

a Thief in the Night

CHAPTER ONE

THE SUN GLISTENED off the rippling water in the fountain and cast a shadow over the face of the dragon statue standing guard in the center.

He'd never understood the statue.

Dragons were terrifying. Creatures of fire and unaccountable wrath. Why give one the honor of being a fountain head when they were so feared?

But so was he, and his portrait had already been commissioned to hang in the grand hall of the judiciary.

He wasn't a dragon though.

He was just doing his job.

Damnit.

He pulled the cap from his head and barely restrained himself from throwing it in the clear waters of the fountain.

Coins littered the bottom, wishes as unreasonable as their guardian.

He dropped his hand to his side and stepped up to the water.

How many wishes could a person make before the waters had no more magic to grant them?

Not magic. Magic was a thing of falsehoods and mischief. It was just a fantasy meant to offer a comfort to the weak-minded and the desperate.

He pulled a penny from his pocket.

The woman, Jaias.

Gods damn him.

She'd smiled at him, standing up there on the platform, smiled like she knew a secret she wasn't sharing with the class, that she thought him too slow to understand.

He was the magistrate!

He was the law.

He was justice.

He hadn't wanted to condemn her, not for stealing the loaf of bread she'd been accused of stealing. Not when he'd learned she managed to pass her unlawful gains to hungry boys playing in the gutter, so starved that the authorities had no time to retrieve the stolen goods before they were consumed.

A momentary good deed? Or a purpose he didn't know or understand?

Thieves were to be punished to the highest extent possible.

Especially thieves whose offenses numbered in the hundreds.

Eskild flipped the coin from his fingers, watched it splash into the pool.

"You should be more circumspect with your coin, Magistrate. Wishes are for sinners and simpletons. Save your money for worthy expenditures."

He turned to the old woman standing at his shoulder.

He hadn't noticed her approach, or her presence at his side.

Her voice was muffled beneath the layers of cloth she wore as a cowl. Even her eyes were hidden beneath the fabric, her stooped back all that he could make out of her crouched form.

"Quite right, Mother. A momentary lapse in judgment."

"Quite." She placed a hand on his arm, her fingerless gloves hiding any spots on her skin, though her grip was sturdy enough.

He watched as she raised her skirts and stepped slowly over the rim of the well, ignoring his sharp breath at her actions to pull her other leg into the water and bend closer to the distorted ripples of the surface, staring down into the fountain's depths.

Her skirts fell into the deep, the dark colors of the material blackening as they soaked in the moisture of the font and she bent low to search out the coins lining the tiled floor.

She dripped when she emerged, reaching for his hand in support to climb back out of the water feature. "No need to waste your coin, Eskild." Her fingers dug between his, untangling his hands he'd not realized he'd clenched before him. She put the penny in the center of his palm. "Your wish was already granted."

He blinked stupidly down at the woman, tilted his head, questioning her response.

He felt her grin.

Couldn't see beneath her wrappings to know if she smiled or not, but he felt it in his bones, the wink that followed when he turned to watch her stalk away.

She dropped the soaked cloak from around her shoulders.

But that wasn't...

A slight wiggle of her hips and the skirt slipped from her body in a wet heap, leather encased legs and sturdy boots underneath.

He'd checked the body...

He jerked when she turned to him for a wave, impertinent, and he stood watching dumbfounded, the woman he'd hung not four hours past alive and breathing and walking around, flesh and blood like him, no ghost.

She disappeared down the lane, slipped into an alley between houses, out of his sight.

"What in the seven hells—"