

CONQUEST OF THE WHITE ROSE

by

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Chapter One

The first roar of fury barely penetrated Elspeth's semi-conscious haze, although it generated a spark of fear and the vague thought that the Normans, who'd taken over Rasgarth, her family's holdings, were embroiled once more in a drunken brawl among themselves. The second was punctuated by a kick that lifted the man she was trapped under. Elspeth peered up at the man who stood above her through one eye. Her other eye was swollen nearly shut.

Her heart nearly stopped when the blurry visage looming above her swam into focus.

A demon!

She knew it must be, for it could be no man—this dark giant, his perfectly chiseled face twisted in fury, his eyes as black as sin.

Renard belched a gaseous cloud of soured wine in her face at the blow, but gathered himself and rolled off of her.

Elspeth made a feeble attempt to cover herself, but Renard had lain upon her so long that she could not seem to command her limbs to move. It was some relief that the dark lord's rage seemed to be focused upon Renard. A flicker of hope went through her. Perhaps he'd come to take the vile Normans instead of the women they had despoiled?

Renard lifted his head groggily, focusing with obvious difficulty. When he finally did manage the feat, his eyes all but bulged from their sockets, which seemed to lend a good deal of credence to Elspeth's fears.

Renard had led the band of ruffians that had descended upon them like demons from hell after William the bastard's army had defeated the forces gathered to repel him from Saxony, and had lain waste to the lands her father had spent a lifetime building to fruitfulness. They had slain all who opposed them and many who had only tried to flee--and those had been the fortunate ones. Those who'd survived had endured a reign of terror such as they could never have imagined.

Her own life had become such a nightmare since Renard had first fastened his lascivious gaze upon her that she had longed for death to end her suffering and would have sought it if he had not watched her so assiduously as to remove all opportunity of a quick and painless end.

"Guillume--my Lord Arnaud! We did not expect you for at least another fortnight!"

"That much is obvious!" Arnaud of Valognes said in a voice that was deadly cold. "Else you and your guard might have been on watch instead of rolling about on the floor with your laymen." He glanced toward the doorway and Elspeth saw two men at arms stood at attention there. "Take him."

"But ... Guill—my Lord!"

The two soldiers strode forward at the command. Each grasped an arm. Hauling Renard to his feet, they marched him from the room between them. The man he had called Lord Arnaud watched their departure through narrowed eyes. When he turned at last, his gaze focused upon her and Elspeth's blood ran cold.

"Out!"

Elspeth stared at him blankly. She had made it a point to pretend she didn't understand a word of their language. She wasn't certain if it would transpire that there was any sort of advantage to it, but she had thought it possible it would. At the very least, she knew they would speak more freely around her and she might be warned of any evil intent toward herself or their people in time to prevent more bloodshed.

She was in no condition at the moment, however, to recall the dangerous charade she had been playing. She looked at him blankly because she simply could not fathom what he wanted.

After studying her a moment, he strode toward her impatiently. Reaching down, he grasped her by one

arm and hauled her to her feet. Renard had shredded her gown when he'd fallen upon her. Trying vainly to cover herself, Elspeth grasped the tatters of her clothing as he pulled her to her feet.

The abruptness of being dragged up so quickly sent a wave of dizziness through her and worse, her body was still numb and uncooperative from being pinned to the cold floor beneath Renard so long. Her knees refused to hold her. The moment his hand loosened, she began to sink toward the floor despite her best efforts to brace herself upright. With a sound of impatience, he hauled her up once more. This time, he caught her face in one hand, jerking it up for his inspection. "Are you too drunk to walk?"

Elspeth stared back at him fearfully, but she'd had time to consider her situation. It seemed unlikely, despite his irritation, that he had it in mind to kill her on the spot. As tempting as it was to respond immediately and try to spare herself yet another beating, her knowledge of their language, pitiful as it was, was her only weapon. Instead of answering, therefore, she merely met his gaze as steadily as she could manage, swallowing her terror.

His frown turned thoughtful as he scanned her face and then looked her over more carefully. She would've given much to know what was going through his mind, but the dark eyes typical of the Norman devils made them nigh impossible to fathom. Finally, apparently satisfied that he had discovered what he sought, he released the bruising grip on her cheeks and turned, dragging her from the room.

She did her best to keep up, unwilling to test his temper further by deliberately provoking him, but her legs still felt strange and uncooperative and it was difficult to hold her gown together with one hand. His long stride was impossible to match in any case.

She stumbled. He glanced down at her frowningly several times and finally slowed his angry stride.

She saw when they reached the great hall that it was overflowing with Normans. The servants were gathered in frightened knots, watching while those, apparently, who'd arrived with Lord Arnaud, lay about them with the flat of their swords, and fists, and booted feet, rousing Renard's drunken men from the floor.

Even as she reached the hall with Lord Arnaud, they began to push the revelers toward the door.

From the knot of frightened servants, an elderly woman detached herself and Elspeth recognized her old nurse, Griselda. "Lady! Lady! What has that monster done to you?" she wailed, falling to her knees beside Elspeth.

Elspeth stared down at her in horror as Lord Arnaud came to an abrupt halt. "Shh! Are you mad, woman! Do you want me to join my ancestors? I've survived nigh two weeks of that pig of a Norman. I've taken no serious hurt, not near so much as I'm likely to take if they learn who I am."

Griselda scrambled to her feet abruptly, wringing her hands and casting fearful glances toward Lord

Arnaud.

Elsbeth didn't dare look at him. She knew few of the Normans had any grasp of the Saxon tongue, but it would take no great intellect to figure out who she was if Griselda was determined to treat her as her lady in front of them. With the exception of her mother, who had passed on many years ago, the Normans had slain the rest of her family—her father and brothers had all fallen beneath Norman blades when they'd gone to protect the realm from the invaders from across the sea. She had no protector and no way of knowing whether the Normans would be satisfied with the blood already spilled or if they were bent upon wiping out the last of her father's seed. It seemed to her, though, that the possibility was great that they would prefer not to harbor the daughter of the old lord.

After a moment, Lord Arnaud tugged her into motion once more and strode toward the servants purposefully, releasing her at last when they reached them. Elspeth cast an uneasy glance at him, but he seemed to have dismissed her. With an effort, she hobbled over to join them. They stared at her fearfully, but parted, allowing her to find her way to the back where she would be less noticeable.

"Who among you speaks French?"

Everyone shifted, exchanging nervous glances when he addressed them. Finally, Jean, the young man who'd come into her father's household as a troubadour and remained as her tutor, stepped forward cautiously and bowed. "I do, my lord."

Lord Arnaud looked him over, assessing him. "You are not Saxon."

"I am a troubadour, originally from Vereins. I joined Lord Odolf's household last spring."

Lord Arnaud's brows rose. "And stayed to entertain so long?"

Jean blushed but didn't glance in Elspeth's direction. "I made myself useful."

Lord Arnaud studied him for so long that Jean shifted restlessly. "Then you may stay and make yourself useful to me, as well. I've need of someone who can speak their crude tongue and pass my orders along until I can master the language myself."

Jean bowed again. "I am happy to be of service, my lord."

Lord Arnaud nodded. "Then set them to work cleaning this pig sty. Remove anything that can be fixed for the craftsmen to repair. The rest should be piled far enough from this tender box so that it can be burned without setting the house ablaze, as well."

Jean looked at him uncomfortably.

"Is there ought about the order that you do not understand?" Lord Arnaud demanded impatiently.

Jean swallowed with an effort. "The carpenter and his apprentice were killed when the ... uh ... others arrived," he said weakly.

Lord Arnaud's lips tightened with barely suppressed fury. After a moment, he nodded. "The order stands. Use your best judgment. Dispose only of those things that appear beyond redeeming."

Battered as they were, everyone was so relieved that they were expected to do no more than perform the tasks familiar to them that they nigh fell over themselves to show their willingness to comply. Elspeth knotted her gown together the best she could and set to work with them.

The first of the servants to venture outside to begin the task of disposing of broken furnishings returned fearfully. Lord Arnaud, they said, had rounded up Lord Renard's men and had lined them up at the whipping posts. The news sent a ripple of unease through everyone as the thought occurred that they might be next, and everyone bent to their tasks with renewed vigor, despairing, but hopeful their efforts might please Lord Arnaud enough that he would consider showing some leniency.

Elspeth would have preferred to remain inside and as unobtrusive as possible, but she was as fearful as the others and presently gathered an armful of refuse and went out to see what she might learn of Lord Arnaud's plans. She made Griselda walk with her, hopeful it would make her less conspicuous, but when she nerved herself to glance toward the proceedings, she saw that Lord Arnaud was watching the progress of the servants to and from the growing pile of refuse. His dark gaze so unnerved her that she stumbled. Griselda steadied her, preventing her from falling on her face, and she concentrated thereafter on listening rather than watching.

When she returned to the hall, she was able to report that Lord Arnaud had ordered twenty lashes for each of the men he'd charged with the task of securing his holdings, including Lord Renard, who was his bastard half brother.

They were certain she must be wrong. Twenty lashes hardly seemed like any punishment at all if he truly was displeased about their behavior. When Jean confirmed her report, they became excited with the notion that it seemed to indicate Lord Arnaud was not nearly so much to be feared as they'd thought.

It was a dangerous misconception, Elspeth thought, and pointed out to them that Lord Renard, whom they were so certain was far more to be feared, had quailed before his half brother. "I think it's far more likely he doesn't wish to render them completely useless. It would be a mistake we might all come to regret to perceive him as weak only because he seems to have shown mercy to his men. There seems to be some hope, however, that so long as we do as we are told, we need not be overly fearful."

They scattered and hurried about their tasks when they saw that Lord Arnaud had returned to check their progress. Unfortunately, no one noticed his arrival until Elspeth had finished speaking, including Elspeth,

and she couldn't forebear sending a panicked, and she didn't doubt, guilty, glance in his direction before she hurried to join the servants and, hopefully, vanish among them.

When she finally nerved herself to glance at him again, she saw that his gaze was on her still and the uneasy feeling that he had realized she was the old lord's daughter could not be shaken.

To her relief, he seemed reasonably satisfied with their progress, however, and left again after he'd thoroughly frightened everyone out of the little wit that remained to them by watching their progress with his cold, assessing gaze. Mid morning, Jean was summoned and disappeared for a while. When he returned it was to inform them that they were to prepare a meal for the men. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been cause for great alarm, but there was little left in the larder to appease fighting men. Her father had taken much of their supplies with him when he'd gone off to make war, and Renard's men had made great inroads into what had been left in the two weeks since their arrival. To make matters worse, much had been destroyed when they'd seized Rasgarth.

Renewed fear swelled among them. It didn't matter that they were not responsible. They would be held responsible and bring Lord Arnaud's wrath down upon their heads.

Assuring them that something could be managed, Elspeth directed them to return to their work, sent the kitchen folk to the kitchen to set it to rights and went off with Jean to check the larder to see if it was possible to keep her word. Her mother had died at her birth. She had been chatelaine of her father's household for years and there had been many lean ones in her time when the crops had failed or a particularly bad winter and late spring had required a good deal of skill to keep the folk fed. She felt—hoped—she could come up with something that would at least be filling if not particularly elegant.

The condition of the larder dismayed her, however. There was no fresh meat since Renard and his men had seemed more inclined to drink and whore than pursue anything useful, and very little smoked meat. The bread was virtually non-existent and most of the cheese was gone, as well.

"We are going to starve," Elspeth said with conviction once she'd assessed the situation, "if Lord Arnaud doesn't slay us first. How many Normans would you guess there are, Jean?"

Even as she glanced toward Jean, the larder grew dark as someone stepped into the doorway, blocking the light. She glanced quickly toward the door.

"What did she ask you?" Lord Arnaud asked coolly.

Jean glanced at Elspeth nervously before he answered. "We were trying to calculate how much we would need to feed everyone, my lord."

Lord Arnaud studied him piercingly for several moments and finally turned to survey the larder, his face hardening. "By what name is she called?" he asked as his gaze settled at last upon Elspeth.

"La--Elspeth."

Lord Arnaud's gaze zeroed in upon Jean once more. One dark brow arched upward. Instead of commenting on Jean's near slip, however, he informed Jean to see to unpacking the supplies he'd brought with him.

Elspeth sagged with relief when he'd left with Jean following at his heels. She found that she was shaking with reaction. She had never considered herself a coward, but the reign of terror they'd experienced at the hands of the Normans had done more than instill a healthy respect of them. It had made her long to flee to some place safe from their merciless tempers. She would have except that she had no where to run to—any family she might have that had survived the invasion would not be in any position to lend her aid. She was certain in any case that the Normans would only hunt down anyone who tried to flee—Lord Renard had made great sport of doing so.

She'd hoped to escape notice, however, and with the best will in the world, she could not make herself believe that she had. Somehow, most likely because he believed she was his brother's whore, Lord Arnaud had focused his attention upon her—with suspicion she feared, but she did not want his attention for any reason.

That thought provoked a wry glance at herself. She had once been considered comely, but she need not look upon her reflection to know that she could have no appeal now for any man. Lord Renard had battered her face into a grotesque, misshapen mask. She was filthy from having been thrown on the floor like a common doxy at any time Lord Renard had been sober enough to spy her, and she had been slow enough for him to catch. Her hair was filthy as well, and scarcely half of it still contained within its braid since they had ransacked her apartments and she no longer even had so much as a comb to her name.

She wasn't certain why Lord Arnaud was interested, but she thought she needn't fear that he would take his brother's place. Unlike his pig of a brother, Lord Arnaud seemed a fastidious man. He wore the grime of the road, of course, but he had not the look of someone careless about their person, and his determination to see that the manor was cleaned seemed to support that assessment.

Very likely it was only that he suspected that she was not a servant at all, but that was hardly reassuring.

Despite her anxieties, Lord Arnaud concentrated on securing his new holdings and setting it to rights. He and the men he'd brought with him spent most of their days hunting for fresh meat for the larder, patrolling, and making certain the serfs were tending the fields that had not been destroyed. The men he'd had whipped were given the additional punishment of having to supply the labor they'd deprived their lord of by slaying so many of his serfs and were put to work preparing the foundation for a stone wall that was to surround the manor in the style of a European fortification.

Little more than a week after his arrival, just as they'd begun to relax and the workings of the manor had

begun to resume some semblance of normalcy, they learned why Lord Arnaud had set about seeing that the household was put to rights as quickly as possible. His bride arrived from Normandy.

Chapter Two

Elspeth and Griselda had found shelter for themselves in one of the tiny cottages near the manor that had belonged to one of the craftsmen killed in the initial raid. Lord Renard had been kept far too busy to turn his unwanted attentions upon her since Lord Arnaud's arrival, and the lord himself had been preoccupied with trying to set his estate in order. Yet, Elspeth knew the peace would not last.

Her bruises had faded. Sooner or later, if she was too available, Renard would notice her again and life would once more become the nightmare it had been before Lord Arnaud's arrival.

The cottage provided the most that she could hope for in avoiding Renard.

Little escaped the new lord of the manor, however, as Elspeth discovered when she opened the door to Jean one evening after she and Griselda had finished their duties and been allowed to seek their rest.

He looked uneasy and Elspeth was immediately alarmed. "What has happened?" she asked a little breathlessly.

Jean twisted his cap uncomfortably. "Might I come in for a word with you, Lady?"

Elspeth gripped his arm and dragged him inside. "I wish you would not call me that! I am lady no more, and I would as soon our enemies did not know that I am the daughter of Odolf."

He flushed but looked even more uncomfortable. "I am not so certain he has not figured it out. He sent me to find you. I am to tell you that he expects you to serve his lady and you must make yourself presentable."

Griselda was more outraged than Elspeth, if possible. "Our lady to serve as maid to that Norman whore!"

She turned to look at Elspeth. "I told you, my lady! You should have told him who you are and demanded that you be treated according to your station!"

Elspeth flushed angrily. "He said that I was to make myself presentable!" she demanded furiously. It was insulting, even though she was obliged to admit that she was a disreputable creature, as bad or worse than the lowest scullery maid. It was hardly her fault, however, that she dared not even allow herself the comfort of decent grooming for fear that Renard would assault her yet again.

"Nay! He did not say that. He said only that he had need of a woman to serve his lady. I thought it would be easier for you, my lady! He asked me about you and I told him that you had been maid to the old lord's daughter.... I could think of nothing else to say once he had remarked that you did not seem to be a common peasant." He stopped, blushing furiously. "And I know that you have tried to hide yourself among the servants and have no wish to draw attention to yourself, but you can not expect to be accepted as lady's maid when you.... It is not at all a wise idea to challenge him by appearing...."

"Like a filthy Saxon peasant?" Elspeth finished for him.

"She is too good to serve such a one as that devil's whore, even if she looked like a swine maiden ... which she most assuredly does not!"

Elspeth glanced at Griselda uncomfortably. In truth, she could pass for one now and it irked her no end that she must go about soiled and untidy, wearing nothing but the mended rags that remained from the gown Renard had torn from her when she had struggled with him.

"You should have thought of something else to tell him. I will not suffer being mauled by that pig of a brother of his!"

Jean frowned. "You have no protection here. If he decides to seek you out, you will be at his mercy. At least if you serve his lady, you will have some protection. You would sleep on a pallet in her room to be close for her call. Renard would not dare to enter there—and you would spend your days in her company."

Elspeth studied him, wavering. As repugnant as the idea was of serving as maid in her own home, it was surely no worse than serving as a lower servant in her own home, and she couldn't deny that the lure of protection was nigh irresistible.

Jean mangled his hat nervously. "I don't think Lord Arnaud would take a rejection kindly, lady."

Elspeth's lips tightened, but she was not such a fool as to think that she could defy the new lord with impunity. Finally, she nodded. "When am I to present myself?"

* * * *

She had nigh forgotten how good it felt to be fresh and well groomed, Elspeth reflected as she made her way to the great hall the following morning at sunrise. The gown Lord Arnaud had sent to her had been one of her own, which had caused her more than a pang or two. It was an older gown and well worn—Renard had taken her better gowns and sold them at the market to put a few coins in his pockets—but it was far better than the one she'd mended and worn for so long.

It made her feel hopeful of a future free from fear.

It made her incautious.

She had already passed the men working on the wall when someone caught her arm, jerking her to a halt. Whirling, she found herself face to face with Renard. Terror closed her throat instantly.

"I have missed you, my pale Saxon rose."

Elsbeth blinked at him rapidly, trying to force her mind to work. She didn't think to respond in his own language or she might well have done so, even knowing that she would not be able to reason with him regardless. All she could think was that Jean had told her she would be safe. "Unhand me," she said, her voice cold, but shaking with the terror that gripped her.

He grinned. "Fortunately for you, I can not understand your guttural tongue, or I might know that for the insult I suspect it was."

She tried to pry his fingers loose but to no avail. "Lord Arnaud summoned me to serve his lady," she said desperately.

Renard's eyes narrowed at the only two words that needed no translation. "Lord Arnaud?" He stepped back to survey her from head to foot. "He'd have no interest in taking my leavings, chere, even if not for the fact that he expects his bride this very day."

Elsbeth licked her lips and turned to look at the manor, so near, and yet so far away. "Jean! Please come! Jean!" she screamed, tugging at her arm again in an attempt to free herself.

Renard laughed, glancing around at his men, who'd gathered closer to watch, their gazes avid as if they had been promised a special treat. "Do you hear that? She summons the scrawny boy to her aid! I am quaking in my boots!"

"You should be," Guillume growled from directly beside them.

Renard's head snapped around so quickly that he met the fist Lord Arnaud slung at him head on. The

impact laid him on the ground. Blood spurted from his nose and ran down his face. Arnaud moved to stand over him, waiting to see if he would rise to challenge him. When Renard merely remained where he'd fallen, holding his nose and gaping up at his brother stupidly, he stepped back and surveyed the men who'd gathered around them.

"Know this—the war has ended. This is my home and I will have peace in it. No man will take an unwilling maid. Slake your needs on the willing, or take your coin and pay for the services of a whore." He glanced down at Renard, his face tight with suppressed fury. "That includes you, brother."

Renard picked himself up and dusted his clothes off. He was angry but trying hard to hide it. He laughed unconvincingly. "She is willing. She likes to play coy, but she was more than willing until she set her sights a little higher. If you want her for yourself, though, brother, who am I to deny you?"

Lord Arnaud's eyes narrowed. "She was summoned to serve my lady. Lady Rosabel has been sheltered and would be distressed to see her maids misused. I saw nothing to indicate that she was willing, and much to indicate otherwise—but if you want it verified, I will send for Jean to interpret for you."

Renard glared at him. "If you do not want her for herself, then why not give her to me as a reward for securing Rasgarth for you?"

Lord Arnaud gave him a look. "Do not draw me into a discussion, here, regarding what you have done for me, brother. She will serve my lady and you will look elsewhere for a layman. I suggest, this time, that you use gentle persuasion. It will take you further with the woman you choose to bestow your favors upon."

Lord Arnaud had already turned to leave when Renard spoke again. "Your gentle bride will not be pleased to learn that she is being waited upon by a Saxon whore."

Lord Arnaud turned to survey his brother coldly. "I would be ... very displeased if Rosabel were to hear anything that might distress her."

With that, he turned and strode toward the manor once more. Elspeth stared after him for several moments, glanced at Renard, and hurried to catch up to him. She was so busy trying to set herself to rights that she nearly plowed into him when he stopped just inside the door.

She looked up at him when he turned to study her, swallowing her residual fear with an effort. "Merci, my lord," she said shakily and bobbed a nervous curtsy.

He surveyed her with keen interest, his gaze missing nothing. After a moment, his face hardened. Lifting a hand, he caught the thick braid that lay across her shoulder, stroking his thumb over her smoothly bound hair almost absently. "It is as I thought—hair the color of sunlight; eyes as cool as a placid lake under a summer sky; skin like cream; and lips like ripe berries—you are clever as well as beautiful,

chere—a dangerous combination. But do not thank me so quickly." Releasing her braid, he ran the back of his hand lightly down her cheek. "If I were not forsworn, I would have you for myself—and I am not at all certain that it would sway me if you were unwilling. If you are as wise as you seem, you will take care not to tempt me to forsake my vows."

Chapter Three

As he left her and strode away, Elspeth wondered uneasily if Lord Arnaud had known that she could understand him. Or had he said those things because he believed she could not understand?

She frowned thoughtfully. Either way, it was surely a warning, but if he had thought that she could understand, or might, then he had intended that she know. That must surely mean that he was a man who considered his vows sacred, and his honor was not a thing which he took lightly.

Perhaps he had believed his brother when Renard had accused her of setting her sights on becoming the lord's layman?

It was unreasonable. She had done nothing more than make herself presentable. She had not tried to make herself pretty to entice. She had washed and combed her hair when she had bathed the filth from herself, but she had bound her hair. She had not perfumed herself, nor sought artifice to enhance the smoothness of her skin or the color of her lips.

Renard's male conceit was such, however, that she need only suffer the misfortune of coming within sight and he was convinced that she wished to entice him.

Perhaps the Normans were all like that?

She could not recall that any Saxon had ever looked upon her as if she was his for the taking—but of course she had had the protection of her father and brothers before.

Mayhap men were all like that, believing it was enough that they should desire, and any female who did not run fast enough wished to be caught?

She shuddered. She did not want to be any man's layman, whatever they thought. In the days before, when she had thought about the time when she would take a husband, she had looked forward with excitement to becoming a woman. Renard's brutality had cured her of that. She thought coupling might not be as repulsive if it were someone other than Renard rutting her, and it was not nearly so painful as it had been in the beginning, but she could no longer imagine deriving any enjoyment out of it for herself.

After a time, she shook her wayward thoughts and went off to find Jean to discover which room was to be the Lady Rosabel's. Jean had seemed to indicate that it would not be the same room as her husband—which seemed oddly cold to her mind, but then the Normans were almost as different from her own people as night to day.

She found to her relief that she had not misunderstood Jean. Lady Rosabel was to have a room adjoining her husband's and she would be allowed to make a pallet for herself near the door, where she would be at hand for the Lady Rosabel's call, and yet not underfoot, and might come and go in her service without disturbing the lady overmuch.

She had not given much thought to what the lady, herself, might be like, but she knew that pleasing Lady Rosabel would be paramount to her own comfort and happiness and she immediately set her mind to thinking of how she might make herself welcome. She had only a vague idea of how far away Normandy was, but she knew that it was across the sea, for the Normans had come in ships. Most likely Lady Rosabel would be weary from travel, she thought, and would wish to bathe the dust of the road from herself and rest.

She immediately set about preparing for a bath. She had two of the menservants clean the tub thoroughly and then carry it up to the room and set it before the hearth, then sent them to fetch water until they had the tub half filled. When that was done, she had buckets brought up and set in a line along the hearth so that the fire she'd built would take the chill from it.

She had thought that she would fetch a tray of refreshment, but she had scarcely finished the preparations for the bath when she heard the sounds of an arrival. She bit her lip, wondering if she should go out to meet the lady, or remain where she was.

Finally, she decided that she should go out. It was certainly not the place of a servant to greet arrivals, but she would not be intrusive and she would not like to be summoned and reprimanded if it transpired that Lady Isabel wanted something upon her arrival and she was not there to see it done.

She was breathless by the time she had raced down the stairs and across the great room to the stout oaken doors that was the main entrance to the manor. By the time she had pulled the door open and slipped outside, the carriage had already drawn up before the manor and Lord Arnaud was leaning inside. She hovered in the shadows near the door, worried now that she'd come that perhaps she should not have. Before she had decided whether to remain where she was or dart inside, she saw that it was too late to change her mind as Lord Arnaud helped his lady from the carriage.

Her first impression was that the lady was very young.

Her second that her color was entirely unappealing.

She had scarcely set foot upon solid ground when she immediately threw up.

Repulsed, for several moments Elspeth could only stare in revulsion as the woman bent over and emptied the contents of her stomach on the ground. Even as Lord Arnaud threw a vaguely panicked look over his shoulder, however, she realized that the poor creature was ill—most likely from the travel—and obviously had either been ill several times before, or had been too ill to eat at all.

The woman was her enemy. She should have felt nothing at all beyond contempt, or perhaps even satisfaction that she was so pathetic a creature. Instead, pity surged through her and she moved forward to help. Pushing past Lord Arnaud, she caught the woman's hair and removed it from harm's way, slipping an arm around her waist to help hold her up. When she had ceased to gag at last, Elspeth steadied her and looked up at the manor, wondering if the woman could manage the climb to her room. Obviously, Lord Arnaud had his doubts, for he swept her into his arms and turned toward the manor.

Elspeth followed at his heels until they reached the great room and then rushed ahead and up the stairs to turn the coverlet back on the bed.

She had scarcely done so when Lord Arnaud shouldered his way into the room and moved to the bed to settle Lady Rosabel. Rushing to one of the buckets of water, Elspeth dipped a cloth, wrung the excess water from it and hurried back to the bed to bathe the young woman's face. "She is ill?"

When Lord Arnaud didn't answer, she glanced up from her task.

He was studying her, but she found it impossible to interpret his expression. "Enceinte," he said succinctly.

Elspeth frowned in confusion, unfamiliar with the word.

"Bebe."

Enlightenment dawned and she glanced at the woman's belly, but although the woman's belly was slightly rounded, she could see little sign that a child grew there. She could not be far along. Elspeth knew very little about the process, however, since no woman that she had been close enough to to share the experience had borne a child. Griselda, however, had attended her mother through five pregnancies before her mother's death. Nodding, she studied the woman's pale face uneasily for several moments. "I should fetch Griselda. She will know what to do."

Lord Arnaud caught her arm when she would have hurried past him. "Stay. I will send for Griselda," he said in halting English, so corrupted by his Norman accent that it took her several moments to translate the words. Finally, however, she understood and nodded. Pulling her arm from his grasp, she returned to the woman, who'd done nothing thus far beyond moaning.

As Lord Arnaud went to the door and spoke with someone outside, she studied her new mistress, unable to think what else she might do to give the woman comfort.

She'd soiled her gown. Elspeth thought she would probably be more comfortable if the gown were removed altogether and replaced with a nightgown, but she wasn't at all certain but what she would begin to retch again if she were moved. Setting the cloth aside, she slipped her arm beneath the woman to roll her over so that she could at least loosen it. As small as the woman was, however, she was heavier than Elspeth had expected. Moreover, she took exception to being disturbed, opening her eyes and slapping weakly at Elspeth.

A shriek near the door startled Elspeth and she looked up in time to see two women descending upon her, babbling so rapidly in Norman French that she could scarcely understand one word of five. Their assault required no interpretation, however.

The tallest and older of the two grabbed Elspeth by her braid and nearly snapped her neck as she yanked her away from Lady Rosabel. The second flew at her, swinging hands curled into claws. Caught off guard and off balance, Elspeth could do nothing but throw her hands up instinctively to ward off the blows, but as the first woman swung her by her braid, she abandoned that defense to catch herself as she fell. She hit the floor bruisingly, knocking over one of the buckets. The two women fell upon her before she could regain her feet. She managed to catch one woman's arms, but the woman was in a tearing rage and stronger with her fury than she might have been otherwise.

Guillume watched the scene play out before him in stunned astonishment, too surprised for several moments to react as Rosabel's maids, Yvette and Pauline, who'd only moments before seemed almost too ill from their journey even to step down from the carriage, flew into the room like harpies and fell upon Elspeth. Even as the astonishment began to wear off, however, he wasn't entirely certain of how to handle the situation. If it had been brawling men, he would have had no doubt, but he had not previously dealt with brawls involving the 'gentler' sex.

He saw, however, that Elspeth was certainly no match for the two of them and that they showed little signs of wavering in their determined attack. With a growl of irritation, he surged forward, grasped Yvette, who'd straddled Elspeth, pinning her to the floor around the waist and tossed her aside. The moment he removed the one, however, the other took her place. Grabbing Pauline by her flying hair, he dragged her off, as well.

Elspeth sat up shakily just as Yvette climbed up from the floor and, screaming, raced toward her again.

Griselda, who'd arrived at the door in time to see Yvette heading purposefully for Elspeth, screamed like a banshee and flew at the Norman woman, knocking her to the floor and locking her hands around her throat. Staring down at the writhing women with a mixture of alarm and fury, Lord Arnaud dragged the woman he still held to the door and pitched her through it, slamming the door in her face. When he'd disposed of her, he strode to the hearth, lifted a bucket of water and emptied it over Griselda and her foe. The cold water instantly dissolved their animosity. They stopped long enough to gasp for air, and he grabbed each of them by an arm, hauled them to their feet, and dragged them to the door, shoving them out one at the time and finally closing the door and barring it.

Still stunned, Elspeth remained where she was, trying to figure out what had happened. Outside, from the screams and the sound of slamming bodies, the battle still raged. Dragging in a deep breath, Elspeth got to her feet and marched purposefully toward the door. She couldn't allow Griselda to fight the two harpies off by herself.

She was halfway to the door when Lord Arnaud caught her around the waist, lifting her clean off her feet. "Put me down!" she demanded, pulling at the hand gripping her. "I have to help Griselda!"

Instead of releasing her, Lord Arnaud strode toward the door. Fully expecting to be the next one tossed out on her ear, Elspeth was stunned and indignant when, instead, he gripped her tightly and opened the door, shouting for his men at arms. They arrived breathlessly, staring in dismay at the three women rolling around in the hallway.

"Remove them and separate them until they're of a mind to settle down," Lord Arnaud said sharply.

Looking none too happy with the assignment, each man grabbed a screaming woman, slung her over their shoulder and started down the stairs again.

Lord Arnaud closed the door and looked down at Elspeth, who was still struggling for release. By that time, Lady Rosabel had sat up in the bed and was looking around the room in shock. She glanced at Lord Arnaud and asked him something in rapid French.

He nodded and finally released Elspeth.

She supposed Lord Arnaud was explaining what had happened, but she was not familiar enough with their language to understand much of it, not when they spoke so quickly. She did grasp that the two women who'd attacked her had been maids Lady Rosabel had brought with her.

She glanced from Lady Rosabel to Lord Arnaud, wondering if she was about to be dismissed and relegated to lower servant once more.

After a moment, Lady Rosabel flopped back on the bed and began to weep loudly. Elspeth stared at her in dismay for several moments and finally turned to look at Lord Arnaud, surprising an almost identical

expression on his face.

It reminded her so strongly of the way her father and her brothers had looked whenever any woman had wept around them that both sadness and amusement descended upon her at once. Biting her lip, since she knew very well that Lord Arnaud would not see the humor in the situation at all, she moved a little stiffly toward the bed and patted Lady Rosabel's shoulder consolingly. "Would you like some water? Aqua?"

Lady Rosabel lifted her head long enough to glare at her. "Non! Go away, Saxon witch!"

Elspeth felt the blood rush from her face at the woman's vehemence only to rush back in a bright red tide. Stiffly, she curtsied, and left the room without glancing at Lord Arnaud. She wasn't quite certain of what she should do when she reached the hall. She'd been dismissed, but clearly the young woman was overwrought. If she left, would she be punished? Would she be punished if she didn't leave?

She was still trying to decide when 'Lady' Rosabel began to scream unintelligibly in French and objects began crashing against the wall and door.

Galvanized, Elspeth moved hastily down the hall to the stairs, hovering there and wondering uneasily if she should try to protect her new mistress from her brutal husband, or simply flee and allow the woman to fend for herself. Abruptly, the door to the room opened, Lord Arnaud exited, his face as dark as a thunder cloud, and he strode down the corridor in her direction, passing her without so much as a glance and taking the stairs two at the time.

The thuds and screams continued for a good ten minutes after he'd left—until, Elspeth supposed, Lady Rosabel ran out of anything handy enough to throw, or wore herself out.

Still with no clear idea whether she'd been rejected as lady's maid or not, Elspeth dared not abandon her post and finally settled near the lady's door, wondering if Lady Rosabel was high strung in general or if it was merely her pregnancy that made her easily agitated. Quiet reigned within the room and she supposed, having vented her spleen, Lady Rosabel had lain down to rest—she sincerely hoped not to regain her strength for another round of temper, but she could not convince herself otherwise.

Perhaps an hour passed before Elspeth heard the approach of several pairs of feet up the staircase. When she looked up, she saw Yvette and Pauline, looking somewhat more subdued, coming along the upper hallway. Behind them trailed Griselda.

She watched their approach warily, but the Norman maids had apparently decided to pretend she did not exist. Without once glancing in her direction, they moved to the door, tapped softly and went in. Griselda settled beside Elspeth.

After looking her over for several moments, she apparently decided Elspeth hadn't sustained injury sufficient to comment upon. "The Norman women are worse than the men," she muttered.

Elspeth thought about Renard and his men and found she couldn't agree. Instead, she shrugged. "Lady Rosabel is with child and ill from the travel, as well."

Griselda studied her with a spark of interest. "Breeding, is she?"

Elspeth nodded. "That's why I asked for you. She seemed very ill, but I couldn't be certain if it was the child, the travel, or both—nor I'd no notion what could be done for her if it was the child. I felt sure that you would know."

A stream of agitated French interrupted their conversation, followed by a barrage of thumps against the door and wall. Yvette and Pauline hastily exited the lady's room.

Elspeth watched them dispassionately as they moved a little way along the hallway and stopped, whispering to one another. When she turned to look at Griselda, she saw that Griselda had turned her head to examine the door and wall, as if she might peer through them.

"I am only guessing, mind you, but I do not think the Lady Rosabel is very happy to be here."

Griselda snorted. "Well, she may certainly leave again and it will not disturb my rest."

Elspeth bit her lip, recalling Lord Arnaud's exit. In truth, she should not find humor in his discomfiture, but she could not help but be amused that the man who struck terror in the hearts of every man about him had been so thoroughly and quickly routed by his lady. She was surprised he had not beat the woman. Not even her father or her brothers, who were notoriously softhearted toward women, would have put up with such a temper tantrum. She was with child, however, and she had only just arrived.

She could almost feel pity for him that he had gone to such lengths to ensure her comfort only to have her throw a temper fit the moment she arrived.

"What amuses you?"

Elspeth glanced at Griselda, but as much as she would've liked to share her amusement, she knew Griselda had a loose tongue. She would almost certainly spread it about and then Lord Arnaud would be justifiably incensed. She shook her head. "Only that yon superior maids faired no better than I."

Griselda sent an evil glance their way and sniffed. "How came they to attack you?"

"I was trying to help Lady Rosabel from her gown to make her more comfortable and she did not wish me to. I suppose, to them, it appeared that she and I were struggling and they thought that they were defending her."

Griselda sent them another glance, but it was more thoughtful this time. "They did not give you the chance to explain?"

Elsbeth grimaced wryly. "No, but I am not at all certain the outcome would have been very different. In any case, I can not speak, or understand, the Norman tongue as well as I had thought I could."

Griselda looked at her in surprise. "I thought you had learned their tongue from Jean."

"I had thought so, but Jean does not speak just as they do. He is not Norman, but from another duchy altogether. When they speak slowly, I understand much of what they say, but when they speak rapidly I understand very little."

"Perhaps, in time, they will all go back across the sea and we will not be forced to listen to their strange tongue."

"I do not think that at all likely, Griselda."

Chapter Four

The servants had already begun to set up the trellis tables for the evening meal in the hall below before Lord Arnaud returned. As he had left, he returned, striding purposefully toward the lady's room this time, only slightly less angry than when he had departed.

The maids all exchanged a glance as he went into the lady's room without even so much as a pause at the door, slamming it behind him. They heard the lady's high pitched, agitated voice, but Lord Arnaud's voice was too low to discern more than a deep rumble, like distant thunder.

The barrage of thrown articles did not erupt. A few minutes later, Lord Arnaud opened the door once more, fixed Elspeth and Griselda with a hard glance and summoned them inside.

Lady Rosabel, her eyes still tumultuous, was sitting up in bed. Grasping Griselda by one arm, Lord

Arnaud dragged her to the bedside and explained that Rosabel was ill with her condition. Griselda, naturally, only looked at him blankly. After a moment, Elspeth moved a little closer. "Do not pretend stupidity, Griselda. You know very well what he wants," she said in a low voice.

Griselda sent her a look. "Is that what he said?"

Elspeth's lips tightened. "He has treated us well. He did not need to. He has taken this place and can do as he pleases. It is stupid to anger him needlessly."

The fight went out of Griselda, and she nodded, turning to look Lady Rosabel over. "Her color is bad."

Elspeth moved a little closer. "Their skin is darker than ours."

Griselda nodded. "Your lady mother was often ill in the first months." She touched the woman's forehead with her palm. "She has no fever. She will be better if she rests. She should only have a little goat's milk and bread when she feels ill. Otherwise it will only come up again. Most likely, if she does not feel ill she can eat most anything and it will stay."

Griselda looked Lady Rosabel over. "She should not wear her gowns so tightly. It will make it difficult for the child to grow as it should."

Elspeth shrugged. "I had thought a bath would help her feelings," she said, pointing to the tub she'd had prepared.

Lady Rosabel firmly refused their attempts to persuade her, however, demanding that Yvette and Pauline be summoned. Finally, Lord Arnaud did so, and pulled Griselda and Elspeth aside. The two maids came in, looked around a little nervously and finally hurried to Lady Rosabel at her call. After a few moments, they began tugging the bed drapes closed and, taking one of the buckets and several lengths of linen, helped Lady Rosabel to bathe and change her clothing.

Griselda gave Elspeth a look, which she chose to ignore, explaining the best she could to Lord Arnaud what Griselda had thought might help to ease Lady Rosabel's discomfort. It was more difficult than she had thought it would be. Naturally enough, the conversations that she had shared with Jean had not dealt with such subjects, and she only knew a word here and there.

Finally, he nodded however, and seemed to dismiss them, turning his attention to the proceedings on the other side of the curtains. He glanced at the tub several times and finally found a stool and began removing his boots.

Griselda studied him a moment, then, almost reluctantly moved toward him to help him disrobe. "It is our custom," she said, sending Elspeth a chiding glance, "and your duty as hostess to offer aid to your guests."

Irritated, Elspeth reluctantly joined her, helping to remove the heavy chain mail shirt that Lord Arnaud wore. He divided a speculative glance between Griselda and Elspeth, but said nothing. "I am not the lady of the house," Elspeth whispered fiercely. "And the Normans are certainly not guests."

Griselda sniffed. "I see no reason to abandon our own customs," she said haughtily.

Elspeth saw good reason to do so, however. Lord Arnaud clothed was intimidating. Lord Arnaud naked should have been less so, but in fact, was not. She did her best not to actually brush his skin, not to notice the heavy, ropy muscles that covered his arms and back and chest, and thought she succeeded fairly well.

His man root was another matter altogether. Even flaccid it was far larger than Renard's, or in fact, any of the male members of her own household that she had assisted in their baths ... and it did not remain flaccid. As she helped him remove his chausses, it more than doubled its size and stood erect. Without conscious volition, her gaze followed it as it lifted upward to touch his flat belly. How long she stared, she had no notion, but when Griselda cleared her throat, it instantly snapped her from her spell and she looked away, unable to prevent the color that flooded her cheeks.

She did not meet Lord Arnaud's gaze, uncertain of whether the display had been deliberate to throw her into confusion, or if it was no more than a purely instinctual reaction and beyond his control. She had never had sisters, but she had had four brothers. She knew very well that one was as possible as the other.

His comments of before assailed her forcibly and her irritation with Griselda grew. She knew very well that this custom could not be practiced in Normandy, otherwise Lord Arnaud would have summoned them to help, and would not have appeared surprised when they offered to do so.

Griselda had instigated it, but that did not mean he would not see it as an attempt to 'tempt him to forsake his vows'.

She busied herself folding his clothes as he moved to the tub and climbed in. Griselda followed him, dipping her hand into the tub to test the heat of the water and then moving to the hearth and testing each of the buckets in turn. She glanced at Elspeth when she'd hefted the bucket. "You should lather his hair. I think I can manage the buckets better."

Elspeth gave her a look, tightened her lips, and finally moved behind Lord Arnaud when Griselda had dampened his hair. Lifting a bar of soap, she worked a lather into his hair. He jerked at her first touch, and she hesitated, but when he stilled she set about her task, trying to focus only on the task and not the fact that it was Lord Arnaud's hair--that seated in the tub, his head was still chest level to her, that his bare shoulders and back seemed impossibly broad and well muscled.

It was hardly surprising considering the weight of his mail, which he wore almost constantly. She and Griselda between them had struggled to lift it. She supposed the links of metal must be far more

protective than the stiff leathers that her own people had worn into battle, but thought it must hamper their movements more, as well.

When she'd finished scrubbing his hair, Griselda lifted the bucket once more and poured it carefully over his scalp to rinse the soap. Elspeth put her hand beneath his chin, tipping his head back so that she could push the soap and water toward the back of his head with her other hand, brushing her palm over his broad forehead. His chin was prickly, drawing her attention. As she glanced toward his face, she saw that his eyes were upon her, his gaze moving over her face in slow, thorough, appraisal. It sent a tremor through her, demolishing the focus she'd attained in her mundane task from him to the task itself.

Shaken, she removed her hands at once, but she was far too aware of him from that moment to manage to focus purely on the task once more. Her fingers trembled as she lathered his hair once more. Heat swept through her, but she could not convince herself that it was the discomfort of embarrassment.

The soap slipped from her hand and she dove for it before she considered. The moment she touched flesh, instead of soap, she considered, and her gaze flew upward to clash with his once more. Withdrawing her arm abruptly, she stared down at the now murky water, wondering if she should simply decamp and search for another bar of soap.

He fished it from the water himself, caught her hand, and closed her fingers around it. Setting the soap on the hearth, she finished scrubbing his scalp and stepped aside with a touch of relief for Griselda to rinse the lather from his hair, but she did not reach for his chin to tip his head back as she had before. She knew his gaze was upon her as he tipped his head back, however, despite her determination to ignore it and concentrate on removing the soap.

Dragging in a shaky breath, she picked up the soap when Griselda moved away again, lathered a short length of linen and, brushing his wet hair out of the way, pressed the cloth against his back until he leaned forward and then scrubbed his back thoroughly.

Feeling weak and more than a little lightheaded by the time she'd finished, she thrust the linen and soap at him and retreated to the other side of the room. Griselda sent her several admonishing glances, but she resolutely ignored the woman, settling on her pallet.

Lord Arnaud, finished his bath in frowning thoughtfulness, casting a glance toward her now and again. When he stood up at last and Griselda handed him another bucket to rinse, Elspeth stole a glance at him, watching in fascination as the water, gleaming from the firelight behind him, cascaded over his body. She glanced away the moment he began to lower the bucket, studying the puckered roughness of her hands as he stepped from the tub at last and took the length of linen Griselda held out to him.

"Merci," he murmured, his gaze settling thoughtfully on Elspeth as he rubbed the linen briskly over his body to dry himself.

Finally, he dragged his gaze from her and turned to look at Lady Rosabel and her maids, who'd watched the entire proceedings with both disapproval and curiosity, and spoke to them. The maids glanced at Lady Rosabel, who nodded, then bobbed a curtsy and departed. Elspeth got to her feet, deciding that they had been dismissed. When she glanced at Lord Arnaud questioningly, he nodded and relief flooded her. She turned to the door and went out.

Griselda joined her a few moments later, looking her over critically. "You are still fearful of men because of that pig."

It was a statement, not a question. Elspeth had no intention of answering in any case, particularly since she knew very well that it was not fear that had left her so shaken.

Griselda patted her hand. "It will pass in time, as it should. All men are not such brutes and I would not like to think that you had been deprived of one of the few joys in life only because you had been so badly used."

Elspeth reddened. "I can not see whether it makes any difference whether or not it passes. It is very unlikely that I will wed ... now."

Griselda studied her a moment but let it pass. "What does mercy mean?"

Elspeth glanced at her. "Merci?"

Griselda nodded.

"Thank you."

Griselda threw her a look of surprise. After a moment, she smiled complacently. "You see! He was pleased. The Normans can not be as bad as we thought if they appreciate our customs."

* * * *

Lord Arnaud made it abundantly clear that that was one Saxon custom that he could embrace whole heartedly. Lady Rosabel made it equally clear that she considered it very unhealthful, that Saxony was damp and cold at the best of times and Lord Arnaud was bound to catch his death—but then she made no bones about the fact that she hated everything about Saxony and that she wasn't at all pleased about having been dragged here when Lord Arnaud possessed property in Normandy that was far better.

Griselda's conclusion was that the Normans were not as hearty as the Saxons, whom, long generations past, had come from an even colder clime.

Elspeth simply wished that she had strangled Griselda instead of allowing the woman to convince her to participate in teaching their new lord their own customs, which he practiced far more regularly than she liked. He never said anything, but the way he looked at her and the tension in his body as she helped him with his bath led her to believe he found it nearly as much of an ordeal as she did.

She wasn't completely certain of why it was that he not only insisted on continuing, but objected when she tried to switch places with Griselda and bear the water while Griselda bathed him, unless mayhap he thought familiarity would breed contempt. She did not grow accustomed, far from it, and she could not see that it bothered him any less either. In point of fact, it quickly reached a point where his gaze looked almost fevered as it skated over her.

It was a relief when he was called to service, gathered more than half his men, and departed, particularly since he took his brother, Renard, with him.

Lady Rosabel's nausea vanished as she grew rounder with child. Her short temper did not grow longer, however, nor did her contempt for the Saxons abate one whit. As soon as Lord Arnaud disappeared through the newly erected gates that had been set into the growing wall around the manor, she banished both Griselda and Elspeth.

Elspeth was relieved. Griselda was torn between indignation at being considered inferior, and hopeful glee that Lord Arnaud would beat her soundly for countermanding his orders when he returned.

Elspeth thought that doubtful. It would've been obvious to a post that Lord Arnaud was looking forward to the birth of his first son. He might be tempted to beat Lady Rosabel, but it seemed highly unlikely that he would risk the health of his child.

She was far more hopeful that Lord Arnaud would relent to Lady Rosabel's wishes and allow her to return to her former position in the household. Her discomfort at assisting with Lord Arnaud's bath was only part of her reluctance. She wasn't particularly happy about Lady Rosabel's foul temper, nor especially perturbed by it, but she disliked the intimacy forced upon them by the close quarters. She did not like knowing, and quite often hearing, when Lord Arnaud bedded his wife. She also didn't like being privy to their frequent disagreements.

The marriage had been arranged. Lord Arnaud seemed satisfied with his choice, despite her temperament, which seemed to come as much a surprise to him as it did to everyone else. Lady Rosabel felt that her family had sold her short and could have arranged a better marriage. She divided her time between weeping and railing each time she was thwarted in any way, and trying to cajole 'love tokens' from him.

Sometimes Elspeth couldn't help but pity Lady Rosabel because she truly was terribly homesick, and it was obvious that she had been so spoiled and pampered by her family that she couldn't entirely grasp that her situation had changed and she was expected to behave as a wife and soon to be mother, and not

her papa's spoiled darling.

Most of the time she empathized with Lord Arnaud, who was equally unhappy whenever Lady Rosabel was unhappy--which was most of the time--but better at hiding it. She might not have noticed at all, except that his relief in finding Lady Rosabel in a sunny mood was so profound as to make it impossible to ignore.

The main reason she wished for distance, however, was because she finally realized that she was with child herself. Fear and revulsion were uppermost in her mind when she reached the point where she could no longer lie to herself, for it could only be Renard's, and she despised him with a deep, abiding hatred that made her feel physically ill only to think of him. She couldn't bear the thought of having a part of him growing inside of her and the near hysterical desire to tear it from her body, or flush it with some poison, even if it killed her, gripped her for days afterward.

Griselda's reaction to the news surprised her. She merely shrugged.

"I thought as much."

"I can not bear that ... monster's child!"

"You have no choice in that, though I am sorry to see it." She shook her head. "Your mother would turn over in her grave to think you would bear a bastard child."

"But ... I can get rid of it. There are ways."

Griselda gave her a hard look. "You should not even say such things. Bad things will come of such an evil wish. Life is sacred. It is not for you to decide."

Elsbeth stared at her disbelievingly. "Evil! I am evil only because I can not bear the thought of that creature's spawn in my belly?"

"The child is innocent of evil. You can not hate it."

"I do!" Elsbeth said fiercely. "Only thinking of it makes my skin crawl!"

Griselda looked at her angrily. "I would never have thought to hear such talk from you!"

"I am disgraced and that is all you can say?"

"You were disgraced when that pig raped you. You are no more disgraced now."

"What you mean is that I am disgraced because I did not take my life!" Elspeth said furiously.

Griselda's eyes narrowed. "You were strong enough to bear the shame then. You are strong enough to bear the child."

"But I don't want to bear the child! I would rather die!"

Griselda slapped her soundly.

Elspeth stared at her in shock for several moments and finally burst into tears. After a moment, Griselda gathered her into her arms. "It is the fortunes of war, Elspeth, that we women must pay, but you can not blame the child. In time, you'll see that you can love it."

Elspeth shook her head. "I can not."

"Shhh! You are only thinking of that pig. Do not think about him. Your child grows in your belly. When you come to accept that it is yours, you will not think of the father, only that it is yours, and you will love it."

In her heart, Elspeth didn't believe it for one moment, but she saw that Griselda would not sympathize with her plight beyond regret that life had taken such a course for them. She would not help her to rid herself of her burden, and Elspeth realized that she would endure it because the only alternative was to take her own life and she was not prepared to do that.

Nursing the secret hope that the seed would fail and die of its own accord, she put it from her mind and worked until she could not think of anything beyond how tired she was. Even when her belly began to swell and the other servants began to glance at her knowingly, she managed not to think about it. There was not one female in the keep of breeding age that was not in the same situation and they were no happier about it than she—and no less disgraced.

The time came, however, when she could ignore it no longer. With the first fluttering of the life inside of her, her perception of it began to slowly change as Griselda had predicted. Love did not grow with it, but the hate began to slowly fade away.

Chapter Five

The pounding on the door of their shelter nigh brought it down. Unnerved, Elspeth threw a woollen shawl around her shoulders and moved quickly to answer the summons. When she snatched the door open, Lord Arnaud stood in the opening, his expression fierce.

Elspeth gaped at him, her heart hammering so wildly in her breast that she felt lightheaded. He had been gone for nigh on two months and she had grown so accustomed to her change in status that it was several moments before it occurred to her that, by Lord Arnaud's command, she and Griselda were supposed to be in attendance on Lady Rosabel.

That thought flickered through her mind, but in truth, her thoughts as she stared up at him were so chaotic she was scarcely aware of any thought at all. She had forgotten how devastating he was to her senses, how his nearness alone took her breath away, the way he could draw heat into her and make her heart pound with only his gaze.

While she was trying to gather her wits, his gaze flickered almost hungrily over her face and then traveled in a leisurely, thorough inspection of her body, fastening finally on the bulge of her belly and remaining there. The color left his face.

"Lady Rosabel sent us away," she said haltingly.

"You carry my brother's bastard," he said as if she hadn't spoken, his voice strangely without inflection. There was no surprise in his expression or his voice and she was certain that was not feigned. No doubt Lady Rosabel had informed him immediately that there was scarcely a Saxon female of child bearing age who was not with child. She had made no attempt to hide her contempt for them all.

Elspeth felt her face turning fiery red, as much with anger as embarrassment. "You can not profess to be surprised when you dragged that ... pig off of me," she snapped angrily before she thought better of it, and then fell back a step, covering her mouth with her hand, her eyes widening with fear.

His gaze moved back to hers, his gaze assessing. "You have mastered our tongue amazingly well."

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, looking down at her hands. "I beg pardon, my lord."

He caught her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "And for leaving your post? Do you beg pardon for that, as well, when I had made my wishes clear?"

Elspeth could only stare at him in consternation. She knew very well that Lady Rosabel was fully capable

of lying about the entire incident if she thought it might make Lord Arnaud angry with her. He must know that she'd been reluctant to serve Lady Rosabel to begin with, which made it even more unlikely that he would believe her claim that she had been sent away. She gathered moisture into her mouth with an effort. "Yes, my lord."

"Then why are you here?"

"Your lady said she didn't want to be attended by Saxon whores," Griselda said from behind Elspeth.

Elspeth flicked a horrified look at Griselda. "Mind your tongue!" she hissed. "We've trouble enough."

"She has ... realized the error of her thinking and has changed her mind."

Elspeth's head whipped back to Lord Arnaud. His words were still thick with his native accent, but it was clear enough that he spoke, and understood, the Saxon tongue.

"Gather your things and return to the manor." He rubbed his face tiredly. "I have traveled long and hard and I need to remove the mire of the road from me."

They did as they were told, but Elspeth did so with a good deal of dread. If Lord Arnaud had returned, then Renard had also. Despite the child's presence, she had managed to put the father, mostly, from her mind. She felt ill at the thought of seeing him, of being seen by him.

He would gloat to see so obvious a sign of his possession.

As she had feared, he was in the great hall. Despite the vast number of men who had crowded inside, his gaze zeroed in upon her the moment she entered. She did her best to ignore it and move quickly through the room to the stairs, but he headed her off, blocking her path when she reached the stairs.

For several moments, he merely stared at her rounded belly. Finally, he lifted his head to leer at her. "I see my seed has found a fertile field."

He was so certain that it was his and no other's—and well he might be—but she longed that it had been otherwise, that she could wipe his smile from his face. She had regretted only that he had raped her, over and over. She had neither considered the possibility of getting a child, nor how revolting it would be to know without doubt that it was his. It would have been better if he had shared her, she thought now, better if she could at least have had some doubt in her own mind.

She should have simply tried to brush past him or, failing that, turned and left, but she knew that she could not avoid a confrontation forever. Despite all her efforts to avoid him, he was determined to force it upon her.

"If I can not kill you, I will kill myself before I allow you—ever—to touch me again," she said tightly.

His eyes narrowed. After a moment, however, he withdrew his eating dagger and pressed it into her hand, flinging his arms wide.

Elspeth barely blinked. On the instant, her entire being focused on revenge and she became blind and deaf to all else, jerking away from Griselda, who'd caught her arm, trying to drag her away. Her hand clenched around the knife handle the moment he released it and she drew the dagger back, aiming for his heart. Her hand was caught before she could drive it home. She struggled briefly, but the hold tightened until her hand went numb. Finally the dagger fell from her hand and clattered to the floor. She stared down at it in consternation, dove for it, trying to grab it with her free hand, but that was caught, as well, and she was swung around to face her captor.

Lord Arnaud's expression penetrated the fog of hate for the first time since Renard had stepped into her path, and fear stabbed through her. He lowered his face to within inches of hers. "Do not allow him to goad you to your death, you little fool."

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, but the fury was still upon her and all she could think was that it would be worth it if only she could kill Renard first.

He saw it in her face and shook her until her head rocked back on her shoulders.

"She pulled a weapon upon me brother. That is enough in itself."

Lord Arnaud focused upon Renard, his eyes blazing. Catching Elspeth around the waist, he leaned down and scooped the knife from the floor, studying it. "I would not think that you would want it known that a slip of a girl overpowered you, stole your eating knife and tried to skewer you with it."

Renard shrugged, grinning. "She is jealous because I have turned my attentions upon another."

Lord Arnaud studied him a long moment. "I saw, and heard, everything Renard. If ever I catch you in another lie—if ever I catch you directly disobeying an order from me again, you will rue the day you were born," he said coldly.

Renard swallowed audibly. "I have never disobeyed an order from you, Guillume."

Lord Arnaud's eyes narrowed. After a moment, he set Elspeth on the stairs and gave her a push to urge her up them. Moving around him, Griselda caught her arm and tugged her upwards.

"You do try my patience, brother. Need I remind you of the disastrous consequences of sending you to secure my property? Did I not charge you to take it as peacefully as could be done?"

Renard reddened. "They resisted," he said through gritted teeth.

"Half the serfs are dead or have fled, and of those who remain, every female old enough to breed is heavy with child and I can expect to lose still more in child bed. Nigh half the fields were burned, the manor itself was ransacked—and when I arrived you and every man under your command were lying about sot drunk. If it had been anyone other than myself that had come upon you, I would have had to lay waste to the remainder of the property in trying to take it back. You are fortunate you are my brother, else I would have slain you on the spot."

He caught the front of Renard's surcoat in his fist and leaned toward him until they were virtually nose to nose. "If you value your life, Renard, do not look upon Elspeth again."

Renard's eyes darted toward the stairs at that. "I understand you ... brother."

Lord Arnaud studied him a moment and released him.

Renard straightened his clothing, smoothing it carefully with his hands as he sent his brother several resentful glares. "Since you are so displeased with my services on your behalf, I believe I will inquire about offering them elsewhere."

Lord Arnaud smiled thinly. "You are welcome to do so."

Renard flushed angrily. After a moment, he turned without another word and stalked away.

Guillume watched him until he had rejoined the group near the great hearth and then turned and ascended the stairs.

* * * *

"What possessed you to attack the Norman!" Griselda demanded in fearful anger when they had gained Lord Arnaud's quarters and closed the door behind them.

Elsbeth, who had moved to the hearth to check the bath, looked at her angrily, but, in truth, the murderous desire had long since fled. "I saw only the means and the opportunity to have my revenge," she said tiredly. "I could not think beyond the gloating smile he bent upon me, his certainty that he had so cowed me that I would not dare to attempt it."

Griselda studied her in silence. "There is more to it than that."

Elsbeth glanced at her sharply. "Nay, there is not."

"You endured well enough until Lord Arnaud accused you of carrying his brother's bastard."

Elspeth flushed. "I am despised for something I could not prevent. The injustice of it chafes me. In what way does that make me any different from anyone else wrongfully accused and punished?"

Griselda shook her head. "I had forgotten you were so young yet, Elspeth. It is not wrong, just unrealistic to expect fairness in this world. Experience will teach you better—But you can not gain wisdom if you are dead. Lord Arnaud was right. You should not have allowed him to goad you. If he had not stopped you...."

A cold chill ran down Elspeth's spine. She rather thought she would prefer to fall upon her own dagger than to face the executioner.

She bit her lip. "In truth, I think I have sorely misjudged the poor Lady Rosabel. There is something about being with child, particularly when one least wants to be, that induces a sort of madness."

Griselda cocked her head with interest. "Lady Rosabel is not pleased that she will bear the lord's heir?"

Elspeth sent her a look, before she could comment, however, Lord Arnaud strode into the room. His gaze went immediately to her. After a moment, he moved to the stool beside the hearth and sat, staring at the flames.

Elspeth studied him guiltily, realizing for the first time that she had been so centered upon her own problems and her fear and hatred of Renard, that she had not given any consideration to the wedge she had driven between Lord Arnaud and his brother. She knew it wasn't entirely because of her—Renard had angered him when he'd diminished the value of the property that had been awarded to him for his service to William the Bastard. Her fear and hatred of Renard were certainly justified, but she did not like being the cause of more bad blood between the two brothers.

When Griselda nudged her to gain her attention, she surged forward to help her remove Lord Arnaud's heavy mail shirt. She gasped when she looked back at him. Massive bruises covered his back and shoulders as well as a number of angry, red half healed wounds.

He glanced at her at the sharp intake of breath and she licked her lips nervously. "You have seen battle?"

He shrugged. "Skirmishes only. By and large, there is peace."

"I will go and get my medicines," Griselda said and bobbed a briefly curtsy and left.

Elspeth felt her heart squeeze painfully in her chest at the realization that Griselda had left them alone. She saw in his eyes that Lord Arnaud was acutely aware of it, as well.

After a moment, he dragged his gaze from her and finished undressing, easing himself into the tub and leaning forward to splash water over his head. Elspeth studied him hesitantly for several moments and finally grasped the soap and moved behind him, lathering his hair. He closed his eyes as she lathered the soap into his hair, massaging his scalp with her fingers.

"He will seek service elsewhere," he said, his voice sounding husky with disuse.

Elspeth glanced down at him and saw that he was studying her. She could think of nothing to say. She could scarcely think at all beyond wondering why she had ever thought his dark eyes so cold. Finally, she managed to nod.

"Until that time, you will stay close to Lady Rosabel."

Again, Elspeth could only nod. Her throat had closed and she could not seem to force any sound past the knot there. Moving away after a moment, she went to the hearth to fetch a pail to rinse his hair.

"Leave it," he said sharply.

She desisted, moving back to the tub when he leaned forward to rinse his hair and helping him squeeze the suds from it, then lathering it a second time. When she'd finished, she took the linen she used for washing and gathered water into it to rinse as much of the soap as she could until Griselda returned to help her with the heavy pails.

He sucked in a hissing breath as she began to rub the cloth along his shoulders and she stilled. He shook his head. "Do it. It doesn't hurt nearly so much now as when I got it," he said wryly.

Still, she hesitated. Almost as if she had no will over her actions at all, she found herself reaching to smooth lightly over the ridge of healing flesh along his shoulder with a fingertip. A shudder went through him.

He caught her hand. Squeezing it almost painfully, he pulled her inexorably around the edge of the tub until she was facing him. "I would think you would rather slip a blade between my ribs than to soothe my hurts," he said hoarsely.

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, knowing that he was right. She should want nothing more than the opportunity to slay one of the conquerors who had swept through her land like some dark plague, slain her family, taken all that had once belonged to her and made her a servant in her own home. He had been a part of that. She should hate him as she did Renard.

When, she wondered, had she ceased to look upon him as her enemy?

"I do not hate you, my lord," she said hesitantly.

"Do you not? Does it not chafe you to see me, your enemy, lord in your father's home?"

Elspeth felt the color leave her face. She didn't try to deny it, however, knowing a lost cause when she saw one. She should have known that, no matter how badly he spoke Saxon, he must understand it if he could speak it, and she had not guarded her tongue as she ought. "How long have you known?"

"I suspected the moment I saw you," he said grimly. "Torn and bloodied as you were, you were not dressed like any peasant."

A pain stabbed through her chest. "You kept me here to watch me—because I am your enemy," she said with an effort.

Something flickered in his eyes, but she was too hurt to recognize it as a reflection of her own pain. All she could think of was how incredibly gullible she had been, believing that he acted out of kindness, out of concern for her welfare, when the truth was he merely wanted to make certain she did not create problems for him with the others.

Tears welled in her eyes and she dropped her gaze, trying to will them away.

"Yes," he said, his voice harsh.

The rawness of his voice drew her head up once more.

His expression hardened as he studied her face. Abruptly, he released her. "Leave me!"

Dropping the washcloth, Elspeth surged to her feet and fled. She met Griselda in the hallway. "What's this?"

Elspeth shook her head. "You should attend his wounds. There are several that look to be in need of attention."

Griselda studying her frowningly for several moments but finally left her. When she had gone, Elspeth settled on the floor beside Lady Rosabel's door. She had left her pallet when she had fled Lord Arnaud's room and she could not bring herself to return for it. She was sorely tempted to flee back to the cottage that she and Griselda had shared, but she did not want Lord Arnaud to come to fetch her back.

If Renard were not present, she might have been tempted to creep down the stairs and make her pallet with the other servants, but as upset as she was, she had no desire to encounter Renard again—whatever Lord Arnaud had said, she doubted that Renard would leave her be. He had convinced himself that she

belonged to him and the fact that Lord Arnaud forbade him to claim her only seemed to have made him more obsessive about doing so.

Her swollen belly made it nigh impossible to find a comfortable position on the floor, for the heavier the child became the more pressure it placed upon her hip joints, but then neither was she comfortable pacing the floor. Finally, she merely folded her legs, dropping her head into her hands and trying to decide why she was hurt, not angry, not fearful.

She could have understood either other emotion. She had been fearful from the first of what the repercussions might be if Lord Arnaud discovered he was harboring the daughter of his enemy.

She should have been angry—with herself at least—for her clumsiness in trying to hide her identity, and her willful blindness in not realizing that she had fooled no one.

She should not be hurt that the Norman saw her as his enemy.

Chapter Six

"Did something happen whilst I was gone to fetch my herbs?"

Elsbeth glanced at Griselda, but she had no desire to share her confusion, and certainly not the embarrassment that was quickly supplanting it. She forced a slight smile. "The child kicks. My belly cramped when I tried to lift one of the buckets," she lied, "but it is better now."

As she had known she would be, Griselda was immediately distracted. "It is probably nothing but it is not wise to dismiss these things. Let me check."

Elsbeth refrained from rolling her eyes and allowed Griselda to place her palm over her belly.

The door to Lord Arnaud's room opened and he stepped into the hall, heading toward his lady's room purposefully.

"I do not feel it kick," Griselda said, "but I am sure there are no contractions."

Lord Arnaud checked fractionally—enough that Elspeth was in no doubt that he'd noticed Griselda's examination, and heard her assessment—before he continued, closing the door behind him.

Yvette and Pauline were evicted into the hallway and arrived carrying their pallets. Griselda and Elspeth exchanged a glance. Without a word, they collected their own pallets, which Griselda had left just outside Lord Arnaud's door when she had finished attending him. Lord Arnaud was not likely to leave his lady for many hours and they would be expected to be up and working at dawn however little sleep they might get waiting in the hall.

Lady Rosabel was not pleased to be disturbed. She complained for a while about her discomfort before the sounds in the room changed dramatically from complaints to moans of pleasure.

Obviously, servants were sticks of wood so far as she was concerned, for she'd never made any attempt to guard her tongue around them and certainly did not when they were not in sight. Worse to Elspeth's mind, she not only made no attempt to curb her enthusiasm for coupling—once Lord Arnaud had convinced her—but, Elspeth suspected, she often exaggerated.

Elspeth could readily believe that Lord Arnaud was a far better lover than Renard. He could hardly be worse, but she wasn't certain she believed the extent of Lady Rosabel's very vocal pleasure. If she enjoyed it so much, why did she always complain and try to find excuses to put him off? Merely because she enjoyed being persuaded? Because she preferred to play coy?

She was more inclined to think Lady Rosabel feigned the entire process to appeal to Lord Arnaud's male ego, for she generally ended her performance by demanding to know what trinkets he had brought for her.

Rolling onto her side, Elspeth covered her head with her blanket, squeezed her eyes closed and did her best to block out all the sounds. She did not expect to sleep. Her thoughts were still in turmoil and the drama, which she could hear far too well, beyond the Lady Rosabel's bedroom wall only added to her disturbed sensibilities. The one thing that could be said for their daily labor, however, was that it so drained them of strength and energy that only the threat of certain death could deprive them of sleep, and sometimes not even that.

When the soft click of a door being closed jerked her awake, it was nearly dawn. Barely half conscious, she sat up, glancing around to discern the threat. Lord Arnaud had paused at her movement. She blinked at him blearily and laid down again, snuggling closer to Griselda for warmth.

Her mind would not allow her to seek sleep once more, however, and as Griselda began to stir, she rose stiffly and rolled up her pallet. Leaving it in one corner, she made her way downstairs in search of a place

to relieve herself and water to wash the dregs of sleep away.

In the kitchen, the servants were already busy preparing the noon meal. The cook glanced at her distractedly and pointed her toward a small mound of meat scraps, cheese and bread crusts.

Her stomach revolted at the sight of the greasy meat, but she took a crust of bread and a sliver of cheese and wandered outside to find a few moments of peace. Her confrontation with Renard was fresh on her mind, but so too was the by-play with Lord Arnaud. She thought it doubtful that Renard would so quickly dismiss the warning that Lord Arnaud had given him—but she did not wander far.

Taking a drink from the dipper in the bucket at the well, she settled on the bench that surrounded it, pulled her shawl tightly about her shoulders and gazed off toward the sunrise, allowing her thoughts to wander to her childhood and the days before the Normans had come. She had not allowed herself the luxury before. In truth, it had been a wound so deep she thought she couldn't bear to think of it at all, but she found that the memories brought her as much solace as pain.

Her father had been a giant of a man, not quite so tall as Lord Arnaud, but broader of shoulder. She found she could not summon his face beyond the long, flowing beard that had been streaked with white and his eyes—a pale blue that had twinkled when he was amused and glinted like steel when he was angry.

It was hard, even now, to accept that she would not see her father or her brothers' faces again in this lifetime. Perhaps, when her spirit joined the mother earth, she would find them waiting? She smiled faintly to imagine them drunk and brawling, and disturbing the peace of the gods as they had so often disturbed the peace of the manor, for they had been a loud and rowdy lot, exuberant with life and as happy to indulge in a round of merrymaking as a good natured test of strength.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, distracting her from her thoughts and her heart skipped a beat as she saw Renard hesitate as he spied her and then cross the yard in her direction. She tensed, glancing toward the manor. If she were not burdened with the child, she might outrun him, but now, she knew she could not. Instead, she remained where she was, determined not to allow him to see how terrified she was of him.

To her surprise, he stopped some distance from her, studying her soberly.

"I have decided to seek service elsewhere," he said finally.

Elsbeth tilted her head, staring at him steadily, but she said nothing.

He cleared his throat. "I would be willing to take you with me as my layman."

Rage colored her cheeks. "I am supposed to be flattered by that?"

He flushed, his own temper rising. "You prefer scrubbing floors and picking up after the Lady Rosabel? Guillume will not take you as his mistress in the home of his wife. He has always been strange that way, perhaps because our father kept no fewer than three at any one time. It distressed his mother."

She knew it was unwise to provoke him, but she found she was beyond caring. "Your conceit is staggering. Do you imagine you have given me a taste for having any man rutting me? I would rather spend my days cleaning the chamber pots," she said tightly.

His hands clenched into fists. For a moment, she thought that he would surge forward and wrap them about her throat.

She felt oddly calm about it.

"There is nothing that you could do to me that would be worse than what you have done already—and no way that you will ever have me willingly. You were my hated enemy before ever I set eyes upon you and you have only taught me more hate. You can not imagine the depths of it."

His eyes narrowed, but he held himself in check with an effort. "You seemed willing enough."

That comment penetrated her calm. Elspeth gasped in outrage. "If beating a woman unconscious is your perception of 'willing' then I can well understand your confusion. No doubt every woman you have had has been as 'willing'."

He ground his teeth. "You are brave because you think Lord Arnaud will protect you."

"I am the daughter of Odolf, late lord of this place—so long as I am useful, yes, I believe he will, but you are mistaken. I am not brave. I simply do not care. You have taught me that there are far worse things than death."

She watched dispassionately as he fought another round with his temper. He almost seemed to surge toward her, but after glancing around, he turned instead and strode away. She watched him until he had disappeared around the corner of the manor and finally rose from the bench. The sun had crested the horizon and she knew she should already have begun her day.

A muscle clenched low in her belly when she tried to straighten. The child was heavy and her body unaccustomed to the weight. She paused, massaging the cramp until it passed and finally straightened and turned toward the kitchen.

Lord Arnaud stood propped against the back wall of the kitchen and her heart fluttered painfully in her chest. She did not want to draw attention to her reluctance to pass near him, however, and after only a slight hesitation, she trained her gaze on her feet and headed toward the laundry shed instead.

He cut off her retreat, bracing an arm across the door frame, and she stopped, dropping a curtsy. "My lord?" she said questioningly, refusing to lift her gaze.

"You are not well?" he asked after a moment.

Surprised, she glanced upward. She saw his gaze was on her belly and looked away again when his gaze flickered to her face. "I am well enough. We Saxons are a hearty lot. You need not fear that I will cease to be useful."

He tensed, but instead of responding to the provocative remark, asked instead, "What did Renard speak to you about?"

She had a strong feeling that he'd heard much, if not all, of their conversation. They had not been standing nearly so close as she was to Lord Arnaud now, and voices carried quite well across the yard. She shrugged. "He asked if I would go with him when he left."

"And you said?"

She glanced at him again. "I am no longer a free woman. I can not choose."

He frowned, his displeasure obvious. "Would you choose to go with him if you were?"

She flushed. He was as thick skulled as his brother. She wondered if men ever thought with more than their cocks—it passed comprehension that they could be so enamored of them that they thought they only had to shove their 'wonder rod' into a woman to enslave her for life.

She had not thought Lord Arnaud such a fool as to believe she had been at all interested in having Renard rutting her. It infuriated her that he did, that he obviously considered her no better than a common whore. As tempted as she was to inform him that she rather thought having her fingernails pulled out one by one would be more pleasurable, however, she bit her tongue. "I am not free. I did not give it any thought," she said coolly.

He caught her chin, forcing her to look up at him. Her heart clutched painfully in her chest, but she regarded him steadily.

"Would you?" he ground out harshly.

She swallowed with an effort. "What answer do you seek?"

His eyes blazed. After a moment, however, he released her abruptly and strode away.

A sense of satisfaction filled her. She had routed two Normans in one day and it was scarcely more than sunrise.

The sense of triumph did not last, of course. The moment he disappeared the satisfaction vanished with him.

Since she didn't want him to know that her trip to the laundry shed had been no more than a ruse, she went inside and sorted the laundry for washing.

She could not fathom the man. Had he believed Renard's lie that she was jealous that he had turned his attention elsewhere? Even if he did, why act as if it mattered? He had made it painfully clear that what she had believed was kindness and concern for her welfare was no more than caution and suspicion, and the cleverness to know that her treatment, for good or ill, strongly affected the servants who remained. They were not likely to attempt revolt in any case, but her assurances that they would be treated well if they accepted their new master had gone a long way toward keeping the peace—which had been his objective.

Was that it? He had believed Renard and thought she might try to flee with him? Was it ... a warning? She had tried to kill Renard without considering the consequences of her actions, but she knew right well that she would have been executed if she had succeeded. Did he think that she might run away, forcing him to track her down and punish her—with all the repercussions that that would entail?

She shook her head in disgust with herself. She should have known that it must be something like that. If she were truthful with herself, she knew very well that she had responded to him as a man and that that was the only reason that she had been eager to look well upon all that he did. She had not truly questioned his motives at any point.

Perhaps she was as guilty of stupidity by conceit as Renard? Had she believed, somewhere in her mind, that he was attracted to her as she was to him? Or that he was being kind because he realized that she was the daughter of Odolf and deserved better treatment because of her birth? She had certainly not been spoiled as Lady Rosabel seemed to have been, but her father had been a wealthy man and she had, once upon a time, been considered a marriage prize.

She would have been settled by now if not for her father's dependence upon her to run his household, but she had not found a man to tempt her away from her home and so she had not pressed her father to settle her.

Perhaps, after all, it was just as well she had not. She would be a widow now, of a certainty, with children that she would need to worry about and protect. At least as it was she did not have that worry.

She found that she was glad her impulse had taken her to the laundry shed. Of all the tasks she performed, laundry was her least favorite, but it was a fine day to be working outside and the relative

solitude of her task helped her to clear her mind a little. By the time she'd finished laundering Lady Rosabel's fine linens, her back had begun to feel as if it would break in two, however, and her hands were already red and raw from the lye. When Yvette and Pauline arrived to check her work suspiciously, as if Lady Rosabel, or they, thought that she might deliberately damage the clothing, she left the remainder of the laundry to them and went inside.

The servants were clearing away the noon meal as she passed through the kitchen once more. She managed to grab a piece of fowl and a crust of bread and gnawed at them as she made her way upstairs. She had spent hours toiling over a pot of boiling laundry and then hanging it to dry and she had not even combed her hair upon rising. She would have to take a few moments to tidy herself before she went in to Lady Rosabel's day room. Lady Rosabel required that her maids be neat in appearance. Clearly she thought that she and Griselda were the next thing to animals, but Elspeth saw little point in giving the lady more to complain about.

To her relief, her belongings remained in the corner where she'd left them. Kneeling, she set the meat and bread she hadn't finished on her rolled pallet, wiped her hands on her apron and dug through the small bundle of her belongings until she found her comb. Quickly removing the leather thongs that she used to secure her braids, she carefully parted her hair down the center once more, dragged one section across her shoulder and began working the snarls from it.

Her hair, she saw, had gotten far too long. It must surely be nearly to her knees by now and it was a great deal more work than she had time for. Pressing her hand to her aching back, she shifted after a bit to sit on the floor and paused long enough to finish her meal.

Hearing a heavy tread on the stairs, she glanced around and saw to her surprise that Lord Arnaud had come up. He rarely did so during the day unless it was to visit his lady in her day room, or, occasionally, to remove his mail and change into more comfortable clothing if he had no plan to leave the manor.

Her heart skidded painfully, but she thought perhaps he wouldn't notice her in the corner if she sat perfectly still. She waited breathlessly until the footsteps stopped, listening for the sound of a door opening. When she didn't hear one, she nerved herself to glance around again.

He was standing at the door to the day room, but she could see that he was facing her, even though she looked no higher than his knees. Turning away again, she dropped the remains of her meal in her pocket and hastily brushed the crumbs from her clothing. When he still did not leave, she wiped her hands on her apron and began to hastily braid the hair she'd combed. She'd intended to form a single braid as she usually did, but she could scarcely think, knowing that he was watching her, wondering why he was watching her so intently.

Her fingers were trembling so badly, she made a mess of the braid before she'd sorted half its length. She stopped, studying the twisted hair and finally glanced toward him again, wondering if she'd been so preoccupied she simply hadn't heard him go into the room.

She saw that he was studying the hair she held clenched in her fist. The impulse to explain herself rose. She tamped it, waiting to see if he would accuse her of ... anything, before she began to babble as if she truly was guilty of something, which she wasn't. Not really. She had begun work before the others and not taken the time to perform her daily grooming first—truthfully, she had dallied in the yard too long, and she knew it.

She should be in attendance on Lady Rosabel now, not huddled in the corner eating her mid day meal.

It was almost as if he had merely waited for her to acknowledge him, however, for after allowing his gaze to skate over her, he turned away and went into the room.

Breathing a little easier, Elspeth returned her attention to her hair, combing the tangles out of the other section of hair and then forming the single braid down the back as she usually did. She left about a foot of hair free of the braid at the end, not only because her arms were aching with fatigue long before she had it all braided but because she meant to make certain that it didn't take her so long to arrange her hair again.

When she'd finished tying the leather thongs tightly around the braid to hold it in place, she gathered her belongings and took them into Lady Rosabel's bedchamber, depositing them next to Griselda's. Dragging her unfinished meal from her pocket, she flicked the lint off of it and quickly finished it, then opened a window and tossed the bone out.

Griselda had a small eating dagger that they shared. It was dull and she doubted very much that it would cut her hair, but she thought it worth a try and dug it out. She'd grasped the hair in a wad and was on the point of trying to saw through it when the door to the Lady Rosabel's chamber opened.

"Don't."

Chapter Seven

Elspeth jumped guiltily, dropping the knife. "My lord?"

He strode toward her, bending to scoop up the knife. "I would not like to see you butcher your hair ... nor injure yourself in the attempt with this dull blade."

She stared at him with a mixture of surprise and irritation. "I have nothing else to use and my hair is far too long. I will be stepping upon it ere I know it."

Without a word, he caught her hair, running his hand down the rope-like braid until he reached the unfettered end. "It gleams like gold," he said musingly, studying it where it lay against his palm. After a moment, he closed his fist around it, pulled his dagger from his belt and sliced the ends off cleanly.

"Lady Rosabel wants her needlework basket," he said as he looked down to slip his knife back into his belt.

Relieved that he had not come into the bedchamber in search of her, Elspeth nodded and went to fetch the basket, then escaped the room. Lady Rosabel did not seem pleased when Elspeth arrived with her basket instead of Lord Arnaud, whom she'd apparently sent to perform the task, but she smiled when he returned a few moments later and sprawled in the chair adjacent to hers. "I thought, perhaps, that you had become bored and left," she said chidingly.

Lord Arnaud smiled faintly. "I am not accustomed to being idle."

Lady Rosabel frowned, her lips tightening. Her response made it obvious that even Lord Arnaud could not escape her tendency to turn every word, gesture and comment over and over until she found an insult in it. "I am not accustomed to being idle either, but I have not been at all well with this child."

His gaze flickered over her speculatively. "That was not an accusation," he said coolly. "I merely meant to point out that I was not bored with your company."

She sniffed threateningly, but apparently decided after a glance at Lord Arnaud to try a different tact and sighed gustily. "I am bored. Why don't you play something for me, Guillume?" she said, brightening.

Lord Arnaud glanced toward the lute that had been hung on the wall by a peg and finally rose and retrieved it. Settling once more, he began to check the strings, tuning each in turn.

"Here girl. Make yourself useful and separate these threads for me," she said, extending the basket without glancing in Elspeth's direction. Elspeth rose at once and took the basket, returning to the bench beneath the window that she had been sharing with Griselda. Without a word, Griselda took a handful of the threads and began carefully sorting them.

"What would you like for me to play?"

Lady Rosabel smiled and clapped her hands in delight. "I have so missed court! Anything! A love ballad!"

Elspeth glanced toward the two of them curiously. Somehow, she would never have imagined that Lord Arnaud possessed any musical talent at all. It seemed at odds with his role as warrior, particularly since she knew from what she had heard his men say of him that he had distinguished himself so well on the field of battle that he had gained William the Bastard's attention, and admiration.

She saw that he had flushed uncomfortably at Lady Rosabel's request and amusement touched her as it occurred to her to wonder if he actually could play the lute. He seemed familiar with the instrument, though, so perhaps he was only uncomfortable with that particular request?

The moment he began to strum the instrument and lifted his voice in song, shivers raced all over her body. She had thought his deep voice pleasing to the ear when he spoke. When he sang, it seemed to reach deeply inside of her. His voice, the music, and the words of the ballad he sang played such havoc with her senses that she made a tangled mess of the threads she was trying to separate.

Griselda's hand closed over hers, stilling her movements, and she glanced at the older woman. The knowing look in her gaze was almost as disturbing as the warning she saw there. She looked down at her hands once more. Griselda took the threads from her, handed her those that she'd sorted and wound into skeins and set to work untangling the mess that Elspeth had made.

Nodding at the silent command, Elspeth rose and placed the sorted skeins within Lady Rosabel's reach. Before she could return to her seat, however, Lady Rosabel spoke quietly to her, sending her to fetch refreshment for her and her lord.

Elspeth had never thought to be grateful to the woman, but in that moment she was so happy to have an excuse to escape that she felt almost tearful with relief. Bobbing a curtsy, she fled the room. She only wished that she could flee from herself.

* * * *

Lord Arnaud seemed determined to better acquaint himself with the wife that he had spent more time apart from than with. Or perhaps it was only that he had tired of her constant complaints of neglect, boredom and home sickness, and thought to make peace--or because of his concern for her that she was seemed to be having a difficult pregnancy. Whatever the case, he spent far more time in her company than he had before.

Despite that, and the fact that she had no way to escape since she was constantly at Lady Rosabel's beck and call, Elspeth managed to either avoid him altogether or remain well out of sight much of the time.

She suspected that was at least in part because Lord Arnaud wished to keep his distance, as well. For,

although he did not seem to actually avoid her, more often than not he joined his lady when she was working elsewhere.

Griselda, for reasons she did not discuss with Elspeth, aided her surprisingly ably.

It was her considered opinion, and Elspeth trusted Griselda implicitly in such matters, that Lady Rosabel was not nearly as ill as she liked to pretend, but that she had indulged herself far too much. Griselda had advised her to rest when she felt ill, particularly in the early months of her pregnancy. She had not meant that Lady Rosabel should spend her entire pregnancy ensconced in her bed or a chair in her sitting room.

Griselda had not mastered the Norman tongue, however, and Lady Rosabel simply pretended she couldn't understand her when Griselda tried to coax her into daily walks that would help to strengthen her for the ordeal she must soon face. Finally, Griselda demanded that Elspeth speak with Lord Arnaud about the situation.

Elspeth had spent weeks avoiding him. She was not only indignant that Griselda would ask, she refused point blank to seek him out. Griselda would give her no peace, however.

"You are that concerned about her?" Elspeth had finally demanded. "After all that you have said about our hated enemies, the Normans?"

Griselda glared at her. "I am not comfortable ignoring danger to her health when Lord Arnaud specifically charged me with seeing to it that she and the child were well taken care of."

Elspeth bit her lip at that. "You truly think that her child is at risk?"

"I truly think that both her and the child are at risk or I would have said nothing! She has done nothing but sat about and eat since she ceased to be ill and she will not have the strength in her body to expel the child when the time comes! Think you the lord will thank us if his wife and heir die in child bed? Or that he will blame us for not taking better care of her? And what is to become of us if she dies in child bed even if he does not blame us for it?"

Elspeth could not like Lady Rosabel, but she did not want the woman's death on her conscience. "Why can you not speak with him yourself?"

Griselda glared at her impatiently. "Because I can not understand the half of what he says, nor he what I say."

"We could speak with Jean," Elspeth said on sudden inspiration. She had seen almost nothing of him since she had been sent to serve Lady Rosabel—because Lady Rosabel had scarcely been down the stairs since she had arrived, but she knew there would be no problem making him understand.

Griselda wasn't particularly happy with that solution, but she agreed that they would try it. When another week passed, however, and they had not managed to catch Jean to speak to him, Griselda began to pester Elspeth again.

Elspeth finally agreed, but that, too, proved difficult. She didn't want to speak to him in front of Lady Rosabel, knowing full well that it would only send her mistress into a rage. Finally, she decided there was no hope for it. When next Lord Arnaud ordered a bath, instead of sending someone else to take her place as she had since the night he had sent her away, Elspeth joined Griselda. Her nerves were on edge, however.

She had not approached him before, which made it difficult enough in itself even if she could have dismissed the animosity that she had worked to shield herself with since he had told her he looked upon her only as his enemy. Even if there had not been so much tension between them, she feared he would react badly to discussing his wife with a servant, especially her.

It did not make things any easier that, when he entered the room, he checked at the sight of her standing before the hearth with Griselda. It was the barest of pauses. She might not have noticed at all except that she had glanced at him nervously at that precise moment.

The unwelcoming look upon his face was enough in itself to make her long to flee and she glanced at Griselda, wondering, once again, if she should even attempt to speak to him. Griselda only frowned at her and gave her a nudge forward as Lord Arnaud settled on the stool beside the tub.

Finally, Elspeth knelt before him. "My lord—may I speak?"

"Concerning what matter?" he said after a notable pause, and although his voice sounded carefully neutral, it was that in itself that increased her anxiety.

"Griseld—it is about your wife," Elspeth said quickly before she lost her nerve, and then dared a glance up at him.

If he had looked even vaguely receptive before, he lost even that much, his face hardening until it looked as if it might have been carved from stone. "Take care you do not forget your place," he said coldly.

The words washed over her in a frigid wave and Elspeth glanced at Griselda again.

"Speak," Griselda said in a harsh whisper, nudging her again. "He thinks you mean to complain ... or insult his lady."

"We are ... Griselda is concerned for her health, my lord," Elspeth said hurriedly. "She has spent too much time abed. She grows weak, and she will have difficulty when her time comes."

It could not be said that any of the tension left him, but the cold fury was replaced by anxiety. "She eats well now. She seems healthy enough to me," he said after a moment, suspicion rife in his voice. "Are you suggesting that there is something I can do about it, even if what you say is true?"

Elspeth bit her lip as Griselda nodded eagerly and dropped to her knees beside her, gesturing toward his legs and belly as she explained the need for strength in the lower body. Lord Arnaud merely stared at her in incomprehension, however.

"You must persuade her to walk so that she will grow stronger. She is weak and the child heavy. It pains her to walk, and she is convinced that it is bad for the child. She will not listen to Griselda."

He frowned. "If she believes it bad for the child, perhaps she knows better where it concerns herself."

Elspeth released a sigh of exasperation. "She has not borne a child before. She knows only that she is afraid."

His eyes narrowed at her tone. "You are younger than she. You are so much wiser?"

Elspeth felt color fill her cheeks. "Griselda attended my mother through the births of five babes. I trust her judgment."

"But can I?"

Elspeth sat back on her heels, staring up at him in dismay. She had known he would not like to discuss his wife with her. She understood it. But she had not thought his distrust ran so deep that he would question their motives, that he might think that they were trying to hurt her rather than help. He held her gaze for several moments before he turned away to study the fire on the hearth.

Almost absently, he fished a leather thong from beneath his surcoat and pulled it off over his head, holding the small pouch attached to it in his palm and studying it for several moments before he clenched his fist around it. "More than any other, I have entrusted her care to the two of you. Think not that I will not hold you responsible if ill comes of it."

Elspeth swallowed with an effort as he turned to look at her once more. "Then you might just as well kill us now," she said stiffly. "For she is as pig headed as you are and suspicious of every attempt to help her, no matter how well meaning."

His eyes narrowed on her face, but Elspeth met his gaze unflinchingly, refusing to back down. After a moment, some of the tension left him and he nodded.

It would have been a vast understatement to say that Lady Rosabel did not take the suggestion well. She

had been enjoying her invalidism and the attention it gained her far too much to willingly give it up. Lord Arnaud spent the first week coaxing her to walk with him, even carrying her downstairs to walk along the paths of the tiny kitchen garden.

She complained endlessly, and swore each time that she walked for more than a few steps that she was having heart palpitations, or contractions, or both. By the second week, Lord Arnaud's patience began to rapidly unravel. He ceased trying to cajole her and commanded her instead, which only resulted in tearful hysterics and even less cooperation than before.

She accused him of trying to hasten her to her death. She accused Elspeth and Griselda of conspiring against her to murder her. Yvette and Pauline, who had never looked upon either of them with anything but thinly veiled hostility and suspicion, fed her doubts until what had begun as no more than thoughtless anger became a certainty in her mind. Soon, the rumor spread beyond the confines of Lady Rosabel's chambers into the general populace of the keep and the Normans began to look upon all of the Saxons with a great deal of suspicion, and vice versa.

There seemed no way to squelch the rumors once begun. The fact was that the truce between the two factions had never been more than a thin facade. Animosity lingered not far beneath the surface, waiting to erupt, and needing only a tiny catalyst. Elspeth found it difficult to accept that anyone actually believed such things, but whether they did or not, it was an excuse for disputes.

Lord Arnaud found more and more of his time was spent settling petty squabbles and trying to keep the peace. Lady Rosabel seemed content with the results. As much as she seemed to enjoy Lord Arnaud's attention, she preferred him dancing attendance upon her as invalid. His determination to deprive her of glorying in her delicate condition made him lose favor with her very quickly.

When she topped off weeks of giving him the cold shoulder and provoking a fight each time he demanded his rights as her husband by informing him that she was no longer in any condition to perform her duties as his wife, Elspeth expected an explosion the likes of which they had not seen heretofore. Instead, Lord Arnaud, furious, but looking far more relieved than disappointed, ceased to inflict himself upon her at all.

Neither Elspeth nor Griselda was relieved. The cold feud between Lord Arnaud and his wife only made their situation far more difficult. Neither of them thought for one moment that he would be any more inclined to take pity on them if Lady Rosabel's labor went badly, but without him to enforce the order for her daily walks, Rosabel balked, and Yvette and Pauline staunchly aided and abetted her.

Short of engaging in a daily battle that threatened to escalate from verbal to physical, the only time that they were able to drag her from her bed and force her to walk was when Yvette or Pauline, or both, were sent to attend other matters.

The only heartening aspect was that Rosabel did seem to be improving. She would still complain when

she was walked from her chamber to the sitting room and back again, and swear that she was nigh fainting, or that she was going into labor, but she had ceased to tremble as if her legs would give way.

They switched from walking her to her sitting room and back to walking her to the head of the stairs. The distance was greater, and Elspeth, at least, thought her curiosity might overcome her reluctance if she saw that she might have the entertainment of company if only she went downstairs.

It was obvious she was tempted. She had seemed pleased, at first, that she had thoroughly routed Lord Arnaud, but that had not lasted once she discovered that he would not sit with her in her day room and entertain her with his lute either.

"Jean often plays his lute once they have finished supping," Elspeth suggested tentatively.

Lady Rosabel glanced at her sharply. "Jean?"

Elspeth nodded. "He is a troubadour from Vereins."

Lady Rosabel frowned. "I am too heavy and clumsy to try the stairs. I would have to be carried."

Elspeth held her temper with an effort. "It can not take much to walk down. Only hold on to the rail and I will help you."

Lady Rosabel's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but since Jean chose that moment to begin tuning his lute, she hesitated. "Go and tell my lord that I wish to be carried down."

Elspeth's lips tightened. "You can walk down the stairs if only you will try," she said, keeping her voice even with an effort. She knew she should simply concede defeat, but she also knew that Lady Rosabel would not budge an inch if she ceased trying to prod her.

Lady Rosabel's face was instantly suffused with rage. "How dare you speak back to me, you Saxon slut! Do as I say or I will have you whipped for defying me!"

Elspeth felt the blood drain from her face. "You are upset. I will help you to your room," she said, trying to placate the woman.

Lady Rosabel slapped her. It didn't hurt as badly as it sounded, for the sound seemed to echo down the stairwell like a clap of thunder. It was also unexpected and caught Elspeth off guard. She wavered and fell back against the wall. Her heart pounded painfully as she glanced down at the stairs, which had never seemed nearly as steep and frightening as they did at that moment.

Instead of being satisfied, however, the eruption of physical rage seemed to have unleashed a tidal wave

of fury that Lady Rosabel had been nursing. Or, perhaps, it only enraged her further that Elspeth did not seem either cowed or particularly harmed by the blow. Whatever the case, the moment Elspeth righted herself, Lady Rosabel flew into a frenzy of rage, screaming and slapping her over and over again about the face and head.

Elspeth shielded her head with one hand, searching blindly with her other to find something to hold onto to keep her balance. The handrail was on the outside of the stairs, however. There was nothing along the inner wall where she stood, to grasp. Almost as if time had suddenly slowed, she felt her balance waver, shift, and then she saw the stairs flying up toward her face.

Strangely, she felt no pain when she landed, only the pressure of the blow, as if she were cushioned from any sensation of pain. Dimly, she knew that she would continue to fall and reached for something to catch herself, but again, it was as if time had slowed, or she had been caught in a nightmare that retarded her efforts to move. She tumbled over and over until she was dizzy and so disoriented that she could no longer tell up from down.

She landed on her back. When at last she ceased to fall she merely lay still, trying to catch her breath, trying to grasp what had happened, expecting momentarily to feel the pain she had not yet felt. Griselda leaned over her, her face contorted, tears streaming down her cheeks, but Elspeth couldn't seem to hear her at first, or understand her when she finally distinguished her voice. She realized finally that there were a sea of faces above her.

Jean's face swam into view. She saw that he was holding her hand, kneading it. "Lady! Lady Elspeth, are you hurt?"

Fear surged through her, but almost as if his voice had finally ripped away whatever it was that had protected her from the pain, it began to surge through her, building quickly until it took her breath away. Her hand tightened on his. She found her voice with an effort. "Take me to the cottage, Jean."

He was thrust roughly away and Lord Arnaud's face was above her instead. His face was chalky white and she knew only from looking at his expression that she was going to die. He glanced toward the people that had gathered around them, ordering them back before he turned to her once. "You will be more comfortable here, chere. Put your arms around my neck."

Her arms hardly seemed to belong to her. She had to command herself to lift them at all. He caught her hands, leaning low and wrapping her arms around his neck, then sliding one arm beneath her shoulders and the other beneath her knees. The pain only seemed to intensify as he lifted her. She dropped her head against his shoulder, unable to think for the pain that seemed to be growing stronger and stronger. It took an effort even to tilt her head back to speak to him and once she had done so, she found she couldn't lift it again. "Take me to the cottage," she whispered urgently. "I do not want to die among my enemies."

He stiffened, hesitating with one foot on the stairs.

"Please."

At that, he looked upward, staring at Lady Rosabel, who stood frozen in horror at the top of the stairs. Abruptly, he turned away from the stairs and strode through the great hall.

Chapter Eight

The night was chill with the crispness of fall. Despite the heat emanating from Lord Arnaud's body, Elspeth's teeth were chattering by the time they reached the tiny cottage that she had shared with Griselda. There was neither light nor heat and Lord Arnaud cursed when he had pushed the door ajar and moved inside.

"You can not stay here," he said harshly. "I will take you inside where you can be more comfortable."

"Nay! Leave me. At least my last sight will not be of their gloating faces!"

"Cease!" Lord Arnaud growled hoarsely. "You will not die."

Elspeth barely heard him. Pain had become the focus of her world. She groaned. "The child is coming."

After a moment, he settled her on the packed earth and rose to search for the makings of a fire. Elspeth curled into a ball, panting as each wave of pain washed over her, groaning mindlessly as it reached its peak and slowly began to taper off.

By the time Griselda arrived, Lord Arnaud had built a small fire in the fire pit. Feeble warmth and light and smoke filled the tiny cottage that was little more than a daub and stick hut. Griselda had fetched her medicines and their bedding, however, and set to work at once spreading first her own and then Elspeth's bedding, one atop the other. When she had finished, she began trying to help Elspeth to sit up. Lord Arnaud pushed her aside, scooped Elspeth up and settled her on the bedding.

"She thinks the child is coming," he said without glancing at Griselda, his gaze pinned on Elspeth's face.

Griselda ran a hand over Elspeth's abdomen and hissed an epithet beneath her breath. Pushing Elspeth's knees up, she flipped her gown back. "She is bleeding. The child is coming."

Lord Arnaud had been stroking Elspeth's cheek soothingly, but at that his hand stilled and his head snapped around. "It is too soon, surely?"

Griselda looked him in the eye. "Yes ... but it comes, nevertheless."

He swallowed audibly. "What do you need?"

Griselda's face crumpled. "Time."

Lord Arnaud stared at her for a long moment and finally gripped her arms, shaking her. "Calm yourself," he ground out in a fierce whisper. "So help me God, if you let her die you will long for death ere I grant it!"

"She is like my own daughter to me," Griselda said angrily. "I would give my life for her, but I could not protect her from that pig! And I can not save her from the consequences. She is strong enough to save herself ... or she is not. I am not a witch, whatever that Norman female says. Nature will take its course, and there is little that I can do beyond making her comfortable."

Lord Arnaud's face hardened, twisted with pain. Finally, he released her. "Do what you can for her." Rising abruptly, he left the tiny cottage.

When he'd gone, Griselda mopped her face and moved to the pallet. Despite the chill that lingered in the cottage, Elspeth was sweating and thrashing about as if fevered. Climbing to her feet with an effort, she found a pail and left the cottage to fetch water.

Lord Arnaud was pacing just outside. He glanced from her face to the pail and took it from her, turning and striding toward the well.

Shrugging, Griselda went back inside and settled beside the pallet, stroking Elspeth's hand and murmuring any words of encouragement that came to mind. The contractions were hard. Either she would expel the child from her body soon, or she would be too weak to do so before very long. She had no idea whether the fall had simply brought on her labor early or if Elspeth had been hurt beyond mending. She could not find any bones that appeared to be broken. Her face was bruised and had begun to swell. There were other bruises, as well, but the bruises would heal and as badly as they looked Griselda wasn't particularly worried about them.

She began praying—to the old gods, to the Christian god, to any deity that might be inclined to look

upon her with pity and grant her wish.

When Lord Arnaud returned with the water, she poured a portion in a kettle to heat and set the remainder near the pallet so that she could bathe Elspeth and try to make her more comfortable. Returning to her bundle of belongings, she extracted the things that she'd collected to help with the birthing. Lord Arnaud, she saw, had knelt beside the pallet once more. She handed him a thick strip of leather. He stared down at it without comprehension. "Place it between her teeth. It will give her something to focus on besides the pain."

He caught her jaw, forcing her teeth apart and placed the strip of leather between them. She bit down on it as her belly tightened once more. He stared at the shifting of her muscles and finally turned to Griselda again. "What are you doing?"

"Brewing herbal tea. It will make her mind strange for a bit, but it will also ease the pain."

He rose abruptly. "I will be outside if you need anything."

She stared at the door when he'd closed it behind him. "And good riddance," she muttered.

Elspeth's eyes were disoriented and glazed with pain when Griselda lifted her shoulders and held the cup of tea to her lips. "I do not want to die," she said hoarsely.

Griselda smiled, stroking her cheek. "Good. Then don't."

Lord Arnaud returned twice to place more wood on the fire and keep it burning. By the time Elspeth's child made it into the world near dawn, the cottage felt like a hot house. He did not linger long enough for Griselda to complain, however. It was as if he could neither bear to remain outside in ignorance of what was happening inside, nor remain inside and watch.

Finally, when she had Elspeth comfortable and the squalling babe nestled at her breast, she left the cottage. Lord Arnaud was seated on a block of wood near the door, idly brushing something back and forth across his palm. When he sensed her presence, he took the lock of hair and thrust it back into the pouch that hung from the leather thong around his neck. "Is she...?"

Griselda sighed and settled on a log beside him. "The bleeding has slowed. If it does not begin again ... and if she does not become fevered."

He said nothing, merely stared off into the distance, and she wondered if he had even heard her.

"I would like to stay with her and take care of her," she said hesitantly, determined that she would, with or without his permission.

"Do you believe that Rosabel intended to cause her harm?" he said after a moment.

Griselda was tempted to fling a furious 'yes' in his face, but in truth, she didn't believe the woman had had malice on her mind. She was simply too self-centered and temperamental to consider the consequences of her actions. There was no doubt in her mind that Lady Rosabel had been horrified when she saw what she had done.

Of course, that might have been because Lord Arnaud had looked up at her with murder evident in his eyes. She thought it unlikely that anyone who had seen his face could be in any doubt that it was only the shock of seeing Elspeth lying still and white on the floor that had kept him from climbing the stairs and slaying her on the spot.

His own men had looked at each other in dismay, obviously fearing they would have to try to restrain him.

If there could be said to be any good that had come of the incident, it was that there was no longer doubt in Saxon mind or Norman where Lord Arnaud's heart lay and she knew it had gone a long way toward bringing the peace once more.

She shrugged. "No. I do not," she said finally, believing it, though she thought she would have said as much regardless. The old lord was dead. The Saxon way of life had gone with those who'd fallen beneath the swords of the Normans. Elspeth had been willing to make peace with the Normans as soon as Lord Arnaud had shown them that he was a fair minded man and they would not be mistreated so long as they cooperated. She would not approve of conflict on her behalf, not when it effected the lives of so many.

He glanced at her then, studying her. Abruptly, he nodded and rose. "Stay with her."

Lord Arnaud did not visit again. Three days later, a messenger arrived from King William, commanding Lord Arnaud's presence and he gathered his army together once more and left Rasgarth.

Elspeth's son, born nearly two months before he should have been, struggled to cling to life for nearly three torturous weeks before he died. Elspeth had not wanted him, and when she saw how tiny and weak he was, she had known he could not survive. She had wanted not to care, but in the end she had not been able to stop herself from loving him. She was devastated by his death.

Little more than a week after she buried him, Lady Rosabel went into labor and she and Griselda were summoned to attend her.

Elspeth was inclined to ignore the summons. She had not really blamed Lady Rosabel for her fall, but she hated her for the death of her son. "I can not wet nurse that ... woman's child! I will not!" she said angrily. Her chin wobbled. "Not when I would be nursing my own if not for her nasty temper!"

Griselda studied her in tight lipped silence for several moments, but she was more worried than angry. Lord Arnaud had left orders that they were to attend his wife, and the captain stood outside with two men at arms to see that they did. "You can not blame the child for the mother's sins."

Elspeth dragged in a ragged breath. "I do not—but I see no reason why she can not nurse him herself."

"It is Lord Arnaud's child, Elspeth," Griselda said quietly. "You would not leave the poor babe at her mercy, knowing how she is?"

Elspeth glared at her, but the fight had gone out of her. Rising, she found her shift and dragged it over her head while Griselda gathered her herbs. Wrapping their shawls tightly about them, they headed toward the manor.

They could hear Lady Rosabel's screams the moment they entered the great hall.

They exchanged a glance. "She will be worn herself out before she even comes to the difficult part," Griselda predicted.

The birthing was a nightmare for all concerned. Yvette and Pauline were as prone to hysteria as their mistress, and each fed off the other's until they managed to exhaust themselves and had to rest before pitching yet another temperamental fit. Lady Rosabel's contractions grew stronger and stronger, but Griselda could discern no real progress. When she finally demanded that Lady Rosabel get up and walk, in an attempt to get the weight of the child itself to help matters along, Lady Rosabel called them every foul name she could lay her tongue to and her maids shoved them aside and refused to allow them near her.

Griselda was torn between the desire to do battle and the certainty that it would be a waste of time and energy. Finally, she turned and stalked from the room. Elspeth followed her.

Lord Arnaud's captain met them at the foot of the stairs. "You were summoned to attend Lord Arnaud's wife," he said grimly, blocking their path and refusing to move out of the way.

"We were ordered to leave," Elspeth threw back at him.

"No order supersedes Lord Arnaud's save the King's," the man ground out.

Elspeth and Griselda exchanged a look and turned, climbing the stairs once more. To their dismay, the captain and the two guards who had escorted them to the manor to begin with, followed them up the stairs once more.

The captain opened the door for them. "By Lord Arnaud's order, these Saxon women were sent to attend

Lady Rosabel. I am ordered to remove anyone who interferes."

Yvette and Pauline gaped at the man, exchanged frightened glances and abandoned their station near Lady Rosabel's bed to huddle in the corner. Lady Rosabel immediately began cursing him and threatening retribution once Lord Arnaud returned, but he withdrew without a word, closing the door.

Griselda studied Lady Rosabel through narrowed eyes for several moments and finally moved to the hearth. Elspeth followed her, watching her in silence for several moments. "You're brewing the tea for her?"

Griselda shrugged. "It would be better to wait if she were more reasonable. She has not made near the progress she should. But she is already growing tired and I do not think we will be able to do anything at all with her until she has settled down. The tea will soothe her as well as dull the pain."

Elspeth frowned. "She will be sleepy, though," she said tentatively. "That is not a good thing, is it?"

Griselda sighed. "There is nothing that is good about this. We will be lucky if either she or the child survives, but I do not think the chances at all good that both will."

Elspeth glanced fearfully toward the door, wondering what the men had been told to do if she and Griselda failed, but there was little point in focusing on it when it would distract them from what they needed to do.

Lady Rosabel accused them of trying to poison her when they brought the tea. Griselda lost her temper and cursed her. Fortunately, her accent was such that Lady Rosabel could scarcely understand her under ordinary conditions. Elspeth's temper was little better. Grasping the woman's cheeks, she gritted her teeth at her. "I would as soon poison you if it would not mean my own death, but I do not think you are worth throwing my life away. Are you so stupid that the idea of dying and taking your child with you seems—romantic to you? What good do you think it will do you for everyone to weep and bemoan your passing? You will not be here to enjoy it!"

Rosabel's eyes nearly bulged out at that, but it was fear, not fury that gripped her. "I do not want to die," she gasped in a frightened whisper.

"Then drink the tea. It will make you calmer and dull the pain—and then walk with us, else the child will die inside of you before much longer and then you will die also."

She complained, but she drank the tea. When she had finished it, Elspeth and Griselda helped her from the bed. Drawing an arm over their shoulders, they supported her between them and walked slowly back and forth across the room until Rosabel began to weep for them to allow her to lie down again.

They helped her into the bed again and Griselda examined her. "There," she said, patting Rosabel's hand,

"that is better. We make progress."

Rosabel looked at her vaguely. "It is coming now?"

"Soon."

Despite everything the woman had done to make her own life a misery to her, Elspeth felt a stirring of pity. She knew what pain the woman must be suffering. She also knew that Rosabel's fear was very real—and not misplaced. Enemy or not, man could not invent a means of punishment more torturous than bearing a child, and it was impossible not to pity anyone enduring it.

When they had allowed her to rest for a little while, they pulled her from the bed and walked her again.

Elspeth lost track of the time. It had not been daylight when they had been summoned, and yet when she thought to look outside, it was still dark. She was disoriented until she realized that Rosabel had been laboring a full day and into night again. The fear that thought inspired wiped her weariness from her. How long, she wondered, since Rosabel had been able even to help them when they walked her back and forth across the room instead of hanging limply between them?

"She's foundering," Griselda muttered under her breath as if her mind followed the same path. "I will give her no more tea. She's too tired now to have the energy to fight us anyway."

"How fares the babe?"

Griselda shook her head. "I can not tell. It has not moved in hours, but they rarely move much once the labor begins. Most likely the poor little mite is growing weaker as the mother does."

"What are we to do?" Elspeth asked fearfully.

Griselda rubbed her head wearily. "I know of nothing. I think, perhaps, her hips are too narrow for the child, but I can not be certain. Most likely it is only that her contractions are too weak to help him move. I warned the lazy she dog that she would not have the strength to bear the child," she finished angrily.

Elspeth drew a shuddering breath. "That is not likely to do us much good when we must explain why she and the child died."

Griselda's lips set in a tight line. "I will save Lord Arnaud's child if I have to tear it from her. I would as soon not, so long as there is a chance that she might expel it herself, for they are bound to believe I killed her on purpose."

Almost as one, they surged to their feet and moved to the bed once more. Dragging Rosabel upright,

Elspeth slapped her cheeks lightly until she roused enough to open her eyes. Instead of taking a few turns about the room, this time they walked her until they were ready to collapse with her, then they merely rested against the edge of the bed a few moments and began to walk her again.

The weight of the child, or the movement, or both, brought the contractions on stronger, and still they continued to move her around the room, dragging her much of the time, until the pains became intense enough that she found the energy to begin screaming again.

Elspeth thought her back would break in half as she struggled to help Griselda get Rosabel on the bed once more. She could only imagine what it must be like for Griselda, who was thrice her age. When Griselda checked her progress, however, she saw that it had been worth the effort. The babe had finally crowned.

Energized by the realization that the ordeal was almost over, Elspeth grasped Rosabel's face and shook her to gain her attention. "Rosabel! The babe is coming. You must push now. Can you do that?"

Rosabel nodded vaguely, gritting her teeth. Elspeth could not see that it helped much, however. "When her belly tightens again, help her to push," Griselda said, a thread of excitement in her voice now despite her weariness.

The baby began to squall angrily the moment its head was freed. Elspeth clapped a hand over her mouth, laughing and crying at the same time. "See, lady! He is as impatient as his father to take the world."

"Get it out!" Rosabel screamed in revulsion as Griselda tried to work the infant's shoulders gently free. "Get it out!"

Elspeth stared at the woman in dismay. A moment before she'd seemed nigh dead. She would not have believed Rosabel still had the strength for a bout of hysteria.

"Push!" Griselda demanded. "You must help him."

"Pull it out!"

Griselda boxed her ears. "Push!" she screamed at her.

She did as she was told, heaving even when they told her to stop. At last the infant slipped from her body and dropped heavily onto the bed. He screamed almost nonstop. Galvanized by the baby's distress, Elspeth rushed away to test the water they had heated to clean him, tipping the cold water into the heated water. By the time she'd made it back to the bed, Griselda had bound the cord and severed it and she scooped the baby up and moved to the other side of the bed to clean him up.

He looked to be almost twice the size of her own baby. She checked him carefully as she washed him off,

but she could see nothing but perfection. Even his coloring was good. Mopping the tears from her cheeks, she looked up at Lady Rosabel. "He is perfect! Your son is perfect! And so beautiful! He is the image of his father! He will be so pleased that you have given him a son!"

Yvette and Pauline, who had huddled in one corner from the time the captain had threatened them, surged forward, pushing Elspeth out of the way and cooing over the baby. A spark of anger rose in her, but she was far too weary to stoke it and it died almost as quickly as it arose. Moving around the bed, she helped Griselda clean Lady Rosabel up once she'd expelled the afterbirth.

They were both bloody from head to foot but too weary to do more than splash halfheartedly at cleaning themselves up. Elspeth was so tired, she lost consciousness almost the moment her face touched the thin pallet.

She was awakened some time later by the persistent wails of the baby and the tightening of her breasts as the milk flowed into them in response. Groggily, she sat up and looked around.

Pauline, looking the next thing to panic, was walking the baby back and forth across the floor. "Give him to me and I will feed him," Elspeth said.

Pauline sent her a resentful glare, but reluctantly handed the baby to her. Lying down once more, she settled the baby beside her, opened the neck of her shift and offered him her nipple. He snuffled around it a moment, like a little puppy searching for its dinner, and finally latched onto it, suckling greedily. She chuckled, stroking his black, spiky hair.

When she woke again, it was to screams and wails of a different sort entirely.

Lady Rosabel was dead and Yvette and Pauline were screaming murder.

Chapter Nine

The commotion woke the baby, frightening him, and he immediately began to wail. Shushing him,

Elsbeth scooped him into her arms and began rocking him as she looked around in confusion, trying to jog her exhausted mind into interpreting what was going on.

The captain of the guard, grim faced, was listening while Yvette and Pauline pelted him with their own interpretations of the events. Griselda, still looking so exhausted that her eyes were glazed and blank, merely stared at them.

"She threatened to poison her," Yvette snarled, pointing a shaking finger at Elspeth.

"She said she would cut the child from its mother. Look at the blood!" Pauline screamed, pointing at Griselda.

The captain glanced from one woman to the next, his hands on his hips. "Did you murder the lady?" he demanded, staring at Griselda.

Griselda only stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Elsbeth got to her feet with an effort. "She did all that could be done!" she cried. "You can not accuse her of murder!"

The captain looked around in disgust. "Take them all and lock them up. Lord Arnaud can sort through this when he comes."

Elsbeth gaped at him. "But ... how will I feed the baby?"

He stared at her in dismay. "We will find another wet nurse."

Elsbeth clutched the baby tightly. "Lord Arnaud said I was to be his wet nurse," she said angrily.

His eyes narrowed. "That was before he thought you would die," he said tightly.

"If he didn't tell you any differently before he left, then he meant that I was to nurse the child if I didn't die," Elspeth said hotly.

He scratched his head. "Lock the others up. We will place this one under house arrest."

"Griselda is old. Leave her with me and she can help to tend the child."

"She is accused of murder!"

"You accused me, too! Look at Lady Rosabel! You will see she died in child bed. We did all that could

be done. Griselda is nigh dead from attending her."

He glanced toward the bed in revulsion, but he didn't move so much as a step closer. After casting a desperate glance around the room, he fixed Yvette and Pauline with a hard glare. "You two—prepare the mistress for burial." He turned to look at Griselda and Elspeth. "You and you, come with me."

He escorted them to a room down the hall, thrust them inside and bolted the door from the outside.

"Send for someone to look at her. You will see we did nothing to harm her!" she yelled at the door.

Lord Arnaud did not come. A messenger arrived with the news that he was in the midst of a campaign to contain unrest near the borders and could not take leave. To Elspeth's relief, however, the captain sent his men in search of anyone with any knowledge of medicine or child birthing and dragged them in to examine Lady Rosabel. When none found anything amiss, she and Griselda were released and they returned to their cottage.

The captain was doubtful about her taking the infant, but since he hadn't been given specific instructions about it and Lord Arnaud had taken Elspeth to the cottage himself, he allowed it.

Unlike her own child, Lord Arnaud's son was strong, and he flourished. He filled the hole left in her soul from the loss of her own son. She knew she was asking for pain to allow herself to grow attached, but she could no more prevent it than she had been able to prevent herself from loving her own child.

By the time he began to look up at her and study her quizzically while he suckled, he had completely stolen her heart. She chuckled as she looked down at him. "He is wondering why I am standing over his dinner," she murmured. "And not at all pleased with me from the frown on his face."

Griselda huddled close, stroking his soft cheek. "You were right. He has the look of his father."

Elspeth sighed. "He will be walking before he has a name. You are certain Lady Rosabel did not give him one?"

Griselda's lips tightened. "She did not even hold him in her arms. No, she did not."

"Lord Arnaud's name is Guillume," Elspeth said tentatively.

Griselda studied her for several moments and finally sighed. "He is not Lars, Elspeth," she said gently.

Elspeth glanced at her sharply, feeling tears fill her eyes at her son's name. She had named him for her eldest brother. She nodded. "I know."

"You should give him up to another to nurse. Lord knows, there are a plenty now who could nurse him. Lord Arnaud will have no shortage of serfs in a few year's time."

Elspeth bent her head to study the infant. "I want to keep him."

"That's just my point, Elspeth. He is not yours. In a year or so, he will be taken away and then you will be lucky to see him at all. You will ... have to give him up. As much as it pains me, in the eyes of the Normans, you are lady no more. You are nothing to them but a common peasant."

Elspeth drew a difficult breath. "I will have him for a little while."

"You will come to love him and it will be all the more difficult to give him up."

"I love him now!" she said angrily.

"You only think you do because he has filled your empty arms. If you give him up, you will see that I am right. You will still mourn your own child, but you will not be trying to replace him with this child."

Elspeth's jaw set. "It is my choice for now. I will live with the pain later if I am given no choice. For now, he needs love as much as he needs nourishment and I can give it to him. There is no one else to give him that."

It was the dead of winter before Lord Arnaud returned at last, and everyone had ceased to expect him to return before spring. Elspeth was huddled under every scrap of fabric that she owned near the fire in the pit when she heard the sound of activity outside.

She exchanged a look of alarm with Griselda, but there was no sound of clashing steel, only the hoof beats of many horses on the packed snow, the jingle of harness on the crisp air—the sound of many male voices.

"Do you think it is Lord Arnaud?" Griselda whispered anxiously.

Elspeth bit her lip, listening. "It must be else the alarm would have been raised."

"We should take the child and go," Griselda said decisively.

"Now? It is nigh dark, and cold as a witch's tit! He is like to freeze before we get there." She looked down at the sleeping baby. "Besides, I have just gotten him to sleep."

Griselda's brows rose. "Lord Arnaud is like to be wroth with us. Especially if Yvette and Pauline are to tell their side of the story first."

Elspeth frowned. "First? Last? Will it make a difference, do you think? He will believe them ... or he will believe us. In truth, I hope that the captain will convince him before we must face him. Perhaps his temper will have cooled by morning."

Despite the argument, neither of them were easy in their mind. They listened for a while until the sounds of arrival began to quiet down. Elspeth had just begun to relax when someone began pounding upon the door of the cottage hard enough it looked likely to cave in momentarily.

Griselda leapt to her feet and raced to open it. She fell back when she saw who stood there. Elspeth was still struggling to gain her feet when Lord Arnaud stepped inside. She stared up at him, her heart pounding in her chest so frantically she thought it would suffocate her.

His face was drawn with weariness, but his dark eyes blazed almost feverishly. "I have come for my son," he said harshly, though his eyes never left her face.

His voice startled the infant awake, drawing Elspeth's attention. "Shhh, sweeting. It is all right," she said soothingly, holding him tightly and rocking him.

Lord Arnaud squatted, so that he was near eye level with her. "Mayhap you will tell me why I return to find my son and heir in this ... sty," he ground out furiously.

Elspeth blinked at him in surprise. "He has come to no harm."

He ground his teeth. "It is nigh as cold in here as it is outside."

"It wasn't until you burst through the door!" Elspeth snapped.

Grasping her arm, he hauled her to her feet unceremoniously and marched her toward the door. She glanced back at Griselda uneasily as he dragged her from the cottage.

Almost as an after thought, he turned back to Griselda. "You too!"

Her uneasiness deepened at that, but it took all of her concentration to hold onto her blankets and the baby and try to keep step with him. When she stumbled and almost fell, he scooped both her and the baby up and carried them the remainder of the way. Expecting him to set her on her feet once they were inside, he surprised her by striding across the great room and up the stairs. When they reached his room at last, he set her on her feet, opened the door, and pushed her inside.

Elspeth moved to the center of the room and turned to face him warily. The baby continued to wail, however, and finally she focused on quieting him. Moving closer to the hearth, she discarded the blankets she had wrapped around them and finally opened her shift and offered him her breast. He

latched onto instantly, balling his hands into fists. Elspeth smiled down at him, stroking his soft cheek and finally began rocking him when she saw that he had calmed enough to go back to sleep.

"What happened to your son?"

Elspeth's throat closed. She looked up to discover that he had moved to the hearth. "He died."

His gaze flickered to the child at her breast. "Yvette said you strangled him at birth."

Elspeth felt a wave of horror wash over her. Her chin quivered despite all she could do. "He was too weak to survive ... too small, but he did not die at birth. He struggled to cling to life for nigh a month. I did not kill my child. I did all that I could to save him."

"As you did Lady Rosabel?"

Elspeth stared at him steadily. "Yes."

"And yet, you despised them both."

Elspeth drew a ragged breath. "If you wish to interrogate me, at least let me put the baby down to sleep. Loud voices frighten him."

He was silent for several moments. "He is nigh four months old and I have yet to see him."

As badly as Elspeth hated disturbing the baby, she could certainly see his point. Blowing on her fingers to make sure they weren't still cold, she unwrapped the baby carefully for his inspection. Lord Arnaud knelt beside her, studying the sleeping child for several moments before his gaze moved to her breast. A blush started on the upper slopes of her breasts and traveled upward. Tugging her nipple from the infant's mouth, she pushed her breast back inside her gown and held it closed with her hand.

He frowned. After a moment he rose and strode from the room. When he returned, he was carrying the cradle that had been fashioned for the infant. After glancing around briefly, he set the cradle near the side of the bed nearest the hearth. Elspeth watched him doubtfully, but when he had settled the cradle, she got up from the stool and carefully laid the baby down, rocking it slowly until the baby ceased moving about restlessly.

When she turned, she saw that Lord Arnaud had settled on the stool beside the hearth. It dawned upon her then why he had summoned both her and Griselda. He'd become accustomed to having a hot bath awaiting him when he returned from his travels, tired and filthy from the road.

The tub was in its place and buckets lined up along the hearth, heating.

Griselda, who had come quietly into the room when Lord Arnaud had brought the cradle, was already moving toward him. Elspeth hesitated, but when he turned from his contemplation of the fire to look at her, she moved forward to help.

The ritual should have long since been something that she had become accustomed to, and yet she found that she had not. Each time that she helped him to removed his armor, and the clothing beneath, she marveled at the sight of his body, felt her heart thundering in her ears. Breathlessness seized her.

He had new wounds, mostly healed now. The sight of them made her heart seize in her chest as the realization sank into her that any one of them might have cost him his life. The thought chilled her.

Lifting her gaze, she saw he still wore the thong around his neck that held the small leather pouch. She studied it curiously, but when she reached for it, he removed it himself, dropping it to the hearth beside his stool.

"You have ... seen much fighting?" she asked hesitantly as she glanced up at him.

His expression hardened as his gaze moved over her face. "Some. Do you want to know how many Saxons I killed?"

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, realizing she did not care so long as none managed to slay him. The realization rocked her and she glanced at Griselda guiltily.

"Shall I get my herbs, my lord?"

"If they have not killed me in this time, they are not like to," he said tiredly, rising and removing his chausses. Stepping into the tub, he gripped the edges as he settled himself, as if his sore, tired muscles resisted the movement.

His hair had grown long, brushing his shoulders, far longer than the Normans were want to wear their hair, though by no means nearing the length that her kinsmen had worn their hair.

He had several day's growth of beard, as well. It was odd that she had grown so accustomed to a clean shaven face when it had seemed so naked to her at first, so—bleak when she was accustomed to bearded men.

When she had finished scrubbing his hair, she cupped his chin, tilting his head back and ran her other hand over his hair as Griselda lifted one of the buckets and poured it slowly over his head. Her gaze flickered to his face when she had rinsed the dark mass clear of suds and she saw that he was watching her.

Her heart seemed to trip over itself and race to catch its balance.

She jumped when she heard the clatter of the bucket as Griselda set it down once more.

Apparently, the noise carried to the infant, for he began to fuss. Elspeth turned immediately, but Lord Arnaud caught her arm.

"I will take the baby where it is quieter and bring him back when you have finished your bath," Griselda said hurriedly, rushing over to the cradle and scooping the baby into her arms.

"Bring him back when he needs to be fed," Lord Arnaud said as she reached the door, his gaze never moving from Elspeth's face.

Griselda hesitated, then nodded and left.

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, her heart thundering in her ears. When he released her, she moved behind him, staring at the soap and washcloth for many moments before she picked them up and began to scrub his shoulders and back. His muscles, she saw, were knotted with tension, but as she massaged the soapy cloth over him, they became more pliant, less painfully tight with tension.

When she had finished washing his back, she handed him the soap and wash cloth and moved to the hearth to add heated water to the tub as he finished bathing. He did not linger. Scrubbing the cloth over his chest and arms, he stood up, rubbing the cloth over his genitals. Mesmerized, Elspeth stared at his engorged cock for several moments before she remembered herself and bent to lift a bucket to rinse the soap. He took it from her, pouring it over his chest. She watched the gleaming cascade until he handed the bucket back to her and asked for the linen to dry himself.

Setting the bucket down as he climbed from the tub, she reached for the linen and moved around the tub, shaking it out and handing it to him, then turned to scoop the soap and wash cloth from the water while he dried off. Placing the soap on the hearth to dry, she wrung the cloth out and set it aside, then bent to collect the buckets.

"Leave them."

Nodding nervously, she set them down once more and turned to look at him. "If that's all, my lord?"

"Nay. It is not." He caught her braid as she turned to go, tugging her to a halt. Her eyes widened, as he pulled the leather thong from her hair and began to unravel the braid with his fingers. Her mouth had gone dry. She moistened her lips as he tugged her closer, releasing her hair and pulling the lacing from the front of her gown. "My lord?"

He lifted his gaze to hers as he pushed the gown from her shoulders and down her arms until it fell to her

ankles. "I have honored my vows, in deed if not in mind," he said hoarsely as he caught her arms and pulled her against him, "though they chafed me mercilessly. In my mind and my heart I have forsaken my vows a thousand times. Before God, I could do nothing else, Elspeth." He caught her face between his palms, his eyes blazing with hunger as he stared down at her. "Waking or sleeping, I could see no face but yours, hear no voice, feel no flesh. I have tasted you on my tongue a thousand times, sank my flesh into your body. I am sick for want of you ... and I will wait no more if I am damned for it."

Elspeth stared up at him speechlessly, torn between fear and the need she had tried so hard to ignore—fearing the need that raced through her veins like poison, leaving her weak and trembling, without the will to protest or resist. "My lord, you can not do this," she whispered finally. "There will be more talk."

"Let them," he said harshly. He bent his head, brushing his lips so lightly across hers that the contact made her lips tingle with sensation as her flesh awoke to his touch. His breath rushed from his chest at the light contact of his flesh to hers, as if he had been holding it. Elspeth's head swam dizzily as she tasted him on her tongue, breathed his scent into her lungs. She went perfectly still, waiting breathlessly for his touch to come again. When it did, his lips melded with hers, clung briefly, parted reluctantly.

Without conscious thought, she swayed toward him, lifting up onto her toes as she sought the heat of his mouth. He sucked her upper lip between his own, as if plucking a sweet into his mouth, running his tongue along the sensitive surface, savoring the taste and texture before he released it and plucked at her lower lip.

A hot tide washed through her, leaving weakness in its wake and Elspeth lifted her hands to his chest. Faint tremors ran through his flesh, as if he were holding himself so tensely that his muscles quivered with the effort.

After a moment, he lifted his head and gazed down at her. Elspeth opened her eyes with an effort and looked back at him. He swallowed convulsively, glanced over her head toward the bed. Bending, he scooped her into his arms and strode across the room with her. Leaning down, he lay her atop the coverlet and covered her body with his own, covered her mouth with his mouth, swallowed her gasp of surprise as he thrust his tongue past the barrier of her lips and possessed her mouth with the ravenous need he no longer stemmed, or no longer had the strength to deny.

Even as his tongue possessed her mouth, he pushed her thighs apart, wedging his hips between hers. The head of his cock nudged the dampness of her cleft, skated along it as he curled his hips upward.

Elspeth gasped into his mouth, stiffened in sudden doubt. He lifted his head, staring down at her as moved his hips until his cock head found her opening and delved it. "Open your eyes, Elspeth. Look at me," he whispered harshly. When she opened her eyes slowly, he pressed against her once more, sank deeper inside her damp, clinging passage. She gasped in discomfort as he stretched her, as she felt her muscles resisting his intrusion. He withdrew slightly, pressed forward again, sinking a little deeper than

before as her body lubricated the way for him. She swallowed, wanting to close her eyes, unable to break the hold his gaze held on her, feeling her heart thundering against her ear drums as she stared up at his taut face and felt his flesh slowly possessing hers. She gasped again, reaching up to close her fingers around his taut upper arms as he withdrew and then plunged deeper still. "My lord."

"Guillume," he said, his teeth clenched, sweat beading his brow, his body trembling with the effort to hold himself in check as he slowly claimed her, allowed her body to adjust to him.

"Guillume," she said, her voice threaded with need.

He groaned, thrusting sharply and sinking into her to the root of his cock. She gasped, more that half fearing pain when she felt her body stretching to accept him. Instead, a wave of pleasure moved along her senses. Her passage clenched around him, clutching his engorged flesh.

Shaking, he withdrew until only the head of his cock remained inside of her, levering his upper body upwards and bending to mold his mouth to hers. He kissed her deeply, hungry to taste and possess her all at once, thrusting his tongue in and out of her mouth as he had thrust his cock into her nether mouth. She moaned as heated pleasure jolted through her system in a dizzying wave, moving restlessly beneath him, sliding a caressing hand along he straining muscles of his back and finally digging her fingers into his buttock.

He tore his mouth from hers as she arched upward toward him, dropping his head forward on his shoulders, gasping harshly. Abruptly, he lowered himself, burying his head against the crook of her neck and shoulder as he slipped a hand beneath her hips and drove deeply, withdrew and swiftly drove into her again, his movements jerky and awkward with blinding need as he lost the battle to hold himself in check.

Elspeth's gasps of pleasure became sharper, skated the edge of hoarse cries as the pleasure burgeoned, built, grew stronger and stronger inside of her with each stroke of his cock along the trembling walls of her sex, until finally it reached the point where it could expand no more. It shattered then, blinding her with its glory. Light and blackness seemed to explode inside her mind. Liquid heat and intense rapture flooded her body. The walls of her sex convulsed around his shaft.

His cock jerked against the kneading walls of her sex, convulsed, spilling fiery warmth inside of her. He shuddered, groaned, and finally went limp atop her, gasping hoarsely as he fought to catch his breath.

When Elspeth stirred beneath him, he rolled off of her with obvious effort, dragged the coverlet down and then pulled her against him, covering them.

Chapter Ten

Elspeth was too stunned by what she had felt, and too drained of all energy even to think to protest when he dragged her beneath the covers with him and pulled her so that she lay draped half across him. Almost idly, he stroked her hair, smoothing it, working the braid free all the way to her scalp until her hair cascaded over her nakedness.

Lifting a lock from her shoulder, he held it to his face and breathed deeply. "I have imagined you clothed in nothing but this golden veil," he murmured, "since the day I saw you combing it."

He pushed her to her back and rolled over, holding himself away from her as he smoothed the hair over her breasts and flat belly. Carefully arranging the fall of hair so that only her distended nipple poked through, he leaned down and flicked the sensitive tip with his tongue, plucked at it with his lips.

Elspeth swallowed. "I should go."

He lifted his head. His expression grew taut. "You will not."

Brushing her hair from her body, he leaned close, breathing deeply as he nuzzled the turn of her neck. "The only thing in this world more heady than your fragrance in my nostrils is the scent of me on you and the essence of our coupling."

Pushing her thighs apart with his knee, he moved over her, settling the weight of his lower body against the bed. He caught her hands in his then, lacing his fingers through hers and pressing her hands against the mattress on either side of her head. For several moments, he did nothing more than gaze down at her, his eyelids heavy with desire, his eyes gleaming with the heat of it. And yet the possessiveness of his gaze, the look upon his face was enough itself to resurrect the passion that had burned itself to embers only minutes before.

His gaze moved down her face to her lips, still swollen from his kisses, making her mouth go dry with the craving to feel his lips once more, to taste him on her tongue. It lingered until her lips slowly parted with the increasing labor of her breath, then wandered downward to her breasts that trembled and shuddered with each panting breath and the tips that had puckered and grown engorged with need. Slowly, he lowered his head, sucking one taut peak into his mouth as if it were a ripe berry, swirling his tongue around it, catching it between his tongue and the roof of his mouth and sucking it as if to savor

the taste of her flesh. She gasped, digging her head into the mattress and arching upward as his mouth stimulated a surge of fiery ardor that stabbed through her to her groin, making her passage quake with need for his possession.

Her reaction to his caress spurred him to lavish his devotion upon her body, and he titillated her senses with his mouth and tongue, teasing first one nipple and then other, caressing the heaving flesh between with his lips, his tongue and the gentle adhesion of his mouth. Her breath caught in her throat on a gasp as he shifted downward, stroking her trembling belly with the damp heat of his tongue, sucking tiny bits of flesh in to his mouth.

He lifted his head at her gasp, surged slowly upward so that his engorged cock nudged her cleft, parting the flesh that sheltered her genitals, gathering moisture as it sought her passage and claimed it. Holding himself above her, he curled his hips slowly upward, impaling her body with exquisite, torturous, languor that tore his name from her throat on a needful groan. With the same tortuous leisure, he withdrew and then slowly pressed deeply inside of her again, and then again. With each unhurried stroke, he stoked the embers to heat, the heat to flame, and the flame to a raging inferno of need so that she was moving feverishly beneath him, panting for the release he would not give her, moaning his name like a mantra.

When she opened her eyes at last to look up at him, she saw his expression was as tortured as her own. He let out a harsh breath, lowering himself slowly until her breasts were pressed tightly against his chest. Opening his mouth over hers, he stroked her mouth with his tongue, inhaling her whimpers of need as he began to thrust into her with swifter, more powerful strokes that quickly brought her body to a crescendo so potent, and so prolonged her heart seemed almost to stop in her chest and the blackness of nothingness consumed her senses for many moments.

Slowly, awareness filtered into her mind once more. More slowly still, the tremors of absolute absence of strength subsided and the tiny jolts of pleasure mellowed into the warmth of sated flesh. She drifted on the sea of wondrous release for a time, enjoying the stroke of his palms over her body and finally knew nothing at all.

When the first thin wails of hunger penetrated her stupor, Elspeth sat up with a fearful start, looking around for the infant.

"Come!" Lord Arnaud growled, his voice husky from sleep.

The door opened and Griselda glanced around. Seeing Elspeth in the great bed, she moved quickly toward her, handed her the baby and left once more. Still too disoriented to think beyond the need to sleep, Elspeth cradled the baby in her arms and offered him her breast, drowsing as he suckled hungrily.

Lord Arnaud shifted, propping his head on his arm and leaning against her back as he watched the infant. Elspeth's eyes widened as she felt his cock grow hard against her ass, nudging the cleft. Reaching between them, he guided his erection between her legs, thrusting along her cleft lazily as he reached

around her and stroked her breast. The infant's eyes opened. He frowned, his waving fist connecting with Lord Arnaud's hand.

A smile curled Elspeth's lips. "He doesn't like being interrupted."

"Neither do I," Lord Arnaud growled, smiling against her shoulder as he nipped the flesh there.

She glanced toward him sleepily. "Surely your hunger was appeased?"

His gaze moved to her face and he lifted his hand, stroking her cheek. "I fear there is no cure for this hunger, only temporary respite, for the more I feed, the more I want."

Pressing his lips briefly to her shoulder, he rolled away and climbed from the bed.

She watched him through half closed eyes as he strode to the hearth, admiring the lean lines of his body, and the bunching and flexing of his muscles as he squatted on the hearth to stoke the fire, feeding the flames from the pile of wood beside the fireplace as the fire began to leap higher.

Checking the pails on the hearth, he moved one closer to the heat and rose, striding to the chest at the foot of the bed and opening it. She waited, curious. When he closed it at last, he'd donned chausses. In his hands were two shiny bright pieces of metal, one squared, the other more knife like. Setting the two objects on the mantel above the hearth, he knelt beside the bucket, splashed water over his face and then soaped it. When he straightened once more, he grasped the blade and, staring at his reflection in the shiny square of metal, began to scrape the blade across his face.

She watched in fascination as the dark stubble slowly vanished, revealing the pale skin beneath. When he'd finished, he wiped the blade and began sawing off the hair that brushed his shoulders a lock at the time, shortening it to the base of his skull and tossing the hair he'd cut toward the fire. The pungent smell of burning hair stung her nose.

She rolled over with the baby, giving him her other breast to suckle while she allowed her thoughts to drift with the uncertainties that assailed her as the dregs of sleep dissipated. If she were light of wit, or knew Lord Arnaud to be, she might be inclined to view what had passed between them as no more than it appeared to be—the slaking of his needs upon the handiest female.

She did not think she could trust the pretty words that he had given her. She had not forgotten that he had told her long ago that he would claim her save for the vows he had already spoken. She had seen hunger in his eyes since, but she was not fool enough to believe that was only for her, whatever he said now. He had slaked his lust upon his wife right well, and he had felt no tenderness for her, only the respect her position as his wife guaranteed her. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, and unlike the marriage that would have been arranged for her had her father lived, it had been strictly an exchange of power and property, a business arrangement. She had seen with her own eyes that neither of them had much liking

for the other, let alone so much as a spark of love.

Regardless, he had taken his vows seriously, upheld them even when Lady Rosabel had not truly honored her own vows. Strictly speaking, those vows were terminated by death, but it was customary to honor a period of mourning, even when the surviving spouse felt none, even among Normans, and she knew Lord Arnaud well enough, she believed, to know that only something powerfully compelling would make him break with accepted custom.

If he had used discretion, perhaps she could have accepted that he had been without a woman so many months that his needs overrode his good sense, but she knew well enough that there would not be a soul within the boundaries of the keep who did not know he had taken her into his bed.

She had been accused of murdering his wife. The captain had dismissed the accusation once he had been assured her death was natural, but to chose the woman who'd been accused was bound to produce a rumor of conspiracy—that they had hatched the plot together.

He would realize that as surely as she did, so why? Why had he not simply chosen another woman for his needs?

Realizing the baby had drifted to sleep, she scooped him up and sat up, climbing from the bed to settle him in his cradle. He stirred when she lay him down and she stroked him soothingly, laying her cheek against the side of the cradle and studying his small face lovingly.

When she rose, she saw that Lord Arnaud, now fully dressed, had seated himself in his chair near the hearth, his long legs sprawled before him, his gaze upon her speculative. Shivering, she retrieved her clothing from the floor where he'd dropped it the night before and pulled it on.

"I was told another tale last eve when I came that ... disturbed me."

Elsbeth looked up at him, feeling something unpleasant knot in her stomach.

He seemed to be waiting for her to comment. When she didn't, he continued. "The tale is that you switched the infants. That mine was slain and yours substituted as my heir."

Elsbeth felt the color leave her face. It was not fear, however, so much as it was a wounding of her soul, that he could believe her capable of such a thing. "And you believe this?" she managed to ask, although her lips felt as numb and unresponsive as the remainder of her body.

His gaze slid to the fire. "It would be a clever revenge upon your enemies—to place your own son in a position to inherit what would have been his grandfather's had your enemies not come."

She looked down at her hands. "I am not capable of killing a child," she whispered.

"You are capable of killing your enemies."

Her head jerked up. For a moment, she thought he was accusing her of having killed Rosabel—perhaps he was, but she thought it more likely that he referred to her attempt to skewer Renard with his own blade. Or perhaps he was saying that she had attempted it twice and succeeded at least once? "Even if you could believe me capable of such a ... cold and calculating thing as you accuse me of, you must know it was not possible. Lars ... my son died more than a week before Lady Rosabel's time came upon her. And Griselda and I were brought here under guard. They stood outside throughout the birthing. How could I have brought mine to make the exchange? How could I have disposed of Lady Rosabel's child?"

He sat up. "By hiding your own beneath your shawl...and by allowing mine to die within his mother's womb and be buried with her."

Elsbeth stared at him in horror, realizing that someone had thought of an answer to counter every truth she uttered and make it into a lie—Lord Arnaud? Or had Yvette and Pauline spent these many months figuring every angle and realized that she could not prove anything that she claimed? "The captain summoned two different mid-wives to look at her to assure himself that we had not caused her death."

"They looked to see signs of poisoning—or the use of a weapon. They were not asked if she had given birth. And they would not have been able to tell if you had simply done nothing at all for her and allowed her to die laboring for naught."

Elsbeth rubbed her aching head. She had been accused of so many foul things, many of them conflicting, that she could not seem even to think how to defend herself.

"I love your son. You must see that I do."

"That is the part that disturbs me."

Elsbeth blinked at him in confusion. "I do not understand."

"You claimed you hated Renard, and yet you also claim you loved his son. And if you did, then you must have hated Rosabel for her part in his death, but you claim to love the son of the woman who killed your child."

She glanced at the sleeping infant and then back at Lord Arnaud. "I still hate Renard. I will always hate Renard with every fiber of my being for what he did to me. But the baby was mine. I carried him inside of me. I nurtured him with my body. I felt him grow and when he was born, it was I who struggled to bring him into this world, suffered pain you can not even begin to imagine only to give him breath. I wanted to hate him because of Renard, but when I held him to my breast and saw that only my nearness gave him peace and comfort...." She pressed her hand over her mouth as a sob tore its way up her throat,

fighting to regain her calm. "I could not help but love him. Even knowing he was too small and weak to live, I could not stop it."

He scrubbed his hand over his face and stood up abruptly. Turning away from her, he stared down at the fire. "Which only means that you might have loved him enough to allow my son to die so that you could secure the future of your own."

"My son died. It is true I blamed her for it and hated her for it, but I did not hate the baby for what she had done. When you have opened your heart to love, you can not close it again. I could not help loving him even if I had tried, and I did not try."

"Even though he was Rosabel's?"

"Because he is yours."

His head snapped around. He stared at her hard, his gaze penetrating. Abruptly, he pushed away from the fireplace and strode toward the door. When it had closed, the sobs she had been trying so hard to hold inside escaped her. She needed to release the pain. She felt that she couldn't hold it inside, but the infant woke almost at once, his lip primping at the sounds of her sorrow. Taking him from the cradle, she sat on the edge of the bed to rock him, trying to calm herself so that she could calm him.

She'd just managed to regain control when the door opened once more. Glancing toward it, she saw that Griselda had come in and she began to cry all over again. The baby burst into tears the moment she did.

Griselda frowned. "What ails you, child? You are distressing the baby!"

Elsbeth sniffed, mopped the tears from her cheeks with her hand and lifted the baby to her shoulder. "I am accused of the most foul things imaginable ... and ... and he believes them!"

Griselda sat beside her and patted her back consolingly. "That is why there is a guard at the door, I suppose."

Elsbeth stared at her wide eyed and burst into tears again. Griselda took the baby from her and began walking him. "I can not calm the baby if you persist in squalling like an infant yourself," she said testily after several moments. "You have not wept and carried on like this since we learned of your father's and brothers' deaths! That, at least was understandable."

Elsbeth calmed herself with an effort and finally got up and tore a piece from the bath linen to use as a handkerchief. "I do not understand these Normans," she said finally, sniffing.

Griselda gave her a hard look. "You mean you do not understand Lord Arnaud."

Elspeth swallowed convulsively, fighting the urge to burst into fresh tears. "No. I do not understand him at all. How can ... how could a man feel lust for a woman when they believe that they have done something truly horrible?"

Griselda frowned, obviously having difficulty following her. "I think you just have no understanding of men at all, child. From what I have seen myself, as often as not, they simply lust and must take their ease. It has nothing to do with any woman in particular. They could ease themselves upon a goat. What does he believe you have done?"

"I am not entirely sure," Elspeth said, sniffing again. "I do not think that he is. Yvette and Pauline have designed so many lies—but I am evil whatever tale they invent. I have strangled my child at birth—or killed Lord Arnaud's child and put mine in his place. I have poisoned Lady Rosabel or simply stood by and watched her die in agony without lifting a finger to help. I am cold and calculating and a murderess besides."

Griselda snorted. "The evil twins. I can not conceive how they could fool anyone at all. They are a plague to peace ... and of the same fabric as their mistress. That one was most certainly cold and calculating—truth to tell, the Normans are a cold lot."

Elspeth bit her lip. "They say the same of us."

She snorted. "They have the cold, emotionless eyes of serpents."

"And they say ours are like ice."

Griselda studied her a moment. "If he will only open his eyes, he will see that there is no darkness in you. In time, perhaps he will."

Elspeth sighed wearily. "I can not believe that time will make a difference. Of a certainty, so long as Yvette and Pauline are here, something will be stirring. Disharmony is the air that they breathe."

Chapter Eleven

Elspeth was surprised when she was told that she was expected to take her meals in the great hall. She had thought that she would not be allowed to leave the room, just as she and Griselda had been confined before when Yvette and Pauline had accused them. She would almost have preferred to remain in her room, however, than to be escorted under guard. She did not particularly care what the Normans thought of her, but it shamed her to be treated as a common criminal in front of people who had known her her whole life.

She supposed it was no more shameful than being treated as a whore, but it was certainly on a par with it when she had been looked upon before as someone of worth.

She was escorted to the head table, which confused her almost as much as everything else that had happened. It was a place of honor. It was the place that Lady Rosabel should have occupied except that she never had.

It confused everyone else as much as it did her.

The man who served her called her Lady Elspeth. She glanced up at him in surprise since no one had spoken of her position since the Normans had first come. She saw, however, that, despite his subservient manner he had not ‘slipped’. He had used it very deliberately. To show his loyalty to her and her family?

When she looked around, she saw that he had spoken loud enough that it had drawn the attention of everyone at the table. Ignoring them, she did her best to focus on her meal, trying to get the food into her mouth without dropping it on the infant in her lap. She had fashioned a sling to carry him around, but the unaccustomed noise of the great hall had woken him. To her surprise and relief, he had not immediately begun to wail. Instead, he opened his eyes wide and stared at everything that passed within his vision. He was a strong child, but young still, and although he could hold his head up well, when he tired, he had the tendency to simply drop it forward on his chest. She had to watch him to keep him from slamming his head against the table.

When Lord Arnaud reached down to take him from her lap, she almost choked on her food. It took every ounce of restraint to keep from leaping to her feet and snatching him back, but she saw after a few nervous moments that Lord Arnaud seemed to be handling him well enough and returned at least half her attention to her food.

He was dully—dutifully—admired by everyone at the table, who made all the appropriate compliments as Lord Arnaud held him up for inspection. When he’d finished showing the baby around, he cleared the space in front of him and sat the child on the table.

He frowned thoughtfully at the child for several moments, while the baby stared back at him as if mesmerized, his eyes wide, his mouth gaping. Finally, holding the baby with one hand, he lifted the other

and rubbed at a dark spot beside the baby's mouth.

"It will not come off. It is a mark that he was born with," she said quietly.

Lord Arnaud glanced at her and then picked the baby up and studied him more closely. The baby lifted his arms and reached for his face, pulling at his nose. Lord Arnaud's lips curled in a smile. "I will call him Etienne—for my grandfather."

When she'd finished her meal, she rose. Lord Arnaud studied her for a moment and finally gave her the baby. Relief surged through her. Cradling him to her chest, she made her way back upstairs to the master's chamber. She found Griselda there, busily tidying up. The tub had been emptied and removed and the floor cleaned.

"We are to stay here, then?"

Griselda turned to look at her in surprise. "I know no more than you. Not as much, I suppose. Did Lord Arnaud say nothing?"

Elspeth bit her lip and shook her head. "Beyond accusing me, no."

"What of the guard?"

Elspeth frowned. "Except for telling me that I was to go down to the great hall, he only follows me about like a shadow. He has not said that I can not go where ever I please." She thought it over. "But then, I have only been downstairs to the hall and back again. Perhaps we are allowed to move about the manor?"

Griselda shrugged and went back to her task. After a few moments, Elspeth settled the baby in his cradle and looked around for something to entertain him. The reflecting shield was shiny, but she was not at all certain that Lord Arnaud would appreciate her touching it and, in any case, it had sharp corners if the baby should happen to get hold of it. Finally, she merely propped him up so that he could watch her and Griselda and helped Griselda finish setting the room to rights. It did not take long with the two of them working together.

When they'd finished, Elspeth fed the baby and put him down in his cradle to nap and she and Griselda went to sit on the pallets they had arranged in the far corner of Lord Arnaud's chamber.

Neither of them were inclined to talk. Elspeth thought that Griselda was very likely as worried as she was about what would come of the latest accusation, but she tried her best not to think about it, particularly since there was nothing that she could do. She had to suppose that Yvette and Pauline—she knew it had to have been them who had accused her—had considered the possibility more carefully after the last time. They had made certain that this time Elspeth had no defense but her word—which did not account for much since she was Saxon.

After a little bit, Griselda sighed impatiently. "I had never thought that I would complain that I had nothing to do, but time on your hands allows far too much time to think. I think that I will see if I can fetch Lady Rosabel's basket of needlework. I have not done any needlework in nigh a year—not since---"

"You should not do that. It belongs to Lady Rosabel."

Griselda gave her a look. "She is not likely to come back and finish the work herself. In any case, no one asked us before they took all that was ours. I can not see harm in working on these pieces, but if you would rather, I will find something that needs mending."

Elsbeth felt more comfortable about the mending. There was plenty in the household in need of it. Plenty more that was beyond mending. They started by sorting the linens, separating everything out that was no longer good for anything but cleaning rags and stacking the linens they might rescue in another pile.

Mid-afternoon, a servant from below stairs was shown into the room and asked Elsbeth if she would tell them what they should prepare for the evening meal. The Normans had begun to complain about the monotony of the meals the cook came up with. Elsbeth was not at all certain that Lord Arnaud would appreciate her interference in the running of his household, but she set her mending aside and went down to see what she could do to help.

She ended up spending much of the remainder of the afternoon overseeing the preparations. By the time Griselda arrived with Etienne demanding his dinner at the top of his lungs, she thought she had things fairly well organized, however, and went upstairs with him to feed him and settle him for the night.

She'd scarcely settled him when the guard informed her that she was expected to join the company downstairs. She looked down at herself in dismay, for she had been working in the gown she had on all day and had collected much of her work on herself. It would not have been so bad if she were not expected to sit at the high table. She would have looked no worse than any of the other servants, but she would still have hated to sit down to dinner in her filth.

Unfortunately, the only other gown she possessed was the one that Renard had torn from her and it looked worse, if possible, than the one she was wearing. Shrugging, she finally decided that it was at least clean and asked the guard if he would wait and let her tidy herself. He did not look inclined to do so, but finally he went out again and Elsbeth quickly bathed off and changed, tidying her hair as best she could.

Lord Arnaud looked at her disapprovingly for arriving late, but said nothing as she took her seat and a servant came to set a trencher in front of her. Elsbeth looked down at the food with approval, saw that it looked far more appetizing than the noon meal, and turned to smile at the servant.

"The food is better," Lord Arnaud commented.

Elsbeth glanced at him. It wasn't exactly high praise, but at least he seemed to have noticed. "Our ... the old cook was ... died. His apprentice is not as good, but then he is not accustomed to cooking for so many. I am sure he will do better."

Lord Arnaud merely looked at her. She wasn't certain if it was because she had stumbled over the explanation about the loss of the old cook, and he thought she was pointing out that it was the Normans' fault if there was a problem—which it was—Or if he meant to emphasize that the new cook had had more than ample time to grow accustomed to cooking for so many. His next comment seemed to support the last.

"Lord Odolf's household was not this large?"

She flushed. He must know very well that it could not have been, for the place was bursting at the seams with the overflow and scarcely half of the people who had once occupied Rasgarth had survived the invasion. "No."

He gave her a look, as if waiting for her to continue. She was reluctant, but then she could see no real reason not to tell him whatever he wished to know. It could certainly make no difference to them now. "Besides my father and brothers, perhaps twice the serfs you see now—perhaps half or three quarters the number of men you have."

"You had no sisters?"

"Thankfully, no."

His brows rose at that.

"I was the last born. I would not have wanted for my sister"

He was silent for some time. "Your mother?"

"I did not know her. She died when I was born. Griselda raised me."

"Your father did not wed again? He must have still been a young man."

Elsbeth studied the food on her trencher, toying with it idly. "My father loved my mother with all his heart. He had nothing left when she died ... could not bear the thought of seeing another woman in her place. He had his laymen. He seemed content enough with that."

"Truthfully, I am surprised that he did not hate me for the loss of my mother—perhaps he did at first, but he seemed to look upon me as his consolation for losing her. He always said that I was just like my mother."

He frowned. "Is that why he did not settle you in marriage? Because he could not bear to part with you?"

It seemed a judgment of her father and she frowned. "Perhaps, but I do not believe he would have stood in my way if I had been willing to accept any of the suitors who came."

"He allowed you to chose?" He sounded both surprised and disapproving, which irritated her, particularly since she could not see that his own arranged marriage had brought him either contentment or happiness. Wealth and power possibly, although she did not know the particulars of the arrangement—but of what good were either if one could not find contentment at least? Her father had always said that, no matter what people said their goal in life was, the end goal was to find happiness if possible, and contentment if that could not be had. It did not matter what it was that they thought would bring them happiness—for everyone the object differed—in the end it still boiled down to the search for happiness. She had always considered that that was why he had sought nothing more. Her mother had given him happiness, and he knew he could not find that again. When she died, he had settled for the contentment of rearing his children and making certain that all who depended upon him were comfortable.

She sent him a look. "From among those he considered suitable, yes. He was not an ambitious man. He was content with what he had and felt no need to profit from my marriage—beyond my happiness."

His eyes narrowed. He knew very well that she had intended to insult him in return. She didn't care. He had no right to sit in judgment on her father. He might have been rough, and loud, and unrefined to the Norman way of thinking, but he had been a good hearted man, loving, generous and just ... and honorable. If he had ignored the summons to war, he might well have lived to see his grandchildren.

She felt like weeping at the thought that conjured of her own son, but resolutely pushed it far back in her mind.

The truth was, he had died defending their homeland. If he had not gone, the only difference would have been that he would have died defending his home, for the Normans would have come regardless.

"May I leave, my lord?"

He nodded without glancing at her and she rose and quit the great room. The baby had not stirred, she saw when she sent Griselda to find her own meal and checked on him, and she sat for a time mending until her eyes grew too tired in the dim light. Finally, she set the work aside and curled up on her pallet.

Sleep was slow to come.

She was tired, but tense also, wondering what was to become of them. She was surprised, after his accusations, that Lord Arnaud had not removed Etienne from her care. Perhaps because he truly believed the baby was hers? But if that was true, why had he not sent both of them away? Or had her placed in a cell until he could decide her fate?

She was still awake when Lord Arnaud came up to retire. He stood over her for a time, studying her and she fought to regulate her breathing, feigning sleep. Finally, he moved away and she heard him undressing for bed.

She relaxed. She had just begun to drift into the edges of sleep, when she realized that he had moved toward her once more instead of dousing the lights and climbing into bed.

"Get up."

She opened her eyes to look up at him, but she did not argue. She could tell nothing from his tone of voice, except that he did not sound at all pleased. When she had stood up, he reached for the ties of her gown and removed it and she thought her heart would beat its way from her chest—partly from dread—partly, she was ashamed to admit even to herself, from anticipation.

"Get in bed—my bed."

Nodding jerkily, Elspeth climbed into his bed and lay down, watching him nervously as he banked the fire and doused the candle that he had brought with him to light his way.

She stiffened as he settled beside her in the bed and dragged her toward him, but he only settled her back against his belly, dropped an arm around her waist and composed himself for sleep. Disconcerted, she lay stiffly for a while, listening to his breathing and finally drifted off herself, still wondering why he would insist that she lay with him if he was not of a mind to use her body.

When a week passed in much the same way, she ceased to be relieved that he made no attempt to couple with her, becoming more deeply confused instead.

After the things he had accused her of, she had not felt that she would be able to enjoy his attentions, or even to pretend that she did. When he made no attempt to couple with her, she decided he must feel the same, and she had been relieved.

It made no sense that she could see, however, that he insisted upon sleeping with her in his bed. He scarcely needed to do so to keep watch upon her. He generally sent the guard away at night, but he could as easily have ordered him to stay.

There were other changes that confused her even more. Little by little, she found herself managing the household as she had done before. At first, it was only a question by a servant here and there, but when

she took care of the situation and Lord Arnaud did not seem to object, the servants fell into their old habits and looked to her to for guidance and instructions.

Yvette and Pauline were packed up and sent back to Normandy.

She could not say that she was sorry to see them go. She was vastly relieved, for they had created unrest within the household from the moment they had arrived. She was not completely easy in her mind, however. As impossible as it seemed that they could continue to create problems from across the sea, she could not completely convince herself that they could not—particularly when the accusations they had launched against her had never actually been addressed.

Lord Arnaud began to examine the manor from top to bottom, studying it. It was winter and there was little that could be done outside. He took men and hunted regularly for fresh game, but aside from that everyone was pretty much confined within the manor and, naturally enough, tempers shortened.

He set men to work cleaning up the space beneath the rafters and laying down more solid flooring. When they had finished, the servants were told that they would thereafter be sleeping in the attic space.

After studying the second floor for some time, he set the men to work creating a series of rooms linking with his own. A door was knocked from the wall between the master chamber and the next and that room transformed into a sitting room. That room was connected by way of another door to a second bed chamber.

The dust and sawing and hammering went on from daylight to dark for nearly two weeks, making life difficult for her since Etienne did not rest well with all the noise. Eventually, however, the hammering stopped and she was informed that the sitting room was hers. The bed chamber opposite the master chamber was now the nursery, and that would be occupied by Griselda and the baby.

She was expected to share his room and his bed.

She did not argue. She had never seen the sense of arguing only for the sake of doing so when she knew very well that it would change nothing. She was in no position to argue in any case.

If she had been Lord Arnaud's wife, she might have thought the effort would be worth the risk of angering him. If she had even been his layman, she might have thought her wishes would hold some sway.

He had not touched her since he had accused her and she had withdrawn from him, however. She wasn't altogether certain why he had not. It would not have occurred to her to refuse him, however hurt and angry she was. If he wanted to take her, he did not need her approval or her cooperation. He could simply beat her into submission and take what he wanted as Renard had.

When he did neither, she began to feel ill used. She could tell herself that she was glad, and that she did not want him to couple with her until she ran out of breath and she still would not be able to convince herself when she lay awake half the night listening to his breathing—feeling it against her neck—and trying to ignore the stirrings of arousal that went through her every time he tucked her against him—and then promptly fell asleep.

When the hurt and anger had finally dulled, she had been content for a little while to wait until he initiated sex with her to spurn him so that he would know she had not forgiven him. When he did not give her the opportunity to, she was angry all over again. That, too, had passed, however, when the cravings of her own body had begun to campaign against her. She began then to consider if there was some way that she might entice him and still save face.

Nothing came to mind. She ceased to leave her hair braided at night, because he had said he liked to see it loose about her shoulders. She had tried undressing for him, but instead of watching her, he always seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts, staring into the fire as if he would find wisdom there. When she helped him to bathe, she made it a point to ‘accidentally’ stroke him with her hands instead of just the wash cloth, but she could not see that that had any more effect upon him.

Finally, after nigh two weeks of uncertainty, she found that she simply could not endure it any longer. When he had tucked her against his belly and settled to sleep, she lay stiffly for a time, battling her pride and then throwing it to the wind. "If you do not want me, I do not know why you will not send me away," she murmured.

He stiffened. After a moment, he rose slightly, caught her shoulder and turned her onto her back so that he could look down at her face.

Chapter Twelve

Elsbeth met his penetrating gaze with a mixture of hope and doubt. Sighing gustily, as if he had been holding his breath, he lowered his head and opened his mouth over hers, forcing her lips to part with the pressure of his mouth and the insistence of his tongue, and then plundering the sensitive inner surfaces with fervent, rapacious heat. His ardor scorched her. Liquid fire engulfed her. Pleasure shivered along

every nerve ending like the vibrations along the strings of a lute. She lifted her hands, skated them along his chest and then locked them around his shoulders, threading her fingers through his hair and cupping his base of his skull as she kissed him back with her own voracious need.

A grunt that was part surprise, part appreciation erupted from his chest and his longing escalated from hunger to frantic need. His lack of restraint unleashed a tidal wave of urgency inside of her. Running a hand along her body to her hips, he skated it over her thigh, settled in against her belly, parting the lips of her nether mouth with his fingers and delving the damp cleft. She gasped as his fingers rubbed along her clit, arching up to meet his touch, rubbing herself against him.

A quaking moved through him at her reaction. When he felt how wet she was for him he lost the little restraint that he had placed upon himself. Thrusting her thighs apart with a shaking hand, he shifted to cover her with his body, probing her cleft with the head of his cock, curling his hips and pressing against her.

She tore her lips from his to cry out as the head of his cock bumped along her cleft and found purchase, sinking into her wet passage. Gritting his teeth, he scooped an arm beneath her shoulders, and one beneath her hips, pumping his hips in short, hard thrusts until he had claimed her fully. With scarcely a pause to catch his breath, he withdrew and thrust again and again, almost savagely, groaning as if he was in agony, setting a cadence that tore little cries of ecstasy from Elspeth as her body abruptly convulsed around his cock and seemed to explode with pleasure.

He jerked, tensed all over and ground his pubic bone against hers as his own body convulsed, ejecting his hot seed deeply inside of her.

When his body had ceased to spasm with release, he simply lay limply on top of her, as if he could not even summon the strength to hold his weight from her, let alone roll off. Elspeth found it welcome, despite the discomfort. It offered her the illusion, at least, of belonging, of being more than merely a vessel for his lust.

When he had caught his breath, he pushed himself off of her with an effort and dragged her across him, stroking her hair along her back.

As completely sated as she was, she was a little miffed, as well, realizing the moment that her brain had begun to function once more that he had out waited her, forcing her into the position of supplicant. "It was not very chivalrous of you to make me ask," she muttered.

His hand stilled. "If I had asked would you have said yes?"

"I would have said nay, and then I would have felt better."

"I feared as much," he said after a moment. There was a hint of suppressed laughter in his voice.

She lifted her head to look at him and saw that his eyes were gleaming with amusement. She narrowed her eyes at him, but she could not resist the teasing gleam in his eyes. Lifting her hand, she stroked his cheek. "You must know very well that I would never tell you nay."

He swallowed with an effort, the amusement fading from his eyes as a gleam of another kind lit them. His lips twisted wryly. Rising, he pushed her back onto the pillows and lowered his lips to her throat. "I dared not chance it. I could not have borne it," he murmured, walking kisses across her throat and along the side of her neck to her ear. "My manhood would have shriveled."

Elspeth uttered a choked laugh, pressing her palms against his chest to push him away. After a moment, he lifted slightly to look down at her. Uttering a sigh of pained acceptance, he rolled away, staring up at the ceiling. Elspeth followed him, catching his face between her palms and brushing her lips lightly across his. His lips parted, a deep sigh of satisfaction hissing from his lips. She plucked at them with her own lips as they parted, sucked gently on his lower lip and finally stroked her tongue across the smooth surface, feeling heat rise inside of her as she delved her tongue between his parted lips and tasted him, explored the heat of his mouth and the texture of his tongue with hers.

He held himself perfectly still, as if savoring her caresses, or perhaps curious as to how far she was willing to go. A heady excitement burgeoned inside of her, the thought making her feel reckless with abandon. Shifting closer, she moved her lips down his throat to his chest, sculpting her palms over the hard musculature of his male breasts; enjoying the texture of his skin and the roughness of the dark hair that covered his chest; the heat that wafted his scent to her; the racing of his heart; the little catch in his breath each time her lips found another sweet patch of flesh to taste.

He jerked all over when her hand caressed his cock and then her fingers closed around it tightly. Lifting her head, she watched his face as she stroked him, saw moisture bead on his brows as he strained to hold himself still. He dug his head into the pillow beneath his head, his face contorted as if he was in agony, his breath ragged.

She moved over him. Placing a knee on either side of his hips, she pushed the head of his cock into her cleft and slowly traced it from her clit to the mouth of her passage. He surged upwards on a harsh breath, catching her hips in his hands, his fingers clenching, digging into her as she lowered herself slightly, pushing his distended flesh inside of her. He settled again, his head tipped up as he watched her slowly working his cock into her passage.

She closed her eyes when she had impaled herself fully, pausing to savor the feel of him stretching her, filling her. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that his gaze was on her face. Slowly she lifted up onto her knees again, and then pressed downward. He watched the melding of their bodies, his eyes glazed, fevered.

Finally, when she could not bear the delight of slow torture any longer, she leaned forward, bracing her

palms on either side of his head as she sought a tempo of movement that began building the delightful tremors to harder, more forceful shocks of bliss. He slid his hands upward to her waist, rocking his hips and thrusting upward to match each downward stroke of her passage over his flesh. Lifting his head, he captured the peak of one swaying breast, suckling her in a way that sent darts of pleasure into her belly to join the delight the stroke of his cock created. She cried out, feeling her body leap toward the precipice she sought. When he released the nipple he held and sucked the other into his mouth, it forced her over the edge.

Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he sat up, tipped her onto her back and thrust into her until his own culmination erupted through him, tearing an agonized groan from his throat. He went still as it died away, shuddering from the force of his release, his face buried against her throat as he gasped hoarsely, trying to catch his breath and calm the pounding of his heart.

When he had recovered somewhat, he lifted his head and stroked her hair from her cheeks, kissing her with such tenderness Elspeth's heart tightened painfully. She opened her eyes to look up at him as he pulled away, surprising a look on his face that she found difficult to fathom.

It disappeared in the next moment as he sat up, pulling her with him and then shifting until they were comfortably situated beneath the covers. She fell asleep, still curled across his chest, the comforting sound of his heart in her ear.

He had dressed and gone by the time Griselda woke her to feed the baby, and she was vaguely disappointed, but she felt too gloriously alive to allow it to mar her happiness for long.

She found herself singing as she moved about the manor performing her tasks, smiling at nothing in particular. It was too much to hope it would go unnoticed, but she found tentative smiles met hers, and everyone seemed to go a little more briskly about their work, their steps lighter.

It was nearing dusk when Lord Arnaud returned with the hunting party he had taken out. He was cold, fatigued, and irritated that they had only succeeded in bringing down a couple of bucks. She refused to allow his mood to darken hers, however, drawing him to the room where she had a hot bath and mulled wine waiting for him.

He seemed wary, almost distrustful of her light mood, but his own humor brightened considerably as she bathed the cold and fatigue from him. The almost festive mood in the great hall when they went down for the evening meal seemed to perplex him, but by the time he'd eaten he seemed to have accepted that the change was something to be welcomed.

Despite the stores he had brought with him, it was late winter and supplies had begun to run low, and as they did, everyone's spirits had sunk in direct proportion to the diminishing stores. Both Saxon and Norman temperaments had grown short. Whatever had lifted their spirits, however short lived it might be, it was sorely needed.

He did not linger in the hall long when they had finished eating, instead following Elspeth upstairs within only a few minutes. He found her waiting in his bed, wearing nothing but her golden hair, a faint smile of welcome on her lips.

It was all the encouragement he needed to join her and make love to her until they both fell into sated slumber.

The dwindling supplies made it imperative to hunt daily, but Guillume found the lure of spending at least part of his days with Elspeth and Etienne in the sitting room irresistible. If they managed to bring down enough meat to last for several days, he would spend at least one sprawled in his chair before the hearth, watching Etienne's efforts to hold himself upright, or inch along the floor, with amusement.

Occasionally, he would take his lute from the wall and play for Elspeth. She never asked. She didn't want to make him feel as if he was welcome only if he came to entertain her, but she loved to listen to him.

Mostly, he would merely watch her, sometimes with amusement when she was trying to put Etienne through his paces to show him what he'd learned, sometimes with the gleam of desire in his eyes, but more often with an expression of doubt, or wariness, or even anxiety.

Elspeth wasn't certain what brought on that expression, but she was afraid it was because he had never completely reconciled in his mind the accusations Pauline and Yvette had made.

She hoped that Griselda was right and that, in time, he would come to realize that she could never have done what she was accused of.

It was the only dark cloud on her horizon—the ever present fear that his desire for her would burn itself out and he would turn away from her because he had never learned to trust her enough to truly care for her.

When she returned to the chamber they shared one day to discover that her trunk had joined his at the foot of the massive bed, and that most all of the things that had once been hers before the Normans came had been restored to her, she had been speechless with joy. She had believed then that he must care for her if he could realize how important it was to her to have her own belongings—the gowns that her father had had made for her, the combs that had been her mother's, and the fine lawn sleeping gowns that had been made for her—not that he allowed her to wear them, for he far preferred that she sleep naked beside him.

Even the weather seemed to favor her, for the snow ceased to fall and the earth began to thaw with an early spring, bringing relief to everyone that the ground would soon be thawed enough to begin to till the soil. Her people, still strongly tied to the old superstitions, saw it as a good omen, a sign that they were

avored because the Norman lord had restored their mistress to her rightful place.

Her happiness lasted until the arrival of a messenger from Normandy.

Pauline and Yvette had fled directly back to the home of their former mistress and had convinced Rosabel's father that she had met with foul play. He had used it as an excuse to gather an army and had lain siege to Guillume's holdings in Normandy.

Leaving orders for his army to begin making immediate preparations to move, he left to request permission from King William to take his army to Normandy and to make arrangements for the crossing.

Guillume was so enraged, his temper so volatile from the moment he learned of it, that it brought all of Elspeth's fears to the forefront.

She could not help but think his withdrawal meant that he blamed her as the root of all of his troubles.

Chapter Thirteen

When the news came that riders approached, Elspeth was in her sitting room. Lord Arnaud had left to speak with King William more than a fortnight before and she moved anxiously to a window and pulled the covering back to peer out into the approaching evening. She saw them as they crested the rise, moving quickly. Her heart skipped a beat when she recognized Guillume's standard.

She turned to look at Griselda. "It is Lord Arnaud!"

"Go. I will tend the babe."

Checking her gown and her hair quickly, she flew from the room and down the stairs, catching a serf as she reached the great room and ordering a bath prepared for him and then dashing to the kitchen to make certain food was made ready for him and the men who had traveled with him.

She was breathless by the time she reached the stoop at the front of the manor. Lord Arnaud and his men were just coming through the gate and it took an effort of will to stop herself from rushing across the keep to greet him. As if he sensed her presence, he glanced toward the manor at that moment and some of the weariness seemed to leave his face.

She knew it was indecorous, and that he might not welcome such a display from his layman, but the moment he dismounted and handed his horse over to a stable hand, she rushed from the stoop to meet him. He staggered back a step as he caught her full against his chest, his arms going around her instinctively. Briefly, his arms tightened and then he set her away from him.

His expression was grim when she looked up at him, but she did not sense that he was displeased with her.

"You are leaving?"

He laced her arm through his and turned toward the manor. "At dawn."

Elspeth swallowed against the knot of fear and misery in her throat. "I know you are weary unto death from your travel. I have told them to ready a bath for you, but you must eat first. And then it will be ready and you can take your ease and rest."

When she had made all ready, she sent Griselda away so that she could have Guillume all to herself. He lifted his brows when he came in and saw that only Elspeth would attend him, but said nothing, moving wearily to the stool and removing his footwear.

He sighed in relief when he had settled into the tub of heated water and Elspeth massaged his head and back, removing the tension and fatigue as she removed the dirt from the road.

When she had handed him the soap and cloth to finish his bath, she moved to the side of the tub so that he could watch as she removed her own clothing. He went still, the bath forgotten, his eyes glazing over with desire.

She had intended only to await him in the bed, but he grasped her before she could move away, pulling her into the tub with him. She gasped as the water washed over her and then chuckled huskily at his impatience.

Squeezing the water from her braid, she coiled it atop her head, using the ends of the leather thong that bound it to tie it in place.

Lord Arnaud watched her with interest, but when she reached for the cloth to help him finish his bath, he held it away. Dropping the soap, he ran the lathered cloth over her breasts, massaging them. Elspeth closed her eyes, feeling the drugging warmth passion flooding through her as his hands kneaded her

breasts and then moved over her body, exploring every inch of her flesh slowly, as if he were determined to savor every moment.

When he had left no part of her in wanting for his touch, arousing heated currents with each caress of his hand, he dragged her toward him, nibbling almost teasingly at her lips before he opened his mouth over hers and slipped his tongue along the exquisitely sensitive inner surfaces of her mouth. Surprise jolted through her and a tide of liquid heat fast behind that as she tasted him, felt the faintly rough texture of his tongue along her own.

When he withdrew, disappointment filled her. She studied him chidingly through half closed eyes, but finally took the cloth from him and began to bathe him as he had bathed her, swiping the sudsy cloth over the hard muscles of his chest and working downward until she felt the brush of his cock along her arm. Holding his gaze, and wrapped her hand around it. He flinched, gritted his teeth on a hiss of a breath. She tightened her fingers and slowly moved her hand downward along his shaft. His eyelids slid closed as she continued massaging the throbbing, distended flesh.

After a moment, he caught her wrist, studying her for several pounding heartbeats. Abruptly, he surged upward, taking her with him, and stepped from the tub. The chill air of the room instantly wrapped cool fingers around them. Elspeth shivered, reaching for the drying cloths as Lord Arnaud grabbed them up and wrapped it around them, cocoon like, pulling her tightly against him and leaning down to kiss her as he rubbed the moisture from her back.

She uttered a faint protest as he dropped the linen and caught her up in his arms, carrying her to the bed, but the heat of his body and the desire he created within her quickly chased the chill from her damp skin. With his mouth and tongue, he bathed her in heat, teasing the sensitive tips of her breasts until she was writhing in fevered need beneath him, then moving downward over her belly, drawing sharp gasps. She lifted her head to look at him when he pushed her thighs apart and stared down at her genitals, his gaze intense as he reached down to brush the golden thatch of hair aside and parted the petals of flesh.

She inhaled sharply at his touch, closing her eyes, jerked as she felt his mouth nibbling a trail of heat along her inner thigh. She was gasping for air by the time he'd woven a similar trail along her other thigh, clutching at him, urging him to enter her.

Instead, he lowered his head to the nest of curls, stroking her cleft with his tongue. Her hips came up off the bed at the excruciating sensation. She grasped his hair frantically, certain she could not endure much of that particular torment. Ignoring her, he opened his mouth over her mound and explored her cleft with his tongue in a leisurely way that had her near to weeping with unbearable pleasure.

She fought to escape that torturous heat, but he grasped her wrists, pinning her to the bed, and continued to stroke her with his tongue, massaging her clit, and sucking it into his mouth to taunt her until release burst upon her shatteringly. She screamed at the force of it, bucking against him mindlessly as he held her down and continued to tease her, drawing her culmination out until blackness began to envelope her

and she went limp beneath him.

She was only vaguely aware of him as he moved up beside her, studying her as she struggled with her frantically pounding heart. She'd scarcely caught her breath when he began to move over her languidly, kissing and stroking her until the explosive release she'd only just experienced gathered in upon itself once more, binding her in a blinding haze of desire once more. "Guillume," she whispered hoarsely. "Do not torture me so. I do not think I can bear it."

She found she could, for he would not give her peace, carrying her to the point where she thought she would shatter with release and then withholding it, over and over until she thought she would lose her mind.

She was sobbing for surcease before he moved between her thighs and thrust into her. Her body, so long denied of the need for release, clenched around his cock convulsively, impeding his possession. She grasped his buttocks, arching her hips to meet his frustrating sorties of conquest, too desperate to feel him deeply inside of her for patience.

He gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to yield to her demand as he allowed her body to accept him, pushing, withdrawing slightly and pressing forward again until the natural lubricants of their bodies allowed full possession, grinding his pubic bone against hers when at last he'd sunk into her to the root of his cock. He held himself still for several moments when he'd claimed her completely, striving to hold to his control, to hold his release at bay.

Elspeth fought him, striving to grasp the release so long denied her, moving against him until, with a harsh cry, he withdrew and set a savage cadence that brought them both to explosive release within moments.

The release sapped the strength from her so completely it shattered her thoughts. She was barely conscious as he dragged her against him, cuddling her close and stroking her soothingly. One fear emerged even from the darkness that was sucking her down into oblivion. "Come back to me, my love," she whispered even as the darkness swept her away.

He was gone when she woke. She stared around the room, empty of his belongings, and felt only a terrible loss that he had gone without even saying goodbye. Slipping from the bed, she dragged a gown and robe from her trunk and rushed to the door. The guard blocked her path. She stared up at him in dismay. "I only want to wish him a safe journey."

"Lord Arnaud is gone—this past hour and more."

Devastated, she closed the door once more and climbed back into the bed, struggling to hold her tears at bay. Finally, gathering the pillow to her that still retained his scent, she wept until exhaustion claimed her once more.

She was awakened by Etienne's familiar wail for sustenance. Sitting up groggily, she ignored Griselda's disapproving look and took the baby, giving him her breast to quiet him.

"I hope you do not mean to mimic the ways of the lazy Norman she-dog and begin to lie abed half the day," she said testily.

Elspeth regarded her dully. "He left while I slept. He did not even say good bye. He did not give me the chance to wish him a safe journey."

Griselda snorted. "Mayhap he had no wish to carry the image with him of you blubbering and wailing like an infant."

Elspeth flushed at the rebuke, knowing it was warranted. She could not fathom why she possessed so little self-control where Guillume was concerned. "Do you think I have given him a distaste for me with my lack of control?" she asked fearfully.

Griselda studied Elspeth a moment. "He seemed pleased enough with that lack last eve."

Elspeth felt the color suffuse her cheeks so hotly it seemed to pulse for several moments. "You heard?" she asked, horrified.

"If there was anyone within the manor who did not, he must be sadly deaf!" Griselda retorted. "I was nigh convinced he was killing you."

Elspeth covered her face with her hand. "I will die of mortification."

"Unfortunately, that has killed no one yet—perhaps fortunately, for many would have fallen long ago. You will recover. The thing is, I can not see how you could feel that he did not bid you farewell most fondly—and more than half the night, I might add. If he does not fall from his horse from exhaustion of having bid you farewell, he is a mighty man indeed!"

Elspeth bit her lip, but the amusement quickly died as her anxiety rose one more. "You think that was his way of saying farewell?"

Griselda rolled her eyes. "I do not think pretty speech comes easily to that one—he has been bred a man of action."

Elspeth swallowed against the urge to weep all over again. "I fear he will not come back to me. Lady Rosabel was wont to say this is a crude, dirty place. Perhaps the lure of their more refined way of life will tempt him to stay once he has finished what he set out to do. Beyond his son, there is nothing to hold him here, and he could send for Etienne."

"I am not going to pander to your determination to grieve. He will come to no harm, and he will return to you. He will not be able to stop himself. You are a blind fool if you can not see that he worships you and that he always has. Battered as you were, I saw the moment he first looked at you that our white rose of Saxony had made a conquest of our dread Norman invader. From that moment onward, he has scarcely taken his eyes from you when you were near. Did it not seem odd to you that he has always known precisely where you were at any moment of any day?"

Hope reared itself, but Elspeth found it difficult to trust it. "He desires me. He told me that long ago."

Griselda pursed her lips in disgust. "He loves you. Why else would he carry a lock of your hair close to his heart these many months?"

Elspeth looked at her sharply. "How do you know that?"

She shrugged. "I thought it curious when he began to wear it, but I had not guessed why until the night when you fell and we thought you would die. The look on his face then was such that no one who saw it could doubt how he felt. Later, when the babe had finally come and I went outside the cottage to catch my breath, I found him waiting to know if you would live. I do not think he realizes that I saw that it was a lock of your hair, for he put it away at once."

Elspeth said nothing, torn between doubt, hope and the fear that she would lose what she had so desperately wanted. "I did not tell him. He left and I did not get the chance to tell him," she said anxiously.

"Be still!" Griselda said sharply. "You will tell him when he returns. Mind the child and mind your chores and you will see he will return before you have had much time to miss him."

Griselda was wrong, however. Elspeth found she had more than enough time to miss him. He had left little more than a skeleton army to guard Rasgarth, taking the bulk of his men with him. Lord Arnaud's absence was enough to make the place seem empty, but the few who remained emphasized it with every gathering.

Weeks passed in a sluggish flow of time. The man he had left in charge emptied the manor of able souls and set them to work tilling the fields to prepare them for planting. The work on the walls, which had stopped when winter set in, was resumed, though little progress was made with so few to work on it.

Elspeth spent the latter half of the month watching hopefully for Lord Arnaud's return, and the second month in despair that Griselda had been wrong and he would not return at all—and fear, that something had happened to him, though she dared not even allow those thoughts to take form in her mind for fear it would bring him bad luck.

He did not send word, and even though Elspeth knew that she was no more than his layman and could not expect to be kept informed of her lord's movements, it hurt and angered her.

By the beginning of the third month after his departure, the child she carried made its presence known as her belly swelled beyond concealing it. Griselda, as Elspeth had guessed, was not pleased. "T'would have been better if you had healed longer from the last time," she muttered irritably, "but I suppose as determined as Lord Arnaud was to plow your fields and as anxious as you were to allow it that it is only to be expected."

Elspeth blushed, but glared at her nurse. "It has been nigh a year. I am strong again."

"T'would have been better if those fields had lain fallow a year before reseeding," Griselda said tartly. "That was no normal birthing. If it had been, I would have no anxiety at all. But there is little point in bemoaning it now. You must take care. That is all." She thought it over. "Small wonder you have been so weak and weepy when you are breeding again. It is enough to make any woman so."

Elspeth supposed that was say Griselda had leavened her disapproval over her wayward emotions, but it made her feel no better that Griselda was concerned about her condition.

She did not have a great deal of time to worry herself over it, however, for by mid month, riders were seen approaching from the East. Certain it must be Lord Arnaud at long last, Elspeth strained to peer into the distance until the standard they carried could be seen. The colors, she thought, were not just the same, but she found she could not dismiss the hope that had swelled inside of her and dashed down to greet the riders when they reached the gates.

Her heart seemed to stop in her chest when the lead rider stopped before the stoop and removed his helm.

Renard leered at her. "You have missed me, I see."

Feeling weak and sick, it took Elspeth several moments even to command herself to move. Finally, without a word, she whirled and fled inside. She did not stop until she had reached the sitting room.

Griselda took one look at her face and turned chalk white herself. "What is it?" she gasped fearfully.

"Renard--Renard has come," Elspeth gasped, dropping into a chair before she fainted.

Chapter Fourteen

"They have not let him in!" Griselda gasped in alarm.

"He is Lord Arnaud's brother! They would not think to turn him away."

"Why is he here!" Griselda demanded, obviously as fearful as Elspeth was.

Elspeth dropped her face into her hands. "You think they would tell me, even if I had asked? I am only Lord Arnaud's layman! They tell me nothing of his business! He has been gone nigh three months already and I have not been told anything—not when he is expected to return, not if he is ill or wounded—nothing!"

"Hush! There have been no messengers. There is nothing more that anyone else knows." She frowned. "You are guarded. I am certain they will not allow Renard to harm you," she said a little doubtfully.

Elspeth was no more certain, but when the first of her fear had passed, she found her backbone and refused to allow the man to so terrorize her as to make her hide herself away in the lord's chambers. She found, in any case, that it was not a feat that was possible, for he lingered, showing no interest in moving on, watching her like a stalking cat each time she crossed within his sight.

As nervous as she was, it was impossible to maintain her guard at its peak for very long. When nigh a week passed and Renard made no attempt to approach her, she ceased jumping at shadows.

She'd been out to check the progress of the laundry. When she left the shed to go back into the manor, Renard was leaning against the wall next to the door. She stopped abruptly, her head whipping around toward the guard who always followed her. To her relief, he was only a few steps behind her.

She glanced toward Renard again, still reluctant to pass him, but finally decided that it would be better to have it over with than to continue trying to avoid him. Bracing herself, she continued toward the house, uncomfortably aware that he had surveyed her thoroughly as she approached him.

"I see my brother wasted no time in claiming you as his layman once his wife had been planted."

His gaze was on the telltale swell of her belly, but she saw no reason to respond to the statement.

"I am curious about my son."

Elspeth's eyes narrowed. She stopped. "You have no son."

"So I was told—but then I was also told my son resides in the master's suite. You are more clever and devious than I had credited."

Elspeth felt anger color her cheeks. As strongly as the desire was to insult him, however, she would not insult the memory of her son only to cut his father. "My son died. Etienne is Lord Arnaud's son."

A smile curled his lips. "So everyone seems to accept—now. But then you are still under guard, are you not? I detect a lack of trust on my brother's part."

He had placed that arrow well. Elspeth had done her best not to think about the implications, had, in truth, become so accustomed to her 'shadow' that she did not give him much thought, but she knew the order would have been rescinded if Lord Arnaud truly believed her. Her eyes narrowed. "I detect far too much interest in business that does not concern you," she said through clenched teeth.

He shrugged, grinning at her. "I was merely pointing out that you rejected a far better offer. But perhaps you regret it now?"

Elspeth's lips tightened. "If you believe that for one moment, then you most certainly can not believe that I am at all clever."

With that, she moved to brush past him. He caught her arm, detaining her, and Elspeth glanced once more toward the guard. His face had hardened and he had surged forward, but she could see that there was doubt there, also. "Release her. None are allowed to touch Lord Arnaud's woman."

Renard reddened, but he released her and stepped back.

Shaken, Elspeth decided flight was the better part of valor. She had thought, after the last time that Lord Arnaud had threatened him, Renard would not dare to actually accost her. That he had done so in front of her guard was proof that he considered nothing but Lord Arnaud's presence a hindrance. She decided that she would not risk another encounter. She would stay in Lord Arnaud's apartments until he returned, or Renard left again.

* * * *

Elspeth was not certain what awakened her except that it was some noise that she was not accustomed to hearing. She lay still for several moments, listening.

The scrape of a tread on the floor near the bed sent a wave of cold over her, freezing her to the spot. Even as she struggled to form logical thought, to sit up and confront who ever it was to see if the threat was

real, a rough hand covered her face.

"If you make a sound I will slit your throat and any who come to your summons."

Elspeth swallowed, her mind still too chaotic with fear to do much more than supply the face that went with the voice—Renard. He would almost certainly have entered through the chamber door—which meant the guard was dead, or in league with him.

Griselda was the only other person near enough to come quickly.

She nodded and was dragged upright. "Where is the boy?"

"Why?"

He slapped her. "In the next room?"

"You can not take him. Lord Arnaud would have every man seeking you."

"He is mine. I will not leave him," he growled.

Elspeth swallowed her terror, trying to jog her mind into productive thought. "Do .. do you not want your son to inherit what you can not?" she asked shakily. "If you leave him, he will be lord here one day—and of the property in Normandy, as well," she added when he seemed to be considering what she'd said.

"So it is true?"

Elspeth nodded shakily. "I could not bear to think he would have nothing. Rosabel's—Lord Arnaud's child died. I thought it could not hurt—and he is entitled to this, at least. It was my father's. Leave him."

"It is tempting, but Guillume suspects already. He is likely to dispose of the boy when he realizes he is mine."

"He will think Etienne must be his if I would abandon him here. And ... and you will have Lord Arnaud's child to hold against him."

He snorted. "His bastard is not likely to hold much interest for him."

Elspeth said nothing. She could think of nothing else that might persuade him to leave Etienne. Perhaps, though, if he took her she could call out a warning to Griselda? Perhaps she could buy her the time to flee to safety with the baby?

"Perhaps it is best this way, after all. We will have to ride hard tonight to elude Guillume's men. It would be more difficult if we have a squalling infant along."

Elsbeth nodded shakily. "Yes! That is true."

For a moment, she thought her anxiety to leave the baby had had the opposite effect. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision and dragged her from the bed. Pulling a length of cloth from his belt, he stuffed the rag into her mouth and bound it around her head. "In case you get last minute doubts and decide to warn the guard yourself," he said, chuckling as Elspeth tried to break his hold. He bound her wrists before her, then dragged her toward the door.

The guard lay on the floor just outside. She peered at him as Renard dragged her past, but she couldn't tell if he was still breathing.

Despair filled her as they reached the great hall. All was quiet and she knew Renard and his men had disposed of those on watch. Her only chance now was to try to awaken someone as they passed through the hall.

Apparently, he had thought of that, as well, for they'd no sooner stepped from the stairs than he struck her along the jaw and she descended into a blackness more profound that she had ever known.

* * * *

"Lord Arnaud! We are pleased to see that you have returned from settling your little domestic problem hale and hearty!"

Lord Arnaud bowed. "Aye, sire. In truth, there was more boredom than action involved."

"You settled the problem to your satisfaction, however?"

"Aye."

King William studied him for several moments. "As it happens, I am glad that you came straight away to report your success to me. I have had you much on my mind."

Lord Arnaud studied him uneasily. "I am flattered, sire."

King William's eyes narrowed, but after a moment he smiled thinly. "Your countenance is like stone, Arnaud. You do not seem flattered to me."

Lord Arnaud flushed. "I was only surprised, sire, that you would give me any thought at all when such

weighty matters besiege you."

King William nodded. "Tis truth." He sighed gustily. "But we are well in hand, now. What put me in mind of you, however, was that I have an heiress that I would like to see settled. Matilda reminded me that your wife had died some time ago in child bed, and that we had settled only a rather insignificant estate upon you for your services. She is no filly, but still of good child bearing age and she is a proven breeder."

A cold sweat broke on Lord Arnaud's brow as he stared at his king, trying to sort through his chaotic thoughts and find the words that would save him. "I am deeply honored, sire."

William's eyes narrowed. "But?"

Despite his best efforts, Guillume found himself reddening once more. "I had come to petition you for permission to wed Lady Elspeth, daughter of Odolf."

William frowned, but it was more thoughtful now than angry. "I am not familiar with this young lady or her sire."

"Lord Odolf was the Saxon who held Rasgarth before me."

William's brows rose almost to his hair line. He studied Lord Arnaud in silence for some moments. "A clever political move, certainly, but you have nothing to gain beyond settling the strain of our new relations. I have already given you Rasgarth."

He studied Lord Arnaud's reception to that remark for several moments, and finally smiled. "Ah. I see. I must suppose that the Lady Elspeth, herself, is the jewel you mean to acquire. You must bring her to court once you have wed. I am anxious to see this rose of old Saxony."

Profound relief swept through Guillume. He bowed once more and rose. "Thank you, sire."

Leaving the bulk of his army behind to follow more slowly, Guillume set out with a dozen knights to reach Rasgarth by the most direct route, far more anxious to reach Rasgarth, and Elspeth, than he would ever have admitted, or thought possible.

He knew, even before he reached the gates that something was not as it should be. There was far more activity in the keep than there should have been.

He gaze went immediately toward the manor, but Elspeth did not meet him as he and his men rode through the gates. Instead, Griselda stumbled through the doors, Etienne in her arms, wailing almost as loudly as she was.

Stark terror stabbed at him as he scrambled from his horse and strode toward her.

"She is gone! She is gone! Stolen while we slept!"

"Who?" Guillume asked sharply, dreading the answer.

"Elspeth!"

Feeling coldness sweep over him, Lord Arnaud thrust her aside, crossed the great room, and strode quickly up the stairs. Griselda followed him, still sobbing. "She is not there, I tell you!"

Slamming the door to his chamber back, he looked around the room for signs of a struggle and saw none. He turned to Griselda, grabbing her arm. "Cease that racket and tell me what has happened!"

Griselda sniffed, bouncing the baby and trying to quiet him. "I brought Etienne in for his feeding this morn and she was gone, the guard at the door slain, the men at watch, also. It was Renard. I knew the moment he came that he had come for mischief."

"Renard was here?" he asked grimly.

Griselda nodded. "He came nigh two weeks ago and would not leave. Elspeth was afraid even to leave the chamber."

Guillume strode into the middle of the room. "And you heard nothing? She did not call out for help?"

Griselda gaped at him. "The guard was dead. She would not have called out for me to defend her from Renard. She would have been afraid for me."

The rage that suffused his face frightened her.

"I see the turn of your mind, my lord, but she did not go willingly."

He looked at her, his eyes cold now. "Did she not? When there is no sign of a struggle? When she did not even cry out? The faithless--"

Griselda glared at him when he stopped. He had no need to finish for her to know what was going through his mind. "Your jealousy will spell her death."

He flushed. "Take care, woman. I have tolerated much from you for Elspeth's sake, but do not think that you can speak to me in that manner with impunity."

Her face crumpled. "Slay me then if it will make you feel one whit better! I will die of a broken heart anyway if you harm Elspeth in your jealous rage. She hated Renard. She has always hated him and feared him and yet you could think that she would run away with him when she carries your child!"

He paled. "She is with child?"

"Aye. Four months gone."

His lips tightened. "For all I know it is his child."

"The jealousy has turned your mind! You know it is yours! She loves you. I had thought that I understood why. Now I am not so sure that I do. It will break her spirit if she sees that you still have no faith in her, no trust, when she has given her heart to you, withheld nothing.

"She needs you. Renard will kill her—whether intentional or not. You saw how he beat her. She is not recovered enough from the last time to survive if he treats her as he did before!"

The madness left his eyes abruptly, replaced by stark fear. "How long has she been gone?"

Griselda thought about it. "She was gone when I came with the babe just before dawn. The bed was still warm. I thought, until I saw the guard, that she had only gone to relieve herself."

Lord Arnaud nodded and strode toward the door. "That means he has nigh a six hour lead."

"Lord Arnaud!"

He stopped and turned to look at her.

"You will see that you are wrong about her, but know this. If you break her heart, you will never have it back again as it was. Nothing that has been mended is ever the same again. I beg you, do not do anything that you will both regret."

His face hardened. "Find someone to feed the child. I will bring her back."

Chapter Fifteen

They had fled as if the hounds of hell pursued them. Renard had said it was only to throw off the possibility that they were being hunted, but she did not think that he believed it. Whatever had possessed him to steal her away, whatever lies he had told himself, they had not sustained him long. He fled like a man who knew he was being chased and knew just as certainly that he would die if he were caught.

He had not removed her gag even when she had come to and they had stopped long enough to tie her to her own horse—yet another indication that someone followed, for he obviously did not want his horse burdened by two riders.

That hope sustained her throughout much of the day. Obviously, he and his men had slain the men on watch if they were so certain they would be pursued. It seemed doubtful that a hunting party would be sent only for her.

She didn't particularly care why, however, only that they would come.

As darkness began to move in upon them, and the aches and pains of having ridden all day swarmed over her, refusing to be ignored, her spirits began to sink with the sun.

Since she'd come to, they had been heading north, leaving a trail that would be easy enough to follow. Once the sun set, he could turn and strike off in another direction entirely and lose whoever was tracking them. By the time it was light enough for them to see again, Renard could be well beyond their reach.

The one bright spot, so far, was that Renard was too intent upon escaping to enjoy his prize for the moment. They had only stopped briefly a couple of times since they had left.

Which, she wondered, would be worse? If Renard decided to continue riding through the night to throw off pursuit? Or if he was unwise enough to decide to stop for the night, in which case he would almost certainly rape her?

In her heart, she knew that Guillaume would suspect that she had gone willingly. She had not fought for fear that Griselda would be hurt, or that he would change his mind about the baby, but the fact that she'd left no sign of her unwillingness would be damning. Especially since Lord Arnaud had never really trusted her. Particularly since she had not even tried to convince him that she would prefer death to Renard.

It was all very well—then—to allow her pride to overrule her head, to convince herself that he was being unreasonable and unjust and should know better than to think such things of her, but look where that

pride had gotten her!

She was his enemy by birth, and by combat. She had no right to expect to be trusted. It had been stupid and childish to think otherwise. Trust was not a thing easily earned in such circumstances—but it had to be earned. If Lord Arnaud had been the sort to blindly yield trust, he would not have gotten far in life.

She spent part of her time praying to any deity that might be willing to listen that Guillume would return and come after her, and the other part praying that she would be rescued by his men and he need never know.

When it grew too dark to see, they stopped to wait for the rising moon. Elspeth dropped wearily to the ground, too tired even to be afraid. Her ass was numb from the pounding saddle. Her hands were numb from the binding. Her wrists were raw and bleeding.

She stiffened when Renard made his way over to her and sat down beside her. When he pulled the gag away and offered her a skin of water, however, she grabbed for it eagerly, gulping as much as she could before he tore it from her grasp. "I think we have lost them."

Elspeth said nothing for several moments. "You said they would not follow. That I was only Lord Arnaud's whore and they would not stir themselves to come after me."

He snorted. "They would not. On the other hand, we did kill three of Guillume's men. They were bound to be righteously indignant over that. But not so angry, I think, that they would continue the hunt when it has grown too dark to track us. Most likely they will have returned by now."

"My lord!" one of his men called out in a harsh whisper.

Renard's head snapped up. "What is it?"

"Come! See what you make of this!"

Renard got up and moved away from her. "Merde!" he exclaimed after several moments.

"Torches. I count twelve—no sixteen. Do you think it is men from Rasgarth?"

"I think we will not stay and see. They are twice our number," Renard said grimly.

Elspeth struggled to her feet as he turned toward her, straining to see the torches, hope spreading through her and bringing renewed strength to her aching limbs. She caught no more than a glimpse as Renard shoved her toward the horse and helped her to mount, but her heart did a nose dive. The torches seemed far away and she feared that, once they were on the move again, that distance would grow.

As they set out once more, she began trying to think what, if anything, she could do to help her rescuers find her. She began trying to tear a strip of cloth from her gown. It was white. With the torches, they would almost certainly see it if they were following the tracks. She found, however, that the fabric resisted her efforts. She could not find a weak point to start, and had nothing to use but her fingers.

Finally, she pushed herself back along the saddle far enough to rub her gag against the pommel. The racing horse made it more difficult than she'd expected. In the first attempt, she banged her mouth so hard she felt her lip split. It brought tears to her eyes. Blinking them away, she turned her head slightly and tried raking her cheek along the bouncing pommel. She bruised her cheek, but she felt the gag slip slightly and renewed her efforts. After some time of struggling with it, she managed to free her mouth and sat up once more to look behind her.

The torches seemed closer, but she wasn't certain if it was pure hopefulness on her part or not. She decided to chance it before any of the men noticed she had managed to remove the gag. Drawing in a deep breath, she screamed as loudly as she could. "Here! I'm here! Help--"

She didn't get the last out. One of Renard's men jerked his horse closer and struck her on the side of her head with his fist. Her terror shielded her from the pain, but not the impact of his fist. Even as she felt blackness engulfing her, she felt herself flying sideways off the horse. She hit the ground so hard it knocked the air from her lungs. She was aware of rolling, tumbling over and over and then nothing else.

"Hold!"

The voice penetrated the fog that seemed to surround her and Elspeth felt fear force everything else from her mind. They were coming back for her. Focusing only on the need to escape, she dug her fingers into the ground, dragging herself forward several inches.

"Elspeth!"

She tried to crawl faster, but someone caught her, rolling her onto her back. She threw up her arm to ward him off. "No!"

She felt a trembling seize her.

"Elspeth! How badly are you hurt, chere?"

Elspeth swallowed with an effort, lowering her arm. "Guillume?" she asked disbelievingly.

He gathered her into his arms, holding her closely against his chest for several moments. Finally, he scooped her up and stood. Striding to where the other riders waited, he lifted her up to one of his men. Once he had mounted, he moved his horse closer and pulled her across his lap, tucking her securely

against him. "Six men with me. The rest—track them. Do not return until you have them or can assure me they have been dealt with," he said grimly.

They rode only a little while before they stopped and made camp. The shock had long since worn off, however, and Elspeth felt every jolt of the horse in every aching joint and bruise. She was relieved when she was taken from the horse and lain carefully on a bedroll that had been spread on the ground, only vaguely aware of Guillume's hands moving over her as he carefully probed her for broken bones.

"I can not find anything broken, Elspeth, but your mouth is bleeding. Did you hurt your mouth?" His voice was urgent, threaded with some emotion she could not grasp.

She nodded. "I was trying to use the pommel to remove the gag so I could call out."

He frowned, examining her face in the flickering light from the fire. "Your face is bruised. From the pommel?"

She nodded. "He hit me."

"Who?"

Elspeth frowned, trying to gather her scattered wits. "Renard—when he took me from the house. He knocked me unconscious. One of his men when I started screaming." She caught his arm when he sat back on his heels. "He said he would kill Griselda if I tried to call for help. He wanted to take Etienne. I only went with him to get him away from Etienne. I swear it, my lord, on my father's soul!"

"Be still. We will talk of this later."

"Please, Guillume—Lord Arnaud. I did not run away. I swear it."

He swallowed audibly and caressed her cheek gently. "I know, chere. I should never have doubted you." He left her for several moments. When he returned, he held something to her lips. Expecting water, she took a large gulp. It burned a trail of fire down her throat—burned her lip. Tears filled her eyes. She choked, holding her ribs while she coughed.

Setting the wine skin aside, Lord Arnaud settled beside her, pulling her against him. "Rest. Tomorrow, I will take you home."

The word 'home' comforted her as much as his heat and strength. Relieved that he seemed to believe her, she relaxed and slept.

It was full dark by the time they drew the horses up before the gates of Rasgarth once more. Elspeth had

never seen a more welcome sight. Lord Arnaud had ridden slowly and had stopped frequently to allow her to rest, but the ride had been an agonizing one nonetheless. Regardless, Elspeth had not wanted to stop at all. She hurt, whether she was on the horse or not, and could think of nothing but reaching home where she could lie still without worrying about having to get on a horse once more.

She felt like weeping with relief when they rode through the gates and she heard Griselda's voice.

A groan escaped her when Lord Arnaud had carried her upstairs and settled her finally in his bed. Griselda, who'd followed them upstairs, immediately began pushing and pulling at her, however, tugging her filthy gown off. She complained, for all the good it did.

The bath was better. She would have far preferred if she had been allowed to soak in the tub, in hot water, but it was still a relief to feel the dirt bathed carefully from her skin. She was more than half asleep by the time Griselda had finished. "How is the babe?"

Elspeth searched her mind. "I do not think he took any hurt."

Griselda checked her anyway, but seemed satisfied. "Your poor face is so battered I would not have known you."

Elspeth opened her eyes with an effort. "I am hideous?"

"You are bruised and swollen from the top of your head to your toes, but the bruises will fade and so, too, will the swelling. I must get my salves for your wrists. But first, you must drink the tea, sweeting."

Elspeth drank obediently, smiling faintly as she lay back once more. "I must look terrible if you are calling me sweeting."

Griselda snorted and stalked away.

When she had gone, Elspeth realized that Lord Arnaud was standing in front of the fireplace, watching her. Covering her face, she rolled over with an effort. She heard him cross the room. In a moment, the bed dipped as he sat down beside her. He stroked her arm soothingly.

"I have carried your image in my mind many months, Elspeth. It ... pains me to see you so hurt, but you are still beautiful to me."

She sighed, but she didn't turn over. Instead, she caught his hand and carried it to her lips. "I have missed you so terribly. I had begun to fear that you would not come back.

"I know that you have never trusted me—I understand, but I had thought if I showed you how

desperately I loved you that you would come to see that I could never do anything that would hurt you."

"I have not doubted you in a very long time."

She tilted her head to look at him. "But ... you thought that I had gone willingly with Renard."

He sighed, scrubbing his hand over his jaw. "I had hoped that you would not realize that—Jealousy knows no reason. I did not truly believe it of you, but I could not completely ignore the fear and doubt. You were his before you were mine."

"I was never his. He took my body, but that did not make me his. Only I can decide who I belong to. I think, from the moment you rescued me from him, that I was yours. I know you did not do it for that reason, but it didn't matter."

He rubbed his forehead, as if his head ached. "I feared as much, but I did not want your gratitude, Elspeth."

"That why you had me guarded, because you believed it was only gratitude and that I would turn against you? How can you say you do not doubt me when you still can not accept that I love you with all my heart?"

"The guard was to protect you," he said harshly. "I did not trust that Renard would not try something."

He was silent for several moments. Finally, he swallowed audibly and clasped her hand tightly. "I ... am not much for pretty words, Elspeth. Mayhap I had not truly accepted it myself when I left, but I knew when I got to Normandy that I had left my heart here ... with you, and that I could not live without it."

Elspeth squeezed her eyes tightly, hardly daring to accept the joy that flooded through her, making her heart pound crazily. "Truly?"

He cleared his throat. "I have petitioned King William for permission to wed with you."

Elspeth forgot all about her embarrassment over the condition of her face. She whirled to look at him with startled eyes. "You have?"

He reddened faintly. "If you will consider my suit?"

Ignoring the stabs of pain the effort cost her, Elspeth sat up and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Guillume! I love you so! Nothing would make me happier."

He cupped a hand around the back of her head. "Griselda does not think I deserve you."

Elsbeth drew back in surprise. "She did not say that!"

A wry smile twisted his lips. "Words to that effect."

She shook her head. "She is such a schemer! She has been assuring me for months that you loved me—and that you would come to trust me in time."

His dark brows rose. A faint flush suffused his cheeks. "I had thought I hid it better than that."

"Then you did love me? You do?"

"Have I not said so?"

Elsbeth thought it over. "No."

"I told you that you held my heart," he said pensively.

In truth, that was even better. She snuggled closer. "When will we be wed?"

"As soon as the bride is ready—as soon as may be—when you are well enough."

* * * *

The Saxon bride wore a gown the pale green of spring. On her head was a coronet woven of spring flowers as she faced her Norman groom before the priest and vowed to love, honor and cherish him ... forever. And when her Norman had vowed the same, he pulled her into his arms and gave her the kiss of peace.

The End