



THE SAXON ROSE

By
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Chapter One

*Northumbria, England**1069*

“God’s bones!” Sir Alan roared in disbelief.

Out of the swirling midnight mist, the woman suddenly appeared directly in the path of his startled destrier. “Move away, wench!” his voice echoed through the murky woods.

Incredibly, the girl never moved. Awash in the fog, she looked as pale and as ethereal as a white rose.

Desperate to keep his horse from trampling her, Alan stood in his stirrups and reined back his mount with every ounce of strength he could muster. Heart slamming, every sinew taut with exertion, he managed to urge the animal around, sparing her from the brutal stomp of the frenzied beast--but not from mishap. While turning his mount, Alan’s leg clipped her shoulder.

Fair hair billowing, white garb aflutter, she crashed to the ground with a bone-crunching thud just off the narrow forest path.

“Sweet Jesu!” he rasped. Why hadn’t she moved from harm’s way?

Jolted to a halt, the long column of men behind him struggled to control their mettlesome steeds. Amid the chinking sound of chain mail and the pounding of their mounts’ hooves, the weary soldiers cursed, “*Merde* and *sacré bleu*.” The supply wagons lurched to a halt and even the horses whinnied in protest.

Alan vaulted from his saddle. Rushing to the wraith-like woman, he knelt at her side, gasping for breath as his sweat soaked into the padded jack beneath his hauberk.

By all the saints, she wore naught but her shift!

Noticing the rise and fall of her breasts, he was grateful she was still alive, but he couldn’t fail to see her nipples, poking enticingly under the cloth of her scant attire. Beneath the smudges of dirt, her beautiful face appeared pale and smooth, like a lustrous pearl.

Alan felt an eruption of hot, potent lust.

Who was this temptress and why had she been prowling these woods at this hour of the night?

One thing he knew; she was no Saxon serf. Though stained with soil and bracken, her garment was woven of fine linen, not the coarse russet worn by *geburs*. The golden chain and cross about her neck gleamed through the dismal light, and her unbound tresses spilled over the ground like spun sunbeams. Slim and white, her hands appeared soft, not callused by the rigors of toil. Significantly, she had no wedding or betrothal ring on her finger.

“Godwin,” she murmured, slowly opening her eyes. In the ghostly light, they appeared silver and unfocused before her lids closed once more.

Who was Godwin? Was he a family member or a lover? Perhaps she had been trysting.

Questions aside, the girl needed help. He must act now. As he reached out to assess the injuries to her limbs and skull, Alan's gangly squire leapt forward, grabbing his arm

"N ... no, Sir Alan! D ... Do not touch her." The boy's dark eyes glimmered with terror, and his face appeared livid beneath its splatter of freckles.

"What the devil, Robert?" Alan said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. Robert had been his squire for several years. He was a good conscientious lad, even if he tended to over-react at times.

The boy released Alan's arm. "S ... She may be an evil spirit, come to lead us astray, like the wicked Mist Maiden we've heard about!"

A glance up at his troops convinced Alan the boy was not the only one who had apprehensions. The faces of his men seemed taut with fear, and their postures were rigid with vigilance--and with good reason.

Hemmed in on both sides by the dense growth of fog-shrouded oaks, the Normans stood vulnerable and were ripe for ambush from the Saxon rebels they had come to subdue.

To make matters worse, as the troops journeyed northward, the tales they had heard of fairies, goblins, and this so-called Mist Maiden who stalked the night, wreaking havoc on their hapless victims increased their fears.

Alan shook his head in disbelief. The whole north of England reeled with chaos as the Saxon rebels allied with the Danes and Scots, yet his men feared this fragile, unconscious girl.

"Nonsense, lad. Our enemies spread such stories to unnerve us. Likely she is a decoy, placed here by the rebel leaders. In her panic she failed to run from the road quickly enough to elude us. While this woman distracts us, Saxon marauders may be stealing in to slay us." Alan gripped the hilt of his sword. "It is flesh-and-blood adversaries we must fear, lad, not ghosts and dragons.

"Yes," Robert replied, a dubious expression on his face.

"Furthermore," Alan continued, "it would be criminal to leave her here to die. Now out of the way."

Quickly making the Sign of the Cross, the boy stepped aside.

Annoyed, Alan realized his words had little effect on the squire and the anxious soldiers. In strained silence, his troops gaped at him and the woman. Some crossed themselves, others gestured, warding off the evil eye as they stared at her with suspicion.

Meanwhile, the mist grew ever thicker. Neither the hoot of an owl nor the whisper of the wind stirred the trees. Even from his own troops, only an occasional snort from a horse or nervous cough from a campaigner pierced the gloomy darkness.

Did the Saxons skulk nearby?

He had to put courage back into these men--now! With a demonstration of assurance, Alan examined her graceful arms, shapely legs, and lovely head. Satisfied her bones remained intact, he draped his mantle over her and scooped her into his arms, hoping she had no internal injuries.

"You see, Robert, I touched the woman, and I still live. Obviously, she is not the magical Mist Maiden who suddenly appears in this forest and kills the men who succumb to her charms and touch her."

His tactic succeeded. The suspense abated, the men relaxed their rigid stances, but their drawn faces betrayed bone-aching fatigue.

In his pursuit of the Saxons, Alan had pushed his troops beyond endurance.

"Ranulf," he called out to his old friend.

Helm in the crook of his arm, the tall, brawny sergeant approached. "Yes, Alan."

"Order the men to bivouac in that clearing for what remains of the night." He nodded to a treeless area just visible through the fog. "If the Saxons attack, at least we'll have room enough to wield our broadswords."

"True, but what do we do with her?" Ranulf bobbed his eyebrows suggestively, a smile on his face. The man was Alan's trusted companion of many years and could be counted on to find humor in the most difficult of circumstances.

"Stop jesting. You know we are honor-bound to keep her. It would be wrong to leave her to fate."

"Judging from her looks, she appears to be a noblewoman, though a scantily clad one." Ranulf pushed back his mail coif, revealing his close-cropped pelt of thick, sandy hair. "We could hold her hostage and demand her kin swear fealty to William."

"A premature ambition, Ranulf. The poor girl may not survive." The thought made him feel guilt, for he had caused her injury.

"If she were my wife or kinswoman, I'd agree to any terms to ransom her."

Too pragmatic for superstition, Ranulf had an eye for the ladies, especially comely ones, and this girl's body would provoke even a monk to lust. "Her people will be angry when they discover she is hurt." Ranulf shook his head. "They will never believe we didn't intentionally injure her."

Alan shrugged. "Maybe. On the other hand, they may not think she is worth ransoming."

"A possibility, but not every family is..."

"Beware, Ranulf!" Alan halted in his tracks, clenching his teeth against an agony so deep, so wide, it snatched his breath and shattered his heart. The sergeant's words raked the embers of searing memories he could not bear to recall but could never forget--no matter how desperately he tried.

"It is time to put the past behind you."

"Never!" Alan grated out. How could he allow his would-be murderers to elude heaven's justice?

"Your bitterness shadows your life, darkens your soul, and causes you to trust no one."

"I trust you. Now enough, Ranulf!"

"But..."

"We were speaking about the woman," Alan interrupted. "Besides, we are not the only raiding party in the vicinity. Her kin may lie dead already."

"Perhaps that accounts for the reason she wandered alone," Ranulf affirmed gravely. "I have witnessed many poor folk dazed and roaming aimlessly after their

villages were destroyed and their kith and kin slaughtered.”

“Perhaps, but I still think the girl may have been spying. We can inquire about her at the convent our maps show is nearby,” Alan proposed. “The nuns may know her or her family, and they must reveal the truth.”

“After all, it is a sin to lie.” Ranulf chuckled, breaking the tension as they resumed their walk. “Until then, how shall we care for her? We have no provisions to accommodate a lady. You allow us no camp followers of washerwomen.”

Alan looked down at her as he considered the question. Her breathing was even, unlabored--a good sign. Perhaps her fall had just knocked her unconscious, and she would recover. He hoped to God that was the case. “I shall make a place for her next to me.”

“Is that seemly?” Mischief twinkled in Ranulf’s hazel eyes. In the somber light they appeared the color of slate.

Alan could not suppress a grin. “I suppose not, but at least she will be safe.”

“Will she? Who will protect her from you?”

Alan chuckled. No matter what the circumstance, his huge sergeant always found some humor in it. “If you must ask, you do not know me as well as you think.”

“It is because I know you that I ask.” Ranulf rumbled with hearty laughter.

“Your success with the fair sex out-distances mine by miles.” Alan stopped.

“This spot will do,” he said, choosing a site near the edge of the forest.

Ranulf removed the cloak from the woman and spread it on the ground. Alan placed her on the garment, wiping the soil from her face with edge of the cape before she rolled to her side.

The sergeant moved toward her. A stab of possessiveness jabbed though him. Alan signaled the man to halt. “No. I will wrap her,” he said, covering her with the thick woolen garment.

Ranulf raised his palms and stepped back, his lips curled in a canny smile. “She is all yours, my friend. Besides, I must post the sentries.” Yawning widely, he strode away.

Alan rose and motioned to Robert. The boy brought him a bedroll and spread it on the ground. Staring at the woman with caution, the squire tripped over his own feet, scampering away to take his place near Father Rollo, their sober chaplain. Obviously, the lad wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the girl.

The boy’s superstitious beliefs annoyed Alan. Such behavior affected morale. Moreover, by the time he had reached the squire’s age, he had learned a bitter lesson: human enemies pose a greater threat than spirits.

To the accompaniment of swords clinking, helms clanging, and saddles thwacking, his weary troops settled down for a well-deserved rest.

Alan sank to the thick wool, divesting himself of his weapons and helm and pushed back his mail coif. He stretched his tired limbs. Slowly, he inhaled the bracing odor of the forest as it mingled with the delicate fragrance of the woman’s rose scent.

His gaze strayed to the girl’s tall, slim form reclining mere inches away from him. Her well-molded cheekbones and chin created a lovely symmetry within the pale oval of her face. Thick, sweeping lashes fringed her lids.

She sighed. Turning on her back, she threw off the cloak. The “v” neck of her shift opened, revealing a substantial portion of her bounteous breasts.

Desire jolted through him like summer lightning. His manhood burgeoned as he fought the urge to caress those white, breasts, and lave her still-erect nipples. Against all logic, his gaze fell to the girl’s hands to convince himself once again that her long, tapered fingers wore no rings

Was she a virgin? The idea caused him to want her even more. Balling his fists in frustration, he turned from the sight of her body, attempting to calm his fierce need.

If her family still lived, would they ransom her? Part of him hated to relinquish custody of her. Another part hoped they loved her enough to do so.

His kin had not acted so kindly. The memory caused his heart to race as he relived the terror of a helpless boy fleeing from a diabolical killer. His fury ignited, and Alan tore the tussock of wet grass growing near the edge of his blanket up by the roots.

The damsel stirred, and he turned his attention to her once more. Her heart-shaped lips parted. How would that lush mouth taste? Alan deeply regretted that the girl was his foe. Though his lust raged, he must never forget that reality. To do so assured his downfall, and he needed all his strength, wit, and energy to outmaneuver the enemy and stay alive.

Long denied, sleep induced Alan to close his eyes. A vision of the woman loomed before him. The distinctive scent of her perfume lingered in the air, conjuring the image of a dew-washed rose veiled with mist.

* * * *

Gwyneth’s shoulder ached miserably, and her bed, so cozy and soft when she had fallen asleep, felt hard and damp. Worsening matters, one of her legs had gone numb and felt as if a thousand needles were pricking it. She moved the limb, and the pins jabbed more vigorously.

She opened her lids. Thick mist clouded her vision. Was she still dreaming? Gwyneth shook her head to clear the cobwebs of confusion. Slowly, awareness dawned. This was not her bedchamber in the abbey’s guesthouse. Where was she?

She struggled to sit up on the cloak where she’d been lying. Suddenly, her focus sharpened to full consciousness, and her breath caught in her throat.

By St. Cuthbert! Just inches away, a huge, dark-haired Norman knight slept peacefully! Peering through the vapor, she discerned the shapes of other men, some of whom snored vigorously. Clothed in hauberks, they appeared fierce even in slumber with their helms and weapons close beside them.

Holy Mother of God, they held her prisoner!

Fear seized her as she surmised a whole contingent of warriors, obscured by the fog, lurked in the encampment. Sentinels, no doubt, kept a silent vigil, and she squinted through the haze, trying to locate their posts.

Why did this misfortune befall her? *That is a stupid question, Gwyneth, for you know the answer too well!* How many times since childhood had she retired for the night only to wake in an unfamiliar place with no notion of how she arrived there?

These nocturnal strolls occurred often and with dangerous consequences. One morning she woke to find herself covered with bruises at the bottom of a deep pit. The

fall had not even roused her when it happened. On another occasion, Aelveva, her maid, once found her on the edge of a steep cliff.

Later, the distraught woman explained that she was able to urge Gwyneth away but had failed to awaken her from her deep, trance-like state.

Though those adventures had been dangerous, the result of her sleepwalking this night had resulted in total disaster. Rape and murder posed distinct possibilities. Or worse, the Normans had seen her sleepwalking! Surely they had concluded she was a witch and had captured her for trial and execution.

Gwyneth and her father, Lord Leofric of Wykston, lived with that fear for years. Hadn't he and her aunt, the abbess, taken drastic steps to protect her? Now she had eluded Aelveva's watch and destroyed all their careful plans.

Gwyneth clapped her hands to her mouth, stifling a sob. The ghastly image of a watery death by drowning, which was the penalty for witchcraft, flooded her thoughts. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back.

She had no time for panic. Clear thought and decisive action must prevail if she wished to survive. She had to flee from this place--immediately.

These troops were likely on a search and destroy mission, ordered to stamp out the last vestiges of revolt. They would pass by Wykston, her father's estate. She must warn him!

Gwyneth's body shook uncontrollably, and her heart beat like the wings of a startled bird. Frantically, she rubbed her prickling leg, attempting to restore normal sensation to it. All the while, her gaze remained riveted on the finely chiseled features of the knight for fear of waking him.

She hoped the damp forest floor would not betray her to the sentries by the crackle of dry leaves or the snap of a desiccated twig under her feet. Pausing, she squinted, straining to locate the guards, but all she saw were their torch lights muted by the fog. She hardly dared to breathe as she hiked up the skirt of her shift as best she could and crawled through the cloudy vapor, praying to elude detection.

Assured she had covered sufficient distance to avoid alerting the watch, Gwyneth stood and began to run. With any luck, she hoped to arrive back at the abbey, her new home, before the abbess and Aelveva discovered she had left. From there, she'd ride a swift horse to Wykston.

Or would she? Panic seized her. Where was she? She was hidden by fog, and no familiar landmarks were visible. How far had she walked in her sleep? Perhaps the knight had taken her to a place leagues away.

As she sprinted through the gloomy woods, Gwyneth could hardly see a foot ahead of her, for the farther she ventured, the denser the mist became. Her lungs burned, and she felt they would burst. To complicate matters, a sharp pain spiked her side, matching the one in her shoulder.

What was that sound she heard? Instinctively, she looked back over her shoulder and crashed into an iron-hard mass.

"Oooohhh!" she squealed and fell flat on her bottom. As her ears buzzed, the dark trees spun round her, fading to gray as they diffused into the mist like ink in water.

"It's good to see you've made such a miraculous recovery." The sound of a rich

baritone voice drifted down from above her. Somehow his strange statement halted her spiraling descent into the sickening vertigo.

Recovery? Had she hurt herself? Her shoulder ached terribly and her back felt stiff.

“Where are you going in such haste, my lady?”

As her blurred vision cleared, her gaze focused on a large pair of leather shoes and traveled up the long, crisscrossed leggings to the hauberk which covered the man from his knees to his thick neck. Stunned, Gwyneth stared up into the face of the Norman knight who had slept by her side but a short time before.

An icy shiver rippled through her. His peaceful expression gone, his eyes seemed cold and stormy--like the sea in winter. Feet apart, arms akimbo, he stood directly in front of her, his square jaw set with resolution, the nostrils of his fine, straight nose flared, his full, well-carved lips unsmiling.

He bent, his fingers closing around her wrist as he hauled her up. Trapped like a hare in the talons of a hawk, Gwyneth felt her unsteady knees wobble beneath her weight.

“I asked you a question, my lady.”

“I ... I am lost, sir,” she stuttered, pretending she didn’t know she’d been his prisoner.

His relentless gaze raked her from head to toe. “I shall accompany you back to our camp where you will be safe.”

“You needn’t bother. If you allow me to pass, I shall try to find my way home,” she replied, attempting to break free of him.

The knight held her fast and stared into her eyes. “I think not, my lady. Alone you may fall into danger.”

What greater peril could she encounter than a Norman who likely suspected her of witchcraft? With slight hope of eluding him again, her mind searched desperately for some excuse to liberate herself. “I ... I need to relieve myself.”

“Go behind that bush, lady. I advise you not to entertain any thoughts about running off.” He nodded toward a bushy yew, darkly outlined in the lapping sea of white haze. “I shouldn’t want you to get lost again in this mist.”

His hypocrisy sparked her ire. Despite her fear, Gwyneth bit back a retort and lowered her lids lest he see the fury in her eyes. She struggled to rein in her emotions and keep a clear head. If she convinced the knight she was a docile woman, he would drop his guard and present her with another chance to flee.

He released her, nudging her toward a nearby yew. Dare she dart off in the opposite direction or wait for a better opportunity? The forest loomed dark, hazy. Escape was still possible, but her captor impressed her as one who would pursue his quarry to the death.

She had just attempted to run and failed. Still, a better occasion may not present itself, and Gwyneth refused to go to her death submissively. If she must die, she would go down battling to the end.

Inching away, Gwyneth heard the man admonish, “Hurry, lady.”

“Your indulgence for a moment longer,” she said, loping off through the enveloping fog.

But her shift caught on a holly and the thorns penetrated the linen, scratching the flesh on her hip. Gwyneth gulped back a cry.

A moment later, his powerful arm seized her waist, and the Norman pulled her full length against his rock-hard body. A finger under her chin, he tilted her head back, obliging her to meet his burning gaze.

“You disappoint me, my lady, but your treachery doesn’t surprise me. I may not see you, but I can detect your location from the sound of your movements, the swirl of the mist, and the scent of your perfume. Don’t waste any more time with fruitless attempts at flight. You’ll return with me to camp.”

His voice sounded neither gruff nor angry but calm, tempered, controlled. Holding her close, he took care not to crush her body. Though he looked strong enough to snap her neck like rotten stick, he used just enough pressure to restrain her.

She pulled back, and he allowed her to break his hold. Then cupping her elbow, the towering knight marched her back toward the encampment.

Mother of heaven! Did a witch’s death await her? Not quite yet, she thought. First, the knight must deliver her to the authorities and then hurl the accusation. Although Gwyneth had not formulated a specific plan yet, she fully intended to make those tasks impossible for him.

Chapter Two

“Alan,” a resonant voice called through the fog.

“Yes, Ranulf. We’re here.”

Gwyneth watched the knight’s hulking friend emerge from the floating mist.

“So you found her.” The soldier stopped and stuck the tip of his drawn sword into the ground, resting both hands on it.

“Our guest is disinclined to accept our hospitality.” Sir Alan’s tone oozed with sarcasm.

The man, Ranulf, grinned widely. “We must protect our little sparrow more carefully, or she will fall prey to a fierce falcon.”

Hospitality? Protect? How dare these Normans jest so cruelly!

Flanked by the huge warriors, Gwyneth reached her former resting place where the possibility of torture and death confronted her.

Alan stepped in front of her. “Lady, I wish to know who ordered you here.”

“No one, sir,” she answered, every fiber of her body tense with anxiety.

“So you volunteered to come?”

“Volunteered?” Gwyneth nervously twisted the free end of her girdle. “For what?”

“Come now, lady. Do not pretend innocence with me.” He stepped closer to her. “You came here to spy on us. No doubt you were on your way to report our position to the rebels when I apprehended you.”

“That is a preposterous supposition!” Gwyneth snapped back.

Alan’s gaze bore into hers. “Let me refresh your memory. You obviously heard our approach but miscalculated our distance because of the fog. When you did see us, it was too late. Paralyzed with fear, you couldn’t run for cover. Unfortunately, I accidentally knocked you unconscious.”

So that was why she felt sore. More importantly, the Norman did not realize she had been sleepwalking. Her secret, which had been so carefully guarded by her loved ones, remained safe. The ordeals of torture and death did not threaten imminently.

Relief flooding through her, Gwyneth closed her eyes and exhaled a pent-up breath.

Still, many problems confronted her. Besides alerting her father, she must hide her identity or the knight would hold her hostage. Nor could she implicate the nuns at the abbey because he might sack it.

Furthermore, the knight could execute her for spying! Somehow she must convince him she neither pose a danger nor was of any value to him. Then perhaps he would free her.

“I had no such intention.” The belt slipped from her fingers, and Gwyneth took a

step back from him.

"You are lying." He delivered the accusation in a bland voice as if he had simply commented on the weather. Only his hand, suddenly clutching the hilt of his sword, betrayed his annoyance.

The man knew his strength. He need not prove it through displays of brutality. She surmised that when his temper finally did ignite, it would prove formidable, and she had no wish to witness it. Antagonizing him would only worsen her situation so she swallowed back the riposte on the tip of her tongue.

"I am not, sir." She forced her tone to match his.

Alan rocked back on his heels, crossing his arms over his massive chest. "Show me one Saxon capable of speaking the truth, lady."

Again her anger flared. Nevertheless, the responsibility to her people, whose very lives she now held in her hands, plus the knowledge that he could hang her as a spy, tamped down her fury. Gwyneth took a deep breath and managed to keep a civil tongue in her head.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned her palms upward. "Then why interrogate me, my lord, if you already believe I shall answer you falsely?"

He turned toward Ranulf. "It would seem our guest has the keen logic of a philosopher."

The big sergeant smiled. "The lady's wit matches her beauty."

Alan glared at him then turned back to her. "You deny spying or acting as a decoy, yet you cavort about the woods alone, dressed in that manner ... or should I say undressed?" His gaze raked over her. "Perhaps you were trysting with a lover."

How she wished his last supposition was true. She would give anything to be a normal woman, but the sleepwalking condition had plagued her for many years. In addition to her "night wanderings," she suffered from *other* terrible fears--apprehensions born of a childhood experience that no youngster should suffer.

However, because of the sleepwalking, her father had forbid her to marry, even though she was his only heir. Leofric feared that when Gwyneth's husband discovered her secret, the man would denounce her as a witch.

"Alan, now that you found her, I'll retire. My tired bones crave rest," Ranulf said.

The knight nodded. "But before you go, rouse a few more men and assign them to guard duty. I do not want our guest here to attempt another escape."

"Aye," Ranulf said and walked off.

Turning his attention to Gwyneth once more, Sir Alan smiled sardonically, revealing his white, even teeth. "Are the Saxons so desperate they employ women to spy for them, or were you simply acting as a decoy?"

By St. Cuthbert and all the saints of the north, his goading infuriated her. Arms stiff by her sides, fists balled, she replied, "No, sir. My people command sufficient strength of arms and a surfeit of courage. They need no skullduggery to attain their goals."

Alan leaned in closer to her. "Doubtless, you are a member of Lord Leofric of Wykston's household. My patrols tell me his manor is nearby, and he has a daughter."

The knight surmised that she was originally from her father's estate! Gwyneth

shrank back from him and damned her careless tongue. "I ... I do not live with Lord Leofric." She wiped her sweaty palms on the skirt of her shift.

She spoke the truth. For months she had resided at the Benedictine abbey. The brilliant abbess, her maternal aunt, had often allowed her to stay there for periods of time since Gwyneth was a child and had begun sleepwalking.

Convinced that Gwyneth's problems were not the work of Satan, but the sign of a troubled heart, the powerful Mother Clotilde, Leofric, and dear Aelveva formulated a plan to protect her--a scheme to save her life but rob her of her heart's desire.

"So you do not reside with the nobleman?" He arched a dark, quizzical eyebrow.

She shook her head. "No," she croaked out, her tongue sticking to the roof of her dry mouth.

"My reconnaissance informs me that the only other place of note in this vicinity is a Benedictine convent." He paced around her in a slow circle, his gaze perusing her body. "But you are certainly no nun."

The dim light accentuated the sharp planes and angles of his even features as his close inspection and the intense glow in his eyes caused her whole body to tremble. Feeling naked, she wished for an over-tunic to cover her body.

"Why do you traipse about the forest in naught but your shift when you should be asleep in your father's house, or is it your husband's bed you have quit? Mayhap he would give a fine price for your return." He casually picked up her hand and examined it. "But you wear no wedding ring."

She yanked her fingers away, and the words blurted forth before she could restrain herself. "I have no husband, sir."

"A virgin then?" He stroked his strong jaw. "So your hoydenish ways go unappreciated by your Saxon noblemen."

Gwyneth willed away her tears as the knight's jibe thrust deeply into its mark. Denied a husband and children by her malady, she dedicated her life to the people of Wykston. Her dream was to build a fine infirmary to heal the sick.

When her father died, she planned to administer Wykston Manor and its village from behind convent walls, living as a lay person. Upon her demise, her estate would escheat to the crown.

"That much is true, or you would not appear so flustered," he quipped, smiling.

Somewhere in the distance, a horse whinnied, and Gwyneth noticed some of the men had awakened. Slowly, they sat up and stared at her. Tears of humiliation glutted her throat, and Gwyneth gulped, swallowing them back. By God, they would not see her cry!

"What is your name, my lady?"

"I ask you the same question, sir knight." She boldly met his gaze.

"A careless omission on my part. After all, we've not been properly introduced. I am Sir Alan Fitz de Personne, bastard knight, sworn to my liege lord, King William." Arm outstretched, he bent into a sweeping bow.

The frank reference to his base birth shocked Gwyneth. And what a strange name! He called himself Sir Alan, Son of Anyone.

"Now, reciprocate the introduction, my lady." His gaze burned into hers.

Would a small concession cause him to cease his harassment?

"I ... I am called Gwyneth." She bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

"From where? From whose house do you come?"

She peered up at him and resolved to remain silent.

"Maybe you do not come from a home but from a tryst. Who is Godwin?"

Swallowing hard, she quelled the torrent of tears stinging behind her eyes.

Sir Alan continued to stare at her, expecting an answer.

She expelled a shaky breath. "I will not speak of him," she answered, trying to hide the torture that had made her life a living hell.

"So be it, Lady Gwyneth. Your counsel is of no great import at present. Sooner or later, I shall have my answers ... all of them." He swept out his arm, gesturing her to recline.

No other choice available to her for the moment, Gwyneth descended to the cloak that she had been sleeping on before her attempted escape. She lay on her side, expecting him to truss her up like a plucked partridge. Instead, the man audaciously reclined next to her, spoon fashion. Now she would never be able to attempt another escape.

She jerked up to a sitting position. "Audacious knave. How dare you!" Obviously, pretending to be docile was not working to her advantage.

He propped himself up on his forearms as amusement filled his eyes as a slow smile spread over his face. "My intent is merely to assure myself that you will not quit this place again."

"Then bind me and leave me to sleep alone." Gwyneth demanded, easing away from him.

He reached out and clasped her wrist, ending her withdrawal. "No. That plan is faulty. If I should fall asleep, you will only escape the fetters and flee again. Then I shall be forced to recapture you, and I am weary. So are my men. We've ridden all day, and we should be sleeping this time of night." Putting a hand over his mouth, he covered a yawn.

His confidence irked her. She jerked her wrist from his grasp. "That you will recapture me is an arrogant assumption."

His gaze, deadly serious, met hers. "So, you admit you'll try to escape. Well, hear this. I usually achieve my goals, my lady, and you will discover I seldom commit the same tactical error twice."

"Then I hope you possess of a number of strategies, for I intend to test them all." The fight instinct rallying hot in her, she tried to pull away, but he held her in his unyielding grasp. "Now release me at once."

"Do not worry, my lady. I do not ravish women. I never venture into that territory uninvited, for I much prefer a willing partner."

She closed her eyes to blot out the stares of the soldiers who watched her. Just being alone in the company of these men she was compromised beyond redemption, even though she remained chaste.

Yet, with the fate of her people hanging in the balance, her reputation seemed unimportant. Sacrificing all propriety for a small chance to put the Norman off his guard and permit her to escape was well worth the price she must pay.

“You give me little choice but to obey your commands, sir.”

“I warn you,” the knight whispered, releasing her, “forget any design to slay me with my own sword as I sleep.”

Stunned, Gwyneth stared into his face.

He raised his dark eyebrows. “Do you deny the thought occurred to you?”

“Emphatically! But you do not believe my words, sir knight. Moments ago, you asked me to show you a Saxon capable of speaking the truth. But, now that you mention it, the idea of disposing you does have some merit.”

“So you would kill me!” His eyes burned with condemnation.

“Since you refuse to credit my denial, I leave you to ponder my intentions.”

Leaving him with a slack jaw, Gwyneth jerked her wrist free, lay down, and rolled to her side.

Suddenly, like a bright star on the distant horizon, an idea glimmered in her mind. Anger flowered into hope. He held her captive, but she refused to be his victim.

* * * *

Alan stared at her as she lay on her side but made no attempt to touch her. Nor would he. Although he found her immensely desirable, he had told her the truth. He was no rapist. When he bedded a woman, he wanted her just as hot and eager for him as he was for her. Lady Gwyneth had made it quite clear that she *wasn't* willing. Furthermore, with his men sleeping all around them, the environment was not conducive to seduction either.

Seduction? What am I thinking? The girl is a spy.

He shouldn't want her, but lust had no logic or conscience. It wanted only satisfaction--deep satisfaction.

He must stop thinking in that vein. He needed rest, for dawn would come all too soon. Then he and his men must ride again. Thoroughly fatigued, Alan sighed and lay on his back. Around him all his men except the sentries had gone back to sleep. He should slumber as well.

Yet thoughts and speculations whirled in his mind, keeping him awake. Were the Saxons lurking beyond the next hill, waiting until daybreak to attack? Would the girl try another escape? If she did, she would not get far. His sentinels expected her to try.

His energy spent, his lids grew heavy. He closed his eyes, but rest eluded him. He tossed and turned for a long while, unable to relax. Finally, though, sheer physical exhaustion overcame him.

Adrift between sleep and wakefulness, the fragrance of roses wafted to his nostrils as he drifted deeper into somnolence. Slowly, like yarn slipping from its needles, the dark, convoluted labyrinth of his mind unraveled.

However, the peaceful dreams he so needed failed to come. His mind conjured the image of a black-clad adversary standing over him. The warrior bore a hideous crescent-shaped scar on his face. Laughing obscenely, the man unsheathed his sword, but Alan couldn't draw his! The weapon seemed stuck in his scabbard. Heart pounding as he lay helplessly on the ground, Alan rolled to avoid his foe's deathblow. All at once, his body came into contact with something soft, but a sharp pain stabbed his ribs.

Gasping, he bolted upright to full consciousness. But his enemy had disappeared.

Instead, Gwyneth's indignant face was nose to nose with his. Her eyes *were* silver. He drew back. Her flaxen tresses spilled over her shoulders, pooling like liquid sunlight in her lap as she sat before him. The fog had dissipated. Bathed in the rosy light of dawn, she appeared even more beautiful than she had last night when the gauzy nocturnal mist had enveloped her

"Why did you strike me?" he demanded.

She crossed her arms over her breasts and leaned back from him. "If you must ask, you have very little knowledge of what is proper between a knight and a lady, sir."

Alan realized that he had likely rolled onto her during his troubled sleep.

He arched a brow. "So you admit you are a lady."

Still glaring at him, she did not reply.

He began to feel somewhat embarrassed by his behavior, and his hand dropped from the hilt of his sword. "Pardon me, I must have been dreaming."

"A feeble excuse for taking advantage of a helpless woman." She drew his heavy cloak over herself.

Alan rubbed his side. "Helpless? From the blow you delivered, I sincerely doubt it, my lady. As to the state of your maidenhead, I'll take your word for it ... until you invite me to do otherwise." Watching her cheeks stain to a deep pink, he lost the battle to the smile tugging at his lips.

"Sir, your preposterous conversation is only exceeded by your outrageous behavior." Her chin lifted in rebellion.

"As does yours, my lady." He stood. "Didn't you consider that being half asleep I could have mistaken you for any enemy soldier and slain you for your unwarranted attack?"

"It was not unwarranted--it was perfectly justified." She averted her gaze and raked back her disheveled hair from her face.

The mere sight of that mass of golden tresses prompted an unbidden vision of Gwyneth and him to flash into his mind. Naked and wrapped in the cocoon of those silken strands, he envisioned their bodies entwined, their lips pressed together in a searing kissing, and their hearts beating in time.

Such thoughts are mad.

He needed to get away from her, to focus his mind on the business at hand. He leapt to his feet. "Ranulf!" he shouted, wanting to wake the man as he marched off a few paces.

Already up and fully clothed, the man bounded toward them. "Yes, Sir Alan."

"Order the men to rise and break their fasts. We must resume our journey."

Ranulf's gaze traveled from his friend's face to Gwyneth's. A canny smile curved his lips.

Alan saw his friend's amusement but remained deadly serious. "I suggest you give the order before we reach our dotage."

The huge bear of a man tossed back his head and laughed. "Immediately," he answered as he marched off.

Moments later a horn blasted reveille, shattering the sylvan tranquility of the camp. A chorus of groans, punctuated by the clang of weapons, erupted from the troops

as the men rose and reached for their swords and helms.

Gwyneth stood. Her cloak gaped open as she stretched her finely boned limbs. Alan's attention involuntarily fastened on the bodice of her shift as it tightened over the curves of her breasts. Still aroused from his dream, his desire now consumed him with the speed of a firestorm. He was grateful his hauberk hid his powerful reaction, but how he wanted to sink into the warmth of her body and feel her tight passage tightening around his length!

Robert hurried to them. The lad set their basket of rations on the ground and avoided venturing closer to the lovely Saxon female than necessary. Then he scurried off like a frightened mouse. The other men, with the exception of Ranulf, also afforded her a wide girth.

Alan shook his head in disbelief. Blinded by superstition, his troops still thought she was some unearthly spirit instead of a clever spy. Perhaps that was fortunate. She could not use her beauty to gull them into helping her escape.

Alan turned toward her and noticed the brownish-red splotch on the skirt of her shift. He approached her, pointing to the stain. "What happened?"

"Last night I collided with a thorny bush." She pulled the cloak over the spot of blood. "It's just a scratch and warrants no concern, sir knight."

He drew away her hand. Beneath his fingers her skin felt like precious sendal from the Orient, and its smooth texture made him hunger to touch more of her. In languorous circles, his thumb caressed the pale flesh of her slim wrist. Delighted, he watched her pupils dilate and her breasts heave as she drew in a deep breath.

So, she was not completely indifferent to him. Perhaps, though, her reaction resulted from fear rather than excitement.

He released her hand and lifted the mantle, inspecting the blot. "Are you certain? I would not want the wound to fester."

"You can afford to let a prisoner die."

"You think I am that monstrous?" he teased, smiling.

She raised her well-arched eyebrows. "Convince me otherwise, sir. Allow me go to the stream and wash the cut."

"Let the water be brought here. Better still, I have a soothing ointment. Shall I summon Robert to retrieve it," he suggested, admiring the golden ringlets at her temples.

She stepped back, her large silver-gray eyes widening. "Surely you cannot believe I would disrobe in front of all these men!"

"I've never been able to predict what a woman would do, my lady." He chuckled at the indignant expression covering her face. "If you wish, Ranulf and I will escort you into the woods and will shield your modesty with our mantles."

"And who would safeguard me from your peeping eyes?" She drew her cloak tighter.

"We have sworn an oath to defend the honor of all ladies. We would never break our solemn vow." He sat and crossed his legs.

"I prefer to tend the wound myself." She tossed her head, and her shiny mane flipped behind her shoulders. "Permit me to go to the brook."

"I am afraid I cannot allow that." Alan took hold of her hand again, encouraging

her gently to sit beside him. He lifted a small loaf from the pannier and broke it in half. "You have a habit of running when I let down my guard." He offered her a chunk of bread as he took a bit from his portion.

She took the food. "As a prisoner, it is my duty to flee should the opportunity arise."

Shocked by her candor, he choked on the bread. He grabbed up his wineskin and squirted a stream of liquid into his mouth. Unfortunately, the wine had gone sour. Still shuddering from the vinegary taste, he wiped his mouth on the large linen napkin. He had to give the damsel credit. She had courage to spare.

The simple meal finished in silence, he quit her side and strode off to find Ranulf again. "Give the order to decamp. We head for the abbey immediately. We must gather information."

"Doubtless, about the woman." The sergeant adjusted his mail coif up over his short-cropped, hair.

"Yes, and other things as well." Alan repeated Ranulf's gesture.

From several yards away, his tall, burly sergeant smiled at the girl, revealing his white straight teeth, and bowed gallantly. Although the Saxon woman didn't return the smile, she certainly did not scowl at him, either. Alan felt uneasy. Perhaps she found the man's curly hair and even features attractive. After all, women loved Ranulf--all women, regardless of age. Moreover, the man loved them in return, but Alan hid the jealousy that devoured him.

"We have no horse for her," Ranulf stated, again gazing at her from a distance.

Feigning indifference, Alan folded his arms over his chest. "It is obvious she must ride with one of us since everyone else seems wary of her." Though he did not want the woman to ride with anyone but him, he knew he could not endure the sweet torture of her pliant body so close to his and still maintain the vigilance necessary to lead his men. "Do you offer to share your mount, Ranulf?"

"I look forward to that with great pleasure." The sergeant smiled roguishly, and a mischievous gleam sparkled in his hazel eyes.

Robert approached with Rampage on a tether. Alan accepted the reins from the boy, and the squire took his leave.

"Would you show such eagerness if the maiden were less comely, Ranulf?" He stepped into the stirrup and mounted his horse.

Ranulf stroked the animal's muzzle and looked up at him. "Oh, so you have noticed."

"I am not blind yet. The woman may ride with you, but the proprieties must be observed."

"Meaning that I am to keep my shaft in my breeches." The big, brawny man chuckled good-naturedly.

Alan leaned forward on his stallion's neck. "Precisely," he said softly. "She is of no value to us without her honor."

"Then it is fortunate the girl repulsed your advances this morning, or else we would have had to forfeit a large ransom," Ranulf teased wickedly.

Alan bolted up ramrod straight in the saddle. "I was half asleep, half dreaming."

Ranulf stepped back and nodded. "Oh, I agree. The lass is quite a reverie, a seductive one."

Alan wheeled his horse around. "You know what I mean, man."

"Hmmm." Ranulf nodded and put a finger to his temple in mock contemplation. "You are about to succumb to her feminine charms?"

"Never. I leave those amorous adventures to you."

Alan urged his steed to a trot. Halfway down the column of men, he glanced over his shoulder and grudgingly watched as Gwyneth, now mounted behind Ranulf, leaned against the man's broad back.

Dispelling the memory of her soft curves molding to his body when he lay next to her, Alan led his troops toward the abbey.

* * * *

"Are you comfortable, Lady Gwyneth?" Ranulf called back to her.

"Yes, sir," she responded, holding tightly to his muscular middle.

"Should you need rest, my lady, let me know. I shall rein in."

"Thank you, sergeant."

Would it be foolhardy to ask the man to stop so she could attempt another escape? She must warn Leofric, but her chances to flee from the Normans were gone. The concealing cloak of mist had dissipated. Even when the fog rolled in at its thickest, she had failed to evade her captors. Now, in broad daylight, surrounded by enemies who watched her every move, she may well lead her foes straight to her home because she knew this area so well.

Fortunately, she had not wandered far last night, and the abbey stood beyond the next hill. Once inside those walls, Gwyneth had her choice of hiding places until she found an opportunity to slip away. Failing that, Mother Clotilde could dispatch a lay servant to Wykston. The best strategy was to leave alone so the knight could not use her as a hostage.

A hideous thought paralyzed her. Suppose she failed to warn her father in time. She shuddered as she imagined Leofric dead or possibly branded a traitor and condemned to be hanged. The crown would seize the village of Wykston. Its few survivors would be turned out to starve, replaced by Normans.

The opportunity would prove ripe for the vile Wulfstan of Braeton Hall to step in. Pleading his loyalty, he would petition William to hold Wykston in the king's name. The perfidious lord had always wanted her father's lands and had asked for Gwyneth's hand. Suspecting his self-serving ways, Leofric couldn't abide the man ... or trust him. What her father didn't know was that Wulfstan used to terrorize her when they were both children and he came to visit. Since then, she avoided him at all costs.

Although he hated the Normans, Wulfstan pretended neutrality and waited patiently until he was sure which side would win. Then he would ally with the victors.

Gwyneth fervently prayed he would not ask for her hand again. Because of her sleepwalking problem, her father had rejected all her suitors. Even if she'd been normal, though, she knew Leofric would never agree to such a marriage under the best of circumstances, since it was rumored that Wulfstan's former wives had died under mysterious circumstances, leaving him a much richer man each time. Gwyneth trembled

at the prospect of wedding the man.

“Lady, are you all right? I can feel you shaking,” Ranulf called back to her.

“Yes,” Gwyneth answered as she bolstered her resolve to flee her captors.

Otherwise, all was lost.

Suddenly, there was a sharp clang, like the sound of a stone striking metal.

Ranulf toppled from his destrier, dragging Gwyneth with him. Her scream rent the air. Dazed and helpless, she lay on the ground with her eyes squeezed tight as her breath whooshed from her lungs.

Chapter Three

“Quick,” Alan shouted, “in the underbrush to the left.”

The breath knocked from her lungs, she felt the earth shake beneath her as horses’ hooves pounded the turf. She opened her eyes to see Ranulf sit up as the horses lunged away.

“My lady, are you hurt?” His hazel eyes held a worried look.

“I ... I think not.” She gulped in a big breath of air. “I’m just startled.”

He braced her back with his strong arm and carefully lifted her to sitting position.

“What happened, sergeant?” she asked.

Ranulf rose and walked to where his dislodged helm lay. As he stooped to pick the metal headgear, Gwyneth saw a large dent in its side.

His finger probed the indentation in the iron. “I’d wager a year’s wages that a stone from a sling hit me.”

“I’d wager two,” Alan agreed as he reined in his mount.

The words hardly uttered from his mouth, one of the Normans rode forth with a child slung facedown across the front of his saddle like a sack of flour.

Holy Mother of God! Even from a distance Gwyneth saw his brilliant red hair and recognized him.

The rider held up the boy by the neck of his russet tunic, and Gwyneth almost fainted. The captor dropped the eight-year-old son of her maidservant, Aelveva, at Alan’s feet. She winced, and tears sprang to her eyes as the lad cried out in pain.

“Cut the little bastard’s hands off so he never again can raise a weapon against his betters,” one of the men yelled.

A metal blade flashed in the sun. A short, swarthy man stepped toward the boy, his long sword poised to strike.

Jumping to her feet, she threw herself between the child and the vile Norman. “In the name of Christ’s blood, have mercy!” Her arms wrapped tightly around the whimpering child, her face wet with tears, she looked up at Alan. “I beg you, sir. Do not maim the boy for life!”

“Is the boy kin to you?” Alan peered at her.

“No, but he is just a child, sir. Can you not show him mercy?”

The knight remained mute, the look in his eyes unreadable. Torn asunder, Gwyneth deliberated whether or not to reveal her identity and promise payment to save little Garth. Oh, if she but had some silver coins! Nervously, she put her hand to her heart, feeling her treasured Celtic cross suspended there. She slipped the holy symbol from her neck.

“I give you this cross in exchange for the damages the boy caused.” She extended her shaking hand, the beautifully wrought chain and cross dangling from her fingers. “It comes from Dublin. It is a valuable piece and will more than pay for the helm.”

Sir Alan dismounted. "Keep your jewelry, Lady Gwyneth. Put up your weapon, Henri," Alan said to one of his men. "I do not use violence to discipline children." He turned, glaring at the men. "Nor do I allow anyone else to do so."

"But the Saxon cub could have killed Ranulf," Henri protested.

"Enough," Alan roared.

The man sheathed his sword and remounted.

Alan trod to the boy. Dropping to his powerful haunches, he took a handkerchief from his hauberk and reached out to wipe the child's tears.

The child jumped back. "Let me go! Let me go!"

Alan released him as Garth turned to Gwyneth.

"Sir, I beseech you. He is frightened," she said, enfolding her arms about the boy once again.

"I know. He should be. He committed a serious offense."

The knight's voice sounded grave, but his eyes held a soft expression now.

"What is your name, boy?"

Gwyneth held her breath, fearing Garth would reveal that his mother, Aelveva, was her maid. His little, round chin trembled, his big, green eyes, so like his mother's, widened, but he said nothing. Still, she felt his sturdy, little body trembling with terror.

"Another silent Saxon, Ranulf." Sir Alan pulled a wry face.

Gwyneth closed her eyes and exhaled in relief as she heard the sergeant laugh.

"The puzzle will not be difficult to solve," Alan said. "The little imp looks too clean and well fed to be an abandoned child. Since the abbey is the only place close by, he must belong there. Mayhap he is a servant's child or a foundling the nuns have taken in. In any case we'll be at the convent soon, and the nuns will answer our questions.

"Your face is dirty, lad. Hold still and show me how brave you can be." Alan dabbed the smudges from the boy's chubby, pink cheeks. "You must look presentable when you ask pardon of those you have put in danger."

Sir Alan looked up at Gwyneth. Suddenly, her heart warmed to the knight for the mercy he showed to the lad. Another Norman would have cut off the boy's hands and left him to bleed to death. At once, Gwyneth's opinion of Sir Alan rose a hundredfold.

Alan's gaze held hers, and Gwyneth stood transfixed by the splendor of his violet-blue eyes. For a moment, she held her breath, affected by the undeniable maleness he exuded. Her surroundings seem to fade away as her pulse leapt. Every detail of his body branded itself into her brain. The sudden awareness of him as a man rather than her enemy kindled a deep longing. She felt her nipples harden as a hard spasm of intense pleasure clenched in her deep in her abdomen, and she gasped for air.

Though she had never felt like that toward any other man, she instinctively knew that it was wrong to have such feelings for an enemy.

Breaking the visual contact with her, Sir Alan turned his attention to the child. "How would you have felt had you killed this lady and the kind sergeant who rode with her?"

Garth's round green eyes swam with tears.

"It is a cowardly thing to attack in stealth." Alan stood. "Now you must ask their forgiveness."

"I ... I am sorry, my lady. I beg your pardon, Sergeant." He wiped away his tears, then blew his snubbed freckled nose on the handkerchief Alan gave him.

Ranulf chuckled as he smiled down at the boy. "You have a good aim, lad. Next time, though, I'd be grateful if you would choose another target."

"Well done." Alan patted Garth's head. "It is a brave person who can apologize, but you must make amends. What you did was wrong, lad."

"What would you have me do?" Garth asked.

"Since the sergeant and the lady were the ones injured, you must ask them when we arrive at the abbey. In the meantime, you'll ride with me."

The child's wary gaze traveled from Sir Alan's face then to hers. Gwyneth prayed Garth would hold his tongue.

* * * *

Astride his stallion, the child straddled in front of him, Alan raised his hand, bringing the troops behind him to a halt. Below them at the foot of the hill, the abbey lay like a rich plum in the lush bowl of the valley. Unlike the typical Saxon thatched wooden-frame dwellings, the buildings within the enclave were constructed of sandstone and shingled with slate. Outside the long, high walls, golden waves of ripe grain waved in the gentle breeze as the men who worked at the convent swung their scythes and reaped the harvest.

A flock of fleecy sheep grazed leisurely on the hillside, which descended in soft, green undulations to a silver stream meandering lazily toward the ocean. A herd of cows peacefully chewed their cud in the sunny meadow.

"It is a rich abbey," Robert said.

Alan turned in his saddle toward the squire. "Yes, lad. It was likely established hundreds of years ago."

"Shall I ride ahead and inform the sisters we wish them to give us hospitality?" Robert's dark eyes gleamed with anticipation.

Alan hesitated. He wanted to confront the rebels soon. Once he gathered his information, he intended to leave, but the brief respite last night in the damp field did not greatly benefit the men. Refreshed, his troops would fight with more vigor and ferocity.

"Would you like to go with him, little Saxon?" Alan asked the child.

The boy did not turn in the saddle to look at him. He simply shook his head and patted Rampage's black neck.

"Robert, tell Ranulf to pass the order down the line that we will accept the abbey's hospitality for the night."

A smile on his face, the squire rode off.

Turning his mount and riding down the line, Alan noticed the men wore cheerful expressions. Even Father Rollo's lined, serious face beamed with pleasure under the snowy nimbus of his tonsured hair.

The prospect of a warm bath and the texture of clean, fragrant linen next to his skin lifted Alan's spirits as well. After weeks of sleeping on the cold, hard ground, the anticipation of a comfortable bed in the abbey guesthouse conjured up the delightful image of a warm, winsome wench with whom to share the accommodation--a female who possessed the face and form of the lovely, golden-haired Saxon woman.

How he wanted to sink his phallus into that hot, wet body and spill his essence there.

Unfortunately, a convent was not the proper place to ease his manly needs, nor was Gwyneth the right woman.

He scanned the line of cavalry to the rear, seeking her out. Riding behind Ranulf with her eyes closed, she appeared untroubled by the close contact with his friend.

Yet she fought my caresses like a wildcat.

Determined to blot all thought of her from his mind, Alan spurred Rampage toward Father Rollo, urging his mount neck-and-neck with the chaplain's beast just as Gwyneth and Ranulf rode from behind into view.

As the elderly priest gazed at the lovely blond woman, a look of suspicion flickered over his dour face. "Have a care, my son." The old man crossed himself. "That lady seems strange. She could be dangerous, in league with the devil."

"Of course she is dangerous, Father. The lady is a Saxon spy." Alan spurred his animal away from the priest to the head of the column. From there he led his men down the hill and through the open gate of the abbey.

He reined in and dismounted on the cobblestone courtyard directly in front of the ancient Romanesque church.

He swung the boy from the saddle and said, "Bide a moment, lad." Alan took the child's hand and made a quick appraisal of the enclave.

The cloisters, abbess's quarters, and dining hall stood clustered around the church and the

Chapter house. To the left of those structures, the dormitory and the infirmary looked out onto the cemetery.

Not a very encouraging view for the sick, Alan mused.

Located diagonally across the wide courtyard from the church, the stables, servants' quarters, and guesthouse were interspersed within a patchwork of gardens. Beyond those buildings, the brew house, bake house, kitchens, and the fish ponds bordered the orchard, which was laden with rosy apples ready for picking.

Lay servants and nuns milled about the courtyard, glowering at his men who led their mounts toward the mews. These Saxons resented the Norman presence here, but they maintained their neutrality to avoid being pillaged.

As the clip-clop of the horses' hooves struck the cobblestones, Alan looked for the abbess. Though many Benedictine sisters held the status of noblewomen, none present exuded the commanding air of a leader this woman reputedly possessed. He must seek out the elusive nun before the day ended.

Once he had his information about Lady Gwyneth and the boy, he would leave at dawn tomorrow. Now, he needed rest and refreshment.

Awkward as a rangy puppy, Robert bounded forward on long, skinny legs, eager to attend him.

"Bring me a change of clothes, lad. I need a bath, and I want the jar of bee balm

ointment as well.”

“I anticipated your needs, and I have those items here,” the squire answered proudly.

“How did you know I would want the bee balm?”

“I thought you may have some sore spots, Sir Alan. You ask for it often enough.”

“Good work, Robert.”

“Thank you, sir.” Glowing with pride, the squire took hold of the reins and guided Rampage away.

Alan patted Garth’s carrot-colored locks as the child returned his gaze. “I must find your parents and have a stern word with them about keeping you out of trouble.”

Watching Ranulf help Gwyneth dismount, Alan felt another twist of jealousy tighten in his gut. “Ever the polite courtier,” he muttered through his teeth.

Clean garb and the salve in hand, Alan caught sight of an old nun and a beautiful young laywoman approaching his captive. Dressed in bright yellow, the lovely female wore no veil. Her red plaits were coiled in twin buns over her ears and glowed like burnished copper in the autumn sunlight. He surmised the gorgeous woman was the boy’s mother.

His suspicions were confirmed as the lad jerked from Alan’s hold and ran to the woman. The redhead knelt and embraced the child. She whispered something to him. Then standing again, she pointed to the guesthouse and the little mischief-maker sped away.

As the two women hurried toward Gwyneth, he saw recognition spark in their eyes.

They know her!

Immediately, their faces froze into guarded masks. Had Gwyneth signaled a warning to them? Her back was turned to him, though she faced the women. Had she raised a finger to her lips, admonishing them to silence?

So ... Lady Gwyneth knew the boy and his mother. No wonder she so fervently pleaded to spare him! Now Alan felt sure the nuns would withhold the information he needed because they would maintain their loyalty to her. As Saxons, their sympathies lay with the rebels. They would certainly help her escape.

He must prevent that. He would guard Lady Gwyneth himself and would not let her out of his sight. He smiled as a pleasant means to begin his watch suddenly occurred to him.

The nun and lay woman began to lead Gwyneth away.

“One moment, if you please, my ladies,” he called out, approaching them.

Startled, the three women abruptly halted and turned toward him as their eyes widened in surprise.

Reaching them, he bowed. “I wish a word with Lady Gwyneth before she retires.” His gaze met hers. “Lady, I would ask a boon of you.”

“What favor could I possibly grant you?” She put up a graceful hand, shielding her eyes from the bright glare of the sun.

“I should like you to assist me with my bath.”

The nun and laywoman gasped, and Lady Gwyneth stepped back from him, alarm

registering on her delicate features.

"Your squire seems most eager to please you, sir. Will he not feel displaced?" Gwyneth asked.

"Robert will be occupied for some time." He removed his helm and pushed back his mail coif. "He has my mount to tend as well as Father Rollo's and his own."

"Will not the grooms here do that?" She plucked nervously at the wide cuff of her shift.

"No one but Robert attends Rampage," Alan explained.

"Oh," she said feebly, dropping her gaze.

"So will you help bathe me, my lady?" he asked softly. The warm September sun caused him to perspire, and he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Gwyneth pursed her lips. "Sir, this is a convent!"

"But it is an acceptable practice for a lady to aid a knight with his bath and well you know it." He rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, preventing her withdrawal.

"Ladies, you also know it is proper." He nodded, addressing the black-clad nun and the pale redhead.

The old sister's faded amber eyes glared at him with suspicion. The strong sunlight and white coif accentuated the deeply etched wrinkles on her sagging skin. Her aquiline nose gave her the look of a hawk.

"I know not what customs the Normans observe," the nun said tersely. "Here usually married women perform such duties." Her thin lips pursed in a tight line of disapproval.

"Maidens do assist their mothers or older women in the task." Alan released Gwyneth's shoulder. "But tell me, sister, how do you know this lady is unwed?"

Was it fear or rage that made the nun's chin tremble and her slack jowls quiver?

"Do you know her or have you noticed the lady wears no rings." But Alan had observed that neither the nun nor the lovely flame-haired woman ever once glanced at Gwyneth's tapered fingers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ranulf striding in their direction. As the man joined them, Alan asked, "Does the thought of a bath lift your spirits?"

"To sublime heights." The sandy-haired man smiled. "I can't wait to wash the grime of the road away."

"Lady Gwyneth can aid me. Perhaps this other fair lady would consent to do the same for you?"

The fiery beauty gasped and placed her hands over her heart. Gwyneth opened her mouth as if to speak. Expecting her protest, Alan placed a gentle finger on her rosy lips, stopping her words.

Ranulf's eyes glimmered with mischief. "Of course, all the proprieties will be observed."

"To the letter." Alan nodded.

A wagon loaded with hay, pulled by a chestnut draft horse, rattled by on its way to the stables, and, somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

Ranulf turned to the flame-haired woman, holding her gaze. "But the lady has not

agreed.”

“Aelveva!” the nun exclaimed sharply, clutching the younger woman’s arm with her gnarled hand.

“It’s all right, Sister Emma.” Aelveva reached for the cross suspended from her white slender neck and fixed her gaze on Ranulf. “I know you will take retribution against the others here should I refuse to comply.”

The broad-shouldered sergeant unsheathed his broadsword with a flourish, and the women jumped back. Jabbing the tip between the cobbles, he placed both hands on the cross-shaped hilt as the sun glinted off his sandy curls. “I swear on my sword that I accept your help only if it’s freely given.”

Alan watched dumbstruck as a smile graced Aelveva’s full lips. Just moments ago, her lovely face had registered dread, yet Ranulf had humored the woman by his display of gallantry. Before the day turned to twilight, his friend would, no doubt, charm the girl--right out of her pretty tunic and into his bed.

“Then so be it,” Aelveva answered, leading Ranulf off toward the guesthouse.

Now that his friend had gone, Alan became aware of Sister Emma’s sullen glare darting through him. If looks could kill, he would be as dead as last Friday’s mackerel.

Ignoring her animosity, he bowed politely. “Thank you, Sister Emma, for your solicitude. Excuse us so the lady and I can find our way to the accommodations *without* your kind assistance.”

He took hold of Gwyneth’s slim hand and smiled as he eagerly looked forward to feeling those soft palms intimately caressing his flesh. The thought provoked a surge of desire to heat his loins and his phallus extended into a hard erection.

* * * *

Following Alan into the guesthouse chamber, Gwyneth’s heart pounded like a smith’s hammer against a hot anvil, but it was not fear that affected her feelings. Had he wished to harm her, he could have done so last night.

No. It was his touch that quickened her pulse and roused a longing so strong that the sensation felt almost painful. Yet those feelings heaped her with guilt because the man was her enemy.

Struggling for composure, Gwyneth glanced about the room. The whitewashed walls reflected the morning light, lending the small space an airy, cheerful ambiance. Through the window, the fresh odor of mint drifted on the breeze and mingled with the fragrance of lavender, wafting from the crisp, spotless sheets on the bed. A pitcher, wash basin, and a clean linen cloth lay on a scrubbed oak table placed against the wall. Sunbeams shafted through the small aperture, transforming the whirling dust motes to sparkling gold. Outside, the song of a lark floated on the air.

The bright glare caused Gwyneth to blink, and she turned away to see Sir Alan placing his clean attire on a chair in the corner. As the knight looked up, his intense gaze held hers.

Enthralled, she stood fixed to the spot. The gleam of his violet-blue eyes took her breath away, a hot sensation washed over her again, leaving her dizzy. Despite her good intentions, Gwyneth continued to stare. By the rood, he was handsome and so distracting.

Chiding herself, she averted her eyes. She must keep her mind on her mission--getting away. Surely by this time, Sister Emma had informed the abbess of her plight. Perhaps at this very moment Mother Clotilde was planning a strategy for Gwyneth's escape. The clever, capable woman ruled her domain with the power of a queen.

A diffident rap on the door brought her speculations to an abrupt end.

"Enter," Sir Alan commanded as he removed his scabbard and sword, carefully resting them on the table.

Their faces pink from exertion under their white coifs, three novices and two postulants hefted a wooden tub, buckets of water, linens, and a cake of soap over the threshold and into the chamber.

"Excuse the intrusion, sir, and my lady, but Mistress Aelveva said you needed provisions for a bath," a tall, lanky novice explained through her large, protruding teeth.

"Thank you, sisters," the knight replied, as he closely scrutinized them. "Please be about it then."

The women obeyed. Their work quickly completed, they hurried off.

"Those women know you. I saw recognition in their eyes as I did when Aelveva and Sister Emma greeted you." He swaggered toward her, stopping just in front of her. "Admit it, lady. You are well known here."

Gwyneth's mouth went dry. "They *know* you hold me prisoner."

He paced in front of the door, blocking her escape. "If you aren't a spy, why were you alone in the forest last night?"

Gwyneth remained riveted to the spot as cold sweat soaked into her shift and the ominous threat of a witch's torture and death stilled her tongue.

"Eventually someone will betray your secret, my lady. You would be surprised at how loyalty can be forgotten and information bought for a few coins."

He spoke the truth. Thank God that her father, Aelveva, and the kind abbess were the only ones to share her secret. Gwyneth considered telling the knight she was on her way to tryst with a lover but quickly dismissed the idea. One falsehood led to another. Besides, in the past she had proven to be the most inept of liars.

His posture slumped, and he expelled a long breath. "Let us get on with the bath then, my stubborn lass," he answered, resignation in his voice.

He moved to the bed and sat. The straw mattress and the feather ticking above sagged and crunched under his sinewy body.

Gwyneth's thoughts returned to escape, and she tallied the number of places she could hide in the cloister once he allowed her to retire. She would be gone for hours before they discovered her absence.

"Would you assist me with my hauberk?"

As Gwyneth helped him remove the knee-length mail tunic, her arms sagged beneath its weight. "Goodness, how heavy!"

"Yes. It weighs close to three stones." He took the chain-link garment from her and stood, carefully placing it over the chair in the corner. He returned and Gwyneth removed the padded jack from his broad torso and dropped it into a basket on the floor. She then peeled off his linen shirt and placed it on top of the jack.

The sight of Alan's immense shoulders pleased her and had a very exciting affect

on her. Though she modestly looked away, her gaze strayed irresistibly to his wide, bulky chest and wandered downward as she scanned his flat, hard stomach, and lean hips.

She felt a powerful urge to trace her fingernail over the prominent blue vein that ran along the bulge of the huge biceps. How would it feel to have those powerful arms around her? The notion caused a powerfully pleasant sensation to throb in her lower belly, and Gwyneth imagined herself irresistibly drawn to him by some invisible force, reminding her of the way the moon pulls the tide.

He glanced up. Discovered staring, she felt like a thief caught with her hand in the poor box. A wave of heat rose from the base of her throat to the roots of her hair. Even her ears burned.

To indulge such feelings was courting madness. She could never be a wife to anyone, let alone a Norman knight.

She must cease this nonsense and carefully consider her plan for escape, for this man was much too clever and had prevented her flight twice before. Gwyneth turned away, but he swung out his powerful arm.

He clasped her wrist and smiled rakishly. "We are not finished, lady."

His callused palm of his other hand caressed her neck, and he rubbed the pad of his thumb over her lips. The warm sensation coursing through her intensified. Dizzy with excitement, Gwyneth swallowed hard and closed her eyes.

What was happening to her?

He released her, and Gwyneth moved back as Alan bent over to unlace the leather strips binding his trousers to the knees. Quietly, he removed the stockings and the soft leather shoes. Clad in naught but his breeches, he stood slowly and stretched. His lithe, springy muscles rippled with the power of a well-conditioned stallion.

Fascinated, her gaze swept over his splendid physique. He was so ... magnificent was the only word she could conjure. Would his thighs, buttocks, and calves be perfect also?

The notion sent her heart tripping. Heaven help her! She wanted to see and to know.

"Why do you hesitate, Lady Gwyneth? Surely you have helped your mother bathe guests before?" He walked toward her.

"No." She shook her head. "My mother died when I was a child."

Their gazes melded once more, and his enchanting eyes took on a soft look. Did she see sympathy shining in those blue depths?

He looked down at the tub and cleared his throat. "Then turn away while I slip out of my breeches so you won't be offended by my nakedness."

Gwyneth knew the sight would not offend her, but she faced the wall. However, unable to resist, she discreetly looked over her shoulder and stifled a gasp. He had long powerful legs, but between his thighs his huge, darkly pigmented male parts hung proudly.

She had seen naked males before. More than once she had seen men swimming in the lake by the manor house, but none were so wonderfully made or so large as this knight.

Another hot wave of excitement rippled over her.

She saw him immerse himself and quickly turned away. It wouldn't do to have him catch her staring.

"I shall need your help to wash my back." Gwyneth peeped over her shoulder. The wooden tub looked absurdly small for his huge body. To fit he had been forced to bend his long, sinewy legs so that his knees protruded above the water to just under his chin. Crammed in that wooden receptacle, he looked oddly vulnerable, and she couldn't suppress a smile.

"Better." He soaked a wash cloth.

"What is better?"

"Your smile. It's the first time I have seen it."

She walked to him. "Forgive me if I don't see the humor in being your captive."

Gwyneth immediately regretted her terse words. If she was to escape, she must keep him off guard. Her father often said that a smile and a kind word went a long way.

He held out the bar of slippery soap and wet cloth. "Shall we get started?"

Gwyneth took up his offering and stood behind him, staring at the broad expanse of his back.

She had never touched a man's naked flesh before. The patients she had helped Sister Edwina nurse were nuns. In the village, Winna, the healer, never permitted her to touch a sick male.

"It would be easier to perform the task if you remove my cloak. You needn't be so modest. I've already seen you in nothing but your gauzy shift." He grinned wickedly.

"I'll manage." Ignoring his innuendo, she lathered the wash cloth with a thick froth of suds. Her hands shook as she hesitantly reached out and touched his warm skin. The heat of his body re-ignited the dizzying sensation, and excitement pulsed through her with each beat of her heart. How could this man, her enemy, cause her to react this way? She must complete this task quickly and get away from him, or she would be lost.

Placing her hands on the knight's head, she washed his short, thick, sable hair. Next, she worked her way down his neck to his shoulders. Reaching over them, she burrowed her fingers under the mat of dark hair on his broad, hard chest. As she retreated again, Gwyneth gently massaged the tender spot at the base of his neck with her thumbs, feeling his knotted muscles relax beneath her ministrations.

The sound of Sir Alan's low groan sent another pulse of excitement through her, and she felt moisture bathe her nether lips.

Stroking every inch of his strong back, her quest glided downward, finally submerging the water to reach the base of his spine. He leaned forward. Entranced, she felt his sinews bunch and flex beneath her quivering palms. She yearned to discover more.

"God's teeth!" he growled.

Startled, Gwyneth dropped the soap into the tub, causing a flotilla of bubbles to ascend from the suds and sail through the air before popping in the bright morning light.

"Surely I did not hurt you?" She stepped around the washtub to face him.

"No," he answered, his eyes glazed.

Their gazes locked, and a primal longing throbbed deep within her, holding her in its thrall. Her nipples pebbled, and her breasts ached. Gwyneth wanted to strip off her

clothes and feel his big naked body next to hers. In fact, she wanted a deeper contact than that. She wanted to merge with him.

But it was wrong--all wrong! This man was her enemy. Flustered, she broke the visual contact and walked to the window.

"Please, Sir Alan, let me go to Aelveva." She faced him.

"Oh, no, my lady. You have a tendency to wander and fall into danger. Besides, if I know Ranulf, the lovely redhead probably has her hands quite full at very this moment." He raised his eyebrows suggestively

Hands on hips, she took a step forward. "Who will help me with my bath? I have to wash. The odor of my horse still lingers on me."

He grinned widely and stretched out his soapy arms. "I thought I would return your favor in kind."

Even though the idea more than appealed to her, Gwyneth said, "Sir! That's an, an...."

"Outrage? Yes." He smiled. "It flashes in your eyes like summer lightning."

Annoyed, perplexed, and frustrated, Gwyneth walked behind him. Viewing the buckets of water, she suddenly thought of a way to free herself of him. Dare she take it?

"I would love bathing you," he continued. "I have a feeling you would enjoy it, too."

That was the final straw! Even if she was attracted to him, he had no right to speak to her that way. Besides, she had to warn her father. Gwyneth strained to lift the heavy pail of icy water, intended for mixing with the hot. With all the force she could rally, she doused him. Then dropping the pail, she scrambled for freedom.

Sir Alan sputtered and roared. She heard something crash to the floor, followed by the rush of spilling water. Before she could escape, his strong hands seized her and spun her to face him.

They struggled fiercely. Slipping on the soapy rushes, they lost their footing and toppled back.

Naked and stretched out full length atop her, the knight put his lips close to hers. In an ominous tone, he growled, "you should not have done that, Lady Gwyneth."

Chapter Four

Pinned beneath his massive weight, Gwyneth could scarcely breathe. Squeezing her eyes tight, she shoved the heels of her palms with all her strength against his shoulders, not because she really wanted him to break the contact, but because she thought she should.

However, he did not budge, and she felt his huge, hard manhood pressing into her belly. Instinctively, she lifted her hips and pressed against it, but not to urge him away. The feel of his aroused flesh made her burn with throbbing need.

"No, my lady, you will stay." Without moving from her, he reached for the large square of linen draped on a nearby chair.

Gwyneth watched him wipe the soap from his eyes and felt the water from his body soak through her mantle and shift. With a will of its own, her whole body tingled with wanton pleasure as she battled to rein in her wild response. How nice it would be to just let this man kiss her and take full possession of her. She wanted to feel the hair on his chest abrade her erect nipples. She wanted him to delve into her wet quivering passage and fill her with his prodigious length.

But she couldn't. He was her sworn enemy.

"You have transgressed, my lady. What penance shall I extract from you?"

Speechless, she stared into his violet-blue gaze. Irritated from the suds, his eyes were bloodshot, lending him the fierce look of an avenging angel.

"I beg you to remember, Sir Alan, I am worthless should my honor be compromised."

"You needn't remind me," he whispered hoarsely, "but, a kiss would not impugn your honor and would atone for your cruel act."

Gwyneth felt the steady thump of his heart against her bosoms while his sweet, warm breath fanned her burning face. She should not want her enemy's kiss. But she did. More than anything, she longed to feel those soft, full lips on hers. Then she wanted to feel his velvety tongue on hers.

She must get away from him or she would give in. Summoning all her willpower, she said, "Sir Alan, I appeal to your mercy as a knight to unhand me. The rushes are sticking into my back."

Alan draped the towel across his loins, protecting her from his nakedness as he freed her.

Gwyneth stared at him, admiring his muscular body.

"Why do you look at me so strangely? I am not a beast, Lady Gwyneth. I never intended to hurt you, though I doubt you can say the same."

"I didn't want to harm you either. I merely wished to escape," and she added silently, *not because I want to, but because it is my duty.*

"No, Lady Gwyneth. You'll never get away from me ... ever." His gaze burned

into hers as lifted her onto his lap. "Now, is this more comfortable?"

He slipped his arm around her waist, and Gwyneth's dry tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "It would b ... be honorable if you allowed m ... me to go."

"You must atone first. That cold water shocked me. I thought my heart would stop." He placed her hand to his chest. "Feel how it thumps."

The heat of his flesh warmed her palm as Gwyneth felt the steady meter of his heart. He continued his assault on her senses, stroking the length of her forearm in a slow, seductive rhythm that increased the tempo of her pulse. Her heart beat so wildly that she became lightheaded.

"So will you repent with a kiss, my Sweet Rose?" His voice was as heady as mead.

"Rose?" Breathless, she could barely repeat the word.

"Yes. The fragrance you wear is the scent of the rose," he murmured, pressing lips to her inner wrist. "Does your kiss intoxicate as well as your perfume?"

His male body beckoned to her hot, hungry need, and her gaze drifted from his eyes to his lips. No man had ever kissed her. In truth, Gwyneth never dared hope to know such tenderness. Was it so wrong to want a single moment of intimacy to cherish before the abbey walls confined her forever?

The knight tightened his hold, molding her to his hard body. His skin, still glistening with water, smelled like the woods after a spring rain. Enthralled, she watched his head incline toward hers, and a frisson of anticipation quivered down her spine. Instinctively, her lids drifted shut, and with bated breath, she waited.

A sharp rap caused them to jerk apart. Though startled, Gwyneth felt sorely disappointed.

"Damnation!" Alan secured the towel around his middle and leapt to his feet. "Come in," he shouted.

Gwyneth jumped up just as the door swung open.

Upon entering, Ranulf smiled, but Aelveva's jaw went slack. Behind them two wide-eyed novices hauled water, more linen, and a change of clothes for Gwyneth.

"I, uh, assumed you wish a bath, my lady," Aelveva said as she stared at Gwyneth.

"Yes." Her face scalding with shame, Gwyneth plucked at the drenched mantle and shift sticking to her body.

Ranulf chuckled as he set the tub upright, his eyes shining with merriment. "It seems you tried to drown the girl."

"It was just the opposite, if you must know," the knight muttered as he reached for another linen.

"Will you join us at chapel for tierce?" Ranulf asked.

"No. We'll remain here while the lady takes her bath."

The women gasped in chorus, and one of the novices dropped the bucket she was emptying into the tub. The wooden pail thudded on the floor, sending another large splash of water through the rushes and deepening the puddles on the floor.

"You cannot mean that," Gwyneth protested.

"No need for alarm, my lady." The knight smiled. "We won't violate your

privacy because we'll be outside. Ranulf will guard the window on one side of the building while I will watch the door. I can't give you another opportunity to escape."

The tension gone from their postures, the novices left and Gwyneth relaxed.

Mischief glittered in his eyes as Alan peered at the two women. "If you modest maidens will avert your gaze, I shall dress and leave. Of course, it is quite all right with me if you prefer to observe."

Embarrassed, Gwyneth exchanged glances with a red-faced Aelveva, and both women promptly faced the wall. A few minutes later, Sir Alan said, "You may turn around."

Swaggering to her, Alan placed a small jar in her hands. "This salve will take the sting from the wound on your hip."

Before she could express her thanks, he and the sergeant turned and made for the door. Just before he quit the room, he paused and faced her, his hot gaze sweeping over her. "I look forward to concluding our unfinished business, my Sweet Rose." "Dear God, my lady!" Aelveva exclaimed as soon as the men were gone. "We were shocked to see you and Garth ride in with the Normans. When I woke this morning, I thought you and he were breaking your fast in the orchard as you often do." The maid wrung her hands nervously. "I did not worry until I could not find you and no one had seen either one of you. I was beside myself with fright and was on my way to inform the abbess when you rode in."

"Oh, Aelveva, I didn't lead the boy into danger." She explained the circumstances of her capture. Then, unable to meet the anxious look on the mother's face, she turned, setting the jar of ointment on the table. "Garth was hiding in the forest this morning. You know how he loves to sneak away beyond the abbey walls."

The maid's hands flew to her pale face. "By all that is holy, I know, my lady. The Norman, Ranulf, told me what happened. He saw the boy's resemblance to me and concluded the obvious. The sergeant said you pleaded for Garth's life." Tears brightening the woman's emerald eyes, Aelveva continued, "I cannot thank you enough. How did you convince them?"

Her heart warming at the memory, Gwyneth recounted how kind Sir Alan behaved toward Garth. The knight's gentleness meant all the more to her because she loved the boy dearly. She lavished all her affection on him, for she held no hope of having a babe of her own.

"Then, Norman or not, I am grateful to the man." Aelveva nodded her bright head. "Another soldier would have killed the boy without a thought." She took Alan's sodden mantle from Gwyneth's shoulders and hung it on a hook by the window.

"True, but I'd still keep Garth away from the Normans, Aelveva. He may drop his guard and give them information."

"I shall, my lady." She helped Gwyneth out of her wet shift then placed it in the basket atop Alan's discarded clothes.

"I'm happy our little adventurer did not suffer dire consequences, but I am sorry for the trouble I have caused, Aelveva." She stepped into the tub. "I wandered again and have placed us all in danger."

"No, my lady. I should have slept in front of the door as I used to and warned

Garth not to travel beyond the walls. Then neither you nor my impish lad would have fallen into Norman hands.” She shook her bright head. “But truly I thought that your malady was gone forever. You have not wandered in some time.” Aelveva approached the tub, the cake of soap in her white hand. “From now on, I shall resume my old post.”

If only my sleepwalking would disappear, Gwyneth thought, accepting the soap.

Aelveva’s chin trembled and tears beaded on her fringe of lashes. “Lord Leofric will be furious with me and terrified that the Normans will discover...”

“That I walk in my sleep and conclude I am a witch,” Gwyneth finished for the maid, as she began to lather her body. “Even now Sir Alan’s men look at me strangely, but he is so convinced I am a spy, he cannot see what is in front of him.”

Even if he was her foe, Gwyneth did not want the handsome knight to believe she was odd.

“I am thankful that the Normans captured you and Garth rather than Wulfstan.”

Though immersed in warm water, Gwyneth shuddered, chilled to the heart at the prospect. “By St. Cuthbert, you are right, Aelveva. The lout would have no compunction about killing either one of us if it suited his purpose. He probably disposed of his poor wives, although we have no proof of it. Each time he brought a new bride to Wykston, she bore nasty bruises.”

“I have heard it whispered,” Gwyneth continued, “that after each woman gave him an heir, he arranged for her demise because the birth of the child insured he could keep the dowry.”

Gwyneth cringed. When she thought of Wulfstan as a husband, she rejoiced at the notion of remaining a virgin. “That is how he has gained so much land without so much as lifting his sword,” Aelveva added.

She stood, thick suds sliding down her wet flesh as Aelveva poured rinse water over her.

“If anything ever happens to Lord Leofric, my lady, Wulfstan will try to abduct you. He wants to add Wykston to his other properties, and he actually believes the mad ravings your father’s steward, Ulfer, spouts.” Aelveva set down the pail and handed Gwyneth a large linen towel.

“Perhaps, but if Wulfstan believes that a son of my body will drive the Normans from our land and bring wealth to his family, it is because it suits his cause. The promise of riches through marriage bedazzles Wulfstan because he cares nothing for battle.”

“True, but without your father, you are defenseless, my lady.”

“That is why I must escape to the safety of Wykston.” With trembling hands, she wrung the excess water from her hair and wrapped it in another linen the maid gave her. “Forewarned, my father can devote all his energies to the defense of the manor and the safety of our people. Otherwise, we’ll see Wykston destroyed. Thus far, William has burned all the villages and estates of the rebellious nobles. His harrying of the people of our land is far from over. He is ruthless and will not stop until the uprising is stamped out.”

“Please, my lady, do not even say it.” The maid handed Gwyneth another linen.

The notion chilled Gwyneth’s heart, and she closed her eyes against the horror of it, but the nightmarish thoughts invaded her mind. She imagined her quiet manor deep in

ashes with its fertile fields scorched black and its inhabitants burned beyond recognition. Worst of all, she envisioned her father's lifeless body swaying from the oak at the entrance to the village.

"I fear for my father," Gwyneth said, rubbing her skin dry. She could not bear to lose him because he was the only immediate family she had left.

Gwyneth cringed as she remembered the day her gentle mother, Enid, and her little brother, Godwin, died so tragically. She had been six years old when the three of them, along with Aelveva, had been drifting down the stream on the little, circular, hide-covered coracles. As often happened, the wind suddenly gusted, and dark clouds rolled in, blanketing the blue of the sky.

"My lady," Aelveva cried, "I am going ashore."

The maid had always harbored a little fear of the water, but Lady Enid was a strong swimmer and loved the stream.

"Very well. Take Gwyneth with you. I'll follow shortly," Gwyneth's mother called out.

Just three years old, Godwin sat on Enid's lap. Dipping his fingers into the water, he then clapped his chubby hands with glee as his silvery-blond hair shone brightly.

Aelveva and Gwyneth had just pulled their little boats to the cattail-fringed bank when lightning forked down from the sky, striking her mother's coracle. Aelveva screamed, but Gwyneth watched in paralyzed terror, unable to utter a sound as the large white flare charged through the air. Lady Enid and Godwin sank like stones as thunder crashed above them.

Days later their bodies, or what was left of them, were found miles down stream.

From that time, Gwyneth was possessed of a morbid fear of drowning and a dread of thunderstorms. Now the last member of her family was in mortal danger along with all the people on the estate.

"I must get away. Many lives depend upon it, our own included, Aelveva. If the knight sees me walking in my sleep again, he may realize the truth and charge me with sorcery."

"Please, my lady. I can't bear to think of that."

Swathed in linen, Gwyneth walked to the table. She opened the towels. Opening the jar of salve Sir Alan kindly had given her, she smeared it on her scratched hip.

"But how, my lady?" Aelveva took one of the linens from her. "The Normans don't let us out of their sight."

"I must think, Aelveva."

Gwyneth slipped the fresh shift over her head, and a sudden inspiration illuminated her mind. Picking up the clean tunic Aelveva had brought her, she tossed it into one of the puddles on the floor.

The maid looked at her with wide eyes. "My lady?"

"Tell the knight I dropped my garment into the water and need another one. Then go to my chamber and retrieve a fresh one and the large ruby ring in the repository on the table."

"But Sir Alan will order the sergeant or someone else to escort me." Aelveva shrugged, holding her palms upward. "The Normans will ask why you have a room of

your own here in the abbey.”

“The knight already suspects I am known here. Reply that I often come here to retreat from the world and pray and that the abbess keeps a chamber in readiness for me. That is the truth. Tell them that I shall not join them for the midday meal because I feel ill.”

“I’ll do what you ask, but be careful, my lady. The Norman knight is no fool.”

* * *

The sonorous tones of the horn floated through the air of the ancient dining hall, signaling the hungry guests to perform their pre-meal ablutions. Lay servants and novices held washbowls, ewers of water, and linen napkins for the guests as they scrubbed and wiped their hands before taking their seats according to rank.

The long, slanted rays of the setting sun beamed through the small, arched windows, turning the white cloths on the trestle tables to gold. The high ceiling vaulted up in groined arches. Two huge tapestries depicting scenes from the Last Supper and the Nativity graced the walls. The fresh herbs strewn on the flagged floor imparted their spicy scent to the delicious fragrance of food.

The cleansing ritual completed, Alan accompanied Gwyneth to her seat.

“The emerald color of your tunic becomes you, my lady.” He rubbed the fine linen of her wide sleeve between his thumb and forefinger. “I am surprised someone who was so ill earlier today can carry off wearing that particular shade of green so well.” He grinned smugly.

She dared not meet his gaze for fear he would see the deception in her eyes.

“Thank you, sir. Sister Edwina, the infirmaress, prescribed a draught, and I feel much better.”

She sank to the bench, and, as he took his place beside her, Alan’s scrutiny caused her heart to flutter anxiously. Should her strategy fail, the knight could kill her.

“This Sister Edwina must be an excellent healer to have cured you so quickly.”

“She is most clever,” Gwyneth said nervously.

He peered at her hand and took hold of it. “It is a fine ruby, but we’ve already established you are a noblewoman.”

Her mouth became as dry as sawdust, and Gwyneth retrieved her clammy hand. The knight observed too much and too well. Gratitude filled her heart as Robert approached then, momentarily distracting Sir Alan’s attention.

Serving them a trencher, the squire cut the bread in half and hollowed out the center of both pieces, filling the crusts with poached fish and carrots. Gwyneth recognized the fear in the boy’s eyes as her gaze met his. His relief became apparent as he left Alan’s side, for the lad’s tense posture relaxed.

“Aelveva told Ranulf you come here frequently to make your devotions. Why do you hide in an abbey?”

“Since you possess all the answers, you tell me.” Avoiding his gaze, she poked a spoon into the vegetables in her trencher.

He leaned in close to her, ensuring that no one else at the table could hear his words. “Very well, my lady, I shall. I think you are Leofric’s daughter. Everyone knows his only heir is a female. I suspect he placed you here for protection during the

rebellion. You learned we were near and foolishly decided to spy. It is a fact that Saxon females are bolder than our sensible Norman women.”

Though shaken that he had guessed her identity, she rankled at his slur. Gwyneth glared at him. “That is outlandish.”

“If you were not spying, explain your presence in the woods.” A challenge in his eyes, he raised a tankard to his lips.

If she explained, she would find herself condemned to die a witch’s death by drowning. Even now his men glared at her with suspicion in their eyes. By St. Cuthbert! This whole situation was as convoluted as a coiled serpent--and just as dangerous.

“I’m beginning to tire of that old accusation, sir knight.”

Father Rollo was sharing their table and frowned at her, displaying his censure openly.

Gwyneth felt quite overwhelmed by her enemies. Besides Aelveva and a few lay servants who helped with the meal, the Normans made up the preponderance of the population. The nuns had taken their meal earlier in their private dining hall, listening to holy writings as they ate.

The repast was tasty, but Gwyneth’s stomach knotted with fear, which made it difficult for her to partake of the meal. She popped a small chunk of fish into her mouth, hoping the nourishment would sustain her, but she could hardly swallow. After forcing the morsel down, she gave up the effort while Sir Alan consumed his food with gusto.

Realizing supper was almost over, Gwyneth realized that she must make her move now if she was to save herself and her village. Somehow, she must divert Sir Alan’s attention so she could carry out her plan.

She discreetly placed her hands in her lap then slipped them under the wide sleeves of her over-tunic. Obscuring her deed, she turned her ring around so the ruby with its secret chamber rested under her palm.

Almost finished with his meal, Alan looked at her intently as he set down his knife. Gwyneth’s heart thundered fiercely against her ribs and her blood pounded in her ears.

“You are trembling, my lady. Shall I warm you?” He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “After all, we do have some unfinished business to conclude.”

Seduction glowed in his eyes like blue flames, igniting a need in her that despite her fear was impossible to ignore. She inhaled a deep breath and fought to resist his powerful allure.

He arched a dark eyebrow and leaned closer to her.

Now! I must do it now. Gwyneth took up her napkin and turned toward him on the bench. Dabbing her lips, she pretended to drop the linen to the flagged floor between them.

“Allow me.” He leaned over the bench and reached down.

Gwyneth placed her hand over the rim of his tankard, springing the top of the ring to release the substance hidden in it into his ale. To her horror, he bolted upright, instantly putting his palm over her hand, so she could not remove it from his drinking vessel.

She stared into his narrowed eyes. A vertical line creased between his dark

brows. Fear dragged her down like a powerful undertow, sucking the breath from her lungs.

He rubbed the smooth skin of her white knuckles with the pads of his long fingers. Lifting her hand, he turned it over and inspected the powdery residue still clinging to the gold in the empty chamber of the ring. Slowly, he returned his riveting gaze to hers. Fury flashed in the depths of his eyes.

What revenge would he take?

"I told you once, I abide no treachery, Lady Gwyneth."

Unable to endure his stare, she bowed her head.

"Tell me, my lady, was it Sister Edwina or Aelveva who gave you the poison to kill me?" he whispered ominously.

She jerked her head up and stared at him. "It was not poison."

A sardonic smile spread over his handsome features. "No?"

"Of course not." She pulled her hand from his grasp.

"What was it?" The tone of his voice dripped with skepticism.

"Sister Edwina gave me poppy seed powder to help me to sleep."

"So you pretended to be ill to obtain the drug." His accusing gaze never left her face. "Then you hoped to dose my ale and escape."

"Yes." Gwyneth felt her cheeks burning.

"I am not a fool, Lady Gwyneth." He ran his knuckles along the tender underside of her jaw and down her neck as his long fingers circled her throat. His thumb flickered across her Adam's apple.

Gwyneth swallowed convulsively. Would he strangle her here in front of everyone?

"Why do you wish me dead?" He placed his other palm on her shoulder.

Though terrified, Gwyneth met his gaze without flinching. His eyes reminded her of violets after a sleet storm. Encased in a thin layer of ice, the blooms appeared so beautiful but so cold.

"I may be many things, Sir Alan, but a murderess is not one of them. Why do you think I would commit such a vile deed?"

His lush mouth compressed into a hard line. "It would not be the first time a woman tried to be rid of me."

Eye-to-eye with him, Gwyneth did not blink. "Then I suggest you seek better company."

"Assuming you did not lace my ale with hemlock, you should be willing to drink it."

"Indubitably." She lifted her chin defiantly.

Silence reigned supreme, and the room's atmosphere became stifling. Everyone had stopped eating, and Gwyneth realized that she and Alan had become the center of attention. Scowling, Father Rollo set down his napkin. Her pale face strained with trepidation, Aelveva's hands covered her heart. Robert's mouth fell open. Only Ranulf's mischievous smile lent comic relief to that sea of grim visages.

"Please! Everyone is staring at us," she murmured, shrugging off his hold.

He looked away from her and observed the other diners. "Continue your repast."

Lady Gwyneth and I are enjoying a private jest.”

Reassured, all the diners, except Aelveva, resumed their conversations.

Alan turned his attention back to her. “Now where were we? Ah, you were going to prove your innocence by drinking my ale.”

Without blinking, she took up the tankard and managed to take a large swallow before he grabbed the vessel from her hand, causing the rest of the liquid to slosh from the cup to her lap.

“No,” he roared.

“You are too late. I’ve drunk most of it. Sopping up the ale, she pressed a napkin to her over-tunic.

Aelveva jumped to her feet, panic on her face. “My lady,” she cried out then clasped her hands over her mouth.

A surprised Ranulf looked up at the redhead with a query in his kind eyes as the maid sank to the bench in abject misery.

Once more the room became silent as Gwyneth again became the focus of attention. “Convinced, Sir Alan?”

His face pale with shock, he leaned toward her. “Your act does not prove your innocence. It merely demonstrates that you prefer death to captivity.”

Outraged, Gwyneth squared her shoulders. “But you inferred a moment ago it would prove my innocence, but you are quite right. I would choose death to life in a Norman prison.”

He shook his head. “I never guessed you would be daft enough to drink it. I thought you would pretend to spill the ale by accident, otherwise, I’d have prevented you from swallowing it.”

So he had called her bluff and lost. Suddenly, Gwyneth felt that the power in their relationship had shifted slightly in her favor.

“How unfortunate for you, Sir Alan.” She smiled with satisfaction. “I suppose you shall just have to wait and see if I have swallowed death.”

Chapter Five

Ranulf stood by a cluster of hawthorn trees while Alan paced impatiently outside the door of Sister Edwina's herbarium.

Unlike the other buildings inside the abbey walls, this little structure was no better than a byre. It was fashioned in the Saxon style, so hewn oak timbers supported its walls, and its roof was made of thatch. The nuns used it for drying medicinal herbs.

He had wanted to carry Gwyneth to the infirmary, but Aelveva told him that the healer was here.

Damnation, why did the girl try to kill herself? Did she despise him that much?

No. She did not hate him. Her eyes had grown dark with passion, and her nipples budded beneath his touch as he was about to kiss her. Those were certainly not indications of revulsion.

Ranulf left the shelter of the hawthorns and walked toward his old friend. "You are wearing a path in the turf, Alan."

"God's bones, Ranulf!" Alan punched his right fist against the palm of his left hand. "If she dies, it will mean she intended to murder me."

"Why does that surprise you?" Ranulf leaned against the wall of the shed and folded his arms over his broad chest.

Alan halted and shot his sergeant an incredulous look. "What? Am I supposed to be flattered the woman tried to kill me?"

"No. Furthermore, the girl does not strike me as being a killer but" Ranulf smiled mischievously. Mimicking deep contemplation, he stroked his jaw.

"But what? Out with it," Alan demanded, stopping in his tracks.

"Aren't you unduly upset? You're convinced she is your enemy, and you are a soldier. Adversaries try to kill you on a regular basis."

And the attempts on his life had begun earlier than most. Jaw clenched, hands balled into fists, Alan steeled himself against the anguish in his heart that the painful memory dredged up.

Ranulf crossed his long legs at the ankles. "My point is that you are perturbed because you are reluctant to lose the girl, and it has nothing to do with the ransom she will bring."

"That is ridiculous!" Arms akimbo, Alan squared off with his confidante.

"Is it?" Ranulf arched a sandy eyebrow and shot him a skeptical look.

Before Alan thought of a worthy riposte, the door of the shed swung open and Sister Edwina emerged. Short and stocky, the nun held a lantern against the dusky twilight. The beacon spilled its golden light onto her black garb, forming a mellow pool at her feet on the ground.

Alan rushed toward the round, little nun. "Will she live?"

"Yes, Sir Alan." The woman answered in a mellifluous voice as the lamp cast a

soft glow on her smooth, fair skin, turning her large eyes the color of amber. “Lady Gwyneth is merely asleep and will remain so for some time. Aelveva reported that the lady mixed the sleeping powder with ale and drank it.”

Alan wiped away the sweat moistening his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Then it was not poison, sister?”

“No!” Sister Edwina shrank back from him. “I have devoted my life to preventing death, Sir Alan, not hastening it. I gave the Lady Gwyneth a dose of poppy seed powder earlier today. She complained of poor sleep for several nights. It was a small dose. Not enough to kill.”

“She lied when she told you that tale, sister. I believe Lady Gwyneth intended to drug me and then escape, but I discovered her treachery. The lady is Leofric’s of Wykston’s daughter, isn’t she?” He stepped closer to the nun. “It is the obvious conclusion because the lord’s lands lay less than a day’s ride from here.”

The nun’s large eyes widened. She stepped back farther from him, tripping on the hem of her habit.

Ranulf came up behind Alan and placed a huge hand on his companion’s shoulder. “It is of no consequence now, and I doubt Sister Edwina is interested in nothing but the welfare of her patient.”

“S ... she, uh, will wake no worse for wear,” the nun said. “Now I must be off to compline. I am already late. Aelveva is tending the lady, so she is in good hands.”

“When you see the abbess, inform her I am still anxious for an audience with her,” Alan called after the nun.

The holy woman hurried away, carrying the metal lamp to guide her through the darkness of the autumn night.

“Why did you interrupt my interrogation?” Alan turned on his heel and glared at Ranulf.

“Since when has anyone ever succeeded in that endeavor?” the sergeant replied, unperturbed.

“You are right, Ranulf.” He shrugged. “I am bullheaded at times.”

“I’m glad you confessed to that because I’d never have guessed it.” Ranulf poked his elbow in Alan’s ribs. “Let’s be off to compline.”

“You and Aelveva go. I will sit with the girl.” Alan smiled. “Unless you find the redhead’s company unpleasant.”

“Never. That woman’s company is a rare pleasure.” Ranulf laughed. “But beware. Your concern for the Lady Gwyneth is obvious.”

“No,” Alan denied vehemently. “It’s not wise to leave the two women unattended.”

“Of course not.” Ranulf shook his head. “Aelveva will lift her unconscious mistress off the cot, slip through our guards, and abscond with her into the forest.”

“That is absurd.” Alan stared at his friend.

“I know. So is your mistrust of everyone.”

“I trust you.” Alan shot his friend a sharp glance, signaling that he wanted to drop the subject.

They entered the dim shed and dodged bunches of dried herbs dangling from the

low beams. Alain couldn't recognize them, but their pleasant odor mixed and permeated the small space.

Aelveva sat on a stool by the makeshift bed where Gwyneth lay asleep, and Ranulf sauntered toward her.

Bowing gallantly, he lifted her hand to his lips. "Sir Alan gives us leave to say our final prayers of the day in church.

She looked up at him, her face a delicate, pale oval. In the low illumination, her eyes looked dark, vulnerable, like a startled doe's. Her hand still in Ranulf's, she protested, "But, I must stay with my lady."

"It is quite all right, mistress," Alan reassured her. "Go to pray for her recovery. I shall keep vigil."

Judging from her expression, Alan knew that she did not want to leave, but he would give her no choice if she insisted upon remaining.

Gracefully, she rose. "I thank you, Sir Alan. I shall return as soon as services are over to relieve you."

"If you wish, but I intend to remain through the night." He stepped aside, affording her and Ranulf room to pass through the narrow space.

"Then we shall both attend her. I'll have one of the other lay servants see to Garth." Aelveva walked to the door, the tall, blond sergeant in her wake.

"So be it," Alan said as the couple disappeared into the darkness of night.

He sat on the stool. Leaning forward, he propped his elbows on his knees, resting his head in his hands. To his relief, Gwyneth did not appear as if she were dying. Alan had seen that look all too often after a fierce battle. No, she looked beautiful, desirable, and smelled as fragrant as a rose. Abstemious for a good while, Alan's need raged.

Gwyneth stirred and sighed.

Rising, Alan took up the lantern from the long, rough-hewn worktable and held it over her. He observed the gentle rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed slowly and deeply. The candlelight gave her flawless complexion the luminescent quality of fresh spring blossoms.

He trailed his fingertips along the curve of her jaw. Her Cupid's bow mouth enchanted him, and he bent to kiss it but suddenly stopped. When he possessed those lips, he wanted to feel her warmly and eagerly returning his passion. The thought caused blood to pool in his loins, and his penis swelled into a hard erection.

But would she return his passion?

He sat again and suspicion insinuated itself into his thoughts.

Suppose Gwyneth had been meeting a lover in those woods last night? The spot was perfect for a tryst. Had her Saxon lover run to warn the rebels while she had distracted him by stepping in front of his horse? If so, she had the nerves of a trained warrior to avoid jumping out of the way when Rampage almost ran her down. The idea tortured him, but it was plausible because if she had been spying, wouldn't a lover make the ideal accomplice?

The Saxons had not attacked, but maybe they were waiting for a more opportune time.

* * * *

“How dare you suggest such a thing.” Incredulous, Gwyneth glared up at Sir Alan. “I thought you concluded I was too hoydenish to attract a lover,” she whispered, seething with indignation.

Though they were attending vespers, her palm itched to slap his smug face in front of all the worshippers. This capricious knight was driving her to the edge of madness. He behaved with kindness one moment, with suspicion the next.

Aelveva had told her that he had been so concerned for her that he had slept on a sheepskin by the foot of her bed all night. Furthermore, he had delayed his departure for her.

Now he changed on her again. Leaning down and murmuring in her ear, he had the effrontery to suggest that she had rendezvoused with a paramour who supposedly abandoned her and fled to inform the rebels of the Norman advance.

As if she would behave in such a manner! As soon as the holy service concluded, she would retire to her chamber and rid herself of the man’s presence until supper.

Perhaps, Aelveva could slip her some news because Gwyneth surmised something was afoot. A party of monks had met with the abbess earlier in the afternoon. The holy men stood close to the altar with their faces obscured by their deep cowls.

Why were they here?

The priest faced the people, raised his arms in blessing, and droned, “*Virtus, honor, lauds, gloria Deo Patri cum Filio Sancto simul Paraclito, in Saeculorum saecula. Amen.*” Virtue honor, praise, and glory be to God the Father with the Holy Son together with the Paraclete from generation unto generation.

Grateful the service was over, Gwyneth sighed and wended her way among the other members of the congregation who were marching out of the sanctuary.

As she walked into the courtyard, she noticed the long shadows cutting purple swaths on the cobblestones. The autumn sunset blazed in a tumult of crimson, gold, and mauve in the western sky as Gwyneth made her way toward the guesthouse.

Catching up with her, Alan placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

In no mood for his accusations, she stopped abruptly and faced him. “Unhand me, Sir Alan.”

He withdrew, but determination gleamed in his eyes. “I will have an answer, my lady.”

“Your demands tire me, but to satisfy your curiosity, I shall tell you. I was not trysting in the forest. I thought I made it clear quite clear to you that I have no man.”

“You said you had no husband, my lady.”

“Must I swear on the holy relic to convince you?”

“Saxons have a habit of taking sacred oaths and later breaking them. Harold Godwinson, your former king, set a prime example.”

“Did he knowingly swear that oath to William?” she spat out, hands on her hips, “or was he tricked by that lying bastard you call king?”

Sir Alan’s nostrils flared, and the muscles in his jaw twitched furiously, but the raw pain in his eyes caused her to regret her base remark.

“Neither the king nor I had any control over the circumstances of our births. Judge us by our deeds not by the indiscretions of our parents.”

Gwyneth turned and marched toward her lodgings. Alan doggedly trudged beside her, but she ignored him, remembering her aborted mission. She had been unable to flee.

Now death and destruction would ravage her home. Certainly, her hope for an infirmary there would never see fruition.

I have failed.

She would lose her home, everyone she loved, and possibly her very life. A whimper escaped her throat. Unable to go on, she stopped and began to cry uncontrollably.

He turned to her. "What is amiss?"

Incapable of speech, she remained silent, her shoulders heaving as she softly sobbed.

"Lady Gwyneth, why are you crying?"

She looked up at him. Through her tears, she saw that his face had an uncomfortable expression on it, as if he didn't know quite what to do.

"Is it so difficult to understand?" She pulled forth a handkerchief from the sleeve of her shift and dabbed her tears away. "I am a prisoner." She sniffed. "You are here to crush us, and many innocent Saxons will die."

He shook his head. "Were there another way to restore the peace, I'd take it. I hate needless bloodshed and death, but these nobles have revolted against the king after they had pledged their loyalty. This is William's land now. He won it in combat. Had Harold invaded Normandy and triumphed, we'd have had to bend our knees to him as our liege lord. It is the way of things. I didn't create them nor can I change them."

He spoke the truth, but that did not make her plight any easier.

"Can't King William negotiate a treaty of some sort?" she asked.

"The king will not be fooled a second time. William did not confiscate any lands from loyal Saxons. The nobles who rebelled, such as Edwin, Edgar, and Morcar, broke their sacred oaths. They have risked the lives of their vassals and serfs for vainglory and greed."

Again his words rang true. Motivated by pride and avarice, many nobles, like Wulfstan and Ulfer, cared nothing for their people.

They resumed their walk then stopped by the garden near the guesthouse. Ashamed of the reference she had made to his birth, Gwyneth cast a sidelong glance at the knight.

"Sir Alan, I" The apology stuck in her throat. Why did she find the words so difficult to say?

"Yes?" His gaze met hers, and he lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

"I ... I very much regret my remarks earlier today."

"You made quite a few comments, my lady. Are you sorry for all of them?"

"I refer to the one pertaining to the status of your birth."

The knight shrugged. "You aren't the first person to remind me of my humble origin, nor will you be the last. Though nothing in Norman law prevents a bastard from inheriting, the epithet stings."

Unable to bear the hurt expression in his eyes, she cast her gaze to the ground.

Alan claimed her hand, leading her through the open gate in the stone fence. His

warm palm on hers caused her body to tremble. Her senses focused sharply. The very air seemed to sparkle with clarity. She met his gaze again, and his brilliant eyes brought to mind the dancing of sunlight on a summer sea.

“Do I have your pardon then?” she asked softly.

“Yes.” He let go of her hand.

Braving its thorns, Alan plucked one of the late blooming roses rambling on the stone wall. “If you will receive my offering of peace.”

She smiled as she accepted the perfect flower. In the deep shadows of the encroaching dusk, its soft petals appeared the color of wine.

“Thank you, Sir Alan. I wish...” Filled with regret that the man was her enemy, Gwyneth turned away, but at the firm touch of his hand on her shoulder, she abandoned her retreat and faced him once more.

“What do you wish?” Gwyneth battled wistfully with the yearning that plucked at her heartstrings. In spite of her best efforts, she succumbed to her emotions and the words blurted forth. “I wish we could have harmony between us.” Frowning, she shook her head hopelessly. “But it’s impossible. You’re Norman and I am Saxon. We can’t stop being what we are.”

“War is a vile business, but treaties are often made and peace restored.”

“Do you think that can happen?”

“Maybe.” He smiled. “I hope so.”

The neckline of his simple tunic descended to a V, revealing the mat of dark, wispy curls. She remembered the feel of their crisp texture beneath her fingers when she’d helped him bathe. The memory stirred powerful sensations. Instinctively, she stepped closer to him

“If you do not love war, why do you fight for William?”

Pain stole across his handsome face, and Gwyneth cringed inwardly. Why did this knight’s anguish distress her to the very depths of her soul?

“It is a long story involving a wo...”

“A woman,” she finished for him.

“Yes. But I cannot blame just the woman.”

“Who else is at fault?”

“It is a woeful subject. I prefer not to dwell on it. I would rather turn my attention to the pleasant matter at hand.”

Gwyneth’s heart raced as Alan took her arm, leading her deeper into the garden. They paused between a huge holly and a stone wall. Gwyneth entertained the illusion that they were the only two people left on the earth.

The sun had dipped behind the distant hills, and the amethyst glow of twilight enveloped the world in the tranquil aura of day’s end. High above, the first star of evening glimmered in a sky still shimmering with afterglow, and a gentle breeze sighed through the trees.

He smiled down at her.

Acutely aware of his virile body so close to hers, she stammered, “The m ... matter at hand, sir?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I believe we have a debt to reckon. You could not have

forgotten so soon.”

Forgotten? Impossible! She trembled with anticipation.

Slowly, seductively, Alan raised her hand and pressed a kiss on the tender underside of her wrist. Gwyneth’s heart leapt. With all her soul, she wanted to sway into his arms.

But this man could be her ruin. Slipping her hand free, she turned from him. Undeterred, Alan caught her arm, urging her to face him. Her hands shook, causing a thorn from the rose she was holding to pierce the pad of her index finger.

“Oh!” She dropped the flower to the ground.

Alan’s gaze melded with hers. He lifted her fingertip to his lips and sucked it. The erotic pull of his mouth inflamed her senses. Weak and dizzy, her blood seemed to turn to mead. Her nipples drew into hard buds, and a hot wave of raw desire swept over her body.

Withdrawing her finger from his mouth, he wrapped his handkerchief around it. “Feel better?”

She had never felt so superb in her life. “Yes,” she whispered breathlessly, unable to tear her gaze from the unfathomable violet depths of his eyes.

The song of a thrush floated on the air as Alan drew her close, encircling her waist in his strong arms.

“Sweet Little Rose,” he whispered, and his breath felt like the lush caress of miniver against the sensitive whorls of her ear.

Gwyneth closed her eyes and inhaled the clean, male scent. She laid her head on his wide chest and listened to the wild drum of his heart. Twining her arms about his hard middle, she tilted her face upward to receive the rain of his tender kisses, which fell with the softness of thistledown. Everywhere his lips made contact, her eager flesh seemed to quiver.

Though she knew this man was forbidden to her, Gwyneth could not stop herself-- did not want to stop herself.

Seized by an urgent desire to touch every inch of his magnificent body, she began a shy exploration. Caressing his cheek, she thrilled to the rough drag of his beard and the bob of his Adam’s apple beneath her fingertips as they skimmed his face and throat.

His embrace tightened, and his gaze fastened on her mouth as his lips descended toward hers. Closing her eyes once more, Gwyneth held her breath, waiting.

Finally, his warm lips claimed hers. The taste of them was sweet, full, and rich, like the flavor of ripe plums, and she savored it leisurely, as she would a fine wine. Her palms slid up his chest, and lacing her fingers together around Alan’s neck, she pressed her body still closer to his.

His kiss became more insistent, though he remained deliciously gentle as the tip of his tongue inquired at the seam of her lips, asking rather than demanding permission to enter. Thrilled by his patient approach, Gwyneth allowed him ingress.

Who would have thought this fierce warrior could be so sensitive and so considerate of her inexperience? The very restraint of his manner inflamed an overpowering need in her. Strong spasms clenched in her belly. Pressed flat against his hard chest, her breasts tingled as Alan’s expert hands stroked the length and breadth of

her back in a tantalizing tempo.

Gwyneth wanted to melt into his bones and merge with him into one inseparable, exquisite creation of pleasure.

His lips and tongue continued their erotic plunder while his palm cupped her breast. As his fingers deftly flicked over her erect nipple, Gwyneth became lost in the riotous sensations Alan evoked from her body, remaining oblivious to everything else.

But she wanted more of him, and she was aware of warm moisture on her nether lips.

He guided her nearer the stone garden wall then cupped her bottom and molded her to him. He wasn't wearing his hauberk, so she could feel his erection between them as he ground into her mons.

Gwyneth's already drumming heart leapt into a gallop as he kissed her neck. Reaching beneath her shift and tunic, he caressed her hard nipples. Then he bent, and his lips closed over one hard, sensitive crest as his fingers played with the other.

She had never experienced anything quite as pleasurable as the tug of his lips on her nipple. Each time he sucked, Gwyneth felt a strong, urgent spasm deep in her belly, and she became aware of a spring of moisture bathing her inner thighs.

She groaned and gasped, but he stopped her cries of pleasure with his deep, hot kisses.

She writhed against him, swiveling her hips against his aroused phallus as he switched to her other nipple.

Then he lifted his head. "Gwyneth," he whispered hoarsely. Kissing her lips again, he lifted her skirts and caressed her naked thighs.

He nestled between her thighs and pressed his hard phallus against her mons. Every fiber of her body cried out for more, and she became desperate with a need she had never known before.

Only when he ceased his caresses and stepped back from her did she hear Aelveva's voice filtering through to her consciousness.

Gasping, she leaned against the wall for support and arranged her clothes.

"My lady, are you there?"

"I ... I'm here Aelveva." She stepped out from behind the holly. "Sir Alan and I were admiring the lovely sunset."

Staring up at him, she marveled at his composure while her whole being still quivered with the heat of unsatisfied desire. Had the intimacy meant nothing to him?

"My lady," Aelveva called as she and Ranulf hurried toward them. "The abbess is most anxious to see you in the

Chapter house."

Gwyneth's stomach knotted. Did the nun have a plan for her escape? She saw Alan and Ranulf exchange glances and despaired of seeing the abbess alone.

Nevertheless, Mother Clotilde knew the knight and his sergeant would demand to be present, for they had persistently asked for an audience with her. Perhaps this meeting

was part of a clever plan to deal with the constant Norman vigilance.

“Let’s attend the abbess,” Alan said. “Now the elusive nun will have to see me.”

* * * *

No tapestries graced the walls of the starkly furnished

Chapter house. The simple chairs, usually lined against the wall, stood in a semicircle in the middle of the room. Two braziers lent their warmth and light to the chilly space. The flagged floor of the spacious chamber was strewn with fresh rushes mixed with herbs. The no-nonsense atmosphere proclaimed the purpose of the place: The nuns of the abbey conducted business here.

Gwyneth deduced from the dour expression on Mother Clotilde’s aristocratic face that the matter at hand must be serious.

A guarded look in her large, dark eyes, the abbess sat ramrod straight in her seat. The light of the flames reflected off the nun’s face, turning her fine features into a mask of sharp angles beneath her white coif and black veil. The sheer energy of her presence so dominated the atmosphere, she almost obscured the monks who, still cowed, lingered in the shadows behind her.

“I requested to see Lady Gwyneth,” the abbess stated imperiously as Alan and Gwyneth, followed by Ranulf and Aelveva, approached her. “I have no recollection of asking for anyone else. The rest of you may leave. The message is for none but the lady’s ears.”

“Since the Lady Gwyneth remains in my care, anything that concerns her becomes my affair, Mother Clotilde. Maybe you will answer my questions, as well.”

Addressing the monks cloaked in the darkness of the corner, Alan asked politely, “What tidings do you bring, Brothers? I’m certain you have news. Why else would you visit a convent?”

Gwyneth nervously twisted the loose end of her girdle. The tallest of the three clerics emerged from the dimness. Even beneath his clerical robes, his body resembled that of a huge plowman rather than that of a holy man.

He threw back his cowl, and Gwyneth almost fainted. *Sweet Mother of God, it is Wulfstan!* What evil scheme has brought him here disguised as a monk? He had even tonsured his long, blonde locks and shaved his golden beard, both of which all free Saxon men wore with pride.

She suspected the other two hooded figures were his faithful housecarls, for the man never traveled without them. Gwyneth wanted to denounce them immediately, but she feared Wulfstan had left his men with orders to attack the abbey should he be captured. Knowing his troops might well be lurking near, she held her tongue, determined to avoid causing harm to befall the nuns.

Wulfstan’s face wore an expression of solemnity as he tucked his hands in his wide sleeves, mocking the posture of a monk. “I have sad news for Lady Gwyneth.”

Gwyneth’s heart pounded, and her palms became wet. “I beg you, Brother, share it.”

"Your father, Lord Leofric, lies dead at Wykston," Wulfstan announced.

"God's teeth! So you are Leofric's daughter!" Alan exclaimed.

Gwyneth gasped. "No!" The news struck her like a fierce blow to the stomach, forcing the air from her lungs. It mattered not that Wulfstan had verified the knight's suspicions and revealed her identity. Her father was gone. Her last ray of hope had been snuffed out like the flickering flame of a lone candle, leaving her to grope in the blackness of despair.

Gwyneth's knees went weak, and she swayed, but Sir Alan caught her in his strong arms.

Despite her grief, she wondered why Wulfstan came to deliver the news--and as a monk. Where was her father's herald? He should have come to tell her. Something was amiss.

Perhaps Wulfstan and abbess plotted to deliver her. No. She was certain Mother Clotilde did not know the man. Braeton Hall guarded a pass near the Scottish border. He had no reason to visit this convent because he patronized the monastery near his own home. Even if the virtuous abbess knew Wulfstan, she would refuse to have any truck with the perfidious lord.

Was her father truly dead, or was this a ruse designed by Wulfstan?

"There is more to my message." The masquerading monk stepped forward.

"More?" Mother Clotilde raised her hand, signaling Wulfstan to halt. "Surely not. The lady is bereft. She needs to retire with her sorrow."

"She will wish to see her father's last wish carried out. He has left instructions in this missive." He removed a scroll from the sleeve of his habit.

"Your insistence is boorish," Alan stated. "Lady Gwyneth must recover from her shock."

"It is your interference that is rude," Wulfstan retorted. "Lord Leofric wished her to sign this document."

Ranulf and Aelveva moved into view. The sergeant offered Gwyneth a chair. She gratefully accepted as her maid, face paler than ever, stepped behind her.

"This woman is now in my protection." Alan held out his hand for the document, his shadow ominously cast on the stone wall. "I must see what she signs."

Wulfstan's face flushed a deep crimson, and his eyes became bloodshot. Gwyneth thought that he would convulse in an apoplectic fit.

"Look to your heart's content." The lord slapped the cylinder of parchment in Alan's palm. "As a petty knight, it is certain you can't read it."

Gwyneth admired Alan, for he remained calm, impervious to the man's insult.

"Thank you, Brother. Anything I cannot understand, Father Rollo, my priest, will decipher for me. Alan unrolled the sheet of animal skin and turned it toward the light of the braziers.

Gwyneth's stomach lurched as the Norman scanned the missive. Could he read? Most men could not. Perhaps he was bluffing. Was the message truly from her father?

As he walked toward Ranulf, Alan began to recite the Latin aloud. He could read! Because Leofric had insisted she be educated so she could administrate her lands more effectively, Gwyneth was able to understand every word, but she could hardly

believe what she was hearing.

The knight ceased his recitation and looked up. "It would seem this is a betrothal contract. Lady Gwyneth is to plight her troth to Lord Wulfstan of Braeton Hall. All that is required is your mark on this parchment, my lady." Alan glared at her, pointing his index finger to the spot on the document that waited for her signature.

"No!" Aelveva clapped her hands over her mouth and swayed.

Ranulf caught the woman before she fell. "Please, Mistress Aelveva. Calm yourself."

Striding back to Gwyneth, Alan showed her the document. Dumbstruck, she took it in her cold trembling hands.

Now Gwyneth understood Wulfstan's foul purpose. It was common knowledge that she resided at the abbey, and his spies had likely informed him that the Normans bided here, as well. Too cowardly to confront Sir Alan on the battlefield, the greedy lord had come to the convent disguised as a monk and with a forged document, hoping to gull the Normans into allowing her to leave. Once he had her in his possession, he would force her into marrying him.

A cold sweat bathed her body, and she shuddered at the very thought of such a union. Sick with revulsion, she rolled the parchment and returned it to the knight. Now she was certain that her father was dead, for Wulfstan would never cross Leofric while he was alive.

"According to this document," Alan said, holding up the scroll, "Lady Gwyneth is a wealthy heiress. As such, her marriage is of prime importance to the king. He alone will choose her husband. You may return to her suitor with those words, Brother."

Alan put the contract into the flaming brazier. Wulfstan glared at him angrily then marched from the room with his two henchmen.

Overcome with grief, Gwyneth sank to her knees and wept.

Sir Alan rushed to her. The knight helped her to her feet. "Come, my lady," he whispered.

She looked up at him, tears streaming down her face. "Sir Alan, I beg you. Allow me to attend my father's funeral."

Chapter Six

Night had fallen, and its sooty darkness matched Alan's mood as he and Ranulf took up their vigil outside Gwyneth's chamber in the guesthouse.

Situated at the corner of the edifice, her rooms had but one entrance. Built as an extension, there was no interior access from her rooms to the rest of the building. Anyone wishing to enter her quarters had to leave the main portion of the structure and enter her abode through a private door that faced a small private garden. Presently, no one could get to her without going past him and Ranulf.

If Lord Wulfstan was determined to marry this woman, he might attempt to abduct her. Alan and his reliable friend were well prepared to deal with him or any kidnapper he wished to send.

Lying on his bedroll, he gazed up at the starless sky, recalling Gwyneth's reaction when he refused to let her sign the betrothal contract. Did her strong emotions betray the fact that Wulfstan was her lover, or had grief at the news of her father's death turned her face the color of ashes? Undoubtedly, both those events affected her, but which caused more pain?

Alan tossed on his blanket and envisioned the lord to be a long-limbed, sinewy Saxon with long, flaxen locks and a bushy, golden beard. Consumed by jealousy, he was now sure she had trysted with Wulfstan the night he found her.

Gwyneth fiercely denied that accusation, but Alan knew that she was protecting someone by her silence. Who else could it be but the lord of Braeton Hall?

The idea infuriated him. Alan could not endure the thought of another man touching her. Closing his eyes, he could still feel her lips beneath his, trembling like a dew-drenched rose in the wind. He remembered the smooth texture of her thighs. He was just about to probe her nether lips when Aelveva had interrupted him. He was sure they would have been drenched with her dew and the memory caused his loins to burgeon with hot, potent need.

He must cease this line of thinking ... and feeling. Lady Gwyneth was his adversary. Nevertheless, she had been hot for him. Or was she pretending? To gain her freedom, she might be willing to have sex with him, but she would betray him in an instant.

Still, the possibility of losing the girl shook Alan to his very foundations. Why? He was not in love with her. *But you want her--more than you have ever wanted any woman.*

This mad desire was dangerous. He must fight the attraction, resist it with all his might. He must have another female to satisfy his lust. The world was full of women; beautiful, winsome females who would be most willing to ease his male urges for the right price. He tried to banish her from his mind.

But like the ever-present mist of this island kingdom, Gwyneth stole gently,

silently, and persistently into his thoughts. He imagined her lying naked on his bed, her flawless skin aglow in the candlelight with the translucent whiteness of a rose. He envisioned her gleaming, golden mane tumbling over his pillows as the pink crests of her firm, full breasts jutted provocatively toward him. How he wanted to lie between those creamy-smooth thighs, sink into her hot, wet passage, and feel it quivered around his phallus.

“Damnation!” He bashed his fist against the damp ground.

“Alan?” Ranulf called through the darkness.

“Yes.”

“You cannot sleep?”

“No.”

“Nor can I.” Ranulf sighed audibly.

Alan propped himself up on an elbow. “What do you think of Leofric’s missive to his daughter?”

His eyes accustomed to the darkness, Alan watched Ranulf’s moving silhouette as the man sat up in the gloom.

The sergeant rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and yawned. “There is a great deal that doesn’t make sense. Why wasn’t she betrothed before this? She is a beauty, an heiress, and has been of age for some years. Her father could have made a brilliant match. Why did he wait so long?”

Alan sat up as well. “She may have been betrothed, but maybe the man died in battle and her father sent her to the convent for safety.”

Ranulf stood and walked to him. “It is possible. Now that she is free to marry again, it seems this Wulfstan wants the girl and convinced her father to give her to him.”

“The lady may have been trysting with Wulfstan and was making her way back to the abbey when we captured her.”

“So ... you have reconsidered your theory that she is a spy?” Ranulf asked.

“Not necessarily. She could be a spy who has a lover. Mayhap they are conspirators.”

“Yes. All Wulfstan needs to do now is decide whether he will attack us or plan a discreet abduction before the girl’s future is put before William. I’m sure he will ask the monks about the strength of our forces, although Aelveva told me he has not declared himself with the rebels.”

“He may petition William himself, in that case.” The prospect made Alan’s gut knot with apprehension. The king could consent to the match because Wulfstan had not taken up arms against him.

“Sir Alan!” Robert called out as he ran toward Alan.

Alan stood. “What is it, boy?”

“King William’s herald wishes to speak with you.”

The messenger came forth, and Alan recognized Eudo of Caen.

“Sir, I bring grave tidings,” the man reported urgently. “The Welsh prince, Edric the Wild, has revolted. The king moves west to restore the peace. He leaves the Counts Eu and Mortain to standby in the event more trouble breaks out in Lindsey. He bids you take whatever lands you can wrest from the rebels, for he plans to come north as soon as

the western situation is resolved.”

“He does not wish us to join forces with him?”

“No, he expects you to prevent more land from being taken by the Danish allies who linger in the Humber.”

“Inform the king that we shall obey,” Alan said.

“Yes.” Eudo turned and hurried away.

“Will we make ready to travel, Sir Alan?”

“Yes, lad.”

“So I suppose we ride to Wykston,” Ranulf said.

“We leave at dawn.” Alan pulled his mantle against the big drops of rain that began to fall. “I promised to allow the lady to attend her father’s funeral. Since he is dead, we must hold Wykston before the rebels do.”

Alan smiled. This event could work in his favor. Busy campaigning, William would postpone making a decision on any petition Wulfstan might send to him.

* * * *

Gwyneth struggled to consciousness like an out-of-breath diver, straining to reach the surface of a lake. Gasping for air, she sat bolt upright in the bed and peered into the blackness. Rain slashed outside the shutters, and the wind moaned through the trees, adding to her confusion.

Panicky, she cried out, “Aelveva!”

“I am here, my lady.” The maid sat up from the mat on the floor beside the bed and reached for the sole taper.

The flickering candle caused the shadows to shift ominously as Aelveva sat on the bed. Gwyneth brushed back her tangle of hair and leaned once more against the pillows, pulling the thick comforter up to her chin. She quivered with a chill.

“Oh, Aelveva, I’m sorry I woke you, but I am so afraid. With my father gone, I feel so vulnerable.”

“Maybe the Norman knight will aid. Ranulf said he is a good man.”

Gwyneth bit her bottom lip. “I doubt it. He will probably extract the ransom from Wulfstan in exchange for permission to marry me. Of course, Sir Alan will also force him to pledge his loyalty to William. The king will approve since the arrangement will gain him allies. Wulfstan will agree, and I shall be forced to marry him.”

“Oh, my lady.” The maid cringed. “Sir Alan will not do such a thing.” She stood, walked to the table, and set the candle down. Her hand shook in the dim light as she poured some barley water from the flagon into a tankard.

“He will because the arrangement suits everyone’s purpose but mine.” Gwyneth gripped the edge of the sheet. “Once I produce the prophetic heir, Wulfstan will dispose of me to keep my fortune and take his next hapless spouse.”

Aelveva approached, handing her the mug of barley water. Gwyneth drained it and returned the empty vessel to the maid.

“It is a chilling prospect, my lady. I pray that we can avoid it.”

The woman returned to the table and helped herself to a drink. After she finished it, she set down her tankard, moved to her pallet, and lay down once more.

Dear God, why was the life of an heiress so precarious? She would renounce all

her possessions in a moment if it would restore her father to her. Gwyneth closed her eyes, feeling grateful he would never see her joined to a rapacious clod who lusted after her wealth.

Gwyneth knew Wulfstan had no scruples about forcing her into marriage--by rape or kidnapping--if need be because the knave would permit no grounds for annulment. Otherwise, he would be compelled to relinquish her dowry. Besides, he wanted the prophetic son of her body--the child who would bring wealth and glory to his family.

The thought of marriage brought just one prospective groom to Gwyneth's mind--Sir Alan. Though he was the least likely candidate for that position, her heart fluttered at the hopeless fantasy.

Even now the memory of his hot kisses made her feverish with longing. Gwyneth wanted to repeat that experience again and again. The gentleness beneath his warrior-like facade aroused a deep hunger in her, a need that he alone could fulfill. Sadly, that desire could never be sated. Too many obstacles separated them.

"Aelveva," she called, desperately in need of company.

Her bright hair glowing in the candlelight, the maid remained silent. Gwyneth heard the woman's deep, even breaths and knew she was sleeping.

A draft blew out the candle. Feeling lost, abandoned, and so empty she could not cry, she listened to the beat of the rain and stared into the dark canopy above her bed.

Suddenly, a ray of hope beckoned. Sir Alan, Wulfstan, and William could scheme to their hearts' content. For a marriage to be legal, the church demanded she give her consent willingly.

And I will never give it.

* * * *

The rains long gone, dawn made its rosy appearance as Alan paced anxiously in front of the stable, watching his troops prepare for the journey to Wykston. The red-gold beams of sunlight glared off their metal helms as his men expertly tacked up their mounts.

Was he leading them into ambush? No, since he expected an attack, he would not be ensnared.

High in an oak tree, a robin chirped in alarm while a squirrel, its tail pluming behind, scurried on the leafy branch close to the bird's nest. His gaze wandered from the woodland creatures to rest on Gwyneth and Aelveva, already mounted, and Garth who sat behind his mother on a white palfrey.

Was the lady's lover waiting close by to attack his men and carry her off?

A nicker interrupted his thoughts as Robert led Rampage toward him. Flanks gleaming like polished obsidian, the usually spirited stallion remained calm under the squire's touch.

Ranulf approached, holding the reins of his own bay. His helm in the crook of his arm, the sergeant stopped next to Alan. "It is dangerous to allow the women and child to accompany us. We could be attacked."

Alan took the reins from Robert who made a hasty retreat. "Their own people would not hurt them."

"They could be killed by a stray lance or arrow," Ranulf countered.

“True, but I promised the lady that she could attend her father’s funeral, and her maid insisted on coming with her.”

Ranulf held a piece of carrot in his open palm, offering the treat to his bay stallion. “Is that the only reason?”

“What other reason could there be, Ranulf?”

“The reason that shouts from your heart, I think.” Ranulf grinned as he placed his helm over his mail coif.

Alan avoided his friend’s gaze, pretending to check Rampage’s girth as he looked at Gwyneth and Aelveva again. The women now waited, well protected, at the center of the column of men. Even if he had not pledged to allow her to go home, he would never have left her at the abbey where Wulfstan could abduct her.

“I believe you speak of your own heart. Do you deny having some feelings for the lovely redhead?” Alan swung into his saddle.

“I never denied them, but my affections go unrequited,” Ranulf mounted, as well.

“What? Not losing your charm are you, old man?”

Ranulf shrugged. “Mayhap she has feelings for me, but something prevents her from responding.”

Alan took up his reins. “Maybe she has a husband.”

Ranulf shook his head. “She has been a widow these past five years.”

“Too long a time for a lovely woman to go without affection, but I’m sure you’ll find a way to console the lusty, uh--I mean lonely--widow.” Alan smiled at his friend as they led the column of men through the gate of the abbey toward Wykston.

* * * *

From the position of the sun, Alan concluded it was close to noon. His apprehension mounted as they approached a grassy field in front of them. The troops had just left the shelter of the forest. As he and Ranulf led the troops across the flat plain, their position became more vulnerable by the second. He turned in his saddle and scanned his troops. The men’s postures were tense with vigilance and bodies primed for action. No one uttered a word.

Even nature was silent, for Alan did not see a leaf flutter or hear a bird chirp in the pleasant warmth of the early September day. The only sounds he heard were the rattle of weapons and rhythmic impact of hooves as they struck the soft earth. Yet, like the calm before the storm, the very air seemed charged with energy.

Beside him, Ranulf sat erect in the saddle. His wary gaze met Alan’s.

Without warning, a thunderous roar erupted. All at once, the Saxons appeared on the ridge of the hill at the edge of the plain. A shield wall stretched from one end of the formation to the other. To its rear, Alan estimated the enemy stood eight men deep as it had at Hastings.

“Robert,” Alan shouted. “Take the women and Father Rollo behind our line into the woods.”

The squire obeyed as a hail of arrows and stones, hurled from slings, darkened the sky. Instantly closing ranks, the well-trained troops deflected most of the darts by raising their kite-shaped shields.

Alan’s archers nocked their arrows and retaliated. Still, Norman casualties

littered the ground, spit by the deadly missiles.

Alan blew his horn, and his cavalry bolted forward up the incline, calling for God's help. "*Dex aid*," they shouted as they clashed head on.

Yelling, "God Almighty and Holy Cross," the wild Saxons held the hill. Sword clanged on sword, stabbing, slashing, and severing. Injured horses whinnied pitifully then crashed to the ground. Wounded men groaned in agony. With sickening thuds, axes joined the cacophonous din of death and cleaved helmets, opened skulls, and spilled brains. Lances skewered their victims like rabbits on a spit. Butchered like sides of beef, men fell. For hours, the infantry left standing hacked away ankle-deep in sticky blood.

But neither army gained an inch of ground.

Sweat pouring, muscles aching, Alan wielded his sword again and again as he desperately tried to carve a breach in the steadfast enemy position.

Shouting, "Out, out," the Saxons fiercely repelled anyone who attempted to penetrate their line as volleys of stones from slings further stymied the Norman advance.

Alan ordered his archers to aim high so that the Norman arrows would penetrate deeply into the Saxon line. Then he sounded a tactical retreat. His cavalry turned and withdrew. As he had hoped, the steadfast Saxons broke ranks, pursuing their adversaries down the slope of the hill.

The opportunity seized, the Normans divided into three groups. Two of the Norman groups circled back on the hounding Saxons, blocking any retreat while the third turned and charged. Now completely surrounded, the Saxons stood valiantly, but the mounted Normans cut them down like ripe wheat before a harvest scythe.

Close to exhaustion, Alan caught sight of a few survivors fleeing to the refuge of the woods.

They're going after Gwyneth! A new surge of energy invigorated every fiber of his body.

"Ranulf!" he shouted. "The women and boy!"

Wheeling their horses around, he and the sergeant spurred their mounts to full gallop into the thick forest of oaks.

With the women and Garth in tow, the Saxons sped away on the horses they had wrested from Father Rollo and Robert. Alan pursued Gwyneth's abductor while Ranulf followed Aelveva's.

White hot with fury, Alan bore down on his enemy, sword drawn. The foe lifted his weapon and resisted the punishing blows. Unaccustomed to combat on horseback, the Saxon dismounted in a wild jump. Leaping from his saddle also, Alan took the offensive and came face to face with the great, blond man.

Wulfstan?

Alan's rage boiled over as their swords clashed and sparked on impact. The forest reverberated with the metallic ring of metal as he took command of the contest and forced the Saxon ever back, never relenting in his assault. Pressing his advantage, he delivered the *coupe de grace* as he plunged his sword deep into the rebel's chest. Blood gushed from the man's mouth. Like a felled tree, he toppled back, death glazing his pale blue eyes.

Heart pounding, chest heaving, Alan whirled around ready to confront any foe

daring to approach. None stepped forth as Ranulf stood over his enemy with his face flecked scarlet and his hauberk smeared crimson.

Suddenly, all went quiet. Thirst burned Alan's throat, and his dry tongue stuck to the roof of his parched mouth. His own hands sticky with gore, and the smell of blood in his nostrils, Alan's gaze met Ranulf's with silent understanding. Certain the danger had passed, they carefully wiped their blades and sheathed their weapons.

Aelveva and Garth knelt by Robert who lay unconscious, his head in Gwyneth's lap. Father Rollo got to his feet as best his old knees would allow and brushed the forest bracken from his somber habit.

Alan went hollow inside and rushed to the boy's side. "No!"

Ranulf also knelt.

"He is still alive," Gwyneth said softly as her fingers deftly worked over his scalp.

"In spite of his fear, he tried to prevent the Saxons from taking the women because you had commended them to his care," Father Rollo said, his white tonsure glowing like a ghostly halo in the invading dusk.

Alan swallowed the lump in his throat. "Yes, he is a dutiful lad."

In the dim light, the blood matting Robert's hair appeared black. Alan dropped to his haunches at the unconscious boy's side. Anguish tore his heart as he scooped the boy into his arms. He whistled softly, and Rampage followed him as he strode back to the edge of the battlefield, leaving the others.

"Sir Alan, I can tend his wounds."

From behind him, Gwyneth's voice sounded concerned. He turned. The gathering mist drifted around her. The black of her mourning clothes contrasted starkly with the paleness of her upturned face.

Stricken and afraid the squire would die, Alan lashed out like a wounded boar. "Why should you care? He is your enemy. We all are."

Undaunted, Gwyneth walked to him. "I have seen enough death this day. I wish to see no more. Robert is not my enemy. He is little more than a child."

Uncomfortable expressions on their faces, Ranulf and Aelveva slipped away with Garth to round up the horses while Father Rollo stared at Gwyneth with suspicion.

Robert stirred. His feeble moan caused Alan to wince inwardly. "Do you have healing skills?"

"Some. I have worked with Sister Edwina, the infirmaress, and Winna, the wise woman of Wykston. I have my basket of herbs and instruments." Her fingers plucked at the cuff of her tunic. "There are many who will need my care this night. Let me begin with the lad."

Alan's arms hurt from the weight of his burden, but his heart ached even more. "Why should I trust you?"

"I have examined your squire," she said. "He has a deep gash at his hairline. The wound needs cleansing or it will fester, but the bones of his head are intact. He can recover nicely, but we must hurry. Please, Sir Alan, while you hesitate, the lad is suffering."

The squire groaned piteously, and Alan cringed as he shifted the boy's weight. "Very well, start with him. But don't waste your time on Wulfstan. I have killed him."

He nodded toward the Saxon he had cut down moments before.

“That man was Aethelstane, one of my father’s housecarls.” She lowered her lids. “Wulfstan’s men-at-arms never came. Those who met their creator this day were all my people. Gwyneth bowed her head and wiped a tear away. Then she bravely met his gaze again. “Carry the boy to the spring behind those boulders. I’ll tend his injury.”

His sergeant and Aelveva approached with the horses. Father Rollo took the reins of his mount and Robert’s.

“Come, Father Rollo. There are many men on the field who need Extreme Unction. It will be a busy night for you.”

“Yes, my son, and those same poor souls will soon need a Christian burial.” He shook his head.

“My lady, shall I aid you here?” Aelveva said softly as she reached for the cross suspended from her neck.

“Yes, Aelveva, after you attend Garth.” Gwyneth shook her head in dismay. “The poor child has witnessed things not even an adult should see.”

His stomach roiled from the stench of death, and Alan turned away to view the battlefield. Already, his men had begun to strip the mutilated corpses of their booty. The feeble cries of the dying made the misty dusk more eerie.

His heart close to bursting with pain, Alan gazed down at Robert, and his soul ached for another vulnerable boy of twelve, an unwanted bastard who had been cast out and marked for murder.

Chapter Seven

Morning light appeared on the horizon like a long, thin sliver of hammered iron then widened to a gray, dull dawn. Mist still hung over the plain like a diaphanous veil. After their night of heavy toil, Gwyneth and Aelveva sat beside a narrow stream. A fresh change of clothes, taken from the baggage cart, lay by their sides.

For all their efforts, few of the wounded survived, though young Robert would mend well. Lids closed, the maidservant leaned against the trunk of an oak, resting briefly before the tasks of the new day commenced.

Her eyes burning from lack of sleep and too many tears, Gwyneth ached from exertion and wondered about her uncertain fate. Now the daughter of a deceased traitor, she lived without the protection of kith or kin, and her lands had been confiscated. Sir Alan now held Wykston in the king's name.

Everything she tried so desperately to prevent had occurred, despite her best efforts. She had failed miserably. Her way of life, as she had known it up until this point, lay as dead as the corpses that the Normans had just buried in the great mass grave they'd dug during the night.

No matter which way she turned, Gwyneth saw a dim future. Sir Alan might advise William to use her to negotiate a treaty or obtain a ransom from Wulfstan. The king could order him to sell her into slavery. Gwyneth could not decide which fate was worse, but she would submit to neither.

If she begged for mercy and asked to spend a period of mourning at the convent, perhaps then Sir Alan would prevail upon the king to grant her wish. The jewelry and gold and silver coin she had hidden in her room there would pay for her escape if the king tried to press the issue of an alliance with Wulfstan. She'd leave the rest with Mother Clotilde to help her people.

Though the loss of her father and home weighed heavily on her heart, the survivors of Wykston concerned her greatly. Moreover, her responsibility was clear.

The September breeze rustled through the leaves, causing the foliage to descend in a flutter of copper and gold. Doubtless, the harvest at Wyskton stood ungleaned in the fields.

In a better time, the valiant men who died yesterday would have been home, reaping the fruits of the earth rather than spilling their blood into it.

What a horrendous waste!

Now the women, children, and elderly would very likely perish from starvation this winter.

After other battles, the Normans burned the fields of their Saxons, creating an unnatural famine to starve out the hapless *geburs*. The conquerors had even destroyed farm implements, and Sir Alan gave her no reason to believe he would not order the same thing done at Wykston ... unless she could persuade the knight to allow the harvest to be

reaped.

But how? All the able-bodied men lay in their graves. The women, children, and elderly could not manage the work alone. The task proved difficult even when every hand was turned to work.

Why should the Norman knight help them, especially since they had raised their swords against him?

Nevertheless, he and his men must have somewhere to winter, she reasoned. Needing food and shelter for himself and his men, he would not be able to destroy the estate. With a firm goal for which to work, Gwyneth felt a little better despite her grief.

Aelveva opened her eyes. Sighing and stretching, she interrupted Gwyneth's hopeful thoughts.

"We should wash, my lady."

"Yes. I found some soapwort by the spring." She held out the bruised leaves to her maid. "It won't lather as well as the soap you make, but it'll remove the blood and the dirt."

"Yes, and Ranulf was kind to heat these buckets of water. It will make bathing outdoors less unpleasant because the weather has gotten chilly." The maid shivered as she slipped off her tunic.

"I'm surprised the knight allowed us to be alone."

"We aren't alone, my lady. Look behind you." The maid pointed to the spring-fed pool in the woods.

Gwyneth turned and saw Alan bobbing in the cold, slate-colored water. Ranulf was with him, holding Garth. She shivered just thinking about the temperature of the pool.

"They know it is safe to leave us alone as long as they have Garth," Aelveva said.

"Yes." Gwyneth nodded. "They are certain we would never go without him." She smiled wryly. "If we ever did, they would beg us to take him back."

Lifting the heavy pail, Gwyneth moved behind a bush with the maid. "I'm glad you told me we were in their sights before I stripped down to my bare flesh."

"I wouldn't have neglected that detail, my lady." Aelveva cast off her shift.

"They needn't worry. For the present time, I won't *not* consider escape." Gwyneth dropped her soiled garb to the ground. Dipping a washcloth into the warm water, she began to scrub. "If our people are to survive, the Normans must help them."

Aelveva's darkly circled eyes opened wide. "How are you going to convince Sir Alan of that? The Normans usually drive out our people and supplant them with their own."

"By showing him it will be to his advantage to do so."

"Oh," Aelveva said as a look of wonder flickered over her wet face. Their bodies covered with a weak lather, they hefted the buckets, rinsing themselves. Teeth chattering, their skins covered with goose bumps, both women quickly reached for the linen towels then dressed in fresh garments.

* * * *

Aelveva and Garth at her side, Gwyneth rode with the triumphant Normans toward Wykston. The grief and horror of the past days had finally caught up with her.

Devastated, she grabbed on to the front of her high-rolled saddle, struggling to salvage the last shreds of her battered dignity.

The wind gusted, flipping over the russet leaves on the ancient oaks. A sure sign rain was on the way. If they hurried, they could avoid the slashing downpour because Wykston lay before them, just beyond the verdant pasture.

"Please, God, no lightning," she murmured.

Wykston sat like a bull's eye in the center of a target, surrounded by two concentric fences with the common land protected between the stockades. Outside those fences, the cultivated furlongs stretched ten times longer than they were wide, rich with a fruitful harvest. Would Sir Alan order those fields to be burned?

Every spring since she was a child, Gwyneth remembered teams of oxen pulling plows and turning over the rich soil. Would her people enjoy the bountiful fruits of their labors? Despite the grief gnawing at her, she must ensure that they did.

Somewhere in the distance, a crow cawed irreverently as the army trooped through the first gate where some livestock grazed peacefully. Alan raised his horn to signal the inhabitants he had come to take possession.

The army filed through the second stockade and into the center of village. The *gerburs*, what remained of them, stared in wide-eyed vigilance. With the exception of some men too old for battle, most were women and children. They stood, doffing their caps or bowing as she passed.

Her heart broke anew. Their shoulders slumped in submission, and their eyes full of fear, the *gerburs* had the look of a vanquished people. The poor souls expected the worst of their Norman conquerors and would likely get it unless she convinced the knight otherwise.

She surveyed the wood-framed wattle-and-daub cottages, knowing where every family lived. Each home had a garden, replete with vegetables and herbs for cooking, medicines, or dyes. Curly wisps of smoke escaped from vents in the thatched roofs, evidence of the cooking fires in the communal rooms, for it was nearly sunset and time for supper.

She bit her lip as her own abode came into view. Much larger than the ordinary villager's home, the building contained enough space to accommodate the frequent guests who visited her father on official business. The entire village could take refuge inside should an enemy attack. For that reason, the manor house possessed its own stockade.

Doubtless, King William would order a stone tower atop a motte and surrounded by a bailey to be built by the new master of Wykston. Such structures now studded the landscape, although just three years had passed since the Normans invaded Britain. From his citadel, the king's vassal would command this area for his sovereign and overlord, enforcing peace over the shire.

But there may be no tranquility for her people--only eviction and starvation.

What would she do if Sir Alan refused to prevent these people from homelessness and death? What would happen to Aelveva and Garth? The problem tormented her as she paraded in silence beside Alan and ironically led the enemy through the defensive enclosure of the manor house.

A gaggle of geese rushed forth. Honking vigorously, their wings outspread, the

fowl abruptly waddled off in another direction when confronted by the huge mounts meeting them square on.

Suddenly, her father's elderly steward emerged at the door of her home and hobbled forward. His long, gray hair and beard straggled to his stooped shoulders and concave chest. The man's frail body shook as the wind caught his cloak, flapping the garment behind him. As if in pain, the man clutched an oak staff and slowly, tenaciously made his way toward Gwyneth.

"Ulfer!" she cried.

Though the steward was too old for battle, Gwyneth found it difficult to believe the fanatical man still remained in Wykston, for his hatred of the Normans bordered on madness. The man's lined thin face remained as hostile as a battleaxe.

Since her father was now dead, Ulfer and Aethlestane undoubtedly had rallied the men to attack Sir Alan's forces.

His faded eyes glared with contempt. "I should have died rather than lived to see Leofric's daughter become the whore of a Norman swine and betray her Saxon blood."

Gwyneth recoiled.

Dismounting, Alan stiffened, and his eyes narrowed to slits. "Hold your tongue, old man. No Norman dishonored the lady. It is you who besmirch her virtue and good name with your lies."

His large hands spanning her waist, the knight helped her from her horse.

Gwyneth decided to contend with the steward's insolence later. Summoning all her courage, she stepped toward the old servant. "I wish to view my father's remains."

Father Alfred, the old village priest, came forward. His spare body appeared too thin for his simple habit. "Yes, my lady. He rests in the church. I will come with you."

"No, Father. I wish to be alone with him this last time."

Vaguely aware the soldiers had dismounted and now led their horses toward the stables, Gwyneth set off immediately for the house of worship. Hurrying across the village to the holy place, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned. Sir Alan was following her at a discreet distance. Gwyneth offered a prayer of thanks that he afforded her some privacy as she headed toward her destination.

All her life the tiny, stone church had been the hub of her existence, the center of her world. There she attended mass each morning, observed the offices of the day, and confessed her sins. When sad or troubled, she always found consolation in the refuge of the quiet, sacred place. Bereft, she had sat immobile with grief as the pallbearers carried her mother and brother's coffins down the center aisle to their final resting places in the churchyard. Now she would attend another funeral within those four walls.

Her childhood hopes to celebrate her nuptials and the baptisms of her children here had long been dashed, scattered like cold cinders to the four winds.

The knight caught up with her but allowed her to enter the church alone. Walking through the portal, Gwyneth shivered. The interior of the small, old edifice trapped the chilled air. Swallowed in gloom, the tiny, high windows with their panes of greenish glass allowed scant light in the sanctuary even during the bright hours of the afternoon.

The tall, thick candles, standing like sentinels at each corner of her father's casket provided but meager illumination. Flickering in the dank drafts, the tapers cast long,

eerie shadows across the floor and walls while scenting the air with the sweet smell of beeswax.

Her heart heavy, Gwyneth genuflected, rose, then plodded down the aisle and stood at the catafalque. She bent over the coffin, gazing in disbelief at the shrouded, pale corpse of her father.

His usually florid face appeared so pallid. Even his blond hair and beard, so liberally streaked with silver, had lost its luster. She reached out to caress his face then jerked back her hand in horror.

So cold!

Her father was gone--forever. In his place lay an empty, lifeless husk, devoid of living spirit. An anguished sob tore from her throat. Blinded by tears, she stumbled to the altar rail and sank to her knees, her hands covering her wet face.

"Please, God, let him rest in peace," she whispered.

Behind her, the sound of scuffling feet approached. She turned. Ulfer limped down the aisle toward her. The knight had also now entered the church but remained near the door, discreetly out of her way. Gwyneth stepped from the altar, joining the old man at the brier.

"You deserved to weep and grieve for the father you so shamefully disobeyed and dishonored," he scolded, disdain stamped on his withered face.

His words struck her like a blow to the face.

"It is not so." She shook her head. "I never shamed or disobeyed him."

Suddenly, Alan appeared at her side. His arm circled her shoulders protectively. "I knew I should have forbidden you entry, old man. Your lies are as ill timed as they are vile. Have the decency to let this woman mourn her father in peace."

Ulfer's pale eyes burned with hatred. "Lies?" His voice trembled. "If she is not your whore, why do you leap to her defense?"

Alan's hand closed on the hilt of his sword. "Because your accusations are false. No one has displayed more loyalty to her people than she has."

"Then let her prove that fidelity by marrying Wulfstan. It was Leofric's last wish." Ulfer pounded the end of his staff of the flagstone floor.

The men's angry voices reverberated off the stone walls, driving nails of pain through her head. Closing her eyes, she covered her ears, trying to shut out their words.

Alan's voice became quiet, but his soft tone did not minimize the danger of his threat. "Go, old man, or else you will regret your foolish jibes."

The two men glared at each other, both refusing to back down.

The tension unbearable, Gwyneth stepped between them. "We shall discuss this later, Ulfer. Now I wish to grieve the loss of my father."

The steward shot her a look of disgust, and she almost withered with shame. Lips curled with contempt, Ulfer scuffled away.

With Sir Alan by her side, she returned to the altar rail. Gwyneth knelt and prayed for the repose of her father's soul, but her thoughts wandered to the abject misery of her existence.

Except for Aelveva, Gwyneth had no one--no parents, no husband, and no children. Her own people considered her a whore and a traitor. Ironically, the Norman

knight believed she was a spy. Could no one see the truth?

Silently, her body shook with sobs until she became aware of a warm, strong hand resting on her shoulder.

Bending down, Sir Alan whispered, "Lady Gwyneth, we must go. This dampness here will sicken you."

She sniffed and wiped her moist face with her handkerchief. "I fare well."

"No, you don't. You've had a great shock, and these last days have been arduous. Come, my lady, you must eat."

"I ... I couldn't." She turned to him. "I..."

"I refuse to take no for an answer. It'll gain you nothing to get ill."

Commiseration shone in his eyes like a kind beacon, guiding her from the tempest-tossed sea of her emotions to the safety of a snug harbor. The knight spoke truly. She must save her strength. Though her grief weighed heavily, she had much to accomplish.

Even if her people no longer trusted her, she still had an obligation to see that they had food for the winter, for it had been her father's decision to lead them into rebellion.

Grasping the cold marble of the altar rail, Gwyneth pulled herself up. She could no longer procrastinate. She must ask the knight to help with the harvest before it rotted in the fields.

Suddenly, thunder rolled in the distance, and she froze to the spot.

He took her arm. "We must hurry, lady, or we'll be soaked to the skin."

She shrank back. "No!"

Gwyneth felt safer inside the stone church, for its slate roof would not burst into flame when struck by lightning like the thatch of the wooden manor house.

"I can see you shivering. We must leave," Sir Alan insisted as he gently tugged her forward.

Gwyneth resisted. "Please! Allow me to stay until the storm passes."

"Very well, since it frightens you," he murmured kindly. "Here, let me at least keep you warm."

Gwyneth did not resist when he placed his cloak over her shoulders and circled her waist with his brawny arm. Alan led her through the inky shadows up the nave to the dark entrance.

She started as lightning flashed through the small windows and chinks in the door, brightening the space with its ghostly bluish-white light. Seconds later, she heard the boom of thunder, the howl of the wind, and the splatter of rain against the roof.

She closed her eyes as fear robbed her of breath. The sight of a bolt of white fire flashing down from the sky and killing her mother and brother flared in her mind's eye.

She did not protest as he held her closer. Inhaling his clean, male scent, Gwyneth rested her cheek against his broad chest, listening to the steady beat of Alan's heart.

For the first time in a long while, she felt safe, protected, and, mad as it seemed, cherished in the arms of her enemy.

Somehow, in the darkness, she summoned her courage.

"Sir Alan, the safety of my people concerns me. For good or ill, my father led them in the direction he thought best. Because of that decision, they paid a dear price.

Most of the men are dead. The women have lost their sons and husbands.”

Gwyneth drew back slightly. Another flash of lightning startled her but still gave her the opportunity to search his face. She read nothing in his eyes. “If your men do not help them bring in the crops, they’ll starve. I know that in other places, the Normans have displaced the Saxons and brought in their own people to work the land, but it will benefit you, as well, for your men must spend the winter somewhere. I beg you, Sir Alan, will you help my people?”

Chapter Eight

Despite the din of the rowdy alehouse, Alan remained deep in thought as he sat at a trestle table nestled into a corner at the far end of the room. In the center of the earthen floor, the crackling blaze of the open hearth kept the chill of the damp evening at bay. Soot streaked the whitewashed walls and blackened their supporting oak timbers, a testament to many such fires over the years.

Alan stared into the bottom of his empty mug. Again and again, Lady Gwyneth intruded on his thoughts like the strains of a haunting melody. When he closed his eyes, he saw her face, smelled her scent, and tasted her kiss. The memory of her soft body in his arms never failed to make him hot with desire.

If Aelveva hadn't interrupted them in the garden, he was certain Gwyneth would have let him make love to her because she had reciprocated his passion. He had been on the point of finding her nether lips when the maid had arrived.

Damn! He was sure he would have found her opening wet and ready for him.

Exhaling a pent-up breath, Alan leaned against the rough wall. How he wanted her.

He also admired her pluck and spirit. From their first meeting, she remained undaunted. Even in the abyss of grief, she considered her people, asking him, her enemy, to help them! Her troubles would have crushed a lesser person. Yet she bore all her misfortunes with dignity and courage.

Still, a mere thunderstorm frightened her! Then again, he supposed many people feared them.

As Alan peered through the blue-gray haze of wood smoke, he spied Ranulf entering the room. Navigating his tall form around several men sprawled out on the floor and insensible from too much drink, the sergeant took a seat on the bench facing Alan.

Close on his companion's heels, a serving wench sauntered toward them, swaying her hips provocatively. Ranulf turned and smiled at the saucy woman.

The girl's heart-shaped face had small even features. She wore no veil, and her tawny braids hung, shiny and thick, to her narrow waist. The bodices of her russet tunic and shift were cut in low, revealing a good amount of her full breasts.

Despite her beauty, Alan found the maid far too brazen for his taste.

A wide smile on her lips, a large pitcher in each hand, the female approached their table. "What will please me lords this round? More ale, mead, or some *other* delight?"

"Ale," both men answered at once, not rising to her bait.

As she bent to fill their tankards, the wench displayed more than a generous portion of her voluptuous bosoms. Her task finished, she ambled away with a sultry promise in her eyes.

"At least that lass is not hostile to us." Ranulf grinned.

Alan sat up straight on the bench, took a sip of his ale then set the tankard down.

“Not overtly, but it is because she would ply her wares, and I do not refer to the drink she offers.”

Ranulf glanced toward her admiringly. “She is a bit too bold, but still it’s nice to see a pretty smile for a change. The other villagers seethe in contempt.”

“The old retainer, Ulfer, feeds the fire of their discontent.” Alan took a long pull of the golden liquid then set the vessel down.

“Yes, Aelveva told me that he is a zealot and hates us.”

“A raving lunatic is a more apt description.” Leaning forward on the rough-hewn table, Alan told Ranulf how the steward had behaved toward Gwyneth in the church.

“Mangy cur! I’d have been hard pressed not to thrash him.” Ranulf shook his huge fist.

“I almost did. It would have taught the knave some manners, but the man is so old and frail, I was afraid I’d kill him.”

Ranulf swallowed a gulp of ale then said, “Another lady would have demanded his gizzard on a skewer.”

“Yes, but Lady Gwyneth never lost her temper, although she seemed crushed by the accusations the old man hurled at her. Still, she never seemed to think of herself. Instead, she begged me to gather in the harvest for the people.” Alan shook his head in amazement

“Careful.” Ranulf shot him a mischievous smile. “You sound as if you admire her.”

Annoyed he had revealed himself, Alan admitted grudgingly, “No one is all bad.”

The sergeant’s jaw went slack. “Be fair, Alan. The lady tended our wounded with the same mercy she showed her own fallen men. Aelveva says she always ministers to the sick, though they have a healer here in Wykston. She doesn’t need to do that.”

Alan traced around the rim of his tankard with his index finger and deliberately shifted the focus of the conversation to his sergeant. “So, the lovely redhead confides in you.”

Disappointment shadowed Ranulf’s eyes. “I hardly call sharing common knowledge a confidence.”

“But you would like to be, shall we say, closer to the woman?”

“What healthy man wouldn’t? She’s a beautiful, sweet, desirable woman. But she won’t allow me to get near her. Though I sense she feels something for me, she is afraid these people will scorn her.” Ranulf shrugged.

“If Ulfer is an example of how these unruly Saxons comport themselves, maybe Aelveva is wise to keep her distance from you. The addled dog kept demanding that Lady Gwyneth marry Wulfstan, and I am sure she probably agrees,” he said bitterly. “I will never forget the look on her face when I wouldn’t let her sign the contract.” Alan’s grip tightened around his mug, turning his knuckles white. “He insists the union was her father’s last wish.”

“No, Alan. He lies. I overheard some of the villagers discussing Ulfer. They say he rants in vain. Leofric forbade his daughter from marrying anyone because he had promised her to God. Aelveva confirms their words.”

“A strange fate for a nobleman’s only heir,” Alan said. “Still it proves the betrothal contract is a forgery.”

Ranulf nodded. “Aelveva also told me that Ulfer has a fool notion. He is convinced that a son born to Gwyneth and Wulfstan will become a great Saxon warrior who will force the Normans from Britain. This heir is destined to bring great riches to his family. That is why Wulfstan wants to marry the woman.”

“I’ll never allow it!” Alan slammed his fist on the table. The force of his blow dislodged the candle from its holder, and it rolled to the edge of the table.

Catching the still burning taper, Ranulf replaced it. “Well, you decided that matter without the benefit of deliberation. Why are you so adamant?” He cocked an eyebrow and chuckled.

Alan scowled at him. How could he tell Ranulf that Gwyneth had gotten into his blood like a raging fever? As irrational as his feelings were, he couldn’t shake them. God, he felt torn.

“Uh, she is alone, without the protection of kin. I can’t abandon her,” Alan replied, trying to excuse his outburst.

Ranulf stroked his chin. “What will you do with her?”

Alan knew what he *wanted* to do with her--what he needed to do with her. He longed to slowly undress her then stoke the fire of her passion to unbearable heights. He yearned to hear her moaning and writhing with hot, demanding need. And when her passage was drenched, he wanted to sink into it to his hilt and feel her fevered flesh slipping against his. He wanted to feel her strong muscles contracting. Then his seed would explode into her.

Alan got hot and hard just thinking about it.

But she loved another man. Wulfstan!

Alan shrugged, pretending indifference. “I haven’t thought about it.” In fact, he had considered the matter too often and long into every night since he found her.

“You could return her to the convent,” Ranulf suggested. “The nuns seemed fond of her and that was how Leofric had decided she should spend her life. Or” Ranulf shot him an impish look.

“Or what?” Alan lifted his tankard to his lips.

Ranulf paused for a moment as if measuring his words carefully. He looked up, rotating his mug between his palms. “You could marry her.”

Alan sputtered on his ale. “Me? You must be drunk. The notion is preposterous!” Setting down his drink, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“Is it?” Ranulf drew out his words, his hazel eyes twinkling with mischief.

Somewhere in the background, Alan heard the punch line of a ribald joke, and the tipsy men at a nearby table reacted with a chorus of hoots and guffaws.

Alan exhaled audibly, wishing he could marry her, but he said, “yes, it is, and well you know it.”

“Don’t deny that you want to sink that big shaft of yours into her and spill your seed in her womb. I know you too well.” Ranulf pointed at him in mock accusation.

Alan leaned across the table and whispered, “I don’t deny it, but there’s more to marriage than desire.”

“Um-hum,” Ranulf nodded, smirking. “Yes, like respect and admiration, which you have already admitted you feel for the woman. But since William will likely name you Lord of Wykston, you’ve decided that you have to wed some whey-faced heiress on whom you’ll beget your children. Once you have sired the suitable number of legitimate offspring, you will shun your wife’s bed and take a comely mistress to yours.”

“God’s bones!” Ranulf had a talent for reducing a thing to its bare essence! Alan shifted uncomfortably in his seat and stared into his tankard, “You make it sound so damned despicable.”

“It is despicable, and don’t justify the practice. Why not marry someone you love, someone with whom you can share all aspects of your life?”

“That’s quite a radical concept, Ranulf.” Alan shrugged and met his friend’s gaze. “Even peasants consider a woman’s dowry.”

“I suppose, but I married for love. My late wife was a wonderful woman. I was content just being around her.” Ranulf’s eyes grew wistful. “No amount of gold could buy that happiness.”

Alan leaned back on the bench, resting his shoulders against the smoke-streaked wall. “But I need money. If I am given lands, I must build a castle, increase the number of my men at arms, and there is the other matter.”

“To return to Normandy and wreak revenge,” Ranulf spat out in disgust.

“Just so.” Alan lifted his tankard and drained it.

“Forget the past. Your future is in England now.”

Alan banged his empty tankard down on the table. “I want justice. I won’t rest until they pay for their crime.”

Ranulf shook his head. The candlelight caught the few silver strands of hair threading through his sandy thatch. “That score must wait for reckoning. Right now, you’ve got your hands full. It’ll be no easy task keeping the peace here.”

“But we have made a start,” Alan protested.

“Yes, but we have merely squelched a small part of the insurrection.” The sergeant tightly clasped his tankard between his hands. “The foothold we gained is temporary unless you win the loyalty of these people. Of course, you could turn them out to starve and populate this demesne with Normans, but that will only embitter the survivors, and the chance for peace will be lost for many generations.”

“Gwyneth asked me to allow the people to stay, and I promised I would help with the harvest,” Alan answered.

“A good start, but remember, our enemies surround us. The Scottish King and his Saxon wife harbor her brother, Edgar the Aethling, the Saxon heir to the throne. The Danes have united with them and are plotting to retake their former place in York. In Normandy, William must watch his back. An alliance by marriage would be a brilliant strategic move.”

Alan hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Now I know the ale has gone to your head. The Saxons would prefer to see Gwyneth dead rather than married to me. They consider her a whore for even associating with us, though she had no choice in the matter. Furthermore, she would never exchange vows with a titled Norman, let alone a bastard.”

"I think she would." Ranulf pushed away his empty tankard. "She looks at you with tenderness in her eyes, and when you touch her, she doesn't shrink away.

Alan silently agreed. Gwyneth didn't cringe from his embraces. She acquiesced--no, responded--to his kisses and caresses. Just remembering her soft lips made his loins ache to fill her.

"In time, Wykston's people will see that her marriage to you does not disenfranchise them from their homes, customs, and all they hold dear. Gwyneth will still be their rightful lady." Ranulf leaned forward. In a voice soft, he continued, "Your children will be part Saxon, and I am sure the *gerburs* of Wykston will much prefer her to a Norman woman.

"If you are fair, these folk will give you their loyalty. You won't be troubled by treachery from within your own enclave."

Sage though his friend's advice may be, Ranulf did not take into account that Gwyneth cared for Wulfstan. For though she returned his kisses, Alan could not forget the image of her stricken face when he forbade her to sign the betrothal contract.

Did she know the document was a forgery? Likely, she did.

Was she pretending the passion she showed him? Perhaps she hoped to lull him into carelessness and complacency so she could slip away to Wulfstan.

No matter, he still unrelentingly and insanely desired her, and Ranulf's cajoling served to fan the flames of his rampant lust. Agitated, Alan hunched over the table and stared again into his empty mug.

"However, another development could prevent you from marrying her."

Alan's head jerked up. "What would stop me?"

"Have you forgotten that Wulfstan could abduct the lady and marry her, or as you suggested, he could petition William for her hand. You saw the marriage contract. Did Wulfstan sign it?"

"Yes." Alan growled in disgust. The idea of another man bedding Gwyneth caused the ale to sour in his belly.

"He wants her," Ranulf insisted. "He believes the gibberish Ulfer spouts. Maybe other Saxons do, as well. With her on his side, he could incite another revolt, and he will cut quite a heroic figure fighting for his wife's lands."

"We defeated these people before, Ranulf, and we'll do it again." Alan rose up from the bench.

The haze and pungent odor of the tallow candles caused his eyes to smart. His head ached as if someone were pounding a hammer inside his skull.

Winking at him, the burly sergeant stood, too. "But an alliance would be an easier way to ensure the peace, and wedlock offers other benefits to which a man could definitely grow accustomed."

"Enough." Alan turned and strode to the door.

Ranulf dogged him. "Where are you going in such a rush?"

The cool air felt refreshing on Alan's face. He stopped, meeting his friend's gaze. "To write the king."

Ranulf chuckled. "It would be wise to inform him of our victory here." He paused. "If I were you, I'd also apprise him about the lady before Wulfstan does."

Ranulf needn't worry. Alan would phrase the letter so that the king would never permit her to wed Wulfstan.

* * * *

The brooding sky threatened rain, and a stiff breeze tugged at Gwyneth's cloak, forcing her to tuck the rosary she fingered into her girdle and pull the flailing mantle tightly around her. Numb with grief, she watched as the burial detail of soldiers heaped the last shovelful of earth onto Leofric's grave.

Father Alfred's Saxon tonsure hair blew in disarray as he lifted his arms in the final benediction. The wind caused his dark wide sleeves to flap like the wings of a crow. The prayer completed, the mourners dispersed, quickly making their way home in hushed reverence.

His spindly body stiff with resentment, Ulfer did not move but withstood the blustery wind tearing at his garments. Heads bowed, hands clasped, and faces serious, Alan and Ranulf stood opposite Gwyneth and Aelveva.

Gwyneth glanced at the fresh grave again, grateful that neither Sir Alan nor Ranulf had any part in her father's death.

Her face pale and her slim figure swathed in black mourning clothes, Aelveva put a protective arm around Gwyneth. "Come, lady. Let us leave this doleful place."

Empty inside, Gwyneth assented to Aelveva's prompting, and the women started toward the manor house, followed by the two warriors.

Gwyneth walked past Ulfer as he limped toward his home in the village. She flinched and lowered her gaze as he shot her a scalding look of disapproval. Certain the old steward would employ any means to attain his ends, Gwyneth shivered. What trap would he spring to lure her into Wulfstan's snare? On shaky knees, Gwyneth trudged down the dirt path and into a terrifying future.

* * * *

Several weeks later, Alan sat on the dais in the center of the great hall and surveyed the scene. Scoured of its grime, the plaster had been freshly whitewashed. A fine tapestry, a gift from King William, splashed merry splotches of color against the pale walls. Fresh rushes replaced the old ones, vastly improving the odor of the place. Suspended from the dark oaken rafters in the center of the ceiling, a circular iron chandelier blazed with candles and supplemented the meager afternoon light that was streaming through the small, high windows.

Today all would swear fealty to him as overlord of Wykston. Not a week ago, his herald had returned from William's camp with a charter confirming that Alan now held Wykston in the name of his monarch.

The king had also forbid him to let Lady Gwyneth marry Wulfstan. William was concerned. As Ranulf had suggested, she and Wulfstan could easily become a rallying point for the rebels. Both hailed from ancient Saxon nobility. That fact plus Ulfer's nonsensical prediction could spark further insurrections to destabilize the Norman regime in England.

To prevent the match, William ordered Alan to marry Gwyneth as soon as possible.

Though the monarch's herald announced that William had bestowed the title of

Lord of Wykston on him to everyone, Alan revealed the king's private order to marry no one--not even Ranulf. He didn't wish the rumor to reach Gwyneth before he had a chance to speak to her. *He* wanted to tell her the news himself.

Alan was waiting for an opportune moment to give her the royal tidings, but first he must secure the loyalty of the people.

Dressed in their finest attire, all the inhabitants of Wykston, Saxon, and Norman alike, waited in respectful silence to kneel before him, put their folded hands between his, and swear their oath of fealty. The ancient tanner, Aldred, his body stooped and too old for combat, squinted at Alan through faded eyes. Gyrth, the white-haired swineherd, leaned on his staff, holding the hand of his little blonde granddaughter. The lovely wench from the tavern, who he had learned was the alewife's daughter, boldly smiled at him with a suggestive gleam in her eyes.

Ignoring the girl's offer, Alan impatiently drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Instinctively, he knew the woman was experienced and capable of giving him pleasure and much needed release, but he did not want her. He needed something more than the mere physical ease she could provide.

Still arrayed in her mourning garments, Gwyneth stood with quiet dignity next to the somberly clad Aelveva.

Just looking at her made his male member stiff. Though he had remained busy since he seized this estate, taking stock and planning improvements, Gwyneth haunted his dreams. He often awoke from a deep sleep, groaning in frustration for want of her. Suppose she refused to swear her oath of allegiance to him? The disgruntled Ulfer made a hasty, angry departure rather than swear his fealty. Nevertheless, Alan believed Gwyneth would comply for fear that he would renege on his promise to help her people. He never went back on his word, but it suited his purpose at the moment to keep that fact from her.

Suddenly, everyone's attention fixed on Gwyneth. She slowly approached him and knelt. Folding her hands, she raised them. Alan leaned forward, taking her cold trembling fingers between his palms. Her nervous breaths fanned his face as she kept her gaze downcast.

He moved nearer so that their lips were close ... so close that if he bent a fraction of an inch more, he would feel their petal softness. She drew back. In a shaky voice, Gwyneth made pledge.

"By God, I pledge my faith and troth to Alan Fitz de Personne, my liege Lord and love...." She stopped abruptly, and her gaze connected with his.

Alan wondered why she paused. Was she remembering that day a week ago when William's herald had arrived? The messenger asked that everyone on the estate and in the village assemble in the great hall. Then he read the edict proclaiming that Sir Alan had become Lord of Wykston. Alan remembered how pale Gwyneth became. Maybe she resented that the king had disinherited her. Now, recalling that momentous day, perhaps that was the reason she faltered in giving her oath of allegiance.

No matter what the reason, the nearness of her body excited him. More blood pooled in his loins and his penis strained harder. But lust was something he understood. The love she spoke of was something else.

Had anyone ever loved him? He searched the mysterious depths of her silver eyes. Surely, she loved Wulfstan.

Lowering her lids again, Gwyneth continued. "And love all that he holds dear. I promised to abhor all that he hates, in compliance with God's sacred rights and secular responsibilities. I promise never to willingly and knowingly, in word or deed, do what is hateful to him; on condition that he sustain me, as I shall deserve. I shall perform all that was in our agreement when I swore my fealty to him and sought his favor."

Gwyneth rose gracefully and retreated from his touch, leaving the scent of roses to linger about him as she returned to her place beside Aelveva.

He would never again smell a rose without thinking of her and how much he desired her.

After the oaths were pledged, Alan invited everyone to celebrate. The alewife served mead, and Alan broke out a butt of fine Burgundy William had shipped to him from France.

The wine brought a flush of good cheer to Father Rollo's pale face as well as Father Alfred's. Ranulf entranced all the women, though he directed his attentions toward the lovely Aelveva. Even Robert, now fully recovered, forgot his anxieties for a while, joining wholeheartedly in the festivities as little Garth gorged himself on cake.

Alan partook sparingly of the potent beverages and fine food. He had attained the reward he had fought for all his life, but something was lacking. Instead of triumph, a strange emptiness lodged in his heart, especially when Gwyneth retired. Because she was still in mourning, she had asked to be excused from the revelry, and Alan allowed her to leave.

Several hours later with the day's events whirling by him like a blur, he left his inebriated guests unconscious on the tables and floor of the great hall. Retiring to his chambers, he tumbled into bed too tired to undress.

* * * *

"Why, my lady? Why did you swear that oath of fealty to him?" Garth asked. "Ulfer said that the Normans are mangy curs, and we should hate them with our dying breaths."

Securing the shutter in Gwyneth's bedchamber against the thickening mist, Aelveva spun around. "You know better than to be so impertinent, child!"

Gwyneth stopped pacing and stood in the middle of the floor. "But he needs an explanation. Obviously, he has heard conflicting messages."

Gwyneth moved to the boy. Kneeling down in front of him, she smoothed his ruffled hair. "I had no choice, Garth. Lammas is gone. We need the Normans to harvest our crops so the gerburs left here will not starve. If I gainsay Lord Alan, he will refuse us the aid we so desperately need to survive."

Gwyneth rose. "I won't give the Normans an excuse to lay waste to our lands."

Garth looked up at her. "Then it is all right for me to like the big Norman, Ranulf?"

Gwyneth smiled and nodded. "Yes. He is a good man." She exchanged a meaningful glance with Aelveva and then looked down at the boy again. "It will help heal the rift between our two peoples."

“Good,” Garth said. “He laughs a lot, and I can’t help liking the man. Still, I didn’t want to be disloyal to my own people, my lady.” The boy turned to Aelveva. “Mother, may I please go to the kitchen? Agatha says she saved an apple tart for me.”

Aelveva shook her head. “By all the saints, love! You have already eaten too much.”

“Oh, please, mother.” He pulled on Aelveva’s hand and bobbed eagerly.

The fond mother smiled, love shining in her eyes. “One tart. Come back to bid us goodnight as soon as you have finished. Then it is off to the sleeping shed with you. It is late, and we all need our rest.” She covered her yawn.

“Oh, thank you, mother.” The boy ran from her chamber as Gwyneth removed her black veil.

Aelveva took the veil and placed it in the chest at the foot of the bed. “Has Sir Alan, I mean his lordship, discussed your future?”

“No.” Gwyneth slumped into her chair in front of the dressing table.

Aelveva ran the carved ivory comb through Gwyneth’s hair. “Do you think he will arrange a match with Wulfstan?”

“It is a plausible option for him and the king. They want to keep the peace and alliances are less expensive and destructive than wars.”

“Wulfstan will leap at the chance, my lady. But you cannot marry him!” The maid put down the comb on the table. “Maybe you could persuade his lordship to send you to the convent.”

“Lord Alan is a kind man, but the affairs of state come first.” Gwyneth turned and looked up at the woman.

“What will you do, my lady?”

Gwyneth untied her girdle. “After the harvest is reaped, I’ll ask to retire to the abbey to pray. Lord Alan cannot refuse me that request. He knows it is my custom to do so. Once there, I shall ask Mother Clotilde’s advice.”

Gwyneth placed the girdle on the table. “The abbess will help me elude my guards and escape to Ireland. The Irish believe in witches, but I have heard that they do not punish them. I will use the gold coins and jewelry I have set aside at the abbey to start a new life.”

“My lady, such a scheme is terribly dangerous.” Aelveva’s hands shook as she helped Gwyneth out of her tunic. Her voice choked with tears, she cried, “And I can’t bear the thought.”

Gwyneth placed her hands on Aelveva’s shoulders. “If I stay, they will try to force me marry to Wulfstan, though the church forbids a coerced marriage.”

“I know.” The maid’s eyes brimmed with tears. “They could hold you prisoner and deny you food till you sign the betrothal contract.”

“So I must take my chances and go. You remain here, Aelveva. Ranulf is a good man. It is obvious he cares for you, and you return his affection. Marry him if you wish. He will make a good father for little Garth.”

“I care for him, but I’ve attended you since I was a child of eight, and you were just a babe. I remember the day you came into the world, my lady.”

“It will break my heart to go.” Gwyneth dropped her hands from Aelveva’s

shoulders. "But I'll be much happier knowing that you and Garth are loved and cared for. Perhaps you'll have Ranulf's babe. That child will be neither Saxon nor Norman but English. Only when the two peoples merge will there be peace and survival for us."

Gwyneth fought her grief. She refused to allow Aelveva to know how she was suffering or the woman would insist on coming with her instead of finding her own happiness.

"Please, Aelveva, do as I ask."

"If that is truly your wish, I'll stay, my lady."

"It is." Gwyneth blinked back her tears.

Clad in her shift, she slipped between the lavender-scented sheets and rested her head on the swan's-down pillows.

A rap sounded, and Aelveva walked to the entry and opened the door.

"Mistress, please come." Elspeth, the tiny dark-haired kitchen girl entreated.

"Garth has vomited in the kitchen yard. I think he ate too many cakes."

"Oh, dear." Aelveva turned toward Gwyneth. "My lady, I do not wish to leave you. I am afraid you may"

Walk in my sleep again. "I am not the least sleepy," she lied. "Shall I come with you?" Gwyneth sat up, ready to throw back the covers.

"No, my lady. If I find the boy has more than an upset stomach, I shall return for your help. After the way he stuffed himself, I am surprised his tummy did not protest sooner." Aelveva left the chamber, quietly closing the door behind her. Gwyneth lay back against the pillows and pulled the covers up against the night chill. Too tired to contend with her problems, she closed her eyes, and the image of the tall, dark-haired man loomed vividly in her mind's eye.

She and Lord Alan were adversaries, but he had leapt to her defense against Ulfer as if she were his cherished kinswoman. He offered her the safety of his arms and the consolation of his virile body.

His body.

Gwyneth longed to feel the protection of his embrace, to rest her cheek against his massive chest, and to hear the steady beat of his heart again. Alan's words had given her solace when he had addressed her in those terms of endearment. He had called her his rose.

In the quiet darkness, Gwyneth could still feel the kiss they shared in the abbey garden. Sighing deeply, she touched her fingers to her lips and again tasted the intoxicating flavor of his mouth.

Desire washed over her in hot waves. Her nipples drew into tight points, and moisture bathed her thighs. She needed more than kisses and caresses. She wanted his big shaft deep inside of her. In fact her body seemed to hunger for it, and Gwyneth groaned as deep spasms racked her lower belly.

But she was mad to harbor such desires. Lord Alan and the king would likely give her to Wulfstan.

The avaricious lord pledged loyalty to neither Saxon nor Norman but to his own gains. Where were his forces when the men of Wykston lost their lives battling the Normans?

Gwyneth had lost everything except her life. Would she lose that to Wulfstan?
No! She would never agree to wed him! Never!

* * * *

What had wakened him? Perhaps a servant trod over a squeaky floorboard or a lone wolf howled plaintively in the nearby forest. Alan jolted upright and leapt from bed. Grateful he had fallen asleep fully clothed, he grabbed up his sword and sprang to the door, opening it.

He peered down the darkened gallery. Gwyneth, clad in nothing but her shift, strolled by him and descended the dark staircase as silently as a ghost. Without a sound, his weapon poised for attack, he followed, keeping a discreet distance.

She crossed the great hall and made her way across the courtyard toward the kitchen house. To his surprise, she ignored Aelveva and Garth who was vomiting in the corner. Instead, she walked beyond the stockade. Alan shadowed her, determined not to lose her in the heavy blanket of fog.

Did she plan to rendezvous with Wulfstan?

"Damnation," he cursed under his breath.

He continued his pursuit as Gwyneth shuffled through the thick accumulation of fallen leaves and strolled to the edge of a pond.

Vapor rose from its surface like steam from a caldron. In the misty darkness, Alan discerned the shapes of the tall cattails, silhouetted near the bank where the weeping willow bent its long, lamenting branches toward the murky water. A pair of swans, asleep under the tree, woke. Flapping their huge, white wings, the startled birds glided into the dark depths, disappearing in the thick haze.

Then Gwyneth reclined by the water's edge. Like Garth, had she suddenly been stricken?

About to rush to her, Alan heard the rustle of leaves. Hiding behind a yew, he watched as Aelveva ran to kneel by Gwyneth's side.

"Lady Gwyneth and Aelveva. You have come at last."

Ulfer hobbled out from behind the willow. "I've waited here each night since your return to Wykston, hoping I would find you alone here. It was once your favorite spot."

Aelveva looked up. "Please, Ulfer, help me. We must take Lady Gwyneth back into the manor house."

"No, mistress. We must make haste to deliver her to Wulfstan." He fell to his knees as well, propping up the unconscious Gwyneth. "She and the noble lord have a wondrous destiny to forge. Their child will drive the Normans from this land."

"The mead you guzzle has clouded your reason," Aelveva protested. "We must bring her to the manor house."

Ulfer let Gwyneth drop back and raised his walking stick to strike the maid. Aelveva shrank back and threw up her hands to cover her head.

Bounding directly into their path, Alan pointed his broadsword at the old man's throat. "Lay down your staff, old man, or your head will roll."

Chapter Nine

Gasping, the Saxon steward flinched back, his staff falling from his bony hand.

"Is there a reason why I should let you live?" Alan asked, the point of his weapon now touching the man's Adam's apple.

"Take my life. I refuse to beg for mercy." His reedy voice full of hatred, Ulfer taunted, "I have few years left. I don't wish to live them under the rule of Norman swine."

One clean, smooth stroke from Alan's blade, and Ulfer's head would fly from the man's scrawny body, but killing an old steward held little merit.

"Go to Wulfstan. Never come skulking here again!"

In the dim light, naked hatred burned in Ulfer's eyes. "I'll go," he lashed back. He took up his staff, hobbled off a few paces, then stopped and turned. Raising his arms, his wide sleeves fell back, revealing his stick-like limbs. He shook his staff and croaked, "You haven't won yet, Norman pig. Our forces will drive you out, and your bones will turn to dust."

"Go. Your empty threats do not intimidate me."

Ulfer's hollow laugh echoed eerily through the foggy woods as he slipped from view, and Alan heard a swishing noise in the bushes. Swinging around, he lunged behind the huge holly, pulling a gangly figure by the scruff of the neck.

"Robert! Are you daft?" The squire's body shook violently, and his brown eyes opened saucer-wide. "Uh, I ... I saw you leave and followed." The boy's voice quavered. "I thought you might need help, my lord."

Alan's heart softened. Robert was a dutiful squire, and someday he would make an honorable knight.

"I thank you, but as you can see I am well. Get back to the sleeping shed with the rest of the men." Alan sheathed his sword.

"Come, lady, come." Aelveva pulled her wrist. Alan bent down, lifting Gwyneth in his arms.

Robert cast a suspicious glance at Gwyneth and made the sign of the cross. "My lord, the old man cursed us. Mayhap you should have let him take the woman."

"Ulfer lies to frighten us so we will reject the woman. He would have her marry Wulfstan and use them both as rallying points against us. Now she appears ill, and I must aid her. Go, Robert. I've business to finish."

"Have a care, my lord." The boy crossed himself again before he slipped into the thick fog.

"My lord, we must return Lady Gwyneth to the manor house."

"Is she ill, Aelveva?"

"Yes, my lord. Garth is sick as well. I left him with Elspeth."

"But why did she leave the house if she felt unwell?" Alan asked suspiciously.

The maid's eyes grew wide, and her hands shook. "Mayhap she was looking for me and took a wrong turn. Sometimes she becomes a bit confused when she is ailing."

More likely, she became indisposed and fainted in the act of escape. Or did Aelveva speak what she thought was the truth? Obviously, Gwyneth had not informed her of a plan to abscond, and the poor maid almost had her brains dashed out trying to get the girl away from Ulfer.

* * * *

"Damnation," Alan cursed, feeling irritable and out of sorts after his uneasy night.

The gloomy morning did not help to sweeten his temper. The wind gusted hard as heavy, dark clouds merged overhead, forming a canopy of gray. Preoccupied with his thoughts of Gwyneth, he had paid little attention to the weather. He urged his horse toward the mews, the ride he so desperately needed to work off his frustrations, curtailed.

Alan could not dispel his fear of losing Gwyneth. Last night Ulfer had almost abducted the woman and delivered her to Wulfstan. Alan's fury still burned hot, and to protect her, he had kept her under close surveillance.

He must now post the banns and marry her as soon as possible. He had a royal command.

William cared not a jot if Gwyneth loved another man. He dismounted and led Rampage into the dim interior of the big stable just as the rain lashed down with the spite of a whip. The fragrance of hay mixed with the pungent odor of manure hung in the air.

Not waiting for a groom, he removed the mount's bridle, draping it over one of the stall doors. As he unbuckled the saddle and lifted it off, he came face to face with the grim truth. Gwyneth remained in danger of kidnapping as long as Wulfstan wanted her.

His anger raging, he wanted to throw the saddle against one of the heavy oaken beams supporting the thatched roof. Instead, he exercised restraint, not wanting to spook the mounts.

An old groom approached and carried the tack away.

His mind reeling with speculation, Alan reached for a blanket and began to walk the horse in the wide corridor between the stalls, cooling the beast down.

Why did Gwyneth respond to his kiss but continue to attempt escape? Was she dissimulating, hoping he would drop his guard so she could flee to Wulfstan? Or did she really become ill and wander as Aelveva explained?

As an old retainer, Ulfer would know that Gwyneth became disoriented when sick. The old man probably just bided his time, waiting for the opportunity to kidnap her and bring her to Wulfstan.

Furious at the notion, Alan stopped in his tracks, staring at the murky pools of rain forming in the mud outside the barn door. He led Rampage into a stall stocked with plenty of straw, feed, and a bucket of water. Then he sloshed into the downpour and through the muddy puddles.

Once and for all, he had to know the truth about this woman. But while he had breath in his body, Wulfstan would never have her.

* * * *

Gwyneth held out her fingers to the warmth of the fragrant apple wood fire. Dancing brightly in the middle of the great hall, the sinuous flames cast their orange glow

on the whitewashed walls, causing the deep shadows to flicker on the pale, flat surfaces.

Across the hall, Aelveva sat in quiet conversation with Ranulf while Garth sat by Gwyneth's side, staring at the fire. Alan had retired to his chambers. Aelveva had apprised her about the incident at the pond. Apparently, the maid's explanation convinced the knight that Gwyneth was ill, for he hadn't made an accusation of sorcery. Perhaps he thought she had attempted another escape because he had forbidden her to venture beyond the stockade of the manor house.

He could not know that she refused to depart until they had reaped the harvest and stocked the winter supplies. She would never leave her people to starve.

Gwyneth sighed and reached for her distaff. Drawing down a length of flax, she held the long fibers between her thumb and forefinger, twisting them together until they reached sufficient length. Tucking the tool beneath her left arm, she secured the coiled strands with a slipknot to the spindle. As she dropped the rotating wooden cone, the suspended weight pulled the rough spinning filaments through her fingers until they reached the floor. The strong thread formed, she twined it into a ball and repeated the process.

The quiet task relaxed her and cleared away the barriers to her innermost thoughts.

Once again her nocturnal wanderings had brought her into extreme danger, though this time Aelveva's excuse had saved her--but for how long? Sooner or later, Alan would discover her lethal secret ... *if you remain here, Gwyneth.*

_____ She must flee soon.

The sound of quick, determined footsteps on the flagged floors startled Gwyneth.

Alan charged toward her like an angry bull. Her stomach muscles clenched in fear as she set her work aside on the bench. Rising, she met his resolute gaze square on.

His stance stiff, Alan stood before her. "I have something of great importance to discuss with you, and I prefer to do it in private, Lady Gwyneth."

The dreaded moment had finally arrived. He would soon inform her she must marry Wulfstan. He could not compel her to wed, though. Holy Mother Church protected her, and Gwyneth prepared for the fierce battle of wills.

She hugged herself, trying to control her trembling. "Shall we retire to the counting room. It is always quiet there."

Walking to the table, he picked up a lit taper. "Lead on." He gestured toward the small alcove off the great hall.

Her knees shook, making her progress difficult. She opened the door. Alan headed for the simple table set against the wall and lit the brace of candles standing on its scarred surface. The illumination revealed numerous scrolls of parchment and tally sticks filling the shelves along the walls.

Here she and her father had spent long hours recording their transactions with the bailiff. Somehow, it seemed strange not to see him at the table, reckoning the accounts.

Still holding his candle, Alan beckoned her to sit in the chair near the small table. The flames reflected bright yellow-white tongues of fire in the pupils of his violet eyes.

Gwyneth wrung her hands together as she took her seat.

"You seem nervous. Is something wrong?" He set the candle on the table.

"I ... I am curious. What business do you have with me, my lord?"

His gaze bored into hers as he straightened. "It is simple. The time has come for you to marry."

Her hands instinctively covered her heart. Hearing him utter those words was like hearing about the death of a terminally ill loved one. The expectation never buffered the pain of the final reality.

He frowned. "You can't be surprised. A woman of rank knows she must wed for political reasons."

"My father wished me to live at the abbey."

Putting his hands on the arms of her chair, he leaned over her. "The prospect of marriage displeases you?"

"No." She would pretend to comply and stall for time. That would give her the opportunity to devise a successful scheme. After they reaped the harvest, she would disappear.

He straightened and moved back slightly, giving her scant room, so that she felt the chair at the back of her legs as she rose. She met his hard stare. "When do you wish me to take my leave?"

He frowned. "For where?"

"Braeton Manor," she answered, feigning cooperation as she moved away from the chair.

"Wulfstan's estate!" His words erupted in a snarl. Grabbing her shoulders, he glared at her in fury. "He will never have you! Never! Do you understand?"

Alan's words sent a rush of relief flooding through her, and Gwyneth burst into tears. "Stop that infernal weeping. Stop!" He released her so abruptly she stumbled back. Breathing heavily, he turned away from her.

Shaken by his gruffness, Gwyneth struggled for composure. Who did the Norman wish her to marry? Not that it mattered, for she could marry no one. Still, he aroused her curiosity. "Th ... then whom do you wish me to wed?"

He faced her, and his gaze burned into hers. He spoke softly, "I am to be your groom."

Believing she misunderstood, she frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

He stepped in front of her and enunciated his words with precision. "I am to be your husband."

Stupefied, she stared at him. "You?"

Alan pointed his finger accusingly. "Now that you know you will never marry Wulfstan, you refuse to give your consent. Before you were willing. You even asked me when I wanted you to leave."

"That was when...."

"You thought you'd be marrying your love, Wulfstan," he cut in. "Forget that dream. I am the man you will wed and bed now and forever." He reached for her and pulled her close. "I will drive that Saxon wolf out of your mind and heart."

He kissed her hard, ravishing her lips and plundering her mouth. She didn't put up any resistance as her body responded and hot urgent desire consumed her. Despite her secret, she wanted to marry him with all her heart.

He intensified his onslaught as he dropped kisses down her neck. Dipping his hand below her bodice, he lifted out her breast. He fastened his lips to her hard nipple and sucked.

Gwyneth moaned as a volley of powerful spasms contracted in her belly, and copious moisture formed between her thighs. He released that nipple and gave her other the same treatment.

She was panting now and pressing closer to him, she swiveled her hips against his huge erection.

He released her breast and lifted her in his arms. "You want me," he murmured between hot kisses, "only me."

He placed her on her back on the table. Standing on one end, he hiked her skirts, nudged her knees apart, and stood between them. Then he leaned his torso on top of her. Her tingling breasts pressed into his massive chest, and her drenched nether lips rubbed against his trousers. The sensation took her breath away and made her want him even more.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Gwyneth knew that she shouldn't allow him these liberties, but her willpower seemed to have fled, and she was helpless to stop him.

He stood back and touched her wet folds. Then he gently found her sensitive spot, and Gwyneth's hips involuntarily jolted up. The movement jarred the candle from its holder. The tallow tapers struck the floor. The dried rushes hissed as they ignited into a burst of white angry flames.

Suddenly, she visualized the lightning bolt that killed her mother and brother.

"Sir Alan!"

"Damned!" he snarled and jerked away.

Blind with panic, Gwyneth jumped from the table and stumbled to the farthest corner of the chamber. Backed against the wall, her hands clutched over her throat, she screamed in terror as the voracious flames flared upward.

Chapter Ten

“God’s bones.” Alan grabbed up the water pitcher from the table and splashed its contents on the blaze, dousing the small fire completely. Acrid-smelling smoke ascended in wispy curls over the scorched spot on the floor--the last gasping remains of the combustion.

Gwyneth slumped to the rush covered flagstones. Though dazed, she heard a barrage of loud crashing. Was it the rumble of thunder?

“My lady, my lady, are you all right?” Aelveva called frantically.

“Enter,” Alan yelled.

She felt something near. Gwyneth’s lids fluttered open. Alan knelt beside her. Deep concern shone in his eyes.

“You are safe now, my lady.” He lifted her into his arms.

The door flung open, and Ranulf, Aelveva, and some the servants crowded hurriedly into the small room.

Aelveva’s face appeared paler than usual in the faint light. “Forgive us, my lord, but we heard the lady’s screams.”

Ranulf’s usually merry face took on a worried look as well.

Cradling Gwyneth, Alan turned toward the company. “Lady Gwyneth accidentally knocked over one of the candles and became frightened when the rushes took flame.”

Aelveva stepped in front of Ranulf. “Shall we convey Lady Gwyneth to her room, my lord.”

“Yes,” Alan agreed. “She has suffered a nasty shock. The rest of you may withdraw.”

Relieved, the startled retainers shuffled off.

Carrying her, Alan marched up the stairs to the gallery overlooking the great hall and into her bower. He entered and strode across the dark room to the bed where he gently placed her on the feather ticking. “Rest now, lady.”

He exited with Ranulf, leaving her to Aelveva’s care.

* * * *

Alan cantered Rampage across the sunny meadow. White puffy clouds that were etched in silver scudded leisurely across the azure sky. A fresh breeze cooled his face but did nothing to improve his understanding of the problem he had on his hands.

Gwyneth had declined his proposal of marriage, and her rejection made him furious. Unfortunately, though her body craved his, Lady Gwyneth’s heart belonged to another man.

If only that damn candle hadn’t fallen, they would have consummated their union, and she would have had to marry him.

But I don’t want her that way. I want her to give her love and body freely.

Would she have had the temerity to rebuff him had she known the king commanded the union? Knowing the woman, she probably would. Why hadn't he told her?

Hoping against hope, Alan desperately wanted Gwyneth to give her consent freely and not solely because he needed her agreement to make the marriage legal.

His body tense with emotion, Alan rode his destrier to the edge of the woods. Dismounting, he tethered his mount to the branch of a scrub oak. As he sat on the spongy bracken, he leaned against the trunk of a tree, tucked his arms behind his head, and closed his eyes, imagining Gwyneth.

At the sound of hooves impacting on the turf, Alan's lids popped open. His hand instinctively reaching for the hilt of his sword, he sprang to his feet, ready for attack.

"Good day," Ranulf called out from the meadow. A big grin splitting the man's face, he galloped his big bay forward to where Alan stood.

Alan released his weapon. "What brings you here? I thought you would be breaking your fast with a certain lovely redhead."

The brawny sergeant laughed as he reined in and dismounted. "I did, but you've lost track of time. It is well after tierce."

"Since Aelveva left her mistress to share a meal with you, I assume Lady Gwyneth's health is much improved." Alan resumed his seat.

"Yes, but the lady took her bread and barley water alone in her room." Ranulf tethered his steed next to Rampage. "Aelveva told me the Lady Gwyneth was still shaken and needed more rest."

Alan felt guilt knot his gut. He'd caused her distress. "Even on the battlefield I never saw such gut-deep terror. But it's hard to imagine why. It was a small blaze and quickly put out. Fires like that happen on a regular basis."

Ranulf sat beside Alan. "I suspect she has a good reason."

Alan nodded. "No doubt, if her response last night gives any indication. I suppose Aelveva hasn't said anything about it." Ranulf ran his fingers over a patch of moss growing near the base of the tree. "No, and I surmise that she would never break Lady Gwyneth's confidence for any reason. If you want to know, you must ask the lady yourself."

"I will," Alan replied.

He gazed skyward, catching sight of a hawk riding the wind in large circles.

"I know you will." Ranulf smiled mischievously. "The woman preoccupies your thoughts. Why else would you be riding alone in these woods where a Saxon lance could pierce your liver?"

"If that's my fate, I can't hide." Alan stood. Smiling, Ranulf rose, as well. "It would be easier to ask the woman instead of making a target of yourself. Let's go back to the manor house. I have a notion you'll find Lady Gwyneth in the garden."

* * * *

Gwyneth knelt beside a bed of betony at the far end of the herb garden. Curled by her side, a ginger kitten slept in a dapple of golden sun. The soft purr of the tiny animal soothed her jangled nerves. She stroked the cat's silky fur and closed her eyes, trying to blot out the embarrassment of her disgraceful behavior the night before.

After the way she reacted to an everyday occurrence, the Norman must have thought she was a madwoman. Why hadn't she simply reached for the flagon of barley water, as he did, and drowned the flames? But her intense fear had frozen her to the spot. Nothing had gone right.

Grateful for Alan's protection from Wulfstan, she should have expressed her thanks. Furthermore, Gwyneth had been astounded when he asked--no, demanded--that she give herself to him in marriage.

How she wanted to accept! What a perfect opportunity to aid her people, to serve as a healing influence between the Normans and Saxons, and to work as Alan's helpmate.

All altruism aside, Gwyneth desired the man with her whole heart, soul, and body. Her body primed just thinking about the notion. If she had not knocked over that candle, she would have let him take her on that hard table like a common whore.

Tragically, she could never marry him. Tears welled in her eyes for the kisses, caresses, and children they would never share.

I am the man you will wed and bed now and forever. His command echoed down the long, dark corridors of her memory.

Why had he been so insistent? What could the Norman gain? Noblemen married to consolidate their wealth and position. He already possessed her lands, and other heiresses possessed richer dowries. Still, he had been so adamant.

How would he react if he found her walking in her sleep?

Not *if*, Gwyneth, *when*. After all, her night strolls were part of her. If they wed, his discovery of her secret was inevitable, and he would think she was possessed by demons. The horror of a witch's death frightened her, but dread of his revulsion broke her heart.

No, the Norman must never know the truth.

"Silly fool!" she chided herself.

But the reverie cost her nothing. True, he proved himself a hard man at times, as he had been in battle, but she had never seen him indulge in deliberate cruelty, though he had been given every opportunity. Alan had always behaved justly in his dealings with her people as well as his own. Her heart glowing with the fond memory, she remembered how gently he treated Garth. And how could she forget his kindness when her father died? The handsome Norman had no obligation to show her any consideration.

"My lady." His rich voice called from behind her, and her body responded by becoming hot with desire.

Startled, Gwyneth quickly stood and turned, self-consciously brushing the soil from her old tunic.

He stood in full sunlight at edge the of the herb garden, the strong rays of the sun gleaming off his dark hair. Tall and handsome in his blue garb, he emanated power, confidence, and sensuality--the fierce warrior and ardent lover combined. His animal magnetism cried out to the unfulfilled need in her, taking her breath away.

But what shocks did he have in store for her this time?

"Forgive me, my lady. I did not mean to frighten you." He walked to her. "I see you seem better today day."

Dazzled by the violet-blue glory of his eyes, she answered, "Uh, thank you for

your concern, my lord.”

Alan stooped to scratch the kitten between its ears then stood again, allowing the creature to resume its nap. The man’s proximity caused Gwyneth’s heart to race even faster, but he looked away from her, giving her the impression he felt ill at ease for some reason. Uncomfortable as well, she looked at the ground.

“Lady, I, uh”

“Yes?” They looked up, and her gaze met his and held. “You have bad news for me, my lord?”

“No.” He shook his head. At least, I hope you won’t be upset.” He took her hand. “Come and walk with me.”

His touch sent a thrill of excitement coursing through her. In silence they strolled out of the garden to the edge of the pond. Waxy-white water lilies floated on the surface of the water as a flock of swans glided serenely between the pristine blooms.

Unable to endure the suspense, Gwyneth took a deep breath to steady her nerves as she gathered the courage to ask him what information he had for her.

“My lady, I want you to know that I’m sorry for any distress I may have caused you last night.”

“It wasn’t your fault, my lord, but mine,” she bit her lip.

They stopped, and he faced her. “No, you can’t blame yourself. We all have our fears.”

She shook her head and lowered her gaze. “The fire reminded me of things I prefer to forget.”

He cupped her chin in his big, warm palm, urging her to look at him. “You needn’t speak of them if to do so upsets you. Sometimes, though, a burden shared is half as heavy.”

Alan’s gentle companionship lifted her spirits. He released her and sat on the grassy bank, motioning to Gwyneth to do the same. As she took her seat beside him, he entwined her fingers with his.

“Will you not tell me, my lady?”

Her fears were common knowledge among her people, Gwyneth decided to tell him. Besides, she couldn’t bear to have him think she was strange.

She took a deep breath to calm herself. “I was six years old when the ... incident happened. Had Aelveva not accompanied me, I should have perished.”

Sir Alan gave her his complete attention as she related how her family members drowned. “I ran into the water, thinking I could save them. Aelveva pulled me back and carried me home as I fought against her.”

Gwyneth’s throat ached with unshed tears as she struggled to get out her words. “T ... that was the last time I saw m ... my mother and little brother alive. I can never forget that terrible day.”

Alan took her into his arms, and Gwyneth turned her face into his broad shoulder. Hard sobs wrenched her body until her muscles ached. After a time, she calmed herself, though her breaths still came in spasms.

Alan drew away from her, offering his handkerchief. “At least you had your father to comfort you, and he had you.”

She accepted the linen and wiped her eyes. "Yes, but he became different. He lost the son and wife he so desperately loved, and he never stopped missing them. Something within him died. He became detached, as if he were afraid to feel or to love again.

"When I was a child, I used to dream that if I looked hard enough, I would find my mother and brother. Then I would lead them back to my father, and everything would be as it was before the storm."

"I'm truly sorry, Lady Gwyneth."

She began to cry again, and Alan held her. After a few moments, she regained her composure.

"Perhaps we should discuss something else," he said.

She hiccupped as he took the handkerchief from her and dried her eyes again. He used the same gentle touch when he had dabbed Garth's face. His compassion inspired her confidence. Dare she tell him that shortly after the death of her mother and brother her sleepwalking began?

Down through the years, her father's warning rang in her ears. Never speak of your secret to anyone, lest you suffer the horrors of a witch's death.

Gwyneth pictured herself before a court, the severe judge proclaiming her sentence. Head shaven, hands manacled, and legs shackled, she stood condemned.

Then transported on a cart through a jeering crowd, she rode toward the river. Gwyneth could almost feel the icy shock of the water and see its surface close over her head as the precious life-giving air escaped her.

She shuddered violently and instinctively gasped.

"You're trembling," he said. "Let's go to the manor house before you become sick." Alan rose, helping her up.

"But you wanted to speak to me."

"Yes, but it can wait till later."

* * * *

That night Alan sat at the oak table in the counting room, perusing the parchments and tally sticks and listing the accounts of Wykston. Since Ulfer had left, Father Alfred had kept all the steward's records and gladly delivered them up to Alan.

Answering Alan's questions, the Saxon cleric also revealed information about the death of her mother and brother that so haunted Gwyneth. The priest's face became grave as he related how the pale, mutilated bodies had been found days later down stream.

Alan banished the macabre image from his mind. He felt tired. The candle in his chamber lent insufficient light, causing his eyes to burn, and the symbols on the parchment and tally sticks seemed to swim together. Besides, he could no longer concentrate.

Gwyneth had him befuddled.

Was she the noble lady she appeared to be or a devious female, using her frailty to gull him to destruction? Devil or angel, it did not matter. The king had commanded Alan to marry her.

Furthermore, whether she proved to be a saint or sinner, he wanted her ... had to

have her. But he also had to admit that her unselfish behavior, her courage, and her fortitude in the face of staggering adversity, had swayed him. What he felt for her amounted to more than base lust.

His chair scraped against the floor as Alan pushed it back. Heaving himself up, he plodded to his room and sank down into the soft mattress, clothes and all. By the rood, he felt swamped by exhaustion, but sleep eluded him as he struggled to solve the mystery of a woman called Gwyneth.

Her sad disclosures gave Alan a new understanding of her. From what he had observed, she was anything but a pampered heiress. In reality, the maiden had been somewhat of a rejected child, much like he was.

“God’s bones!” He sat up in the bed with a jolt.

Alan empathized with the little girl who, in her own way, had suffered as much as he had. True, Leofric had not stopped loving Gwyneth, but he had abandoned her by his withdrawal into grief.

By God I’ll show my children love and warmth!

Would he and Gwyneth be blessed with heirs? She had refused his proposal, saying that Leofric wished her to return to the convent. Still, from the moment he saw her, Alan knew she had no religious vocation. Instinctively, he felt the woman was created for loving.

Was he deluding himself? Perhaps Wulfstan was the real reason she had rejected the idea of wedding him?

Still, he and Gwyneth shared a common ground, a base from which to work to build a future. They also had a tremendous passion between them. With those thoughts in mind, he mustered the courage to reveal the king’s command.

* * * *

Gwyneth sat in her chamber and plucked her harp, easing a celestial ripple from the silvery strings. The soft glow of candlelight together with the haunting strains of the ballad she performed created a plaintive mood. The music finished, the last notes faded into the peaceful silence. She placed the instrument on the table then leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes.

“Your song betrays you, lady. You always play those melancholy tunes when your cares weigh heavily on your heart.” Aelveva nodded her head sagely.

“I can never hide anything from you.” Gwyneth reached into the basket beside her chair and picked up a thick tuft of wool.

“It wouldn’t be the new Lord of Wykston who causes you concern?” Aelveva smiled cannily.

“That perplexing man has avoided me for the past several days, ever since I foolishly poured out my soul to him.” Gwyneth carded the fibers with undue vigor.

Aelveva leaned forward, sympathy on her face. “You miss him.”

Setting her work aside, Gwyneth confessed. “It’s difficult to explain. I should concentrate on my plan to escape because he must not learn my secret, but I can’t.”

Kindness gently glowed in Aelveva’s emerald eyes. “Have you lost your heart to him? That would make leaving difficult.”

Gwyneth’s cheeks flushed. She peered down at the wool in her lap. “It wouldn’t

matter if I had. I can never marry him.”

“You do care for him,” Aelveva said.

Gwyneth squirmed in her seat. “He’s been kind and delivered me from Wulfstan. I miss his understanding, his consideration, his” *Embrace*. “Oh, Aelveva!”

A sharp rap interrupted her words. The maidservant rose and stepped to the door, swinging it open. “My lord!”

Alan swaggered over the threshold and bowed to Gwyneth. “Forgive the intrusion. I know the hour is late, but we have business to conclude, my lady.”

Exchanging a meaningful glance with Gwyneth, Aelveva stood. “I must check on Garth. He’s with Ranulf in the great hall.” She exited, closing the door quietly behind her.

Gwyneth rose. “You have come to discuss my future.”

“*Our* future.” Grinning broadly, he walked toward her.

His smile set her heart racing. By St. Cuthbert! The man could charm the moon from the sky. “Then you still wish to marry me?”

“Yes.” He took her hand in his. “I think you will agree that there are many reasons why it would be good for both our people. They need each other. The women and children here need my men to harvest the crops and protect them from marauders. My men need wives. Together we can all build peaceful, prosperous lives. Maybe we can set an example for others by showing that Normans and Saxons can live together in peace and happiness.”

His words rang true. In the short time Alan had been the Lord of Wykston, he had proven himself a wiser administrator than Leofric. Generous and fair, he treated Saxons and Normans with equal justice--a rare thing in a conqueror.

And instead of pawning her off to a petty noble for political gain or dismissing her to a convent, he offered her marriage.

“It is the logical thing to do, I suppose,” she replied, trying to sound indifferent.

The pressure of his big, warm hand increased on hers. “You agree then?” he asked with the enthusiasm of a boy.

Her heart breaking, Gwyneth slipped from his touch and moved to the window. She opened the shutter to the view of the night sky, jeweled with twinkling stars.

By seeking her compliance, was he merely ensuring no impediment threatened the legality of their alliance? Moreover, why was he so anxious to wed her? He already possessed all her lands though not quite all she owned.

She peered over her shoulder at him. “You are asking, not commanding?”

In two strides Alan closed the space between them. Lifting her hand to his lips, he placed a kiss in her palm.

A hot wave of rapture washed over Gwyneth, suffusing her body with desire. Slowly, languorously, Alan kissed the tip of each finger, provoking her desire to the heat of a conflagration.

Looking into her eyes, he asked, “Will you, my fragrant rose? Will you be my wife?”

Yes, her heart and soul shouted for joy, but the chasm that separated them remained too wide. Tears filled her eyes. “It’s impossible!”

He looked as if she had slapped him. Then anger masked his face. "Why? Are you already secretly wed to Wulfstan?"

"No, I'm destined for the convent."

His jaw hardened, and he drew back from her. "I'm sorry to contradict you, but you are not suited to a life of celibacy, and we will be married."

Would he force her by refusing to gather the harvest and displacing her people? "You cannot coerce me. The Church protects me."

"I could rape you on the spot if I chose, but I'd never force you, Gwyneth. I told you once that I want a willing partner, but I don't believe the Norman clergy would defy the king," he responded ominously. "The pope himself sanctioned his invasion of this land. It's William who commands this union."

Gwyneth grabbed the windowsill for support as the room seemed to spin about her.

Alan pulled a parchment scroll from his tunic. "Examine this missive. It bears the royal seal."

As she perused the parchment, dread filled her heart. So the king's command was the true reason the Norman asked for her hand. He did not really care for her. That realization left her hollow.

"I bid you consider your decision carefully, my lady," he said softly. "Our monarch will brook no resistance to his plans and may regard your refusal as treason." He bowed. "I bid you good night."

The door swung shut with a soft thud. Alone in the darkness, Gwyneth felt as if the cold, murky waters of the river closed over her, snuffing the breath from her body.

Chapter Eleven

The bright autumn sun flooded the field. Its heat penetrated Gwyneth's tunic and shift, soothing the tired muscles of her shoulders. Her palm on the small of her back, she straightened and scanned the ripe sea of gold.

Working by her side, the Norman also gleaned the crops. True to his promise, he ensured the survival of her people, assisting them by the toil of his own hands. He ruled here as the lord of this manor, yet he stooped to bundle sheaves of wheat and hefted them on the cart for storage.

Furthermore, Alan had not tried to coerce her into wedlock. Indeed, he had not mentioned the subject again. He proved himself a man of his word--a man with whom a woman could build a home and future.

How Gwyneth wished she could marry him.

The sight of his muscled torso, naked and bronzed by the warmth of the sun, quickened her pulse. Alan looked up, and their gazes melded. They stood galvanized until Gwyneth heard a discreet cough.

Ranulf smiled as he ambled to them. "My lady, Aelveva bids me to tell you that Mother Clotilde and her entourage have been seen approaching the manor."

"Many thanks, Ranulf," Gwyneth responded. "I'll go and make myself presentable."

For the first time in days, she felt hopeful. If anyone could help her with the problem of her mandated marriage, the abbess was that person.

Leaving the field, she hurried to the manor house, where all waited in readiness for the nun. Gwyneth sped to her chamber. She quickly washed and dressed in a fresh shift and blue tunic. Being a virgin, she wore her hair unbound by a veil, but she braided her tresses into thick plaits and wound them over her ears.

Then she descended the steps from the gallery and waited for Mother Clotilde in the sunny small room off the great hall.

A basket of freshly harvested apples and a flagon of ale rested on the table. Chairs flanked each of the two windows, and bright afternoon light streamed into the chamber, bathing the space in the mellow, golden sunshine. Because of the strong illumination, she and Aelveva often sat with their embroidery when no one transacted business here.

Gwyneth moved to the window to assess Mother Clotilde's progress, but the nun had not yet entered through the stockade of the manor house. She began to pace nervously.

How would the nun react to the news that Gwyneth and Alan must marry by order of the king? A Saxon through and through, would the woman rail against the union?

The sound of horses and feminine chatter caused Gwyneth to return to the window. A procession of mounted sisters and servants entered the courtyard. She

hurried to the entrance of the house to greet them.

From her place on the doorstep, she saw Mother Clotilde dismount and give the reins of her beast to the groom who greeted her. The others in the entourage did the same.

Gwyneth wanted to run to the abbess but restrained herself as she walked forward to greet her.

"Welcome, Reverend Mother. I am so glad you've come." She turned toward the serving girl. "Elspeth, see that our guests are served refreshments and shown to their chambers."

The young, petite brunette curtsied, then led the others to the great hall, and Gwyneth and the abbess entered the counting room.

"May I offer you some ale or perhaps some apples, mother?"

"My lady, I did not leave my abbey at the busiest time of the year, when every hand is needed, and travel the whole day to gorge myself on sweetmeats and ale. Why did you bid me come here with such urgency?" The nun took a seat by the window. Smoothing the skirt of her habit, she said, "I am waiting, my dear."

Feeling like a child about to be disciplined, Gwyneth wrung her hands. "I am deeply troubled. I know that the bishop frowns upon the sisters breaking their rule of inlaustration, but when I reveal my problem"

"Leave the bishop to me. I've always been able to handle any of them. Now get to the point, girl." She crossed her arms, tucking her hands into her wide sleeves of her dark robe.

Gwyneth began to pace. "The king has commanded me to wed the new Lord of Wykston. It's no ruse. I saw the missive. It bore the royal seal."

The breeze blowing in through the window billowed the nun's black veil. Mother Clotilde smiled and nodded. "Splendid."

Gwyneth frowned and stopped short. "Mother Clotilde, how can you say that? Should Lord Alan discover my secret, the consequences will be dire."

"But your secret, as you call it, will not be discovered, for the problem will not exist."

Gwyneth stared at the woman in disbelief. The nun spoke with such assurance.

"How can you be so certain, Reverend Mother?"

"Because I know you almost as well as Aelveva does. She believes as I do. You never belonged in a convent."

"But you and my father agreed." Gwyneth shook her head, not believing her ears.

"No." The nun shook her head. "I never agreed with Leofric and told him so. I merely acquiesced to his wishes because he was your father." The nun's hand touched the cross hanging from her neck. "You need a husband and children to take the place of the family you lost and to give you the security that was robbed from you." She leaned forward. "That is why you roam at night. You search for your mother and brother. You call their names and ask for help to find them. I have seen you do it on many occasions since Leofric first left you in my care."

Gwyneth remembered her father departing that first time. The memory stirred feelings of loss, abandonment. She walked to her embroidery hoop. A tear fell on the

stretched linen. "I may still walk in my sleep. Then Lord Alan will denounce me."

"I think not." The abbess shook her head. "The man does not strike me as being overly superstitious. Besides, he is besotted with you."

Gwyneth knew he wanted her, but was he really besotted? She turned. "How do you deduce that?"

Mother Clotilde smiled broadly. "Anyone with eyes would conclude as much. Why, the man never let you out of his sight when you stayed at the abbey. Had he wished to be rid of you, Gwyneth, he could have persuaded the king to marry you off to a petty lord or concocted a story for William that would have put you in the remotest convent in the kingdom." Her dark eyes glittered with merriment. "My sources at court informed me that he wrote a compelling letter about you to William."

Gwyneth walked toward the abbess. "Contacts? Who? What did the letter say?"

Mother Clotilde laughed. "One question at a time, Lady Gwyneth. My cousin, Cedric of Dunningstead, is my informant. He swore his fealty to William last year when the king marched into York. My wise relative was one of the very few who remained loyal. He said the letter glowed with praise about how you ministered to all the wounded, that you were learned, and the daughter of an ancient Saxon house."

"Oh." Gwyneth sat in the chair next to the nun. Alan had certainly been possessive and jealous. How many times had he accused her of trysting with a lover?

"The man wants you, and it would be safe to marry him. Maybe after a time you should confide in him. Then the problem will disappear entirely. Aelveva and I both agree that your *night strolls* have occurred less frequently these days."

The nun assessed the situation correctly. Gwyneth did not wander nearly as often as she once did. She wished with all her heart that Mother Clotilde's prediction proved right and her sleepwalking would disappear forever. She so wanted a husband, a home, and children. Still, old fears died hard.

"You don't think it would be better for me to run away to Ireland?" Gwyneth walked to the other chair and sank into it.

The nun shook her head. "You can't run from your problems. They'll follow you to Ireland, I'm afraid. You must face them and overcome them. I believe this marriage is not only the king's will, but God's." She arched a finely shaped eyebrow. "And I think you have feelings for the man."

Gwyneth cast her gaze into her lap and twisted the end of her girdle.

"Your silence doesn't fool me, my girl."

Gwyneth looked up.

The nun shook her finger. "Your eyes mirror what you feel in your heart."

Gwyneth stilled her hands and held Mother Clotilde's scrutiny. "Oh, Mother, what am I to do?"

"What does your heart dictate?"

Putting her hand on her chest, Gwyneth leaned toward the nun. "It tells me I'm tired of loneliness, Mother.

"Then listen to it, Gwyneth."

"How can you advise me to marry the enemy?"

"It would not be the first time enemies married for political reasons. This man

seeks to build rather than destroy. You could do a great deal worse.”

“But I’m so afraid, Mother. All these years my father told me I was defective, and if I had children, they would inherit my affliction.

“Oh, nonsense! You did not start sleepwalking until you lost your mother and little Godwin. A sad heart cannot be inherited by your children.”

“Suppose your opinions prove wrong, Mother?”

“You’ll see that I speak the truth.” The nun shook her head. “You have simply lived with your fear too long. Now is the time to face your troubles and resolve them.”

“Why is it you do not believe I am possessed?”

Mother Clotilde’s eyes glimmered wistfully. “Before I took the veil, I saw a wealthy young widow accused. The lord who made the accusation wanted her lands. When she refused him in marriage, he charged her and paid the oath takers to bear false witness. It was only after she had been drowned that the truth emerged. By then it was too late. She lay dead, and her mortal life could not be restored to her.” The nun dabbed a tear away. “She had been a dear friend. I have never forgotten the injustice done to her.

“But enough of my sad memories. It is your future we wish to arrange. Will you meet the challenge before you, Lady Gwyneth?”

The abbess was right. Gwyneth must slay her dragons, for no one else could perform the task for her.

Suddenly, Alan appeared in the entryway. Had he heard any of their conversation? Gwyneth’s heart tripped with anxiety.

“I’ve come to pay my respects to you, Mother Clotilde.” He walked to the abbess and bowed from the waist. “Welcome to Wykston. I hope your visit will be pleasant.”

The abbess acknowledged his greeting with an imperious nod of her head. “It is always good to see Lady Gwyneth, but my stay will be brief. I must return to the abbey to oversee the gathering of the harvest.”

“I understand.” He smiled. “Perhaps you can visit at your leisure another time.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, my lord, and I accept your offer.” Stately as a queen, she rose from her seat. “Now I seek my chamber because my bones are still aching from the long hours in the saddle. I’ll see you both at vespers.” The abbess headed for the doorway. As she reached it, she stopped and turned. “Lord Wykston, I believe the lady wishes to tell you something.” Smiling, Mother Clotilde swept gracefully from the room and quietly closed the door behind her.

“Why didn’t you tell me she planned to visit?” Alan stared at her from across the room.

“Must I seek your permission to see my friends?” She moved to the embroidery hoop and sat in front of it.

“That depends.”

“On what?” She took up a needle, threading it.

“If they wish me well or ill.”

“She wishes you well.” She took a small stitch and looked up. “In fact, she most thoroughly approves of you.”

“Does she indeed?” He raised his eyebrows.

She nodded. "Oh, Yes."

"So you discussed me?"

Gwyneth felt her face become hot. Not able to meet his gaze, she began stitching again.

He strode toward her and stopped in front of the embroidery hoop. "Look at me." Securing the needle in the stretched cloth, she forced herself to meet his riveting stare.

"Did you tell her of the king's command?"

The intense violet-blue of his eyes rendered her momentarily speechless.

"Well, did you?"

"Yes." Her answer was barely audible for the thundering of her heart.

"What did she advise?"

"She told me to accept the king's will because she believes it is God's will as well."

"Will you accept her counsel?"

"Yes," she whispered through trembling lips.

He set aside the hoop and pulled her toward him.

Feeling as if she were in the thrall of a whirling vortex, Gwyneth surrendered to his embrace.

"Rose," he murmured, just before his lips claimed hers.

Again and again his hot, soft mouth slanted over hers, in a gentle assault of intoxicating kisses. His tongue probed the cleft of her swollen lips, pleading for entry. Her senses reeled as he penetrated her mouth.

Still pressing her to his hard, male body, Alan removed her hairpins, allowing her braids to fall to her waist. One of his hands nestled her breast, while his thumb flicked over the hardened crest in slow, titillating circles. Repeating the exquisite process on her other mound, he continued to provoke a tumult of incredible sensations from her body. Her breath already short, she gasped as hard spasms deeply clenched low in her belly, and a gush of warm moisture sprang between her thighs.

Cupping her buttocks with his palms, Alan ground his pelvis against hers. Even through the layers of their clothing, Gwyneth felt his engorged manhood against her stomach, fueling her ardor to dizzying heights.

"I want you," he whispered hoarsely.

And she wanted him--more than she could say.

He urged her against the wall. Exposing her breasts, he dropped kisses down her neck and over her breasts, tantalizing her nipples with the sweep of his tongue. Then he took her hand and slipped it under his breeches, and she felt his hot engorged member throbbing under her palm.

Her body seemed to glow with heat as she imagined his manhood deep inside her.

A sharp rap on the door startled them, and he jerked away from her. As they rearranged their clothes, he called out, "Enter."

Robert stood in the doorway. "Forgive the intrusion, my lord, but the king's herald awaits you in the great hall."

Lord Alan looked at her. "Forgive me, Gwyneth, but I must go."

Her body still hot with desire, she nodded and he left.

Suddenly alone, she debated the wisdom of her decision to ignore her father's wishes and marry. Gwyneth desperately hoped Mother Clotilde's assumptions that a home and family would cure the strange ailment proved correct. If not, disaster stalked her.

* * * *

Alan walked through an abandoned area of the village and shoved against the battered door of the deserted forge. Sunshine streamed across the earthen floor, flooding the dim shop with brilliant light. The faint odor of charcoal lingered in the air, although the furnace, with its squat clay and sandstone chimney, no longer glowed with the red heat of smelting iron. The massive anvil, too, remained mute without the rhythmic clang of the hammer. Unused, tongs hung from hooks deeply driven into the sooty walls.

The smith, killed in battle, left no one to fashion horseshoes or farm implements. God forbid that a scythe should break before they gathered the harvest. Overwhelmed, Alan tramped to the low stool in the middle of the room. He sat, propping his elbows on his knees and holding his chin in his palms. He added the problem of finding another smithy to the growing list of troubles confronting him.

Across the pond, the mill stood inactive, the miller another casualty of the recent combat. Filling the position with an honest man presented Alan with a formidable task. Notorious cheats, millers often kept a larger portion of flour in payment than was their due. Of course, grain could be ground by hand, but the process was pure drudgery and rendered but little flour at a time.

Alan rubbed his aching head. Everywhere he turned, problems needed solutions, and decisions begged conclusions--but he could not keep his mind focused. His last encounter with Gwyneth haunted him. He remembered the torture he experienced as he tore himself away from her pliant body. How he needed her warmth and tenderness.

Soon though, they would be married and he would take her to his bed.

He heard footsteps and looked up. Ranulf appeared in the doorway. The sergeant's massive form obscured the sun, casting a shadow on the floor.

"Alan, the hour grows late. Have you forgotten your meeting with the priests?" The sergeant ambled in.

"Damnation, Ranulf!" He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "The time has slipped away from me."

"It is understandable. You have much on your mind." The sandy-haired man smiled. "But why all the secrecy? You have not told us the reason you wish to meet."

"You will soon discover the reason." Alan stood.

"Then lead on." Ranulf extended his arm in a wide arc, indicating the way out. "But I have a suspicion the reason is a royal command to wed a lovely blond?"

"How did you know?" Then Alan waved his hands, indicating that he needed no explanation. "Never mind. What Lady Gwyneth knows, Mistress Aelveva soon learns, and I'll wager my sword that you cajoled the information from her."

Ranulf laughed. "I did not have to try very hard."

Alan smiled and bobbed his eyebrows. "So the wooing goes better?"

"Much better!" Ranulf replied.

* * * *

Robert tripped and almost dumped the tankards of sloshing ale from the tray he was carrying. "My lord, surely you cannot mean that!" His color livid beneath his freckles, the boy wobbled on long, skinny legs to the center of the great hall and approached the trestle table where Alan, Ranulf, and the two clerics sat.

The men glared at the awkward boy. He had spoken out of turn. A wary look on his face, he set the tray down as the men reached for the refreshments he proffered.

"No, Robert," Alan contradicted. "I am as serious as a priest hearing confessions. Lady Gwyneth and I will wed."

Alan deliberately spoke in a booming voice so the other servants who loitered about, hoping to hear a snippet of gossip, stopped and stood, eyes agog, mouths open.

"Felicitations," Ranulf said. He stood, strode toward Alan, and slapped him on the back. "To the new bride of Wykston, the Lady Gwyneth." He raised his drink.

The other men lifted their tankards as well. "The Lady Gwyneth," they chanted in unison, but no smile tugged at the lips of the Norman cleric. He averted his eyes as his companions quickly gulped down their ale. Exchanging a furtive glance with the squire, Father Rollo's thin, lined face lacked enthusiasm.

"M ... my lord," Robert stammered, "the steward, Ulfer, said that she must marry Wulfstan. The old man predicted that the son of their union will drive us from England."

His patience at an end, Alan stood abruptly. "Robert! Stop your tomfoolery!" He struck the top of the table with his fist. "The king commands this marriage."

Startled, the boy jumped back as the other minions scurried off in all directions.

"How many times must I tell you, lad? Ulfer seeks to sow the seeds of superstition and fear in our midst. It is the enemy we must fear."

"Of course," Ranulf agreed, and an uncharacteristic look of annoyance wavered across his face as he returned to his seat.

The boy's dark eyes grew wider, but Alan suspected his nervous squire had more to say.

"I ... I beg your pardon, my lord, but I am not the only one who fears Lady Gwyneth. Many of our men still remember her strange behavior the night we found her." Robert's knobby knees shook visibly.

"I am sure they do after you babbled all of Ulfer's mad ravings to them. You played right into his hands. Tell him, Father Rollo." Alan extended his hand toward the cleric.

The Norman priest shifted in his seat, as if he felt uncomfortable having to defend her. "If King William wishes this alliance, we must comply, lad."

"To be sure," Father Alfred interjected. "Lady Gwyneth is a devoted daughter of the Church. Your words can do great harm, Robert," the priest admonished as he lifted the tankard to his thin lips.

"Now be off with you, lad," Alan added. "We have business to discuss, and keep your yapping tongue silent."

The squire loped off like a rangy wolfhound.

"Let us get back to the matter of your nuptials, Alan," Ranulf suggested, leaning forward.

Alan motioned to a serving wench to bring more ale. "I have written a simple

marriage contract. I would like you all to peruse it.”

Chapter Twelve

Plighting his troth, Alan's voice echoed with surety throughout the little church.

Her hand in his, Gwyneth trembled with anxiety, causing the ruby silk of her over-tunic to glisten with silvery highlights. She was taking a dangerous chance and prayed the abbess had given her sound advice. If the Norman realized she walked in her sleep, she shuddered to think what punishment he might wreak on her.

Certainly, the fragile trust taking root between them would be killed. Winning his confidence would take time, and, of course, she must prove herself.

Since the day Gwyneth agreed to wed him, she had seen little of Lord Alan. True, a multitude of problems confronted him, but of late he held himself aloof. Here she stood, pledging to spend her life with this man, yet she knew nothing about him, save what she had observed and he had revealed--which consisted of precious little.

Her mind reeled with questions. Though he grew up a bastard, had he known his father and mother? Where did he learn to read? Did he have brothers and sisters? How did he come to be a knight? Who fostered him? Why did he trust no one but Ranulf?

By telling him about the deaths of her mother and brother, Gwyneth had revealed some of the deepest personal details of her life. She had expected him to reciprocate in kind, thereby establishing a basis for intimacy. But concerning his thoughts and feelings, Lord Alan remained as remote as the distant heavens.

Nevertheless, in an unexpected gesture of kindness, the man had returned her dower lands. The memory of Alan's generosity caused her heart to swell with a resurgence of affection and hope.

Gazing up at him, she admired his perfect profile against the candle-lit walls of the sanctuary. Handsome in his blue garb, his clean woodsy scent mingled with the sweet fragrance of the glowing beeswax tapers, intoxicating her. Lightheaded, she clasped his hand tighter as the lavender-pink blooms of heather festooning the altar blurred before her eyes.

Without warning, Alan peered down at her, a quizzical look on his face. Father Alfred, regal in his chasuble of sparkling white, cleared his throat and blinked. Father Rollo, similarly clad, glared at her with censure. Somewhere in the congregation, a guest coughed nervously.

Enchanted by her new husband's good looks, she had failed to speak her vows. Regaining her wits, she managed to stammer out her pledge. Alan lifted her hand. The wide, gold-trimmed sleeves of her ruby silk over-tunic, which matched the color of the huge jewels in her coronet, fluttered and shimmered in the candlelight as her arm moved upward. He slowly slipped the simple golden band on her finger.

The ceremony completed, she flushed with pleasure as he tenderly placed an unexpected kiss on her lips before they retraced their steps up the aisle. Standing in front of the church portal, Alan bowed gallantly to her then lifted her hand and kissed it as the

wind gently caressed her unbound hair.

Delighted by his panache, she smiled at him, but her joy disappeared quickly as she surveyed the crowd. Old Aldred, the tanner, and Gyrth, the swineherd, glowered at her as if she were a traitorous whore. The faces of the Normans also mirrored their mistrust, though they cheered in deference to their lord. Even the Saxon women stared at her cautiously.

A coil of icy fear constricted her heart. His men still suspected her. The situation had been made worse by Robert's prattling, for she'd overheard the boy herself. Thanks to Ulfer, her own people held her in contempt as well.

Was Alan's grand design to unite their two peoples simply an impossible dream? How could she ever be a part of that noble plan if the people feared and mistrusted her? Her happiness snuffed out like a candle in a draft, Gwyneth accompanied Alan to the great hall.

* * * *

The guests sat in order of rank at the long oaken tables. Pantlers scurried about, bearing fresh, crusty trenchers and creamy butter to be shared by each pair of celebrants. The butler and cupbearers served fine Burgundy, as the alewife and Edith, her seductive daughter, sauntered about, proffering their ale and mead.

Other servants treated the guests to savory platters of fish in butter and dill sauce, haunches of venison, roasted geese, saddles of lamb, roasted boars, and stuffed swans. Carrots, peas, beans, and parsnips swam in butter and herb sauces. Desserts included cheeses, cakes, custards with raisin sauce, poached fruit, and nuts.

"You hardly ate anything." Alan took her hand in his. "Are you ill?"

"No, my lord." She lowered her lids as she struggled to keep her emotions in check.

He cupped her chin, tilting her face upward as he gazed into her eyes. "Already regretting your decision to marry?"

Gwyneth forced a smile, trying to conceal the ache in her heart.

"Your smile does not reach your eyes, wife. What is amiss?"

His eyes reflected his concern, prompting her to tell him her fears. Still, this was not the moment. "Later, my lord."

Alan dropped his hands from her face. "But we will speak of it."

Although soft, the tone of his voice rang with determination, but Gwyneth was spared from further interrogation as the old piper and harper began their music.

She and Alan led the dancing then relinquished the floor to watch the others. A steady stream of guests filed by to give their best wishes, but Gwyneth felt their words merely consisted of lip service.

As the night dragged on, fatigue and doubt caught up with her, and the gold coronet holding her loose hair back grew heavier by the moment.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Edith, flagon in hand, leaving the celebration. To where was she flitting off this time? Perhaps she was going to tryst with a lover. Over the years, the girl had the habit of slipping away for days, leaving her mother to contend with the work while she cavorted in neighboring villages. Her behavior remained the subject of gossip, for most folk never strayed from their estates.

The only child of a poor widow, the alewife's daughter had been spoiled since she was a babe.

A gentle tap on her shoulder interrupted Gwyneth's speculations. She turned. Aelveva, joyful as a sunbeam in her yellow tunic, smiled at her.

"It is time to retire, my lady."

Clad in green garb, Ranulf wove unsteadily behind Aelveva, grinning from ear to ear. "Relinquish your bride, my lord." He hiccupped loudly. "While she prepares herself for you, let us raise a tankard to your health and, shall we say..., endurance."

Several ribald remarks erupted from the inebriated guests, followed by a burst of uproarious laughter. Cheeks flushing hotly, Gwyneth rose and followed Aelveva.

* * * *

Tired and nervous, Gwyneth had dismissed Aelveva, hoping a few quiet moments would enable her to calm herself.

Clad in a fresh shift, her bare feet chilled against the cold, oaken floor planks, she stood in front of the chest at the foot of Alan's bed and neatly placed her folded wedding dress inside it. As she closed the lid, she realized that the noise of the feasting had waned. Outside, a stiff breeze stirred the trees.

Suddenly, the faces of the men outside the church haunted her. The memory caused her knees to shake, and she grabbed the sturdy chest for support.

Had she made a horrible mistake by marrying the Norman? Suppose his troops deserted him because they mistrusted her. Alan would be powerless against his enemies if he did not have the loyalty of his men. The notion tortured her. She and the abbess never bargained for this development.

Still, the mistake could be rectified. If she and Alan failed to consummate their marriage, he would be free to petition for an annulment.

Perhaps her destiny lay in the convent after all. If so, she prayed the Norman would find some way to safeguard her from Wulfstan.

The idea of leaving Alan, of never feeling his arms around her, or his lips touching hers again, filled her with desolation. Contrary to all logic, the handsome Norman had awakened an undeniable need in her, causing her body to ache with an insatiable longing for him.

But she must resist. To yield could result in his destruction--and hers, for she still had her sleepwalking problem.

Her thoughts a battleground of conflict, Gwyneth walked to the table and blew out all but one of the candles. Tears brimmed and overflowed as she fought to stem the tumult of emotions flooding her heart.

Suddenly, the door swung open on creaking hinges, and she started. Without the customary fanfare of a wedding party to lead him to his bride, Alan entered alone. He walked toward her, taper in hand.

"Tears? So you do regret your decision to marry," he rebuked.

"It is you, my lord, who should regret it." Gwyneth wiped her moist cheeks on the cuff of her shift.

"Why do you speak so strangely?" A muscle twitched in his jaw. "This is no way for a bride to welcome her husband." He set the candle down on the small table near

the bedstead.

"Did you not see the faces of your men? Admit that the marriage has made them uneasy."

"They will become accustomed to our alliance when they begin to see the benefits of the union."

She shook her head. "I doubt they will ever come to accept our marriage, but it is not too late to correct the error. Our marriage can be annulled."

Even in the dim light, she saw his face darken, and his eyes blazed like the violet-blue center of a flame. "So you can be free to go to Wulfstan? Never!" He gripped her shoulders. "You are mine, and I keep what is mine."

Though Gwyneth retreated from him, her blood turned to racing fire, and her flesh tingled with excitement at his touch. Backing away from his advance, she found herself pinned against the wall.

He pressed her close as his palm slipped to her breast and his thumb flicked over it. Gwyneth felt her nipples pucker tightly beneath his caress. Instinctively, she clung to him.

"But you respond to me. Why is that if you want another man? Are you a wanton, desiring any male who is near?"

Horried by his words, Gwyneth stared up into his eyes. Vehement denial would not convince him of the truth. Softly, matter-of-factly, she answered, "No, my lord. I never had feelings for any man until..."

"Until Wulfstan," he snarled.

She kept her gaze steady, her voice low. "No, my lord. I hate the revolting toad."

His scrutiny burned so intensely, Gwyneth felt her flesh would scorch under his gaze. He loosened his hold and stepped back, a look of bewilderment on his face. Was he debating with himself as to the truth of her words?

"Then why did you turn pale when I forbade you to sign the marriage contract?" His tone challenged her declaration.

"I swooned in blessed relief."

"Relief?" He raised his dark eyebrows questioningly.

"Yes. The boorish oaf has buried three wives. All died young and under questionable circumstances. Of course, each poor wretch left him richer. Those facts are easily verified if you wish to do so, my lord. Wulfstan wanted me for his next hapless victim. He has coveted Wykston for a long time."

"Then why speak about an annulment?"

She cast her gaze downward and bit her lower lip. With all her soul, Gwyneth wanted to confess everything about her bizarre secret, but her fear of being drowned as a witch seized her.

"I am waiting to hear your reasons, Lady Gwyneth." "My lord, what is most important now is your success here. It will benefit both our peoples." She paused, groping for the right words then continued, "If your men cannot accept me, the union we hope for cannot happen. I don't wish to harm you. I care too much," *for you*, she added silently.

She clasped her hand over her mouth. Her emotions welling up like a spring from

the earth, her words had poured forth before Gwyneth could stop them.

Alan's breath audibly caught in his throat, and his eyes glowed with warmth as if he had guessed her unspoken words.

"Gwyneth," he murmured. His arms tightened about her, and his heart thundered in rhythm against hers. His wine-flavored kisses were neither gentle nor tentative this time but insistent, demanding, ravenous, making her breathless, dizzy, excited.

Her arms around his neck, Gwyneth returned his kisses with long pent-up ardor. Her tongue encountered his as it cajoled, teased, and inflamed her senses to new heights of pleasure. She broke away from his mouth and rubbed her cheek against the fine stubble of his beard then pressed gentle kisses all over his face.

Alan gasped as the tip of her tongue explored the swirls of his ears. She continued her feast, savoring the salty taste of his flesh as her lips took their journey down the strong slope of his jaw, over his neck, and to the sturdy projection of his collarbone.

Gwyneth wished she could remain in his embrace forever, feeling protected, cherished, and desired as Alan stroked his palms down her spine, kneading her derriere, intimately molding her to his body.

Suddenly, he broke away. "Remove my tunic, Gwyneth."

Her fingers fumbled at his cincture, but she managed to unfasten the knot and dropped the cord to the floor. He bent his strapping body to enable her to lift off his garb, and she eagerly accommodated him, letting the garments fall. Looking up again, Gwyneth paused. She had seen his naked body before, but the splendor of it never failed to enthrall her. Unable to control her impulse, she swept her hands over his broad shoulders and raked her fingers through the crisp, dark mat of hair covering his massive chest.

Wanting to see more, Gwyneth knelt, removing his shoes and hose to reveal his powerful calves and well-made feet. Still, she hesitated about slipping her fingers into the waistband of his breeches and tugging downward. Instead, she rose.

Alan completed the task, and his exultant male flesh popped free.

He dropped to his powerful haunches and grasped the hem of her shift. He stood, slipped the garment over her head, and dropped it to the pile of discarded clothes at their feet. The heat of his gaze caused a hot flush to sweep over her entire body.

He drew her into his embrace, his mouth slanting over hers in a renewed assault of fiery kisses. The floor tipped away, and the room spun as he lifted her into his brawny arms. Seconds later, Gwyneth heard the crunch of the straw mattress and felt the feather ticking above it at her back.

In all its male glory, Alan's hard body rested atop hers, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, breast to breast, as his thick mat of chest hair tantalized her thrusting nipples beyond endurance.

A cry of protest escaped her lips as he disengaged from her again.

"Patience, my Sweet Rose. We must go slowly your first time, and I'd have us savor every delectable moment."

As he returned to her, Alan paid homage to her breasts, first with his tender touch and later with his mouth, suckling first one hard peak then the other. His gentle tugs

intensified the primal beat thrumming low in her belly, causing her whole body to pulsate with desire.

Flesh to flesh with him, Gwyneth longed for a deeper union, a closer bond, an amalgam of body, mind, and soul. She wanted to fuse with him, forming something newer, stronger, better, like the fine alloy of two precious metals.

Alan slid his hands over her lower belly and pressed the aching void consuming her there. Next, he proceeded languidly to the apex of her legs. Burrowing his fingers beneath her triangular patch of hair, he explored her dewy folds.

Gwyneth's knees parted, and her hips jolted up to meet his erotic touch.

"Flowing with hot nectar," he whispered. "You are ready for me, wife."

Alan found her pleasure spot and continued his relentless siege as he unerringly provoked her to exquisite desperation. Her back arched taut as a bowstring. Her body clamoring with desire, Gwyneth grasped his shoulders.

"My lord, I need you inside of me."

Alan loomed over her, and she drank in the warm, clean smell of his body. Taking the tip of his engorged member, he pressed against her swollen, eager flesh and entered slowly. With reckless abandon, Gwyneth lurched up to meet him in joyous welcome. Complete enchantment supplanted a twinge of pain as he sank deep within her, filling her hungry emptiness.

"So hot and so tight," he rasped out.

Slowly, he withdrew a little then re-entered her slick sheath again and again in a provocative rhythm. The rapture she felt increased with his every thrust until all awareness fled except the exquisite sensation of his body in hers. On and on, he slid against her, and the friction urged her upward, onward, toward sublime bliss.

But what she strove for seemed just beyond her reach. She became frantic now.

They were moaning, panting, and trembling as she lifted her hips to meet his thrust.

Alan then lifted her buttocks, and the new angle allowed a deeper penetration and more stimulation.

His eyes shut tight, his breath ragged, Alan increased his tempo, plunging stronger, faster, deeper until her entire body throbbed with ecstasy. She felt shattered yet whole as the powerful spasms gripped her body in their thrall, sending liquid sunshine tingling outward down her legs and up her arms to the tips of her fingers, toes, and breasts.

"Gwyneth," Alan cried, collapsing on her.

Moments later, he rolled from her, gathering her in his arms. "From the moment I saw you, I knew you were made for loving," he said softly.

"Am I?" Her index finger trailed along the bridge of his nose. "I knew I wanted you, but I didn't expect making love to be quite so exquisite."

"Oh, it gets even better, my Little Rose."

In wonderment, Gwyneth propped herself on her elbows and stared at him. "How could it?"

"With practice. A great deal of it," he answered as he pulled her to him once more.

* * * *

Alan stood by the window, enjoying the sensation of the morning breeze on his naked body. He watched the sun float like a burnished copper globe above the horizon. As it ascended, it blushed the pale mist to golden pink. He turned from the rosy celebration in the eastern sky to rest his gaze on his slumbering wife.

His breath caught in his throat as the pink buds of her bare breasts peeped through the fall of blond tresses tumbling over her flawless skin. Desire coursed through him, and he wanted her again--fiercely.

But what he felt right now was more than lust. He felt a kind of tenderness for her that he had never experienced before.

Had he embarked on an uncharted journey of the heart? He had never expected to feel this way, but Gwyneth had given him something infinitely precious. The depth of her passion, the totality of her response thrilled him beyond his wildest dreams.

The woman had never flinched, even as he felt her maidenhead yield to his thrust. She had given of herself generously, freely, allowing him to abandon himself to the sweet pleasures of her moist, warm body. Gwyneth made him feel whole, complete, and alive as never before.

Treading softly, Alan crossed the chamber floor to stand beside her. Awestruck, his gaze fixed on her full, ripe lips. Parted in repose, they begged to be tasted. His mouth went dry, and his heart thudded with anticipation. Gwyneth was his lawful wife to take again and to savor to the fullest extent. He took up her white hand and pressed his lips to her soft palm.

She stirred, stretching lazily. Her long, silken locks fell away, exposing the rest of her slim body to him. She opened her silver eyes and smiled. "Good morrow, my lord."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he chuckled and took her in his arms. "Under the circumstances, it would be appropriate to call me Alan, and I shall call you Gwyneth."

She raked her fingers through his hair, tousling it. "Alan," she repeated. Her simple utterance sounded like music. He rocked her gently. "How do you feel?"

She looked up at him, and her fingers traced the underside of his jaw. "I feel ... it is difficult to describe." She blushed like a new rose.

"Pleasant?" He nipped her earlobe.

She sighed. "More than merely pleasant. Exhilarated and so, so"

"Satisfied?" He tightened his embrace.

"Precisely. Do you feel the same thing, then?"

"I know not if it is exactly the same, but the sensation takes me beyond the realm of delightful."

She caressed his cheek, and Alan responded by kissing the juncture of her neck and shoulder, breathing in the perfume of her warm, luscious skin.

Suddenly, a sharp rap interrupted them.

"My lord!" The voice belonged to Robert.

"Quick," Alan whispered. "Cover yourself while I see what Robert wants."

Gwyneth pulled on her shift and over-tunic as Alan stepped into his breeches and rushed to the door.

The anxious squire stumbled into the chamber. On short breath, he stammered out, "M ... my lord, Charles, the Strong Arm, and the other sentries who guarded the mill have been found dead with their brains spilt from their skulls."

"Oh," Gwyneth cried.

"Not only that, my lord, but the millstone has been dislodged and cracked in half."

"God's bones," Alan growled. "Sergeant Ranulf begs your pardon for this intrusion but asks that you please come, my lord."

Alan pounded his fist on the wall. "Damnation! When did this happen? Why wasn't I informed immediately?"

"I learned of it but a few moments ago, my lord." The squire's face glowed with a fine sheen of sweat.

Alan slipped on his under-tunic, and Robert helped him put on his padded jacket, hose, shoes, and hauberk.

"Inform Ranulf I shall meet with him presently," he ordered, pulling up his mail coif.

"Yes, my lord." The squire turned on his heel and quit the chamber.

"As if we don't have enough problems as things stand. Our best men dead, and now we have no way to grind our grain. The craven curs waited until we least expected attack."

Pale and shaken, Gwyneth sat on the bed. Even now, their enemies could be waiting in the forest for another opportunity to strike and kidnap her. Little by little, their foes could severely deplete the ranks of men or set the entire village to the torch. The realization hit him like an ax.

For all he knew, Wulfstan's men could be hiding within the geburs' homes at this very moment. Under the guise of compliance, were the Saxon villagers still bearing the animosity of a defeated people toward him and his men? Likely, they were collaborating with the lord.

Buckling on his sword, he looked at Gwyneth. "I am sorry to leave you so soon, but you understand I must go?"

She walked toward him. "Yes." Reaching up, she kissed his cheek. "Please be careful, Alan."

"I shall, Little Rose." He returned her kiss, put his helm on his head, and strode from the room.

Chapter Thirteen

Alan stared down at the corpse still lying by the vandalized mill. The crown of Charles' skull had been hacked off right through his metal helm. Congealed blood and chunks of brain had gushed onto the ground. No doubt the wound had been inflicted by a murderous ax.

The other men's injuries appeared just as fearsome. Poor bowlegged Henri bore a gaping chest wound. Obviously struck from the rear, the other three men lay face down, their backs gashed open.

With five men on guard, why hadn't one of them sounded the alarm horn? Furthermore, they had been killed at close range, not shot by arrows from afar. Why had the victims been so inattentive? Had they been sleeping on sentry duty?

The notion caused Alan's temper to boil over. If they had dozed off, their carelessness had resulted in the waste of their lives. Moreover, the enemy invaded without detection, perpetrated the heinous act, and escaped with the opportunity to return and inflict more damage in the future. Turning away from the gory sight, Alan noticed a group of soldiers standing nearby. Seasoned veterans all, they obviously had come with Ranulf to investigate the incident.

"What discoveries have you made, Ranulf?"

The man shook his sandy head. "Unfortunately, not a great many. No one seems to know anything."

"So the villagers noticed nothing awry?"

Ranulf looked at the bodies, grimacing. "We have not finished questioning everyone as yet. I believe quite a number of foes attacked since they dislodged the millstone and cracked it in half, mayhap with a great cudgel. They wrecked the inside of the mill as well. The sole reason they refrained from burning it is because we'd have seen the fire and pursued them."

"It was a quiet night with a breeze blowing across the pond toward the village," Baldwin, an old campaigner, said. "The sound of an alarm would have carried, but we saw and heard naught. I say it was the work of the devil."

The other soldiers muttered their affirmations, nodding in agreement.

Alan felt his face and neck flushed hot with anger. "I will not abide that nonsense. How many times must I tell you we must fear our enemies and our own complaisance, not hobgoblins! Spirits need no axes and lances to kill. This was the work of clever foes. Now let us get to work and investigate this crime."

"To be sure." Ranulf nodded. "Baldwin, inform Father Rollo to prepare for the funerals. The rest of you get to your duties."

Grumbling their discontent, the men straggled back to work.

Ranulf walked toward Alan and continued his speculation. "The mill provides the rebels with an easy target because it's surrounded by thick woods and is unprotected by

the village walls. The enemy could have come from any direction and disappeared under cover of night.

"Still, five well-armed men should have at least sounded an alarm or shouted. Charles died with his horn still around his neck."

Alan stood face to face with his old friend. "I know." He shook his head in disgust. "I believe they fell asleep."

"All of them?" Ranulf's eyes widened. "They knew the penalty for such an act. Charles served so conscientiously. I find it hard to believe he would ever do that."

"Perhaps they were helped." Alan stroked his chin.

"You mean they were drunk?"

"Yes," Alan answered.

"By the saints, you may be right, Alan! Charles had been keeping company with the wench, Edith."

"The alewife's daughter?"

"The very one," Ranulf said.

"The girl is a born seductress and has tried her wiles on most of the men here. She also had every opportunity. She could have easily slipped away with mead or ale and put something into it to ensure the men slept."

Ranulf shook his head. "The girl would have proved hard to resist for a young, robust man like Charles, who had a lusty appetite."

Alan and Ranulf began their walk around the pond toward the village.

"Well, we know where to start our questioning." Alan nodded toward the alehouse.

"If she is there." Ranulf quirked a brow. "Aelveva says she has a habit of disappearing for days at a time."

"Why?"

"No one seems to know. If they do, they are unwilling to talk about it," Ranulf answered. "Of course, someone else might have brought the brew to the men. There are others in this village who resent us. Old Aldred and Gyrth are just two." *And my wife could be another.* Gwyneth could have paid someone to do the deed. No one would ever suspect her as she had been with me, consummating our marriage.

Sick to his soul, Alan's stomach lurched. He hated being suspicious of her, but if his parents had no compunction about killing him, why should his spouse? Was the story she had told him about Wulfstan true, or did he simply want to believe it?

"Of course, forces outside of this village could want to harm us. Mayhap they bribed one of the *geburs*," Ranulf said.

"True, so in the meantime, I want the guard doubled, every home searched, and no villager is to be allowed outside his home after dark."

"Do you wish to be present during Edith's interrogation, Alan?"

"Definitely."

* * * *

Dogged by worry, Alan paced the rush-strewn floor of his dim bedchamber. The flames from the guttering candles flickered vigorously in the drafts whistling through the room. The hour late, his problems had gnawed at him long into the night.

Edith had shed considerable light on the murders. Would his plan to apprehend the villains work? An elaborate and extremely dangerous scheme, months could elapse before it bore fruit.

Unfortunately, the investigation had not cleared all doubt from his mind about Gwyneth. True, Edith did not mention her, yet his wife could have played a part behind the scenes, of which the alewife's pretty daughter had no notion.

Alan's gaze rested on his wife. Gwyneth had sat quietly for over an hour, never interrupting him with useless prattle. Instead, she passed the time carding wool and keeping her peace. She appeared to be all a man could want in a woman: intelligent, industrious, beautiful, generous, and so passionate in his bed. If he could just assure himself of her loyalty--but his unanswered questions cast dark doubts on his trust. Why, for instance, had Gwyneth been prowling the woods alone on the night he found her? He repeatedly asked her, but she never answered to his satisfaction. When would she reveal the reason?

Perhaps he should take Ranulf's advice and forget his distrust? Still, his suspicions had served as a valuable survival tactic, alerting him to danger many times. He refused to cast caution aside.

Gwyneth put her hand to her mouth, covering a yawn, and stretched her long limbs. Setting her work aside, she stood and approached him, her long shadow preceding her. She took hold of his hands. As she looked up at him, her silver eyes glowed luminously.

"What troubles you, Alan? May I be of some help?"

The woman appeared as innocent as a dove, and the rose-scented perfume of her skin permeated the air around him, making him drunk with need for her. How he wished Gwyneth truly was as good and as honest as she seemed to be.

Suddenly, a sharp rap on the door interrupted them.

"Enter." Alan turned from her toward the door.

A tall, blond man with a broken nose and a tanned face entered, accompanied by Robert. "Forgive the intrusion, my lord," the squire said, "but Theobald rides from the king with an urgent message."

The herald dropped to one knee. "My lord, William asks that you leave sufficient men here to defend Wykston from the rebels and join him immediately in Lincoln. From there he plans to impose his peace as he marches across the countryside."

"Oh, no!" Gwyneth clasped her hands to her heart.

Alan stared at his wife then returned his attention back to the herald. "So William has restored order in the west?"

"Yes, my lord. But many problems face him in the east before he can march north to York. He plans to take that city soon."

"Rise, Theobald," Alan ordered. "Tell King William we leave at first light."

The man departed, followed by Robert, leaving Alan annoyed. He must abandon a great deal of unfinished business here, as well as some unsolved riddles, not the least of which was whether his wife was consorting with traitors. Much as he hated the idea, that notion rode his back like a hair shirt.

Furthermore, he still had no smith and no miller. He must now delegate the

solution of those problems to Ranulf.

"I wish you did not have to go," she said softly.

Were the tears shimmering in her eyes sincere?

"I have no choice, Gwyneth."

"I know." She nodded. "But we have had so little time to become acquainted with each other." She walked to him, putting her arms around him.

Despite his doubts about her, his body responded to hers instantly. If he were not careful, he would end like Charles Strong Arm. He disengaged from her.

"I must arrange many things before I depart." He walked to the door, paused, and turned to her. "I shall leave Ranulf in charge of the defenses. Should you need anything, you can rely on him."

Exerting every ounce of self-control he possessed to resist her charms, Alan quickly left the room.

* * * *

Gwyneth inspected the dry herbs dangling from the ceiling beams of her small still room. Satisfied with her stock, she turned from the task and walked toward the table by the wall, lighting a candle against the gloom of the winter afternoon. Next, she checked her supply of poppy seeds, for the remedy was her best weapon against the pain of injury. She wished she had such an anodyne for the ache in her heart.

The lonely days had stretched into weeks for Gwyneth. Although she occupied her time with a myriad of tasks, neither her husband nor the memory of his abrupt, cold departure ever strayed far from her thoughts.

After the king's herald left, she had waited for Alan to return to her, but she kept a futile vigil, lying awake all night, staring into the darkness. She convinced herself that he was busy with important matters.

At dawn, Gwyneth wished him farewell as he rode off, but his aloof demeanor perplexed her, leaving her feeling rejected, angry, and even a little frightened. She feared she might never see him alive again. That anxiety haunted her every day and especially at night when she slept alone in their bed, which now seemed too large without him.

The harvest time drifted into the deep of winter. The tree limbs, gaunt and bare against the gray, dismal sky, reflected the desolation of her soul. Why had her husband changed toward her? Had she done something to cause him to become so distant?

On several occasions, she tried to broach the subject with Aelveva, but her maid was enjoying her courtship with Ranulf so much that Gwyneth could not bear to vex her. The faithful woman had done enough for her.

Fearful she would walk in her sleep again now that Alan was gone, Gwyneth asked Aelveva to take up her old post and again sleep in her chamber in front of the door. The loyal maidservant graciously complied.

But Gwyneth had not walked in her sleep since her marriage. That fact constituted the only glimmer of hope on a dark horizon. So far, Mother Clotilde's reasoning had been sound.

Perhaps when Alan returned, she could gain his trust, and he would not be aloof toward her.

If he returned, that was.

* * * *

Alan fought the bone-chilling cold. The snow fell thickly, sticking to the mantles of his men like fluffy little feathers as they traveled home to Wykston at last. They had campaigned for two months and had re-established Norman rule in the north, but with devastating consequences to the Saxons.

William reached York and retook the city, burning it to the ground a few days before Christmas. In fact, the Normans celebrated the holy day and heard mass there. Afterward, the king's forces had separated into small groups and harried the whole north of England, laying waste to the countryside with a terrible vengeance.

The area now subdued, William commanded Alan to return home and hold the peace in Northumbria, while the king and the rest of his army rode on to Chester.

In the meantime, Alan had heard no news from home. Had the rebels destroyed Wykston? Would charred buildings and blackened corpses lying stiff against the snow greet him?

If the village had been spared, winter surely had inflicted its own hardships. Without anyone to mill the grain to flour, the people would have precious little bread, and they still had no one to forge tools. Even if they survived the harsh conditions until spring, their plowshares and other tools needed to be in good repair for planting time. For that, a smith was essential.

And would he find Gwyneth there, or had she deserted and run off to Wulfstan? If she had spoken truly, she hated the man. That fact did not necessarily mean she remained loyal to the Norman cause. She could have escaped to Scotland. King Malcolm and Queen Margaret were hosting many Saxon nobles who had fled.

And damn him to the lowest pit in hell! In spite of all his doubts and anxieties, Alan still wanted her, ached for her, had not lain with another woman since he had left her.

Through a thick curtain of snow, Alan saw his home. The stockade still stood intact. But what hid behind it? His scalp pricked with apprehension, for soon his questions would be answered.

Cautious anticipation seemed to settle over the men as well. Formerly quiet, their ranks now buzzed with conversation. Even Rampage strained to charge forward. Alan picked up the pace, allowing the feisty stallion to break into a canter.

As the troops approached the stockade, Alan spied Ranulf on horseback near the outer gate, galloping to meet him.

"Welcome home!" The big man wore a wide grin as he turned his horse to ride by Alan's side.

"Many thanks, Ranulf. It's good to see you again. I trust all goes well," Alan stated warily, not knowing what awaited him.

"More than just well. Superbly."

Surprised, Alan stared at Ranulf. "How so?"

"Wait and see." Ranulf smiled, and his hazel eyes twinkled.

Encouraged, Alan and his companions rode through the second gate. Looking around the village, he saw that the people looked well fed. In fact, they appeared quite content as they went about their daily tasks. Despite snowfall, he discerned a plume of

smoke ascending from the forge. The familiar clang of a smithy's hammer beat out a lively tempo. Moreover, the distinct fragrance of baking bread wafted on the frigid air.

Alan turned in his saddle. "Obviously, you lured a smith here and managed to mill the grain."

"It was not I who managed the miracles."

"Who then?"

"Lady Gwyneth." Ranulf grinned.

So she had not deserted him! His wife had remained here and proved herself a loyal and able steward in his absence. Elation flooded through him. "But how, Ranulf? Where is she?"

"Here she comes now." Ranulf chuckled and pointed in her direction. "Let her enlighten you."

Her deep green mantle billowing behind her, Gwyneth picked up her skirts and ran toward him, blazing a trail in the new-fallen snow. "My lord," she cried.

Casting aside all restraint, he dismounted and sprinted to meet her. Lifting her into his arms, he spun her around.

"Welcome home, husband." She smiled, wrapping her arms about his neck.

"It is the happiest homecoming I have ever had, Gwyneth."

Alan left Rampage to Robert and carried her into the manor house, up the steps to the gallery, and into their bedchamber.

As he opened the door, the warmth from the braziers made the room cozy, beckoning them. The table was set with plates, cutlery, tankards, a flagon of mulled wine, trenchers of bread, a haunch of venison, a wedge of cheese, and a basket of apples. Obviously, Gwyneth had ordered refreshments when the guards at the gate recognized him and informed her of his approach. He set her down and kissed her, his heart filled with longing, and his body tensed with need.

Her response was eager, fervent, and enticing.

He drew away and held her at arms' length. "May I conclude from your reaction that you missed me?"

"Terribly, husband." Her silver eyes shone, and her complexion glowed rosy from the chill of the wind. "Have you missed me as well?"

"Yes." He embraced her again, hoping to restrain himself from behaving like a rutting stag. He had been abstinent for a long time and wanted her beyond all imagining.

"Ummm," she hummed, closing her eyes as she inhaled. "How is it you smell so clean?"

"I washed this morning before dawn. Robert heated some buckets of water for me. I still nearly froze to death, but I didn't want to greet you with the stench of battle and death on me."

"Your garb seems fresh as well." Opening her eyes, she looked up at him.

"I took advantage of William's washer women. They followed us everywhere."

"Is that the only favor you sought from them?" She pierced him with a look of skepticism.

"Be assured, my Little Rose." He stroked her cheek. "Most of the poor souls hobbled about, old and bent. Speaking for certain favors, though, I wish you'd shower

some wifely ones on me.”

She smiled seductively. “I think I can arrange that, but we need to get you out of that mail first.”

Gwyneth helped him slip out of his heavy cloak, mail, padded jack, and linen shirt. He sat on a stool near the fire. Caressing him, she slowly and tantalizingly helped him out of his shoes, hose, trousers, and breeches.

His erection throbbing, he stood and pulled her to him. “Now, I can feel your softness.”

“And I can feel your strength,” she said.

Alan claimed her lips in another searing kiss, his need burgeoning by the second. He loosened her veil, allowing her wealth of golden hair to cascade down her back. In one fluid movement, he reached down and grabbed hold of the hems of her shift and tunic, pulling them over her head, so she stood before him in all her womanly glory. He knelt again and removed her shoes and hose while covering her flat stomach, thighs, and knees with kisses before he stood once more.

He embraced her, reveling in the feel of her body full length against his as his manhood strained between them. Alan’s senses reeled as he succumbed to the intoxication of her scent, her taste, and her touch. His pulse quickened when her long, tapered fingers trailed through the hair on his chest, sliding downward over his ribs and round to his back. A low moan escaped his throat as she cupped his buttocks with her warm palms.

Aflame with desire, he led her to the bed. Then he left her for a moment and returned with a goblet of warm mulled wine. He offered her the cup, and she took a sip. Then he took a delicious swallow.

Urging her to her back, he spilled a little wine on each of her breasts and feasted on her hard, luscious nipples. He loved their texture, and he swept his tongue over each one. He wanted to fuel her desire, so that when he plunged into her passage, she would be hot and very wet.

Gwyneth groaned, and as he lifted his head, he saw that her hands gripped the bed sheets. He spilled more wine and continued to lap it from her flesh. Gwyneth writhed as he tipped his tongue into her navel. She swiveled her hips, and her breath came in hot pants as he reached the golden curls that guarded that gateway to her passage.

“Part your thighs, Gwyneth.”

She complied, and he poured wine on her glistening folds, then he touched down on them, sweeping over her pleasure spot again and again, savoring her delicate taste.

“Oh, I feel it coming!” she cried.

Alan kept up his siege until he felt her body shudder. Then he stopped and held her tightly.

Urging her on her stomach, he brushed her shimmering locks aside as he began adoring her body with his lips, tongue, and hands. He kissed the smooth column of her neck, the snowy mantle of her shoulders, and the delicate ridge of her spine.

“I feel as if you are touching me everywhere,” she whispered huskily. “I don’t ever want you to stop.”

Savoring his delightful exploration, Alan continued, trailing kisses down the

length of her legs to the soles of her feet.

"I love your sighs, my Little Rose. They tell me I please you."

Rolling over, Gwyneth sat up and took his face between her hands. "I'd like to return the favor."

"Anything to accommodate a lady." Chuckling, he stretched out on his stomach.

Gwyneth kissed every inch of his back until he could not bear the titillation of her lips and tongue for another second.

"Roll over," she said.

He almost jolted off the bed when she took his penis into her hands and caressed it. Then she took it into her mouth, and her tongue swirled over its rigid length. His loins were close to bursting, but she kept up the tortuously sweet ministrations.

Finally, he could take no more. He quickly pulled away and seized her in his arms. He rose to his knees, taking her up with him. Nudging her in front of him, so her back pressed against his chest and abdomen, he instructed her how to support herself on her knees and elbows. Wrapping his arms around her slim waist, he took full possession, invading her wet cleft from behind.

"Oh," she cried, "you fill me so completely." "That is because you are so tight."

He kissed the back of her neck. One hand slid up to settle over her breasts, and he delighted in the sensation of her erect nipples against his palms and the slick moisture of her sheath gloving his penis as he plunged deep into her sweet enchantment. Each silken stroke fanned the flames of his desire, propelling him ever nearer to fulfillment.

He continued until he felt his pleasure looming. There would be no stopping it now.

He stroked her folds. She quivered, and her throbbing spasms incited him even more. Finally, he felt the muscles deep inside him contract, and his seed throbbed from him in long heart-stopping pulses.

Still joined, they rolled to their sides, gasping.

After a few moments she whispered, "Alan?"

"Yes, sweetheart," he answered, still imbedded in her warmth.

"Do you think I will conceive soon?"

"I don't know."

They had never spoken about children. He simply assumed they would lie together, and his seed would take root. He knew she loved little ones. She doted on Garth and always was kind and affectionate to the other children in the village.

Knowing only too well how it felt to be an unwanted child, he admired her gentleness with them. "Do you want children, Gwyneth?"

"I want yours with all my heart. I never hoped to be fortunate enough to marry a good man who would give them to me. I expected to end my days as a virgin in a convent."

"That would have been a shameful waste, my Sweet Rose," he whispered, his heart overflowing with joy.

Gwyneth wanted his children.

"I hope we will provide more safety and more security for our children than we

have had.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” she asked.

“We’ve precious little cash, sweetheart. We must wait to sell the wool we shear in June before we can build the stone keep William wants here, and those funds will only finance a start.”

“I expected he would want one here. He has built quite a few of them.”

“Yes. William has good reason if these insurrections are any indication. We also need a stone wall to surround the keep and outbuildings, especially the stables. Horses are vital to the success of our military operations.”

He sighed. “It will take years. We can afford to spend just a small amount per annum to pay for supplies and masons because I do not want to construct the keep of wood, as some lords have done. Timbers burn, and it will take but one arrow to start a blaze. Hopefully, we will make a profit on our wool and make a beginning this summer.”

He finally withdrew from her.

“Oh, sooner than that!” She sat up.

“Gwyneth, I just explained. I have little cash.”

She giggled. “But I’ve plenty.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” Her eyes sparkled as if she were privy to a great, joyous secret.

“Would you explain how you came by this fortune?”

“My father gave it to me for my sustenance when I went to live at the abbey. I also own a good bit of jewelry. The coronet I wore at our wedding will pay for the keep.”

Alan remembered the piece. Wrought of gold, it held five rubies the size of pigeons’ eggs.

“I also have rings, bracelets, earrings, and some fine Viking brooches my mother bought on a trip she took to York. There is more than what we need. With enough masons, the work will go quickly, and the keep will be finished in a year. The other buildings will take longer.”

He stared into her beautiful eyes. She had just offered him her precious possessions. Her heart was proving as warm and lovely as her seductive body.

“Is that how you repaired the mill and hired the smith?”

“Yes. Until we find a miller, the abbess has promised to share hers with us. The smith was a journeyman at the abbey.”

He shook his head. “I will not take your ornaments, Gwyneth. I must find another way.”

“What good will all the finery in the world do me if I am killed by an enemy arrow?”

His gaze fused into her. “An *enemy* arrow?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her eyes wide, she nodded.

“You are a Saxon, yet you would give your support against your own kind?”

“I’m no different from some of the Saxons nobles in the south. The Saxon lords around Bristol swore their loyalty to William. But I pledged my oath of fealty to you. I take that vow seriously. I also plighted my troth to you as your wife.” Her fingers

caressed his cheek. "Your foes are mine, be they Saxon, Norman, Scot, or Dane."

Her declaration rendered him speechless, filling him with regret that he could not better provide for her.

"Gwyneth, I did not even have the coin to present you with a morning gift after our wedding night."

"I need no *morgenifu*." She cuddled down next to him. "You returned my dower lands to me."

"The land is rightfully yours, my Sweet Rose."

"And it's only right you accept the gold and jewels. I give them freely. It is an investment in our home."

"Our home?" His arms cradled her reverently.

"Yes. We're husband and wife, partners in all things. You just said you wanted a safe home for our children, so it would make me happy if you accept my offering, Alan."

"Then I accept with gratitude," he answered, wanting her again.

"You are most welcome. Now, would you like a bite to eat?"

"Food is not what I need at the moment," he murmured just before he kissed her again.

* * * *

The wind sculpted the surface of the snow, whirling the silvery particles into the air like glittering smoke. Gwyneth pulled her heavy green cloak about her against the blustery gusts as she took pity on the flock of sparrows chirping noisily near an ice-glazed puddle.

Withdrawing a stale trencher from beneath the folds of her cape, she crumbled the bread between her fingers until she had a handful of crumbs. Sprinkling the bits of bread onto the white powdery surface, she retreated to the corner of the garden wall. Sheltered there, Gwyneth watched the shy birds approach the food to eat their fill.

Agatha, the cook, believed that the doves should be the benefactors of her generosity, for they could be eaten later, but Gwyneth felt sorry for the poor sparrows. Since childhood, she had fed them every winter. Beside, they had been blessed with an especially bounteous harvest this year, and she wished to share her blessing.

The plentiful grain afforded a generous supply of bread. Apples and vegetable filled the root cellars. In November, at Martinmas-in-Winter, the animals had been slaughtered, salted, and packed in barrels. The same had been done with fish. Nuts had been gathered and stored, and many wheels of cheese filled the shelves in the undercroft.

Her home snug against the rigors of winter, Gwyneth and Alan now spent more time together. Some evenings after compline, they walked through the starlit snow, making plans for the future. An attentive lover, Alan eagerly shared her bed each night, showing her diverse means of expressing their passion.

Yet he remained silent about the days before they met. He refused to speak of them or his feelings. Perhaps she was mistaken to want so much emotion in her marriage. After all, no matter how she felt, theirs was a political union, commanded by the king.

She should concern herself with the real cloud on the horizon: They had never discovered who helped the assailants penetrate Wykston and kill their men.

Gwyneth still had her doubts about Edith. No doubt, the girl cast her charms on poor Strong Arm. She remembered the alewife's daughter had left the marriage feast early with a flagon of mead.

When Gwyneth informed Alan about the incident, he refused to take the news seriously. He seemed blind to the girl's wiles. Why? Had he fallen under Edith's spell like most of the men in the village?

Feet numb with cold, fingers freezing, Gwyneth decided to head toward the church. Time for vespers rapidly approached. Suddenly, the crunch of footsteps on the ice-crusting snow and the sound of Ranulf's voice stilled her.

"I love you, Aelveva. I have wanted you from the moment I saw you."

Full of tenderness, the brawny sergeant's declaration traveled on the raw winter wind. The wall of thick yews hid Gwyneth from the lovers. She felt a twinge of guilt for eavesdropping. Yet she was thrilled for Aelveva and remained fixed to the spot.

"Say you love me, my girl," Ranulf said.

Gwyneth imagined the big bear of a man with his arms around her flame-haired maidservant as he looked lovingly into her eyes. The image gladdened her soul.

"I love you, Ranulf, with all my heart, and well you know it." Profoundly moved by their exchange, Gwyneth hoped to hear such a declaration from Alan. The couple became quiet, and she guessed they were kissing.

After the pause, he urged, "Marry me."

"I want to, but I must think of Garth."

"I love the boy as my own, and he is fond of me. I promise you that I will make him a good father."

Gwyneth discreetly slipped away, strolling toward the church. Then she stopped abruptly. On the church steps, Alan and Edith were engaged in a conversation. Gwyneth ducked behind a beech tree, hoping her husband and the girl had not seen her. Peeping around the big trunk, she saw Edith gaze up at him. The alewife's daughter stood too close to him. Was the smile on his face a flirtatious one?

Alan moved closer to Edith. His hand closed over hers, and he seemed to give her something. Unfortunately, Gwyneth stood too far away to identify the object.

The seductive woman cast her gaze downward. Gwyneth imagined that the alewife's daughter was feigning innocence.

He swallowed her pretense as a fish does bait, Gwyneth thought. Her whole body shook with anger. She stepped from behind the tree into the open and walked toward the pair.

"My lady!"

Hearing Aelveva's voice behind her, Gwyneth turned. Hand-in-hand, Aelveva and Ranulf hurried toward her, smiling.

Radiant, the happy woman said, "We have some news to give you." She looked up at Ranulf. "Will you tell my lady, or shall I?"

The sergeant lifted Aelveva's hand and kissed it. "I believe Lady Gwyneth would prefer to hear the tidings from you, my love."

Aelveva's eyes sparkled. "We are to be married."

Gwyneth reached out to embrace her dear companion. "Oh, Aelveva, I am so

happy for you both.” She disengaged from her maidservant and turned toward the prospective groom.

“Much joy to you, Ranulf. You’ve made a wise choice.”

He bowed. “Thank you, my lady. I feel fortunate. Aelveva is taking a great chance with me. I have but few worldly possessions.”

“You offer the most precious gift anyone can give, Ranulf,” Aelveva replied. “You give me your love.”

At that moment, Gwyneth would have traded all she owned to hear Alan say those words to her.

She became aware that the villagers now padded through the snow on their way to church.

Garth burst upon them. “Did she say ‘yes,’ Ranulf? Did she?” His cheeks and snubbed nose red from the cold, the boy bobbed with excitement.

“Yes, little warrior.” Ranulf rocked back with laughter.

Garth began to dance, chanting, “I am going to a wedding.”

“Hush,” Aelveva admonished. “Run along and wait for us in church, Garth.”

Heralding the news, the boy tore down the snowy path, now splotted with the purple shadows of dusk.

A crowd gathered around the happy couple. Of course the Normans expressed their good wishes, but many Saxons offered kind words also, for Ranulf had earned their respect by his fair dealings, kindness, and infectious banter.

Gwyneth wanted to enjoy the couple’s happiness, but she still felt shaken by the scene she had observed on the church steps. What had transpired between Edith and Alan?

“Gwyneth, I have been looking for you.”

She swung around and stared up at Alan. His violet-blue eyes glinted joyously, and he carried a cylinder of parchment in his hand.

“Ranulf, why do these ladies weep?” he asked, humor in his tone. What have you done to them?”

“They are tears of joy, my lord,” Aelveva answered for him. “Ranulf has asked me to be his wife.”

Alan slapped his friend’s back. “So you finally gathered your courage and did the deed. When will you wed?”

Ranulf lovingly looked down into Aelveva’s upturned face. “As soon as we can.”

“Good. If you wait too long, Lent will be upon us, and you will have to postpone the nuptials till after Easter. I’d like to see you married before Gwyneth and I go to Westminster.”

“What?” Dismayed, Gwyneth looked up at her husband. “When? Why?”

Alan laughed. “One questions at the time. The king commands us to attend him there to celebrate Whitsunday in June.” He opened the parchment and showed her the message.

“Oh,” Gwyneth said for lack of anything better to say. She had no desire to leave the safety and comfort of her cozy home to go to court.

“You will have a wonderful time,” Aelveva smiled.

They all looked to her for some show of enthusiasm. "Yes," she responded, forcing a smile.

"But enough talk, we'll be late for vespers," Alan reminded them.

They joined the throng and made their way to church, but Gwyneth's mood stayed as cheerless as the dismal winter twilight creeping in on them.

* * * *

Gwyneth stood by the table in the counting room, keeping the chill at bay with a goblet of mulled wine. Outside, the snow fell thickly, and the wind howled, rattling the tightly closed shutters. The tallow tapers relieved some of the gloom of the winter night, but the small lights strained ineffectively against the dreariness in her heart.

The interchange she had witnessed between Alan and Edith still haunted her.

She had many reasons to be happy. She had not walked in her sleep since she married. Her people enjoyed safety, Alan spared her from Wulfstan, and Aelveva would soon wed. Her handsome husband sat by her side, pouring over the designs of the infirmary they planned to build, along with the new keep and curtain wall.

Alan had been so responsive to her proposal for an infirmary that he asked the abbess to send the plans of the one at the abbey. Gwyneth's dream would soon come to fruition, yet she found it impossible to muster any excitement.

"You have no suggestions?" Alan shook his head. "I thought you would be bursting with ideas."

"My head is reeling with them." But they weren't about the infirmary. Since she observed Alan with Edith, her mind held room for nothing else.

"Sometimes it helps to discuss the possibilities."

"Yes," Gwyneth answered on a sigh. Reaching for the wine, she took a sip then set the goblet down.

"Gwyneth, what ails you?"

How could she explain she was afraid that Edith's seductive charm would win him from her? To be honest and confront him about the scene she witnessed, she would have to admit that she hid behind a tree and spied on him.

"I wish the woman, Edith, was gone from here."

"Why?" He drew away from her, shock on his face.

She turned from him, unable to meet his gaze. "Because I have known her since childhood. She invites trouble. She has been betrothed, but that man died. Charles Strong Arm paid her court, and he also is dead. I want you to find both her and her mother another place."

"I cannot banish a poor widow and her daughter. They depend on me."

"I think the daughter relies on you overmuch. She looks at you with sheep's eyes." Mortified, Gwyneth realized she had revealed herself. She turned to see Alan smiling at her.

"Go on. You were saying." He bobbed his brows.

Infuriated, she walked off a few paces. His footsteps fell behind her and his arms slips around her waist.

He leaned down and whispered, "I think you are jealous."

She turned in his arms and looked up at him. "That is ludicrous!"

"Is it?" He smiled smugly.

She drew away. Hand on hips, she shot back, "It is a supposition that betrays your conceit."

"It is the deduction of a logical man, based upon your statement. You just told me you did not like the way she looked at me."

Gwyneth felt her face flush. "Why do you defend that brazen hussy?"

"I have nothing to defend. She has done no wrong." His eyes took on a serious expression, and his smile disappeared. "And neither have I."

Gwyneth had to admit he slept in their bed every night. In fact, since the workload on the estate decreased during the winter, she and Alan often retired to their bedchamber in the afternoon as well.

"I did not accuse you. I simply don't like the girl's behavior. She acts the wanton. Furthermore, she behaves irresponsibly. She leaves her mother for days to go heaven knows where."

"Gwyneth, the girl is young and lonely, but why do you suddenly bring up the subject? Edith has lived here all her life." He raised his eyebrows and peered deeply in her eyes. "I believe you saw us this afternoon at church."

Unable to sustain his stare, she bowed her head.

"You did see us, didn't you?"

Still looking at the floor, Gwyneth nodded.

"I sought her out to give her some coin. I ordered special mead and bragot to celebrate Ranulf's wedding. He told me he would propose to Aelveva, and I felt sure she would agree." He drew her close. Cupping her chin, he tilted her head up. "I do not want Edith. I've not desired any other woman since the moment I first saw you."

His lips touched down on hers, and she returned the kiss. With all her soul, Gwyneth wanted to believe him. Why, then, did doubt slash away at her like a dull saw through an oaken log?

* * * *

Aelveva and Ranulf celebrated their marriage amid the rollicking festivities of Twelfth Night. Two Saxon widows and two Norman soldiers joined them in the connubial adventure.

Gwyneth's heart swelled. Soon the distinction between Norman and Saxon would disappear, and the descendants of these unions would call themselves English.

As she watched the guests fill the great hall, Gwyneth felt a surge of pride. Because she had supervised the decoration of the great hall for the Christmastide, the chamber stood ready for the wedding celebration, and she felt more than satisfied with the results.

Garlands of cedar and pine festooned the whitewashed walls and filled the air with their spicy scent. The circular iron chandelier glowing with candles and a cluster of mistletoe hung from the ceiling beams. The central hearth roared with a huge log, its heat permeating the room with cozy warmth.

Mulled wine, ale, bragot, and mead flowed abundantly, as well as a cider the Norman's loved so well. Tables groaned with venison, boar, fowl, winter vegetables, great pies, custards, dried fruits, and nuts.

Gwyneth smiled as Aelveva and Ranulf shared a goblet of wine. The bride's white veil shimmered against the wreath of holly holding it in place. Arrayed in a moss green tunic trimmed with gold embroidery, the woman beamed radiantly.

Ranulf turned from his love to attend Garth, who tugged at his arm. Dressed in fawn garb, the big sergeant never looked as handsome.

Their love promised a strong marriage--one based on the deepest respect and admiration. How Gwyneth wished she could enjoy the same. She felt guilty for the envy she harbored in her heart, but she longed to hear Alan say he loved her.

Why did his declaration mean so much to her when she possessed everything else? With startling clarity, the answer hit her.

Because I love him.

The piper and harper began to play their merry tune, and she scanned the room, searching for her husband. She and Alan must lead the dancing.

Consternation filled her heart when she spied him gazing down into Edith's pretty face. Unable to bear the sight, Gwyneth turned away. Why couldn't the girl marry someone from York or--better still--London and go far off to live?

London. This summer she must travel to Westminster Palace. The thought chilled Gwyneth when she contemplated the consequences of being discovered as she walked in her sleep while at court.

Chapter Fourteen

"Everything is in readiness, my lady." Closing the lid of the trunk, Aelveva rose from her knees, wending her way through the maze of baggage on the bedchamber floor to the window where Gwyneth stood. "I wish Ranulf and I could go with you and his lordship, but by the time you return, I shall be big with child. I did not think I would conceive almost immediately." Beaming, the woman patted her swelling abdomen.

Aelveva calculated correctly. Alan and Gwyneth planned to bide at court for about two months, coming back to Wykston in time for Llamas in August.

"I shall miss you, Aelveva, but I don't want you to endure the discomfort of such a long journey that late in your term." Gwyneth looked with chagrin at her own flat stomach.

Married nine months now, she should have been almost ready to present her husband with a child, but each time the moon cycled, her flux arrived with frustrating regularity.

To give him credit, Alan never mentioned the lack of an heir, but Gwyneth cringed at the disappointment she viewed in his eyes whenever her menses came on.

Sometimes, Gwyneth wondered if the same dark seeds that caused her to walk in her sleep also prevented her womb from quickening, even though she had not taken a night stroll since her marriage.

Interrupting her grim thoughts, the porters entered the room. Two men to a trunk, they hauled the heavy luggage away.

Dejected, Gwyneth sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, Aelveva, this is not an opportune time to leave."

"Why not, my lady?" Aelveva shook her head. "The masons from York have made good progress on the tower. The builder predicts it will be finished before the first frost comes again. The fields lie green with crops, the orchard is laden, and the sheep grow fat on the hillside. Ranulf and I will tend things. We'll give special attention to your infirmary, since we know that it is your heart's desire."

"I know. Ranulf proved to be a conscientious castellan when Alan left for York, and I am most grateful to you both, but I don't wish to go."

"My lady, what is really bothering you?" Aelveva walked to her. "It is the sleepwalking isn't it?"

"Yes," Gwyneth nodded. "The prospect frightens me. You know it was the reason my father never let me go to court during old King Edward's reign or poor Harold's."

"But you've not taken a night stroll for months." Aelveva shook her head. "Don't you think you are cured?"

Gwyneth took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "By the rood, I hope so."

Aelveva smiled and took a seat by her on the bed. "I think the malady is gone,

and now that the rebel leaders are dead or are in exile, you have the opportunity to enjoy a safe trip through lovely countryside.” She winked mischievously. “And until you get to court, you’ll have your man all to yourself.”

Neither she nor Alan would be absorbed in the business of the estate. Perhaps once she rested and relaxed, Alan’s seed would take root in her womb.

And he would be away from Edith. The bold wench had disappeared again, much to Gwyneth’s relief. Perhaps she was visiting a lover in another village. Maybe she would soon marry and leave forever. But perhaps other temptations awaited Alan at King William’s court. Many beautiful, worldly women would be there. Gwyneth prayed Alan would not become a victim to their charms.

Garth suddenly burst on the scene, eyes wide, cheeks pinks. “Mother, come see! The soldiers are waiting in the courtyard to escort His lordship and my lady. Lord Wykston said while he is gone, I am to practice my swordplay. When he returns, he’ll foster me. He says I’ll make a good fighting man.”

“Take a moment to breathe, lad.” Aelveva laughed as she leaned forward, giving him a hug.

Ranulf appeared at the door and bowed. “I’m sorry for the noisy intrusion, my lady. He ran ahead of me.”

The boy never failed to lighten her spirits. Gwyneth smiled and motioned Ranulf to enter. “It’s his way, and I should not change him for all the gold in William’s coffers.”

Handsome and commanding, Alan stepped in the chamber. “Are you ready to depart, wife?” Her heart lurched with fear, but Gwyneth nodded, praying the visit would not result in her undoing.

* * * *

Alan woke. Drowsy, he turned over on the fur pelt, reaching for Gwyneth, but the place where she had fallen asleep felt cold, empty. Alarmed, he wondered if she had become ill and confused as she did the night Ulfer tried to abduct her. He recalled how she had walked from the manor house to the pond.

“Gwyneth,” he called softly, sitting up.

The wind tugged at the flap of the tent, allowing the light of the full moon to shine inside. She stumbled forward but did not answer, colliding with the small table between them.

Hadn’t she seen it? The moon afforded enough light.

Concerned that she had hurt herself, he rushed to her, helping her up.

“Sweetheart, answer me.” In the moonlight, she looked dazed.

“Please, I must find Godwin.”

He remembered she had made that same plea the night they met. Alan felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. God’s bones! Did his wife suffer from fits of madness? Was that what Aelveva had meant when she used the term confused? Had young Robert, Father Rollo, and his men been right to harbor doubts about her? Had he been so convinced she was a spy that he did not see the obvious?

Still, she had been so lucid, logical, and capable later. Except for that one occasion, she always displayed a quick, lively wit. There must be a rational explanation for her strange behavior. But what was it?

“Godwin, where are you?” she asked, trembling.

Was Godwin the man she had met with the night Alan had first found her? Gwyneth had never given him a reasonable explanation as to why she had been wandering alone in the woods. But perhaps, as Aelveva explained, she’d become sick and disoriented. If he hadn’t been so blinded by his conviction that she acted as a spy, he would have deduced this long ago.

Furthermore, whoever Godwin was, he had not been her lover. Gwyneth had been a virgin when she came to Alan’s bed as his wife. So who was this fellow who disturbed her rest? Why had she refused to discuss him?

“Come, my Little Rose,” he whispered. “We’ll find him together. First, though, let us go back to sleep.” He gently led her back to the pile of furs. “Rest well,” he murmured, holding her.

* * * *

Breaking her fast with ale and bread, Gwyneth sat by Alan at the small table near the entrance of the tent. A gentle breeze drifted in, ruffling his dark hair and flaring the wide sleeves of her tunic. From her seat, she watched the glow of dawn creep on rosy knees into the interior of their pavilion.

“Who is Godwin?” Alan asked.

Terror constricted her throat. Not able to swallow her drink, Gwyneth set down her tankard. “Why do you ask?”

His gaze bore into hers. “Let’s be done with games.”

Calmly, he related the events of the past night, his recollections of the time they met, and the incident at the pond.

Gwyneth realized with horrifying certainty that the illusion had reached its end. How could she explain? Once she confessed, her best hope was to be remanded to a convent. The worst would result in ... no, she could not even think of that possibility. But she *must* consider that likelihood because he could denounce her as a witch. On the edge of hysteria, she began to shake violently.

“Is the truth so vile that you cannot bring yourself to speak of it?” Alan leaned forward across the table and took hold of her clammy hand. “Who is Godwin, and why do you ask for help to find him?”

Tears filled her eyes and stuck painfully in her throat. “He was my little brother,” she blurted out.

Strangely, Father Alfred had never mentioned the boy’s name. He simply referred to the child as Leofric’s son.

“But he died with your mother in the storm. Why do you ask for help to find him?”

She slipped her hand from his and buried her face in her palms, giving full vent to her sorrow. Alan pulled her into his arms. She rested her cheek against his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. His body felt like a bulwark of strength around her, but once she revealed her terrible secret, she would never find protection in his arms again. The prospect filled her with grief, and she cried harder.

“Wife, what troubles you so terribly? Can you not confide in your husband? You trusted me once.”

Drawing back, she brushed her tears away with her fingers, but Alan took her into his arms again.

"Gwyneth, you don't lack courage. When you considered me your enemy, you displayed more fortitude than you do now. Why are you holding back?"

Terrified, she looked up at him as fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

He kissed her temple. "No matter how bad the problem is, I promise to stand by you."

Even if what I tell you may mean my death and yours?

"Together we will find a way through our troubles."

"Our troubles?"

Oh, he was being so sweet and encouraging that she wanted to bare her soul. But the *trouble* was hers, and, after years of keeping her secret, she found it difficult to give up the habit.

He took up the napkin and dabbed her eyes. "What hurts you hurts me."

In truth, Alan had wedded her with the full knowledge that his men distrusted and feared her. He had taken a great chance, for his troops might have deserted him ... but he thought that she was normal and their fears were groundless. If he ever discovered the truth, he might react very differently. When he discovered she was not a normal person, would he shrink back from her? If he did, Gwyneth would not be able to bear the revulsion in his eyes.

"We have all the time in the world, Little Rose." The callused tips of his fingers grazed the slope of her jaw. Descending to the pile of furs, Alan urged her onto his lap. "Now, tell me."

Gwyneth blew her nose and inhaled a shaky breath. She must tell him something. She decided to tell him the truth--but not the whole truth.

"I often dream of the time my brother and mother died. I have terrible nightmares about it, and I get restless in my sleep and thrash about." She burst into tears.

"Sweetheart." Rocking her in his arms, he kissed her temple. "I wish you had told me of this sooner. I understand how your childhood fears can continue to haunt you."

He didn't know the half of her fears.

Alan pushed a curl back from her hairline. "You are safe now, Gwyneth. I will always protect you."

"Yes," she agreed, but she knew that there were things from which he could never protect her--like a charge of witchcraft.

Alan kissed the side of her neck. "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No," she murmured and like dry tinder, her desire kindled. She slipped her arms around his neck and inhaled his woodsy scent. "But I think you prefer to amuse yourself in other ways than playing cleric and listening to confessions."

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "At the moment, priestly celibacy is not what I have in mind."

Alan's heated gaze blended with hers as he tipped her back on the luxuriant pelts, and she felt the soft warmth beneath her. His mouth seized hers in a fiery kiss, and Gwyneth eagerly yielded up her willing flesh.

The bud of affection, born of his generosity and gentleness toward her, had

unfurled lately into the full bloom of love. The emotion only increased the depth of her passion, causing her to long to yield up everything she possessed to this man. Her pleasure became secondary and his assumed preeminence. Breaking the kiss, she sat up, forcing him to roll off her.

His amazed look made her smile. Gwyneth tugged at his garments, helping him to remove them. Her efforts were not slow or seductive but quick, efficient, and with a new dimension of longing she had never before experienced.

Alan sat up and reached for the hems of her shift and tunic. She raised her hips and then her arms, enabling him to slip the clothes over her head and fling them in an arc across the pavilion.

Gwyneth pushed against his shoulders and sent him sprawling back on the soft furs. She stretched out full length atop him, blanketing him with the warmth of her body, the glow of her love, the fire of her desire. Her passion fueled to wild, new heights, she kissed him everywhere, tasting his salty skin.

His response answered her in kind. Erect and eager, his hard male member thrust up, full of vigor and life.

Her uppermost aim to please him, she drew back and straddled his powerful thighs. Twining her fingers around his arousal and stroking its length, Gwyneth cupped his sacs with her other hand, gently caressing them.

“Gwyneth,” he gasped out, “if you continue, I’ll come too fast.”

“But you are enjoying it,” she said.

“Yes,” he grated out.

“So you really don’t want me to stop.”

She continued stroking him with her hands, lips, and tongue, feeling the beat of his blood coursing through his powerful shaft.

Gasping and writhing, he thrust his hips up as his hard shaft rubbed against her curled fingers and soft palm.

She knew he was getting very close to completion. Soon his pearly essence would fountain out of him. Should she continue?

But she could not bear to waste a drop of his precious, life-giving seed, so she immediately sheathed him and stretched out on top of him.

Growling, he pressed his big hands over her buttocks and shuddered as he ground into her.

Her heart exalting, she stayed on him a long time, treasuring the full length of him as she cherished the precious intimacy of the moment.

Finally, he withdrew, and he held her close and kissed her temple. “That was a generous thing to do, Gwyneth.”

They dozed for a while, but she woke to the sensation of his lips pressing hers, and she responded. Surfacing from the kiss she said, “That’s a lovely way to wake up.”

“I think I owe you a debt.”

“Which you are more than eager to pay.”

He chuckled. “How right you are.”

He guided her into spoon position and began to caress her breasts with one hand and her folds with the other until she was frantic.

Then she rolled over. "My turn."

Taking him inside her again, she straddled his thighs and began bobbing in the rhythm she knew pleased him. Her loving continued frantically until her own pleasure seized her in a tender joy that took her to a union with him beyond anything she had ever known.

Still deep within her, he pulled her down over him and rolled over, reversing their positions without breaking contact.

Wanting the deepest penetration possible, Gwyneth drew her knees to her chest. She gasped and reveled as his flesh slid against hers, and each time the pleasure became stronger. Yet the need for satisfaction grew more demanding.

Her body pulsed as a hot tingling wave broke over her, and her lower belly throbbed in a heartbeat rhythm.

Finally, he cried, "Gwyneth," and his body shuddered with his release. Breathless and sated, they lay together in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Little Rose, I always enjoy our coupling, but this time our union reached beyond any pleasure I ever imagined."

* * * *

Her cold hand in Alan's, Gwyneth paused on the threshold of the great hall of Westminster Palace. "Do I look all right? Perhaps I should go back and change into the scarlet silk."

"No, I prefer what you have on." He smiled.

She stared down at her sky blue tunic and plucked at the wide embroidered hem of her sleeve. The torch flames turned the silver threads in the swirling pattern of ivy leaves to the color of molten cooper. Yet the garment appeared so pale compared to the bright hues worn by the nobles standing about the cavernous chamber.

Alan winked, his gesture at odds with the stately black of his attire. "It will be all right."

Gwyneth wished she possessed his confidence. Everything at Westminster was so grand that she felt overwhelmed. The whole manor house at Wykston could barely fill a fourth of this great hall.

Glancing up, Gwyneth sucked in her breath, marveling at the height of the great hammered beam ceiling. In the center of the floor, an enormous central hearth burned brightly, its light augmented by numerous torches blazing at intervals along the stone walls. Long rows of trestle tables, covered with white linen, lined the perimeter of the room.

"Let's pay our respects to the king and queen," Alan murmured.

Her gaze fell upon the regal figure seated on the dais beneath a canopy of red and gold cloth. Even from this distance, William exuded fierce energy. Neither the folds of the tan, ankle-length tunic, nor the cloak of crimson fastened on his broad shoulder by a ruby brooch, hid the power of his muscular physique. Wrought in the shape of a circlet of strawberry leaves, a lustrous coronet crowned his head. Erect and alert on his throne, William emanated power, authority, and sovereignty.

Arrayed in an over-tunic and veil of sunny yellow, tiny Queen Mathilde sat by his side, a smile on her pale face.

Her gaze focused on the floor for fear of tripping on her own feet, Gwyneth kept pace with her husband as they approached the royal couple and knelt.

"Welcome, Lord and Lady Wykston." William's voice rumbled over them.

"Thank you, sire," Alan said.

Though she bowed low, Gwyneth peeped up through her lashes as William leaned forward. "We are grateful to you, Lord Wykston. Due to your efforts, all remains quiet in Northumbria."

"For the present, sire. All the rebels are either dead or in exile," Alan said.

King William sat back. "We have great faith that you will sustain a lasting peace in our northern regions."

"It is my greatest wish, sire." Alan nodded. "A tranquil existence promotes wealth and prosperity for the good of the realm."

"Your wise alliances please us." The queen nodded her approval, her big blue eyes shining brightly. "They secure enduring harmony more economically than the force of arms."

"It's true that some of our men have married Saxon women, your highness."

"You have prudently led them by your example," Mathilde stated firmly.

Gwyneth raised her head for a better view. Her gaze traveled from the amiable queen to King William as he looked kindly at his dainty wife. The man's stern visage had softened to that of a fond husband.

He cherishes her. The idea stunned Gwyneth, although everyone knew that William remained faithful to his wife when adultery seemed the rule at court rather than the exception.

Would Alan come to love her some day? The king and his consort gave her hope that he would, for their marriage, like hers, was a political alliance. If they found love, the same chance existed for her and Alan.

"Rise, Lord Wykston, and introduce your lovely wife to all present," William commanded. "Know that we appreciate your achievements and loyalty."

Gwyneth and Alan stood and slowly backed away from the royal couple. Relieved to escape their scrutiny, she turned and lost her breath. Wulfstan, Lord of Braeton Hall, stood a few feet away, and his hard gaze speared into hers.

* * * *

Along with most of the court, Alan had gone falconing. To avoid the outing, Gwyneth feigned a headache. Now she sat in a quiet corner of the rose garden, still tortured by her silent encounter with Wulfstan. She fingered her rosary and stared into the bed of gillyflowers, certain the man was up to no good.

Judging from his past behavior, he attended court to gull William into believing that he was serving him as a loyal vassal. Meanwhile, Wulfstan bided his time, waiting for an opportunity to acquire more land.

From the hard gleam in his eyes last night, Gwyneth knew without a doubt that the man still bore her ill will. He had turned on his heel and strode from the great hall as soon as he saw her. Perhaps he didn't want to come face to face with her husband. Even so, a confrontation had to take place unless Wulfstan had decided to leave court.

Gwyneth knew she should have informed Alan of the man's presence

immediately, but she refrained, not sure of what form of action her husband would take. He had harbored a great deal of jealousy toward Wulfstan, believing that she had wanted to wed him before she had convinced him of the truth.

Suppose he recognized the lord as the arrogant monk he had met at the abbey? That insight could result in disaster.

"So we meet again, my lady."

Startled by the familiar voice coming from behind her, Gwyneth gasped and turned. *Wulfstan!* Immersed in her thoughts, she had not heard him approach. Now he stood in the garden, his pale blue gaze piercing through her. His blond hair and beard had grown again and moved in the breeze.

"Have you no warm greeting for an old friend?"

His tone sounded civil, but Gwyneth knew his tactics. He always covered his malice with courtesy then struck with ruthless savagery when his victims least expected the onslaught.

Taking the offensive instead of waiting for his attack, Gwyneth rose from her seat, clenching her rosary. "Why do you seek me out, Wulfstan?"

"Your directness borders on rudeness, my lady," he replied, stepping closer.

"After all we once meant to each other, I wished to see your lovely face again."

"Cease your nonsense, Wulfstan. You meant naught to me, and I represented nothing but a rich dowry to you."

"No, Gwyneth. You underestimate my affection and the force of our joint destiny. Together, we will create a dynasty to wipe the Normans from the face of the earth. We shall seize the greatest wealth ever possessed in this kingdom." He reached for her hand.

She jumped back. "You rave madder than Ulfer when he is in his cups, Wulfstan. If you seek to destroy the Normans, why do you take King William's hospitality?"

"I use whatever means at my disposal to fulfill my fate, and you must take yours in the same grand scheme." He moved closer.

Gwyneth put out her hand, preventing his advance. "Your treachery is vile, and I will have no part in your base design. Leave me. I am a married woman."

An obscene smile spread over his face, and his pale eyes reminded Gwyneth of January ice.

"Many a wife has become a widow. With so many ways to die, death looms ever near. A man falls from his horse, meets the point of a sword, stops the flight of an arrow, ingests poison." He counted the possibilities on his fingers.

Gwyneth cringed inwardly but refused to let him see her fear. "Go, Wulfstan, else my husband will skewer you on his sword like a roasting pig."

"Your lot could be great beyond your imagining, Gwyneth," Wulfstan insisted.

"Yes, my wife's future shines bright," Alan stated.

His jaw slack, Wulfstan whipped around, and Gwyneth's heart sank. Her husband had crept up on them so quietly that they had not heard his approach. Why was he here when he told her he would be with the falconers until vespers?

Alan moved near as he placed his arm around her shoulders, but he glared down at her. "I returned to inquire on the state of your health, my lady. I see you fare much

better.”

By St. Cuthbert! Does he think I lied so I could tryst with a lover?

“My wife is remiss in her manners as she has not introduced you to me, sir. Still, there is something familiar about you. Perhaps we have met before?”

“I think not, my lord.” Turning pale, the coward bowed. “I am Wulfstan, Lord of Braeton.”

Gwyneth felt Alan’s arm tighten around her shoulders. Looking up, she saw her husband’s face darken with anger. “Surely, Lady Gwyneth mentioned that I was an old friend of her late father’s,” Wulfstan continued. “We met quite by chance this morning. I was congratulating her on her marriage when you came upon us. Now if you will excuse me, my lord, I have some pressing business.”

* * * *

Alan’s guts roiled with rage as he paced the length of his chamber. Gwyneth sat on the bed, her face grim with denial, her chin raised in defiance.

Furious, he remembered where he had seen Wulfstan before. The lord had pretended to be the monk who gave Gwyneth the news of Leofric’s death. He also conveniently delivered a marriage contract for her to sign. The man’s hair and beard had grown out now, but his eyes, his strong body, the configuration of his features remained the same.

In all the months they had lived together, Gwyneth never mentioned Wulfstan’s masquerade. Furthermore, she had deliberately lied to Alan this morning, saying that she felt ill and could not possibly accompany him. Why?

Because the two of them had planned a tryst.

The complete account Gwyneth had given him about her relationship with Wulfstan had proven a lie, especially when she said she loathed the lord.

In the months that they had been married, Alan had become inordinately fond of Gwyneth, but, more importantly, he had begun to trust her. Now he had caught her red-handed. What a great fool he had been!

“So how long has this deception been going on?” he barked out, walking toward the bed.

“I told you no deception exists.” She stood and moved toward him.

“Then why did you neglect to tell me Wulfstan was the monk who came to the abbey?” He grabbed her wrist. “The man must have wanted you beyond all reason to take that chance.”

She yanked her arm away from him but did not retreat. Instead, she stepped forward. “No, he wanted Wykston. He still wants Wykston, and will do anything to get it.”

“That fact has long been established, my clever wife. Now explain why you refused to tell me?”

Hands on her hips, eyes blazing with indignation, she stared up at him. “Because I did not know if his army waited outside the abbey, ready to attack if he failed to return to them within a certain time. I had the safety of the nuns to consider.

“Besides, he left after you forbid me to sign the contract. I thought I was safe from him, and, in case you have forgotten, I had just lost my father. I was numb with

grief and not thinking very clearly. The only thing I wanted to do was to go home and grieve his loss.”

She began to pace. “After that, my dear husband, we came under attack. Most of my men died. I busied myself for some time with the wounded and dying, and I tended Norman and Saxon both. Then I buried my father.”

Her voice cracked, and she stood still at the mention of her father. Alan expected her to cry, but Gwyneth lifted her chin and continued her defense.

“Following his funeral, the survival of my people became my main concern. I worked side by side with you in the fields, reaping the harvest to ensure we had food for the winter. Then we married, and I believed that I was safe from Wulfstan. Soon after you left for York, I had the smith and miller to procure so our people would not starve or go without needed tools.”

She looked him straight in the eyes. Without blinking, she said, “That is the reason I did not tell you. I forgot about him and the whole hateful incident at the abbey. In truth, I had not thought about the cur again until I saw him here yesterday evening.

“As for failing to inform you last night, you surrounded yourself with a bevy of ogling women.” She bit her lip. “Furthermore, I did not know how you would react, so I kept my counsel until I could decide when to tell you. As I can see from your reaction, I was right to keep silent.”

She sniffed, and again Alan believed she would cry, but her eyes remained dry.

“Now you may believe what you wish, my lord. I give not a tinker’s damn. I am tired of defending myself against your blind mistrust, but consider this ... while we are fighting between ourselves, Wulfstan is planning something.” She paused and took a deep breath. “He made unveiled threats on your life. He believes he and I have a destiny together because of some mad ravings of Ulfer’s and will perpetrate whatever vile deed necessary to achieve his aim. I suggest that rather than suspecting me, you concentrate on the real danger: Wulfstan!”

She collapsed into a chair and burst into tears. Alan stared down at her, taking in her words, but his heart still smarted with pain. He had to leave, to put some distance between them, to sort out the facts. Maybe then he could see the problem in its proper perspective. He turned and left abruptly, slamming the thick oak door behind him.

* * * *

For some time Alan had walked aimlessly and finally found himself at the stables. A good long ride in the fresh air was what he needed to clear his mind.

After asking a groom to deliver his tack, Alan prepared Rampage himself. Swinging into the saddle, he cantered his mount away from the field and toward the Tyburn Marsh.

The cool breeze carried the salty smell of the sea inland. As he neared the wetlands, he caught sight of a row of cygnets swimming in tandem behind a mother swan through the brackish water. Somewhere in the abundant crop of spiky cattails emerging near the bank, a bullfrog croaked out his low-pitched song.

Alan dismounted. Tethering his mount’s reins to the branch of a bramble bush, he sat, staring out at the marsh. Despite the pain in his heart, he forced himself to analyze what he had seen between Wulfstan and Gwyneth. He had to admit that he had not

witnessed much. He did not find the two in a passionate embrace. The man had been telling Gwyneth she had a fine future. Still, Alan had known that the lord believed in Ulfer's nonsense.

Alan grudgingly admitted that her arguments for keeping Wulfstan's escapade to herself were reasonable.

Besides, Gwyneth had been nothing but good--to him and for him. She'd given him a king's ransom to finance a keep. She had also given him her passion, affection, and encouragement. Her actions were not those of a woman about to abandon her husband.

His suspicion, once a survival tool for him, no longer proved useful. It certainly did not help to forge the bonds of a strong marriage. What was it Ranulf had once said? *Your distrust follows you like a long shadow. It darkens your life.*

He must find Gwyneth and apologize.

Chapter Fifteen

Vespers over, Gwyneth emerged from St. Margaret's parish church. The entrance of the edifice stood at right angles to the abbey cathedral. The smaller house of worship ministered to the needs of the parish while the cathedral served as the seat of the bishop and functioned for state occasions.

Still annoyed, Gwyneth saw Alan hurry to her, and she turned away from him to walk across the church lands to the palace behind it.

The wind whipped up, catching her veil and stirring the surface of the busy Thames.

"Gwyneth," he murmured, catching up to her. "Please, hear me out."

She stopped and turned toward him, not wanting to make a scene, for other nobles thronged to William's home.

"Yes, my lord?"

His face held a look of humility she'd not seen before.

"I rode to the marsh and considered your words. Perhaps I ... have been hasty."

She kept her voice low and calm. "You accuse me of treachery and obstructing the truth, and all you can say to me is that perhaps you've been hasty? If your attempts at warfare proved half so fainthearted as your apology, I'm afraid for Wykston and all its folk."

"Gwyneth, I'm not a minstrel to woo you with fancy songs and flowery words."

"You prate on eloquently enough when you hurl your accusations." She turned and resumed walking, and he kept in step by her side.

"Would you have me grovel?"

She cast him a sidelong glance. "It would do for a start."

"I do not beg well, Gwyneth."

"No?"

"For how long will you punish me?"

She stopped. "Punish you? How do you think I felt?"

"Please, Gwyneth. I want to atone. I'll buy you an ell of silk."

She remained silent.

"A cloak of miniver?"

She crossed her arms.

"A trip to the Cheap in London?"

She resumed walking.

He caught her hand, stopping her progress. "I'm terribly sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

"That was all I wanted to hear."

He pulled her close. Several Norman ladies cast cold glances at her as they passed by.

"I will not live beneath the cloak of suspicion, Alan."

"I shall never doubt you again."

She relented to the smile tugging at her lips. "I shall hold you to the trip to London."

They both laughed.

* * * *

Wulfstan left court abruptly on the day Alan confronted him with Gwyneth. Feeling safe in that assurance, Gwyneth and Alan embarked on a tour of London.

She felt relieved to leave court. Now the Norman ladies could not shamelessly pursue him, and she hoped to discover more about her husband. The greater part of Alan's life still remained a mystery to her, although she had lived with the man for almost a year now. Away from the concerns of Wykston and the intrigues of court, perhaps he would reveal something of his former life to her.

The tense journey down the river over, Gwyneth now rode beside him, casting all her cares temporarily away as the sights and sounds of the city called to her.

Under a gray sky, London stretched around them out in all directions. The sheer size of the place awed her. Thatch-roofed, wattle-and-daub buildings sprawled everywhere.

Throngs of people bustled about the streets, and the sounds of the city merged into a unique song with a meter all its own. Hawkers peddled their goods. Children ran about, and dogs barked. The smiths' hammers on the ironmongers' lane clanged noisily. Carts and wagons rattled by loaded with wares. Church bells chimed. Smells from the river mingled with the fragrance of baking bread, roasting meat, smelting iron, tanning leather, and horse manure.

Alan turned to her and grinned. "You are quiet, Gwyneth. What are you thinking?"

She returned the smile. "I never expected London to be so enormous."

"I heard five thousand people live here now."

Gwyneth patted her palfrey's neck as she observed the great number of shops lining the street. Along one street, tradesmen shaped metal, along another they wove cloth, and on still another they cooped barrels.

Skimming along the wide, busy river, small boats conveyed fish, chickens, eggs, and cheeses to market. Large ships brought products from Flanders, Normandy, France, Norway, and the Germanic States.

Suddenly, the wind picked up, and the sky delivered on its threat of rain.

"We can take shelter at that inn over there." Alan nodded towards an establishment with a white stag painted on the sign hanging in front. "Right now a goblet of mulled wine would ward off the dampness. We can order a pasty, as well, if you are hungry."

"You know the place?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "The fare is excellent."

The damp in her bones, her appetite sharpened by the cool air, Gwyneth needed no convincing. "You read my mind, Alan. I am about to perish."

"Good." He tapped his middle. "I am so hungry my navel is hitting my

backbone.”

Gwyneth giggled. “It is fortunate today is not a day of fasting. You may eat a whole side of roasted boar if you wish.”

He chuckled. “At this moment, I feel as if I could.”

They left their mounts in the stable behind the inn and entered the dining room. The warmth and the delicious smell of roasted fowl welcomed them. Near the large hearth in the middle of the flagged floor, a young boy turned a brace of moorhens on a spit.

Exposed oaken beams, darkened with age, supported the whitewashed walls. By the look of the well-dressed clientele in dining hall, the inn catered to the well to do.

The innkeeper showed them to a private chamber on the ground floor that was a smaller version of the large dining room. As they sat at a trestle by a fire, Gwyneth appreciated its warmth, feeling the dampness ebb from her bones.

Alan took hold of her hand. “You are glad to be away from court.”

“Yes.” She clasped his fingers and shook her head. “I am afraid I shall never be a polished courtier. My Saxon tastes are far too simple.”

“Your tastes match mine.” He smiled. “I don’t enjoy life there either.”

Alan was right. She disliked Westminster as well. While he spent his time in the company of the men hunting or in some other manly pursuit, Gwyneth was left to the mercy of the Norman ladies who made it clear that they held her in contempt.

They often made ribald remarks about Alan, deliberately intending for Gwyneth to hear them. They also made no secret of the fact that they wanted his body. They even wagered as to which lady would be the first to seduce him.

Now the tavern wench who approached their table had the same hungry look as those women. This tawny-haired girl’s bold stare reminded her of Edith and set Gwyneth’s teeth on edge.

“What will be me lord’s pleasure?” the girl asked.

“Gwyneth?” He looked at her expectantly.

“You order,” she answered.

He turned his attention to the woman. “Two pasties and two cream custard tarts with raisin sauce.”

“Will you be wanting some ale, my lord?” The girl shifted her weight so that her hips swayed.

“No, we want two goblets of mulled wine.”

As the girl walked off, the simpering smile on her face grated on Gwyneth’s nerves.

“Why do you scowl so, Gwyneth?” He squeezed her hand.

“That brazen girl”

Alan chuckled and leaned forward on the table, taking hold of both of her hands. “The wench bears a resemblance to the alewife’s daughter.”

Gwyneth wondered if all alewives’ daughters were cut from the same ell of cloth. Inhaling deeply, she quelched her jealousy.

She must remember her marriage was a political alliance, commanded by the king. Alan had never said he loved her. She had been well aware of that when they wed.

Still, her heart ached when other women flirted with him.

He frowned. "Are you going to sulk?"

"No."

An ewerer approached, helping them wash their hands. As he left, the serving girl entered with a large tray bearing their food. The steam rose from the hot victuals and the goblets of wine, filling the air with savory aromas. Gwyneth's mouth watered, and her stomach growled.

Tearing into the flaky crust of her pasty with gusto, she put aside all contention. Conviviality restored, they spent the rest of the meal joking and laughing. Warm and content, she yearned to linger at the inn with him forever. The repast finished, they cleansed their hands again.

"My goodness, I am stuffed." Gwyneth patted her stomach. "I didn't intend to eat so much."

"Your appetite has improved lately." He peered at her, a question in his eyes. "You wouldn't be eating for two, would you?"

"I do not think so." Disappointment filled her heart. More than anything, she wanted to have his child.

As if reading her thoughts, he leaned across the table and whispered, "Don't fret. We have all the time in the world to have heirs."

He stood and walked to her side of the trestle table. Taking her hand, he helped her up. "Would you like to spend the night here? The rooms are cozy and clean."

That would be wonderful, Alan, but won't the king be offended if we don't appear?"

"No." Alan's hot gaze met hers. "As a faithful spouse, he approves of husbands paying court to their wives."

She smiled. "He is a wise monarch, but how do you know the rooms here are comfortable?"

"Now, Gwyneth, you know that I was not a monk when you married me." He called for the innkeeper as he led her toward the stairs.

Perhaps his past was unimportant and she should let sleeping dogs lie. Alan treated her well. So far, she felt confident that he had not betrayed her, and she still hoped that one day she would win his love. After all, the abbess used to tell her that if she lived well in the present, the past and future would tend to themselves.

Deciding to take that advice, Gwyneth answered, "Then I suppose we are well matched. You once told me I was no nun."

* * * *

The next day Gwyneth and Alan left the inn, planning to ride along a lane toward the river to a huge marketplace called the Cheap. They had not ridden more than a few yards when the mournful bay of a hound rent the air. A dog sped by, followed by a group of dirty boys in ruthless pursuit. The gang of urchins who were throwing stones at the animal hit the mark, and the poor animal yipped pitifully and fell.

Gwyneth gasped. "Alan, make them stop!"

"Enough," he bellowed, wheeling Rampage around between the dog and the ragged boys. He swung from his saddle, and the gang dispersed in all directions. Head

bowed, he knelt by the wounded dog in the middle of the narrow lane.

Gwyneth dismounted and walked to her husband. Her heart contracted. The big, gray animal was breathing hard. His tongue was protruding, and his eyes were glazed with pain. Two big gashes on its hip oozed blood. The poor beast seemed nothing but skin and bone. Doubtless, its fur crawled with fleas.

"Oh, Alan, why?"

Alan shrugged. "Maybe the beast chased a goose or duck in its desperation for food, and the boys defended their livestock."

He looked up at her, and Gwyneth saw his eyes misting. Undone by his display of emotion, she turned away gulping back her tears.

He gently stroked the animal's matted coat, and the dog whimpered.

"It's all right, old boy. No one will ever hurt you again."

He picked up the large animal. "For such a big dog, the poor beast weighs hardly anything, Gwyneth."

She followed him to the stable behind the inn, paying the hostler to find a place for the dog. He entered a stall, laid the animal down in a bed of straw, and sat beside it.

"Gwyneth, please ask the innkeeper for a bowl of gruel." He gave her a coin. "The poor hound must have nourishment."

Gwyneth left and returned some moments later with the broth. Kneeling, she placed it by the animal. Almost too exhausted to drink, the dog slowly lapped up the warm liquid as Alan lovingly stroked its wiry coat.

"Do you think you can save this dog, Gwyneth?"

The stricken look on his face tore at her heart.

"I have never treated an animal, but I will try. It's good he was able to drink, but he is filthy, and his wounds need tending. Those blood-sucking fleas certainly do him no good."

Alan called a groom and paid him to bathe the animal with strong soap to eliminate the fleas, after which Gwyneth dressed the dog's wounds with some linen they bought from the innkeeper. She ordered the wet straw discarded, and they placed the beast on clean, dry bedding.

"Leave him to sleep now," she said. "When he wakes, we will give him more broth. There is nothing we can do now but wait."

Paying the groom to tend the hound for the afternoon, they returned to the inn, changed their soiled garb, and ventured forth to enjoy the sights of the city again.

As they rode toward the Cheap, Gwyneth glanced at her husband. She could not help but admire the way Alan cared about the abandoned beast. Her husband had a soft spot for children and animals. Many men would have left the poor cur to be torn to shreds by the angry gang.

"Why are you so fond of dogs, Alan?"

"It's a tale best told when the snow is deep and the night is long."

His evasiveness nettled her. "You always give me such an answer when I ask about your past. Why?"

"Gwyneth, did it ever occur to you that I don't wish to discuss the past because it may be unpleasant for me?"

"I" She felt her face flushing. "I never considered that. I beg your pardon. I didn't wish to distress you. Still, I have confided in you."

"I will tell you when the time is right, Gwyneth. Now I'd prefer to drop the subject."

What could be so horrible about his life that he couldn't bear to speak of it?

"Now what would you like me to buy you at the Cheap, my Little Rose?"

"I prefer to wait and see what is available." She giggled, giving him a sidelong glance. "Is there any limit to the amount I may spend?"

"Well, I hope you will exercise your usual prudence and frugality."

She laughed. "Do I detect a note of caution in your answer?"

He smiled. "Maybe, but I'd like you to choose something to commemorate this occasion."

As they dismounted and began to stroll around the place, the size of the Cheap and the seemingly endless variety of wares on display amazed her. Merchants sold everything from fine jewelry to live doves.

Because Gwyneth refused to choose a gift, Alan selected a golden brooch with which to fasten her cloak. Wrought in the shape of a circle, the pin swirled with an intricate Celtic design.

"But it is so expensive," she protested.

"No." Alan fixed it to her cape. "It was made for you."

The gray-haired merchant smiled, his brown eyes beaming.

They moved on to a cloth merchant, and Gwyneth chose an ell of green linen for Aelveva. After that, Alan purchased a fine scabbard for Ranulf and a toy sword for Garth.

If Gwyneth entertained any questions that Alan would keep the stray dog, her doubts vanished when he haggled with a vendor and acquired a cage large enough to transport the sick animal to Westminster.

* * * *

Back at court several days later, Alan and Gwyneth made their way to the great hall. He looked down at his beautiful wife. Her periwinkle tunic and veil flattered her delicate blond looks, and his heart swelled with pride as she walked beside him.

Each day the bond he forged with her grew stronger. Her kindness overwhelmed him, for she always made an effort to please him.

Quietly and diligently, Gwyneth had nurtured the hound so that in just a few days the dog had gained a little weight, was on its feet again, and looked immeasurably better. She would never know how much he appreciated her mercy because the animal represented something so deep and precious he could not speak of it.

They paused at the huge studded doors of the great hall, now flung open, and watched the unfolding spectacle.

The king had ordered special entertainment for this evening he played host to several foreign dignitaries, and the hall buzzed with activity.

Torches glowed on the walls, and candles burned brightly. Servants scurried about, filling goblets with wine. A troop of jugglers hurled their bright balls into the air to the accompaniment of musicians piping a lively tune. Gaily dressed acrobats stood off

in a corner, waiting their turn to perform. Arrayed in their finest attire, the elegant courtiers sat watching the entertainment.

Taking Gwyneth's hand, Alan prepared to enter. Instead, he froze to the spot, bile rising in his throat. Were his eyes playing tricks on him? Every muscle in his body tensed, ready for attack.

"Alan, you are hurting my hand." Gwyneth's upturned face wore a pained expression.

He quickly released her. "Sorry."

"What's amiss?" Frowning, she rubbed her hand. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"Maybe I have." He turned, seized her wrist, and marched away, pulling her down the long, torch-lit corridor.

Chapter Sixteen

"Please, Alan, tell me what is vexing you?" Gwyneth entreated, struggling to keep up with him.

Inside their chambers at last, Alan slammed the door behind her with such force that the walls seemed to shake. The hound leapt up, barking.

Gwyneth hurried to the startled dog and knelt beside it. "It's all right, fellow." She stroked the wiry gray fur on its head, and the dog settled near the foot of the bed, laying a paw over its muzzle.

Alan began to pace. The years of pent-up rage and loneliness descended on him like a rockslide.

Gwyneth moved to him and placed her hand in his. The bewilderment on her face caused him to stop his movement.

"Alan, tell me why you're in such a wrath? I've never seen you like this before. It is frightening."

"Gwyneth, I" He exhaled a breath in frustration.

He wanted to share his story, but the pain stabbed so deeply he could barely speak. For years he had rehearsed what he would say and what he would do when he met his father and stepmother again. As a child, abandoned and crying himself to sleep, he had planned a bitter revenge. Now, he was so undone he could do nothing but run like a wounded wolf and lick his wounds in the solitude of its den.

But he was not alone. His wife's light footfalls sounded behind him. Soft as swan's-down, her arms twined around his middle as she rested her body against his back.

"Alan, you once told me that a burden shared becomes half as heavy."

Turning in her arms, he faced her, his embrace tightening around her. "It is a long tale...."

"Best told when the night is long and the snow is deep." Her gaze fused with his. "I don't think the story will keep until then."

Gwyneth broke from his hold, took his hand, and led him to the table. She poured the wine from the flagon into two goblets, filling them to the brim. She offered him one, and he accepted.

"Tell me, Alan, please!"

He looked into the cup, watching the candlelight shimmer on the dark surface of the wine before tipping it back, draining it, and banging the vessel down.

"My father is here at court," he answered quietly. "I saw him a few moments ago sitting with the king."

Frowning, she set down her drink. "I thought you did not know your parents. You told me you were ... I mean ... I am confused."

"I was born a bastard so you assumed I did not know them," he said matter-of-factly.

“Yes.” She nodded as her gaze was still fixed on the wine goblet.

He sat. “I didn’t know my mother. She died giving me life, but I knew my father well--very well--or so I thought. I lived with him until he married my stepmother.”

She stared at him, astonished. “What is his name then?”

“Warroc Lord of Raddon. He holds one of the largest estates in Normandy.”

A look of perplexity on her face, Gwyneth slowly sank into a chair next to him.

“But you called yourself Fitz de Personne, Son of Anyone.”

“When I took that name, I feared for my life. He and my stepmother, Eleanor, tried to have me murdered.”

“Oh, Alan!” She left her chair to kneel beside him, slipping her arm about him in a fierce embrace. “How could anyone kill a child?”

“I don’t know. I cannot fathom their actions.” He pulled her into his lap, needing to feel her near.

She caressed his face. “Tell me everything about it, Alan.”

“The memory makes me sick to my heart.”

She kissed his cheek. “I felt better after I told you about my mother and brother drowning.”

The time had come to lance the boil that was festering in his soul. He took a deep breath and exhaled audibly. “Though I was a bastard, I lived with my father. He treated me well. So did everyone in his household. I felt loved and wanted until I was seven. That year my father married the beautiful Lady Eleanor.”

“From the moment the woman saw me, she hated me. It was a few weeks after she took up residence in my father’s estate that she connived to separate us, and I was sent to foster.”

Feeling the abandonment anew, Alan paused as the pain slashed his heart.

“In truth it was time for me to go, but greed spurred her on. She surmised that my father planned to leave me an inheritance. According to Norman law, bastards can inherit their father’s estates and titles. King William is a prime example of that. His father, Duke Robert, never married William’s mother. Yet William inherited the duchy of Normandy. Eleanor wanted everything for herself and the legitimate heirs she planned to give Warroc.”

“Avarice is one thing, but you’re accusing your stepmother and father of murder.”

“It’s no empty charge. My would-be assassin named her.”

Gwyneth sat up. Her eyes wide, she put both hands over her mouth.

Alan could still feel the terror sweep over him like a raging torrent as he recalled the incident.

“I remember every minute detail of that day as if it were yesterday. I had come home to celebrate the Christmastide with my father. It was the first time I had returned in a year, and it was only the fifth time in as many years that I was allowed to return to Raddon.

“The men had organized a hunt because Eleanor had a craving for venison. She was carrying a second child, and my father denied her nothing since she had already presented him a *legitimate* male heir, although while I was alive, they couldn’t supplant me.

“We left at first light. I can still see the tree limbs, black under their dusting of snow.”

Alan’s stomach churned with apprehension just as it had that cold, gloomy morning when he was a boy.

“My deerhound, Fleetfoot, gave me my only consolation. I had owned him for a few years and loved him dearly. The animal was a skilled hunter.

“My father suggested we break up into pairs. One of Eleanor’s henchmen, a big, dark oaf called Eustace volunteered to be my partner.

“The man terrified me. I was still only a lad of twelve years old. Although I was tall for my age, my strength and inexperience posed no match for the hulking, seasoned warrior.

“To make matters worse, the man’s face had a horrible jagged scar on his swarthy cheek and a broken nose, which gave him a grotesque, hideous appearance.”

Agitated now, Alan stood, lifting Gwyneth to her feet. “We rode for hours, traveling deep into the thick woods, though I never saw deer tracks. All the while, an ominous feeling gripped my guts, but my father had approved of Eustace, so I had no choice but to follow.

“Frightened, I asked when we’d stop because the sun shone straight above in the sky. We had traveled about six hours by then, and I knew we would never be back at Raddon by sundown. I didn’t want to spend the night in the forest with this man, but the huntsman told me to shut my whining mouth.”

Alan halted, his fists clenched as all the pain and fear of that long-ago day stormed his heart. Gaining his composure, he continued, “Finally, we stopped near the edge of a steep precipice. Below it, a swift stream carved its bottom. Eustace ordered me to dismount. I obeyed, though I thought the better of that move.

Behind me, I heard Fleetfoot growl, and I turned. Eustace had drawn his hunting knife. It is strange the small things you remember. I can still see the feeble winter light glaring off its sharp edge, and I almost wet my breeches.”

Even now the memory caused Alan’s stomach to lurch.

“Meanwhile, Fleetfoot had circled around and stalked him from the back. With an obscene smile, Eustace ordered me to say my prayers. He gloated as he informed me that Eleanor ordered him to kill me. I had nowhere to run. My back was toward the cliff, and Eustace faced me.”

A cold sweat bathed his body as the terror of that moment assaulted Alan anew.

“He sprang for me, but in a move of divine inspiration, I stepped to the side. Fleetfoot lunged and pushed Eustace over the precipice, but the good dog plummeted with him. The man plunged into the abyss, and his head smashed on the rocks before the rapids sucked his body under. But the sight of my faithful animal lying broken and dead on the boulders broke my heart.”

Alan swallowed hard and blinked back the tears stinging behind his lids. “I’ve never felt so completely alone as I did when Fleetfoot died. It was as if my last support in the world had been knocked out from under me.” He paused, his heart so full of grief he could not speak.

Gwyneth embraced him, and he held her close, composing himself enough to

continue. "I mounted my horse and rode for days, surviving on anything my arrows or sling could bring down, which was pitifully scant. At night, I took shelter in barns, caves, or churches."

"I was unable to feed my horse, so I left it near a church one night, knowing the priests would keep the beast. Then freezing, ragged, and starving, I collapsed days later at the door of a Benedictine monastery."

Even now, Alan could feel the excruciating cold numbing his limbs and the unrelenting hunger gnawing his belly.

"Didn't the monks ask about your parents?" she asked as she rested her cheek on his chest.

"No, they never guessed my identity. After my ordeal I looked like a beggar, and they assumed my impoverished parents deserted me. I never disclosed any information for fear my father and Eleanor would discover my whereabouts."

He removed her veil and ran his fingers through her smooth, golden locks.

"I stayed at the abbey for two years. They taught me to read, write, cipher, and a host of other things. In fact, they were so kind I considered taking Holy Orders."

She stroked his cheek. "Then how did you become a knight?"

"A devout nobleman, Charles de Langniac, came to the monastery on his yearly retreat. The old lord lost all his heirs in one way or another. Because he loved children, he helped young boys who had aptitude but were penniless." Alan paused, sighing as he remembered the old man.

"I often acted as his partner when he wanted some swordplay for exercise. I knew little because I had just become a squire before I ran away, but he said he saw an innate ability. So Lord de Langniac asked the abbot, his old friend, to allow me to go to his estate. He believed I could best serve God by following my natural talents.

"Because of his generosity, I became a knight and continued my academic studies, too, because the old lord was a learned man." He shook his head.

"Unfortunately, he died soon after I won my spurs and left all his lands to the monastery, so I went Caen and offered my sword to William."

"Alan, I don't know what to say except that I never want anything to hurt you again."

"Thank you, Little Rose," he answered, stroking her cheek.

"After all you have suffered, it's obvious why you were so kind to Garth and wouldn't allow the hound to be hurt."

"Yes."

She tilted her head back and looked into his eyes. "Sweetheart, let's go back to Wykston. We can follow the example of Lord de Langniac and make our estate a place of refuge for the sick, the troubled, and the unwanted of the world."

"That is my plan, but I must conclude this business with my father."

She withdrew from him and rose. "To what end, Alan?" Fear in her eyes, she clutched his hand. "Surely you would not..."

"Kill him?" Standing, he shook his head. "No, you should know by now I'm no murderer."

"Then why not leave? Put all the sorrows behind you and proceed with our

plans.” She released his hand.

“No, I must expose him and Eleanor to William and to the whole court. Everyone must know what blackguards they truly are.”

“You have not thought through your strategy. The strike you plan is a poor tactical and political move.” She stepped back.

“How so?” Arching a brow, he crossed his arms over his chest.

“William has a tenuous hold in Britain. The Scots are fierce warriors. Given the slightest provocation, they would raise their swords in an instant to invade. Queen Margaret’s brother, Edgar, a leader of the last rebellion, bides his time at Malcolm’s court, in case you have forgotten.

“As if that is not bad enough,” she continued, heaving a sigh, “the French cast a greedy gaze on Normandy and would plunge a dagger in William’s back if the occasion arose. Do you think he will tolerate petty squabbles between the only nobles on whom he can rely when his realm is in jeopardy?”

She shook her head. “I know not how many men your father has pledged to William for service, or for how many days a year he has promised them, but I am sure what he can offer the king is more than you can provide. If Lord Raddon serves him as an important ally, the king will bestow a great estate on him here.”

Gwyneth spoke with clear logic, but the pain in his heart made it difficult to reason. He had lived with the anger and bitterness too long. Could he ever relinquish it?

“Gwyneth, don’t you want to see justice done?”

“Justice? Yes.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you will not see it meted out by men. Leave such things to God.”

“William will understand. He escaped murder as a child as well. He hid while his enemies butchered his custodian while the poor old man slept.”

She clasped his arm. “Alan, your anger clouds your reason!” Her voice became shrill, grating in his ears.

“It’s you who will not see reason,” he shouted back

Nostrils flaring, chest heaving, she stepped back. Her voice was quiet yet cold as she said, “Hear this then and hold it in your memory well. I will not be a party to this folly. You can either stay here or come home with me. With you or without you, I leave Westminster tomorrow.”

“You’d desert me?” he asked, tasting bitterness in his mouth.

“No.” She withdrew her hand. “It is *you* who desert me, our people, and all we have built because you will have your revenge!” Tears filled her eyes, and she turned away from him.

Rancor ground in his guts. He had stripped his soul and stood before this woman as naked and completely vulnerable as a new babe. Instead of offering him succor, she planned to leave him. He felt wounded, betrayed, and abandoned *again*. Why couldn’t she understand that he needed to finish this business before he could go on with his life?

He spun her around to face him. “Gwyneth, I warn you. I’ll not beg you to stay, but if you desert me now, I will never forgive you.”

* * * *

The sun shone brightly, penetrating the fabric of her tunic and warming her back.

Still, its radiance could not melt the chill in her heart. In front of the great stables with her armed escort about her, Gwyneth mounted her white palfrey and set out for Wykston-without Alan.

Blind with revenge, her husband obstinately insisted on exposing his father and stepmother, despite all the sound, logical arguments that Gwyneth proposed. The rift between them gaped before her like a deep, wide abyss and left her with a sense of gnawing emptiness. Until now, she had not realized how much of her life he filled.

Fear ambushed her heart. Suppose Alan and she never found their way to reconciliation? He had said he would never forgive her if she left. Yet she couldn't stay and watch him sow the seeds of his own destruction.

Her vision blurred by a fresh fall of tears, she rode away from the palace, past the great abbey surrounded by its quilt of cultivated fields, and down the winding path to the river's edge. Though swamped by a deep sense of shame for her desertion, Gwyneth could not resign herself to become a part of Alan's retaliation.

"Holy Virgin, please help me to let my husband see reason," she murmured.

Reason.

How foolish she had been! She could not expect him to think rationally when he suffered such gut-wrenching agony. She had taken the wrong approach. Alan needed sympathy, consolation, and understanding. He needed to know she cared. Later, when his pain had been assuaged, Gwyneth could use rational means to convince him.

She must return to him now before the breach between them became too wide. She raised her hand, signaling the escort behind her to stop.

"My lady!"

The shout came from a distance. She turned in the saddle to see a rider near the crest of the hill. His green cloak billowing out behind him, the man rode toward her as his mount's hooves kicked up a cloud of reddish-brown dust from the trail.

The lithe herald reined back his mount, vaulted from his saddle, knelt, and bowed his golden head. "My lady, the king begs you to return immediately. Warroc, the Count of Raddon, has been injured. He fell from his horse a short time ago."

The man they wished her to treat was her husband's would-be killer! Why did the king ask this of her?

"Where is the Royal Physician?"

"He left for London early this morning, my lady. It will take too long to travel down the river to London and search for him. Lord Raddon needs help immediately!"

Her duty clear, she delayed no longer. Murderer or not, she must attend. Gwyneth turned her mount. Her escort in tandem, they followed the messenger back to the palace.

Dismounting, she procured her basket of remedies from the luggage cart and sped with the herald to Warroc's chambers. The anteroom was empty, but as Gwyneth entered the bedchamber, she found the king and courtiers hovering about the bed. Everyone turned and stared at her, and a sudden hush fell over the room. King William came forth, and Gwyneth curtsied deeply.

"Your husband wrote me of your healing skills," William explained. "He informed us you eased the pain and suffering of my subjects at the battle fought near

Wykston. We hope you can help our valued friend and trusted ally.”

“I will try, sire,” Gwyneth said. “I heard he fell from his horse. Is that true?”

“Yes.” William nodded. “A rotten limb fell in front of his mount as we rode this morning. His stallion reared, and Warroc of Raddon toppled from his saddle.”

The mighty conqueror appeared stricken with worry.

“I will do what I can, sire, but if he is injured inside, there is naught any mortal person can rectify.”

“God be with you then, my lady,” William said, returning to the foot of the Warroc’s bed.

Gwyneth shuddered, remembering a poor wretch Winna had treated at Wykston. He had no visible wounds, but his bleeding inside caused his death. Gwyneth dispelled the dismal memory and concentrated on the serious task ahead of her.

She quickly set out her medicines and called for water and linens. Proceeding with her patient’s examination, she marveled at the man’s resemblance to husband. The dark eyebrows, the finely chiseled nose, the square jaw were so like her Alan’s. When she pulled back his eyelids, examining the size and shape of his pupils, the violet-blue of his irises startled her. His dark hair, though, was streaked with silver strands. Both men stood taller than average with huge shoulders and chests.

Her assessment completed, she breathed a sigh of relief. He did not have the pale, sweaty appearance of someone who was hemorrhaging internally, nor did he have a serious head or neck injury. Nevertheless, a lump the size of a goose egg protruded from the back of his head. No wonder the poor man lay unconscious. However, Gwyneth found three cracked ribs on his right side.

“Who is Lord Raddon’s manservant?” She surveyed the crowd.

An old gnome of a man stepped forward and bowed. His face reminded her of a hawk, for his aquiline nose and large, golden eyes lent him a predatory look. His gaze pierced through her.

“His name is Monsar, my lady,” King William revealed. “He is a mute. An enemy hacked his tongue many years ago.”

She handed him a pair of shears. “Please cut some linen into wide strips, Monsar.”

She turned to the king. “Unless there is something I failed to discover, I found nothing more than some broken ribs. Thus far, they have not penetrated his lungs. We must bind him with linen and a poultice of comfrey made into a plaster to keep his torso stiff. If he remains bound for six weeks or so, his bones will mend nicely. There is naught else we can do.”

The king’s face relaxed. “We are most grateful. You will stay with him until he is well.” William’s words rang with command not request.

“As you wish, sire.” She curtsied, obeying.

The king reached out and helped her up. “We feel secure in the knowledge that you are tending this man.”

“I’ll try to deserve your confidence, sire,” she said.

William and his entourage exited, leaving her with Monsar. The little man cut the cloth into wide bands while she made the poultice. Gwyneth and the servant worked

quickly, girding the man with the sticky strips until they completed the difficult task.

As she smeared some bee balm salve on the bump on his head, Warroc groaned and opened his eyes. Gazing at Gwyneth, he frowned as if confused.

She put a finger to his lips. "Don't waste your energy with talk, my lord. I am Gwyneth of Wykston. I've come to tend your injuries. You fell from your horse and broke some ribs. Are you in pain? Just nod your head."

He did her bidding.

"I shall give you something to ease it, my lord."

She left his side and mixed some vervain with ale, instructing Monsar to elevate his head. Returning to him, she spoon-fed the liquid to Warroc. While she was dosing the man, Gwyneth could not help but think that this was certainly a strange way to meet her father-in-law.

* * * *

Alone in his room, Alan sat at the table in his chambers, watching his hour candle melt down to another ring. He had hoped Gwyneth would have returned by now. How humiliated he had been this morning when the king's herald came here looking for her, and he was forced to tell the man that she had departed for Wykston.

How could she leave him? He never would have abandoned her. Knowing her as he did, she was tending his father's wounds at this very moment. He could not fault her for that. Though Alan wanted revenge, he didn't want his father or his stepmother dead. Such blood lust would make him like them--murderers--and he had no desire to sink to that base level.

Alan had shunned court at midday, his misery so complete he could not face anyone. Instead, he bid Robert to deliver his meal to his rooms. The food had tasted like gall so he fed most of it to the hound.

The animal seemed to sense his sadness. Periodically, the dog approached, resting his head on Alan's knee. Stroking the animal's wiry coat gave him comfort.

Court had become a living hell for him. First Wulfstan made an appearance. Then his father had arrived. Eleanor must surely be skulking close at hand, spinning her silken web of destruction.

Strangely, no one had mentioned her. When Alan asked Robert, the boy related he had not heard of a Lady Raddon. If his memory served him correctly, his father and Eleanor shared an inseparable union.

Moreover, where were his half brothers, Riwal and Deroc? Surely Eleanor wished to promote their interests to the king.

The door creaked open then closed again, and Alan's heart beat fiercely as he recognized the quick, light footfalls announcing Gwyneth's arrival. Jumping to his feet, he strode to the anteroom.

She looked exhausted and pale, and her veil was about to slip off.

His anger flared. "So you deserted me, but you hurried to aid my enemy."

Undaunted, Gwyneth met his gaze. "I don't wish to argue with you, Alan. I know you will not believe me, but I was returning to you, hoping to resolve our difference. William's messenger hailed me first. The king ordered me to help Lord Warroc."

"I know." He turned from her, raking his fingers through his hair. "The herald came here looking for you."

She placed her basket on the table and slowly trod to the bedchamber as her veil fell to the floor.

For a reason Alan could not comprehend, he needed to know about his father. "How is he?" he inquired, following on her heels.

Gwyneth stopped abruptly and turned, colliding with him. She looked up at him, her silver eyes wide with surprise. "He will recover."

"No need to look so shocked, wife. I told you once that I am neither a beast nor a murderer."

"I have known that for quite some time, Alan. That is why I returned. I could not bear the thought of you being alone with your pain, but"

"But what?"

"Not moments ago, you called the man your enemy."

"He made himself my foe."

"I know." Gwyneth put her arms around him, nestling close to him, her voice full of compassion. "How I wish I could change that."

He held her tightly, needing her comfort as he needed the air he breathed. He kissed the top of her golden head. "I don't wish him dead, I just want him to receive the justice he deserves ... and I don't want you to be involved with him or his wife."

"I will limit my contact with him to treatment, Alan. I cannot say that I know how you feel, for I have not lived through your experience. My father never cast me out. Maybe with time I shall come to understand it."

Her soft words felt like balm on his aching heart. She seemed to care and to understand. "I'm glad you're back."

"I never really left. Halfway down the path to the river, I felt compelled to stop. I could go no farther from you."

He attempted to kiss her, but she put her palm against his chest, arresting his advance.

"Wait, Alan. There is something you must know. I want no dispute between us, but I must tend Warroc until he is well. It is my sacred obligation, and I could no more relinquish that duty than you could break the rules of your knightly code."

"The Royal Physician can care for him," he answered.

"No, he is in London. William commanded me, and even if he had not, I began treatment, and I'll remain with my patient until I can discharge him from my care."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "It's hard for me to swallow the fact that you give aid to the man who plotted my death."

"I must admit I had some conflict about that, but I have never refused my skills to anyone in need of them. Enemies or not, I treated your men as well as mine when they battled for Wykston."

How could he forget her compassion, her devotion to duty? To her, those men were neither Saxon nor Norman, but poor wretches who needed help in their agony. Suspending all prejudice, Gwyneth felt the same way about his father. He knew she would never shirk her responsibility.

“Alan, can you understand?”

He faced her. “Yes, but can you appreciate my position?”

“Of course, and I respect the pain you must feel. I can live with our differences.” She reached out and touched his hand. “Can you?”

He nodded. “But I cannot help fearing for you. My father and his wife exude evil.

“You keeping mentioning the woman, but I did not see her. The only women by his side were servants. If the lady is at court, wouldn’t she bide at his bedside?”

“Without a doubt. What about her sons, Riwal and Derroc?”

“Sweetheart, I saw no one new. Maybe they did not accompany your father. He could have left them to administer his estate.”

“No, they wouldn’t miss an opportunity to further their interests with William.”

She circled him with her arms. “There is something else I pledge to you.”

“What is that?”

“While I live and breathe, I shall never leave you again, Alan.”

* * * *

Satisfied with her patient’s progress, Gwyneth quit Lord Raddon’s chambers and headed for the walled garden below his rooms. The lush turf cushioned her footsteps and she removed her shoes, reveling in the cool texture of the soft grass on the soles of her feet. As she padded to the stone bench in the corner, she sat, enjoying the glorious abundance of marigolds as butterflies fluttered by. High above, the white limestone towers of the abbey cathedral shimmered against the azure celestial vault. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the fragrant smell of the sun-drenched roses rambling across the high, thick stone walls.

Gwyneth sighed with contentment. She opened her eyes and smoothed the skirt of her pale yellow tunic. She and Alan planned to leave for Wykston soon. At court a month now, they needed to return to Wykston because Llamas would soon be upon them and after that harvest time. Close upon that, Aelveva’s lying-in would arrive, and Gwyneth wanted to attend her companion at her confinement.

Gwyneth wondered again why she hadn’t conceived. She had not taken a night stroll in some time. She had hoped that now that problem was solved, as the abbess predicted, she would become pregnant.

The crunch of gravel on the path distracted her thoughts and alerted her to another presence in the garden, and she looked away from the colorful flowers.

“Lord Raddon! I asked you to wait until tomorrow to venture out so far. Monsar, how could you permit his lordship to leave his apartments and risk falling on the steps?”

Her father-in-law put up his hand, signaling her to silence. “It was not Monsar’s fault. I could not abide those four walls any longer. I am accustomed to moving about. I felt as if I would stiffen permanently if I did not get up and walk a bit. I have been in bed for three days.”

Leaning on Monsar’s arm, Lord Raddon walked to her, grinning broadly, his eyes matching the violet-blue of his long tunic. His smile completely disarmed her, banishing every trace of annoyance she felt.

She shook her finger. “If you should fall and re-injure yourself, you will end up

back in bed where you do not wish to be, and I shall be forced to postpone my return home and upset my husband's plans."

"Ah, so you finally have mentioned him. It is about him that I wish to speak."

Gwyneth regretted her words. Alan's caution resonated in her ears. Warroc so totally charmed her that she had let down her guard, giving him the opportunity to question her.

Why did he want to speak about her husband? How did he even know about Alan? The man had just arrived at court not a week ago. Surely Warroc believed his son was dead.

Fear settling in her belly, Gwyneth scanned the garden. She found herself alone with these two men, for all the courtiers would be on their way to vespers. The manservant could overcome her, and her screams would go unheard if they decided to assault her.

"I ... I am to meet him at vespers, and I am already tardy. If you w-will excuse me ...," she stammered, trying to walk past the two men.

Warroc caught her wrist. "And when you do not arrive, he will come looking for you. Then I'll have the pleasure of finally seeing him."

Gwyneth's heart raced, and like a wildcat pushed into a corner, Gwyneth lashed out. "Unhand me, my lord. Injured or not, you have no right to subject me to such indignities. If you want an interview with my husband, come by it honestly and simply ask for one."

Warroc loosened his grip. "I humbly beg your pardon, my lady. I meant no harm."

His complexion faded to gray, and he winced as he attempted to bow. His torso firmly bound in plaster, he barely managed a nod.

Despite her anger, Gwyneth felt a pang of remorse because the man was obviously in pain. The gnome-like manservant stepped closer to her, scowling.

Warroc put a hand on the man's shoulder. "It's all right, Monsar. Leave us. I wish to speak with the lady alone, and I doubt she will attack an invalid." He pulled a wry smile. "Go to vespers."

The man left, and Gwyneth relaxed a bit, aware that Warroc hadn't the strength to chase her if she decided to run. Still, she resolved to return to the palace and began to follow the paths between hedgerows of hawthorn.

Warroc stepped in beside her. "Why are you reluctant to speak of your husband, my lady?"

"Why does he interest you?"

"I have reason to believe he and I share a kinship."

Gwyneth's mouth went dry, and she felt her knees shake. The man suspected something. "Kinship? How can that be?"

"His name is Alan, isn't it?"

"Yes, but that means nothing." "It means a great deal." Warroc began to breathe hard from exertion.

"How so, my lord?"

"I shall tell you all, but first let's find a place to sit. My ribs are aching fiercely."

They reached the palace, and a guard opened the great studded doors. She and Warroc entered an anteroom. Continuing to the great hall, they sat at a trestle table near the entrance of the chamber.

Warroc sighed deeply. "I once had a son named Alan. In truth, I had three sons, but they are all gone from me now."

That news surprised her. "Gone from you?"

"Yes. At least Riwal and Deroc are lying in their graves, and so is my wife. They died before my eyes of a fever. I survived, though at the time I wondered why God spared my life. Alan, my eldest, vanished before that, some twelve years ago. He and the huntsman with whom he traveled were never found. My men and I searched for days, but we never recovered their bodies." The man's voice broke, and he hung his head.

Gwyneth sat immobile, riveted to the spot.

"At the time of Alan's disappearance, my wife had already given me one son and expected another, but I've been unable to forget my first born. He was a good lad." He looked into her eyes. "Maybe he was the best of all my sons, and I loved him dearly. The others turned out to be selfish and spoiled like their beautiful mother."

Gwyneth leaned toward him. So, the man knew something of his wife's wickedness, but certainly he hadn't guessed she plotted Alan's death.

"Since we never uncovered my son's corpse, I always hoped he may have survived. I discovered your husband was a Norman when I inquired about your background yesterday. Then the king told me about you and Alan."

Warroc ventured ever closer to exposing Alan's identity, and Gwyneth felt her panic rise with each word he uttered. Was his sad story the truth or just a ploy to engage her sympathy and trick her into a confession? Why didn't he just leave them alone?

"There are many Norman freelances who have pledged their swords to King William. Many of them are called Alan. It's a common name among the people of Normandy," Gwyneth said.

"To be sure, but how many of them are bastards as your husband is? How many of them are the age my son would be?"

"I know not, my lord, nor do I care. My husband and I want nothing from his father, whoever the man may be. We wish to be left in peace to build our lives together."

Trembling from head to toe, Gwyneth got to her feet and started to leave. "Now, please excuse me."

"I beg you to hear me out!" Warroc caught the sleeve of her primrose tunic.

Suddenly, the doors of the great hall swung open, crashing against the walls. The dogs sleeping by the fire jumped up and barked, and the servants froze as Alan burst through the entry.

His fists clenched, he marched toward Gwyneth and his father. "Unhand my wife, my lord! Now!"

Chapter Seventeen

Lord Raddon loosened his grip.

“Alan!” Gwyneth rushed toward him. “I thought you were at vespers.”

He twined a protective arm about her waist. “I waited for you on the church steps. When you did not arrive, I got worried.”

“I can explain, my son,” his father answered.

“How dare you address me as such!” Alan retorted. “You’ve been no father to me.”

Warroc stood with effort. “I dare because I speak the truth, and we all know it. Now that I see you, I am sure of it. You’re older and taller, but your face and the color of your eyes and hair are like mine.”

His anger mounting, Alan retorted. “Why this sudden outpouring of paternal concern when you and your wife, Eleanor, conspired to murder me?”

“That is a damnable lie!” Indignation on his face, his father stepped toward him. “Why do you say such a thing?”

Gwyneth jumped between them. “My lords, this can be discussed quietly. The servants are staring at us.”

Gasping and holding his ribs, Warroc sat again.

“It is no falsehood,” Alan said. “Eustace named Eleanor when he ordered me to prepare for death.”

Warroc’s face turned livid. “No!” He shook his head as a look of disbelief entered his eyes. “I cannot imagine she’d be that evil.”

“Why should I lie? Why would her own henchman bear false witness, especially when he was about to slash my throat? I’ll never forget the obscene smile on the blackguard’s face. His hideous leer lingered in my dreams for years. He took enormous pleasure in tormenting me before he lunged at me.”

Warroc clutched his heart. Groaning, he pitched forward off the bench. Alan and Gwyneth rushed toward the count, helping him to his feet.

Was it possible his father truly did not know what Eleanor had ordered?

“Husband, we must get him to his rooms!”

He and Gwyneth supported his father as they slowly made their way from the great hall up the steps to Lord Raddon’s chambers. With patient care, they removed his outer clothes and helped him into the big bed.

“I cannot believe your words, my son.”

“Hush, my lord. You should sleep now.” Gwyneth covered him with a cream-colored down quilt.

“No!” Warroc gasped out. “For years, I wondered about my son’s fate. Now I must know the truth.”

Was his father sincere? How he wanted to believe that! How he needed to know

that his father had really loved him--still loved him.

"Please, son! Even if the pain of it kills me, I must hear the truth." Gwyneth interlaced her gentle fingers with Alan's, her touch giving him reassurance. She gazed up at him, a silent plea eloquent in the depths of her silver eyes.

His thoughts a mass of confusion, Alan shrugged. "I hardly know where to begin."

Her gaze met his. "Tell him the story as you told me, husband."

Alan pulled two chairs to the side of the bed and sat by Gwyneth. Crossing his legs, he leaned back, taking hold of her hand again. Once he began, the story seemed to pour forth effortlessly, cleansing him like a gush of spring water from the earth.

"But Eustace mentioned only Eleanor. He never accused me! Why didn't you return and expose her?" his father asked.

"I was a terrified boy, a bastard. Besides, you seemed to abandon me, and you appeared to be besotted by your wife. I thought you had colluded with her. After all, the woman gave you two other sons. You didn't need me. In fact, I felt certain you would kill me. That is why I never revealed my true identity and called myself Fitz de Personne, the son of anyone.

Warroc struggled to heave himself up, but Gwyneth jumped from her seat. "Let me help you." She plumped his pillows.

Winded from the exertion, he lay back against the pillows again. "But both of you must know that I never could have been a party to such a crime! No matter how much I wanted the woman, I never could have conspired to kill my own flesh and blood. I grieved for years. I loved you, Alan. I still love you."

"Then why did you send me away?" He stood, feeling like a vulnerable, young boy again, the wound of desertion smarting fresh in his heart. "I was just a lad." He swallowed hard. "I needed you."

"It was time to send you to foster."

Alan folded his arms and began to pace at the foot of the bed. "So you expect me to believe that your marriage and my banishment occurred coincidentally?"

"No." Warroc shook his head. "I must be honest about that. I knew Eleanor begrudged you my affection. I hoped that once she had her own children, motherhood would give her a feeling of security. I thought she would come to accept you. I was not totally blind to her faults, though you may have thought so. But I am sick to my soul to discover she was a murderess."

"Was?" Alan halted, a quizzical look on his face.

"Yes. She and your brothers died of a fever several years ago."

Alan could not move. For years he had sought vengeance on a person who no longer existed. The realization struck him like a mule kick. He stepped closer to his father. The man looked so hurt, vulnerable, and had been just as much of a victim of deceit as he.

"I never stopped searching for you, Alan."

"I took pains to avoid detection, my lord. I wanted to control the time and place of our confrontation, so I could meet you as an equal. That way, you and Eleanor could not destroy me. With power and wealth behind my name, I'd have the credibility to

unmask the both of you.”

Warroc sighed. “I regret the part I played in earning your distrust. But I thank God I found you again, although I never expected to find you here. I learned about you through asking about your wife. I wanted to know all I could about this beautiful Saxon woman who was so skillful.” Lord Warroc smiled at Gwyneth. “Then Monsar indicated he caught sight of you at church. He recognized you immediately because he believed you resembled me a great deal when I was younger.”

“How?” Gwyneth asked. “The man cannot talk.” “Through the years we’ve devised a way to communicate by various signs.”

Alan remembered Monsar with fondness. The speechless little elf of a man had often played with him before he had been fostered.

His father grimaced.

“You should sleep now, my lord,” Alan said.

“I cannot until I know that I haven’t found you only to lose you again,” Warroc replied.

Tears rolled down his father’s cheeks, causing Alan to cringe inwardly.

“I loved your mother, Alan, more than any woman on earth. Her name was Herlève. We were to be betrothed, but we quarreled bitterly. I don’t remember why. I was young, foolish, full of pride.

“She never told me she had conceived before I left on a long visit to England. Perhaps she wanted me to stay with her because of love instead of obligation. In my arrogant way, I thought she would be waiting for me when I returned, and we would be wed.

“On my return to Normandy, I found she had died, giving you life. I went mad with grief, but I still had a part of her in you, so I took you home with me.

“Son, go to that chest on the table, open it, and remove the scroll of parchment inside,” his father said.

As Alan obeyed, he noticed that the tiny wooden dragon his father had whittled for him also occupied the chest. He had not seen the toy since he went to foster.

“Read it,” his father urged.

Alan unrolled the cylinder so Gwyneth had access to its contents as well. After she read it, she looked up, her eyes misty. Putting his arm around her waist, he gulped back his own tears.

The document deeded the estate of Beaucieux to him to hold in his liege lord’s name when he reached his majority.

“Did Eleanor know of this title?” Gwyneth asked.

“Most certainly,” Warroc answered, looking at Gwyneth. “I explained to her that although Alan’s birth occurred outside the bonds of marriage, he was still entitled to his inheritance. I told her that even though I had not wed his mother, Herlève was of noble birth, and I wished to give you the estate near the river as well.”

“Eleanor replied that the land belonged to me to dispose of as I wished. She made no protest. I believed she accepted my decision. The sons we had together would receive a vast inheritance when I died.”

“Eleanor used stealth and attempted murder instead of open opposition,” Alan

said.

“The woman victimized both of you,” Gwyneth pointed to the parchment. “This document provided her with a motive for murder.”

“Yes.” Warroc nodded. “I was devastated when I lost you, Alan. It was as if a part of me had died as well. I carried that old deed and the carved dragon with me always. They remained the only things I had by which to remember you. Now, I give them to you. The manor is yours. I hope you will give the wooden toy to your first-born child.”

Alan’s throat ached with unshed tears.

“Have I your leave to declare you as my son? I want to proclaim the fact to the whole world. I’ve always been proud of you and never denied my paternity.”

Rendering him speechless, emotion welled up inside Alan so that his heart flowed with uncontainable joy. Through all the years of estrangement, his father had missed him, mourned him, and loved him.

His arm around Gwyneth’s waist, he trod to the bedside. As they knelt, Alan took the Warroc’s hand. “Yes, Father, as I recognize you.”

* * * *

Five weeks later, Gwyneth trailed behind Alan and Lord Warroc while they took a tour of the sunny garden. The colorful tapestry of summer flowers dazzled her senses, delighting her eyes and intoxicating her with their scent. The hound, now robust and well groomed, trotted by her side as she afforded her husband and father-in-law the opportunity to enjoy the relationship so long denied them.

As good as his word, Lord Raddon announced to the world that Alan was his son, and the reconciliation brought about a profound change in Alan. He no longer had the haunted look of a man on a never-ending quest. He let down his guard and had become less mistrustful. He appeared more at peace with himself.

Lord Raddon also filled the void in Gwyneth’s heart left by her own father. Soon they all planned to return to Wykston for a long stay because Alan wanted to show his father the estate and the new stone keep, which through Ranulf’s messages, she knew would be finished by the first frost.

She anticipated the journey with relish. Once back in her own home, everyone she loved would be with her. They had prolonged their stay while Warroc recovered. Llamas had come and gone. The harvest and all the heavy toil it entailed would soon descend upon them again. After they reaped the crops, livestock must be butchered, nuts gathered, the grain milled to flour, and the cheeses pressed.

Gwyneth didn’t care about the heavy labors, for she harbored a selfish reason for wanting to return. Perhaps back in that peaceful atmosphere, she would have the opportunity to complete her husband’s happiness by presenting him with an heir.

With the frequency that she and Alan enjoyed each other, she was surprised she had not conceived long ago. Her empty womb troubled her as she tallied all the women she knew who became pregnant shortly after they wed. Was she barren? The prospect caused a hollow feeling to lodge in the pit of her stomach. Gwyneth wanted children--desperately.

The dog whimpered, looking up at her with soulful eyes, as if sensing her doubt

and offering commiseration. She knelt to hug the animal, taking comfort in the warm, furry contact. Perhaps when she found peace, and no longer lived with the threat of an accusation of witchcraft, she'd get pregnant.

Hope brightened. Her night walks were becoming more infrequent. Months had elapsed between incidents now. Was a cure possible as the abbess had suggested?

Gwyneth felt guilty about withholding the truth about her sleepwalking. Alan had told her everything, but she still kept a secret.

However, his confessions did not have the threat of a witch's torture, excommunication, and death attached to it. She still couldn't be sure of his reaction. Maybe, though, the point was moot because she hadn't had an episode for a long time. Perhaps she was cured and she need never tell him. Yet Gwyneth wanted to confide in him and have him say that it didn't matter because he loved her.

Still, she had to acknowledge that through all their trials, he had never declared his love for her.

Maybe he never would.

* * * *

Half asleep, Alan reached out to draw Gwyneth near, but his hand came in contact with a cool linen sheet rather than her warm flesh.

"Gwyneth," he called, but all remained quiet.

A long sliver of bright illumination contrasted sharply against the blackness. That meant the door had been left slightly ajar, allowing the light from the torches lining the corridor to seep in.

God's bones! She stood at the far end of the long passageway near the alcove which housed the king's privy. He called softly, and fear gripped him when she did not respond.

Was she ill or had she been dreaming of Godwin again? Alan dashed down the empty corridor after her. He reached her just before she entered the nook.

In the light of the torch affixed to the wall, he saw that her eyes had a strangely vacant look--just as they had had the first time he saw her.

"Gwyneth?"

But she didn't respond.

Come to think about it, this was the fourth time he'd seen her in such a state. When they first met, when Ulfer tried to abduct her, during the journey to London, and now.

The strange sightless look in her eyes made his hair stand on end, but now was not the time for speculation. Putting his arm around Gwyneth's waist, he hastily urged her away. As he led his wife back to his room, Alan decided they must leave for Wykston as soon as possible.

There was something more to these so-called nightmares that haunted her--something he felt she was keeping from him. Deep in his gut, he felt that there was more than mere restlessness. Once they arrived home, he would make it his business to discover the truth.

* * * *

Two days later, Gwyneth sat in the encampment by a brook and stroked the

hound's head. The gentle babble of the water coursing over its rocky bed did little to ease her mind, and she barely nibbled her midday meal, for Alan had been strangely aloof since they started their return to Wyckston.

Why? What had caused such a change in him? He should be happy after his reconciliation with his father.

Gwyneth looked up. After eating, the men were taking in a brief rest before resuming their journey. They would arrive at Wyckston just after compline, but neither the memory of the visit with the abbess yesterday nor the prospect of seeing Aelveva again lifted her spirits.

Agitated, she got to her feet, strolling deeper into the woods, glad for the opportunity to stretch her legs. She stopped short.

No! It cannot be!

Through the green lace of dense foliage, Gwyneth saw Alan and Edith. Face to face, they appeared in deep conversation. The woman's face and posture strained with distress, and Alan held her hand. How dare he touch another woman!

No wonder he had seemed so distant toward her.

The world seemed to darken around her, and Gwyneth turned and fled. Tripping over a long bramble cane, she tumbled to the ground, the thorns scratching at her ankles.

The rustle of leaves warned her of someone's approach. She scrambled to her feet to see Alan and Edith hurrying forward.

"Gwyneth, Aelveva's time has come!"

"But it is too early." Gwyneth felt her panic rise. "Where is Winna?"

"At the abbey," Alan answered. "She wanted to exchange herbs with Sister Emma. Edith was on her way there to fetch her when she saw us. I'll lend her horses. That way she and Winna can reach abbey and return more quickly."

"That will still take too long," Gwyneth replied, running toward her mount. "I can be in Wyckston in a few hours." Two precious lives had no one on whom to depend but her.

* * * *

They arrived at Wyckston shortly before compline. Leaving everyone in her wake, Gwyneth dismounted and raced through the great hall, up the stairs to the gallery toward her old room, which Ranulf now shared with Aelveva.

Outside the door, the big, sinewy sergeant paced. The waning daylight could not conceal the anxiety etched on his handsome face when he stopped and bowed to greet her. For the first time, she saw fear in his hazel eyes as he came forward to greet her.

Garth, too, looked frightened. He sat on the ground, quietly for once, his big green eyes staring up as he rose and aped Ranulf's manners.

"Ranulf, what happened?" Gwyneth walked toward him.

He bowed. "It's a miracle you've come, my lady. She fell, and her pains commenced. I sent Edith to fetch Winna."

"The girl met us first," Alan said, stepping aside Gwyneth. He turned to her. "I brought your basket of remedies." He held out the pannier.

She hung its handle in the crook of her arm. "Thank you, Alan. I'll go to her now. His eyes wide with fear, Garth tugged at her sleeve. "Will my mother die, my

lady?”

How could she answer the frightened boy’s questions? How could she allay his fears, Ranulf’s, and her own? Aelveva could very well die. Childbirth was a risky thing for mothers and babes.

She dropped to her knees, hugging him. “She is strong and healthy, and she survived your birth, Garth. Do you want to help your mother?”

He nodded. “Yes, my lady.”

“Then pray.”

“I have been praying all day, my lady.”

She stood and shot a look at Ranulf and Alan. “Then continue. She and the babe need your prayers.” *And so do I.*

Gwyneth mustered her courage and turned from them, entering the small, familiar room. Candles blazed against the whitewashed walls, dispelling the darkness of the late hour. Elspeth, Agatha, and Galswinthe stood about the big, new Norman-styled bedstead Ranulf had the carpenter make.

The maidservants faced her and bowed as she neared the bed, their heads covered in tight-fitting white coifs.

“My lady?” Aelveva called, her eyes closed.

“I am here,” Gwyneth answered softly, trying not to communicate the horror she felt as she viewed her friend’s condition.

The woman’s face was the color of tallow, her eyes circled by dark rings, her lips almost as livid as her complexion.

“I recognized your step. I prayed you would come,” Aelveva whispered, her eyes still shut. “It is early. Will my babe fare well?” Aelveva opened her lids. Her usually clear green eyes appeared glazed and sunken.

How could Gwyneth answer this question truthfully and give the woman the encouragement she needed? “The child is in God’s hands, Aelveva. Let us keep our faith and fight hard.”

“I have faith in the Almighty ... and in you, my lady.”

Touched by the complete vote of confidence, Gwyneth almost burst into tears, but she suppressed her emotions. Dear Aelveva needed her now more than ever, and Gwyneth could not allow anyone to see her defenses crumble.

Barely able to speak, she said, “I must go for a moment. I need to prepare, but I’ll return immediately.”

Ranulf and Alan stared as she left the chamber and fled down the gallery into her own rooms. She stood against the closed door for a moment, staring into the darkened room. All at once, her tears flooded forth in an uncontrollable rush.

The task ahead of her far exceeded her abilities. Gwyneth had delivered babes before, but Winna had always been there to help. Moreover, they had been normal births. Aelveva’s labor had been induced by a fall. She had another full month before her time was due.

Gwyneth felt so alone, so helpless. The odds were great Aelveva and her unborn babe could very well die.

Hands over her face, she slid down the wall to huddle on the floor by the door and

wept until her eyes and throat burned.
responsibility before her.

“My lady?”

The voice belonged to Elspeth, the kitchen maid. “Yes,” Gwyneth replied, clambering to her feet, wiping her wet face on the sleeve of her tunic.

She did not open the door, for she did not want the girl to see her crying. Nor could she communicate her self-doubt to Aelveva or anyone else, for that matter. Everyone needed to give the laboring woman courage. Aelveva’s greatest weapon right now was faith, and that could not be jeopardized.

Elspeth continued, “Lord Wykston and Sergeant Ranulf ask that you please come, and Father Rollo and Father Alfred told me they would pray for Aelveva at mass.”

“I’ll be there in a moment. Tell them I am preparing myself and thank the priests for me.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Gwyneth heard the sound of the girl’s quick footfalls fading in the distance. Her clothes discarded, she rushed to the washbasin on a stand beneath the window. Washing quickly, she donned clean, old garb.

Suddenly, Gwyneth remembered her birthing sheet. For a year now, she had stored the large linen, hoping to use it for her own confinement. Now, a more urgent need for it had arisen.

Rummaging through the big trunk at the foot of her bed, she pulled it free and tucked it under her arm. Then she lifted the birthing stool from the corner. Fully equipped now, she hurried to Aelveva, hoping the big piece of cloth she carried would not become the woman’s shroud.

“How is Aelveva?” Warroc inquired, falling into step beside her.

“We must pray and hope,” Gwyneth replied.

They entered the room. Ranulf, Alan, and Garth stood by Aelveva’s side. Several women from the village also came.

“I’ll ask everyone but Elspeth, Agatha, and Galswinthe to please leave,” Gwyneth said as she entered the chamber. “It will be a while before the child comes, and Aelveva must rest. Ranulf, Garth needs to break his fast.” Gwyneth placed her hand on her own growling stomach. “In fact, we all should eat something.”

“I want to stay with my mother,” Garth whined.

“You must do as you are told,” Aelveva said, her voice strained with effort.

Warroc took Garth’s hand. “Come with me for a while. I’ll show you how to carve a dragon from a piece of beechwood.” He looked at Alan then returned his gaze to the boy. “I used to do that for my own lads.”

The boy looked up at him. “May we make a guardian angel for my mother instead?” Her father-in-law smiled. “Yes, but first you must eat your meal. Come along.”

They left, and Alan turned to Ranulf. “Let us follow that advice. I am hungry as a wolf and you look as if you need some fresh air and a good stretch of your shanks.”

Ranulf shook his head. “You go. I want to stay.”

Gwyneth moved to them. “Come outside. I wish to speak to both of you.”

They hastened out of the room to the gallery. Below them in the great hall the soldiers dined.

"There is naught you can do, Ranulf," Gwyneth said gently. It will serve no one, least of all Aelveva, if you get ill."

"She's right, Ranulf," Alan said. "I bought some imported Brie and a keg of good Norman cider from some merchants in London. Let's enjoy them."

Ranulf shook his head. "I doubt I shall be able to enjoy anything until I know Aelveva is out of danger," he answered reluctantly. "I can't help but remember that the same thing happened with my first wife, except this is worse. Arlette carried to term. I've never run from any foe, Alan, but this is one I don't know how to fight."

"Then listen to me, Ranulf," Gwyneth said, putting on a show of bravado. "Neither Aelveva nor I can afford you to get sick. I can't nurse you both at the same time. You will go with Alan, you will eat your breakfast, and then you will visit your wife. She needs your encouragement and strength more than she had ever needed anything in her life. Now off with you!"

Gwyneth lectured herself as well as Ranulf because no one sympathized with him more than she did.

The two men walked to the door, but Alan stopped, turning to face her. "I will bring something back for you."

"Thank you," she said, wishing she could manage a smile for him.

They left, and Gwyneth returned to the room. Aelveva moaned, and her hands clutched the top of the sheet.

Panic threw its strangling net over Gwyneth, choking the breath from her body. Her heart raced, and a chill covered her body with cold sweat. She had to rein back her runaway emotions. Aelveva needed her.

Gwyneth stepped to her patient. "I must look."

Aelveva nodded, gasping with pain, unable to talk.

Gwyneth pulled back the linen. Aelveva's swollen stomach bunched hard for several seconds before her muscles relaxed. Gwyneth performed her examination, finding the birth opening still narrow.

"It will be a while." She covered Aelveva.

Elsbeth, Agatha, and Galswinthe entered with Ranulf. Alan tagged behind, carrying a large napkin in one hand and a tankard in the other. Gwyneth left the expectant parents with the women, as she and her husband sat on the floor in the gallery just outside the doorway.

"Are you sure you don't want to go down stairs?" Alan asked.

"No, I prefer to stay close."

Alan handed her the tankard and unknotted the linen, offering her half a trencher, broken and generously spread with Brie. The fragrance of the fresh bread and ripe cheese caused her empty stomach to growl. She felt near to fainting with hunger since she had eaten nothing since midday.

"Thank you, Alan." She picked up the food and took a bite. The rich, creamy texture contrasted well with the crunchy crust.

"You're welcome," he answered. "I know you're worried, but you are a good

healer, my Little Rose.” He took her free hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Everything will be all right.”

She stared into her lap and bit her lip. Never had she needed reassurance more than she did at this moment. Never had she loved him more for giving it to her.

“I hope I deserve the confidence you have in me, Alan, but the situation is serious.”

“I know, but we must look on the bright side. As I told Ranulf, we should be grateful she didn’t fall earlier. The child wouldn’t have had as good a chance to survive.”

“That is true. Still, the baby may have been injured and....”

He put a finger over her lips. “Hush, love. Let us not borrow trouble.”

Alan was right. She could not afford one wit of self-doubt to undermine her.

Gwyneth had just finished the last drop of her cider when she heard a shriek.

Dropping the tankard, she jumped up and turned, hitting her nose on Ranulf’s chest as he came through the door.

His face was as pale as cold cinders. “My lady, please come.”

Gwyneth whizzed past him to the bedside. Aelveva lay against the pillows, panting for breath as beads of sweat glistened on her brow. Gwyneth lifted the sheet. In the short time she took to break her fast, Aelveva’s labor had progressed. Her birth opening had enlarged considerably. Was the labor now going too fast?

“You are doing well.” Keeping a cool facade, she patted Aelveva’s hand.

Ranulf and Alan stood in the doorway, their anxiety mirrored in their eyes. She approached the two men who also looked as if they needed reassurance.

“It is all right.”

“But she screamed as if she were being murdered, my lady. And she looks so exhausted.”

Gwyneth agreed, but she sought to comfort him. “It is called labor for a reason, Ranulf, and it’s also normal for women to scream. I’m told giving birth does smart a bit.”

The big sergeant nodded. “You know what is best.”

If he knew the terror and doubt she felt, the man wouldn’t think she was so wise.

She turned from him and again took up her watch at the bedside. “Hold my hand, Aelveva, and squeeze as hard as you have to. Do you want the biting stick?”

Her patient gave her a weak smile. “Not yet, my lady.”

As the labor progressed, the darkness of night faded to dawn then brightened to the radiance of morning and afternoon. Gwyneth did her best to make the woman comfortable, bathing the sweat from her body and securing her long red hair beneath a clean linen coif. To ease Aelveva’s pain, she was tempted to dose her, but Winna long ago had warned her against this trap. Poppy seed potion stopped labor. Aelveva’s pains occurred more frequently and lasted longer as twilight descended.

After performing another examination, Gwyneth stated, “It is time for the birthing stool.”

She, Elspeth, and Galswinthe helped Aelveva onto the wooden stool, while Agatha went to fetch water. Suddenly, another gripping pain seized Aelveva.

“My lady,” she called feebly, “I feel something that is not right.”

Stooping, Gwyneth looked under the birthing stool, and her trepidation reached a crescendo. Between Aelveva's thighs, a tiny leg and foot protruded out. The babe was in the wrong position!

Chapter Eighteen

“Ranulf, let’s go to the courtyard and practice some swordplay. If I don’t get some exercise soon, my sinews will be rendered useless.” Alan stood. His limbs stiff from sitting on the floor in the dim, cramped gallery for so long, he stretched and yawned. “Besides, if you continue to hone the edge of that blade, you will wear the metal away.”

Still seated, the sergeant looked up at Alan. “I know, but it’s hard to leave when my wife and unborn child may die.”

Alan’s concern for Ranulf increased by the moment. Never had he seen the usually devil-may-care man so completely undone, and he had campaigned with the combat-hardened warrior for years. This was the first time Alan had seen the man so shaken.

Not one to do anything by halves, Ranulf had given his heart to Aelveva, totally and unconditionally. Now, he stood to lose everything again.

The big sergeant seldom uttered a word of apprehension. Even before battle, he always maintained an air of optimism, but now Alan could almost feel the man’s aura of pain.

Never eloquent, Alan racked his brain, trying to find some word of comfort. What would he himself want to hear if their roles were reversed?

The notion prompted a shadow to fall across his heart, and the hairs on the back of Alan’s neck stood on end. Life without Gwyneth seemed so dismal and empty. He could not bear the thought, for she had become like the dawn of his life, quietly illuminating his world and filling each day with brilliance and warmth.

But something troubled her--something she had not shared with him. Why?

Guilt jabbed his heart. He should not be concerned with himself and Gwyneth at the moment. He must focus on cheering Ranulf.

“Aelveva and your child are in the most capable hands I know,” Alan encouraged as he sat again. “Gwyneth nursed both Robert and my father. I suppose I am stating the obvious, but they recovered. The king, himself, preferred her care to that of the Royal Physician when my father was hurt.” Alan felt a sense of deep pride in his capable wife.

“I know that, Alan.” Ranulf wiped his blade. He replaced it in his scabbard, set his whetstone in an oblong wooden box and closed the lid. “It’s just that I feel so helpless, and this waiting drives me to the brink of madness.”

Frustration quaked in the big, brave man’s voice, causing a lump to swell in Alan’s throat. How he wished he had some magical answer for Ranulf.

Gwyneth’s light, dancing steps sounded behind him, and Alan’s gaze pierced Ranulf’s. Ranulf jumped up, and he and Alan turned. The grave expression in her eyes caused his gut to contract with fear.

“Aelveva.” Ranulf’s voice cracked with emotion. “Is she all right?”

“So far.” She bit her lip.

Alan believed his wife was trying to reassure them, but she could not hide the pale face and the anxiety lurking deep in her eyes. He knew her too well.

“The child?” Ranulf inquired softly.

Her chin trembled. “The babe is coming feet first, Ranulf.”

“No!” Ranulf turned, pounding the wall with the end of his fist.

Alan put a hand on his shoulder. “Steady, man. Hear her out.”

Ranulf turned toward Gwyneth. “Forgive me, my lady.”

“It’s all right, Ranulf. I understand your concern.” She took a deep breath. “I’d ordinarily turn the child, but it is too late for that. The babe’s whole leg has descended.” She lowered her lids. “I will do my best.” Her fingers tightened on the cross suspended from her neck.

Ranulf nodded.

Alan suspected that Ranulf’s throat was so choked with tears that he could no longer speak. He noticed Gwyneth blinking quickly, as if she was trying to suppress her tears. He knew that at this moment, the hearts of his old friend and good wife were breaking. Empathizing, he fought to keep his own emotions in check.

“May I see her?” Ranulf asked softly.

“Yes,” Gwyneth nodded. “I need your help to lift her to the bed, but Aelveva must see you confident and unafraid. She needs all the courage and strength you can muster.”

“I will not fail her, my lady.” Ranulf squared his shoulders.

“I know you will not, Ranulf,” Gwyneth said quietly.

Alan followed them into the birthing room. Though the window was open, the unbearable heat from the blaze of candles, needed to give sufficient light, hit him in the face like a slap.

“How fares my brave girl?” Ranulf asked, lifting and placing her on the bed.

“I feel so tired, love,” Aelveva murmured wanly.

“Hold my hand. Let me give you my strength.” Ranulf laced his fingers with hers.

Alan cupped Gwyneth’s elbow and took her into the corner. “This may be another hurdle, but I still feel better knowing that she and the babe are in your hands.”

“Thank you, Alan. Please pray. We need God’s help.” She blinked, but, despite her best efforts, tears beaded her eyelashes, and Alan quickly dabbed them away.

“I will.” He kissed her temple. He walked to Ranulf. “Let’s leave the women to their business. We are intruding here.”

The big man rose and followed Alan from the room. Gwyneth moved to the bed. Aelveva lay beneath the blue down quilt, her stamina seemed spent.

Sweet Jesu, where were Winna and Edith? They should have arrived before this. Gwyneth needed their help--now.

She firmly took the woman’s limp hand. “You must remain calm and work with me. Can you do that for the babe and me?”

“Yes,” Aelveva’s gaze met Gwyneth’s. “As long as you are with me.”

Overcome with emotion, Gwyneth turned away to prevent her patient from seeing

the terror in her eyes and called for water. She withdrew the soapwort leaves from her basket and lathered her hands with the mild suds, ensuring they were sufficiently slippery.

“I must examine you, Aelveva.”

“Do what you must, my lady.”

Gwyneth probed. A chill froze her heart. The cord was coiled around the babe’s neck. She tried to slip her fingers beneath it. Luckily, it felt loose enough. She held her breath. With infinite care she eased the slick lifeline over the infant’s head. Exhaling slowly, she rested for a moment.

Thank you, dear God. The quick prayer could not express the profound gratitude she felt.

“Just a while longer, Aelveva, and you will hold your baby.”

Aelveva nodded. She grimaced and grunted softly as Gwyneth introduced her hand once more and slipped the infant’s other limb down. Getting a good grip on its legs, she eased its whole little body forward a bit more.

“Elspeth, hurry! We need more warm water. Agatha, call for Galswinthe to make the linen ready to receive the babe.”

The women sprang into action and moments later, Galswinthe hurried through the door.

“Aelveva, I know you feel exhausted, but you must push as soon as the next pain comes,” Gwyneth said.

“I shall try, my lady.”

Gwyneth dabbed the sweat from the laboring woman’s brow as they all waited.

Finally, Aelveva’s abdomen bunched tightly, and she writhed, screaming. Agatha quickly put the biting stick between the mother’s teeth.

“Push, Aelveva. Work with the pain.” Gwyneth held on to the new life and inched it forth.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Aelveva cried.

Finally, the infant boy’s head emerged, round and quite bald. He was tiny, red, but perfectly formed. His little chest heaved as Gwyneth held him up at last, and the babe took his first breath and squalled weakly. The road ahead would not be without obstacles because he was small, but he was alive and so was his mother.

“You have another son, Aelveva.” Gwyneth smiled, and her heart expanded.

“Thanks be to heaven,” the woman gasped out, tears in her eyes. “And thank you, my lady.”

A deluge of emotions rushed over Gwyneth as joy, gratitude, and blessed relief flooded into her soul. Tears blurred her vision as the wondrous power of the miraculous event impacted her. A new life had come into the world, and she had taken part in the momentous happening.

The rest of the delivery progressed quickly. Gwyneth cut and tied the cord. Agatha bathed the babe while Galswinthe and Elspeth helped to rid Aelveva of the afterbirth then bathed the new mother.

Her fatigue forgotten for the moment, Gwyneth wiped the sweat from her moist face. Feeling as if her feet had wings, she left the room.

Ranulf immediately rushed toward her. "Aelveva?"

"She is well, Ranulf, and you have a fine son." She smiled, thinking that the little boy resembled a small, skinned rabbit, but she thought the better of expressing that opinion.

Ranulf smiled, and his eyes took on their old, familiar twinkle.

"Congratulations!" Alan smiled and slapped his friend's back.

"May I see them?" the new father asked.

"For a moment." Gwyneth smiled and nodded. "They need sleep after their long labor and so do the both of you."

At that moment, Winna's old, hunched form followed Edith's shapely one up the oaken staircase. "I'm sorry we arrived so late, but our horse went lame. How is the mother, Lady Gwyneth?" the old healer asked.

"Well," Gwyneth answered.

A look of apprehension on her face, the old woman asked, "the child?"

"Small, but alive."

Edith's face showed relief.

Winna smiled widely. "We can fatten him. You did well, my lady, but you look tired. You should rest now, I'll keep watch."

Gwyneth nodded. "Thank you, Winna."

They entered the room and expressed their happiness and best wishes. Gwyneth's heart swelled with emotion as Ranulf knelt by his wife's bed and kissed her hand.

"Thank you for our son, and thank God you are all right, love," he said with tenderness.

The babe tucked in the crook of her arm, Aelveva pushed back the blanket to reveal the red face of the swaddled newborn. A look of pure wonderment shone on Ranulf's face as he gazed on his son for the first time. The crisis now over, Gwyneth suddenly ached with fatigue. Feeling stifled in the hot, crowded chamber, she stepped outside the room for a breath of fresh air. All at once, the gallery seemed to whirl around her in a blur while a loud noise buzzed in her ears. A moment later, she plunged forward into an abyss of blackness.

* * * *

Alan heard a thud and went to the door to see Gwyneth lying on the floor.

Winna ran forth. Placing her hand to Gwyneth's forehead, the woman looked up at him. "She is not feverish, my lord, just exhausted."

"Yes. Stay with Aelveva and the babe. I can tend her." Scooping her up, Alan carried her to their room.

Gwyneth had pushed herself beyond all human endurance. Now that the crisis was over, she had let down her guard and collapsed.

Since they first met, she had done little but work and care for everyone around her. Even in the deep of winter, when the fields lay in slumber beneath their cloak of white, waiting for the first kiss of the sun, Gwyneth toiled. Never idle a moment, she spun wool and flax, sewed, embroidered, distilled herbs for potions and simples, managed the household, and always tended the sick.

Yet some dark thing troubled her.

Removing her veil, he unbraided her thick, golden plait. Next, he performed the slow, tricky maneuver of discarding her over-tunic without waking her. Finally, he slipped off her shoes and massaged her slender feet.

He felt drained himself, though he had managed to nod off intermittently during the long vigil. How much more depleted Gwyneth must feel.

He cast off his garb and reclined beside her and turned to cradle her in his arms.

"Sleep, my Sweet Rose," he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

Sometime later, he woke to the glare of the sun on his face. He swung from bed, intending to close the shutter so the light wouldn't waken Gwyneth. He paused and stood at the window for a moment, listening to the distant clink of the stone masons at work on the keep.

Because Gwyneth had given him her money to hire extra teams of laborers, in just six months the workers had made amazing progress on the tall, square tower with its thick walls.

Gwyneth stirred, and he turned toward her. She appeared so fragile and so vulnerable.

Like a bolt of lightning, the realization hit him. He loved her, deeply, fiercely ... hopelessly. Why hadn't he realized it sooner? How could he have been so dull-witted? The process had occurred so slowly, so gradually that he never perceived it happening.

But he had fought trusting her and loving her because he was afraid she would betray and desert him. Instead, her sweetness and devotion had ensnared his heart irretrievably. Alan had never dreamed he could feel this way. The depth of his emotion shook him because now his heart was exposed and unprotected from hurt.

But she could still leave me.

The old fear of abandonment reared its ugly head. But if Gwyneth wanted to go, she would have escaped long ago. Hadn't she proven her loyalty time and again? Why couldn't he just enjoy the gift? Not every man was so blessed, and he was tired of always anticipating the worst.

True, that frame of mind had served him well, but things had changed, and he must revise his thoughts and behavior according to his new circumstances.

He strode to the door. Hailing a servant, he ordered food to break their fasts and tubs for baths.

She yawned, and he moved to the bedside. Her lids opened, and she smiled.

"Good morrow."

He returned her smile. "Good morrow."

Suddenly, she frowned. "Oh!" Jumping up, she moved to the trunk and took up her tunic.

"Where do you think you are going?"

"To Aelveva," she answered, panic on her lovely face.

"Not in your life." He stood in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders. She would work herself to death if he did not stop her.

"Alan, I must." She pushed past him.

He caught her wrist. "What you must do is rest."

"But she is my patient."

“And you are mine.” He pulled her close. “Aelveva and the babe are in Winna’s capable hands. Now, back in bed.”

She relaxed against him. Her softness made his loins ache with desire, but to ensure her well being, he restrained himself.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Starving.” She patted her stomach. “I can’t remember when I ate last.”

“Good.”

A knock heralded the arrival of their food. Robert entered and left them with crusty trenchers, a wedge cheese, a tankard of cider for Alan, and a mug of barley water for Gwyneth.

He noticed his squire had become used to his wife and did not run from her. Perhaps all her good works had won over the suspicious persons in the village. That thought brought relief. He had enough to worry about without having someone on his own estate sabotaging his wife.

Alan brought the food to her.

“You’ll spoil me, Alan.” She smiled. “Really, I feel quite well enough to get up.”

“Let me indulge you. Besides, I have an ulterior motive for wanting you to save your strength.” He smiled suggestively.

“Oh, I see.” Gwyneth nodded and giggled.

“Now don’t jump to conclusions, Gwyneth. I wish to take you somewhere. I’ve got something important to tell you ... and something to ask you, as well, and I don’t want any interruptions.”

“Oh? What are they?”

“Part of it is a surprise.”

“Oh, Alan, you know I have little patience.”

He laughed. “Eat up then. After we’ve bathed and dressed, I’ll show you.”

* * * *

The sun shed its copious light upon the forest, filtering through the majestic nave of green, leafy branches. Hand and hand, Alan and Gwyneth strolled into Wykston Wood. Her rose-scented perfume blended with the fresh fragrance of the forest. Birds twittered merrily, and a hare hopped through the bracken to dive into a hole near a cluster of red-brown boulders.

“Are we almost there?” She glanced up at him. “The suspense is tormenting me.”

“Just there.” Alan pointed to the spring that fed the millpond. Two swans glided on the shimmering surface. Bill to bill their long necks formed the shape of a heart.

Walking toward the stream, they sat on the grassy bank, listening to the musical babble of the rushing water.

Alan smiled, “I hope what I tell you will make you happy.”

“If you don’t tell me soon, I will burst.”

“Patience,” he teased as he slipped his hand from hers and put his arm around her shoulder.

“A virtue I lack.”

"I'll not tease you any longer. What do you think of transforming the old manor house into a larger infirmary than we originally planned? I also want to build a building for orphans."

"Oh, Alan!" She threw her arms around him. "You could not have pleased me more. It's a dream I've held dear since I was old enough to know I could ease suffering." She drew back. "But what will we do with the structure you have already built?"

"You can use it as a herbarium instead of that cramped still room you work in now. You'll have a big place to dry your herbs and mix your simples."

She hugged him again. "Thank you, dearest. You made me so happy."

"Good, I always want to make you happy, but lately" He drew away and looked into her eyes intently. "No, not lately, from the very beginning, I've felt there has been something between us, Gwyneth, something you haven't told me."

Gwyneth felt her panic rising, and she swallowed hard.

"When we first met, you stepped directly into Rampage's path. I yelled a warning, but you didn't seem to hear, even though your eyes were open."

Gwyneth's heart slammed against her ribs. The moment she had dreaded for so long had finally arrived.

"On three other occasions you wandered in your sleep. You said you had nightmares and got restless. Then you explained your dream. The last time you walked, you were on your way to the king's privy. I discovered you and took you back to our chambers. You had the same vacant stare in your eyes as when I first found you, and you didn't respond to me. Why, Gwyneth?"

Humiliated and terrified, she burst into tears. If she told him the truth, he might denounce her as a witch and leave her. Somehow, she dreaded his scorn and rejection more than death. Yet, in the wrong hands, accusations about her could also hurt him. He could be accused of guilt by association. To protect him, she had to tell him. She loved him too much to expose him to danger.

"What is it, Little Rose?"

"Oh, Alan, I'm so ashamed."

"Of what, sweetheart?"

"I am not like other women, and that is the reason I didn't want to marry you. It had nothing to do with Wulfstan. Even though the king commanded me, I should have still refused if the abbess hadn't convinced me."

He frowned. "Why aren't you like other women?"

"I walk in my sleep, and I cannot be awakened until the spell is over. I didn't get out of Rampage's way when you found me because I did not see him! I did not see Ulfer either. I was shocked when Aelveva told me he almost captured me. That night on our way to London, I don't remember anything. The only way I know I walked is that you asked me about Godwin. I told you part of the truth then, but I could not bear to have you shrink from me in horror."

"What did the abbess say to convince you to marry me?"

"She told me the malady would pass once I was happily married. That is why I finally consented. Otherwise, I'd have spent my days in the convent, away from the world so no one could accuse me of witchcraft. I was beginning to think that I was cured

until now. I wanted to tell you, but I thought you'd denounce me, even though the abbess said that you weren't superstitious."

"Oh, Gwyneth, I wish you had told me sooner." He took her in his arms and rocked her. "No one who knows you could ever accuse you of anything like that. Besides, the abbess was right. As I keep saying, witches and goblins are not the things to fear. Mortal enemies pose more of a danger."

"But if the secret gets out, your enemies could use it against you. They could say that you consorted with a witch, and you'd be excommunicated and possibly killed, too. Your own men once suspected me."

"Well, no one will find out, and no one will ever hurt you, Gwyneth, not while I'm alive." He took her into his arms. "I love you, Gwyneth. I think I've loved you from the first moment I saw you."

She gasped. He had finally said the cherished words she so longed to hear. "You love me?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I love you more than anything in the world."

Overcome with emotion, she burst into tears. Between sobs, she said, "And I love you so much I don't have the words to describe it."

He held her tighter. "I ... can't believe your saying those words to me, Gwyneth. I wanted to hear them for the longest time."

"And I've wanted to say them."

"Your sleepwalking will be our secret, love, and I think that the abbess is right. The episodes will stop soon."

"Do you really think so, Alan?"

"Yes." He kissed her temple.

"And you love me," she said.

"More than I can say and more than I ever imagined it was possible to love anyone, Little Rose."

"You couldn't have made me happier."

He chuckled. "Actually, I was hoping I could." He lifted her unto his lap. "I've missed you." He nuzzled her neck and caressed her breast. "I need you."

She laughed. "It has been just two days, my randy husband."

"Is that all? It seems like three months." He lifted her hands and kissed the tips of each finger.

"Ummm, lovely." She laid her head on his shoulder.

"It's just the beginning of what I have in store for you," he brushed a wispy curl of gold back from her forehead.

Alan removed her veil and plunged his hands into her tresses, raking his fingers through them.

"A bold promise, my lord." She smiled as she tilted her head back to better look at him.

Oh, how she wanted to make love to him. Now, no secrets stood between them. They could truly be one, and she couldn't wait. Her body responded. A hunger yawned in her lower belly, and she felt strong clenches there as she anticipated him filling her. Her nipples hardened into tight, sensitive buds, and she longed to feel his tongue sweep

over them.

Answering her challenge, Alan kissed her forehead, eyelids, cheeks, the tip of her nose, and finally, he claimed her mouth.

His tongue probed the crevice of her lips, and she invited his entry as her arms circled his neck. She savored the taste of his lips and darting tongue as it swept against hers.

He surfaced to brush a trail of kisses along the smooth descent of her neck to the crook of her shoulder.

She trembled in his arms. "Alan, I've missed you, too. It's impossible to say how much."

He tugged at her garments, and she raised her hips then lifted her arms as he helped her shed her clothes. He quickly did the same then spread his mantle on the ground and dipped her back against the soft red wool.

She wanted him beyond all imagining.

"You're beautiful, Gwyneth."

"Am I?" Her gaze melted into his. "You've never told me so before."

His knuckles grazed the underside of his jaw, increasing the pulsing heat in her belly. "Then I've been a fool."

"No, sweetheart. I think you are wonderful."

She kissed him, and his fingertips skimmed over her sensitive flesh, goading her need mercilessly.

Her heart expanded, for she knew that he returned her love as well as his passion.

She straddled his thighs. "I want to pleasure you first."

"Then I acquiesce." His gaze never left her face.

She leaned forward and traced the outline of his lips with her nipples, allowing him to suckle them. Then she sat up and took hold of his shaft with both hands. She let her fingers dance over his rigid length and gave special attention to its helm and cupped his sacs. He groaned and gasped as she licked its tip.

"Gwyneth," he rasped out. "I need to be inside you."

She immediately sat on his erect member and squeezed it with the muscles of her passage.

"Oh, that feels so good," he grated out.

Then she stretched out atop him and began to lift and lower herself on his hard penis. The position allowed maximum friction against her pleasure spot. Soon her whole body tingled with a special kind of heat, and blood drummed in her ears.

This is what I was created for, she thought. The contact became more and more pleasant, and her need for release became more and more intense.

Yet she had never felt closer to anyone in her life. There was nothing between them now, and she felt as if she'd now become part of him, and he, part of her.

Her pleasure loomed just above. She got that hot tingling feeling that always foreshadowed a climax. She strove harder then it swooped down on her and lifted her off. Stars seemed to burst behind her eyes. Her womb went into hard spasms, and her whole body pulsed with deep, exquisite pleasure as Alan held her close.

"I wish you never had to go out of my body," she whispered.

“And I wish I could stay in your warmth forever, but there is always the next time.” He kissed her neck.

“And you haven’t come yet,” she said.

He chuckled. “I don’t think it will take much. I feel as if I’m going to burst.”

He pushed, and they rolled over without disjoining.

“Oh, I feel you so deep inside,” she said. “I love to feel full of you and full of your seed.”

“Then you’re ready for another ride?”

“More than ready.”

Spurred on, Alan cupped her breasts and flicked his thumbs over her nipples. Already erect, they drew tighter. Then he suckled them.

He felt her back arch.

“Alan,” she cried.

He didn’t withdraw, but he put her legs over his thighs and pulled her to sitting position. Heart to heart, he kissed her. With profound emotion, he held her against his needy body, as if he embraced the most precious treasure in the world.

She pushed her breasts against his chest and ground her mons into him. Alan molded her to him, cupping her firm buttocks in the palms of his hands as his manhood strained inside her.

Then he leaned her back and withdrew almost all the way. He put the tip of his manhood just inside her and jabbed quickly, but did not enter all the way. He just gave her a taste and watched as a flush covered her flesh.

She jerked her hips up trying to pocket him, but he held them down and continued his teasing until she was panting, moaning and swiveling her hips.

She was very hot and wet when he took full possession, reveling as her silky flesh enveloped his length. Her enthralling welcome almost stopped his heart. For Alan, their union vaulted beyond the meeting of flesh to the sublime heights of lovemaking.

Gwyneth reciprocated in full measure, returning the same intensity of response, touching the profoundest depth of his soul.

Her breathing became even more rapid as she tilted her hips. The angle allowed him to feel more stimulation, and he delved into her, and they established a rhythm. As he pushed forward, she relaxed her muscles and as he retreated, they pulled them tightly.

She climaxed a second time, and her body throbbed around his aroused flesh, pulling him deeper into her.

His loins were clamoring for release now. He began thrusting with long, hard, deep strokes, desperate to expend his seed. At last, he felt his muscles tighten, and his essence burst from him in long, hard pulses of exquisite release.

He lay on top of her, and for the first time in his life, he experienced the sensation of being truly one with another person. The gnawing loneliness fled, replaced by an indescribable joy.

They stayed joined for a long time, and every once in a while her muscles would tighten around him. Finally, though, he withdrew and rolled from her and cuddled her next to him, kissing her cheek. “I love you, Gwyneth.”

“And I love you, Alan.”

A tumult of emotions storming his heart, he kissed her again. Breaking away, he murmured, "Oh, Little Rose, you've made me so happy, but I have to admit that the first time I heard you say you loved me, I was stunned."

"W... why are you so shocked that I love you?"

"Because you refused to marry me until the king commanded it."

She took his face between her hands, but a sad look haunted her eyes. "But now you know why."

"Yes, love." He kissed her hand. "But you are safe now."

"No, I am not." She shook her head then gazed intently into his eyes. "I can wander at any time, and I don't think we've seen the last of Wulfstan."

"I'm sure we haven't," Alan murmured, reaching for her again. "But for now, I don't want to think about him, Gwyneth."

* * * *

He loved her!

Gwyneth was thrilled, for she'd thought never to hear those words, so longed for and so cherished, from his lips. Her bliss unbounded, she skipped her way down the stairs, through the great hall, and out into the middle of the bustling village.

Her basket over her arm, the warm sun penetrating her old russet tunic, she walked past the cooper's shop, and the smith's forge on her way to orchard, admiring the apples that were ripe for the picking.

She smiled as she thought that the long delay in her husband's admission of love had been worth the wait. Now Alan repeated his avowal often and on a daily basis. She had never expected the declaration, but recalling their union in the woods, she felt a warm glow.

Something magical happened that day. Their joining encompassed a fresh element, a new depth of passion and breadth of sensitivity that had been absent until then. Pleasant though their encounters had been, this was the first time she felt Alan's emotion had matched her own.

Her husband finally had fallen in love with her. At last their emotional journey had taken them beyond respect, admiration, and affection to abiding love. Her heart so full she barely could breathe, Gwyneth felt a sense of lightness, as if a large burden had been lifted from her heart, which now took wings.

The years of loneliness had fled. No longer would she walk about feeling that her body surrounded a large gaping void. Now she had more than a husband. Gwyneth had found her soul mate! Alan was someone with whom to confide, dream, and share true intimacy. The hopes she had for her marriage beckoned not as the pale glitter of a distant, unattainable star but as a glorious, tangible, reality.

Would the knowledge that Alan loved her induce her recalcitrant body to flower with her husband's child? Somehow, for the first time since her marriage, Gwyneth felt confident she would conceive. She smiled as she saw Garth with the other village children playing with the cur. The glinting of their hair in the sun and the squeals of their laughter gladdened her heart.

Familiar footfalls sounded behind her, and she turned in front of the empty wool house. Alan's dazzling smile and violet-blue eyes shone down on her.

“What are you up to, my Sweet Rose?” he asked.
“No good at all, my lord.” She winked.
“Good. Then we can be wicked together.”
“The prospect suits me well since you’re my favorite accomplice in mischief.”
She smiled.
“I had better be your only accomplice.” He placed his hand on her shoulder.
“Do I detect a hint of jealousy.”
“You do,” he replied, drawing her closer.
“Rest assured, you remain my only accomplice, my only husband, and my only love.”
“If you continue that talk, I’ll be tempted to take you to our chambers.”
“Is that an invitation?” She batted her eyelashes playfully.
“Yes, but I’ll have to postpone the assignation.”
She frowned. “Why?”
“The merchants we expected have arrived from Durham and York to discuss preparations for the fair.”
Months ago, they had discussed hosting a fair at Michaelmas, but they had lingered at court too long to prepare for a September feast. A Martinmas-in-Winter fair would take place in November instead.
“Oh, Alan, I can hardly wait!” She clapped her hands together.
“Nor can I,” he answered smiling.
“Do you want me to greet these merchants with you?” she asked.
“If you wish.”
“It is a good time to have a fair. People will want a celebration before the weeks of Advent descend upon us.”
They started to walk to the manor house. “I’ll meet you in the anteroom, Alan, but first I want to change into a proper tunic.”
He kissed her forehead. “Until later then,” he murmured as they parted ways.
* * * * *

A few days later, Gwyneth, clad in her oldest tunic walked toward Aelveva who sat under a beech tree just outside the kitchen house door. Fully recovered, and her complexion rosy under her white veil, the new mother rocked a cradle. A finger to her lips, the maidservant alerted her that little Dunstan slept.
Tiptoeing to the cradle, Gwyneth gazed down at the peaceful baby. In the month since his birth, his skin had faded from the poppy red of a newborn to the soft pink of a cherry blossom.
“He grows by leaps and bounds,” Gwyneth whispered. “He seems to have gained weight since yesterday!”
“Yes.” Aelveva smiled. “He’s inherited Ranulf’s appetite.”
Gwyneth giggled softly as she caressed his smooth, hairless head. “Do you think he’ll have a sandy thatch like Ranulf’s or coppery silk like yours?”
“I just hope he will just grow *some* hair.” Aelveva chuckled. “I don’t care what color it will be.”
Gwyneth sat next to the mother and child and lifted her knife from the bench. In

front of them, large buckets of fat formed a semicircle.

"I know Lord Alan said not to be concerned about hawking our wares, but I should certainly like to make some of that lavender soap to sell. I hope Agatha gave us only beef and mutton fat," Aelveva said.

"Yes, and she told me she took care not to salt it while she cooked."

"Good. Else we'd never get the soap to harden properly. I once tried goose and chicken fat. It was a mess, my lady." Aelveva picked up a waxy piece of congealed grease.

Gwyneth took up a hardened slab as well. Turning it over, she scraped some particles of gelatin and meat from its underside. Suddenly, her stomach flip-flopped. Sweat drenched her body as a wave of nausea washed over her, and she dropped her knife. Grabbing up a wet cloth and pressing it to her mouth, she jumped up and stepped away, leaving Aelveva wide-eyed.

Gwyneth turned her back and leaned against the smooth, silver-brown trunk of the beech tree as she gulped in the fresh October air.

"Are you all right, my lady?" the maidservant asked, coming up behind her.

"I shall be in a moment," Gwyneth answered between deep breaths.

"What is amiss? Have you eaten something that upset your stomach?"

"I have no idea. All at once, I just felt sick and uncommonly hot." Gwyneth sunk to the bench beneath the tree.

"I feel a bit warm, myself, and it will get hotter as we melt the fat."

The image of the boiling fat struck Gwyneth with another wave of nausea, and she got to her feet. "Aelveva, I need to go to my chambers."

"Do you want me to come with you, my lady?"

"No, I shall recover. Have Elspeth help you. I'll be back as soon as I can." Gwyneth hurried away.

* * * *

Voluptuous and auburn-tressed, harvest time graced the land like a lusty serving wench, dropping the fruits from the apron of her bounty on Wykston's rough-hewn table. Smiling at the image Alan conjured in his mind's eye, he glanced at Ranulf. From their place atop the motte, the view spread out in glorious spectacle for many miles.

Soon, a fair would bring people from all over the north of England to his home, increasing commerce in the village. Who knew? Perhaps in the years to come, Wykston would be a large center of trade. If a cathedral, complete with a holy relic, could be built here, it would attract pilgrims from all over Europe.

Very soon now he would move into his own keep. He and Ranulf watched as the workers hoisted large baskets of slates from the ground to the top of the tower.

"I can't wait to see them begin the roof," Ranulf said, enthusiasm in his voice. "Then we can occupy the keep."

"Yes." Alan nodded. "I could hardly believe the slates had finally come from Wales until I had to pay for them. They cost dearly. The bag of gold Gwyneth gave me to build the place is gone. I suppose I could have spared some of the expense, but the slates will not burn from a flaming enemy arrow the way thatch can, and the cistern on the roof will provide us with water on each level of the building. The servants won't

have to haul it from the well, and the indoor water supply will ensure us against dying from thirst in the event our well is poisoned during a siege.”

“I like the privy in the nook. It will save long journeys on cold nights.” Ranulf smiled.

Alan had ordered the builders to fashion one like King William had at Westminster.

“And the undercroft will store a great deal of food,” the sergeant added.

“Just like you, Ranulf, always thinking of your stomach.”

“Not always,” the sergeant added, bobbing his eyebrows.

Alan laughed. “I share the sentiment.”

Lord Raddon wound his way up the steep incline to the foot of the tower. Garth skipped beside him, his red hair shining in the sun. The hound kept pace with them, nose to the ground, sniffing diligently.

“I never thought the builder would make good his promise to have the keep ready by Martinmas, but he’ll finish his task before time,” Ranulf said.

“I paid for extra crews of masons with some of Gwyneth’s jewelry. The rest went to pay our troops. I hated to take her ornaments, but she insisted. She would not permit me to go to a moneylender. The poor girl has naught left but her wedding ring and the gold cross she always wears.”

“You will have good coin next June when you shear the sheep,” Ranulf said, reassuringly.

“Yes, if all goes well.” Alan ran his fingers through his hair. “That’s eight months away. A great deal can happen in that long period.”

Ranulf nodded. “A lot can happen in a day.”

Lord Raddon joined them as Garth made a beeline inside the tower.

The hound sniffed Alan and licked his hand. He stooped, scratching the dog’s head.

“You’ve always had a way with animals, Alan,” his father said.

Ranulf dropped to his haunches to pet the creature, as well, and the dog rewarded the sergeant with a lick on the cheek.

“You’ve had this beast for months now. When are you going to give it a name?” Ranulf asked.

“He has a name,” Alan answered, “a nice simple tag.”

His father and friend looked at him curiously.

“Would you share it with us?” Ranulf asked.

“I call him Dog,” Alan replied.

A smirk on his lips, Ranulf shrugged. “Of course. How witless of me.”

* * * *

The joyous activity of Martinmas descended upon them once again.

True to his promise, the builder had the keep ready for occupancy, and for the last several weeks Gwyneth had been consumed with arranging her new home. Tapestries hung on the stone walls, keeping chilly drafts at bay. She and Aelveva had sewn colorful pillows for the chairs. She especially enjoyed decorating her and Alan’s bedchamber. Her husband had commissioned the carpenter to build a large bed for their bower, and

Gwyneth had fashioned a special down coverlet for them to snuggle beneath in the coming months of winter.

Picking a pillow from the bed, Gwyneth hugged it to herself, dancing round her new bedchamber. Now certain that she had conceived, Gwyneth found her happiness difficult to contain. As if to convince herself, she tallied the weeks in her mind. The full moon had come and gone twice, but her monthly flux remained wonderfully absent.

Whirling past her harp, she held out her hand and plucked its strings, filling the room with the joyous ripple of its song. She smiled to herself, thinking that the miracle must have taken place the day Alan told her he loved her. She laid the pillow on the mattress and calculated.

If Alan's seed had taken root that day, the child would arrive in June, when the daisies dotted the meadows and the sheep grew fat on the hillside. She pictured long summer days when she could rock the child in the shade of a spreading elm or beech.

Oh, she couldn't wait to tell Alan! First, though, she wanted to make her news especially festive by buying something at the fair that would make the occasion special, a token that he could keep. That way, he'd remember the event every time he glanced at it.

Gwyneth secured her green woolen mantle and set out to find the memento. She verily skipped down the steps from the gallery and pranced through the great hall of the new keep. The hammered beam ceiling vaulted thirty feet above the flagged floor. A large circular chandelier of wrought iron, which was ablaze with candles, hung from its center. She stepped out into the courtyard. Advancing further, she looked below to the village.

The Martinmas-in-winter fair spread before her like a colorful tapestry. Bright tents of every hue merrily decked the landscape where merchants had set up their temporary shops and stalls, loaded with goods of every kind. Hawkers plied their wares, their voices carrying on the cool wind. The smell of freshly baked pasties and roasting fowl filled the air, whetting her appetite. The whole small village buzzed with festivity.

Gwyneth imagined her feet floating over the ground as she descended the steep hill. The blustery wind caught her mantle and nipped her face.

She stopped at the first booth. Taking hold of the thick blue cloak, she rubbed the sturdy cloth between her thumb and forefinger.

"It is a fine garment, my lady," the old, chubby merchant's dark eyes gleamed shrewdly. "The cloth was woven in Flanders."

The cape was the most beautiful garb Gwyneth had seen in a long time. "To be sure, but it is not exactly what I want."

The man's crestfallen expression touched her heart, but she wanted a souvenir that could be passed down father to son or daughter.

She walked toward the silversmith's stall. Admiring the intricately wrought brooches, her gaze fell on the most wonderful gift for Alan: a huge, round cloak pin, its surface animated with the splendor of a Celtic pattern.

Gwyneth bargained with the thin, auburn-haired merchant until they agreed upon a price. She reached into her leather purse, drew out the coin, and handed it to the man. She replaced the money with the jewelry, tucking it into the pouch secured to her girdle beneath her cloak.

Tonight, when she and Alan retired, she would give him the good news and the gift. She shivered with delight in anticipation of their rendezvous. Gwyneth walked through the center of the village, mingling with throngs of people from all over the north, some traveling from as far away as Berwick. She returned greetings as she looked for her husband.

She wanted to share a pasty with him. Lately, her stomach became upset only in the morning, and her appetite had increased sharply. She smiled, imagining herself as plump as a Christmas goose as her body swelled with child.

Arms linked, Robert and dark-haired Elspeth walked by and paid their respects. Gwyneth acknowledged the greeting and continued on her way.

Father Rollo, Father Alfred, and Lord Warroc walked together. The old priests had become good friends, though in other places Norman and Saxon clergy had their differences. Their amity had a healing effect upon the relationship between the Norman and Saxons in the village.

In the distance, Gwyneth saw Garth watching the puppet show. Laughing at the antics, Ranulf stood nearby, his heavily muscled arm around Aelveva who held the new babe.

Gwyneth walked past the tavern. The place buzzed with the activity of a beehive. The alewife enjoyed a brisk business, though Gwyneth did not notice Edith.

But where was Alan?

She left the crowd behind her, walking beyond the commercial center of the village toward the ancient gravestones in the churchyard.

Gwyneth looked down to see a patch of withered comfrey growing near the thick clump of yews. What luck! She always used it to set broken bones. Lately, she had wanted to go into the woods, since this was the season to dig up the valuable root, but she had not found the time.

Gwyneth stooped and took hold of a jagged rock to dig up the plant because she didn't have her knife. She paused, hearing the muffled tones of a man and woman in conversation. The voices seemed to come from behind the high growth of evergreens.

Was that Alan's voice?

Peering through the yews, her heart sank like a stone to the hollow pit of her stomach. A tender expression on his face, Alan was wiping Edith's tears!

Chapter Nineteen

Anger filled Gwyneth's heart like the incoming tide. This made the third time she had seen her husband and Edith together. True, the alewife's daughter had given her the message that Aelveva had fallen ill, but why hadn't the woman come to her? Why did the hussy always run to Alan, and why did they always meet alone?

Tears stung her eyes. No longer able to bear the sight of them together, she turned from the scene, her mind a welter of speculation. Had Alan lied when he said he loved her? Why did he wait so long to say such a thing if he did not mean it?

Perhaps he wants to keep you off guard.

Had Alan been keeping Edith as his leman since before their marriage? No wonder he constantly sprang to the girl's defense, protesting her innocence whenever her motives came into question.

How blind he was! Couldn't he see that the woman played an integral part of Charles Strong Arm's death? Given the chance, Edith would kill Alan. Maybe she already had tried. Gwyneth believed with all her heart that Edith had plied the sentries at the mill with drink so they could be slain. Hadn't she left the marriage feast early? Furthermore, the girl was the sole member of the village who enjoyed the freedom of leaving the village and traveling to places unknown for days on end.

While Gwyneth lived and breathed, she refused to suffer Alan's leman to remain right under her own nose. The fight hot in her, she marched toward them but stopped. She hesitated to speak to them with anger in her heart.

Her dignity of paramount importance to her, she refrained from approaching them without it intact. She would confront her husband when she had regained her composure, but as long as she lived, Gwyneth resolved never to trust him again.

The pain of betrayal heavy in her heart, Gwyneth plodded toward the church. She longed for solitude so she could think and pray. Entering the darkened church, she slowly trod to the altar rail. She fell to her knees and wept until she could not cry anymore. If hell existed on earth, its torture was losing a dream.

But through the tenebrous agony, a shaft of light penetrated the gloom. She was not alone. Gwyneth had her child to consider now, a small, fragile life solely dependent on her.

She thought about retiring to her dower lands. There she would raise her babe and dedicate her life to the care of the sick and suffering who came to her for help. Though the injury inflicted on her heart would never heal, Gwyneth realized with sharp clarity that she still had an important purpose in life.

She rose, her limbs aching from kneeling for so long. The little church surrounded her with its quiet darkness. By now, the sun had set, and everyone was enjoying supper.

No, something was not right. No one had attended vespers! Where were Father

Alfred and Father Rollo?

She hurried from the church, stopping short in front of the portal. The sky ahead loomed bright with the most unusual sunset she had ever seen.

Gwyneth gasped. This was no sunset. It was fire! Wykston was burning!

* * * *

The granary was blazed. Big, jagged flames soared skyward, piercing through the thatch, licking the stout beams, and devouring the structure with voracious fury. Sick with apprehension, Alan realized his only hope was to prevent the fire from spreading. Otherwise, the whole village would be engulfed in the raging conflagration.

The cries and shouts of the villagers rang in his ears. The crews of masons, along with the merchants, peddlers, and every soldier Alan commanded joined the battle.

The flames cast a flickering orange hue over everyone, lending them an eerie appearance. The heat singed Alan's face as sweat poured off him. Still, he remained close to the hut, receiving the big buckets of water drawn from the well and passed to him, hand to hand, down the long line of men, women, and children.

All efforts seemed fruitless as the storehouse continued to burn with a vengeance.

"Damnation!" Alan swore under his breath. Why the hell hadn't Leofric built the village out of stone? Such structures should be as secure as possible. They were vital to the life of the estate.

Robbing the breath from his lungs, thick, black smoke billowed out of the small windows. The odor of sulfur choked the air. Alan could taste the acrid flavor in his mouth, feel the grit between his teeth, and see the grime on his skin as he continued to fight his hellish enemy. All the while, he prayed no one would be hurt. A loud groaning noise followed by a thunderous clatter boomed through the night as the heavy, oaken beams of the roof collapsed. A shower of sparks spewed upward, dropping a fiery rain on the battle weary firefighters and burning holes in their tunics.

"It fell inside," Alan yelled to Warroc, who labored at his side. "Mayhap we can contain the fire if the wind stays calm and doesn't fan the blaze to leap up."

"If the flames don't burn through the walls and travel to the barn next to it," Warroc bellowed, his face streaked with soot as the fire roared like an uncontrollable beast.

Ranulf ran forward. "Alan," he shouted, "All the animals in the stables have been herded in the surrounding pens."

"Good work, Ranulf," he yelled as he still accepted the full buckets and continued to douse the shack. "We may not be able to save the buildings, but at least we'll not suffer from loss of lives and livestock."

Ranulf took up his place next to Warroc. Alan's hopes were dashed as he noticed that the thatch on the barn had already kindled.

"Look there," he shouted to his father and best friend, pointing to the barn roof. "The sparks must have ignited it," he yelled, his gaze meeting Ranulf's grim stare.

"It is better for the barn to go because no other buildings stand to its left. If the fire had gone to the right, we'd have lost the whole village," Warroc barked out, his face smudged with soot. The gray strands in his hair shone with an orange cast as the firelight flickered over them.

"If the wind shifts, we may still lose it." Alan paused to catch his breath and wipe the stinging sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand.

His father grunted, nodding gravely.

The villagers fought on valiantly for about an hour, but their speed began to flag as the water now took longer to reach its destination.

Alan's back, arms, and legs burned with fatigue as he watched the barn being consumed. Still, he kept working. Unfortunately, too little water arrived too late. To make matters worse, Alan noticed that the wind began to whip up and had shifted as well. God's bones! The whole village would be incinerated.

Until that moment, Alan had not missed Gwyneth. Where was she? Perhaps she toiled farther up the queue. Or maybe she was watching little Dunstan while Aelveva took a turn in the water line. He missed her, wanted her by his side. He needed her support and encouragement--terribly--but he could not muse upon his wants for long.

The conflagration raced through the row of shops. Their old, dry timbers had ignited like tinder, creating a long, wide wall of fire. The peddlers and merchants had long ago moved all their wares far from the blaze.

Now, as he continued to battle, Alan noted the old tanner and a group of men struggled to drag his tools and materials from the shop. The smith did the same with his implements. The saddler followed suit, as did the cooper, until the villagers retrieved most of their valuables.

Sadly, ravenous flames engulfed the little shops one by one, leaving in their wake a path of smoldering cinders down the center of the whole village.

Helpless, Alan watched the fire burn itself out as the exhausted firefighters staggered to the keep.

But where was his wife?

* * * *

Gwyneth watched in horror as the sky glowed with an orange light. Picking up her skirts, she ran toward the fire, but from out of the shadows three merchants came forward and surrounded her.

"What a boon for the lord," the tallest man sneered, pulling back his hood.

Despite his disguise, Gwyneth immediately recognized him as Edric, one of Wulfstan's henchmen.

"Wulfstan will be so pleased," he continued.

The other men grunted in agreement. One bore a horrible, deep scar across his cheek and pointed a knife to the base of her throat. The other had no teeth, lending the lower part of his face a sunken appearance.

"Offer any resistance, lady, and I'll be forced to skewer your heart," the scarred one warned.

Trembling uncontrollably, Gwyneth nodded, and instinctively her hands covered her belly, protecting her unborn babe.

"It will do you no good to scream either. No one will hear you," the toothless man gloated. "We set fire to the granary so everyone will be distracted for quite some time. "It was too easy to do," he laughed. "With all the folk enjoying the fair, we had no trouble slipping in to the village with these disguises and hiding in a wagon full of

wares.”

Unfortunately, the oaf spoke the truth. Alan had posted guards, but it proved impossible to detect every villain with so many unfamiliar people coming into Wykston.

Two of the men came forward, grabbing her roughly. The scarred man sheathed his knife and gagged her while the toothless one tied her wrists tightly behind her back. Using a dagger, which he had also drawn, Edric prodded her forward.

Despite her fear for herself, Gwyneth felt heartsick. Filled floor to ceiling with bags of grain, the granary lay destroyed. The village’s whole supply had literally gone up in smoke. How would they get through the winter without bread?

Hiding like a mole in the earth, Wulfstan would undermine Alan until he had Wykston for his own. Sooner or later, he would kill her husband by stealth to avoid William’s wrath. And he would force her to marry him. But what about the child she carried now? She shuddered, for Wulfstan would kill the babe. He could deliver a fierce blow to her abdomen, forcing Gwyneth to miscarry her beloved child.

Fear and revulsion paralyzed her, and her knees shook so hard she had to stop her trek.

“Move!” Edric roared, sticking what felt like the tip of his knife between her shoulders.

Pain shot down her back, and Gwyneth fell. As the two other men jerked her up, she vowed that somehow she must escape. Her child’s life depended on it and so did her own.

They plodded on through the dark, damp woods. The wind moaned a dirge through the bare tree limbs. They walked until they came to three horses.

Edric swung into the saddle, and the other men hoisted her behind him, forcing her, much to her disgust, to ride behind the toothless man. They rode, following the route of a narrow stream.

The clouds parted, revealing the starlit heavens. As the dawn broke, Gwyneth oriented herself by the direction of the rising sun in the east. The rose-colored sky flamed to her right, indicating that they had traveled north. She felt certain they were close to the border of Scotland, likely about a half a day’s ride from Braeton Hall.

Stopping at a cave, they broke their fast. The scarred man untied her hands while the toothless one offered her wastrel and ale from a leather mug. The coarse bread tasted stale and was difficult to chew.

They allowed her to relieve herself behind a rock, but Gwyneth found no opportunity to attempt flight. She could not outrun them because they had the horses. Besides, these men would not scruple to abuse her and cause her to lose her child should a shuffle ensue. No, she would have to think of a clever plan to get away.

Edric rode off, leaving Gwyneth in the custody of Tosig, the scarred man, and Aelfric, the toothless one.

Crisp and cold, the wind sliced through her like the honed edge of a keen knife. Her hands rebound and her mouth gagged, she walked to the cave and huddled deep inside, trying to keep warm. Tired now, she settled down in the pile of fallen leaves, blown in by the wind, grateful for the protection of her thick woolen cloak.

In the process, her hand touched a rock. Her eyes acclimating to the dim light,

Gwyneth saw a circle of them. Perhaps some wayfarer had taken refuge here and built a fire against the chill. But how could she use the weapon? She couldn't fight two men. Still, a chance may present itself. Slowly, she curled her fingers about the smooth stone.

Several hours latter, Gwyneth heard the thunder of hooves and felt the earth quiver as two men reined in. Looking toward the mouth of the cave, her mouth went dry. Wulfstan stood at the entrance, his dark bulk silhouetted against the light of day.

* * * *

"Where the hell is she?" Alan asked with exasperation. He sat by his father and Ranulf at a trestle table in the great hall. In front of them, the fire in the central hearth crackled, keeping the chill at bay.

Warroc shook his head and stared into his tankard. Ranulf shrugged.

Initially, when Gwyneth did not appear, Alan had not worried. He had bathed, changed garments, and eaten a light meal, thinking that she had stayed with Aelveva.

Her children asleep, the redheaded woman informed him that she'd not seen Gwyneth since midday. Still, he did not panic. He persuaded himself that she was tending the children. Some of them had gotten blisters from the flying sparks. Miraculously, no one else sustained serious injuries.

As time ticked away, and no one he asked had seen her, raw terror set in. Now he sat with his head buried in his hands, afraid to even speculate.

He looked up as a cold sweat moistened his upper lip. "You don't think she could have been inside a burning building?"

"No," Ranulf replied quite emphatically. "I have smelled the odor of human flesh burning. The unmistakable stench was absent. Rest assured, Alan." He placed a comforting hand on Alan's shoulder. "She was not in the granary." He let his hand fall away.

"What reason would she have for going in there?" Lord Warroc asked. "You ordered all the grain taken out of there this afternoon. I thought you had gone mad to undertake the task in the middle of the fair, but thank God you had the foresight."

"Yes," Alan muttered, not commenting on his reasons for doing so.

Dressed in their familiar russet garb and white veils, tiny Elspeth and chubby Agatha entered the room diffidently.

"You asked to see us, my lord?" Agatha asked as both women curtsied.

"Do you know the whereabouts of Lady Gwyneth?"

"No, my lord," the women answered together.

"The last time I saw her, she was heading toward the church," Elspeth said. "It was in late afternoon."

Following that lead, Alan, Ranulf, and Warroc hurried out of the keep. They searched the church and the surrounding area, but they found no evidence of her.

Had she gone into the woods to gather roots? Gwyneth had mentioned that she needed some comfrey for setting broken bones. Had a pack of wolves fallen upon her as she had set about that task? At this moment, she could be lying face down in the forest bracken, wounded, bleeding or ... a shiver quaked through him.

Perhaps she had fallen asleep and taken one of her night strolls.

"Father, we must organize a search party."

“Yes, son. The sooner we begin, the better, especially while the trail is still warm.”

Though everyone was exhausted, Alan led a search party of fifty soldiers. Behind him, the men carried torches against the cloaking darkness. As he looked back over his shoulder, the procession of lights reminded him of the beads in a flaming rosary. He hoped God heard the fiery prayer.

Scouring the immediate countryside in all directions, they rendezvoused at midmorning to give Alan the disappointing news. The deep woods had refused to relinquish its secrets.

Sick with worry, he ordered them back to Wykston. After a short rest, they would make another attempt--this time with provisions to search for several days.

* * * *

“So we meet again, my lady.” Wulfstan entered the cave.

Gwyneth struggled to her feet.

“I have a proposition or perhaps I should say proposal.” The huge blond man strode toward her, a sardonic smile on his face.

She remained silent.

“Come, my lady. Is this a gracious way to greet an old friend?”

“Friends do not abduct each other, Wulfstan. Let us cease the pretense.” Her gaze met his unflinchingly, though her heart pounded against her ribs.

“I see you are determined to be unpleasant.” He loomed over her, his glacial eyes narrowing. “Very well. I shall come straight to the point. You will write to your unfortunate Norman husband and inform him that your conscience can no longer allow you to live with him in sin, since Lord Alan forced marriage upon you and the alliance is not valid in the eyes of the church. You will tell him that you intend to petition for an annulment.”

“No, my lord. I will not. Lord Alan never coerced me, and I will not write such a lie.”

Wulfstan moved his hand to circle her neck. “I think you will,” he whispered as his grip tightened.

“I am not intimidated by your threats, Wulfstan.” She glared at him, deliberately not flinching away.

“No?” He smirked arrogantly as he walked toward her.

“I am worthless to you dead,” she shot back.

“But of great value to me alive. Our child will be the great Saxon leader who will drive the Norman’s from the land. He shall outshine the greatness of Arthur and Alfred.”

“You babble like a madman, Wulfstan.”

He grabbed her wrists. “I think you will write the little missive.”

“You cannot force me.”

He let her go. “If you do not, I could have it forged, or I have another plan that would be more amusing. It would not take much to convince a court that you practice witchcraft.”

Gwyneth jumped back, hitting the wall of the cave. Did this man know her secret, or was he one of those greedy men the abbess had spoke about who would accuse a

woman just to get her possessions? What difference did it make whether he knew or not? Once he hurled the charge, she had two choices: to be cast into the river or to endure the trial by ordeal by fire, which meant carrying a red-hot iron bar nine feet or plunging her arm into a caldron of boiling water.

Water horrified her, and the other options didn't appeal to her either.

He advanced on her.

"How could you say such a thing?" she asked as she stood pinned against the rough, damp walls of the cave. "You know it is not true."

"Mayhap, but you know the way of herbs, as witches do. If you can cure, you can also cast spells and kill!"

"Nonsense! I never hurt anyone. Is this something you and Ulfer plotted?"

"That fool is dead."

"Ulfer is dead?" She stared at him.

"An unfortunate accident, but he had grown old and had outlived his usefulness. I should have thought of the witchcraft accusation sooner, then your father would have had to accept my proposal of marriage." He tossed back his head and roared with laughter that bordered on madness. "But I arranged things so I did not need his consent."

Dear God, had he killed her father?

He tore off her veil, grabbing a fistful of her hair. Pulling her head back, he put his face close to hers. "You will write this letter, or you will face a court."

"You won't live to do it, Wulfstan. Alan will lay siege to Braeton Hall, kill you, and rescue me."

"That is why neither of us will be there. You'll stay here until I'm ready to make my move. For the moment, let us play that pleasant little game from our childhood." Wulfstan spun her around so her back pressed against his chest. Roughly he clasped one palm over her mouth and nostrils so she could not breathe. His other hand pinioned her wrists behind her back.

"Now lady, know how it feels to drown."

Gwyneth struggled but to no avail.

"Even now you long for air, but the more you fight the worse your desperation becomes. Your heart is racing in your chest, isn't it?" he taunted.

Her panic increased as she frantically tried to tear herself from his hold.

"You will squirm and flail in agony, as you do now, but the water will sluice over you in cold, merciless waves. You'll feel your lungs rupture and then your brain will burst."

Near to unconsciousness, Gwyneth went limp in his arms. He released her, and she dropped to the ground, coughing and gasping for breath.

"Of course, I would also be compelled to accuse your husband and the whole village. Every man, woman, and child will be exterminated like vermin."

Wulfstan laughed again, his glee maniacal. He called to the guard to remove the saddlebag and bring it to him. Removing the writing materials, he demanded water and mixed it with the ink powder he emptied from a piece of parchment into the inkwell made of horn.

"You will write what I tell you, my lady," he demanded, holding a quill toward

her.

* * * *

Alan paced his room, waiting for the pack animals to be loaded with supplies so he could resume his search.

The new chamber seemed so empty without her. The bed looked too big and too empty. The blue down quilt, which she had so lovingly fashioned, brought him no warmth in her absence. The small harp, alive with music under her touch, remained silent on the oblong table by the wall.

His life, so happy just two days ago, had collapsed into a shambles. Gwyneth was gone, and with her went all his vitality and all his joy.

He walked to the window. The peddlers and merchants had packed their wares and filed in slow procession past the devastated shops of the village. He shook his head, feeling sorry for them. They had made little money. He closed his eyes against the painful sight as the charred rubble and cold ashes mirrored the desolation in his heart.

He heard footsteps behind him and felt a big palm on his shoulder.

"You must not lose hope," Warroc said, encouragingly.

He turned. "I am trying not to Father, but you cannot imagine how I feel."

His father gave him a wry smile. "No? How do you think I felt when you vanished without a trace?"

Alan heaved a heavy sigh. He had wrapped himself so tightly in the shroud of his own misery, he could not see beyond it. "I am sorry, Father. How thoughtless of me."

"No, your pain blinds you, and your reaction is understandable."

Alan felt crushed under the weight of his responsibilities. The shops in the village had to be rebuilt, and the masons needed to be retained to reconstruct them. Sadly, he had no ready coin for the project.

He must wait months to sell his wool, which the sheep had not grown yet. Even then, he doubted the price of the wool would cover the entire expense. Alan would be forced to borrow the money, or write the steward at his estate in Normandy that his father had given him, hoping some funds could be collected there.

Meanwhile, what would the poor craftsmen do? Most of them had lived behind their shops.

Unfortunately, his mind would not focus on any of those problems. His main worry centered on Gwyneth. Nothing mattered without her.

"Have heart, Alan. You will find her," Warroc said.

Alan had no doubt he would find her, but would she be dead or alive?

"My lord," Robert called from the door. "All is ready. The men await you."

"Father, please look after the estate while I am gone. I know I leave it in a shambles, and it is a great burden for you."

"I have survived worse." His father smiled. "I'll have everything in order when you find that elusive wife of yours."

They walked down the steps of the tower and into the huge great hall of the new keep. His men stood, facing him, waiting for his instructions. He made ready to address them when Garth ran to him.

"My lord, a strange man in the village bid me deliver this to you." The boy held

out a piece of parchment, and Alan accepted it.

“Didn’t you recognize him?” Ranulf moved toward his stepson.

“No,” Garth answered.

“Perhaps he was one of the peddlers.” Alan unrolled the missive and perused the first few lines of the message.

Surely, he misread the words! He reread the same sentences again. He had understood correctly the first time. Devastated, he walked to the chair against the wall, sat, and allowed the letter to fall from his fingers, not reading the rest of it.

The words of the succinct note caused him to be ill. His wife, whom he had come to trust, honor, and love more than his own life, had *betrayed* him! She had deserted him after she vowed that she would never leave him.

How could she lie to him with such ease?

His soul in agony, he stood. “You may all retire. No search will take place.” He waved his hand in dismissal, watching frowns of puzzlement flicker across the faces of all present.

“Alan?” Amazed, Ranulf stared at him.

He didn’t answer his friend. In a daze, he trudged to his chambers. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stared into space. His first impression had proven correct about her. She had been a spy, working with Wulfstan. He never should have trusted the woman.

But for over a year, she had pretended to care about him, his father, and his friends. Every act of kindness, every ministration, had been a ploy to win his trust so she could deliver the deathblow.

He had been so stupid and so gullible! How did he allow her to insinuate herself into his heart? Was she the evil Mist Maiden Robert had once believed her to be? No, the woman was just a consummate liar who had bided her time.

Indeed, she allowed him to mastermind the plan to improve Wykston. Now that he’d built a strong fortress, she would seize it, using the citadel against him and William, for she was privy to every nook and cranny of its plan.

What a lust-blinded fool he had been!

Gwyneth had lied about Wulfstan, too, swearing that she hated and loathed the man. Now she most probably was lying in his arms. The idea made Alan so angry, he rose from the bed, picked up a chair, and smashed it against the wall, sending a burst of splinters and shattered wood all over the room.

The outburst did little to discharge his fury or the wrenching agony that tore at his gut. He must ride to Braeton Hall. He would kill Wulfstan, as he should have done the night the devious lord came to the abbey, trying to claim Gwyneth.

The perfidious wench never told him of the man’s visit until months later.

“And you believed her excuse. Fool!” he muttered to himself as he hit his forehead with the flat of his hand. But even Wulfstan’s death will not cause Gwyneth to love you, his logic dictated.

He walked to the chest at the foot of the bed. Raising the lid, he drew his rough palm over the soft linen of Gwyneth’s tunic still redolent with the odor of roses. He lifted the garment to his face, inhaling the familiar fragrance. Abruptly, Alan dropped the garb back in the chest, slamming the lid down.

He must forget the faithless woman. Let her proceed with the annulment and cast her lot with her Saxon lover. Good riddance to her!

Finding a woman had never been a difficult task for him, even when he'd been a landless bastard knight without a farthing to his name. As Lord of Wykston with another estate in Normandy and also being the heir to his father's lands, as well, few women would refuse him.

He would choose the richest heiress he could find. That would show Gwyneth that he did not need her. But he still loved and wanted her with an intensity, which until now, he did not think possible. How could the woman behave so lovingly and sincerely one moment, then turn on him like an adder?

If she planned to leave him, why did she nurse his soldiers and give him a king's ransom for the keep? If she loved Wulfstan, she could have run to him when Alan had campaigned in York, giving her funds to him to build a keep at Braeton Hall.

His logic rebelled against the inconsistency of her behavior. Women changed their minds. That was an irrefutable fact, but they did not change their characters. Something was gravely wrong. He must read that letter again.

"Son," Warroc called from outside the room.

Alan sprang to the door. His father and Ranulf entered.

"I thought you would want this in your safekeeping," his father said, holding the letter toward him. "Ranulf took it up from where you dropped it."

"As a matter of fact, father, I was just coming to retrieve it." Taking the parchment Alan reread the letter--this time all the way through.

My Lord Alan,

I wish to inform you that I must follow the dictates of my conscience. For that reason, I cannot allow our marriage, which you compelled me to enter, to continue. Holy Mother Church considers coercion a major impediment to the sacrament of Matrimony. As I can no longer live with the lie of our marriage, I will petition for an annulment.

Being a man who honors his father, you will understand my wish to be true to my heritage and comply with the wishes of my late parent, Lord Leofric, who wanted this match. Therefore, I shall ally myself with Lord Wulfstan. Gwyneth of Wykston

Insight flashed in his mind like a fork of lightning in the summer sky. "Of course," he exclaimed, waving the missive in the air. "Read this, father."

"Ranulf and I already have." Lord Warroc looked a little sheepish. "We are confused."

"Don't you understand?" Alan asked, seeing the perplexed look on their faces.

"I took the liberty of showing this to Aelveva," Ranulf said. "I hope you do not mind, Alan, but she has been beside herself with worry. This letter assured her that Lady Gwyneth is alive."

"No, I approve of your action. Tell me what thinks Aelveva of my wife's message."

"She believes Lady Gwyneth would never write such a lie of her own accord. She said Lord Leofric would never have approved of the alliance. He refused Wulfstan several times. She fears Gwyneth has been abducted and is being held against her will," Ranulf said.

"I concur with her theory," Alan added. "Gwyneth told me as much many months ago. Had I read the whole message through, I should have saved myself a great deal of heartache and precious time."

"We must plan a rescue," Lord Warroc said.

"Yes, and quickly, Father." Alan tucked the parchment into his tunic close to his heart. But even if he hadn't that evidence of her loyalty, Alan knew he'd have gone after her.

* * * *

Still captive in the dank cave, Gwyneth hoped that Alan would understand her cryptic message. If not, he would flare into a towering rage. Worse, he would be hurt, wounded beyond healing.

Tears trickled down her cheeks. She had waited so long and worked so hard to gain his trust and his love. She had succeeded only to be forced to lie and throw the love and trust he had for her back in his face.

"Please, God, let him realize the truth," she whispered. Trying to calm herself, Gwyneth bit into the crust of the coarse wastrel. The meager supper was not appetizing, but she must keep up her strength and provide nourishment for the new life growing secretly within her.

She trembled as she contemplated the fate of her unborn child if her captors discovered her pregnancy. She touched her still flat stomach. Even if Wulfstan did not force her to abort, he would never allow Alan's child to live after the baby was born.

Surely, he would never mistake this child for his own. She was already two months into her pregnancy and Wulfstan and she never ... she shuddered at the mere thought of that man ever touching her. She shook her head, trying to dispel the vile thought.

Wulfstan would kill her as soon as he got his hands on Wykston and the son he wanted from her. He probably wouldn't denounce her as a witch then, for his child would be suspect. No, he would arrange a discreet accident, as he had for Ulfer and his other poor wives.

To survive, Gwyneth must escape. She must plan it carefully. Failure meant death. She felt for the smooth stone. She had no had a chance to use it. For the past few nights, two men kept the watch, casting dice before the fire. She might be able to knock one unconscious, but certainly not two. Soon, however, they would change guards. Perhaps just one man would keep watch tonight.

Oh, how she wished she had her herb basket. Just a little poppy seed in their ale, and she could be halfway back to Wykston before her gaolers woke.

Such wishful thinking proved fruitless. She must make do with what resources she had. Taking an inventory, Gwyneth thought of three tools: her mind, her will, and the big heavy stone. *No, you have others.* Of course! Why hadn't she thought of them before?

* * * *

The central hearth of the great hall crackled with bright, sinuous flames, chasing the chill from the cavernous chamber. Dog dozed by the soothing warmth. Next to the beast, Aelveva stood, clad in an old russet tunic, her brow furrowed with worry, her new

babe asleep in her arms. Gnomish Monsar sat, head bent, silently and patiently instructing Garth in the craft of carving a wooden bowl.

Servants milled about, performing routine tasks, morose expressions on their faces. No one said much, but Alan knew they shared his concern for Gwyneth.

Seated at the trestle table, he turned his attention back to the map of Braeton Hall spread on the oaken surface. A tankard of bragot in hand, Warroc hovered to his left, his long crimson tunic reaching his ankles.

Dressed in his hauberk because he had just returned from patrolling the area, Ranulf directly faced him across the large parchment.

"We could post troops here," the sergeant pointed to the back of the stockade bordering the forest. "With grappling hooks our men can climb over the barrier. Once inside we could rescue Lady Gwyneth and be long gone before the Saxons discover what has happened.

Without warning, Edith burst into the room. Drenched to the skin, she left a wet trail in her wake as the water dripped from her old, brown woolen cloak. "By your leave, my Lord Alan, may I speak with you in private?" she gasped out. "By all that's holy!" Warroc bellowed. "Come near the hearth, girl, or you will catch your death."

"Lord Alan, please!" She moved to the fire.

Alan stood and walked to her. "There is no longer a need for secrecy between us, Edith. You may speak before my father and the others. It's time they learned of your valor."

She dropped her hands and turned to him. "Lord Wulfstan plans to ride to York to present Lady Gwyneth's petition for annulment to the bishop," Edith blurted out.

Gasps echoed through the great hall.

"How do you know this, girl?" Warroc demanded.

"I have just come from Braeton Hall, my lord." Edith shivered visibly.

"Have you seen Gwyneth or talked to her?" Alan asked.

"No, or else I would have helped her escape. Wulfstan has her hidden deep in the forest. He fears you'll lay siege to Braeton Hall and retrieve her. He will keep her hidden until the annulment is granted."

"Damnation!" Alan bashed his fist on the table.

Little Dunstan began to squall, and the hound jumped up, barking. Aelveva put the baby to her shoulder and walked to the far end of the hall, patting his small back as she paced.

"Why can you come and go to Braeton Hall without suspicion, Mistress Edith?" Warroc asked.

Rubbing her chapped hands, Edith moved closer to the flames and cast her gaze downward.

"I've asked you a question, girl," Warroc said.

"It's a long story, Father, and right now every moment is precious," Alan answered for her. "It suffices to say that, at great risk to herself, she has been gathering information for me for months."

"Very well." Warroc stared at the girl.

"Edith, do you where Wulfstan keeps the Lady Gwyneth prisoner?" Alan asked.

“Not exactly, my lord, but I heard some of the men talking about a ride to the Scottish border to do guard duty.”

“Where along the border?” Ranulf frowned. It’s many miles long.”

“Yes, but I believe that it’s northeast of Braeton hall. I watched the guards ride out each morn and return a little after noontime, so it cannot be longer than half a day’s ride,” she said.

“It’s still a large area.” Warroc stroked his chin.

“Yes, but we need not be concerned,” Edith added. “You have a faithful friend that can lead you to her.”

“Who?” the three men asked in unison.

“Dog.” Edith pointed to the hound. “He is like a beast I once had and seems to be more of a scent hound than a sight hound. Such animals can track their owners.”

“She is right!” Alan leapt up. “Why didn’t we take Dog the first time?”

“Aelveva, would you go to Lady Gwyneth’s room and get me something that she has worn recently.”

“Yes, my lord.” Her babe now asleep, she walked toward Alan. “I’ll bring the over-tunic she wore the night before she disappeared, but I want to go with you, my lord.”

“Lady Gwyneth wouldn’t wish me to allow you to do that,” Alan said. “Your sons need you, and I cannot say what danger we will encounter. You’ll serve Lady Gwyneth better by seeing her home is well run.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Tears in her eyes, Aelveva bowed, then quietly went on her errand.

“I’ll send heralds to the bishop and the king to inform them of Wulfstan’s treachery and deceit,” Warroc declared.

“Yes, Father, and I leave you in charge here. We leave immediately. I will find my wife and take care of Wulfstan once and for all time,” Alan vowed.

Chapter Twenty

Night crept in silently, overtaking the day with its brooding darkness. The forest mist, veiling the black, bare tree limbs, thickened by the minute. Despite the protection of her sturdy, woolen cloak, the dampness penetrated Gwyneth's bones, causing her teeth to chatter. Streams of moisture, barely invisible in the dim light, trickled down the sides of the cave like large, shiny tears.

At the mouth of the cavern, Tosig squatted by the meager, smoky fire, built from the unseasoned wood he had scavenged from the area before Aelfric departed for Braeton Hall. Later, her gaoler would enter the hollow and take up his post just inside the gap, sitting with his body in front of the entrance, preventing her escape.

However, Tosig had unlashed her wrists, enabling her to take nourishment. Tonight he would keep vigil alone, giving Gwyneth the opportunity she needed. The basket of wastrel over her arm, a leather bottle of ale in her hand, she walked toward him.

The struggling fire flickered over his face, accentuating his disfigurement. The poor man would not have been bad looking but for the deep crescent-moon scar that so cruelly mutilated his cheek.

"Tosig, would you care for the rest of this bread? You are exposed to the elements, and this damp cold hones the appetite."

His eyes widened with surprise. Was he astonished by her compassion or wary of her motives? Perhaps the man had received little gentleness in his life.

He rose as she placed the coarse fare in his outstretched, work-worn palm. "I thank you, my lady. I'm starved."

So was she, but she had to ingratiate herself to this man. He held the key to her freedom in his hands.

"Sit then, Tosig," Gwyneth said as she did the same.

He bit into the hard crust, chewing vigorously as the crumbs flecked his bushy, brown beard.

"Doesn't Lord Wulfstan provide better food than this?" she inquired. "How does he expect loyalty from the men if he mistreats them so? A man needs a little cheese or fish to keep going. Even some dried fruit and nuts would help."

Tosig swallowed the course bread and took a swig of weak ale to wash his food down. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "True, my lady. Wulfstan is a hard man, but we don't have much choice. Aelfric and I are members of the fyrd. We are pledged to do military service for the lord a certain number of days a year. Then we go back to our usual work on his estate."

"What might your employment be?" She blew her warm breath on her cold, numb fingers.

"I am journeyman shoemaker, my lady. I'd like to have my own little shop some day, but I'll never have the funds to do that. My master is fairly young and in good

health, so he'll stay at Braeton Hall for a long while." He picked up a long twig and started to trace aimless lines in the damp earth.

Gwyneth continued to draw the man out. "You are a young man. What of your mother, father?"

"My kin are dead. I've no brothers or sisters."

"Do you have a wife, Tosig?"

"No, but I do have a lass who likes me, scar and all." His gaze softened, and his face assumed a wistful expression. "Most lasses won't let me get near them, but she's a good one, my Morag is. She says it is what's in my heart that counts, not what's on my face. But why is a fine lady like you asking such questions of a poor wretch like me?"

"I am interested in all people, and I don't like to see anyone suffer," she answered truthfully. "Do you have plans to wed?"

"No." He shook his head, and his shoulders sagged, but he continued to draw in the moist earth. "I see the lass rarely. She is a Scot. She lives over yon border, and she has no dowry. Her folks are poor as dirt. They tend a few head of bony cattle and works a strip of common land. I don't get much chance to visit her."

"Your prospects appear somewhat bleak, Tosig. Doesn't that make you sad?" Gwyneth lifted her palms upward in question.

He looked up and nodded, a wistful look in his eyes. "It does, my lady, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"That is a shame." She paused, her heart racing.

Now. Make your proposal now! "Suppose I told you I know a way for you to have your own shop and have Morag for your wife as well."

He pierced her with a sharp stare for a few tense moments. "You wouldn't be trying to hoodwink a poor man like me?"

"No, Tosig." She returned his steady gaze.

The man stood and walked to the entry of the hollow. He turned and asked, "How, my lady?"

Gwyneth rose and walked to him. "Allow me to return to Wykston," she said urgently, "and I'll see that you have all you need."

"Not in your life, my lady. Lord Wulfstan will kill me then hang my flayed hide to his door. My life may not be the best, but it's still dear to me."

His words rang true. She had once seen a man's dried skin removed from his dead body and nailed to the door of a manor as a warning to all other would-be transgressors. Nevertheless, she had to convince the man, or she was undone.

"He will not know where you are," she continued. "By the time he discovers anything, you will be safe in Scotland with your lass. You will have money to buy leather and tools to start your work. Maybe you can set up your little shop in perhaps Edinburgh or Perth."

The man looked away from her. As he appeared to ponder her words, the puckered scar on his face contorted beneath his scowl.

His gaze met hers again. "It would be a dangerous thing to do. Sometimes Lord Wulfstan checks on his men. If he finds them sleeping or doing something else he doesn't like, he cuts them down."

“Then we should not waste time, Tosig.” Close to tears now, she choked out, “Please, let me go back to my life. Then you can find a new one for yourself.”

“How will you pay me once I let you go?”

“I shall pay you before you go.”

He tossed his head back and laughed. “You must be thinking I’m daft. You haven’t got any gold, my lady, and if I let you go, your husband would be after me like a robin on a worm.”

She shook her head. “No, Tosig, my husband would reward you for helping me. Neither he nor I have anything against you. It is Wulfstan he will punish because the lord is a cruel man who has stolen another man’s wife.”

Tosig’s gaze met hers. “To be sure.” He touched his cheek. “It was he who gave me this. I was not an ugly lad before he scarred me.”

The man appeared to be considering her proposition, and Gwyneth pressed home her point. “Wulfstan is selfish and harsh. Look at your bedroll.” She stooped and picked the corner of the woolen blanket up as she rose. “This cloth is too thin for such a chilly night. Lord Alan would not treat his lowest scullion so meanly.” She dropped the wool at his feet. “If you were in Scotland with Morag, you would be warm and cozy and among people who would be kind to you.”

“I would need a good bit of coin to start me life, my lady.”

Gwyneth took the leather pouch at her belt from beneath her mantle. She opened it and retrieved the cloak pin she had bought for Alan. She hated to part with the piece, but no other opportunity afforded itself. She placed the pin in Tosig’s hand.

“It is a fine piece, my lady, but it will not be enough.”

Tears pricked behind her eyes as she unclasped her mantle. Gwyneth carefully lifted the fine gold cross and delicate chain, hidden beneath her tunic, from around her neck. Giving up the gift from her father crushed her heart, but she had no choice.

“Now will you agree?” Gwyneth hoped he would not demand her wedding ring as well.

She held her breath while the man seemed to be deliberating with himself. He bit the cross and pin, nodding as if satisfied.

“Go quickly, my lady. Follow the stream. It will take you due south and straight to Wykston. I’m afraid I must take the horse, though. Wulfstan will not kill you, but he’d hack me to pieces in a second.”

With another word, Gwyneth ran into the dense mist, frightened Tosig would change his mind. A few moments later, she heard the thud of hooves pounding through the foggy forest and knew Tosig was riding to freedom.

Gwyneth ran until her lungs burned and a stitch stabbed her side. Gasping for breath, she stopped, scampering beneath a yew where she hid until she felt able to proceed.

Then she scrambled out from the temporary haven and began her long flight home, keeping as close to the stream as possible. At times, the opaque mist obscured her view of the brook, forcing her to keep her course by listening for the rush of water.

On and on she traveled, resting only briefly as she tried to put as much distance as she could between the cave and herself. Inevitably, Wulfstan would discover her escape.

His rage boundless, he would ruthlessly chase her down.

Gwyneth longed to be back at Wykston, safe in her keep before the man got that information. But even if she succeeded and arrived home unharmed, she wondered if she would ever really be safe from him.

If Wulfstan knew for certain he would not be able to wed her, his condemnation of her and the whole village would follow.

While she carried her child, the authorities would not kill her, but she would wait out her time in a filthy gaol. Once Gwyneth had given birth, the babe would be wrenched from her breast. She would be taken out and drowned, unless she underwent trial by ordeal by fire. But she may not survive that either.

"Dear God, protect us all from Wulfstan," she prayed softly as she continued her journey on through the endless mist.

* * * *

Daybreak prowled the eastern sky as gray and sullen as a hungry wolf. The fog continued to hide her in its deep white cloak, and Gwyneth said a silent prayer of thanks for the cover. Perhaps she would reach her home and maybe someday this nightmare would end.

But hope sank like a millstone when in the distance she heard the beat of hooves coming from behind her. Climbing a tree, she stood precariously on the slippery, wet branch of a thick yew. Hidden high above the ground in the dense evergreen, Gwyneth could hardly distinguish the pounding canter of the mounts from the beat of her heart. Suddenly, the thunderous clamor came to an abrupt halt. Paralyzed with terror, Gwyneth held her breath, squeezing her eyes tight and clutching the branch as she recognized Edric's sinister voice below her.

"We've been traveling for hours, my lord. Shall we camp here for a spell and resume the search later?"

Dear God, let them go on, Gwyneth prayed desperately. She was shaking so violently that she almost lost her footing. Opening her eyes, she looked down. The fog had become so thick, she could not see her pursuers, but she knew from the sound of their voices and the snorts of the mounts that they remained near--too near.

"No," Wulfstan answered, his voice filled with venom. "We must press on. I will find the evasive bitch if it takes till Judgment Day. She will be my wife. I will beget my son on her, and we will drive the foul Normans from this land."

"Yes, my lord." Edric's voice betrayed his fatigue.

"As for that traitor, Tosig, if I ever catch him, I shall tie him to a stout oak and order the archers to use him for target practice. The lout never thought I'd travel to the cave, but that is how I foil my adversaries, Edric. I always do the unexpected. I lull them to complaisance. Then I strike."

"Begging your pardon, my lord. We're not sure he's a traitor. Scottish rieviers often slip over the border. They may've killed Tosig for the horse and taken the girl hostage till her husband comes to claim her. Lord Alan could have discovered her whereabouts and come for her."

"Who would tell him?" Wulfstan scoffed impatiently.

"The girl, Edith."

"Nonsense, Edric. I gave no order to capture the lady. Her abduction was a bit of luck that fell into your lap. Furthermore, I never told Edith where the noble lady was hidden."

So Edith was working for Wulfstan. *I knew it! But Alan doesn't suspect she is a traitor.*

"I still don't trust the girl," Edric said, an edge on his tone.

"Enough talk. Let us be off." Wulfstan urged his horse to a gallop.

The sound of hooves and the jostle of weapons passed beneath her and gradually became faint in the distance as the troops resumed their search.

Gwyneth released her breath in relief. She decided to remain at this spot for a while, letting Wulfstan put some miles between them before she resumed her long trek home. Ironically, she would follow her pursuer at a safe distance. The lord would never guess she lagged behind him.

The imminent danger over, her fears momentarily assuaged, Gwyneth descended the tree and took shelter under a low-growing bush. She lay on her side. Pulling her knees up to her chin, she made herself as comfortable as possible in the thick fall of leaves. Exhausted, she closed her eyes, resting for a few moments as the rhythm of her heart returned to its normal tempo.

Behind her eyelids, the vision of a plump, rosy babe with violet-blue eyes filled her thoughts, and her heart overflowed with love.

A new determination sparked within her. She would survive not only for herself but also for the tiny life within her. Nothing would stop her from bringing forth this child; not Wulfstan, not a charge of witchcraft, nor any other evil.

Gwyneth scampered out from her haven and began to run with renewed vigor. She had traveled about half a mile when the earth gave way under her feet. Losing her balance, she hit the ground face down.

* * * *

Ordering his men to take a brief respite, Alan sat beside Ranulf on a fallen oak log. A huge, white bracket of fungus invaded one end of the rotten wood. He turned away from the sight, halfheartedly trying to force down the nourishment he shared with his sergeant.

He would never be able to thank Ranulf for his steadfast loyalty. The man offered tremendous comfort to him and bolstered Alan's spirits, helping him to retain his sanity.

Alan took a long quaff of ale as he contemplated the ironic events of the past few days. Just when he believed his life had finally taken a steady course, his world turned topsy-turvy. Would he ever find the peace for which he yearned?

More importantly, would he ever find Gwyneth? Every moment that passed increased the odds for failure. The morbid vision of his wife lying motionless in the spongy bracken flashed into his mind. The image made his stomach queasy.

He set down his drinking horn. If Wulfstan had harmed Gwyneth, Alan would tear the knave limb from limb with his bare hands.

"You're too quiet." Ranulf tipped the brim of his horn to his lips.

"I am thinking," Alan answered.

"Yes, and your gloomy thoughts are betrayed in your eyes." Ranulf nodded.

“You must keep faith, Alan, or else you will descend into the hell of despair. Lady Gwyneth is a resourceful woman. You often tell me how clever and competent she is. She will find a way to escape or create an opportunity to do so. She has the courage of a berserker. Don’t you remember how brave she was when we captured her?”

The memory caused unshed tears to stab behind his eyes. He and Ranulf had witnessed her grit that night. “She is determined as well,” he added.

Dog rose to his paws and stretched his back. He yawned widely, his long tongue extending forward. Closing his mouth, he shook the bracken from his fur and trotted to Edith, who sat alone, eating a crust of bread. The hound whimpered, laying his muzzle in her lap. She smiled and offered the animal a crust, which he downed in a gulp.

Ranulf nodded in her direction. “Another female who has more guts than most men. She risked her life dozens of times during the past year, pretending to spy for Wulfstan.”

“Yes,” Alan said. “If it had not been for her warning, every sack of grain would have gone up in smoke. She got to us just in time, so now the harvest lies safely in the undercroft. It is too bad she did not know Wulfstan planned to abduct Gwyneth. I’d have gladly lost the grain instead of my wife.”

“You haven’t lost your wife.” Ranulf shook his finger at her. “She is temporarily absent.”

“Of course, you are right, man.”

“Why haven’t you told Warroc about her?” Ranulf looked toward Edith.

“I did not wish to spoil his peace of mind. He has suffered a great deal.” Alan set down his leather bottle and placed the wooden stopper in its opening. “You were the sole person privy to the information.”

“You didn’t tell Lady Gwyneth?”

“She has had a great deal to contend with as well. She had a difficult year. She’ll find out all the details soon enough. I think it’s only fair she learns the truth.”

“I felt the same about Aelveva. I did not want anything to disturb her during her pregnancy, and I am glad I kept my peace. In the end, she needed every ounce of strength. I get the shakes just thinking about that birth. Besides, you asked me to tell no one.”

“Thank you for respecting that confidence. Had you told Aelveva, Gwyneth would have known our secret. Your wife can keep nothing from mine.”

Ranulf laughed. “True.”

Dog sniffed the air, started to whine, and grabbed the hem of Edith’s shift in his teeth, pulling at it.

She immediately stood. “Good beast,” she praised, petting the animal on the head.

The hound dropped her hem and ran a little ahead then stopped, turning to look at her. When she did not follow, he ran back to her, barked, and took off again, repeating the process.

Edith walked toward Alan and Ranulf. “The animal wants us to follow.”

“So it seems,” Alan agreed. “Are you sure you will not return to Wykston. It would be safer for you.”

"I know. If Wulfstan discovers I've been in league with you all these months, he will do his best, or I should say his worst, to kill me. Be that as it may, I'll stay. Lady Gwyneth will need a woman to assist her if she is hurt. She has always been kind to my mother, and I wish to return the kindness." Her sky-blue eyes filled with tears.

"I understand, Edith. Your courage will be rewarded when we return to Wykston."

The hound continued to bark in earnest, continuing his short sallies and retreats.

"Let's go," Alan said, hoping that Dog had picked up the right scent.

* * * *

Gwyneth struggled to a sitting position. She had stepped into a depression in the ground which had been covered with a heavy fall of leaves. Likely, the hole housed a family of hares. She flexed her ankle and sighed in relief, assured she had not broken it when she felt no pain.

Slowly, Gwyneth commenced her travels south again as her stomach ached with hunger. She had lost track of time but calculated that she had not had a decent meal for two or three days. She began to forage about for food.

Delighted to find some nonpoisonous mushrooms, she stuffed them into her mouth with undue haste. Even raw and without herbs to enhance their subtle flavor, they tasted delicious. Unfortunately, the meager supply did not fill her. Even as she finished the last succulent cap, she was still famished.

She gathered some acorns. Placing them on a rock, she cracked the hard shells with a stone. The astringent flavor of the raw nuts puckered the inside of her mouth uncomfortably, and she shuddered, forcing them down all the same.

Slowly, she hobbled down to the stream for a drink. Her thirst quenched and her hunger somewhat assuaged, Gwyneth continued her journey. How far had she traveled? She could not tell the time for the mist still hid the position of the sun and prevented the length of the shadows from giving her any clues.

Thoughts of impending doom undermined her hopes. Suppose she reached Wykston to find Wulfstan had killed everyone there? Furthermore, a chance remained he had turned back to meet her head on and alone.

She prayed the fog held and Wulfstan decided to take another route home.

* * * *

The hound ran alongside Alan's trotting mount. Nose close to the ground, Dog sniffed relentlessly. Suddenly, the animal stopped. Alan raised his hand, signaling the men to rein in.

Ranulf looked at him, a quizzical expression on his face. "Why do you think the animal stopped?"

Alan's heart felt as if it would thump out of his chest. "Do you think Gwyneth could be lying in the underbrush?" he asked.

"I think not," Ranulf replied, anxiety on his face. "Dog would have run straight for her to ferret her out."

Dog pointed still as a statue. What in Hades was going on?

In the distance, Alan heard an almost imperceptible sound. He motioned to Ranulf. "Have the men dismount as quickly and quietly as possible," he murmured. "I

believe we are about to meet a group of riders. If they are foes, we must be ready to attack. If they are friends, maybe they will join us in our quest. See that Edith hides in the underbrush.”

Ranulf immediately carried out the command, quietly passing the orders down the line so as not to alert the enemy.

Some men led their horses behind bushes and trees on either side of the trail. Others formed a barrier across the narrow path as all waited in silence. Dog hunkered down, panting and alert. His sides heaved like bellows as his long, pink tongue protruded out the side of his mouth.

Alan and Ranulf remained mounted side by side at the front of the line.

The sergeant returned to him. “I can hear them now myself. The noise grows louder by the second. I’d like to think that it’s a band of monks on their way to Durham to pray at the tomb of the venerable Bede, but the penitents make the pilgrimage on foot.”

“Yes.” Ranulf peered into the woods. “If the fog weren’t so dense, I am sure we would see them by now.”

The earth shook with the rhythm of a trot, and the rattle of mail and weapons became unmistakable. The mist ahead swirled in agitation.

Suddenly, Wulfstan emerged from the fog. On his helm, the traditional figure of a squatting boar embellished with a silver cross shone through the pale fog.

Drawing his sword in a flashing arc, Alan charged into his path. “Defend yourself, Wulfstan!”

“Make ready to die and know your wife will bear my son, Norman swine, for I’ve already had her many times.” Naked blade in his hand, as well, the lord spurred his mount forward.

Alan did the same. On impact, both men fell to the ground, rolling away from the horses. Meanwhile, Ranulf blew his horn, charging also as the Normans circled the Saxon forces.

Alan and Wulfstan regained their footing. Blades still in hand, their bodies crashed together with bone-crushing force as harsh snarls erupted from their throats. Their blades sparked upon contact. Again and again, their swords clanged, but neither man gained an inch of ground.

All around them, the forest rang with the din of battle as horses whinnied and men shouted fiercely or screamed in pain.

For a man who dodged battle, the Saxon lord was proving to be a formidable opponent. Suddenly, Wulfstan’s blade broke off close to the hilt. He flung it to the ground. Alan did the same, wanting the fight to be fair. Daggers drawn, they circled each other, cautiously waiting for an advantage. Wulfstan stooped and grabbed up Alan’s sword. Wheeling around with tremendous speed, the Saxon tried to lop off his opponent’s head. Alan ducked, avoiding the blade, then lunged full force at the lord’s middle, landing atop the man.

Wulfstan suddenly lay very still, his blue eyes open, his mouth agape, gasping sounds emerging from it. Alan had sunk his razor-sharp dirk deep into the throat of his enemy. He drew back and stood, breathing hard, his gaze fixed on the quickly widening stain of red on Wulfstan’s neck.

Someone shouted, "The lord is dead," and the Saxons left standing lost heart and quickly surrendered.

Bloodstained and battle-weary, Alan put up his weapons, staggered to the trunk of an oak, and sank down. Robert rushed forth to take his gear.

Ranulf took a seat beside him.

"The girl, Edith?" Alan asked.

"She is coming now with Dog," the sergeant pointed toward the alewife's daughter emerging from beneath a bush, the animal scrambling out behind her.

Edith's face was smudged with dirt, and she pulled her brown, borrowed cloak around her.

"The men are exhausted, Ranulf. After we rest, assign a burial detail. Then the rest of us must press on. Every moment counts."

Lord Wulfstan would never trouble any of them again, but was it now too late to save his wife?

Robert returned with tankards of ale and some linen towels, dampened in a nearby rivulet.

"Thank you, lad," he called after the squire as the boy walked away. After wiping the blood and grime from their hands and faces, Alan and Ranulf took long swigs of ale.

"What about the Saxon prisoners?" the sergeant asked, putting down his tankard. "Most look like poor members of the fyrd."

Alan thought about his decision for a moment. He dragged himself to his feet and faced his prisoners.

"Men of Braeton Hall," he said. "I proclaim your home for King William and hold the land in his name. You may swear your fealty to me, or I shall petition the king, my liege lord, and let him determine your fate. Remember that you took part in an abduction. Know that William is a fond and faithful husband." Alan shook his head. "He will take unkindly to someone who has interfered between husband and wife."

The men looked at each other as if they weighed Alan's words carefully and nodded.

"My lord, I'm called Baldwin. I'm a poor man and am a member of the fyrd. I'd no choice but to follow Lord Wulfstan. Most of us here are in the same situation. He would have killed us and our families if we gainsaid him. As for me, I'll be casting my lot with you, my lord,"

"Me too, my lord," man after man affirmed as they enumerated the cruelties Wulfstan visited upon them.

"Very well," Alan said. "You are my men now, but if you swear fealty to me and the king, I will expect you to aid me in my search for my lady wife."

"Yes," the men cried.

They took the oath en masse, and after a brief respite the men mounted and set out again with plans to meet the burial detail at Wykston.

Guilt gnawed at Alan, for he pushed the men to the very limits of their endurance, but he had to find his wife.

* * * *

Gwyneth stumbled on, still following the narrow stream. The sky grew darker,

and she resigned herself to another night in the cold, dreary forest. She felt more ravenous than she had ever been in her life. The acorns lay about in abundance on the forest floor, but she had difficulty gathering enough of them to fill her empty stomach.

And the taste! Perhaps roasted the nuts would yield a better flavor, but she had no flintstones with which to start a fire, and the mist made the twigs too wet to kindle a spark. Besides, the smoke and flames would alert Wulfstan to her whereabouts.

A sound, like a distant rumble, caught her attention. The unfamiliar noise came from directly in front of her. Was it the rush of a waterfall? Impossible! She had not heard a cascade on the way to the cave, and she retraced her route along the stream. Along with the roar, she also heard the unmistakable sound of clanging metal and stopped.

“A battle!” she exclaimed to no one and began to shake violently.

Wulfstan had likely engaged some adversary. Gwyneth did not need divine inspiration to conclude that his foe was her husband. Perhaps he met Alan and killed him. The thought chilled her to her heart.

If Wulfstan won, he would return and she would meet him face to face. Maybe this time she would not be so fortunate, and he would capture her.

Gwyneth ran for cover. Should she stay hidden here or run in another direction? The abbey loomed foremost in her mind, but she hated to invite Wulfstan’s wrath upon the innocent nuns there.

If she fled back north, she could take refuge in Scotland at the court of saintly Queen Margaret. Still, the Scots may not welcome the wife of man who fought for the king of England. Heading southeast into Wales presented another possibility.

But she did not have one farthing. If her husband lay dead, Wulfstan would try to seize Wykston and her dower lands. Alan’s men could rally behind Ranulf and save her home.

But was Ranulf still alive?

Exhausted, famished, and confused, Gwyneth buried herself under a thick layer of fallen leaves blanketing a hollow beneath a large rock. The noise had faded and silence reigned supreme again throughout the murky woods.

Gwyneth thought of her unborn babe--Alan’s child. If her husband had died, he would live on in his child. She must give this baby the opportunity to live a good life. Maybe Warroc still lived. Perhaps he had not fought with Alan. Her father-in-law would want the child.

But he may be dead, too, Gwyneth.

Why was she thinking so pessimistically? Her husband would triumph. Alan was a valiant knight.

Still, she had to prepare herself for the worst. Wulfstan passed her by in the forest. Likely, Alan had been looking for her if he read the meaning in her cryptic missive correctly. At this moment, one or both of them could lie dead. One thing remained certain, the wily Wulfstan would not fight him fairly.

But Gwyneth refused to give up. Her child’s life depended upon her determination and fortitude. She resolved to remain in her leafy haven until nightfall. Under cover of darkness, she planned to head southwest to Gloucester, where William

would stay for Christmastide. She resolved to reach her destination in time to plead her cause to the king. Hope beckoned and faith would light the way.

But suppose Wulfstan hurled his charges of witchcraft at her?

Her heart full of determination, she said aloud, "Then I shall endure trial by ordeal. I'll grasp the hot metal bar."

She had treated burns. None of her patients' wounds ever festered. Gwyneth would treat herself. Other women survived the tribulation and so would she.

She did not know how long she lay in her little hollow when the baying of a hound imbued her with terror. The relentless beat of horses' hooves pummeling the forest floor accompanied the persistent, high-pitched yowling.

Had Wulfstan returned with a hunting dog to track her? If so, the fog would not help her now. Nor would climbing a tree for the animal would bark at the base of the trunk. The baying became louder, increasing her panic by the second.

Her heart raced so fast, Gwyneth could scarcely draw a breath, and the lack of air made her dizzy. She forced herself to inhale slowly and deeply.

Should she run? Surely, though, the animal would pursue her. Still, she could not let the beast just pounce upon her for the hound's howls were frantic now, and the battering of the horses' hooves caused the ground beneath her to tremble. If she crossed the stream, the hound may lose her scent.

She must go now! But her decision came too late. Instead of creeping out of her hole, Gwyneth drew back into the hollow, squeezing her eyes shut. Leaves and earth fell on her face, and the strong smell of an unwashed dog drifted to her nostrils while the infernal baying continued. Loud scratching grated in her ears as she imagined the dog digging in the dirt as if possessed.

Trapped, she heard the men dismount. *If I am captured, I shall simply flee again and again if I must, but I'll never give up.*

Finally, the beast leapt on her. Yet, he did not bite. His wet nose jabbed her face. She parted her lids to see his eyes glowing red in the dark. Her vision already accustomed to the darkness, she recognized Dog.

"Dog!" she cried as the animal licked her cheek.

"She is there! Enough Dog! Quick, over here!" She recognized Alan's voice barking out the command.

"Alan!" she shouted, crawling forward.

Strong arms lifted her to the safety of his embrace. Alan's soft lips touched her forehead, eyelids, cheeks, nose, and finally her lips in a kiss that spoke of relief, longing, and love.

"Oh, Alan, Wulfstan" A lump clogged her throat and tears sprang from her eyes. She buried her face in the curve where his neck met his shoulder. Too overcome with the storm of emotions whirling in her heart, she was struck dumb.

"Ssshhh, we'll talk later," he said softly.

Alan sat on the ground and rocked her gently as he kissed her. When she broke the kiss, Gwyneth noticed tears brightening his eyes. Her heart swelled larger until she thought it would burst with love.

"I know you are exhausted, love, but you must be starving as well." Alan set her

gently on the ground and stood. "Robert, food for the lady. Ranulf give the order that we dine and bivouac here for the night."

"Yes, Alan." Smiling, Ranulf walked toward them and bowed. "I am to see you, my lady, and Aelveva will be beside herself with joy. She wanted to come with us, but your husband," he shot a glance at Alan, "forbade it, and rightly so because she is still nursing our son."

"I can't wait to see her again, Ranulf."

The lad came forward and set down a basket filled with some bread, cheese, ale, and linens he had wet in the stream. With a nod, he took his leave.

Gwyneth washed her face and hands, turning the white napkin filthy brown with the grime from her skin. Next, she shook the bracken from her hair and soiled veil. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about her stained tunic, but after living in the most primitive of conditions for days, she was grateful for what simple amenities could be afforded her at the moment.

Though the fare was simple, to Gwyneth, the plain, dark bread, creamy cheese, and weak ale tasted delicious.

As she ate, she noticed many of the men were Saxon, for their hair and beards were long, unlike the Normans', but they were not prisoners. They carried the weapons and broke bread with Alan's men.

She set down her drink. "Why are so many of these men Saxon?"

"They were Wulfstan's men. I gave them a choice to either follow me or be delivered to the king." He wiped his mouth and hands on his napkin. "They gladly swore fealty to me and William, saying that Wulfstan was a cruel master, and they were happy to be rid of him."

"I can't blame them for changing their allegiance," Gwyneth said. "Their action makes the union of our two peoples easier to accomplish."

"I think that dream will take some time to be completely achieved throughout England, but we have made a good beginning at Wykston." Alan smiled. "We have no dissension there, and that is good, for the work before us will challenge the saints."

"I know about the fire." She gently touched the back of his hand. "I saw the flames in the sky, and the men who captured me boasted how easily they penetrated our home because of the fair."

"Yes." Alan nodded. "I don't know how we could have prevented the deed. Our guards were posted, but it's difficult to discover Wulfstan's kind of stealthy treachery."

"The men said they disguised themselves as merchants and rode through the gates hidden in a wagon full of wares. Disguises are an old trick of Wulfstan's," she said. "He used it at the abbey."

"Yes, as a result Wykston Village lies in ashes." Alan shook his head, a disgusted look on his face.

"The whole of it?" Gwyneth asked, her mouth going dry.

"No, some of the villagers' houses are intact, but the shops and the homes where the craftsmen lived were incinerated. The barn suffered the same fate."

"They told me they burned the granary house," Gwyneth related, explaining the rest of her adventure. "I am sorry we lost the grain."

“We didn’t lose it, and you are safe now, love,” he revealed.

“How did you manage to save it?”

He stood. Helping her to her feet, he lifted her into his arms. “Later,” he murmured.

She returned the embrace but stiffened in his arms, for over his shoulder, the familiar face and form of the alewife’s daughter came forward through the mist.

Gwyneth disengaged from him, leaving him with a surprised expression on his face.

“What is wrong, Gwyneth?”

“Alan, there is much you must explain. Now!”

Chapter Twenty One

Alan set Gwyneth on her feet. Fresh garments draped over her arm, her long tawny plaits reaching to her swaying hips, Edith came toward them. The girl appeared remarkably clean and well groomed, although her coarse, russet tunic was old and worn.

"Would you care to change your garb and tidy yourself as I have just done, my lady?" Edith asked. "I took the liberty of asking Aelveva to select some things for you because I knew you would want to refresh yourself."

"Tell me what other liberties have you taken, Edith?" Gwyneth retorted. "Furthermore, why are you here? And what truck have you carried on with Wulfstan? Do not deny your involvement. I heard Wulfstan and his man, Edric, speak your name with my own ears."

"Gwyneth, this is not the time," Alan intervened, trying to lead her away.

"It is exactly the right time," Gwyneth snapped, gazing at him defiantly. "I will have my answers. I'll know why the two of you have met clandestinely on several occasions. You both thought I was unaware of your little trysts. Well, I am sorry to disappoint you. Moreover, I think Edith is implicated in the massacre of the men at the mill and now the burning of the village."

Edith's shoulders slumped. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

"Your right in a way, my lady, but the evil started before then." The girl put her hands to her face.

Alan placed his hand on Gwyneth's shoulder. "Edith has been as much a victim of Wulfstan as you, wife."

"By my faith, how?" Gwyneth put her hands on her hips. "Has she been bound, gagged, and abducted? Has she been compelled to spend her days and nights fighting for her life with nothing but her brains between her and disaster?"

"She has done exactly that since your father died," Alan answered.

As they were speaking, the men had erected tents, and Alan ushered the two women inside the one meant for him and Gwyneth. They all sat on the brown fur pelts arranged on the floor, and the alewife's daughter placed the fresh change of garb beside Gwyneth.

"Edith, tell her the whole tale," Alan urged.

"Yes, my lord," Edith replied, wiping her eyes on the wide sleeve of her old tunic.

"The terror began over a year ago when Wulfstan came to Wykston to visit your father, my lady, when you were at the abbey. He and Ulfer plotted that you and he should marry. We all knew that Lord Leofric intended otherwise, but Wulfstan and Ulfer hoped to persuade your father to relent. "When Lord Leofric refused to change his decision, Wulfstan and Ulfer plotted to kill him."

Gwyneth gasped, clasping her hands to her mouth. He had hinted as much.

“How do you know that?”

Edith nervously tugged at the end of her girdle. “Because Wulfstan’s cupbearer acted as your father’s, as well, that night at supper. The Lord of Braeton Hall brought his minstrels and jugglers with him. He said he wanted to bring some cheer. My mother and I were there, too. We helped serve the guests. We all knew the wretch was up to no good, my lady.”

Edith frowned and shuddered as she continued, “The cupbearer was a clever knave. He tasted the mead my mother brewed before he served Wulfstan and your father. Everyone in the hall drank the same mead. That way, no one could point a finger and say the drink was poisoned.

“But, on the second round, my mother was filling her flagons at the barrel and witnessed Wulfstan’s man pour something into his flagon. The cupbearer saw my mother watching him. He told her that if she warned Lord Leofric before he filled his tankard, he’d have Wulfstan kill me. He did his foul deed, and then he pretended to trip and managed to spill the rest of the poisonous mead on the floor.

“The cupbearer told his vile master my mother knew. Wulfstan informed us that if we said anything he would accuse us of murder, for we had been near the mead too. He was a powerful nobleman, and we were just poor brewers.” Edith shook her tawny head. “No one would believe us, me lady. In court of law, a lord’s word far outweighs our testimony.”

Gwyneth knew that to be true. Saxon courts did not examine evidence. What determined the case depended upon the number of oath takers each side presented to verify its word. The word of a knight’s outweighed a churl’s, but an earl’s superseded a knight’s, and so on up the social scale. Wulfstan’s oath helpers would swear to the truth of his word. Though the Normans now ruled the land, Edith and her mother were simple folk, easily intimidated by the older custom.

“Later that night, Lord Leofric became ill, and we were scared to death, my lady. Old Winna could do naught. She said he had fits and was having trouble breathing.”

“Oh!” Gwyneth suspected from the symptoms that Edith described that the poison was savin.

Devastated by the realization that her father had been horribly murdered, Gwyneth burst into tears. The pain in her heart burst like a lanced boil.

Alan held her close. “Please, sweetheart. Your father has been at peace now for over a year.”

“Shall I leave now, my lady?” Edith inquired, moving toward the entrance of the tent.

“No,” Gwyneth sobbed out. “I must know all of it.”

Edith sighed. “Wulfstan could have silenced us by killing us, but he knew his threats were enough to control us. Besides that, the man seemed to enjoy torturing my mother and me. Maybe he believed that with Leofric dead, he had nothing more in his way. It was common knowledge he wanted Wykston, and he believed Ulfer’s drunken prattle about a son who would bring glory and wealth to him. But Lord Alan upset his plans so the lord devised another. He would get Ulfer to take you away.”

“When Ulfer failed, Wulfstan became furious. He beat me and vowed to vex

Lord Alan in every way he could. He was mad with rage when he learned you were married, my lady. He planned a little wedding present as he called it.

"I was to take bragot and mead to the men guarding the mill. Wulfstan told me he did not want to kill those men, he simply wanted to burn the mill and starve the Normans out. I was reluctant because I was in love with Charles Strong Arm." Edith wiped a tear with the tip of her finger.

"Wulfstan said that if I did not obey, he would kill my mother outright, and if I had any notion of betraying him. I was terrified. So on the night of your wedding, my lady, I did his bidding.

"You know the rest. I'll never forget the sight of those dead bodies, my lady. Charles and his men could offer no resistance. They were fast asleep in a drunken stupor when I left them because I kept proposing they drink to his lordship's health."

Edith burst into tears again, and Gwyneth's heart filled with pity.

"I was horrified that the man I loved was dead. It was the second man I cared about and lost," she gasped out between sobs. "I didn't care about anything after that. When Lord Alan questioned me, I blurted everything out and begged him to save my mother."

Edith's shoulders heaved, and she wept copiously.

Gwyneth put her arm around the girl. "I am sorry Edith. I have judged you unfairly."

"Since that time, Edith has pretended to be loyal to Wulfstan. She has informed me of his schemes," Alan revealed. "It was she who warned me of the plan to burn the grain. We were able to remove it all out and store it in the undercroft of the keep. Despite our action, the arsonists got their revenge. While we were waiting for them at the storehouse, they likely saw us, since we did not expect them to be disguised as merchants. They could not get to the grain so they started a fire in the stable instead."

"Edith, will you forgive me for my jealousy and suspicion?" Gwyneth asked.

"There is nothing to forgive, my lady. I should be asking your pardon, for I was a party to Wulfstan's treachery."

"An unwilling ally, and I'd do as much for my mother if I feared for her life," Gwyneth said.

"Thank you, me lady." Edith stood. "Would you like me to assist you with a bath. We've no tub, but I can have water put over a fire, and I've some soap."

"I'd appreciate that, Edith."

"Have Robert prepare the same for me, Edith," Alan added. Remorse in her heart, Gwyneth watched the girl leave then met her husband's gaze. If she had not been so full of mistrust and pride, she would have gone to Alan and Edith when she saw them together. They would have told her the truth, and she would not have been captured.

She took her husband's hand. "Why didn't you tell me, Alan?"

"For many reasons, but mainly because I didn't want you to worry and live in fear. You had enough to be frightened about in the past."

"You're referring to my sleepwalking."

"Yes," he answered, rubbing the pad of his thumb across the back of her hand.

"It's a strange thing, but I don't think I have done that for some time."

"You haven't since we left London." He drew her onto his lap.

"I am sorry, Alan."

"For what, my Little Rose?" He kissed her neck.

"For my distrust of you and Edith. It was petty of me."

"I know something of suspicion." He drew back and smiled, and even in the gloomy light of the tent, his eyes gleamed like fine sapphires. "You've shown me that love and trust go together."

"You've helped me learn as well." She smiled.

Still holding her, he drew back an arm's length. "I have? What might that be?"

"That to vanquish my fears, I must face them."

"That's true. We don't defeat our enemies by retreating from them. But I have learned something also. You have taught me to trust, Gwyneth."

He pulled her to him again and kissed her fully on the mouth.

"My lord and lady, your water is ready," Edith called. She and Robert stood at the flap of the tent.

"Leave the bathing utensils. Lady Gwyneth and I will assist each other," Alan said.

* * * *

One week later, Alan lay in his bed in Wykston keep. Outside, the wind blew, and he wondered if the snow was still falling outside. It didn't matter. Cuddled under his thick quilt, Gwyneth safe and asleep in his arms, he felt as content as a cat before a kitchen hearth, and he didn't plan to move from his bedchamber for a long time.

He felt Gwyneth's fingers laced with his. "Are you awake?" she asked, her voice still heavy with sleep.

"Yes," he answered, kissing her cheek.

She turned to him slowly as she stretched languorously, arching her back and extending her limbs. "Good morrow, love."

"A good morrow to you, too." He propped himself up on his elbow. "Did you rest well?"

"Never better." She giggled, and her silver eyes sparkled with merriment. "I see that I didn't wander either."

"No, you didn't." He chuckled. "That's because you cannot bear to leave me."

Her eyes took on a serious expression. "No, I can't, though when I was wandering the forest and my thoughts became black, I was afraid I might never see you again."

"I'm not that easily killed. Remember, sweetheart, assassins have been trying to be rid of me since I was a boy."

"Don't speak of it so lightly, Alan." She stroked the slope of his jaw. "I don't want to be a widow."

"No?" He raised his eyes, mocking surprise. "A widow has powerful status. You'd be mistress of your own destiny with no master to whom you must answer," he joked.

"You would leave me with no coin, a burned village, and the hostile Scots at my back door?"

His hand settled on her breast. "You have charmed other enemies."

He kissed her passionately, taking her breath away. He surfaced, and his lips traveled to her neck while his fingers played over her breasts, fanning the desire quickly building within her.

"Yes, love, but you would not want another man to raise our child."

His hand stilled, and he pulled away, staring at her in wonderment. Then he took her into his arms again and kissed her deeply. Breaking the kiss, he said, "When?"

She laughed and nuzzled his neck. "When what? Do you want to know when your child was conceived, or when he'll make his appearance into the world?"

He kissed her temple. "Uh, both, I suppose."

She ran her fingers through his thick sable hair. "I think I conceived the day we went to the spring in the woods."

"Yes, it was a magical time." He lay back down beside her.

"The babe will make his appearance in June."

"His appearance? How can you be so sure it will be a boy?"

"Shall we wager on it then?"

"Yes, but after we make some more magic." He pulled her close, covering her face with kisses.

A hot wave of desire rippled over her and her body primed in eager anticipation.

"Oh, Gwyneth, I want you so much."

"And I want you."

He paid homage to her nipples, sucking them until she was gasping and moaning, and her back arched. Then he found her wet nether lips and caressed them delicately, giving special attention to her pleasure spot.

The exquisite tension built in her body, drawing her tight. She lifted her hips, pressing her moist flesh into his fingers as her breath came in harsh, rapid gasps.

She felt her blood pounding in her ears when he slipped his finger inside her and stroked her wet sheath while still teasing her pleasure spot. Her muscles grasped it tightly, and she felt the exquisite drumming beat in her belly as her climax broke over her.

As her pleasure ebbed, she took hold of his penis and stroked him, hearing his sharp intake of breath. She continued her caresses as he jolted his hips up, increasing the friction of her palm against his rigid length.

Alan then rolled her on her side and spooned behind her. In one quick thrust, he entered her from the back. With one hand he teased her breasts and with the other he caressed her folds again. She pressed her buttocks against him as he rammed forward in a frantic rhythm, sliding into her hot passage and inciting her senses.

Alan turned her over on her back and lifted her buttocks. At this angle she felt his thrusts rubbing against her pleasure spot and his penetration extended deeper. He drove even harder, and she felt him come. Gwyneth climaxed again--this time harder and stronger than the first.

He released her hips and rested on top of her, and she felt his length deep inside of her.

"I love you, Gwyneth," he murmured.

“And I love you. Thank you for saving my life, love,” she whispered.
“I saved my own, too,” he answered. “Without you, I have no life.”

Epilogue

Wykston Manor 1074

Alan at her side, Gwyneth sat on a bench beneath the big beech in the garden. She held her newest babe, Enid, in her arms. Above them, the keep, now flanked by additional wings, and other buildings rose like a dignified sentinel behind, maintaining the peace for as far as the eye could see beyond its crenellated curtain wall.

Below them, the village, rebuilt of red sandstone and slate, lay quiet and without the bustle of commerce. Alan had declared this Midsummer's Day one of rest and frolic for all, and everyone in Wykston joined celebration at the castle. The June sun bestowed warm, vibrant kisses on them all and provoked a lovely fragrance from the new roses, rambling profusely on the garden wall.

At the edge of the walk, Gwyneth's dark-haired son, Richard, played with Dog. The dignified abbess, who had made a rare visit to Wykston, carried on a lively discussion with Father Rollo, Father Alfred, and Lord Warroc as they sat beside the bed of gillyflowers.

Since his reconciliation with Alan, her father-in-law had traveled from Normandy to Wykston every other year. Gwyneth and her husband visited him on the alternate years. There they also stayed at their estate in Normandy, which had partially financed the rebuilding of the village.

Edith, rewarded with a title and land for her courage and loyalty, now lived close to the Scottish border.

Watching the flow of drink, Gwyneth laughed to herself, thinking that many a husband would awake tomorrow with a splitting headache.

Gwyneth stood, hardly able to contain her joy as Ranulf and Aelveva approached. Recently knighted for his great service to the king, Alan's old friend had become the new lord of Whitmere Hall.

Aelveva, resplendent in her yellow tunic, held Dunstan's hand. The boy had grown a great crop of sandy hair and was the image of his father. Their newest child, Maud, nestled in Aelveva's arms. Garth was now Alan's foster, and the boy ran ahead of his family, his red hair unmistakable in the bright sun.

"Well, old friend, I see that Lady Gwyneth won yet another wager," Ranulf slapped Alan on the back.

Alan laughed. "She has indeed. She predicts the sex of our children with uncanny accuracy every time. It's a plot to pick my pockets."

"For shame, my lord." She turned to him, an irrepressible smile tugging at her lips. "It's you who always chooses the stakes."

Alan's violet-blue eyes sparkled. "I do at that."

"What is your prize this time?" Aelveva asked. "Ranulf gave me a topaz ring

when Maud arrived.” She lifted her hand to display the large honey-colored gem.

Alan took a leather pouch from his belt. He loosened the thongs, took her hand, and inverted the little sack, allowing the contents to fall in the hollow of Gwyneth’s palm.

She stared down at a Celtic cross in disbelief. The piece was exactly like the one with which she had bought her freedom. Tears welled in her eyes. Her heart filled with sentiment, her words came with difficulty. She looked up at him. “How? Where?” she asked shaking her head.

Alan offered her his handkerchief. “After Easter when I went to Edinburgh for the king to negotiate a truce with Malcolm, I stopped in a shoemaker’s shop for a pair of shoes for you. The shoemaker wore the cross round his neck. I knew how much your father’s gift meant to you and the reason you no longer possessed it. I asked if I could buy the piece from him.”

“Did he have a scar?” Gwyneth asked excitedly.

“Yes, he did.” Alan eyes widened.

“Tosig!” Gwyneth exclaimed as she sank to the bench once again.

“Correct again,” Alan said.

“When he realized I meant no harm, and I told him my wife bought her freedom with a cross just like the one he wore, he took it off and gave it to me. Tosig confessed how he came by it. He related that because of you, Gwyneth, he found a happy prosperous life, and the time had come to return the sacred symbol to its rightful owner. He recounted that he was able to buy it back from the man to whom he sold it very soon after he set up shop. He felt it had given him good luck.”

She stood, and Alan slipped the cross over her head, careful not to wake the blond infant in her arms. “Thank you, love,” she whispered.

“That is not all Tosig said.” Alan dropped to his haunches and lifted another pouch, which he had left on the grass.

“So now you are finally going to let me see it,” she said.

“Yes, my Sweet Rose.” Alan withdrew a lovely pair of red leather shoes. “Tosig said to expect a pair every year at this time. He says he has found happiness with his wife, Morag, and wants to share his lot with the brave lass who gave him the courage to find a new lease on life.”

Gwyneth fingered the shoes. “As he did for me. I am glad the man found happiness.”

Lord Warroc had left his clerical friends and joined Richard. They both hurried toward Gwyneth. Dog followed, sniffing at their heels.

“Mother, I am hungry,” Richard announced.

Her father-in-law’s eyes twinkled, and he patted his middle. “So am I.”

“Very well then, let us begin to the feast.” Alan stood.

Gwyneth’s heart swelled with love. The three generations of men, Warroc, Alan, and Richard all resembled each other so strongly, there could be no mistaking they were related. Surrounded by friends and family, Gwyneth felt fortunate. Everyone whom she loved was here today.

“May I have the honor of holding my new granddaughter?” Warroc asked. “I never had a daughter, and I have a special fondness for little girls.”

“Then I give her to you with pleasure,” Gwyneth answered.

His chest swelling, Warroc, Lord of Raddon, took the tiny child into his muscled arms with heart-rending tenderness.

Everyone paraded across the verdant turf to the middle of the sunny inner bailey where tables that were groaning with food had been set for the hungry diners.

Alan and Gwyneth lagged back, holding hands.

“I have another surprise for you today,” her husband said.

She turned to him. “Oh, Alan, you know I cannot bear the suspense.”

“I won’t tease you then.” He drew her into his arms. “William has changed the penalty for witchcraft from death to banishment.”

She sighed. “Thanks be to heaven, my love. Though that threat has not hung over me for many years now, I feel happy for other poor souls who may still be accused.”

“Yes. You have not walked in your sleep since well before Richard was born.

“The abbess was right. She said that when I felt safe and had a family of my own, I would not roam about, looking for the one I had lost.”

Alan took her into his arms. His violet-blue eyes aglow, he whispered, “Want to make another wager?”

She giggled. “That depends on the stakes, my lord.”

“We could further enlarge the infirmary?”

“In that case, you are on and our next child will be another girl.”

“That would suit me well. Like my father, I have a fondness for females. Shall we seal the bargain then?”

She nodded, and Alan possessed her lips with a kiss that proclaimed his unending love and Gwyneth responded in kind.

The End