

## FEVER DREAMS

### EXCERPT

When she appeared on his doorstep, Eve was not surprised that the first thing Ryder said was "Where is your bodyguard?"

She couldn't fault him for taking her to task, since she should not have come alone, yet she had actually forgotten about the danger. "I left him across the square because I wanted to speak to you in private."

A muscle flexed in Ryder's jaw, but he escorted her into his study and gestured for her to take a seat. Eve preferred to remain standing, however, so Ryder settled one hip on his desktop.

"Now, Countess, what is so urgent that you must disobey my direct order?"

"I expect you know. It is my sister. I hoped you would talk some sense into Claire and convince her to give up this foolish idea of marrying you."

Ryder's eyes held some emotion impossible for her to read. His pose was relaxed, lazy even, as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Lady Claire has all the right qualifications to be my wife."

Eve felt herself stiffen. She had hoped Ryder would be reasonable, but it seemed she had some serious persuading to do. "Perhaps she is qualified, but Claire deserves better than a marriage of convenience."

"As you suffered."

That was as good an argument as any, since she wasn't about to explain the true source of her discontent to Ryder. "Yes, if you must know... as I suffered." When he remained silent, Eve tried earnestly to stem her anxiety. "Ryder, you know very well that you and Claire would never suit."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, you are older than she is."

He arched a dubious brow. "My age wasn't an impediment when you were making up a list of potential brides for me."

"Perhaps it isn't a deterrent for other young ladies. But as a husband, you would be too intimidating for a gentle girl like Claire."

He smiled, a cool dangerous smile. "Claire knows I would never hurt her."

"Not intentionally, of course. But you are far more experienced than she."

"Physically experienced, you mean."

"Yes."

Ryder was watching her with an intensity that was unnerving. "Let me see if I take your meaning. You are afraid I am going to debauch your sweet, innocent sister."

"No... not debauch—"

"That is what bothers you the most, isn't it? The thought of my bedding Claire. So you are riding to her rescue."

Eve gave him a look of vexation, not wanting to admit how close Ryder's conjecture had come to the truth.

"You aren't perhaps jealous, are you?" Ryder said in an amused drawl.

She opened her mouth to issue a denial and shut it again. She refused to confess that jealousy was also driving her. "No, certainly I am not jealous. And in any case, my feelings have nothing to do with the matter. I am interested only in seeing that Claire marries a man who is her ideal match—and you most assuredly are not."

A lazy smile touched his lips. "What you are really saying is that I'm not good enough to marry your sister. I am mortally wounded, love."

"No," Eve insisted, "that is *not* what I am saying. I have no objection to your marrying anyone but Claire. But since she won't listen to me, it will be up to you to discourage her."

He paused a long moment. "Very well. I will see that she gives up any thought of marrying me... on one condition."

"Condition?" Eve said cautiously.

"Come here, sweeting."

She tensed with sudden wariness. "Why?"

"Because I asked you to."

His gaze was a bold and steady challenge, capturing hers and holding it without effort. When he simply waited, Eve reluctantly obeyed, moving to stand before him. She watched in fascination as Ryder reached up to brush her lips with his fingertips.

When she flinched at even that light touch, his sensual mouth flickered at the corner. "Have no fear, I won't attack you the way I did yesterday."

There was a spark of indulgent teasing in his eyes, yet it didn't reassure Eve. "What condition?" she repeated with impatience.

Instead of answering, he tucked an errant tendril behind her ear, letting his fingertips skim the outer rim with the gentlest of caresses.

Eve stood perfectly still, suddenly unable to move. How had Ryder managed to shift the subject so completely? Indeed, how was he able to make her forget why she was even here?

He left off toying with her ear and shifted his hand so that his thumb stroked along her jaw. Eve became aware of an abrupt weakness in her limbs. Her mind was filled with the memory of his kisses yesterday, while her body still wore the burning imprint of his ardent embrace. *Don't think about that*, she ordered herself sternly.

"What condition?" she forced herself to say in a voice far huskier than she would have liked.

"That you spend one night with me."

The silence between them was profound. Eve stared at Ryder, wondering if she had suddenly gone daft—or if he had. "I beg your pardon? What did you say?"

"You heard me, Countess."

She bit back a nervous laugh. "You must be jesting."

"Not at all. It is a simple bargain. I won't attempt to marry your sister if you will spend one night with me in my bed."

"What sort of bargain is that?" She took a step backward, out of reach. "The very thought is absurd."

"Not in the least. I'm concerned about you, sweetheart. You have let your fear rule you long enough. I deplore the idea of you going through life afraid of physical intimacy."

Eve hesitated, and Ryder could see her breath quicken as she struggled for an answer. "I am... not afraid precisely," she finally said.

"But you have a warped view of lovemaking. I want to show you another perspective. Carnal relations can be quite remarkable with a man who cares enough to give you pleasure. I mean to prove to you that all men are not like your late churl of a husband."

The silence lengthened another dozen heartbeats until finally Eve shook her head. "Ryder, this is outrageous, what you are proposing."

"No. One night of passion. That is my condition. Otherwise I can't agree to put an end to Claire's hopes of marrying me."

Heat flashed in her eyes. "That is blackmail!"

"So it is," he replied, forcing his tone to remain mild. It grated on him, having to resort to such underhanded tactics, but Claire was right on that score. He'd made little progress in his clandestine courtship of Eve, and he would have to change his approach if he ever hoped to succeed. He knew Eve would make any sacrifice for her sister; indeed, she would battle to the death to protect any of her family.

"You are hardly behaving like a gentleman."

His mouth quirked with amusement. "I'm not concerned about being thought a gentleman just now. This is solely about you." When she remained mute, he lifted an eyebrow, feigning innocence. "My interest is purely altruistic, I assure you," he lied. "I intend to help you conquer your fear of men."

In response, Eve squared her shoulders. There was a martial light in her eyes he had never seen before, yet there was also a hint of uncertainty, of vulnerability.

"You needn't worry that there will be a repeat of yesterday, Eve," Ryder said, keeping his tone casual. "I won't get carried away again, you have my word." He could see her frown. "Oh, my body wants yours," he added lightly. "I think we proved that quite satisfactorily yesterday. But I can manage to control my lustful urges for one evening."

She didn't quite believe him, he could tell. But Ryder refused to back down. He wanted Eve for his wife, yet physical intimacy was possibly the only way to wear down her defenses. If he could win her body, perhaps he could eventually win her heart. He meant to woo her with passion, with sensuality, with every physical skill he possessed.

To that end, he softened his tone when he asked, "Can you deny that you want to know what real passion is, Eve?"

Her lips parted as she stared at him. Eventually she averted her gaze. "I won't find any pleasure in lovemaking," she murmured in a barely audible voice.

"I can promise you will, Eve. You've just never had the right lover before. I gave you a taste of it in your library, remember?"

He could see she was wavering, and Ryder held his breath. He wanted to melt the ice Eve had encased herself in for so long. To release the fire and the passion he knew were inside her. To make her blossom for him and only for him.

And he suspected that deep down she wanted the same thing.

She had been asleep for too long, and he intended to change that. At the thought of her sensual awakening, desire stung him with fresh insistence.

"Your body wants mine," he pressed.

Her unwilling smile was wary and endearing. "I can't seem to help that." She cast a sidelong glance at him. "It isn't fair, you know."

"What isn't fair?"

"How you use my own desires against me."

Ryder hid his relief at her grudging admission, but the tightness in his gut eased a measure. Eve wasn't fully convinced, yet he could see the longing in her beautiful features as her gaze searched his face.

"One night, that is all?" she asked, her tone uncertain.

"Yes, that is all. One night of pure, unadulterated pleasure," Ryder promised, willing his heart to stop pounding as he waited for her answer.

Excerpt from Fever Dreams by Nicole Jordan

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