitchen staff had died. Lizette and many others died three days after discovering the illness in the kitchens.

Pestilence had entered the walls of Stokesley. Only a handful remained—two soldiers, five servants, a child or two out of hundreds that once filled the walls. Jasper grieved for his wife, uncaring of the other deaths happening around him. He hoped many times he would grow ill. It moved quickly, killed with the precision of a well-trained army, but Jasper remained untouched by it. For months he kept himself secluded behind the walls trapping in all the lost souls that had perished. He drank them away, stumbled past them, turned blind eyes to their ghastly faces and deaf ears to their cries of pain and fear.

Months later, he awoke knowing he could stay at Stokesley no longer. So he rode for Ravenshill and his son.