

DESIRE

EXCERPT

Brynn swam a while longer, trying to burn off her frustration -- to no avail. She was physically spent by the time she turned toward shore, but her feelings of guilt and anger and helplessness were just as strong as she clambered onto the ledge of the rocky pool.

For a moment she stood dripping wet in her shift, wringing out her long hair. The sea breeze would dry it quickly, for this stretch of Cornish coast boasted one of the warmest climates in England.

When she started to reach for the towel she had left lying on the ground, however, she realized it was gone. Her gaze lifted, searching, then fell upon the intruder in her private sanctuary. Brynn froze, her heart thudding in her chest.

He was leaning casually against a boulder, watching her from the afternoon shadows. He was dressed informally as well, in breeches and gleaming topboots and a white cambric shirt with no cravat. Yet there was nothing casual in his look as his measuring gaze slowly raked her.

Alarmed, she took a backward step. How had he found his way to the rocky stretch of beach below the cliff? Had he discovered the cave below the house with its secret tunnel? He didn't look like a revenue man, but government men sometimes roamed these shores, searching for contraband.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a breathless voice. "How did you get here?"

"I climbed down," he replied, gesturing with his head at the rocks above him.

"You didn't answer my first question."

He was tall and lithely built, she noted, with dark, curling hair worn a trifle longer than fashionable. When he stepped out of the shadows, her gaze riveted on his face. His lean, aristocratic features were strikingly handsome, barely saved from arrogance by a sensual mouth. His heavily lashed eyes were a startling hue, the deep blue of the ocean on a brilliant summer day, and they held her transfixed.

"I'm Wycliff," he said simply, as if she should be duly impressed.

She was, in truth. She recognized the name of the rich and powerful Earl of Wycliff. By reputation, he was a notorious rake and a leader of the infamous Hellfire League, an exclusive club of wicked noblemen dedicated to pleasure and debauchery. Brynn was suddenly keenly aware of a different kind of danger. Simply being alone with him could taint her reputation.

"That does not explain what you are doing here," she replied tartly.

"I am visiting a friend."

"Do you realize you are trespassing?"

His mouth curved in a charming half smile. "I couldn't resist the pleasure of watching a sea nymph cavort in her kingdom. I wasn't even certain you were real."

He held out her towel to her, but Brynn warily backed another step, every instinct she possessed warning her to flee. She wanted to retreat farther, yet with the pool directly behind her, there was nowhere to go but into the water.

"You needn't fear me," he remarked soothingly. "I'm not in the habit of ravishing beautiful women, no matter how scantily clad."

"That is not what I hear--" Brynn began, then looked down at herself and nearly gasped. The shift she wore had turned transparent, showing her breasts with their puckered rosy nipples and the thatch of auburn hair at the vee of her thighs. Flustered, she crossed to him and snatched the towel from his grasp, then wrapped it around her body, shielding her charms from his interested gaze.

"I won't assault you. I am a gentleman, after all."

"Are you?" she asked skeptically. "A gentleman would go away at once and allow me to dress in private."

A lazy smile filled his blue eyes, but he made no move to accommodate her wishes. Annoyed by his arrogance, Brynn brushed past him and stalked barefooted across the shingle toward the rock where she had left her gown and slippers. She had barely taken four steps, however, when a stinging pain in her left sole made her draw a sharp breath. Halting abruptly, she stood on one leg, cursing her clumsiness. She had cut the pad of her foot on a shell or rock.

"You're bleeding," a concerned voice said behind her.

"I am fine."

When she tried to hobble toward her clothing, though, she suddenly felt herself being swept up in a pair of strong arms. Brynn gasped in shock.

"How dare you... Put me down!" she demanded, and tried to break free, but her struggles were in vain. Not only was Wycliff tall and lithe but surprisingly muscular as well -- and altogether too domineering for her taste, both in manner and tone of voice.

"Be still," he ordered. "I only want to see to your wound."

He carried her as if she weighed no more than thistledown and lifted her up onto a boulder so that she sat facing him, her knees level with his broad chest.

Brynn glared repressingly at him, but he only flashed her a wicked smile. When his gaze flickered over her bosom, she realized that her towel had come loose and clutched at it wildly, covering her indecently exposed breasts. There was nothing she could do, however, to hide her legs, which were bare to the knees.

At last he turned his attention to her left foot. He cradled it gently in his elegant hands, turning it slightly to inspect the bloody cut on the underside. His touch was careful as he brushed away sand and probed the wound with his thumb.

"It doesn't appear to be too deep," he murmured.

"I told you, my lord, I am perfectly all right. And I don't appreciate you accosting me."

When he looked up, his sapphire eyes had darkened.

Brynn froze. Sweet heaven. She had seen that look before in men's eyes. Want, need, primitive male lust. She was sitting there, wet and bedraggled as a drowned cat, and yet this handsome stranger was looking at her as if she was the most bewitching woman he had ever encountered.

It was the Gypsy's curse again, Brynn thought with a sinking heart. The powerful Romany spell that had made men go wild for the females in her family for nearly two hundred years. And she was alone with this wicked lord, wearing scarcely a stitch of clothing.

She shivered, despite the warmth of the sun beating down on her wet head.

"Are you cold?" he asked, his voice suddenly husky.

"No... I told you I am quite all right. Or I would be if you would go away and leave me in peace."

"It would hardly be chivalrous of me to leave you in this condition. You're injured."

"I will manage well enough. Please, just release me."

"On one condition."

"Condition?" Brynn eyed him warily, trying to summon her defenses. After the frustrations of her day, she was in no mood to be trifled with or eager to become the plaything of a rake.

"You must pay a forfeit." His hand lifted to her face, and with one finger he brushed her mouth lightly. "A simple kiss. Nothing more."

He wouldn't be satisfied with one kiss, Brynn feared. Even a rake as experienced and jaded as the Earl of Wycliff would not be able to resist the damnable Gypsy's curse. To her everlasting dismay, she possessed unique feminine powers. An irresistible allure she had inherited from her legendary ancestor.

Yet she knew she wouldn't be rid of him unless she agreed.

"If I kiss you, then you promise to go?"

"If you insist."

"You give me your word of honor?"

"Absolutely."

His eyes touched her intimately, and she couldn't look away. She only hoped she could believe him.

"Very well," she said with grave reluctance. "One kiss."

Her throat dry, Brynn braced herself as he put his hands at her waist to lift her down from her rock. But instead of simply setting her on the ground, he held her against him. Her breath caught in her throat as he deliberately let her slide down the full length of his body.

His seductive smile was unapologetic. "If I am only allowed one kiss, I must make it good."

Excerpt from *Desire* by Nicole Jordan
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