

Dream Castle

By Andrea Kane

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Braden Sheffield first spies her on a deserted beach—a lone figure who emerges from the fog like a stunning apparition. Betrayed by the woman who was to be his bride, the world-weary duke of Sherburgh is captivated by Kassie's youth and beauty, by her candor and the tinkling music of her voice. But Kassie's life is in grave danger. As passion ignites between them, Braden vows to protect Kassie no matter the cost—and to preserve a love that could be the fulfillment of their happiest dreams.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Andrea Kane’s groundbreaking romantic thriller, Run for Your Life, became an instant New York Times bestseller, which she followed with No Way Out, Scent of Danger, I’ll Be Watching You, Wrong Place, Wrong Time, and Dark Room. With a worldwide following and novels published in sixteen countries, she is also the author of fourteen historical romances. Kane lives in New Jersey with her family, where she is learning to sharpen her firearms and investigative skills like a more seasoned FBI special agent. Between target practices, she is researching and writing the sequel to Twisted. www.andreakane.com

No Bio

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From "Chapter One"

July, 1819

"This betrothal was arranged twenty years ago, and I refuse to let you break it, Braden!" Abigail Devon was furious.

Braden was bored.

"Do you hear me?" she shouted. "I have given you ample time to reconsider your ludicrous decision of three years past. It is time to cease this nonsense and make me your wife!" Abigail's coldly beautiful features contorted with rage as she paced the full length of Sherburgh's impressive library. Her blue eyes flashed sizzling fire, and she whirled around to face Braden, tossing her pale blond curls over her shoulders and down the back of her lemon-yellow gown.

A muscle flexed dangerously in Braden's jaw as he stifled the urge to throttle Abigail and put an end to her outrageous demands. He leaned back against the intricately carved walnut bookcases that lined the pillared walls, struggling for control. "Yes, I hear you, Abigail," he said through clenched teeth. "In fact, the entire staff can hear you."

Two red spots appeared on her pale cheeks. "I don't give a damn about who hears me, Braden. Or about your servants. Or about -- "

"Grant?" he added helpfully.

She exhaled sharply. Damn him for remembering. "Or about Grant."

He nodded. "Or about any of the other men you have since spread your lovely legs for?" he inquired in a deceptively silky voice.

Abigail looked stunned.

"Oh, did you think I knew nothing of them?"

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

Braden pushed himself to his feet. "Let's end this deception, shall we?" He strode over to stand directly in front of her, every muscle of his powerful physique taut with suppressed anger. "The betrothal was a mockery from the start. Not only do I not love you, I do not even like you. I am aware of every man you have enjoyed. The reason I said nothing is that I never felt anything stronger than disinterest. Your life is your own, Abigail. But you will never be part of mine." He paused, his eyes flickering over her contemptuously. "The truth is you have absolutely nothing to offer a man but your beautiful, though somewhat soiled, body." He paused. "'Tis a pity you do not spend nearly as much time on your honor as you do on your back."

She gasped, then slapped him with all of her strength. "You are a bastard!" she spat out through clenched teeth.

He didn't even blink. "And you are a slut."

He walked around her, throwing open the library door. "We have nothing further to say to each other. Get out, Abigail."

Braden waited for the resounding slam of the entranceway door as confirmation of her departure, then poured himself a brandy. Abigail hadn't changed one iota. But then, he hadn't expected she would.

He could still remember her theatrics when he had ended their betrothal three years ago. It had been much the same as the scene she had enacted just now, only then she had protested her innocence, whereas today she had not. A wise decision, considering her continued wanton behavior.

Braden lifted the glass to his lips and swallowed deeply. Well, the whole damned *ton* was welcome to her. She was actually quite accomplished in bed, if one cared nothing about the consequences. As far as he was concerned, a paid courtesan was a far better choice. Braden was more than willing to part with his money, which was in abundant supply. But at least with a *fille de joie* he could retain his title, his name, and his self-respect.

The library door closed with a thud.

"What happened?"

Braden turned at the sound of his uncle's voice, facing Lord Cyril Sheffield with an expression carved in granite.

"I presume you are referring to my conversation with Abigail?"

The tall, middle-aged man nodded, displeasure evident in his rigid stance.

"I just saw her bolt out the entranceway door. She was quite distraught."

"Pity." Braden tossed down the remaining contents of his drink, then regarded the empty glass thoughtfully. "She came here today hoping that I had experienced a change of heart with regard to our severed betrothal." His lips quirked in amusement. "Or perhaps she hoped that I had suffered a selective memory loss and had forgotten all that had preceded our...er, parting."

Cyril sighed, smoothing the collar of his greatcoat as he broached the unpleasant subject of Braden's future with Abigail Devon. "Your father did make an agreement with William Devon when you were but a boy," he reminded his nephew.

Braden's magnetic hazel eyes darkened to a smoldering slate gray. "Let us not begin this argument again, Cyril. I have as little respect for my parents' wishes as they always showed for mine. What they may or may not have wanted me to do no longer matters to me."

"I am your uncle, Braden. What you do affects the Sheffield name. Think of that, if not your father."

Braden gave Cyril a contemptuous look. "'Tis a shame that Father could not have left his title to you when he died. You would have taken far better care of it than I do."

"Braden -- "

Braden slammed his fist down so hard that the ornate wooden table shook from the impact. "That woman is a trollop at best. When I marry, it will be to someone I like and respect. Surely that is not too much to ask, even for a duke." The taunting words silenced his uncle. Braden's irreverent feelings about his title were no secret to Cyril Sheffield. There would be no winning this argument.

He took a deep breath and tried in a more understated tone. "Braden, if you would just be reasonable -- "

"Is it *unreasonable* that a man should demand some degree of respect from the woman he is *expected* to marry?"

Cyril grew silent at the implication of Braden's words. He was well aware of the fact that over the years Braden had shown not a shred of interest in the prospect of marrying Abigail. And her involvement with men hadn't helped.

Cyril shrugged. "I do not believe it is a question of respect, Braden. It is your duty to marry and provide Sherburgh with an heir."

Braden's lips tightened. "Of course it is. However, I am hardly ancient. I still have time to fulfill my familial obligations, Cyril, and I *will* choose a suitable wife. But," he bit out, his jaw clenched, "given the fact that I have a strange aversion to worrying over whether the heir to Sherburgh is indeed mine, my choice will not be Abigail Devon."

When Cyril opened his mouth to protest, Braden shook his head vehemently.

"The subject is closed. You are overstepping your bounds, Uncle." He lowered his empty glass to the table with a loud thud. "I am going out."

He needed some fresh air.

He needed some faith.

The air would be easier to acquire.

He slammed the door behind him, leaving the library and the house.

Outside, Braden strolled about the vast grounds of Sherburgh. He willed himself to relax, letting his mind wander where it would.

The words he had said to Cyril echoed in his head. A woman he liked and respected? A virtual impossibility.

Unbidden, an image appeared of an exquisite, ethereal creature with coal-black hair and eyes like flawless

aquamarines. A young woman of strength and courage, of wisdom beyond her years. A breathtaking angel without guile or pretense who was on the very brink of womanhood.

Kassie. The earnest and lovely girl that had looked up at him so adoringly, asking that he wait for her to grow up, was by now a ravishing beauty of eighteen.

Braden had thought of her often these long years, feeling strangely restless and vaguely unfulfilled at the memory. Countless times he had been tempted to seek her out for the sheer pleasure of her company but had resisted. She was young, *too* young, and she called upon emotions within him that he preferred to leave unexamined. He had, instead, contented himself with the hope that she was happy, that she would one day find someone worthy of her goodness. He was too old, too experienced, too jaded to be anything in her life...even merely a friend.

Braden turned in the direction of the beach, staring off into the darkened sky.

He could almost hear her call his name.

Dark. It was so dark. She couldn't see.

Cold. She could feel the cold. It gnawed through her body.

Oh God, she was so afraid, so alone. Oh please, someone come...someone help...

And still it grew colder, darker.

She began to run.

She cried out, but no sound emerged. She ran faster, faster still. She was failing... falling. She could feel the air rush by her, dragging her down, down. She couldn't breathe...couldn't breathe.

Suddenly it appeared. A huge black-beast. It reared back on its hind legs, opening its cavernous mouth. It was going to devour her. And she couldn't stop it. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't run. She was frozen. Then falling...falling. Alone...alone...

The scream began deep inside her, rose up to her mouth, and pierced the silence of the room. An endless scream of inescapable terror.

Kassie was wide awake, trembling uncontrollably, struggling for air. She was assailed by a stark panic that would not be assuaged. Frantically she combated the fear, taking deep, deliberate breaths, purposefully wiping her mind free of the chilling images.

Moments passed. Slowly the insurmountable terror receded, diminished until it was a dull ache inside her. With a shuddering sigh Kassie eased herself back down onto the pillows, closed her eyes, and in the same manner that she had each night since her fifteenth birthday...by conjuring up an image of Braden Sheffield.

Braden. Handsome, powerful, tender. Though they had met for but an hour, it seemed she had known him for a lifetime. He was compassionate and gentle, yet she could feel his reluctance to display these qualities, his need to hide them beneath a mask of self-protection that experience had only served to reinforce. It had been three years, and still the memory of their only meeting had not faded. If anything, it had grown stronger, clearer. Kassie could remember every detail of the way he looked, the things he said.

The things he didn't say.

His eyes had offered her his friendship, his strength...and something more. There had been a magnetic pull between them... or did she just will it to be so?

She knew what Braden's real world was like, for she read about it every day in novels, in newspapers. The nobleman's world, the world of the *ton;* vapid and without substance; exciting and glittering, filled with carefree men and beautiful women. A world she could not understand and in which she had no part.

Her dream of Braden disintegrated into sharp particles of pain and loneliness.

It was but a fantasy, for he had, no doubt, long since forgotten their encounter. In truth, Kassie would probably never see him again.

Throwing back the covers, she jumped out of bed, reaching for the thin robe that lay upon it. She couldn't bear to be alone. She just couldn't.

Seeing his mistress prepare to leave her room, the silky-haired beagle jumped up from his warm spot by the fire and hurried along behind Kassie on short, sturdy legs.

Kassie smiled down at her only friend, a warm, brown-eyed reminder of that special meeting with Braden.

"Come, Percy," she whispered. "Let us go down to the library and fetch a book of your namesake's poetry."

A light shining beneath the library door altered her plans. Kassie spotted it as she descended the steps and felt a small stab of fear. Her father was awake. She had no desire to see him...or to have him see her. She knew what he was like when he was disturbed...and drunk. It was very ugly.

She turned to retrace her steps, gesturing to a bewildered Percy to follow her.

It was then that she heard the voices.

"You must try to understand...to be patient." Her father's speech was slurred, but his tone was clearly pleading.

"I have been more than patient, Grey," a second masculine voice snapped back.

"I will have your money very soon." Kassie winced at her father's idle promise.

"Really? And from where do you intend to get it, you sniveling fool?" the stranger demanded.

"That is my concern, not yours."

"I beg to differ with you, my dear Robert, but that is very much my concern. Now, I repeat, from what source do you intend to get such a large sum of money?"

There was a pause, during which time Robert was, no doubt, draining his glass of whiskey.

At last Kassie heard a barely audible reply. "My luck is changing. I can feel it."

A sardonic laugh. "And this is what you are pinning your hopes on? A change in your luck? I can hardly sleep easy, knowing that my debt will be repaid by your winnings. Judging from your luck thus far -- "

"My luck" -- Robert's voice broke -- has not been the same since Elena died." He moaned. "Oh, why was I such a fool? If only I could have controlled her, convinced her not to turn away from me...none of this would have happened. She wouldn't have had to die. But as it was, it was inevitable. She left me no choice but to do what I did... to her, to myself." A choked sob. "Don't you see that she left me no choice?"

The words echoed inside Kassie, setting off a warning bell as ugly memories threatened to claim her, to drag her down into their drowning darkness. From the moment the conversation had started her heart had begun to beat faster, reaching a frantic, erratic rhythm. Her palms were damp, her throat dry. The room began to close in on her. Escape was the only answer.

She backed away from the door, clapping her hands over her ears to block out the assaulting voices. She had to get away...now.

Desperately, with Percy at her heels, Kassie fled to the beach.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Yohe:

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