



Anne Ireland

• Trial by
Fire

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Ally smiled, picked up another suitcase, and carried it upstairs.

"Why do you always smell so sweet? Why does your skin have the perfume of flowers?"

Ally froze as she heard the whisper. The voice was a man's—a man talking to his lover.

Laughter and now, whispers! Ally's skin prickled as she stood on the threshold to her bedroom. The voice had seemed to come from this room. But, it couldn't have. She had been into the room; she knew it was empty. Perhaps one of the other rooms? Was it possible that someone had been squatting here?

Putting down her case, she walked along the hall and looked inside the other bedrooms. They were both neat and clean, as pristine as when the agent had showed her the cottage. No one was in the house. It was her imagination.

Ally went back to the bedroom. It was quite empty. She was alone in the house. She hadn't heard that whisper. It was all in her mind.

Perhaps it was the book beginning to take shape at last. The explanation was one she could live with, because it had happened occasionally in the past. Not whispers exactly, but thoughts that came out of the blue and were so insistent, so loud in her head that they might have been spoken.

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Prologue

It was almost time. Isolde could smell the fear on her own flesh. That was one of the worst things they had done to her so far, refusing her water for washing and clean linen. She hated the smell of her own body now, the stench of dried excrement, sweat, and fear.

She had spent the night in prayer, beseeching God to rescue her from this foul prison cell and the cruel men who tormented her in His name. At first, she had been bold, certain of her place in the world, and the rightness of her cause. She had laughed at the charge levied against her. She had believed in the justice of both God and man. Now, after days of torture, abuse and unbearable pain, she no longer believed in anything. Yet still she had prayed to her god. That he was not the god of these men who called upon her to repent of her sins lest her soul be damned for all eternity, she knew beyond doubting. Her god was a gentle god, the god of nature and all things beautiful, of goodness and light, and love.

Perhaps her god was the devil as these men claimed. Mayhap she was a disciple of Satan: a witch who used her powers to destroy life. They had questioned her over and over again, starving her, beating her, never letting her rest so she no longer knew what was true or what was false.

Isolde lifted her tear-stained face towards the tiny grill in the roof of her cell, the only source of light or air in the filthy dungeon. Why not offer her soul to the Lord of Darkness? She had never sought to do other than good and for that, she had been condemned to torture and the fire. Through a tiny crack in the ceiling above her, she could see a chink of light. It would soon be morning and then they would come for her.

"If I am the vile creature they have named me, take my soul," she muttered fiercely. For all their cruelty, they had not yet broken her spirit. "If God has deserted me, then let Satan come to my aid. Where are you, Beelzebub? Oh, horned creature, demon of darkness, whatever be Thy name. Guardian of Hell, I call on thee to save me!"

The sound of a heavy key in the lock of her cell made her start. She looked round as the man came into her cell, the sour, unclean smell of him turning her stomach sick. She knew him for her enemy. He had been determined to drag her down, bringing all his power and influence to work against her. A terrible fear gripped her, causing her to

pass water. She felt the hot sting of urine against her inner thighs and was shamed.

The priest carried an incense burner. He made the sign of the cross before her, wafting the pungent fumes into her face as though warding off evil. His harsh features were devoid of feeling or pity.

"Are you ready to confess your sins, witch?"

Isolde gathered the last shreds of her dignity. It was difficult to stand because they had placed hot irons to the soles of her feet in an attempt to force a confession of guilt from her.

"I am innocent of all the crimes of which I am accused," she replied. She had been beautiful when they brought her to this place. Even now, with her hair shorn and her lovely white skin blistered and festering with sores, her face retained enough of its former beauty to infuriate her tormentor. "I have always loved God and sought to do good to others," she said quietly. "Of this alone am I guilty. I am here because the jealousy of others has caused my downfall."

"So, still you dwell in vain pride." The priest stared at her with his dull, cold eyes. "You have broken the laws of God and man, witch. You shall pay the price for your wickedness in the fire."

Isolde raised her head, gazing into his eyes with proud defiance. Gathering all her strength, she spat into his face.

"Curse you!" she cried. "You are the evil one, not I. I curse you, priest, and your seed for all eternity! May you feel the pain I feel as I die. May your soul wither and die in the pit of Hell! May your soul never find peace."

The priest recoiled in horror as her spittle touched his skin, then hastily made the sign of the cross over his breast. Isolde laughed to see real terror in his eyes. He actually believed in her curse!

In a moment, the fear was replaced by hatred. He lifted his arm, summoning the others who had waited at the door, giving her a chance to make her confessions in private.

"The witch does not repent," he said in a voice filled with loathing. "Take her! Take her to the fire!"

Chapter One

Cambridgeshire 1998

Snow had been falling intermittently all day and was beginning to turn to slush, making driving conditions hazardous. Ally knew she ought to stop and find somewhere to stay the night. It was foolish to have set out at all in such atrocious weather, but she'd been impatient to reach the cottage before everywhere closed down for the Christmas holidays. She had been promised that the heating was on, the fridge stocked as she'd requested, and the phone working, but in Ally's experience, promises were often not worth the paper they were written on.

Especially promises made by a man to the woman he was supposed to cherish and protect. *To have and to hold... until death us do part.*

Oh, God! She mustn't let her thoughts drift that way, not here on this lonely road tonight. Ally fought down her rising panic. It was over. All of that was over. She had clawed her way back from the brink, and she wasn't going to let the grief and anger destroy her again.

She peered through the tiny space the wiper had cleared on the windscreen. Where the hell was she for goodness sake? She couldn't remember having come this way when Paul had driven her down to inspect the cottage a month ago. Had she taken a wrong turning somewhere? It wouldn't be surprising if she had missed a signpost in this weather.

She felt the car slide towards the side of the road and her heart skipped a beat. The road was slippery! It was black ice that had caused the accident two years previously; black ice and the fact Tony had been drinking too much.

Ally braked softly, her car sliding to a gentle halt in the country lay-by. She was trembling. It had been months before she could bring herself to get in a car again. A year before, she'd let Paul bully her into driving herself.

"You've got to do it, Ally," he'd told her. "Until you do, the nightmares won't stop. You've got to stop hiding from the truth. Tony is dead. He was responsible for the accident, not you. You've got to stop blaming yourself. You have to start living again. Stop thinking it would have been better if you had died that night."

"Oh, Tony..." Ally's eyes stung with tears as she leaned her head on the steering wheel. "I'm sorry. So sorry..."

Paul insisted she wasn't responsible, but Ally couldn't remember. She knew they'd been arguing all night at the party. She had accused Tony of cheating on her with Laura Baines, his agent and manager. He had denied it furiously, but Ally wouldn't let go. She'd kept on nagging at him, refusing to believe his excuses, so he'd started drinking too much. She'd driven him to it by her jealousy.

They'd been arguing when they left the party. Ally had wanted to drive. She had tried to snatch the keys from him, but he had held on to them.

"You're drunk!" she'd screamed at him. "You'll kill us both."

But of course he hadn't. He'd killed only himself – and his unborn son.

Ally couldn't remember what happened after they'd finally got in the car. She had no memory of Tony's expensive sports Cabriolet leaving the road and plunging into a tree. She remembered the fear of waking to bright hospital lights and pain. She'd been lucky, they told her some days later. Two cracked ribs, some bruising and a bang on the head were nothing. Not when you considered the way the front of the car had crumpled on the driver's side.

"It was probably the bump to your head that wiped out your memory," the doctor explained when she'd asked why she couldn't remember the accident. "It may come back in a few weeks, months or never. We don't know why amnesia is total in some cases and not in others."

She hadn't recalled anything. Nothing more, after screaming at Tony to let her drive.

Why hadn't she forced him to give up the keys? She should have done something. It was her fault Tony was dead, her fault she had lost the child they had both wanted so badly.

"I'm not saying you can't have more children, Mrs. Matthews, just that the accident damaged you and may make it more difficult for you to conceive again. Although, time is a great healer, of course. In a year or two – well, we shall see."

"I don't want another child. I don't deserve to have one."

Ally wasn't sure whether or not she had spoken the words aloud in the doctor's clinic. She had hardly been living at the time, drugged into a false state of calm and close to being a zombie.

"Oh, Tony... Tony..." Something inside her called out to him, trying to bring him back from the grave. She was still consumed with her guilt after all this time, still unable to find any real reason to live. If Paul had let her, she would probably have taken the easy way out. A handful of tablets and then oblivion.

"Excuse me!" Ally opened her eyes, blinking in the glare of headlamps. A car had pulled up behind her and a man was knocking at her window. "Are you all right? Did you break down or something?"

Ally wound her window down. *Tony! It was Tony.* She had willed him back from the afterlife.

"What's the matter? You look awful."

"Sorry." She blinked hard as her eyes began to focus properly. Of course it wasn't

Tony. There was a superficial likeness, but this man had darker hair and his features were more rugged—lived in. “Nothing is wrong. Except that I seem to have lost my way. I’m looking for Abbey Cottage. I’m sure I passed a sign for Lynston village a little while ago, but I can’t seem to find the turning for Monkshead.”

“You should have turned off to your right about a quarter of a mile back,” the man said. “If you’re really all right to drive, you can follow me. I’m going that way myself.”

“Thank you, that’s very good of you.” Ally smiled at him. He wasn’t really like Tony at all. It must have been a trick of the light. “I was thinking I might have to find somewhere to stop over night, but I would really like to get into the cottage tonight if I can.”

“You can turn out of here,” he said. “I’ll go slowly, because the roads are like ice. I thought you’d had an accident. Gave me a turn, to see you sitting so still, with your head against the wheel.” He gave her a wry look. “We must both be mad to be out on such a night.”

“Yes.” Ally allowed herself a brief smile. “Yes. I wanted to move in before everything closes down for Christmas, but I ought to have waited. I suppose I could have waited until after the holiday. It’s just that having taken the cottage, I was impatient to move in.”

He nodded but didn’t bother to answer. Ally watched as he returned to his car, then reversed out into the road and across it. She glanced both ways but there was no sign of any traffic, so she followed in his wake. He was keeping to his word, taking it very slowly. Ally wished he would go a little faster. For some reason the heater in her car wasn’t working very well. Her feet were freezing!

Even at her guide’s snail-like pace, it took only a few minutes to reach the cottage. Ally breathed a sigh of relief as she stopped the car in the driveway. Someone had left the porch light burning to welcome her.

She got out of the car and opened the boot, then turned as her guide came up to her. She could see he was tall and well built, more of an outdoor man than she’d taken him for at first. He was wearing a thick sheepskin jacket and a flat cap. Not at all like Tony, he was probably a farmer, she thought. It was farming country: the heart of the fens was how the estate agent had described it to her.

“Why don’t you unlock the door?” the stranger suggested. “I’ll cart these things in for you.”

Ally hesitated momentarily. They were in the middle of nowhere and this man was a stranger. He might be an axe murderer for all she knew! When Paul arrived for Christmas, he might stumble over her mutilated body.

Her imagination was working overtime again! Ally smiled inwardly. She hadn’t, three years previously, won the Bronze Dagger Award for the Best Thriller of the Year for nothing.

“Thank you,” she said. “You’re very kind. I would still be sitting there if you hadn’t turned up when you did.”

The stranger said nothing, merely lifting the first of her heavy cases and humping it towards the door. Ally turned the key in the lock and went in. It smelled warm. All

fears of finding the place damp, dark, and friendless faded as she heard the phone ring.

"Hello. Ally Matthews speaking."

"Ally?" Her brother's voice sounded as if he was just up the road instead of New York. "I was wondering if you had moved in yet. Everything all right, love?"

"I've just got here," she replied, "but the heating's on and the phone works, so yes, I think it will be fine."

"I've rung to tell you I shan't be down until late on Christmas day itself," Paul said. "Apparently there's another meeting here, which means I've had to cancel my flight and take a later one. A damned nuisance, but I can't get out of it."

"Don't worry about it," Ally said. "You know I love having you, but you don't have to fuss over me, Paul. I'm fine now. Honestly." The stranger had carried in the last of her things and was looking at her inquiringly. "Thank you," she said, hand over the mouthpiece. "You didn't tell me your name?"

"Brian," he said, and laid her car keys on the oak chest just inside the door. "Brian Forrester. I'm your nearest neighbour actually. I'll call in a couple of days to see how you're settling in."

"Who are you talking to?" Paul's voice said in her ear. She smiled and nodded at her helpful neighbour, then answered her brother as the front door closed firmly behind him. "I've just met my neighbour. I was lost actually, and he showed me the way and brought some stuff in for me."

"Oh, you must mean Brian Forrester," Paul said. "Decent sort of chap. Yes, you'll like him. His family owns most of the land round there, or at least they did until fifty or so years ago. I think they sold the manor off then, but he still owns a fair bit of land."

"He certainly seems friendly," Ally said. "It's been snowing all day, and the road was slippery. I'd stopped in a lay-by for a few minutes when he saw me and came to ask if I was okay."

"Snowing..." she could hear the concern in her brother's voice. "Well, at least you arrived safely."

"I'm fine. Honestly, Paul. How are things going over there?"

Paul Wyndham had one of the most brilliant minds in the computer software business. Ally smiled as she listened to him talking about the love of his life. He was thirty-five, divorced, and totally absorbed in his work. Sometimes she worried, because he went from one brief love affair to the next without seeming to become involved. She supposed he worried about her getting over Tony's death, in much the same way. They had been good friends as children, but had become closer over the past two years.

"This call must be costing a fortune," Ally said some ten minutes later. "And I have some food that needs to go in the freezer."

"Hint taken!" Paul's laughter warmed her. She could picture his gentle, intelligent face, eyes twinkling behind gold-rimmed spectacles, his always a little too long, soft brown hair falling over his brow. "I'll ring you when I arrive at Heathrow. Take care, love."

"You too, and Paul..."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"Me too," Paul replied. "See you soon, Ally."

Ally replaced the receiver. She glanced at the boxes and suitcases waiting for attention. Food into the freezer first, then a cup of tea, she thought and picked up her cooler bag.

She walked into the kitchen and sighed with pleasure. It was such a satisfactory room. Large enough to live in, with two pine dressers, a long table, a rocking chair set either side of the Aga, and a lovely American style fridge/freezer.

Ally and Tony had spent several months touring America, when he was recording folk music for his TV shows, and she had learned to appreciate the enormous storage space in these double cabinets. A glance inside, revealed the eggs, milk, butter and bacon she had requested, together with a good selection of salad and tiny red tomatoes.

She popped one into her mouth, smiling in pleasure as she tasted the sweet yet tart flavour on her tongue. Lovely!

It seemed as though the woman the estate agents had recommended was reliable after all. Ally hadn't met Ellen Walters yet, but the house appeared to be spotless, and there was a faint, sweet perfume in the air. Not the synthetic perfume of commercial fresheners. No, this was like spring flowers. Lily of the valley or roses, the old-fashioned kind. Ally glanced round the room in search of the source, but couldn't see anything.

She would probably work on the table in here. She'd had a very efficient set up in her London flat, but she hadn't been able to write there. In fact, she hadn't written a novel since the accident. She'd managed a few short stories, but nothing serious, nothing that gave her any satisfaction. Tony had left her everything, of course, and she'd had a little money of her own, so it hadn't mattered financially. Yet she wouldn't be at peace with herself until she was working properly again. Writing was something she needed to do the way other people smoked or took soft drugs: it was a compulsion, as necessary as oxygen to her well being.

Ally had been on the verge of making it to the very top, when the accident had pulled the proverbial rug from under her. Sara Tomson, her agent, had been mentally ringing the till bells for the crime novel she had been planning.

"This is going to be the '*Big one*', I can feel it in my water," Sara had phoned her two days before Ally's world had collapsed. "I've already had offers from a publisher who wants to take you over. No more short print runs and minuscule advances. I'm talking big bucks here, love."

"Hold on, Sara," Ally had laughed. "I've only finished one chapter. Besides, you know I like having Edwin as my editor. I'm not sure I want to change."

"You leave that to me," Sara said. "I have plans for you, my darling. I want to see you at the top of the best-seller lists, where you belong."

She had let Sara down badly. Ally felt guilty about that, as she did about so many things. It was partly because she wanted to pay Sara back for her continuing faith in her that Ally had decided to rent the cottage for three months. She needed a change, somewhere with no memories, no reminders. Perhaps then, she could get down to some

real work.

Paul had always said, she should sell her flat and buy something different, but he didn't understand. The flat was hers, not part of Tony's legacy. She had kept it after they married, because Tony thought it would be useful when they needed to stay in London overnight.

"It isn't big enough for us to live here," he'd said, rather amused by its neatness and order. "Besides, I prefer to live in the country."

Tony's home was a huge and rambling Tudor style manor house in Sussex. It had been the first real extravagance he'd splashed out on after his shows went to the top of the ratings. He'd built a fantastic recording studio in one wing, and invited his friends to come down whenever they felt like it. Because he was a generous host, they took him up on his offer in droves. Sometimes, Ally had wished for a little peace and quiet, a few days when the two of them could be alone.

"This place would be like a morgue without people," he'd told her when she suggested it might be nice not to have visitors for a while. "Besides, I like my friends around me. I like to make music."

Ally hadn't sold the house, though she'd had several offers. It was currently let to an American family. She hadn't been near the place since Tony died. She probably would sell it one day.

Ally drank her tea and left her cup in the sink, then went back into the hall and picked up the first of her cases. It was heavy and she had to drag it up the stairs, one by one.

The bedroom she had chosen for herself had a good view out over the surrounding countryside. It was rather flat and not particularly inspiring to look at, though she was reliably informed the fen skies could be beautiful at times. At the moment, of course, it was too dark to see anything outside.

The room was furnished with heavy, antique oak furniture. The bed had been part of what attracted Ally in the first place. It was a four-poster with heavy, damask silk curtains in a pretty shade of turquoise blue, shot through with gold stars. There was a canopy of the same material overhead, and an elegant armchair set by the window, which had been recovered, in the same material. The wardrobes, chests and writing desk were probably Victorian, she imagined, but the chest at the end of the bed looked much older. Perhaps fourteenth or fifteenth century, unless it was a fake.

She ran her hand over its smooth surface. It felt genuine. The wood had a lovely smooth feel beneath her fingers, and the carving was rather crude and rubbed with age.

Ally dumped her suitcase and turned back to fetch the second. As she did so, she caught a breath of the perfume she'd smelt downstairs. It was much stronger here, but still very fresh and light, the sort of perfume a young girl might wear. There were no flowers in the room, except a little arrangement of silk roses. She bent to sniff them, but they had no scent. Perhaps it was furniture polish.

As she went down to the hall, Ally heard someone laugh. It was a pleasant sound, youthful and joyous. Where had it come from? The door to the sitting room was open. She walked in, half expecting to see a child at play, because it had surely been a child's

laughter. The room was unoccupied, but the tiny, latticed window had been left open a little at the top. Of course, that was why she had heard the laughter. Sound carried a long way at night. Her neighbour probably had children.

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Perhaps it was the book beginning to take shape at last. The explanation was one she could live with, because it had happened occasionally in the past. Not whispers exactly, but thoughts that came out of the blue and were so insistent, so loud in her head that they might have been spoken.

It was probably her muse trying to get in touch, telling her it was time to get down to work. Ally had never told anyone—not even Sara or Paul—but sometimes when she was writing, she felt as if she was given ideas from a being outside herself. Paul would have laughed and said she'd always been imaginative as a child, and Sara would have wondered if there was any publicity mileage in the idea.

Ally laughed at her thoughts. At least the whispers were creative. Already she was seeing a girl in her mind. A very pretty girl, innocent and not very old, perhaps ten or eleven. She was wearing a long white shift and her feet were bare. Ally saw her running through a meadow of summer flowers. The kind of meadow that was common before agriculture became so intensive. She was running and laughing, looking over her shoulder at a young lad who chased after her. He was probably her brother, because they looked a little alike.

Ally blinked, bringing her mind back to the task in hand. She really wanted to get her things unpacked before she even began to think about starting the book. Besides, her thriller had no place for a young girl. It was set in New York and featured a young female lawyer who found herself defending the boss of a big crime syndicate.

This girl had probably lived centuries ago, Ally thought, as she fetched up the last of her cases and unlocked them. She hung the jeans and loose tops, which were her favourite working clothes side by side with a couple of smart suits, a softly-pleated skirt and a long, black velvet evening skirt with a sequined jacket. She had bought it specially and would wear it for the first time for dinner on Christmas night with Paul.

Ally stroked the velvet, smiling to herself as she imagined the dinner she was planning to cook for them. She imagined them sitting by a log fire afterwards, Paul on

the settee, her on the rug, leaning her head against his knees. She saw herself looking up at him, then he bent to kiss her on the lips. A feeling of horror went through Ally, as she realized the way her thoughts were taking her.

What on earth had put such an idea into her head? Paul was her elder brother. He was kind, considerate, and very dear to her but she'd been picturing him as a lover.

For the first time since Tony had died, Ally was aware of a need to make love. The physical side of their marriage had always been special. She supposed it was the aching hunger his kisses had always stirred inside her, which had kept them together even after the rest of it began to fall apart.

It was Tony she'd been thinking of—of course, Ally reassured herself. It had become harder and harder to see Tony's face over the past two years, so she'd substituted the face of the person she loved most these days. The explanation was quite simple, but the mind slip had shocked her more than she liked.

"You need to get a life, Ally Matthews," she scolded herself, as she went into the kitchen and took some bacon from the fridge. "Paul was right. It's time to leave the past behind."

"The past is a part of you... You can never be free..."

Ally shivered, feeling cold all over suddenly. She didn't like this much and wished it would stop. Whispers... Thoughts trapped in her subconscious... Whatever. It was scary.

She took her bacon sandwich to the kitchen table, then opened her briefcase. She took out a pen and lined pad, and at the top of the page, she wrote in a firm hand. 'COME TOMORROW.' A thriller by Ally Mathews.

Chapter one.

She took a bite of her sandwich and made a few notes. The heroine's name was Isobel. She had dark hair and eyes, was petite, gutsy and quick to wound with her rapier-like speech.

Ally began to write swiftly, the words flowing out of her as she introduced her heroine to the crime boss, with a few pithy words that brought a smile to its creator's lips.

"That's the stuff, girl," Ally murmured. "Give it to him straight."

Ally wrote two pages, then closed the pad. That was enough for the moment. In the morning, she would set up her laptop and then she could begin in earnest. It had been a longish drive down from London, and she was sleepy. She glanced at the kitchen clock. Only nine-thirty, that was early for her. Perhaps it was the change of air.

She stood up, yawned, and stretched her shoulders. She would have a nice relaxing bath and then get a good night's sleep.

Chapter Two

Lynston Manor 1330

"You are no longer a child." Isolde's nurse scolded her sharply. "It is not fitting that you run about like a common wench. Look at your feet, girl! What would the master say if he saw you like this?"

Isolde looked down at her bare feet. The mud had dried on them, caking between her toes. She wriggled them, smothering her desire to laugh out loud. Everyone knew Lord Mortimer would not bother to glance at her twice. She was the least important member of his household, the daughter of his kinsman by a serving wench. No, he would not deign to notice her. Now if it had been Robin—but Robin loved her as she was. He was always telling her she smelled of flowers.

"The master does not care what I do," Isolde said, defiantly. "I do not like to wear shoes. They hurt my feet."

"You should be grateful the master has given you shoes," grumbled her nurse. "You were bastard born. You should be down on your knees thanking God for your good fortune. Not many would have taken you in after your mother died in her sin, unrepentant and unshriven."

Isolde considered this. Why was it her mother's sin only and not equally that of the man who had planted his seed in her belly? It seemed unfair that a woman should bear all the blame, but she knew it was the way of the world. In the eyes of the church, women were often cast as sinful creatures, who must cover their heads lest their beauty tempt a man to evil.

She was fortunate to live in Lord Mortimer's house, of course, even if everyone slighted her. Except Robin. He was always kind to her. It was because of Robin she had not been put to work in the kitchens when she was eight. She was thirteen now, and beginning to blossom into a lovely young woman, her breasts small but firm, clearly visible beneath the soft material of her kirtle.

"You are my kinswoman." Robin had declared when his mother had suggested she should earn her bread by working in the manor kitchens. "My family does not do menial work."

Surprisingly, Lord Mortimer had supported his son's stand against his mother. So, Isolde had been left to run wild, coming and going much as she pleased with no one to censure her except her nurse, Mairie, and occasionally Robin.

"What shall I do?" Isolde had asked her young champion once, after he'd chided her for not attending to her nurse. "What is my place in your world?"

"You are my companion," Robin Mortimer replied, a smile playing at the corners of his generous mouth. He leaned towards her, soft brown hair falling forward over his brow. "You will be taught to sew, to play the harp, and make cordials. Then you will be fit to take your place as my wife."

"Am I going to wed you?" Isolde had stared at him in wonder.

She did not think the idea would please his father. She was a sort of cousin to him, even if her mother had been of common stock. But it was an unequal match. The church frowned on such marriages: it set a bad example and taught others to look above their station.

Isolde went regularly to the tiny church on Lord Mortimer's estate. She listened to the priests in awe and was a little afraid of them. They seemed such stern, cold men with their talk of hellfire and damnation. Of course, most of what they said was in Latin. How the common folk were supposed to understand, Isolde could not tell, but she knew enough Latin to follow the scriptures.

She could read, because Robin had taught her.

"My father says it is not fitting for a wench to read Latin," he'd told her when they began their lessons in the hayloft above one of Lord Mortimer's barns. "But I think a wife should be able to talk about books and music to her husband, so I am going to teach you to read."

Books were rare and precious things. Isolde knew that most of them were written and owned by the monks or the University. It was they who held most of the power in the land. Even rich, important men like Robin's father had a healthy respect for these men. Isolde had heard tell of a case some years earlier, where the Abbot of the Lynston monastery had fallen ill, after being asked to tutor the son of a great lord's mistress. On his deathbed, the Abbot had named her as a witch. He had confessed, she had bewitched him and he had lain with her, declaring that the wasting sickness which had come upon him was God's judgment for his sin. The woman had been put to the test, found guilty, and burned to death.

Isolde's nurse had made her go with her to watch the execution of the wicked creature, but Robin had rescued her, taking her away before the fire was lit. They had spent the day playing by the river instead. But the stench of the burning had reached them even there, and a black cloud had lingered in the sky for almost two days.

"Why did they burn her?" Isolde asked. "Was it truly her fault that the Abbot took sick and died?"

"I doubt it," Robin replied, looking thoughtful. "I dare swear she had enemies. They destroyed her because they were jealous of her beauty."

"But could not her lord have saved her?"

"He might have been denounced as a warlock or a wizard had he tried," Robin said

and frowned. "Or perhaps he had simply tired of her and did not want to save her."

"Are men faithless then?"

"Some are." Robin laughed and reached out to touch her anxious face. "Never fear, little one. I shall always love you. You are my true love, Isolde. I shall never, never desert you." He had knelt at her feet then on the riverbank, his hand on his heart. "May my soul know eternal damnation if I ever fail you. May I never rest easy in my grave if I love another better than you."

"No! Do not say that," Isolde pleaded. "You must not, even in jest."

"I was not jesting."

Sometimes the intensity of Robin's love frightened her. She loved him too, but she felt instinctively that this passion of his could bring him only grief. He was so sure of himself and of his place in the world, but he was still only a youth. Five years her senior, she sometimes thought he was younger, less worldly than she.

"You do love me, Isolde? You do want to be my wife?"

"I love you with all my heart."

Isolde lifted her face for his kiss. His mouth had been warm and sweet on hers yet passionless. He had been but thirteen that day and she just eight.

"With this kiss, I seal the bond between us," Robin Mortimer had vowed. "You are mine, Isolde, for all eternity."

Isolde shivered in the cool breeze. She looked to the open door from the courtyard, blinking as she struggled to bring her thoughts back from that precious, sunlit day.

"So there you are!" The woman's voice was harsher than Mairie's had ever been. "My lord wishes to speak with you."

Isolde stared at her. "The master has sent for me?"

"Stop gawping like a simpleton," Lady Ellen snapped. "And do as you are bid."

Ellen Mortimer was a thin-faced, sour woman. She had given her husband only one living child, though another eight had died soon after their births. Her health was poor, her skin yellowed by a sickness the physicians could not cure. Beneath her wimple, her hair had turned grey and was falling out in patches, though she was but five and thirty years. Married for twenty years to a man who had used her as a brood mare, taking his pleasures elsewhere, she was as bitter as she was sickly.

"You look like a common village slut!" The Lady Ellen made a face of disgust, which caused Isolde to hang her head in shame. "Clean yourself at once. And put on a fresh tunic to cover your kirtle. Have you no modesty, girl?"

Isolde's cheeks burned. Mairie was always telling her not to forget to wear her outer gown, but she found it more comfortable to wear only the loose-fitting kirtle.

"I am sorry, my lady. I forgot."

Isolde scurried to her chamber, which was no more than a tiny cell behind the Lady Ellen's solar. It contained her mattress and blanket, and a carved oak chest Robin had given her to store her clothes. She had two plain kirtles for everyday wear and one of a rich blue cloth. In her chest, there were three tunics of varying quality, her shifts and two girdles. One of these was fashioned of fine leather, the others of thread woven with beads.

She took out her best tunic, which was a simple outer gown with an opening for her head to go through and slits down the sides, so the material of her kirtle showed through. Next, she tied her best leather girdle about her waist and slipped her feet into leather shoes, finely stitched with bright threads. She did not waste time in washing, for she had bathed in the river that morning, but pulled a plain white wimple over her hair and fastened it with an embroidered band.

The headdress covered her pale gold hair which fell to her waist in soft waves, completely. Robin said it was a sin to hide such glory, but Isolde knew it made her look modest, and she dare not present herself before Lord Mortimer with her head uncovered. It would not be fitting.

Isolde's heart was racing wildly as she hurried down to the main hall, where she knew she would find the master. It was almost noon. He would have eaten a simple meal of pottage and bread at half past eleven, which was the time he always returned – either from the hunt or an inspection of his lands, and would now be ready for the day's accounting from his steward.

Isolde hesitated as she entered the hall. It seemed that the master had lingered over his meal. Besides the usual pottage, dishes of meat and game had been served. Lord Mortimer had two guests. One of whom was clearly a priest by his shaven head and simple gown.

She glanced at her hands, praying they were clean. They were. It was only her feet that had been caked with mud as she came from the river.

Walking slowly towards the table where the men lingered over their wine and nuts, Isolde felt her heart flutter. Why had she been summoned here? What could the master want with her?

He glanced up as she approached, heavy brows knitting in a frown as he saw her. His cold eyes studied her in silence for a moment, before he turned to the man sitting at his right hand.

"Here is the girl, my lord."

The man thus addressed was dressed much like the priest, but his outer gown was of the finest quality, fashioned of gold and purple cloth and trimmed with squirrel fur. Isolde wondered if he might be a bishop, though he did not wear his mitre at table but went bare headed like her master. She was never invited to sup at Lord Mortimer's table, taking her own meals with either the Lady Ellen or her nurse. Yet she knew her master often entertained the great men of the land in his house. And this man was important. She understood that from the deference shown him by her master.

The man's eyes fixed on her. They were a curious light blue, but not unkind. He seemed more mellowed, more approachable than the priest who glared at her from his position at Lord Mortimer's left hand. He reminded her of the priests who preached at her on Sundays, his eyes cold and accusing, as if he could see her soul and found it wanting.

"What is your name, mistress?"

Isolde turned her gaze on the man with the kind eyes. "Isolde, sir. I am told I was called after my mother."

"Ah yes, your mother." The man nodded. "How old are you, Isolde of Lynston?"

"I am thirteen, sir."

"Are you a modest girl? Are you clean and decent in your habits—and do you fear God as you ought?"

"I—I believe so, sir."

She heard a tutting sound from the priest and glanced at him nervously. It was clear he disapproved of her. Her heart fluttered as she returned her gaze to the other man. Why was he asking her all these questions? He was looking at her so oddly, it made her feel strange.

"You believe so?" There was a sudden gleam of amusement in his eyes. "Do you not know, Isolde?"

"I try to be all that I should, sir," she answered truthfully. "But there are those who say that I could do better."

"Ah, I see." He nodded thoughtfully. "Then perhaps it is time. Yes, Mortimer. I believe it is time for the girl to leave your household."

"Leave this house?" Isolde was startled. Her troubled gaze flew to her master's face. "Am I to be sent away from here, my lord?"

What had she done? Why was she to be banished? If they sent her away, she would not be able to see Robin. Her life would be over.

"Be quiet, girl," Lord Mortimer growled. "Listen to what the bishop has to tell you."

"But why?" Isolde cried. "What have I done?"

"It is the duty of women to be obedient," remarked the priest piously. "Silence is a virtue to be coveted. You speak only when spoken to, wench."

"No, no, Brother Friedrich, you frighten her." Bishop Walden smiled down at her. "It pleases me that you have been happy in this house, Isolde, but now it is time for you to leave."

"Where am I to go, sir?" Again, she was conscious of the priest's disapproval. No doubt he thought she should accept her duty without question.

"To live with the Sisters of Charity. Their house is in the north of England, not far from my own home. I have decided you will spend three years with them. They will teach you many things, child. After that, a marriage will be arranged for you. I have already begun the negotiations for your contract. Your husband will be Sir Henry March. You are a fortunate young woman, Isolde. Not many girls of your birth have the chance to marry well. It is only because Lord Mortimer begged me to intercede for you that this honour has been granted you."

Isolde looked down at the floor. She did not know how to answer him. Her heart rebelled at the idea of being sent away from her beloved Robin, but her head told her that she was privileged to be given this chance. With the nuns she would learn to improve herself. And marriage to a man of good birth was more than she was entitled to expect, but she loved Robin! How could she bear to leave him?

"Have you nothing to say, girl?"

Isolde raised her head, pride in her face. "I must thank you for your generosity, my Lord Bishop," she said in her sweet, clear voice. "Had I the choice, I would stay here,

but I am my master's property to dispose of as he chooses. I must be obedient to him in this as in all things."

"Impudent wench!" Lord Mortimer glared at her. "You deserve a whipping for your insolence."

"Nay, my lord." Bishop Walden hid his amusement as he laid a restraining hand on Mortimer's arm. "She has an honesty I find refreshing. And she does not seek to defy you. Only to express her thoughts."

"That is sin enough," remarked the priest sourly. "A bastard born wench should hold her tongue before her betters."

Isolde looked at him. Why did he dislike her so? What had she done to make him look at her like that, as though she carried the mark of evil on her brow.

"Wenches are for bedding, not for thinking," Lord Mortimer growled. "I crave forgiveness, sir. I must have been over-lenient with the wench."

Bishop Walden frowned. "In this case, I disagree with both you and Brother Friedrich. The girl has intelligence. I like that. She pleases me. You have done well by her, Mortimer."

"If she pleases you..." Lord Mortimer shrugged, but the priest pulled a sour face.

"She does." The bishop smiled at her again. "You may go now, mistress. You will be ready to leave with me at dawn tomorrow."

Isolde curtsied low, her head modestly bent. She had discovered she liked the bishop. He was quite old, of course, perhaps as much as three and thirty, but a large, well-favoured man, with eyes that seemed to be laughing at the world.

Dismissed from the hall, Isolde turned towards Lady Ellen's apartments. It was time for her mistress to take the medicine the physicians had prepared for her. It was very powerful and must be measured, drop by drop, or it might kill instead of easing the patient's pain.

"Isolde!" She felt her arm grabbed by a strong hand. At eighteen, Robin Mortimer was already a skilled swordsman. He had been taught to fight with a variety of fearsome weapons by a master, here in the courtyard of his father's house. "Where are you going?"

"To your lady mother, sir."

"What's this?" Robin frowned. "So formal, Isolde?"

"Please allow me to pass, sir."

"You are angry. What is wrong? Why do you look at me that way?"

Isolde replied with a toss of her head. "Your father is sending me away. You might have told me first, instead of letting me learn it from a stranger."

"Sending you away? Where?" It was clear from his expression that he knew nothing of this. His grip tightened on her arm, his fingers bruising her skin. "Tell me at once!"

Some of her anger faded as she saw how disturbed he was by the news. She explained what had taken place, and saw the flash of anger in his eyes.

"You should have refused to leave!"

"Would it have served if I had?"

Robin gazed down into her clear eyes. He could never quite decide on their colour

for it changed with her mood, sometimes seeming blue, sometimes turquoise. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but he could swear they were a brilliant green just then.

"No, I suppose Father would not listen to you," he admitted. "But I shall make him listen to me. I shall tell him you are to be wife to no man but me."

"He will not listen," Isolde said with calm certainty. She had always known in her heart it would come to this. Robin had always loved her, but he would find another. When she had gone from here, he would forget her as was the way of men. At least, she prayed he would, for if it were otherwise he would be miserable, and so then would she. "Lord Mortimer will never allow us to wed."

"You are mine. I shall never give you up. If they send you away from me, I shall follow and pluck you from wherever you are. Nothing and no one shall stop me!"

"Oh, Robin," she whispered, tears squeezing on to her dark gold lashes. "Do not cause yourself such pain, my dear one. Accept it now and let me go."

Robin seized her, pulling her close to him. She could smell the musk of his body after a hard training session at arms. It mingled with the scent of leather from his jerkin and the sweet oil he had rubbed into his skin that morning. The scent of him was familiar and dear to her, but as his mouth took hungry possession of hers, the musk filled her nostrils and she found herself choking.

She could not breathe! It was a strange feeling of foreboding that gripped her, making her chest tight and painful. This must not happen! She had always known their love was impossible. Forbidden. It could only bring pain and suffering for them both.

With a tremendous effort she broke free of him.

"You must not," she cried. "You will cause trouble for us both by this stubbornness. Accept the truth, Robin. We shall never be wed. Your father has decided otherwise, and he has the power to do anything he will with us both. You must obey him, as surely as I."

"I shall never give you up. I swear it by all that I hold sacred."

"Then you will ruin us both."

Isolde felt the icy chill spread through her. Robin loved her. He loved her so much he would give his own life for her. Yet as she gazed up into his eyes she knew with a clear, cold certainty that he would be the cause of her death.

"You will ruin us both," she whispered. Then she turned and walked away, leaving him to stare after her in bewilderment and dismay.

Chapter Three

Ally awoke refreshed and full of energy. The previous night she'd fallen into a deep sleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. She had a vague suspicion she'd been dreaming, but it must have been pleasant, because she was feeling wonderful.

Dressing in a soft navy tracksuit, she went downstairs and drank a glass of fresh orange juice in the kitchen. She glanced out of the window and saw that the snow had cleared, though the trees were still covered with a frosting of white and the ground looked hard.

Ally went out into the back garden behind the cottage. It was a stretch of rough pasture, which eventually led to the river. The landscape was very flat, almost treeless, but walking round to the front, she saw a wide green, which had a gentle slope down to a pond. There were several stubby willows edging the water, and at the far end, a rather magnificent oak tree presiding majestically over the whole. Beyond it was the back entrance to Lynston, but because of the high wall and trees surrounding the estate, it was impossible to see what lay beyond.

When she'd asked the agent what was hidden in the trees, he'd told her. "Actually it's a rather lovely Georgian house. I believe, there was an Abbey somewhere around here once, and a manor house, but they're supposed to have been destroyed by fire during the War of the Roses. At least, that's what it says in the record books—though there are vague stories of a curse."

"What kind of a curse?"

"That's all I know," he'd admitted with a rueful smile. "Just a curse on the family who lived there at the time, I suppose."

Ally would have liked to hear more of what promised to be a fascinating story, but the estate agent couldn't tell her.

"There are always stories like that about old houses and ruins," Paul had pointed out with a smile. "And they are all nonsense."

"I dare say most would agree with you," the agent had said. "The new owners of Lynston don't seem to be bothered—but the Forresters had their share of tragedy. Some folk hereabouts put it down to the curse."

Remembering his words, Ally thought about the man who'd helped her the previous

evening. Was it his family who had been haunted by tragedy up at the house, or was he just a relation? He'd told Ally he was her closest neighbour. Looking about her, she saw smoke coming from a chimney some distance along the road towards the village. The house itself was hidden by a clump of large trees and a bend in the road.

Ally decided to go for a run in that direction. It would give her an appetite and sharpen her mind, before she settled down to work. Besides, she was curious about her neighbour's house.

A quick sprint up the road brought her level with what was quite a large, well designed and very modern building. No mock Tudor beams here. Instead, it was a rather interesting combination of brickwork and glass, which had been built on various levels.

Ally stood on the grass verge opposite the gravel drive, indulging her curiosity. One level of the house had been built over a huge garage; the doors were wide open and she could see a Land Rover and two vintage cars besides the saloon Brian Forrester had been driving the previous evening. There were no visible signs of children ever having played in the garden, no swings, bikes or balls left lying around. Somehow, it didn't look as if a family lived there. Besides, it wasn't close enough for her to hear the children, even if they were playing outside.

Ally continued her run, returning the same way some fifteen minutes later. As she approached the driveway, Brian Forrester's car backed out of the garage. He saw her and waved. She returned the greeting but didn't stop. She was eager to get back to the cottage and start work.

Two cups of coffee and a thick slice of toast and marmalade later, Ally opened her laptop and switched on. She created a new file and typed in the chapter heading, then reached for her pad, reading through the first two pages. She frowned as she noticed she'd misspelt Isobel twice. Why had she written Isolde?

Flipping over to the second page, she was puzzled to discover she'd apparently begun to make notes for a historical novel. When had she done that? She couldn't recall making notes like these. Reading through them, she discovered they were for a story about a girl called Isolde who had lived in the fourteenth century.

'You must not forget me,' Robin said, looking down at her so intently that Isolde felt breathless again. Her head swam and she thought she was going to faint. In that moment, she was afraid of him, afraid of the passion he seemed not to be able to control. 'Do not let them wed you to another. At the end of your time with the Sisters of Charity, I shall come for you. You shall be mine, Isolde. I swear it by all I hold sacred.'

Isolde left him there in the great hall of his father's house and went out to the courtyard where Bishop Walden and her nurse were waiting. She was to ride a gentle white palfrey the bishop had provided for her. Mairie was already mounted pillion behind Brother Friedrich. Isolde saw from his face that he was displeased with the arrangement. He was looking at her, eyes cold, angry. She shivered, her flesh creeping as she felt his hatred sear her flesh like an icy wind.

It was going to be uncomfortable if they were to be travelling companions for the next several days. She did not like this man or the way he looked at her.

Why had she written this page of the story? Ally was puzzled. This wasn't her usual

way of working. Yet the handwriting was hers, so she must have written it. But when? Had she come down again after her bath? It was odd, but when she thought about it, the story was like her dream. She vaguely recalled something about the girl being told she was being sent away from her home to live with the nuns for three years. Ally checked the notes again, yes, there it was.

Had she got up in the night to make notes? It wouldn't be the first time she'd been driven to leave her bed in order to scribble down something that had occurred to her, refusing to let her go until she had made notes. However, she usually remembered having got up in the night.

She'd been tired after her bath, very sleepy. It was possible she'd gone back to bed and fallen asleep, then come down in a state between waking and sleeping to record her thoughts. The vague memory of a dream had been with her when she woke, so perhaps it wasn't a dream, but a story, which had begun to haunt her.

Plots were like that sometimes, forcing their way into her mind whether she wanted them or not, but this wasn't her usual type of story. It looked like a romance, and Ally wasn't into that scene.

She began to type the beginning of her thriller. Although she usually wrote the first few pages of each section of her book in longhand, once started she could carry on for several pages straight on to the computer. Lost in the world she was creating for herself, Ally worked non-stop until she finally became aware that her shoulders were aching from the strain of sitting too long.

She glanced at the clock. It was past one and she was hungry! Making sure she had saved her work, Ally switched off the computer and stretched, easing her shoulders. She wandered over to the fridge and took out a tub of cottage cheese, tomatoes and celery to make herself a tasty salad. She was pleased with her morning's work, but she wouldn't try to continue for the moment. Instead, she thought she might drive into Cambridge and do some shopping.

Ally had brought most of the food she would need for Christmas with her, but there were a few bits and pieces she still lacked. And she might find a present for Paul. She already had a couple of things wrapped in shiny paper, but she wanted something more... Something special.

It was past five when Ally returned to the cottage. She had enjoyed wandering around the town of Cambridge, which was looking festive with the Christmas lights and the market stalls laden with fresh trees and holly. She hadn't had time to do more than rush round the shops, and pick up a tree, but she'd made a mental note to take time out to visit the colleges during her stay in Cambridgeshire.

She'd found her way back to the cottage easily this time. The light was on over the porch. Had Mrs Walters been in again? The agreement was that she'd come twice a week to clean, but the cottage hadn't had time to get messed up. Ally wasn't sure she liked the idea of someone coming and going at will.

She let herself in. No lights were on inside the house and everything was exactly as she'd left it. Perhaps the porch light worked on a time switch?

Ally unloaded her bags on the kitchen table. She'd bought fresh fruit and vegetables, also some delicious fresh cream chocolates from a shop in the street by the market square. And she'd found that special present for Paul. A silver cup and cover, beautifully inscribed in Latin and very old.

"I would place this in the fourteenth century," the antique dealer had told her. "It isn't English. I don't know where it was made, I'm afraid. If it was hallmarked, it would fetch several thousand pounds at auction—but I bought it recently for next to nothing. If it's what you're looking for, I can let you have it for three hundred and fifty pounds. I can't guarantee its age or anything else, but my gut feeling is that it is very old."

Ally suspected the dealer was out of his depth. The cup was quite small but beautiful and probably worth far more than he was asking. She wondered if he had come by it honestly and hesitated over buying it, but only for a moment. Even though the shop was small and crowded with bric-a-brac of all kinds, there were a few good pieces on sale, so hopefully the owner was genuine. Besides, she wanted the cup for Paul. It looked dull at the moment, but a bit of spit and polish would bring the shine back.

"I'll have it," she said. "Will you take a cheque?"

"You look honest to me," he replied and grinned at her. "That came out of an old man's shed, been there for years I should think. I thought it was pewter at first, but I shouldn't be surprised if it's German silver. Not that I'm selling it as silver. Not allowed to without a hallmark."

Ally was certain in her own mind that the cup was silver. It might be from Germany or some other part of Europe. She didn't really mind. Paul would love the simple design and the inscription.

Ally left it on the table while she went upstairs to the bathroom. Once again, she was aware of the strong smell of flowers as she entered her bedroom. Roses, she thought. Lilies, and was that jasmine?

'Why have you turned against me? Isolde! You are cruel. If you do not love me, I shall die of a broken heart.'

Ally stood absolutely still. The cry had been so real, so despairing, she could feel the speaker's anguish. What could have made him call out like that? Had Isolde betrayed him with another man? She must be cruel to hurt someone who loved her so much.

Ally blinked. What on earth was she thinking? Isolde wasn't real. She was a character she'd invented for a story she would probably never finish.

What was it about this place? Ally wondered. Could it be something in the air, or the atmosphere of the fens? There were so many ancient mysteries, so many tales of ghosts and legends surrounding this whole region. Was some of it rubbing off on her? Or was it simply that after being unable to open her mind to plots for so long, they were flooding in now she had somehow thrown back the barriers.

Ally walked over to the window and looked out. A mist was creeping across the pastureland towards the cottage. It looked like being thick, which would effectively cut her off from even her nearest neighbour. Just as well she hadn't spent any longer in

town.

Slipping off her clothes, she walked into the bathroom and took a shower, using a new flowery shower gel she'd bought in town. It was very different from her usual brand, but something had made her pick it up and she rather liked the scent of roses and jasmine. It felt right for the country somehow, though in town she would use something more sophisticated.

Towelling herself afterwards, Ally was aware of sexual hunger. She glanced at herself in the bedroom mirror, running an exploratory hand over the curve of her breast and experienced a sudden, piercing pang of desire. She wanted a man! At this particular moment, any man would probably do. She hadn't even thought about sex for two years, but now, she was remembering how good it had been with Tony.

"Oh Tony," she murmured, her throat half closing with the intensity of her longing. "Why did you have to leave me? Why did you break my heart?"

Ally jerked away from the mirror and pulled on a soft robe to cover her nakedness. She had never indulged in sexual play with her own body and she wasn't going to start now. For goodness sake! What was happening to her? She'd always enjoyed making love, but before Tony, there had only been a couple of lovers. She'd never been a nympho!

Perhaps it was time to start thinking about a relationship. She couldn't go on living the way she had for the past two years.

"Get a life, Ally," she told herself as she went downstairs, not bothering to put anything on her feet. The floor in the kitchen was a sort of cork tile and warm to the touch. Besides, she liked the feeling of having her toes free.

On the threshold of the kitchen, Ally stopped, suddenly wary. There was an odd smell. Not flowers, more like incense. Unpleasant. Her eyes were drawn to the table. The cup she had bought for Paul was lying on its side and a thin dribble of liquid was running from it. Was it wine or – what?

Ally knew this wasn't possible. She hadn't used the cup. Unless someone was in the house, playing games with her. She took a few steps towards the table, her mind suspended from belief. This wasn't happening to her. Her hand reached out with a volition of its own, and she dipped a cautious finger into the liquid, then stared at it for a moment before tasting it with the tip of her tongue.

It was blood! She gagged, the vomit rising up in her throat as she shook her head in disbelief. Suddenly the smell of incense became so strong that it almost choked her. Mixed with the incense was wood smoke and burning. The most vile stench she'd ever experienced in her life. It was like burning hair and fat – flesh burning!

Ally's head went round and round. Pictures had begun to fill her mind, terrible, frightening pictures. She could hear a woman screaming. The screams got louder and louder until they made Ally's head feel as though it would burst. She had to stop this! She had to stop it! This must not happen. It was a terrible wrong. She had to prevent it – but how?

It was happening because of the cup. The idea flashed into her head. If only she could clean the cup, the heinous sin would be washed away. She had to wash the cup

clean of its poison. Then no one would ever know the truth.

Her feet felt as if they were glued to the floor, her legs were heavy, refusing to move. But somehow. Somehow, she forced herself to reach out for the cup. It was so hot she almost dropped it, but she managed to grab it and carry it to the sink, dropping it into a bowl of cold water. There was a hissing sound as the cup touched the water, and the pain in Ally's head was so bad she could no longer bear it.

She screamed, then felt the room spin round her faster and faster. She was falling, falling into the darkness.

"Help me, Robin," she screamed. "Help me, Robin..."

And then, there was only the darkness.

Ally woke with a splitting headache to hear the front doorbell pealing. She glanced at her watch, realized it was nearly ten o'clock and groaned. What on earth had she been doing to deserve a head like this?

The doorbell had given way to the knocker. Whoever was at the door seemed insistent on being heard.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," Ally muttered, throwing back the bedcovers. She reached for her robe, pulled it on hastily, and ran down the stairs to answer the door. "Yes?" she asked, glaring at the duffel-coated woman who stood on her doorstep. "What can I do for you?"

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry. I thought you would be up by now." The woman tried to hide her disapproval but failed. "I don't use my key once a tenant is in resident, unless we've agreed between us that it's convenient. I'm Ellen Walters. I've come to give you a clean before Christmas. I shan't be able to come tomorrow, so it's today or nothing."

Ally resisted the temptation to challenge her ultimatum.

"Oh, of course, come in," she said and stood back. "I am usually up long before this. I don't know what made me sleep in so late."

"Heavy night by the looks of it." Ellen Walters pursed her thin lips. "You must have had company."

Ally had followed her into the kitchen. She stared in disbelief as she saw two empty wine bottles on the table, one of which was lying on its side. Had she had company? No, of course she hadn't! She didn't know anyone here. She wrinkled her brow, pushing back a strand of her heavy dark hair as she tried to remember.

What had she done the previous evening? She could recall coming home with her shopping but nothing more. How odd! She couldn't possibly have drunk two bottles of wine on her own—could she?

"I'm going to have a shower," Ally said, ignoring the woman's comment. Even if she'd had company, it wasn't up to Ellen Walters to pass judgement. But it was no doubt the habit of a lifetime. Her face had a thin, sharp look about it, and her hair was iron grey and tightly permed. There was a look of suspicious dislike in her eyes, as if she thought Ally was an intruder in the cottage. "If you could tidy in here first, please, then we shan't get in each other's way when I come down."

"I usually prefer to do upstairs first, but I suppose in the circumstances, I could start here for once."

Ally went out without replying. She had obviously started out on the wrong side of Mrs Walters. The woman disapproved of her and in a way, Ally couldn't blame her. Two bottles of wine! Even when she and Tony had a night in alone (which hadn't happened often), they never drank more than two bottles between them.

Could she have had company and forgotten it? Ally tried hard to remember, but it was no good. She could recall unpacking her shopping and that was it, until the bell rang this morning.

Why had she tried to drink herself into oblivion? She still missed Tony, of course she did, but the pain wasn't as sharp now. It just wasn't like her to get drunk alone; she never had more than a couple of glasses of wine during an evening. Especially when she was working. She much preferred coffee, because it stimulated her thought processes.

Yet she must have over-indulged. Her head felt as if there were a hundred hammers at work inside it, and her mouth tasted of ashes.

Ally puzzled over it as she took her shower, then dressed in her tracksuit. A breath of fresh air was what she needed to blow the cobwebs away.

She could hear Mrs. Walters singing tunelessly to herself as she left by the front door rather than risk another confrontation.

This time she turned to her right, running in the opposite direction, away from Brian Forrester's house and the village, towards the main road. She'd noticed a crumbling stone wall the previous day and wanted to take a closer look at it.

Mrs. Walters was on the point of leaving when Ally returned from her run.

"You just caught me," she said. "I've been through with the polish, Miss Matthews, but I'll give you a proper clean the week after Christmas."

"Thank you." Ally hesitated. "Shall I pay you now?"

"It can wait until next time. I've got a lot to get through today."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting this morning."

"Well, we all have those sort of days." Mrs. Walters bestowed a thin smile on her. "I've cleaned that cup for you. You shouldn't have been using it in that state, Miss Matthews. It looked as if it had been dug up out of the ground. Disgusting!"

"No, I suppose not."

Ally was thoughtful. Had she used a cup to drink the wine?

"I'll be off then. Expect me towards the end of the week. My family are coming to stay so I shan't manage to get here before that."

"That's fine."

Ally nodded and went past her into the cottage. The cup she'd bought as a present for Paul was standing on the kitchen table. Mrs. Walters had polished it so brightly you could see your face in it. It had been very dirty, she remembered. Surely, she hadn't used it to drink her wine. She'd left it standing on the table and gone upstairs for something.

"Why did you fail me?"

"I loved you and you betrayed me."

"No. I never betrayed you. Never!"

Ally felt cold as she heard the whispering voices. Could these be the same voices she'd heard the first night she'd come to the cottage? What had happened to make the lovers so bitter and accusing of each other?

Picking up the cup, Ally examined it carefully. She was sure Paul would love it. She would fetch some paper from her room and wrap it straight away. And then, she really must get down to some work.

As she turned towards the stairs, Ally heard the doorbell. She went to answer it, feeling pleasurably surprised to see Brian Forrester standing there. He was carrying an armful of holly and mistletoe.

"Have I called at a bad time?" he asked. "I thought you might like to decorate the cottage with this. It grows in abundance on the estate."

"How lovely," Ally said. "Won't you come in and have a coffee with me? I was just thinking of making some. I've been out for a run later than usual for me."

"Yes, I saw you jogging early the other morning," he said. "Thank you, I wouldn't mind a coffee. I noticed Ellen Walters leaving a short while ago. I hope she didn't drive you out? She's very efficient, but she can be—difficult at times."

"I expect she's all right when you get to know her," Ally said, smiling as she led the way inside. "I was late up this morning for some reason. I probably had too much wine last night. My head was awful first thing, but I'm fine now."

"Lucky you!" Brian Forrester grinned at her. "If I over-indulge, as one does on the odd occasion, I suffer the whole day. You must tell me your secret for getting rid of a hangover, Miss Matthews."

"Oh no, please call me Ally," she said, switching on the filter coffee machine. "I'm really pleased you called. We must get to know one another while I'm living here. Perhaps you could bring your wife for a meal, an informal supper rather than dinner?"

"No wife," he said, "but I would love to come for supper sometime. And it's Brian."

"You don't have children then? I thought I heard them laughing the other night."

"Oh, there's plenty of lads from the village come this way. They like the pond, and some of the braver ones go up to the ruins."

"Do you mean those bits of flint and stone wall near the main road?"

"Yes, that's right. It's all that remains of Lynston Abbey. It was burned in the fourteenth century, you know. The walls didn't burn, of course, but the villagers took the stones away to build their own cottages. There was a cottage built of stone here—or rather in your garden. My father moved the foundations when he had this one built after the war."

"Your father owned this place?" Ally brought the coffee jug to the table. "Do you prefer cream or milk?"

"Cream, if you have it," Brian said, "and two sugars. Very bad for the figure they tell me, but I can't drink coffee without it. Yes, my family owned most of the land round here when I was a lad. Father sold the big house a couple of years before he died. I was

away in the army at the time. He moved into a flat in town, but when I married, I had a house built up the road." Seeing her expression, he grimaced. "Divorced. Painful and messy, but over."

"Like my brother, Paul." Ally nodded. Her gaze dropped as she passed him his cup. "My husband was killed in a car crash a couple of years ago."

"Yes, I know. It was reported locally. Your last book sold rather well here. I enjoyed it myself. Are you writing another?"

Ally was grateful for his tact. He hadn't said he was sorry. Most people said that, even though they knew nothing about her or Tony. She hated that. It was so much better to say nothing.

"Trying to," she said. "The trouble is, I have a couple of ideas and I can't quite decide which one I want to work on first."

Now why had she said that? There was only one book she was interested in finishing at the moment, the other was nonsense. She would never finish it. She didn't know enough about the period: it would take ages to research it properly, even if she wanted to write it – which she didn't.

"That's rather splendid," Brian said, picking up the cup she'd bought for Paul. "I should suppose it was used for taking communion, wouldn't you? What does the inscription say?"

"I have no idea," Ally said, smiling ruefully. "I was never any good at Latin. I dropped it after my first year and took modern languages instead."

"*Laborare est orare.*" Brian quoted aloud. "*Labore et honore*—if my memory serves me right, roughly translated it means. "*Work is prayer. By labour and honour.*" He looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not a communion cup after all. The inscription could have been added later, of course, but I should say it was used by a member of a religious house."

"Work is prayer..." Ally smiled. "I knew it was meant for Paul as soon as I saw it. He lives for his work since the divorce."

"It's certainly beautiful," Brian said. "You were lucky to find it. These things are usually in museums or very old houses."

"Yes, I suppose so. It had lain forgotten in someone's shed for a long time, or so the dealer told me."

"Quite possibly it had been dug up out of the ground," Brian suggested. "It might have come from the ruins of an abbey or a monastery."

"I bought it in Cambridge." Ally frowned. Something about the cup had started to bother her, though she wasn't sure what. "Could it have come from Lynston Abbey, do you think?"

"That's rather too much of a coincidence," Brian said. "Mind you, it makes a good story and who can disprove it? I dare say quite a few things have been dug up around here over the years."

"Wouldn't that make it Treasure Trove or something?"

"It might." Brian grinned. "You bought it. My advice is to leave it at that. It's worth a bit, but not a fabulous amount. Now if it had been gold set with pearls and turquoises, I would have been interested. We lost a gold chalice some years ago. It disappeared one

night and has never been seen again."

"Was anything else stolen?" Ally was intrigued.

"Just the chalice. No sign of forced entry—just vanished into thin air. The insurance company refused to pay. They seemed to think we had arranged for it to disappear ourselves."

"That is mysterious." She smiled as she saw the naughty gleam in his eyes. "Did you have ghosts at the manor?"

"Quite a few, if rumour is to be believed. My father was convinced the place was haunted. He sold it soon after my sister was killed in an accident." Brian's expression sobered. "She was twenty, and very lovely. I was away at the time, as I told you before, but he wrote to tell me what happened. I came home on leave for her funeral, of course. She died after a fall from her horse, but Father believed it was part of the curse. There have been quite a few tragedies over the centuries, I must admit."

"Do you know why the family was cursed?"

"No, not really. There are a lot of stories, but I don't suppose any of it was actually true."

"What kind of stories?"

"Oh the usual." He shrugged. "There was one about a nun who had been walled up in the Abbey for whoring with the Abbot, and several about faithless lovers."

"Nothing specific then?"

"I'm not sure. Father spent a lot of time researching the original house and family. He once told me, he thought he might be close to the truth, but then..."

"Then?" Ally arched her brows.

"He had a stroke and died before I saw him again." Brian's eyes shadowed with remembered grief. "I could put it down to the curse, of course, but I don't choose to. He was sixty-nine, and he never fully recovered from the deaths of my mother and sister who died within weeks of each other. My mother had cancer. My grandmother died of tuberculosis and her brother was drowned when he was a child of seven."

"I see." Ally picked up the coffeepot. "It's easy to see why your father might think his family were cursed. Another cup?"

"Thanks, but I ought to get on." She noticed his eyes were a soft grey and seemed gentle and kind. There was something in them that suggested humour, as if he found much to laugh at in the world about him. "Is your brother coming down for Christmas?"

"Yes, but he may not arrive until Christmas Day. He has a late meeting in New York."

"I usually have a few friends round for drinks on Boxing Day morning," Brian said. "You and Paul would be welcome to join us. I've met your brother a few times, you know."

"Yes, he mentioned he knew you."

"We had a mutual friend." An odd smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Our wives went to school together."

"Oh, I see." Ally pulled a face. "I'm afraid I didn't care much for Lynda. She hurt

Paul and I've never forgiven her."

"You should, you know. Life is too short to bear grudges. Well, I must go. I shall expect to see you both on Boxing Day then."

"Yes, thank you."

"She went to the door with him, waving as he walked down the road. Returning to the kitchen, she picked up the cup again.

"Laborare est orare," she said. "Work is prayer."

It could have been inscribed for Paul. It was perfect for him, and yet, she no longer felt thrilled about giving it to him.

"Don't be silly," she scolded herself. "He will love it."

She fetched wrapping paper and made it into a parcel decorated with bows and ribbon, then took it into the sitting room and laid it under the tree. Mrs Walters had set it in a tub for her, and there was a box of decorations on the floor close by.

The decorations must belong to the cottage. Ally had bought the tree on impulse, not even thinking about the tinsel and baubles needed to dress it properly. She hadn't had a tree for ages. Tony had thought them sentimental and mawkish.

Ally sat on her heels at the foot of the tree and began to unpack the decorations. They were beautiful! The balls were glass and quite old. She smiled to herself, remembering one of the last Christmases she and Paul had spent together before their parents spilt up.

Their father was still alive, living very comfortably with his young wife and new family somewhere in the north of England. Their mother had died a few months after the divorce became final, of a broken heart, Ally believed. She hadn't spoken to her father since, because he had chosen not to come to the funeral.

"I don't see the point," he had told her on the phone. "There was nothing left between us, Ally. She wouldn't want me there."

'But I want you. What about me?'

She hadn't said the words aloud, of course. She was too angry. It was his fault her mother was dead. He might just as well have taken a gun and shot his wife as leave her to break her heart. Ally would never forgive him for what he had done.

Ally dashed the tears away and began to dress the tree. Harry Wyndham wasn't worth crying over! He had always been too selfish to consider the feelings of others. What he wanted was really all that mattered to him.

'A wench is for bedding, not thinking.'

Ally blinked as she heard the harsh voice. It could quite easily have been her father speaking, except he wouldn't have used those words, but the sentiments were his.

What was happening to her? Ally felt a flicker of fear. Was she on the verge of having a nervous breakdown? She knew Paul had been worried about her for a while. These voices she kept hearing... The empty wine bottles and her odd lapses of memory... Could they be a warning that she was cracking up?

No, no, surely not! She didn't feel hysterical. She still missed Tony, she still felt to blame over his death, but in her own mind, she knew she was over the worst. She was beginning to come out of the dark place and into the light.

Then why was she hearing voices?

"Either this place is haunted or I'm going nuts!" Ally said the words aloud, then laughed. She wasn't mad and she didn't believe in ghosts. Oh, she enjoyed a story that sent shivers down your spine, but they were just myths and legends like the curse on Brian Forrester's family.

Ally rose from her crouching position. She would finish dressing the tree later. She wanted something to eat, and then it was time she got down to work!

Chapter Four

Cumbria 1346

Isolde bent over the sick boy. He had been brought into the Lazar house the previous night, and from the festering sores on his face and body, it was easy to see why the villagers had taken him for a leper.

The Lazar house was built just outside the walls of the Abbey, which was set halfway up a steep hill and looked down on the village below. Whenever the inhabitants of the village believed someone was suffering from madness, leprosy, or some other pestilence they feared, they brought him to this place. Very few ever left it alive.

"Do not fear," Isolde said gently as the boy saw her and started up in alarm, obviously fearing the worst. "Sister Bertha says you do not suffer from God's curse. Yours is merely a putrefaction of the skin, caused she believes by eating bad food. We shall ease your sores with a salve, and feed you properly. You will soon be well again."

"May God bless you for your goodness, Sister."

"No, no, I am not one of the Sisters," Isolde replied with a smile. "I help them to nurse the sick."

"You look like an angel."

"I am merely a sinner like yourself."

Isolde passed on to the next bed. The woman who lay there had a wasting fever. Sister Bertha had cupped her the previous day to draw out the bad blood and balance her humours, but she did not seem to improve. She was nine and twenty, worn down by poverty and childbearing. It was unlikely she would live for very much longer, but at least here, she could be certain of kindness during her last hours.

Sister Bertha knew that many illnesses were beyond her powers of healing. She did what she could to help those who came to her with their ailments, but did not pretend to have the scientific skills of the physicians.

"If the sickness is a punishment from God, then no one but He can heal it," she had told Isolde when she had first asked to be allowed to help with her work. "I have only the simple learning of women. Yet, I believe in many cases the body heals itself, with the Lord's help. If it is ordained the patient will recover, we have only to ease their pain

and pray."

"And is there no hope for the others?" Isolde asked, after she had witnessed the terrible suffering of a man dying from wounds to his leg, which had turned black and stank of the putrid humours that poured from it. "Could we not, at least, try to help them? If the wounds were cleansed of the filth that invades them, might that not help the flesh to heal?"

"Suffering is good for the soul," Sister reminded her. "It is God's test—unless the sufferer wantonly brought it on himself. In which case, it could be a sin to help him. The teaching is not clear on this, but it is prudent to be careful in such cases."

Isolde accepted the nun's teaching without comment. Since her arrival at the nunnery, she had learned to hold her tongue. The sin of talking unnecessarily had often been punished by the loss of her supper. Sometimes, though, when she saw the way the patients endured such terrible pain, she longed to do more to ease them. However, on the rare occasions when a physician was called to one of their patients, it distressed her to discover that the treatment offered was often the cause of more pain.

Clysters, hot irons, and bleeding were the favoured remedies for most ailments. Isolde had, on one occasion, been certain that the treatment hastened the death of a man. In another case, she had witnessed a miraculous revival and knew some patients did recover, even from illnesses that seemed incurable.

Of course the physicians were very learned men, and could tell what ailed their patients by studying samples of their urine without even visiting the sick person. They also consulted charts to discover whether the patient was of a dry or wet humour, which determined the treatment offered. Isolde respected their learning, which she knew was far beyond her understanding. Yet in her heart, she believed Sister Bertha's gentle nursing was usually more beneficial than a visit from the physician. The only fault she could find in the nun was her refusal to treat those cases she thought hopeless.

Isolde stopped by the bedside of one such case. The man had been brought in after being cracked over the head in a drunken brawl. His head had been laid wide open; the brains spilling out in a bloody mess, his cheek cut to the bone. At Isolde's insistence, his wounds had been cleansed and bound in clean linen, the protruding brain eased back into his skull. Nothing more could be done for him, the nun had assured her. He should be left to live or die according to God's will.

"The man is a persistent sinner," Sister Bertha said, shaking her head sadly over the case. "He has brought this on himself by his wickedness. Unless God chooses to save him, he will die in his sin."

Isolde knelt by the man's straw pallet, bending over to see if he still lived. His breathing was shallow, his mouth edged with blue. She poured a little water from the bottle she carried at her waist into her hand and wetted his lips. His bandage was stained with blood and puss, but she had been forbidden to change it.

"You poor man," she said. "I pray that God will forgive you your wickedness and heal your hurts." She leaned over him and drew the sign of the cross on his forehead.

"Isolde! What are you doing?"

Isolde started as Sister Bertha came up to her. "I wanted to see if he was still alive."

"Did I not tell you he had committed a vile sin by bringing such a wound on himself?" scolded the nun. "If he dies, it is his own fault."

"He did not ask to have his head laid open. Should we not care for all the sick equally, Sister Bertha? I know he has not confessed his sins or asked for absolution, but he had lost his senses when they carried him here. God surely cannot want this poor man to suffer, or any of these people here? If he created us from love, why should he want us to feel so much pain?"

"Hush, girl!" The nun glanced over her shoulder. "Do you not know that for saying that you could be accused of blasphemy? I know you speak from the goodness of your heart, yet others would not see it thus. It would be unwise to let others hear you speak so carelessly. You are a woman, Isolde. You cannot be privy to the learning of those who understand these things in a way you never will. Accept what you are told, and do not question your betters."

"I know you are right," Isolde replied. "But may I not at least apply some of your salves to his wounds?"

"They will not cure him," said the nun. "Even though I fear it may be sinful, I would help him if I could. Do you not believe me? I have never known anyone to recover from a wound such as his. Come away now. You have done enough here. The Abbess has requested that you attend her in her cell. I believe she has news for you."

"News? What news?"

Sister Bertha shook her head. "Questions. Always more questions! Learn to control your tongue, girl. Even if I knew why the Abbess wishes to speak with you, it would not be my place to tell you. Away with you, Isolde. You must not keep Mother Margaret waiting."

Isolde got to her feet. As she reached the door of the Lazar house, she stopped to wash her hands in a little water from a jug, which stood ready. It was water that had been blessed by a priest and was meant to protect the nuns who nursed the infectious sick. In this way, it was hoped the ill humours they had encountered would be left at the door of the house, and not carried to the other Sisters.

Glancing back, she saw that Sister Bertha had begun to unwind the man's bandage. Perhaps she too had doubts concerning the doctrines of her 'betters,' but was too careful and wise to say so openly.

Isolde smiled inwardly. During her two years with the nuns, she had come to love this Sister above all others. At first she had found their life hard. There were so many restrictions, so many rules to learn. She had missed the freedom she had known, and Robin, of course. He had begged her not to forget him, promising he would come for her at the end of the three years.

Sometimes now, Isolde found it difficult to recall his face. She had deliberately schooled herself to accept her destiny. It had been arranged for her to marry another man, there was no use in her rebelling against her fate. If she had ever thought otherwise, her time with the nuns had taught her the need for obedience.

God's will was law. To resist was sinful. Even the highest in the land must obey the teachings of the Church without question and she was merely a baseborn woman. She

had no power, no voice. She must endure and obey.

Sister Bertha had taught her these things, but she had done it with kindness, in a way Isolde could accept. Yet there was still the occasional wicked thought in her head, still the need to question. Because she loved the gentle nun who had befriended her, and because she wanted Bertha to love her, Isolde did her best to banish her sinful thoughts.

It was wicked to look at one's own naked body. Sister Bertha washed beneath her shift with a cloth rung out in cold water, so Isolde did the same. If she longed to swim naked in the river as she had when a child, she fought her longing and spent an extra ten minutes on her knees to expiate her sin in prayer.

Reaching the Abbess's cell, Isolde knocked and waited until invited to enter. Despite the bitter chill of the February morning, there was no fire here. The walls were stone, without benefit of tapestries to cheer or protect them from the damp which constantly ran down them, and the room contained only the bare essentials necessary. A board and trestle, a stool, oak hutch, and the straw mattress which was her bed. And of course, Mother Margaret's personal copy of the Bible, beside which stood, a drinking cup, her candlestick and writing materials.

Mother Margaret had been writing in the ledger of accounts. At least here, Isolde thought, it was accepted that a woman should be able to write and add simple figures together.

"You wished to see me, Mother?" Isolde stood with her head bowed and her hands clasped before her.

"Yes, Isolde." The Abbess glanced up from her work. She was a woman of five and twenty, who had come to her position by way of her family's wealth. A generous donation to the Church had secured for her a life of serenity, if not comfort. She was strict with the Sisters in her care, but always fair and at times, sympathetic. "I have news from our patron."

"Bishop Walden?" Isolde had seen the bishop twice since he'd brought her to the Abbey. She knew he had authority over Mother Margaret, and it was perhaps because of his indulgent patronage that the Sisters were allowed some privileges denied to others of their calling. "Is he to visit us again, Mother?"

"He will come next week," the Abbess told her. "He will speak to you himself, but I believe you are to leave us sooner than we expected."

"Leave here? Why?" Isolde saw the look of censure in the older woman's eyes. "Forgive me, Mother. It is only that I believed I was to stay with you for another year."

"We are all subject to God's will and that of our superiors. If Bishop Walden has decided to take you from us, we must accept it, though we shall miss you." Mother Margaret smiled at her. "Especially Sister Bertha. She thinks highly of you, Isolde. She says you learn quickly and have a healing touch."

"Any healing I perform comes from God," said Isolde, knowing this was expected of her. "I am merely his tool."

"Very true," observed the Abbess, "yet God does not choose to use us all in this way. Sister Bertha had hoped you might decide to stay with us."

Isolde was silent. She was not quite sure what was expected of her. "I am in the

hands of Bishop Walden," she said at last. "I do not think it was his intention that I should become a nun."

"No, perhaps not—but even Bishop Walden could not deny you, should you choose to give your life to God." The Abbess looked at her inquiringly. "You do not feel a calling?"

"I am not sure," Isolde confessed. "I have been happy here, and it pleases me to help Sister Bertha, but..."

"Perhaps you have not considered the alternatives?" suggested the Abbess. "I ask only that you will think carefully, Isolde. When I was your age, I knew that I would not be happy as the wife of a man I did not like or respect. Since my only alternative was to choose God, I begged my father to allow me to come here. I have never regretted my decision."

"Did you never love anyone?" The words were out of Isolde's mouth before she realized. "Forgive me. I should not have asked such a question."

"You mean a man?" Surprisingly, the Abbess smiled. "That question would have cost your supper had I not invited it, but I shall answer you honestly. I have never known that kind of love, nor do I wish to. However, I believe it is necessary for some women. If you should be one of them, Isolde, you must not join us."

"May I have time to think, Mother?"

"Of course. I do not wish to persuade you—only to offer a refuge, should you need it."

"Thank you. You are very..."

A frantic knocking at the door interrupted Isolde. The Abbess frowned as one of the nuns came in without waiting for an invitation.

"Yes, Sister Anne? What is so urgent you saw fit to enter without permission?"

"Forgive me, Mother." The nun looked fearfully at Isolde. "You must come at once. One of the patients went mad and attacked Sister Bertha. We need your help. She is bleeding nigh to death."

"Sister Bertha attacked?" Isolde glanced at the Abbess. "May I go to her, Mother?"

"Of course, but remember what I have said."

Isolde mumbled her thanks. She hurried after Sister Anne, her thoughts anxious and confused.

"Who attacked Sister Bertha?"

"It was the man who had his head cracked open," Sister Anne replied. "She said he seemed to be coming to his senses and bade me bring her salves. When I returned, he had her by the throat. He was screaming like a wild beast. I went to her aid, but before I could reach her, he had taken her own knife and stabbed her with it."

Isolde made the sign of the cross over her breast. "What did you do? Did he attack you, too?"

"No, for blood suddenly poured from his nose and he fell back, gasping and soon after died." The nun crossed herself. "It was surely the Devil at work in him. At the moment of his departing, he was possessed by demons come to carry away his soul. God has cast him out for his sins."

"No, I do not believe that," Isolde cried. "It was probably some terrible pain in his head that caused him to attack Sister Bertha. He could not have known what he was doing. The blood that ran from his nose must have come from his brain bursting through his skull. It was only the bandage that kept his head closed."

The nun stared at her in horror. "That is blasphemous," she said. "You must not defend such an evil creature or the demons will fly from him to you."

Isolde was tempted to tell her how foolish she was, but remembered Sister Bertha's warning in time.

"We should not be talking idly," she said. "Mother Margaret will deny us the privilege of supper if we are reported."

This had the desired effect of silencing Sister Anne. Isolde ignored her dark looks and hurried into the infirmary where Sister Bertha had been carried. The nun was lying on a pallet, surrounded by anxious nuns, her eyes closed. Isolde dropped to her knees, making a swift judgement: her friend had been stabbed in the chest, but was still conscious despite the loss of a great deal of blood.

Bertha opened her eyes and smiled as she saw Isolde. "Send the others away," she whispered as the girl bent over her. "I want you to tend me alone."

Isolde obeyed, aware her action annoyed the other Sisters, who resented her closeness to their companion. Who was she to take charge of Sister Bertha? She had been with them only two years and could know nothing of the skills needed to care for such a wound.

"What do you want me to do?" Isolde asked when they were alone. "Shall we send for the surgeon?"

"Not unless you wish me to suffer needlessly," Sister Bertha said. "I know I am dying, Isolde. I want you to give me some of the sleeping juice—then sit with me quietly until I am at peace."

"No, no," Isolde cried. "You must not die. Please let me send for the surgeon. He might save your life." Her throat closed with emotion. "You must not die. It is my fault. You would not have been tending that man if it were not for me."

"It was not your fault, dearest child." Bertha held out her hand. "He was possessed by demons. I have observed this before in such cases. That was the reason I had thought it best to leave the patient alone. If they come to themselves they can be violent. It is the cracking open of the skull that lets the devil into their minds."

Isolde remained silent. Who was she to argue with the woman who had taught her what little she knew of the healing arts?

"Won't you at least let me bind your wound?" Isolde asked. "If we stop the bleeding, you may yet live."

"Give me the sleeping juice," Sister Bertha said, "then sit with me until I leave you."

Isolde got to her feet. She poured a few drops of the medicine, which she knew contained a small amount of hemlock, into a cup of wine and held it to her friend's lips. She cradled her in her arms as she swallowed a few sips, then bent to kiss her cheek.

"Sleep in peace, my dear Bertha."

"Do not pine for me. It is by God's will that I go to Him."

Isolde sat quietly by her side, watching as her lids grew heavy. When Bertha's hand fell away from hers, she bent over her again, opening the neck of her shift. She had given Bertha a strong enough dose of the medicine to make her sleep, but not to carry her gently to death as they did sometimes for patients who were in terrible pain. The wound was crusting over with dried blood, but Isolde did not think it had gone deep enough to pierce the nun's vital organs. Providing they were all where they should be in her body, and had not moved to another position (as the physicians said they did sometimes) she believed Sister Bertha would live.

Working swiftly and carefully, Isolde cleaned the wound, then gathered the skin together and pierced it through with one of the bone needles they used for sewing lesser wounds. She placed a pad of clean linen soaked in healing salves against the wound and bound more linen tightly around the nun's chest to hold it in place, and contain any fresh bleeding her work had brought forth. Then she dipped her forefinger in some water she knew had been blessed and made the sign of the cross on Bertha's forehead.

"Oh God, be Thou merciful," she whispered. "This woman has never done harm to any. I beg Thee, in Thy mercy, give her the strength to recover. Do not take her from us, Lord. She is too young to die. Forgive her sins and let her live. For she is sorely needed in this place and many will suffer if she be not here to tend their hurts."

Swept up in the passion of her prayers, Isolde was not aware of Sister Anne's cold eyes watching her from the doorway. Nor could she have guessed how fierce and unrelenting, was the hatred she had aroused in the nun's breast.

"So..." Bishop Walden said when she greeted him some five days later. "What is this I hear of you, Isolde? Do you have the healing touch? They tell me you saved Sister Bertha though she was convinced she would die."

"It is true, Sister Bertha is much better today. She is still weak, but her wound was not deep. She should live unless she takes a poisonous humour. However, she now believes she is meant to live, and knows how to tend her own wound far better than I."

The bishop frowned. "It is not a matter for her or you, Isolde. If she lives, it is because God wills it."

"Yes, my lord. All I did was to make her easy. The healing was not mine to give or withhold."

"As long as you understand that." He nodded. "I am pleased with you, Isolde. The Abbess has sent me good reports of you. You have learned modesty and obedience—qualities much prized in a wife. I believe Sir Henry will be satisfied with your progress."

Isolde was silent. In truth, her heart was beating so fast that she could find neither the breath nor the words to answer him.

"You are to meet your husband quite soon," the bishop told her. "I have come to take you to his home, which is not more than thirty leagues from here. He has but recently

returned from court, and wishes to bring forward the time of your marriage."

"I am to be married at once?" Isolde felt sick with fear. "But it was not to be for another year."

"You are fifteen, quite old enough to be a wife," the bishop said. "I would have granted you another year of study with the Sisters, but Sir Henry grows impatient for his bride. He is five and twenty and feels the need to secure his heir. Especially as it seems His Majesty, the King would make war against the French. Sir Henry is one of Edward's most trusted followers and must fight at his side, but if he should die without issue during the coming campaign, his name dies with him. I have therefore acceded to his request."

Isolde looked beyond him to the Abbess. Only a miracle could save her from this unwelcome marriage, for even if she were to send a message to Robin, she doubted he could do anything to stop it. Lord Mortimer still lived, and while he lived, his son must obey him.

"Before you take Isolde from us, I believe you should discover whether or not she has a vocation for the Church," Mother Margaret said. "If she wishes to give her life to God, then neither you nor Sir Henry can deny her."

Bishop Walden's eyes narrowed in annoyance. They were so intense that Isolde shivered, feeling as if they might pierce her very soul.

"Is this true?" he asked. "Do you wish to offer your life in the service of God? Speak now, Isolde of Lynston, or accept the destiny I have ordered for you."

Isolde was torn by indecision. She had been happy here, yet she longed for life, for freedom. And if she gave herself to Christ, she would never see Robin again.

"Speak, girl!"

"I cannot answer you, my lord," Isolde said at last. "I do not know what God wants of me, so I must submit to your will."

"Then you do not have a vocation," the bishop said, well satisfied. "You are a good Christian woman, I make no doubt of that, but you can be devout as a wife. Indeed, you must, for Sir Henry will expect it." He smiled at her. "Make your farewells, Isolde. We shall leave within the hour."

"May I see Sister Bertha before I leave?"

"Yes. There can be no harm in that, but be brief."

Isolde turned away. She felt sad to be leaving her friend, but she believed it was right she should go. In her heart, she did not feel the life of a nun was right for her. She was not modest enough.

Sister Bertha was lying with her eyes closed when she entered the tiny cubicle that was her cell. It was very cold, icicles forming on the bars of the window.

"Are you sleeping, Sister?"

"No, just thinking." Sister Bertha looked at her. "So you are leaving us. I had hoped you would stay. There is no one to take my place when I die. No one who understands, as you do."

"But you have Sister Anne and the others."

"They do not see as you do," Bertha said. "I have lived by the rules, doing my best to

ease pain where I can, but you make people well again, Isolde. I have seen it with my own eyes. Felt it in my heart. You do not believe in submitting to an unkind fate. There are times when I too have rebelled."

Isolde stared at her. "But you have always said it was a sin to try and save life, that we must only ease pain. You told me it was only if God willed it, we were able to heal."

"I was wrong," Bertha said. "I would have taken the sleeping juice, but you would not let me die. I shall recover and I shall help those I can. But you could have done more."

"I want to help the sick," Isolde said, "but I want to live in the world, Bertha. I cannot help myself. I want to know the love of a man."

"As I did once." Bertha smiled at her surprise. "I was not always a nun. I did not come to it as a vocation, as Mother Margaret. I discovered men are faithless creatures. I was left alone, deserted by a lover who used me ill and then deserted me. I would have starved had the Sisters not taken me in. I have always been grateful for their care of me and I have served the best way I could. You would be safe here, Isolde, I fear for you when you leave here. Such beauty as yours is a curse. I fear it will bring you to grief."

"I wish I could stay," Isolde said, tears starting to her eyes. "But there is someone I love. If I stay here, I shall never see him again."

"Is he the man you are to wed?" Isolde shook her head and the nun looked sad. "Then you will suffer for that love."

"Perhaps. Even so, I cannot stay."

"Then go with God, Isolde. I shall remember you in my prayers."

"And I, you." Isolde bent to kiss her. "I love you, Bertha. I think you are the only person I have ever loved except Robin."

"Is that his name?"

"Yes." Isolde smiled. "We played together as children. We always loved one another. I think perhaps we always shall, no matter what happens to us in this life."

"Take care, Isolde. I see danger for you in this love."

"I have always known that," Isolde admitted. "Yet I cannot let it go, try as I may to be dutiful. I must meet my destiny, whatever that may be. I fear it, yet it draws me on."

"Then go," Bertha said. "My thoughts go with you and my blessing."

Isolde was reluctant to leave her, but she knew she could delay her departure no longer. Bishop Walden would be growing impatient.

As she walked from the cell, she heard something and glanced back. Sister Anne was standing partly concealed by a stone pillar, as if spying on her. Isolde hesitated.

"You will take care of Sister Bertha?"

"I do not need you to tell me my duty." Sister Anne's eyes narrowed to jealous slits. "I am glad you are going. You do not belong in this place."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know you for the wicked creature you are." The nun took a step closer. "I have heard your blasphemy and seen your unholy rituals. You have the evil eye. Your powers come not from God, but from the horned beast himself." Sister Anne crossed herself swiftly. "I know you saved Sister Bertha's life, but you have endangered her

immortal soul. If you had not bewitched her, she would rather have gone to her grave than submit to your foul arts."

"That is a lie!" Isolde cried. She felt an iciness at the nape of her neck and shivered. "I have no rituals, no special healing power."

"I have seen and heard you," the nun said. "You have powerful friends to support you, but one day, they will desert you and then you shall be revealed in all your foul wickedness!"

"You have the foul mind, not I," Isolde said, her head going up proudly. "It is not me who will answer for my sins at the day of judgement, but you. You will surely burn in Hell for your wicked thoughts."

She turned and walked away, leaving the nun to stare after her.

"Witch... Witch!"

Isolde did not hear, nor would she have paid attention or looked back if she had. Her mind was looking forward to the future and to life itself.

Chapter Five

Ally, Christmas 1998

"It's freezing out," Paul said as she greeted him on Christmas morning. "It looked as if it was going to snow again, and then I should never have got here. He kissed his sister's cheek, noticing the new perfume, which was rather intoxicating. "Hmm, I approve of the perfume, what is it?"

"Oh, just something I bought the other day," Ally said. "I rather liked it."

"So do I," Paul said. "It's sensual and you look wonderful, Ally, much better than you did a few weeks ago."

"Thanks, Paul," Ally hugged his arm. "Maybe it's being here in the cottage. I really like it, except for the whispers, that is. They can be a bit scary sometimes."

"Whispers?" Paul arched his brows at her. "Are you saying someone has been annoying you—or that the place is haunted?"

"I think it's haunted," Ally said with a self-conscious grin. "Brian says all this area belonged to the monastery once."

"Yes, of course. I knew that—but surely you don't think the cottage is haunted?"

Ally laughed and shook her head, her hair spraying about her face, sending out wafts of her delicious new perfume. Paul noticed there was a new huskiness in her laughter, a glow about her that hadn't been there before. He certainly hadn't noticed it, and it made him feel a little odd. He was seeing her as a desirable woman and not his sister. He pulled his thoughts up sharply. What the hell was he thinking!

"No, not really— I expect it's this book I'm writing. Not the thriller I came down here to write. I've done a few chapters of that, but for the moment, I've had to put it on hold—this other damn thing won't let me be. I'm getting up at all hours to write it."

"Sounds as though it might be good," Paul said. "Am I allowed to read it?"

"Not yet, you know I hate that. My books aren't fit to be read until I'm finished with them. I've no real idea of what I'm doing as it's set in the fourteenth century."

"Good grief! Do you know anything about the period?"

"That's the odd thing," Ally replied. "I wasn't aware I knew anything, but it seems to be flowing. I thought I might be making it up as I went along, but I checked some stuff

at the library and so far, I seem to be getting it right."

"Well, I suppose the important thing is that you're writing," Paul said. "You couldn't for a long while, could you?"

"No, that's the surprising thing," Ally said. "The ideas seemed to come the moment I got here—but let's leave this for now. I want to give you your present, then I'll go and see how dinner is coming on."

Paul followed her into the sitting room. A huge fire was burning in the grate and there was a warm, comforting atmosphere. He glanced at the Christmas tree, thinking how attractive it was and that it reminded him of his childhood, when life had been so much better somehow.

"Sherry or a glass of wine?" Ally asked. She took the parcels she had left beneath the tree and gave them to him. "Happy Christmas, Paul. I hope you will like your present."

Paul kissed her cheek. Her skin was soft and the perfume really was sensational. It made him feel extremely odd. He handed her the gifts he'd bought for her, half-wishing he'd gone for something more glamorous. Chocolates, a book, and a mobile phone had seemed like a good idea at the time. But now he wished he'd selected something more personal. A silk blouse or underwear. No, not that! Good grief! He had better put a check on his thoughts; she was his sister, not a potential lover.

Ally tore the wrappings from her gifts, exclaiming in delight.

"You always know exactly what I like," she said. "Thank you, Paul. I've been meaning to get this book and a mobile is exactly what I need. I could have done with it the other night when my car skidded off the road."

"It's the very latest..." Paul broke off as he saw what Ally had bought for him. "My God, Ally! This is fantastic. Where did you find it?"

"Oh—at a shop in Cambridge," she said carelessly. "Do you like it?"

"It's wonderful. Is it very old? It looks as though it must be."

"The dealer didn't seem to know much about it," Ally said. "It was in a dreadful state—but the cleaning lady polished it up. She's very good, though a bit of a dragon."

"They usually are," Paul said with a wry look. "Have you met many people yet?"

"Not yet. Brian has invited us for drinks tomorrow morning. We shall probably meet quite a few people there."

"Yes—that's a good idea. It will be nice for you to know some people down here, being on your own may be good for writing but it can get a bit lonely. Besides, Brian is a nice chap." He yawned and gave her an apologetic smile. "Sorry. It's travelling—upsets my time clock."

"Sit down and relax while I get the lunch," Ally said, smiling at him affectionately. "It's going to be another hour yet. Have a sleep if you want. I'll wake you when it's ready."

Paul nodded, yawning again. "I'll be all right by this evening. If you don't mind, I might take a nap on the sofa."

Trial by Fire

Robin had trained in the exercise yard until he was exhausted, but it hadn't eased the anger or the pain inside him. They were going to marry her to another man, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. His arguments with his father had brought him nothing but more pain and frustration. Wild thoughts went through his head, thoughts of killing his father, Bishop Walden, or the man who would be Isolde's husband.

He burned with jealousy as he thought of Isolde in her husband's arms, of her soft white skin being touched by another's hand, of her lying beneath another man, while he wanted her. He wanted her so badly that his flesh ached for her... For the smell of her.

"Wake up, Paul!" Ally gave her brother's shoulder a little shake. "You're having a nightmare—and lunch is ready."

Paul opened his eyes. Startled from his dream, he felt disorientated, unsure of where he was. He'd had such a vivid, strange dream.

"Sorry," he said apologetically and pushed his hair back out of his eyes, aware that it needed cutting. His forehead was damp with sweat. "It was so odd—I was dreaming I was living in medieval times, and thinking I'd like to murder someone, but I can't remember who or why."

"It's my fault for telling you about the book I'm writing," Ally said. "Or maybe this place has an odd effect on your mind."

Paul shook his head and stood up. "I don't believe in ghosts or in reincarnation. Come on, let's eat. I'm starving."

Ally nodded, but she felt uneasy as she led the way through to the dining room. Was it her imagination—or had it gone very cold in here?

"You will ruin us both, Robin."

She heard the agonized cry and glanced at her brother, but he was looking at the festive table.

"You've gone to an awful lot of trouble," he said. "Roast goose and all the trimmings, and special stuffings. You must have made a lot of these things yourself?"

"I wanted it to be a good Christmas for us both."

"It will be, my love." He poured some red wine into two glasses and handed one to her. "To the future—may it be happier for us both."

"He shan't have her! She's mine. I would rather see him dead."

Paul blinked. He wasn't dreaming now, but he'd heard the voice—the same voice as he'd heard in his dream.

"Did you say something, Ally?"

"No..." She looked at him intently. "Did you hear something, Paul?"

"No—not just now."

"Nor did I," he denied stoutly. "I expect it was the wind outside. Let's eat. I'll carve."

Chapter Six

Isolde

The countryside through which they'd passed earlier on their journey had been bleak indeed, but now the great mass of the Pennines had given way to the gentle coastal plains of Cumbria. Here, there were lakes more beautiful than anything Isolde had ever seen. The woods were teeming with game and rich, fertile lands where sheep grazed lazily and grew fat. She was enchanted with all she found, her spirits lifted as she saw at last the great manor house, which was to be her home.

It had begun life as a Norman castle, as its main tower stood looking out over the wide sweep of a natural bay. However the manor house had been built more recently, facing down towards the Tarn, a huddle of stone cottages clustered about its edges, and the little church set back from the village.

"So this is Urstwick," Isolde said as the bishop's horse drew alongside her own. "It is a fine house, my lord."

"Your future husband is a rich and important man," he replied. "I have not given you to an unworthy man, Isolde."

Isolde's serving woman, provided for her by Sir Henry, was riding pillion with the bishop's servant, their horses trailing some distance behind. Knowing they could not be overheard, Isolde asked the question that had formed long ago in her mind.

"Why have you troubled yourself with my future, my lord? I am no one. Merely a base born woman, a bastard. Unworthy of your notice."

"No!" He shook his head, looking at her oddly. "You were never that, Isolde. I knew you would ask one day. At the time, it was decided to let everyone believe you to be the child of a serving wench, but you were actually the daughter of a lady. She bore the child of her lover in secret while her lord was away fighting for the king."

Isolde nodded. She had begun to suspect the truth long since.

"Who was my mother, sir?"

"My own dear sister." Bishop Walden's face softened. "I cared for her deeply and was unhappy when our father wed her to a man she despised. He was unkind to her from the start, and I saw the bruises on her arms where he had beaten her. She came to

me for help when she knew herself with child by her lover. She was afraid her husband would return and discover her sin. I helped her to conceal your birth." He sighed heavily. "She died of a fever some months later. I dare say it was a just punishment for her sins, but her death grieved me sorely. I vowed then, I would see her child restored to her rightful place in the world one day."

"You must have loved her a great deal."

"Perhaps too much," he confessed. "Her name was Avis and she was very beautiful, much like you, my child."

"I wish I had known her."

"Had she lived, she would have taken you back, for her husband never returned. He was killed in battle and buried where he lay."

Isolde frowned. "Who was my father, sir?"

"That is not for me to tell you. I have revealed my part of the secret. I can do no more. Be satisfied that you are of good birth and fit to wed with the man I have chosen for you."

Isolde accepted this in silence. Her father was a kinsman of Lord Mortimer. Since her mother had also been a lady, there had been no good reason why she could not have married Robin. For a moment, rebellion flared in her in a hot, white flame. Why must she marry a man she did not know? Why could her uncle not have betrothed her to Robin Mortimer?

Her rebellion lived for only a few seconds. Bishop Walden had every right to give her to whom he pleased. Knowing her mother came of gentlefolk did not change the fact that she was a bastard, born out of wedlock. Perhaps it was that which had turned Lord Mortimer against the match. She was fortunate Bishop Walden had taken an interest in her for his sister's sake. He could easily have placed her with the nuns and left her there.

She must accept her destiny with courage, but Robin's face was in her mind. She could see it clearly in every detail, feel his presence as if he were riding close beside her.

"*You are mine, Isolde. I shall never let you go.*"

Did he know the wedding had been brought forward? Is that why his soul reached out to hers? She felt he was in pain, and his sorrow almost crushed her.

"Oh, Robin," she whispered. "Come to me. Claim me now or let me go!"

"Did you say something, Isolde?"

"No..." Isolde blushed for shame. How wicked she was to rebel in her heart this way. She knew it was her duty to obey her uncle's wishes. "No, my lord. It was nothing."

Nothing! When her heart cried out against this marriage. She longed to turn her palfrey and ride away back to Robin, yet knew it was impossible. She could never find her way to Lynston alone. She had no money to buy food, no jewels, nothing that was hers by right. Besides, she had no way of knowing if Robin was still living under his father's roof. He might have travelled to London, to offer his services to the king.

Isolde had heard the king intended to go to war himself. Even in the remoteness of the nun's retreat, the rumours had reached them of the great army that was being gathered together to fight the French.

King Edward the Third was popular with both the people and his lords. Though said to be of a somewhat fiery temper, he was renowned for his charm, regal manners and generosity. He loved pageantry and shared the pleasures of the great barons, who held so much power in the land, delighting in tournaments and the art of warfare. After the turmoil of his father's reign, when there had been much strife between king and lords, such a pleasing change was welcome to all.

Robin was well skilled in the art of combat. If he wanted to win honour for himself, he must present himself at Court and prove his courage in tournament or on the field of battle.

Isolde recalled her wandering thoughts. They were riding into the courtyard now, their horses' hooves clattering over the wooden bridge. A member of Sir Henry's men at arms saluted her with a pike. Others were hard at work, training with all manner of fearsome weapons. It was clear that Sir Henry's followers were preparing for combat.

Isolde's heart caught as she observed two men more richly dressed than the others. They had been in close conversation, but as they saw the new arrivals, broke off and came to greet them.

One was hardly more than a youth, perhaps seventeen years or less, the other was undoubtedly a man. A foot taller than his companion, he was clearly strong, broad in the shoulder and muscular. His hair was thick and flowed on to his shoulders in a dark mane. He had a scar to his right cheek, which ran from the corner of his eye to his chin. It had been made by some weapon of combat, and he wore it proudly, his manner as stern and proud as his appearance.

For a moment, his dark eyes dwelt on Isolde's face, then he looked at the bishop. "You are welcome to my home, my lord," he said. "You and the Lady Isolde. As you see, we prepare for war but everything is ready for the wedding. Please come inside and refresh yourselves." His gaze returned to Isolde. "You must be weary from the journey, my lady. Let me help you."

Isolde felt strong hands catch her by the waist, then she was lifted from her palfrey and set on her feet. For a moment longer, Sir Henry held her, gazing down into her eyes. Something she saw in his made her shiver. This was a powerful man. She sensed that he could be ruthless, even cruel, and she felt a flicker of apprehension.

"You shiver. Are you cold?" he asked and frowned.

In another moment, he had released her. Isolde's heart resumed its normal beat. Her head went up as pride asserted itself.

"Thank you, my lord. I am neither cold nor tired, and could have dismounted alone. Although I am but a woman, I am both strong and healthy."

"There's for you, Harry!" The younger man smiled at her, openly admiring. "Philip de Grenville at your service, my lady. My cousin is too used to having his own way. It is time he had a wife to teach him some humility."

"Your tongue runs away with you as usual, de Grenville." Sir Henry glared at him, then inclined his head in Isolde's direction. "He is a fool but harmless. Take my guests inside, cousin, and see they are made comfortable. I shall join you when I have finished here."

Isolde wondered if she had angered him by her answer. She was not sure why she had spoken thus, except that she had felt a need to assert herself. She had been given no choice in the matter of her marriage, but she was no mere possession. The knowledge that her mother had been a lady had given her a new confidence. She would have to obey her husband, but she was not to be crushed. Respect was her due, if nothing more.

She did not smile as she turned away to follow Philip de Grenville into the house. If Sir Henry March wished for her smiles, he must earn them. She was obliged to do her duty, but she need give him no more than was his by right.

Alone in her apartments some twenty or so minutes later, Isolde's attitude towards her betrothed husband softened a little. She had never seen anything as beautiful as the hangings about the bed, or the wall tapestries. A real bed, not merely a pallet on the floor! The hangings were of a rich blue brocade shot through with gold thread, and the tapestries featured ladies, children, and a minstrel in beautiful gardens. She thought they must depict the court, for she had never seen anyone so finely dressed.

"Would you like to change your gown, my lady?"

Isolde turned as the serving woman spoke. "Your name is Griselda, is it not?"

"Yes, my lady. I am to wait on you and keep your wardrobe. There are two more women to sit with you. Ondeline plays the harp, and Mary has some skill as a midwife."

Isolde felt her cheeks growing warm. It seemed Sir Henry had thought of everything.

"I have only the clothes I am wearing," Isolde said. "My possessions were left at the abbey. Bishop Walden did not want to be bothered with baggage. I dare say my things will arrive soon."

"I mean these gowns, my lady." Griselda went over to what Isolde had at first glance thought a carved screen, but now realized was part of a large press. When it was opened, she saw several garments had been laid on its shelves. "We have been sewing for many months against your coming. Sir Henry sent for this cloth from the Flemish merchants. It is of the finest quality."

Isolde touched the velvets, brocades and fine wool in wonder. She had never seen such lovely materials.

"Are these all for me?" she asked. "Surely I shall never need so many kirtles?"

"You will need more when you go to Court with Sir Henry. We have only used some of the cloth, my lady. You may wish to choose other patterns. These were prepared for your wedding and the feasting."

"They are...very fine," Isolde said. "But I shall wear my own kirtle for the moment. At least until I am married."

"As you wish, my lady."

It was clear the woman thought she was odd not to want to change out of her old clothes at once. However, Isolde felt a perverse need to cling to her dull grey kirtle and plain over-gown. She had grown accustomed to the modesty of the nuns, and was almost afraid to wear the finery provided by Sir Henry.

"Vanity is a sin," she said. "Until I am wed, I prefer my own things."

Hearing the sound of female laughter, Isolde frowned. Where had it come from? She

looked about her, then saw a hanging flutter as if someone stood behind it. She moved towards it, pulling it back sharply to reveal the two women who stood concealed in the tiny alcove. They had obviously been listening to what she was saying. It angered her that they had spied on her.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I am Ondeline," said the taller of the two. She was slender, pretty with very blue eyes and fair skin. Her hair was covered by a fine veil that revealed its golden sheen. "I am here to wait on you, my lady, and this is Mary."

There was something sly and knowing about her eyes, thought Isolde. She was dressed in a deep blue kirtle and her over-dress was embroidered with emerald green. She seemed very proud and sure of herself.

"Where do you come from?" Isolde asked. "Of what family were you born?"

"I am cousin to Sir Henry," Ondeline replied proudly, her face cold with dislike. "I have always lived here, because my parents died when I was a babe in arms."

"And you?" Isolde looked at the other girl. Mary was plump, plainer than her companion, but seemed more modest in her dress. "Have you always lived here?"

"Oh, no, my lady. I was brought here specially to wait on you. I am the daughter of a poor squire."

Isolde nodded. She knew who had laughed at her. Ondeline's eyes held a deep resentment. She did not relish the prospect of waiting on her cousin's bride. Perhaps she would have liked to be mistress here herself, had it been possible.

"Then you may sit with me, Mary," Isolde said. "I shall not need you for the moment, Ondeline, or you, Griselda. I shall summon you when I wish food brought."

"But..." Griselda hesitated, seeming to protest, then, at a look from Ondeline, subsided. "As you wish, my lady."

"So..." Isolde said when the others had withdrawn. "How long have you been here, Mary?"

"Three weeks. My father has served Sir Henry for the past three years, and when he asked if I could serve you, I was sent for."

"They tell me you have some skill as a midwife?"

"Yes, my lady. I have helped many ladies at their birthing time. My own mother has borne seven healthy children and I assisted at her last three confinements."

"And does your mother still live?"

"Why yes, my lady. She is but five and thirty."

"That is surely a good age?"

"We live long in our family. My grandmother was well past forty when she died."

"She was very fortunate."

"Indeed she was, for she was scarcely ill a day in her life."

Isolde nodded. "Tell me, Mary, will you serve me faithfully?"

"On my life, I shall, my lady."

"Then answer me this, why did Griselda fall silent when Ondeline looked at her so oddly?"

"It was because you said you would send for food here, my lady, and because you

would not change your gown. There is a feast in your honour this evening."

"I see." Isolde was thoughtful. It was clear to her now. Ondeline had laughed because she knew Sir Henry would send for his bride to join his guests, and it would shame him if Isolde came to the feast in her old clothes, which would have made him angry. "Then, perhaps I shall change my gown after all. Which kirtle should I choose, Mary?"

"There is such a pretty green," Mary cried. "And a gold over-gown to go with it. And you should wear your fur-trimmed mantle." Mary looked at her admiringly. "Your hair is so pretty, like spun silver. Why do you not wear it loose? You could cover it with a fine veil, but you do not need to hide it completely."

"I shall let you dress it for me," Isolde said, "but see that you do not make me look immodest."

"It is obvious to all that you are both devout and modest," replied Mary. "Yet you are also beautiful. It would be a shame to hide that beauty from the world."

Isolde found herself responding to the woman's flattery. No one had ever encouraged her to do anything which might enhance her appearance before this. It did not occur to her to distrust the woman. Besides, she was tempted by the fine clothes which had been prepared for her, and something in Ondeline's eyes had touched her pride on the raw.

"Come then," she said, sitting on the stool. "Prepare me for the feast."

A number of vials and pots were spread out on a small table with legs shaped like a curved X. Opening one of the pots, she discovered it contained perfumed oil for her to rub into her skin. There was also a square of polished silver with a handle that had been ingrained and embossed with leaves and vines. When she turned it over, she could see her face reflected in the smooth surface.

Isolde knew such marvels existed, but had never before seen one. Lady Ellen had not possessed anything so costly, or so indulgent. It was not necessary for a woman to gaze at herself. Vanity was a sin.

She replaced it at once. What would Sister Bertha say to such worldly pride? Isolde almost changed her mind about wearing the new gown, then realized she would look foolish in the eyes of her serving woman.

She sat patiently while the sides of her hair were woven in coils and secured by intricate bosses of gold net work, then a filigree cap of gold mesh was fastened over a veil of very fine sarcenet, which allowed the colour of her hair to show though.

The kirtle Mary had brought her was fashioned of a good quality silk, and the over-gown of cloth of gold, fastened by a jewelled girdle that hung loosely on her waist. Because of the cold weather, she wore a velvet mantle trimmed with Miniver, a pure white fur from the belly of a weasel and much prized.

Isolde resisted the temptation to look at herself when her woman told her she was ready. However, the expression of shock and jealousy in Ondeline's face when she came to inform her Sir Henry had requested her presence, was enough to confirm the change in her appearance.

"You look beautiful," Mary whispered to her. "Sir Henry will have eyes for no one

but you this night."

Isolde made no reply. She followed Ondeline from the solar and down the winding stair, which led to the great hall. The noise of many voices met her before the huge chamber came into view, and her heart jumped with fear. There were so many men in this household, and she had been used to the silence of the Sisters. For a moment, her courage failed her and she wished she could run back to the safety of her solar. Then Ondeline turned and looked at her, such scorn in her eyes Isolde's pride immediately reasserted itself.

"I can find my own way now," she said. "Wait here for a few minutes before you join us."

"As you wish, my lady." Ondeline was angry but she was forced to obey the woman who would be her mistress from now on.

Isolde had reached the open gallery. She walked slowly along it to the head of the main stairway. Pausing there for a moment, she was aware of a sudden hush from the hall below. She lifted her head, so regal and proud in that moment she might have been a queen. All eyes were upon her as she began to walk down the stone stairs.

As she reached the bottom, Bishop Walden came to greet her.

"You do me credit, Isolde," he said.

He was dressed richly in robes of purple and gold, a sable cloak thrown over his shoulders. Isolde realized now how plain and awkward she would have looked in her old clothes. Had she not changed, it would have seemed to insult all these wealthy and important men who had gathered here to greet her.

Glancing round, Isolde realized she was the only woman amongst perhaps a hundred men. For a moment, she wished Ondeline was at her side, then she dismissed the idea as the bishop took her hand and led her to the head of the table, where Sir Henry was waiting to greet her.

He had risen to his feet, and his eyes seemed to glow with a simmering fire as they fastened on her face. His own gown and surcoat surpassed the bishop's in richness and splendour.

"Sir Henry, I give you the Lady Isolde of Lynston," Bishop Walden said. "Tomorrow, she will become your bride, for this evening, she remains under my protection."

"Lady, you are welcome." Sir Henry kissed the hand she offered. "Sit here at my right and you, my lord, at my left. I thank you for bringing me so fair a bride. Indeed, I had not thought she would be so lovely."

Isolde blushed and dropped her gaze. He had seemed to take her for granted on her arrival, looking at her in a way that made her feel she was simply part of a contract he had made with her uncle, but the hungry, burning look he gave her now was very different. Was she so changed? She smiled as he snapped his fingers and a youth set the chair for her.

It was strange to sit at the top table. She had been used to squeezing on to the bench below the salt at Lord Mortimer's board, but here she took the place of honour beside Sir Henry.

Looking at the tables, which ran the length of the hall to either side of her, Isolde saw

Ondeline squeeze in beside Philip de Grenville. Her brother smiled and made room for her, but the sulky droop to her mouth showed her displeasure.

Ondeline had made her resentment clear. Isolde was not yet sure of either Griselda or Mary. Seeing Philip de Grenville's friendly smile in her direction, she believed him at least to be her friend.

"Will you take some wine, Lady Isolde?"

Her wandering thoughts were recalled as Sir Henry himself poured wine into a cup of gold set with precious turquoises and pearls. He drank a few sips, then offered the cup to her. She took it, raising it to her lips and drinking deeply. The wine had a spicy taste and was not as bitter as she had become accustomed to at the abbey.

"This is pleasant, my lord."

"You will discover many things to please you here, Lady Isolde. I hope you find your apartments comfortable?"

"I have not been used to such comfort. It makes me uneasy to have such fine things about me."

"Indeed?" His brows rose. "Your sentiments are unusual for your sex, my lady. I meant only to please you."

"I am not displeased." She bit her lips, realizing her words had annoyed him. "It is only that I find such display a little unsettling. I have been taught that our duty to God is all, the rest merely vanity."

"Such sentiment is for the dried up hags who seek sanctuary in a nunnery, because they have no hope of marriage or the pleasures of the world."

"Sir! You insult my friends." Isolde was shocked by such bluntness. "I pray you to moderate your language."

"Do you indeed, my lady?" Sir Henry's mouth curled in a sneer of derision. "Far be it from me to offend your modesty, Isolde, but you will hear worse in my house. I commend you to put your prudish thoughts behind you, for otherwise you will find my friends laugh at you when your back is turned."

His mockery silenced her. She had wondered what manner of man her husband might be, but never once had she expected this. He seemed to turn everything she had ever learned upside down, to deny all her beliefs, even her faith in the rightness of that teaching.

"I cannot be other than I am, my lord. If it does not please you, I must beg for your forgiveness."

"Are you really so meek?" Henry's eyes dwelt on her face. "Can it be that such loveliness belies the character that lies behind it? Is there no fire, no boldness in you? Yet I see something different in your eyes, sweet Isolde. I dare swear that I shall drive the teaching of those harridans from your head once I have you safely in my bed."

Isolde's cheeks flamed as she saw the challenge in his eyes. She thought he was laughing at her, but could not be sure. His manner was stern, even forbidding yet, to speak to her in such a way! Surely he must be jesting?

"You are to be my husband, sir, you may teach me what you choose." Her head went up, pride making her bold. "Yet, I think you tease me out of malice, my lord. And that

is not kind in you."

"Where is it written that a husband must be kind to his wife?" His brows rose. "Not in the contract I signed, I vow."

"Surely it is an unwritten rule of chivalry, sir? Any knight would swear to protect and keep his lady."

"Or to cherish her?" Now there was a glint of malicious humour in those dark eyes. "I swear to cherish you, Isolde, and to chastise you should that tongue of yours become too sharp."

Isolde saw the gleam in his eyes. He was punishing her for the way she had greeted him, and her rejection of his wealth.

"I fear I have offended you, my lord, and crave your pardon."

A harsh laugh escaped him. "Now you spoil the game, lady. You had aroused the hunter in me. I would not have you meek or sour like spoiled milk. Wine well spiced is my favoured cup, as you will discover soon enough. Yet you please me, Isolde. Once you have forgotten everything the nuns taught you, we may suit one another."

Isolde could think of no answer to his mockery. She knew she had drawn it on herself, but took refuge in all she had been taught. By turning the other cheek, she would rise above such taunts.

He waited for her to speak for a few seconds, then gave his attention to Bishop Walden. Isolde sat in regal silence, looking straight ahead of her. She ate sparingly of the rich dishes placed in front of her, knowing she would need time to accustom herself to such a diet; to eat too greedily of foods she had scarcely tasted since leaving Lynston would make her stomach turn.

It was towards the end of the feast that Sir Henry turned to her at last with a frowning look.

"You do not eat, Isolde? Have I stolen your appetite with my jesting?"

"No, my lord. I have eaten sufficient for my needs."

"Here, try these dates and almonds," he said, passing her a dish. "I had them brought specially from the merchants of London to please you."

"Thank you, that was thoughtful of you, sir." Isolde took two of the brown fruits and bit into one experimentally. It was the first time she had tried such a luxury, and she discovered it was moist and sweet. "This is delicious. I was afraid to try it before, for I did not know how it would taste."

"I am glad you like them," he replied, smiling now. "Try one of the sweetmeats. I think you will enjoy those, too."

"Marchpane," Isolde said, nodding as she took one from a silver dish. "Robin gave me some of these once as a Christmas gift."

"Robin?" His brows rose, eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. "Who is Robin? And what is he to you?"

"Robin Mortimer," Isolde said, her cheeks flushing. "We played together as children at Lynston, my lord."

"Ah yes, I believe I know Robin Mortimer. I have seen him recently at Court. When the king comes to Lancaster, we shall join him for a few days. You may see your

childhood friend then, Isolde. He is a great favourite in the tournament. I believe the ladies of the Court compete to give him their favours. They say he is as skilled in the arts of love and verse as combat."

Isolde felt a slash of jealousy as she imagined Robin at Court. He had probably forgotten her long ago. She would be a fool to think of him again. Her life was here, with this man, whether she willed it or no.

"As to that, I cannot answer you, sir. I know only that we played together as children and he was kind to me."

"Had I any suspicion otherwise, it would go hard with you, Isolde," Sir Henry said, his mouth hard and un-giving. "Be not fooled by my jesting, lady. I would have my wife come to me a chaste virgin, and remain faithful to me always. Betray me, and I vow you shall regret it."

"You insult me to suggest it, sir." Isolde dropped her gaze before the fierce challenge of his.

"Then I beg your pardon, lady," he replied, but did not smile. "Now, take a little more wine and learn to enjoy yourself. If you are ready, I shall summon the tumblers to perform for you and perhaps Ondeline will play and sing for us later."

His gaze flicked towards his cousin. She smiled at him, her beautiful face coming alive. At that moment, her love was revealed and Isolde understood the woman's resentment of her. Ondeline was passionately in love with her cousin. Did he feel the same towards her? Would he have wed her if she had not been his cousin?

Isolde studied his face, but could not read his thoughts.

Isolde stood as if in a dream as the women prepared her for the wedding. Her kirtle was a pale blue, her over-gown white with gold embroidery. On her head she wore a white wimple and a coronet of gold, studded with pearls and turquoises. She had refused to wear her hair loose, despite Mary's efforts to persuade her.

Sir Henry demanded a chaste bride, and she intended to appear virtuous, as indeed she was. Isolde had decided it was her immodest headdress, which had provoked Sir Henry's mockery at the pre-nuptial feast. Had she covered her hair, he would not have said such lewd things to her.

"It is time, my lady," Mary reminded her.

Isolde's mouth was dry from fear. She had spent a restless night thinking of this moment, but no way of escape had presented itself to her mind. Indeed, now that she had begun to know the man she was to marry, she realized it had been too late from the moment the contracts had been signed. Sir Henry March would never let go his hold on whatever he owned. Had she tried to break free, he would as soon have seen her dead and Robin too.

"I am ready," she said. "Ondeline, take the train. Griselda and Mary must come after you."

In giving Ondeline the position as her chief handmaiden at the wedding ceremony,

she was acknowledging her rank. It was her due as Henry's kinswoman, and merely a courtesy. Yet it would have been a deadly insult to do otherwise.

Isolde's train fell from her shoulders and was made of velvet heavily trimmed with squirrel fur. Even with Ondeline carrying most of it, it made her progress slow and stately. The coronet pressed hard against her brow, giving her a slight headache. Or, was it only the frantic pounding of her heart that caused her to feel so unwell?

Isolde raised her head. She must not show her anguish. Sir Henry had made it plain he was a jealous, possessive man. He must be given no reason to suspect she was an unwilling bride.

Isolde saw him standing before the altar in the chapel as she was met by her uncle. She had expected Bishop Walden to perform the ceremony, but he had elected to give her to her husband. The ceremony was to be conducted by Sir Henry's own chaplain. The bishop would merely bless them afterwards.

"Avis would have been proud of her daughter this day."

The bishop's words, softly spoken, made Isolde raise her head a little higher. She had not been wrong in thinking him a kind man. He had done what he believed best for her, and she no longer resented his influence on her life. It was surely God's will that she marry Sir Henry, and she would submit, no matter what it cost her in private sorrow. She would be a good and faithful wife, and obey her husband as she ought.

Isolde did not look at her husband as she took her place beside him. Despite her determination to do her duty, she could hardly keep from shivering. Her face was pale, her voice barely above a whisper as she made her vows. It was only when Sir Henry slipped a heavy gold ring set with emeralds on to her finger that she dared to glance up at him.

His harsh features were set in an expression of displeasure. What had she done now to make him look at her so sternly? Isolde felt her bottom lip tremble. She bit on it and tasted blood. Somehow, that restored her courage and she managed a cool smile.

Had Isolde known it, she had an air of regal calm that belied the turmoil of her thoughts. Her beauty was cold, virginal, lacking the fire of the previous evening. Her air of detachment pricked the man's pride, making him angry.

Sir Henry had not seen Isolde until the day of her arrival at his home. He had accepted her as his bride out of a deep respect for Bishop Walden. They held similar ideas concerning the Church and State. Ideas that were startling for the age in which they lived, and might have been denounced as both treason and blasphemy had they been openly admitted. When two men of superior understanding met, an invisible bond was formed. It was a meeting of minds and an acceptance of the evils they knew they could not change yet struggled against, each in their separate way.

The link between Bishop Walden and Isolde had been Henry's main reason for agreeing to the marriage, though it had become urgent for him to take a bride. There was no one else to carry his name forward, a name that held a proud lineage, for his family had held lands in France long before they came here with the Norman conquerors. Philip was the son of Henry's mother's brother, and though heir to his estate by right of blood, could not claim the title of Baron. Without a son to follow him,

Henry would die unfulfilled.

Besides, Henry was aware of Ondeline's feelings towards him. Feelings it would have been all too easy to abuse. Ondeline was not only beautiful, she had a passionate, fiery nature. Henry had been tempted by her beauty more than once, resisting only from a sense of honour. It was unfortunate they were first cousins, for he knew she would have suited his temperament. Yet because of the blood tie, their union was forbidden. Even had he been able to overcome the laws of Church and man by special dispensation, he would never have contemplated such a marriage.

In an age of superstition and dogma, Henry refused to believe much that was laid down as absolute law. He saw death and disease about him and suspected much of it was due to the filth and poor living conditions of the people. Why should madness and leprosy be a curse from God? Had Jesus not healed the sick, forgiving their sins, forgiving even those who nailed Him to the Cross? Surely, the deadly diseases that afflicted so many were more likely passed from man to man, woman to woman, than to have come from God?

Although never openly admitted, Henry knew many of his views were shared by Bishop Walden. Therefore, he had agreed to the marriage out of friendship, hardly giving Isolde a thought before the moment of their meeting.

Sir Henry was an enlightened man in some ways, but shared the sentiments of his fellows in others. The art of combat was his chief pleasure. He loved to fight and knew he would most likely die in battle. Indeed, he would glory in such a death, preferring it to a sordid decline into sickness or infirmity. He needed a wife he could trust to bear his children and keep his house in order while he was absent.

Some nobles locked their wives into chastity belts while they were away to make certain they were not cuckolded, but Henry considered it barbaric. He had expected Isolde to be comely, but her haunting beauty had surprised and disturbed him. She aroused feelings he had not thought to experience.

Women had always come easily to a man such as he. He had taken them with pleasure, giving pleasure in return and then as easily forgotten them. He was annoyed to discover that Isolde's coldness only inflamed his passions the more. There was no time for love or tenderness in his life, no time to court a woman with sweet words and music as the troubadours would have it done. Henry wanted a warm and passionate woman, who would welcome him to his bed, then busy herself with the duties of a chatelaine while he was absent. He did not require her to love him, only to accept her duty with a good heart and warm body. He needed to be able to forget her the moment he left her arms.

Isolde would not be easy to forget.

The feasting had been going on for many hours, when Isolde left the great hall and went up to her solar. She paused at the bend in the stair to look out at the night, through the slit that served as the only source of air and natural light. There was a pale

crescent moon in the dark sky, its light touching the waters of the Tarn. A night for lovers, she thought and sighed, thinking of the day by the river when Robin had sworn to love her forever.

She must never think of Robin again! Isolde banished her memories to a far corner of her mind. She was wife to Sir Henry now, and must renounce all other men.

Her women had left the hall with her. She had done her best to ignore the lewd looks and coarse whispers of her husband's men, though her cheeks burned for shame. Had she known it, she had been spared much by her husband's decree. The whispers would have been shouts and rude gestures had not Sir Henry's word been law. There were to be no rough games, no cruel tricks played on his bride. She was to be treated with respect at all times.

Isolde stood silently as the women took away her clothes and dressed her in a thin night shift. Now her hair flowed over her shoulders dipping to her waist at the back, a rippling mass of shining silk strands. Her skin tingled from the oils she had allowed them to smooth on her feet, arms and legs.

"You may leave me now," she said. "Do not come again until—until my lord has left me."

She saw the blaze of anger in Ondeline's eyes and wished they might change places in the marriage bed.

After the women had left her, Isolde knelt on the cold stone floor and began to pray. She was not sure why she prayed so fervently, because she knew God would not answer her. It was too late now; all chance of happiness had gone.

She became aware she was not alone. Rising to her feet, she turned slowly to face the man who was now her husband. In the smoky light of the torches, his face seemed grave and serious. He was wearing a velvet gown over his shift, his long hair flowing onto his shoulders. She could smell some sweet oil that seemed to come from his skin, and knew he must have prepared himself to come to her. How tall he was! He towered over her, making her heart beat so fast she found it difficult to breathe.

"Forgive me if I disturbed your devotions, Isolde. I thought you would be ready for me."

Isolde's head went up proudly. "I am ready, my lord. Tell me what you wish of me."

"So meek and obedient." Henry came towards her. She noticed the faint sheen of sweat on his brow and the look of excitement he could not quite hide. "Well, I suppose it is what I should have expected from a girl taught by the nuns. At least you do not mean to fight me."

"I am your wife. You may do as you wish with me."

"Indeed? I thank you for the thought." Henry's mouth took on a mocking smile. "I shall be as gentle as possible with you this time, Isolde, though I may take you at your word one day."

She made no reply as he reached for her. For one moment longer, he looked down at her, then bent to gather her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She was aware then of how strong he was, and of her own vulnerability. Her eyes were wide and frightened as she stared up at him.

He bent over her, his hand caressing her breast through the fine material for a few moments. Isolde held her breath. He was so powerful, so much a man, that she was terrified by his nearness. She stiffened as he sat on the bed beside her, bending over her to kiss her lips and then her throat, just where a tiny pulse was beating madly. His hand reached down, pulling her nightgown up to her waist, then moved firmly over her flat naval to part her legs. His action was gentle and yet firm, giving her no chance of refusal.

Isolde closed her eyes as he moved to cover her with his own body. She felt his breath hot against her face, his weight pressing down on her suddenly, then something hot and hard pressed against her forbidden place. A gasp of surprise turned to pain as he thrust upwards and into her in one sudden action. She screamed, but his mouth covered hers and the sound was lost beneath the kiss.

It hurt so much! Isolde had never dreamed becoming a wife could be this painful. She struggled against him then, but he held her down, continuing with his urgent thrusting, deeper and deeper inside her until she felt her flesh was on fire. Tears stung her eyes, but she held them back. This was his right. She had known something must happen to make a child between them, but had never thought it would be so hard to bear.

At last he seemed to have finished his thrusting. She felt his weight crushing her, then he grunted and rolled away. He seemed to lie tense and still beside her for a moment.

"I am sorry it was so painful for you," he said at last, and his hand touched her hair as if in apology. "It was your own fault, Isolde. You were dry because you resisted in your mind. Once you have truly accepted me as your husband, it will be easier for you."

Isolde did not answer. The thought of enduring this agony ever again was almost unbearable. She felt a surge of pure hatred. He had hurt her, used her as if she were a harlot! Robin would never have taken her thus.

She felt the bed move as Henry left it, but still would not open her eyes, though she knew he was watching for a sign from her, something that would acknowledge his right, ease his conscience for what he had done to her.

"Had I known you would hate me so, I would have sent you back to the nuns," he said at last. "But it is too late now, Isolde. We must make the best of things. I need a son and heir. When you have given me my son, I shall leave you to lie in peace. Until then, I must visit you like this. Do you understand me? It gives me no pleasure to force you — but I shall, if you make me."

Isolde looked at him then, anger and hatred blazing in her eyes. "Mother Margaret asked me if I had a vocation and I said no, but had I known what kind of a man I was to marry, I would have stayed with the nuns. Force me if you will, my lord, but you shall never have joy of me as I have none of you."

Henry's face was a mask of indifference as he looked at her. "So be it, Isolde. Hate me if you will, but know that I shall have my heir whether you give him willingly or no."

Chapter Seven

"I'm glad you came, Ally." Brian kissed her cheek, then turned to her brother. "It's nice to see you again, Paul. Did you have a terrible journey down?"

"No, it wasn't bad at all," Paul said. "Besides, I couldn't let Ally down. She would have hated to spend Christmas alone."

"I'm sure my cousin would have found room for her," Brian said. "Come and have a word with her, Paul. Helen is a widow with two children, but she manages to run a small farm with the minimum of help. I don't know how she does it to be honest."

Helen turned out to be a plump cheerful woman, who greeted him with a cheerful smile. Paul returned her smile in a vague way, listening to her chatter and replying only when necessary. She wasn't his type. He glanced round the attractive room and out of the eight women gathered there, only one was attractive in his eyes. Ally had something special about her, something that came from inside.

She was talking to a small group of men, all of whom seemed to be hanging on her every word. Paul felt a spurt of annoyance. Who the hell did they think they were—dogs hanging out after a bitch on heat?

Paul was immediately shocked by his own thoughts. It wasn't like him to be so coarse—and Ally was his sister! He couldn't understand what was happening to him. He'd never felt this way before. He loved Ally, of course he did, but he wasn't in love with her—he didn't want to make love to her. Such a thing would be abhorrent to his nature.

He loved Ally in his own quiet way, always had—but this was ridiculous. More than that—it was disgusting. Yet as he watched his sister laughing up at Brian Forrester, he felt that irrational jealousy once more.

Glancing across at her brother, Ally was shocked by his expression. Was he so bored? He looked angry, though she couldn't imagine why he should be. It was a good party and the people were friendly.

"So..." Brian was saying. "Are you settling in now?"

Yes. I like the cottage very much, only..." She gazed up at him uncertainly. "Have you ever heard rumours that it might be haunted?"

"No, never," Brian replied truthfully. "My father was convinced the manor was

haunted, as I told you, but as far as I know, he never experienced anything untoward at the cottage. Not that he lived there long..." He frowned. "Why, have you seen something?"

"Not seen," Ally said with a self-conscious laugh. "I hear things... whispers... unless they're in my head. I'm not sure. It might be to do with the book I'm writing."

"What kind of a book?"

"I'm not entirely certain about that either," she admitted. "I came down here to write a modern thriller, but this other thing keeps running through my head. It's a medieval story..."

"That's a departure for you, isn't it?" He arched his brows.

"Yes, very much so. I had no intention of writing it, but it gets me up at all hours."

"Well, don't knock yourself out over it," Brian said. He hesitated, then asked. "Would you let me take you out to dinner one evening—after Christmas? We could get to know each other, become friends."

"Yes, I should like that," Ally said and smiled at him. "I expect you're pretty much tied up for the next few days. If not, would you like to come to supper with Paul and I before he goes back?"

"I am rather involved for the next few days," Brian said. "I'd love to come some other time—whether Paul's here or not."

Ally blushed a delicate shade of rose. It would be difficult to misinterpret his manner. He was interested in getting to know her very much better. Only a few days earlier, Ally would have shied away from any kind of emotional involvement but somehow, the hurt inside her had begun to ease. It was time she relaxed her guard, time she started to live again.

"We'll fix something up soon," she said. "I'll look forward to it."

"So shall I—very much." Brian smiled at her warmly. "It was my lucky day when you decided to come down here to write your new novel. You won't finish it too quickly, will you?"

"At the moment, I'm making no headway with the book I want to write," Ally said. "So it looks as if I'll be around for a while."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear."

Ally laughed, responding to his honesty. When she'd first seen him the night of the snowstorm, she'd thought he was like Tony—but he wasn't. Tony had been arrogant, proud and selfish. Brian was warm and generous, and she liked him a lot!

Ally smiled at her brother as she served lunch a little later that day.

"I thought we we'd have poached salmon, something lighter after all the food we ate yesterday."

"You don't need to worry about your weight," Paul said and frowned at her. "You were far too thin, but you've put on a couple of pounds."

"Thank you, kind sir," Ally said pulling a wry face. "I'm not sure I want to put on a couple of pounds."

"It suits you," Paul said. "No, really. I've noticed—and so has Brian Forrester. The way he was looking at you earlier! Be a bit careful of him, Ally. You're down here all

alone, at least, you will be once I go back to New York. Don't let him take advantage of you."

"Brian, take advantage?" Ally stared at him in surprise. "He isn't the type, Paul. He's very warm and honest."

Paul's expression was grim as he ate his meal. "Just remember I warned you."

Ally made no further comment. It wasn't like Paul to be this way. He'd always encouraged her to make new friends and go out. Now it was almost as if he wanted to stop her—as though he were jealous of her making new friends...of Brian.

Paul couldn't be jealous—not in that way! Ally felt slightly sick as she recalled her brother's manner at the party. What was wrong? He was never moody—this was completely out of character.

Should she ask him if he was worried about something? Ally was a little anxious. Was Paul ill? Surely, he would tell her if there was anything the matter with him. Perhaps it was something to do with his work.

After lunch, they both rejected the TV in favour of a brisk walk. It was cold out, but the exercise seemed to do them both good, and Paul's brooding manner had disappeared by the time they got back.

"I'm not hungry yet," Paul said, when Ally asked if he wanted anything. "If you don't mind, I'd like to work for a while."

"Good idea," Ally said. "I've had an idea for the next chapter of the thriller. I think I'll strike while the iron is hot."

Paul took his laptop into the dining room, and Ally worked at her desk in the sitting room. She found the words came easily and managed ten pages of crisp, clinical writing before Paul came to rejoin her.

"Not still at it?" He frowned at her. "You'll wear yourself out, Ally."

"It was going well," she said. "You can talk—you're a workaholic yourself."

Paul smiled. "Shall we have a sandwich and a glass of wine? I'll make it."

"There's a quiche in the fridge if you prefer?"

"I'll bring a selection," he promised. "We'll be lazy and have a tray on our laps for once—watch the film on TV. I think we both deserve that."

"Fine—whatever you want." Ally smiled sleepily at him. This was the brother she loved. "I'm feeling lazy."

She got up and went over to the settee, curling up with her eyes closed as she relaxed.

Henry stared at Isolde. She was beautiful but so cold—cold to him, her husband. He was angry to see that she smiled at others.

"Hey! Wake up," Paul's teasing voice brought Ally back as she slipped into the dream. "You can fall asleep after you've eaten."

Ally nodded and brushed her hair back out of her face. "Oh, that looks lovely, Paul. I could get used to this."

"Make the most of it, love. You'll be on your own again soon enough."

Ally yawned and stood up. It wasn't really very late, but she was so tired. She couldn't understand why she should feel this tired, perhaps it was the country air.

Trial by Fire

"I'm going to bed, Paul. You don't have to though. Stay and watch the TV—I'm exhausted."

"Yes, you look tired," Paul said. "Get a good night's rest, love. I might do a little more work before I go up."

"I'll probably read a few pages of the book you gave me."

Ally smiled at her brother and went out. Upstairs, she undressed and pulled on some warm pyjamas. She often went to bed wearing nothing at all, but the cottage seemed cold and she was aware of the need for some warmth.

She snuggled down in bed, then opened the book that had been one of Paul's gifts to her. Her eyelids felt heavy and the book slipped from her grasp as she drifted into sleep.

Paul closed the computer and glanced at his watch. Good grief! It was three in the morning; he hadn't realized how long he'd been working! Time for bed, he decided, thankful that his work seemed to have driven the voices out of his head.

He walked into the hall, then noticed the light in the sitting room. Surely, he'd switched off when he took his laptop into the dining room? Opening the door, he glanced in and frowned as he saw Ally at her desk. She was slumped over it, having fallen asleep.

"What on earth do you want to work like this for?" Paul asked as he went to her. He saw the screen was still live and read the last words written there.

"You have to let me go," Isolde said. "I'm married, Robin. There is naught you can do."

Paul felt the icy trickle down his spine. Isolde and Robin, theirs were the voices he'd been hearing over and over again. It just didn't make sense; he must be going out of his mind. Unless... Ally was right. Maybe it was this place.

He closed Ally's computer, making sure he'd saved her work. Then he took hold of her shoulders and gave her a little shake. She didn't stir so he shook her hard. She was like a rag doll! Paul was suddenly scared. Had something happened to her—a stroke or a heart attack?

"Wake up, Ally!" he cried. "For my sake, don't be ill. Don't die!"

Ally's eyes came open, but she looked drugged—in some kind of a trance.

"You should not be here," she said clearly. "You must go before Henry comes or he will kill you."

"Ally!" Paul was frightened, not only by his sister's odd state, but by what was happening to him. He felt as if he were being taken over, as if he were becoming someone else. *"Isolde ... I can't leave you. I want you...need you..."*

Robin clasped Isolde to him, kissing her hungrily. He was beyond sanity, beyond caring that Isolde belonged to another man. He wanted to possess her, to know her as a man knows his woman.

"You are mine, Isolde. I shall never let you go."

Robin's mouth devoured her as she went limp in his arms but then, all at once, she began to

struggle. She was staring at him in horror, thrusting him away and crying out that he must stop...

"What are you doing?"

Ally's eyes were open now, staring at him in shock and bewilderment. Paul was horrified as he realized what he was doing.

"My God! I'm sorry, Ally. I was trying to wake you. I don't know what happened." He let her go, backing away from her. "I thought you were someone else ... that I was someone else... Robin and Isolde.

"Robin and Isolde..." Ally stared at him. "But how did you know...have you been hearing the voices too?"

Paul nodded. "I thought I was imagining it at first...it was scary. What's happening, Ally? What's going on here?"

"I don't know." She looked at her computer. "Have I been working on Isolde's story?"

"Yes--Robin was trying to make love to her but she resisted."

"It is a forbidden love," Ally said and gave a little sob. "I don't like this much, Paul."

"You should leave here--we both should."

Ally stared at him, then shook her head. "I can't leave yet, Paul. I have to stay. I have to write her story. She wants me to do it. If I left, she would go with me, but I know I have to stay here. It's important."

"Then I must leave," Paul said. "I can't stay, not after what's happened. God only knows what might have happened if you hadn't told me to stop."

"Do you really have to leave?" Ally saw the answer in his eyes. "At least wait until the morning."

"Lock your door then," Paul said. "I don't want this to happen, Ally. I love you. You're my sister. If I did anything to harm you ... I'd never forgive myself."

"It wasn't you, Paul," Ally said. "It was him... Robin. He wanted her desperately but they married her to someone else."

"What happened to them?" Paul looked at her anxiously. "I know I'm mad, Ally, this can't really be happening--but supposing it is? Supposing you are in danger?"

"I don't think I am," Ally said. "I think Isolde is in danger. I think she wants me to help her...somehow stop whatever it was that happened to her.

"How can you? If it happened it happened, you can't change the past."

"No--but perhaps Isolde can." Ally laughed. "I don't know what I mean, Paul. All I can feel is that I have to do this for Isolde."

Chapter Eight

Isolde

King Edward the Third had called a gathering of his nobles at the great castle held by the Earl of Lancaster. As they approached the huddle of buildings that made up the walled town close by the castle, Isolde saw the brightly coloured tents of many of the King's followers set up on a flat plain outside the walls. It was here the tournament was to be held the next day, but Sir Henry owned a house within the town itself, and it was there he took his bride of two weeks.

Like other walled towns of the time, it was bursting at the seams. The narrow streets crowded one upon the other in an effort to contain the ever-growing needs of the populace, without pushing out the boundaries. However, houses and inns had begun to spring up in ramshackle fashion beyond the walls, though as yet they were but poor shacks and generally looked on with a jaundiced eye by the town's inhabitants. Most of the buildings were of the same grey stone found locally, hard and enduring, but the styles were a hotchpotch that varied from the grand to a crumbling hovel.

Isolde had seldom been in such a town before, and was mesmerized by the bustle and chaos of its streets, to say nothing of the stench that came from its open ditches in which all manner of filth lay rotting.

Folk from every walk of life had gathered for the tournament, setting up stalls to sell their merchandise wherever they pleased and adding to the confusion. Several fights were going on, as local shopkeepers grew angry at the influx of itinerant merchants and peddlers. Seeing the blows exchanged on all sides, Isolde shuddered. There would surely be more than one head cracked open that day.

"Out of the way, fellow!" Sir Henry shouted as two brawling merchants blocked Isolde's palfrey. "Make way there!"

Seeing the approach of a great lord and his train, the brawling men broke off their fight and stepped away, their dispute temporarily abandoned. It was from such patrons as Sir Henry and his lady that they hoped to earn their profits over the next few days. Many bows and apologies were sent in their direction.

"They meant you no harm," Sir Henry said, drawing alongside Isolde as if to protect

her. "It is their own heads will be sore on the morrow."

"It was of that I was thinking," she replied. "We nursed many such cases at the abbey and most were hopeless."

"And did that distress you?"

"Yes, my lord. Sister Bertha was attacked by one poor man. She would have left him to God's mercy, but I persuaded her to tend him. It was my fault she was injured."

"Or her own for not making sure there was someone to aid her." Sir Henry's eyes narrowed in thought. "Have you some skill at healing?"

"A little, my lord."

He nodded. "Then I may ask you to tend some of my men after the tournament. Should you be willing?"

"Why, yes, sir. I should be glad of the employment. I have been idle these past two weeks."

"And bored, I'll warrant?" He nodded as she blushed. "I have been remiss, Isolde. My time was otherwise employed, but when we return, I shall place the keys of Urswick in your hands. You will need to consult with my steward, but I shall expect you to keep my house while I am away fighting in France."

"It will be my duty, and my pleasure, sir."

Isolde dared to glance at his face. She had scarcely seen him since their wedding night. Despite his threats then, he had not come to her bed again. She joined him each night for the main meal of the day, but he seldom spoke more than a few words of greeting.

Bishop Walden had left them two days after the wedding, and since then, several messengers had come to Urswick from the King. Sir Henry's time was given to receiving them and training his men. He seemed to have forgotten Isolde until now.

She had spent most of her time sitting with her ladies in her solar. The weather had been too cold for her to walk for more than a few minutes in the courtyard or the walled gardens. She had not once ventured outside Sir Henry's grounds until they set out to join the King.

Used to being confined at the abbey, she had not dared to ask if she might walk down to the village or ride in the surrounding countryside.

"Here we are, Isolde," Sir Henry said as they came upon one of the better houses in the town. It was half-timbered with jutting windows at the upper storey, and stood square to the open space of the market square. An archway led through into a small courtyard and stables for the horses. "May I help you dismount, my lady?"

"Thank you, my lord." Isolde blushed as he lifted her down. His hands did not linger about her waist, as at their first meeting, and he immediately turned away to greet his steward, who had ridden on ahead to warn of their arrival.

"This way, Lady Isolde. I will show you to your quarters."

Isolde looked round as Ondeline spoke. Mary had remained at Urswick and Griselda was following behind with the baggage train. Ondeline had ridden pillion with her brother.

"Thank you," Isolde said. "But I should like to inspect the rest of the house first."

Since my lord seldom visits here, I should make sure the rooms are clean and prepared for our coming."

"I can do that," Ondeline began, then shrugged as she saw the flash of anger in Isolde's eyes. "As you please. I have always done these things, but if you wish to trouble yourself."

"I do," Isolde said. "But you shall accompany me. We shall begin with the kitchens and storerooms. I have brought some salves and ointments with me, but they may not be sufficient to heal the wounds of my lord's men. If there are none in the house, they must be sent for from an apothecary in the town."

Isolde's spirits lifted as she went into the house. It was evident from the air of neglect and a slight smell of mustiness that the place was seldom used. She looked about her with satisfaction. Nothing was wrong that could not be put right with some diligence and a little beeswax. Now that she had Sir Henry's permission to assume the duties of chatelaine, she would find much to occupy her time.

The sun was shining as Isolde and Ondeline took their places under the awning, set up to protect the ladies invited to join the royal party. Isolde had been presented to the King, who had greeted her with all the charm and graciousness for which he was renowned.

He was in his prime of manhood, a strong, bearded man full of vigour and energy. Isolde had noticed particularly his eyes, which seemed always to challenge and were bright like a hawk's, as if he were constantly alert to danger. As indeed, he needed to be.

In his minority, Edward had come under the thumb of his mother and her lover, Roger Mortimer, Earl of March; an ambitious man who had usurped the power of the throne. At eighteen years of age, Edward had disposed the pair and taken over the government of the country, which had taken both cunning and courage. Since then, he had been almost continually at war with Scotland and France, with varying degrees of success.

The imposition of the pretender Edward Balilol to the throne of Scotland had resulted in several fierce and bloody battles between Scots and Englishmen. In the end, Balilol had been forced to find refuge with friends in the north of England, and the situation continued uncertain between the two countries. Yet now, Edward the Third had turned his sights towards France and his own pretensions towards the throne he coveted.

At the moment, there was a disputed succession in Brittany, and Edward supported John de Montfort, the true heir. The French king supported the rival claims of his nephew Charles Blois who was married to the daughter of John the Third, the late Duke of Brittany, and had unjustly been given the lands in a will. There had been several battles between the two rivals, and de Montfort had been taken prisoner by the French king. However, Jane de Montfort soon after gave birth to her husband's son and carried him about the countryside declaring he was the true heir apparent and she would fight

to uphold his claim. She sent her child to the English king as proof of her loyalty to him, and it was because of this, Edward was now preparing a great army to take arms against the French.

His earlier meeting with the French army had led to a great victory at Sluys for the English, which had brought Edward much popularity with his warlike nobles. It was to arouse their interest in the new war and money, which parliament was as ever slow to grant, this great tournament was being held.

Isolde looked around her. There was a field away to her left where other entertainments were going on. In the meantime, dancing bears, jugglers and tumblers, performed beside the peddlers selling all manner of goods, from sweetmeats to ribbons and buckles made of bronze or silver.

Her eyes came back to rest on Queen Philippa, her attendants, and other ladies who were wed to important nobles. All were dressed in rich gowns, their hair coiled and dressed in fine gold mesh and elaborate head-dresses, or left to flow on their shoulders. Some wore the wimple, but many did not, seeming to flaunt their beauty. They were laughing together as they watched the knights preparing for combat, and Isolde was a little shocked by their boldness. Some of them were shameless in the way they sought attention, and the remarks she heard all around her were lewd and not what she would have expected from highborn ladies. However, she remembered her husband's warning not to show her piety too openly, unless she wished to be laughed at behind her back.

"Oh, do look!" she heard one young matron cry. "There is Sir Robin Mortimer. How handsome he is! I wish I dare offer him my favours, but my husband would kill me."

Isolde stiffened as she heard the giggling behind her. Where was Robin? When had he been knighted? Had he seen her? What would he do when he did?

The thoughts went round and round in her head as she looked for him in vain. Then all at once, she saw him and her heart stood still. He was speaking to her husband. Dressed in a short tunic and hose, he had not yet donned his armour. They were standing in front of a green and white striped tent, which had the pennant of the Mortimer's of Lynston flying over it.

Isolde gasped, her heart catching with pain as he turned his head in her direction, and for one moment, she thought he had seen her—that he would come to her. Then his expression hardened and he resumed his conversation with her husband.

"The tilt will begin soon," Ondeline said beside her. "See, the first contestants are coming out. They will present themselves to the King first, then prepare to ride against each other."

Ondeline went on to explain the entertainment was to consist of single-handed jousting, which tested the skill of one knight against another and was less deadly than the melee, which often resulted in serious injury or death. Edward did not wish to risk his best knights, and there were to be no fights to the death today. It would be a more courtly display of skill and chivalry, and the rewards would be armour won by valour. However, no prisoners could be taken and held to ransom as had happened in the past.

Isolde listened, her heart beating wildly. The two knights who had ridden out were unknown to her, but soon it would be Robin's turn. He had gone into his tent to change.

How could she bear it, if he were injured or killed before her eyes? She wished she could leave at once, but knew she dare not. It would be taken as an insult to the King and Queen, and frowned upon by her husband.

The first two knights had presented to the King. One of them was already wearing a lady's favour on his arm. The other rode to where the ladies were sitting and dipped his lance in front of one young and very pretty lady. She laughed and threw him a silk ribbon, which he caught and attached to his armour.

Glancing towards where the King was sitting, Isolde saw her husband bend to speak to Edward. He smiled and nodded, and Henry took his place on the bench behind him as the jousting began.

The first two knights rode against each other. One was immediately unseated to jeers and groans. When he failed to struggle to his feet, his servants and squire ran out to carry him back to his tent.

Isolde crossed herself. "The poor man," she whispered to Ondeline. "I pray he is not dead."

"He will be no loss," Ondeline replied scornfully. "To be unseated at the first tilt shows his skill is poor. In battle, he would be of little use."

Isolde did not reply. She was thinking of the injuries the knight might have sustained. He was not one of her husband's followers so she would not be allowed to help him. She hoped his squire had some knowledge of medicine.

A blast of horns announced the next two knights. This time, they both broke their lances at the first clash. They rode twice more before one was unseated. He was on his feet almost at once and swung his mace round to bring his opponent down. They fought hand to hand for several minutes, the ring of metal against metal sounding loudly in the arena until, at last, one was forced to submit. Because of Edward's decree, the winner granted his victim his life in return for the forfeit of his armour.

Wild cheering greeted this manly display, the victor retiring to wait his turn to enter the lists again.

It had become quite warm. Isolde closed her eyes. She had a slight headache. The noise of combat and cheering seemed oppressive and she wished herself back in the peace of the walled garden at Urswick. It would be pleasant there now spring had arrived, with the hum of bees from the hives and the distant swish of the sea, against the shore below them.

A loud blast of the horns made Isolde open her eyes once more. Her heart caught with fright as she saw one of the knights who rode out this time, was wearing the colours of Lynston. It was impossible to see his face because of the heavy visor on his helmet, but she knew it must be Robin. She gripped her hands together in her lap, her face pale and tense as she watched him present to the King. Then he turned and rode towards the ladies. He progressed slowly in front of them, stopping directly level with Isolde.

"I salute you, Lady Isolde," he said in a clear, challenging voice. "Will you honour me with your favour that I may fight this day as your champion?"

Isolde's heart stood still. What ought she to do? Everyone was staring, waiting for

her answer. She could not deny his request, though it should never have been made. Standing up, she tied a green ribbon to his lance. He bowed his head to her and rode away.

Only then did Isolde dare to glance at her husband. His eyes were watching her closely, but he did not seem as angry as she had feared. She offered him a small, dutiful smile and he nodded in acknowledgement.

Isolde's gaze reverted to the two knights. Her heart was fluttering like a caged bird beating its wings against the bars that imprisoned it. How could she bear to watch this? Yet she must. To leave now would give rise to comment and scandal. Her hands clasped in her lap, fingers worrying at the heavy ring she wore. She raised her head slightly, fighting her fear with pride.

The knights were riding hard towards one another. Isolde knew a moment of extreme anguish as their lances clashed and one snapped. It was not Robin's. What was happening? Ah, now she understood. He was indicating they should ride again. His chivalry in allowing his opponent to take another lance was met with loud cheers of approval. Isolde swallowed hard, waiting for the second charge.

It resulted in Robin unseating his opponent. The knight rose unsteadily to his feet, staggering about in a daze until he was helped from the arena by his squire. Robin rode towards Isolde and saluted her with his lance, then retired to wait his turn once more.

He had won! Isolde exalted in the joy of his triumph. She had always known Robin had some skill in the art of combat, but had not been sure he could compete with these proud knights.

She could hear the excited chatter of the ladies behind her. They were discussing the extraordinary hardness of his lance, and her cheeks flamed hotly as she realized they were not speaking of his prowess on the field of battle but in another area altogether.

Two more knights had entered the lists. Isolde watched as the combat went on. Now at last, the numbers were beginning to thin out. As successive knights were eliminated from the contest the band of elite warriors grew smaller. Then, after what seemed an eternity, there were only eight left and all had ridden before.

Now began the challenge to see who would emerge as champion. Robin rode again and was successful on his first tilt. He retired to wait. Then there were four knights. Again, Robin sent his opponent clattering to the ground with his first charge. The knight was severely injured and had to be carried off the field.

Isolde sat still and pale. Could Robin win a fourth time? She could scarcely bear to watch as he rode out to meet his final opponent. The knight was wearing black armour with white plumes in his helmet. He had already shown himself a strong and skilled fighter.

"Sir Edward of Rochester will win," Ondeline told her confidently. "Your champion has done well to come thus far, but he cannot prevail against such a skilled knight."

Isolde did not reply. She was very much afraid Ondeline was right. She closed her eyes as the knights rode at one another, but opened then as her companion gasped. Both men had been unseated in the charge, but both had risen to their feet. Their squires rushed forward with swords and the battle commenced once more.

Trial by Fire

Sick with fright, Isolde shuddered with every blow Robin took on his shield or armour, knowing that each must result in a bruise or worse. Oh, this cruel sport! Why must men fight for pleasure? She forced herself to watch, praying it would soon be over.

The end came suddenly, as Sir Edward stumbled beneath a crashing blow from Robin's sword. He was winded and could not rise. At other tournaments, he might have died or been taken prisoner, but the King immediately rose to his feet, signalling the end as Robin stood back and threw down his sword.

"Robin of Lynston," Edward cried in a ringing tone. "I name you Champion this day. The honour is yours, sir."

Robin bowed his head, then turned towards Isolde, saluting her, his sword pressed against the visor of his helmet.

She rose to her feet, inclining her head as a squire brought a coronet of flowers and placed it on the end of a lance. Robin took the lance, offering the coronet up to her. She took it and held it up to the crowd, smiling as the cheers of the crowd seemed to reach out and include her in the warmth of its approval.

Robin bowed to her once more, then walked away towards his tent. Isolde sat down, her knees almost giving way as she felt the relief sweep over her. He was safe! It was finished.

"Are you ill?" Ondeline asked, eyes narrowing in sudden suspicion. "You seem faint."

"No, no, I am well enough," she replied. She could not tell Henry's kinswoman of the fear and pain she had felt watching Robin fight his way to victory, or the confusion of her thoughts when he handed her the victor's laurels.

"Henry comes," Ondeline said. "Shall I tell him you wish to come home at once?"

"No!" Isolde denied her swiftly. There was to be a feast at the castle now, and it was possible that she might have a chance to speak with Robin. She needed to talk to him, to see his face, which she had so far only seen from a distance or hidden by his visor. "No, no, I am not ill. Only a little weary from the excitement."

Ondeline gave her a searching look, but she ignored it. Perhaps the other woman wondered if she was already with child, but it was not so. Her courses had come and gone since her wedding night.

"Your kinsman did well," Henry said as he joined them. "I spoke with Sir Robin before the lists began. He asked my permission to seek your favour and I granted it. It will please me greatly if he decides to join me at Urstwick. To have such a skilled knight at my side in France will be an honour."

Isolde felt an icy shiver trickle down her spine. Why had Robin asked to join her husband's retinue? His skill would have gained him a place with the King or one of the great earls of the kingdom. So why come to Urstwick?

Isolde sat at her husband's side during the feasting that evening. She was at the end

of the top table, five places away from where Robin sat at the King's left hand. She could not see him from her place without leaning out, but she could hear him laughing with the lady who sat at his left hand. Her heart ached with the longing to be near him, to speak to him alone.

If only she could be with him privately for a few minutes! Yet she knew it was impossible. She was here as a guest, there was no reason for her to leave the hall.

The King demanded silence. He addressed the champion of the day, and asked. "What favour might I grant to so brave a knight?"

"I crave nothing for myself, sire," Robin replied. "Save to see this company enjoying your hospitality. If you would grant me a boon, let there be dancing. I would also ask Sir Henry Marsh, to grant me the favour of his wife Isolde as my partner to lead the dancing."

Isolde flushed and glanced at Henry's face. Surely, he would deny such a request. He was rising to his feet, turning towards Robin, inclining his head graciously.

"I am gratified Sir Robin wishes to honour my house. I am certain his kinswoman would be pleased to accept such a courteous invitation."

"You are generous indeed, sir."

Isolde stood as Robin came down behind the table to claim her. Her heart was beating so fast she felt breathless, but managed to keep her hand from shaking as she laid it on his arm.

His nearness almost overset her. Had he been this tall, this strong and manly when they last walked together in the grounds of Lynston? She could not think it. His face had lost the softness of youth, had become harder, more stern, though he still went beardless.

"Lady Isolde." He bowed to her. "With your permission?"

He led her out to the middle of the floor, where he bowed and she curtsied reverently to the King. Several other ladies and gentlemen had come out to join them, and the pipes had started to play. The dancers clasped hands and formed a circle, preparing to perform what was known as a carol-dance.

One person was chosen to stand in the middle, and when he clapped his hands, the pipes were silent as he sang a verse of a song, while the others moved round him; then he rejoined the circle and another took his place.

Robin was naturally chosen as their first leader.

*'There was a lass of Lancaster,
So fair of face was she
That her lover swore to leave her never.
Unless unfaithful she should be.
He brought her gifts of gold and silver,
But a cold, cold heart had she.
She took his gifts so fine and dear
Then betrayed him with another.'*

Isolde turned cold as Robin's clear tenor voice ended its tale of betrayal and he returned to the circle, clasping her hand firmly in his own. It was usual for the dancers

to sing religious songs. She knew this ballad to be bawdy, though undoubtedly amusing. It was the kind of song most frowned upon by the Church.

Robin's fingers pressed so tightly on her hand, it was painful. She turned her head to look at him as the next man began to sing a verse. His eyes were so cold, so accusing, she knew exactly why he had chosen to sing this particular song.

His message was clear. He was telling her she had betrayed him by marrying. She moved her head negatively. It was not her fault. He ought not to blame her. She had not willingly married another. Yet he did blame her, she could see it in his face. His anger was such that it seemed to scorch her flesh, searing her to the very soul.

"Please, Robin," she whispered. "Do not look at me so."

"Not now," he warned. "I shall find a way."

'She was a lover but never a wife

And she died in the cold, cold snow.'

Isolde pulled her hand from Robin's, as the last verse of the song ended with the maiden's disgrace and predictable end. She curtsied to him deeply as befitted his status as the day's hero, then turned and walked to join her husband at the table, her head held proudly. Henry was watching her, his expression thoughtful.

"Why so angry, Isolde?" he whispered to her as she sat beside him. "Does the song offend your modesty?"

"It may be thought amusing by some," she answered, her cheeks warm. "I think my uncle would not be pleased to watch me dance to such a tune."

"You wrong him," Henry said, mouth twitching at the corners. "Do not show your disgust so plainly, Isolde. Your feelings are not shared here. Your piety makes you an object of ridicule amongst more sophisticated company."

"Forgive me if I embarrass you, my lord," she replied angrily. "I cannot help my nature."

"I do not believe it is your nature," he replied, amused. "You have been crushed by the teaching of the nuns. Allow yourself to relax a little, and you will see such pastimes are harmless enough."

Isolde bit her lip. She was not truly offended by the song itself, though she knew the Church would be outraged by such a lewd display. However, she also knew that even the common folk often flouted the laws forbidding such pleasures. Music and dancing were enjoyed by all, despite the disapproval of the clergy. Yet to cover her confusion she could not do other than pretend to a piety she did not feel.

Her thoughts were chasing round like fallen leaves in a gale. What had Robin meant when he promised to find a way? A way to do what? He must know it was hopeless. They could never be together as he had once hoped. She was Henry's wife, forbidden to all other men.

Robin did not approach her again that evening. He danced several times with other ladies, one of them Ondeline, and he sang another naughty song to amuse the company. It was clear he was used to the manners of the Court, and popular. Isolde began to see what her husband had meant, when he'd told her Robin was as skilled in the arts of love as of combat. It was evident he could have taken his pick of several

ladies present that night for his wife or his lover.

Watching the lascivious looks bestowed on Robin by some of the married ladies, Isolde suspected them of being ready to betray their husbands for his sake. Was that what he expected of her – that she would lie with him in secret?

Isolde's cheeks burned for shame. No matter how she might regret her marriage, she would not disgrace herself by betraying Henry.

He came to her solar that night. Isolde had dismissed her women and was lying half-asleep when she felt the covers pulled from her. Opening her eyes, she saw Henry looking down at her hungrily, and a little gasp of fright escaped her.

"Do not fear me," he said. "I am not a monster, Isolde. I would not hurt you willingly. Will you not try to accept me as your husband? Help me to make this easier for you?"

Isolde felt tears sting her eyes. She had been thinking of Robin, dreaming of his lips on hers, but this man was her husband. She saw the heat of desire in his eyes and knew she could not deny him. He would take her whether she willed it or no.

"Please tell me what you want of me," she whispered, a tear sliding from the corner of her eye. "I do not mean to displease you, my lord."

"No, no," he said, the gentleness of his voice causing a sob to escape her. "Do not weep, Isolde. You do not displease me. Indeed, I grow daily more proud of you. Forgive me if I tease you. I believe you are suppressing your true nature; we might be comfortable together if you would but relax and do your duty willingly."

Isolde rubbed a hand across her eyes. She knew he had a right to expect willingness from her if nothing more. "I will try, my lord – but I do not know how."

"Then let me teach you," he suggested. He sat beside her on the bed, his hand caressing her breast over the fine material of her night shift. "This can be pleasurable for you as well as me. Let yourself go, Isolde, forget sin and denial of the flesh, do not fight me in your mind, but let yourself come to me with gladness."

"I am not fighting you."

"Are you not?" He smiled and bent to kiss her lips. "Then we shall go slowly, little one. I was angry with you the last time, but I was wrong to take you against your will. This time I shall make you ready for me." His hand moved down, sliding beneath her shift to caress her secret places. "Open to me, Isolde. Let your womanly juices flow in welcome to my loving. I must have an heir of you, but I would have you pleased by my touch."

His voice had a low, husky, coaxing quality that was almost like the music of a stream washing gently against grassy banks, reminding her of summer and happier times. She began to remember the days when she had played so innocently in the meadow with Robin, before the nuns had taught her to deny all pleasure as sin. And all the while Henry's hand stroked her skin, soothing and teasing, giving pleasure where before there had been only pain.

Henry laughed as a little moan of content escaped her. "That is very much better, my sweet wife, but you shall beg me to come to you before I have done with you."

Isolde could never have imagined she would ever want him to do *that* to her again. But as his hands and then his tongue caressed her, she felt a sharp, white heat of flame suddenly come to life within her. Her back arched to meet the insistent stroking of his hand, wanting this strange, sweet feeling to go on and on.

"Are you ready for me now?"

Isolde gasped, her head tipping back, lips parted on a sigh, her nails gouging his shoulders as his body slid over hers and she felt the lancing heat of his manhood pierce her. For a moment, she stiffened, expecting pain, but to her surprise, he slid easily into the warm wetness of her femininity. It felt good. Isolde could not believe how pleasing the hardness of his lance felt inside her. She cried out as she had before, but this time it was not a protest.

Again, he covered her lips with his own, his tongue delicately probing her mouth, teasing and arousing her to a kind of frenzy. She was panting, her body moving to the urgent rhythm of his own. When he spilled himself inside her, she curled her legs around him, holding him to her as they rocked together, shuddering as the waves of desire broke over them as surf against the rocky shore.

A long time afterwards, when he had left her, believing her to be sleeping, Isolde wept. Not because the soreness between her legs was unbearable, as it had been the first time, but because of her lost love. Now she understood how it might have been with Robin, and her body felt an aching need for the joy it would never know. If a man she did not love could pleasure her so much with his body, how much greater would that joy have been with the man she had loved all her life?

"Oh, Robin my dear love," she wept into the pillows. "What shall I do without you all my life? How can I bear it? To be wife to another when it is you I long for."

After a while her tears dried. She lay listening to the sounds of the town. Somewhere a dog was howling mournfully, and the strains of drunken ribaldry came from far away, then the rumble of a wagon on cobbled streets. She longed for the country, for the sweet song of a lark and the sunlit, carefree days of childhood.

"Oh, Robin ... Robin, it is too late."

She belonged to her husband now. He had put his mark on her and she could not be free of him, no matter how much her heart denied him.

Chapter Nine

Ally

Ally looked out the window. It was raining again, too miserable to go far, and she was feeling lonely, missing Paul. He had made one brief phone call from New York, and since then, nothing. Nothing for a week. What was wrong? Did he blame her for what had happened when he was with her?

It was so unlike her brother not to phone regularly to check if she was well. She'd tried ringing him to see if anything was wrong at his end, but for some reason, he wasn't answering her calls.

She sighed and went back to her desk. She was making good progress with her thriller at last. For the past few days, she'd not heard any whispers and the oppressive atmosphere seemed to have lifted. She could still smell the perfume from time to time, but she sensed that Isolde wasn't trying to get in touch with her for the moment.

She'd slept well for the past few nights and was beginning to feel much better, but she missed Paul.

"Why don't you ring me?" she said, looking at her telephone as if she could will it to ring. "I miss you, Paul... I miss our old companionship."

She was startled by the ringing of her front door bell. Paul couldn't be here, could he? He had gone off so abruptly, and the memory had left her with an uneasy feeling.

Opening the door, she saw Brian Forrester standing there. He smiled at her apologetically. "Remember me?" he said. "I'm sorry I've taken so long to come round, but my cousin had a bit of a crisis. May I come in-or is this a bad time?"

"It's a very good time," Ally said. "I've been working but I was about to take a coffee break as I was feeling depressed because of the weather."

"Yes, it has been rather miserable of late, hasn't it?" He smiled at her. "It looks as if my dinner invitation for this evening might not come amiss?"

"Wonderful-it's what I need to cheer me up," Ally said. "Come through to the sitting room while I put the coffee on."

"Mind if I tag along after you?" Brian said. "Your perfume is enticing, Ally. I've noticed it before-but it's even more powerful here at the cottage."

"It's one I'd never used before," Ally said with a slight blush. "I bought it on impulse—but it seems to suit me."

"It certainly does," Brian said, and the look he gave her was hungry with desire. "Ally... I don't usually make advances this early in a relationship."

Ally smiled. She was as drawn to him as he to her. She made no move to stop him as he reached out for her, drawing her into his arms. His kiss was gentle but also hungry, his lips warm and seeking as they explored her mouth. They looked at each other in wonder as they drew apart.

"I know it's too soon to say this... but I think I've fallen in love with you, Ally."

"I'm feeling much the same way," she admitted, her voice trembling. "I haven't been in a relationship since my husband died."

"I haven't looked at a woman since my divorce," Brian said and grinned. "Do you think we're both sex starved?"

Ally laughed huskily. "I think it's much more than that," she whispered, "but maybe the sex would be a good place to start"

Chapter Ten

Isolde

Isolde listened to what her husband was saying in dismay. Surely, it was not true. Yet the evidence was before her eyes: Robin was to travel back to Urstwick with them. He was to live under Henry's roof, train with his men, and go with him to France when the King was ready to begin his war.

It was spring now and Edward's army was not yet prepared for the offensive he planned. Perhaps two or three months might pass before his nobles were called upon to join him. And for all that time, Robin would live under the same roof as Isolde. She would see him every day, know that he was sleeping somewhere near by.

How could she bear it? She knew he was watching her now. Could he see the marks of Henry's possession on her? Her mouth felt full and swollen by her husband's kisses. He had come to her every night they spent here, taking her with a greedy hunger that left her exhausted and heavy-limbed in the mornings. In the bed they shared, he was truly her master. She could deny him nothing. Indeed, she had grown to anticipate his coming with an eagerness that almost matched his own.

Could Robin see the change in her? She did not know what was in his mind, but sensed a cold, simmering anger in him and feared what he might do. Why had he deliberately courted Henry's trust and friendship? Surely, it would have been much easier for them both if they never met again?

To see each other every day, to speak, to pass without touching, must be agony for them both. She wondered if Robin lay alone at night imagining her in her husband's arms. If he did, it must be torture for him.

He was a fool to deliberately bring such pain on himself. Remembering how reckless he could be, Isolde wondered what was in his mind and feared for the future.

The journey back to Urstwick was tense and difficult for Isolde. She was very aware of Robin. He rode most often at Henry's side. They seemed to have much in common,

their laughter was often so spontaneous and merry, she wondered at it. Perhaps she alone suffered. Perhaps Robin had ceased to love her, had accepted that she was another man's wife, and put her from his mind. It might be he was interested only in winning honour through the interest and influence of her husband.

Isolde almost managed to convince herself it was so. Until the second day of their homeward journey, when her palfrey lost a shoe and was lamed. Robin happened to be nearest to her when she realized what had happened and reined in, knowing she must dismount before her horse was further distressed. Before she could dismount herself, Robin was there, lifting her down, his hands about her waist. Gazing into his eyes for one brief moment, she saw the fire leap up in them and knew he had not changed. His smiles and laughter were but pretence, to lull the suspicions of others.

"You cannot ride that poor creature," Henry said, riding up to them. "A servant can walk it slowly back to the blacksmith in the village we passed some minutes ago. You must ride pillion, but not with me as this beast of mine is not used to carrying a lady and might become restive."

"If you will permit it, I shall take the lady Isolde up before me," Robin said. "As children, we often rode thus and I think she may trust me to have a care of her."

Henry hesitated, then nodded. "If your horse will allow it, sir. Urswick is no more than an hour's ride ahead of us. I would take you myself despite this beast, Isolde, but I have some visits to make and must ride on ahead of you. You will be safe enough with Sir Robin and the others."

"As you wish, my lord."

Isolde was trembling inside, but she gave no sign of it as Robin lifted her on to his horse then mounted behind her. She felt close to fainting as his arms went round her.

"Are you comfortable, my lady?"

"Yes. Thank you, sir."

"Isolde, why does your skin always smell of flowers?"

She felt sick with fear as she heard the whisper against her ear. She glanced at Henry, but he was riding a little ahead of them, obviously impatient to be on his way. A servant was leading her palfrey back the way they had come, and the rest of their train straggled behind. The only ones near enough to notice or hear anything were Ondeline and Philip de Grenville.

"Be careful," Isolde warned softly. "Henry is a jealous man. Do not give him cause to suspect you or he will kill you."

"Unless I kill him," Robin murmured. "Would you like that, Isolde? Shall I kill your husband and take you away, or shall I kill you, my faithless love?"

Isolde felt a chill of fear strike through her. "I am not faithless. You knew the marriage had been arranged. I had no choice."

"You could have refused to wed him."

"My only other choice was to take the veil of Christ and become a nun."

"Better that than to be wife to another."

"Please do not," she whispered. "Ondeline is suspicious. She is looking at us."

"She is not close enough to hear what we say."

"But she will wonder what we are talking of."

"Then let her! You are my kinswoman. Where is it forbidden for us to speak to one another?"

Isolde was silenced. Why did he not understand it was dangerous? Their love was forbidden and could cause only unhappiness for them both: it must be renounced, forgotten.

"You should not have come to Urswick. Why did you?"

"To take back what is mine," Robin said. "Shall I ride off with you now, Isolde? Shall we cast our fortune to the winds now, this very minute?"

"If you try to abduct me, Henry will come after you. He would kill you, Robin. Believe me, I know him."

"He might try. Have you so little faith in your champion, Isolde? Do you think I could not defeat him as easily as the others?"

Isolde was silent. He spoke so wildly, as he had as a youth. Did he not understand things were different now? She was bound to Henry in so many ways.

"It would not be single combat," she said. "Henry would make you a prisoner, then he would have you executed, perhaps tortured."

"Do not worry so," Robin said. "I was merely jesting. I would not throw away that which I prize above all things. Henry must die in battle, then I shall be free to claim you."

What did he mean? Isolde felt cold all over. Was he talking of murder? Surely he was not planning anything so wicked? Yet she sensed something, some violence of feeling inside him. He was determined to have her and the only way he could be sure of wedding her, was to see her husband dead.

Ondeline was making eyes at Robin again. She had lost no opportunity to catch his attention these past three weeks, and he seemed to be responding to her. Isolde knew she ought to be pleased; it would be better for all of them if he were to fall in love with Ondeline and forget her.

"Why so pensive, my lady?"

Isolde started as Philip de Grenville came up to her. She was sitting on a ridge, overlooking the flowery mead beyond the walls of the house, watching her ladies gather herbs and wild flowers for the lotions and salves she herself would prepare later that day. Robin was holding Ondeline's basket and laughing at something she had said to him.

"I was thinking how warm it is and pleasant to sit here," Isolde lied, blushing as she felt the young man's eyes on her. "You do not train with the others today, sir?"

"I train only as often as I must," he replied with a wry smile. "I would prefer to spend my time writing poetry and playing the pipes, but my cousin does not think such work fitting for his kinsman."

"Poor Philip." Isolde looked on him kindly. She had come to think of him as her

friend, and knew that he slipped away to spend time with her whenever he could. "It is not fair of Henry to make you fight if you do not want to."

"It is my duty as his kinsman to serve him as best I may," Philip said, then glanced at his sister and Robin. "Do you think he means to offer for her?"

Isolde had wondered. "Would she take him if he did?"

"I think she might. Ondeline needs to be mistress of her own household. She has been restless since you came here. I believe Sir Robin's mother is very sickly. And Lynston is a fine estate."

"Not as fine as Urstwick, but she would be mistress there. I understand Robin's mother hardly ever leaves her chamber these days. Ondeline could do much as she pleased there."

"I shall be glad if she weds him," Philip said, sitting down at Isolde's side. He glanced at her again, his eyes dwelling on her lovely face more revealingly than perhaps he knew. "But you have not told me why you are so sad. It grieves me to see you thus."

"I am not sad," she said and smiled at him. "Just thoughtful."

Philip picked a daisy and gave it to her, his gaze sliding away as he asked. "Is my cousin unkind to you, sweet lady?"

"No, no, of course not. He shows me every courtesy."

"He could not do otherwise." Philip plucked a long stem of grass and chewed the end. "For his honour, he must be chivalrous, but there are other ways of being unkind. I do not think he understands a lady likes to be courted."

"My husband has many duties," Isolde replied. "His men must fight well. The King relies on Henry and others like him."

"Laborare est orare," Philip said. "For Henry, work is God. Yet I think the soul has need of other things, where is the sin in sparing time for love?"

The glow in his dark eyes told Isolde there was more to his words than she cared to know. He was infatuated with her, but he must not be. He must not look at her so adoringly or Henry would notice.

She felt guilty as she saw her husband walking towards them through the meadow of wild flowers. He was frowning but seemed lost in his own thoughts, as he so often was, and hardly aware of her or her companion.

"Philip," he said. "I thought I might find you here. Word has come from the King. He desires me to go to him. I must leave at once. While I am gone, I charge you to keep the men hard at work. There must be no slacking, for our lives may soon depend upon our skill in battle." Henry's thoughtful gaze moved to Isolde. "You have a free hand with the running of my household, Isolde, but Philip and Ondeline will help if you are anxious about anything."

"Yes, my lord. Shall you be away long?"

"As long as needs be," he replied. "Walk to the house with me, Isolde. I have some instructions for you."

Isolde rose obediently. He offered his arm. She laid her hand on it, listening attentively as he spoke of various household matters, telling her how much it was

proper for her to pay for services she might need.

"You have never been to my apartments, I think?" The question surprised her. She shook her head. "It is time I showed you certain things, my lady. You should have a key to the strongbox where monies for the household expenses are kept. You may have need of it while I am away. If not now, then in the future."

"The key to your strongbox, my lord? Should that not more properly be entrusted to Philip?"

"If I die without an heir, Philip will have the right to demand it of you, Isolde, but you are my wife, and while I live, you shall keep it for me. If you bear me a son, my will appoints you his guardian in jointure with Bishop Walden."

Isolde was silent. Henry was showing great trust in her. Many men gave their wives no authority over their homes or their own children. She was pleased and honoured by his confidence.

"You do me great honour, my lord."

"No more than you deserve." Henry smiled at her. "I mocked you for your modesty, Isolde, but it was only because you were cold to me at the start. In truth, it pleases me."

"I am happy you are pleased with me, sir."

Henry had led her through the hall to a part of the house she had not visited before. He drew aside a heavy tapestry to reveal a heavy door studded with iron bolts. Taking a key from beneath his tunic, he unlocked the door and stood aside for her to enter.

Isolde smothered a gasp as she stepped inside. There were no windows in the room, only chests bound by iron bars, bales of silks and costly materials, and jars of spices which were more precious than gold itself. It was clearly Henry's treasury where he kept everything of value securely locked away.

"This is the chest to which you will have a key," he said and unlocked one of the smaller ones. "I think you will find it contains a sufficient amount for your needs."

Inside, it was lined with metal, which made it too heavy for one man to lift, and divided into two halves. One was filled with silver coins, the other with gold.

"There is more than I could ever need here," Isolde said, realizing what a responsibility he had placed on her shoulders.

"That is because you have never needed more than a few coins to buy baubles," Henry said, smiling at her indulgently. "However, you would soon discover it is expensive to live the way we do here. Much of my treasure is in this room, Isolde. If you are ever left as the guardian of my son, you will need to guard it carefully until he is old enough to take control himself. Do not trust even those closest to you, for the lure of great wealth makes others envious."

"You frighten me," she said, feeling an iciness at the base of her neck. "Please do not die and leave me, Henry. I would not care to be guardian of all this."

He laughed, well pleased by her answer. "I have no intention of dying easily," he promised her. "And not before I have my heir. Have you any news for me, Isolde?" His eyes searched her face. "Am I wrong, or are your courses late?"

Isolde's cheek took fire. "No, you are not wrong," she said. "I have not seen them since we... But it is only a week or so and Mary tells me it is not yet certain that I have

conceived."

"Yet, I have seen a certain moodiness in you of late," Henry said. "I believe it is common in women who are with child." He took her to a table she had not previously noticed but now saw was laid out with charts, which seemed to depict the human form. One of them showed the inside of a woman's body and a child forming in the womb. "I have studied the sciences of the human body," Henry told her and frowned. "There is much the physicians hold sacred which I neither believe nor approve, but I believe these drawings to be accurate. The man who made them is more enlightened than many of his calling. I shall employ him to watch over you when your time comes, for I would not have you suffer as I know some women do."

Isolde was touched by his concern for her, and awed by what she saw. Now she realized that some of the jars contained ingredients often used in the medicines prepared by apothecaries, some of them deadly poisons if used unwisely and beyond her wisdom.

"I did not know you had knowledge of such things, my lord."

"I have always had an interest in the science of medicine," Henry said. "I have books you may borrow if you choose, Isolde, they will help you improve your skills in the healing arts." He smiled at her. "I was pleased with the way you treated the young fool who broke his head last week. He is mending well thanks to your nursing."

"I should be grateful if you would lend me your books," she replied. "I know they may be beyond my understanding as a woman..."

Henry's mocking laughter stopped her. "Do not pretend to a false modesty with me, Isolde. Others may be fooled by your words, but I know your pride. If I thought the books beyond your understanding, I would not have offered them. For myself, I believe a woman's mind may absorb as much as any man's. At least, if she be intelligent, as you are, my lady."

Isolde looked at him uncertainly. He spoke words his equals would think a kind of blasphemy. Seeing the amusement lurking in his eyes, she discovered she was beginning to like this man of many moods. He was demanding and arrogant, but he could be gentle when he chose, and now his words and look seemed to promise much more.

"I am never sure whether you are teasing me, my lord," she said uncertainly.

"Give me a son, Isolde," he said, his expression serious now. "Oblige me in this and you shall discover much you do not yet understand about me."

With Henry gone, the atmosphere at Urstwick became much more relaxed. The men trained during the day, but at night their behaviour became almost wild. Cider and wine flowing so freely that the jests became louder and coarser as their tongues loosened.

Isolde watched with a growing unease. Henry would be displeased to see his men drunk, leaving them heavy-eyed in the mornings.

She remonstrated with Philip one morning after finding several of the men still sleeping in the hall when she had set the servants to the task of laying fresh rushes on the floor.

"You are right," Philip said, looking shame-faced. "But they do not heed me as they would Henry. He makes them work so hard they have seized the opportunity while he is away."

"It is your duty to keep them in order. Henry will not be pleased when he returns. You must think of something, Philip."

"If I may make a suggestion?" Isolde started at the sound of Robin's voice. She had not been aware of him standing behind her. "Why not organize an archery contest for the men? We could hold it down by the Tarn. Make a special feast day of it and offer a prize. Perhaps ten silver nobles?"

"It would give them a reason to practice with the bow," agreed Philip. "Will you put up the prize in Henry's name, Isolde?"

Isolde hesitated. It was a lot of money. Henry already paid and housed these men at great expense. They should not need to be tempted to practice their skills, and yet it would not please her husband to see them idle."

"Yes," she said at last. "I shall provide the prize, but if this drunkenness does not stop, you must punish the offenders, Philip. You must force them to respect and obey you."

"Do not scold me, Isolde." Philip took her hand and kissed it. "I shall try to do what you ask."

He smiled at her and walked away. Isolde sighed. Henry had placed too heavy a burden on his kinsman's shoulders: Philip was not and never would be, a soldier.

"Will you ride down to the Tarn with me, Lady Isolde?" asked Robin. "It is a beautiful day. The air would do you good and you could decide where the tables should be set up for the feasting at the contest."

Isolde hesitated, tempted beyond bearing. Every day since Henry's departure a week earlier, Robin had found some way of being with her. If she walked in the walled gardens, he came to her there, or in the meadow as she picked flowers for her lotions. When she left the hall at night he was waiting, often escorting her to the door of her solar.

"It is for your protection, Isolde," he had told her when she begged him to have a care. "I am your kinsman. With Henry away, it is my duty to protect you. Philip has no control over the men. I am concerned for your safety."

Isolde could not deny him. To have him near was both agony and ecstasy. As yet, he had done nothing that could harm her honour or anger her husband, though the hot looks he gave her when they were unobserved and the husky passion in his voice was proof enough of his sinful thoughts.

He had destroyed her peace. She could never forget him, never turn her eyes without seeing him.

"Yes, I shall ride with you, Robin," she said now, knowing in her heart it was reckless folly. "It is a lovely day and I should make preparations for the feast."

It was beautiful beside the dark, mysterious waters of the Tarn, a pool so deep and cold that some said it was bottomless. Away from the bustle and noise of the manor, Isolde was suddenly at peace. Walking with Robin on the grassy banks beside the water, she was reminded of the times they played together as children, and of the love she had always felt for this man.

"Isolde." She turned as Robin touched her arm. "There is a secret glade in the wood. Come with me, my love. Lie with me where none can see us."

"Oh, Robin..." She caught back the tears. "I beg you, do not ask it of me. It would be a terrible sin. I dare not betray Henry, even if I would. It is wrong and dangerous."

"He has no right to your love," Robin said fiercely, swinging her round to face him. "Your body may be his by right of marriage, but your heart is mine. You gave it to me years ago. Do not deny it, Isolde. You have always loved me."

"I do not deny it." She gasped as he seized her arm, drawing her against him. "Have a care, Robin! Someone may see us."

"We are too far from the house," he replied with a scornful twist of his lips. "Besides, I would kill anyone who spoke ill of you. I would kill Henry should you wish it, Isolde."

"No!" she cried, her heart catching with fear. "Never speak of it again, Robin. If I believed my husband had died at your hand, I would hate and despise you."

"Then you love him."

She saw anger and pain in his eyes, and caught his hand. "No, I do not love him as I love you, Robin, but I honour and respect him for the man he is. I could not love you if you had his blood on your hands. Do you not see it would be impossible to live with such a sin?"

For a moment, rebellion flared in his eyes. "How can I stand by and see you wife to another man, Isolde? Do you know how it tortures me to think of you in his arms? Lying so close to me yet with another?"

"You should leave this house, Robin," she said, her throat catching with emotion. "I do not wish to cause you such pain, or to feel it myself. It would be better for both of us if you left Urstwick. Go now, while Henry is away. Leave here and forget me."

"Do you really want me to go?" She closed her eyes against the tears, nodding once but unable to speak. Then, as she felt the touch of his fingers against her cheek, she trembled and looked up at him. "I will go if you wish it, but there is a price."

"Name it," she whispered, her mouth dry with fear as she saw the answer in his eyes. "No! Oh no, you cannot ask it of me, Robin. I dare not, must not betray Henry."

"He will never know," Robin said. His eyes held a strange glitter of excitement. "Lie with me once, and I will leave Urstwick."

Isolde's heart was racing wildly. She must not listen to Robin's tempting. She must not! But her body was melting in the heat of his passion; she was swaying towards him, surrendering to the demand of his desire for her and her own. She wanted to know the joy of his loving, wanted it so much that she was sick with longing.

Surely, it was not such a terrible sin. To lie with the man she loved, just once. Henry need never know. It could not harm him.

Robin had sensed her weakness. "I beg you to come to me just once," he pleaded, the entreaty in his voice and eyes tearing at her heart. "I have loved you so long and so well, Isolde. Give me something to remember when I can no longer see you or smell the perfume of your skin. If I must give you up, grant me this at least. If you love me, you cannot deny me this one favour."

Isolde gazed up into his eyes. Eyes that were as blue as the sky above her, enticing, pleading. She felt as if she were being drawn up into the sky itself, floating, dissolving in the heat of his desire. Nothing seemed real to her, except this longing to be in his arms.

"Just once..." Her tongue moistened lips dry from fear or excitement. "You swear Henry will never know and you will leave us?"

"I swear on my life, Isolde."

"And no one will see us?"

"Trust me, my love. I shall keep you safe."

Isolde would never forget the scents of that woodland glade, or the stolen moments in her lover's arms. What passed between them would forever be enshrined in her memory, sweeter than honey yet spiced with danger.

Robin was truly skilled in the arts of love. He played on her body as the strings of a harp, bringing forth hauntingly beautiful sensations as he loved her again and again. Once, twice, three times he took her, making her cry out his name and weep for joy. And afterwards, when he held her, at peace at last, she knew that nothing could ever be this perfect again. Even if Henry were to die and they were wed... No, such thoughts were treachery! She must never let herself think such a thing again.

Isolde felt the weight of her guilt begin to press on her as Robin brushed the debris from her gown and helped her to mount her palfrey. She had betrayed her vows, betrayed Henry's trust. It was a sin she would carry with her always.

"You must go soon," she told Robin. "This must not happen again."

"After the contest," he promised. Something, an expression in his eyes disturbed her. "I love you, Isolde. I would do nothing to harm you but surely now you understand you belong to me?"

"No," she said, fear catching at her throat. "I am Henry's wife."

"And my lover." His look of pride, anger, and a simmering menace sent shivers spiralling through her. "Do you really believe I would give you up now?" His eyes were cold, glittering. "Be patient, my Isolde. One day I shall claim you as my own."

"No! This is over. It was to be only once. You promised! You promised me, Robin." She threw him a despairing look. "You cannot break your word now."

"I would wade through the fires of Hell to have you," he said, his voice throbbing with passion. "You are mine, Isolde. Your husband stole what was not his. I shall take you back."

"Take me back to Urstwick," Isolde demanded. "I am not yours to command, sir. I see now that I was wrong to give in to your persuasion. You deceived me."

"No, Isolde!" Robin's tone terrified her. "You deceived yourself, because you wished to. You knew once you were truly mine I would never let you go."

Trial by Fire

Isolde looked down at him helplessly as he lifted her into the saddle. He was no longer the supplicant, begging for her love, now he commanded. There was a recklessness in him, a wildness that frightened her. She was afraid of what he might do if she defied him.

What had she done? She had believed him when he said he would go if she gave herself to him. Now she knew he had lied to get his way with her. If he would swear an oath and break it in the next breath, what more might he do? He had spoken so often of Henry's death as if it were certain. Yet surely, he would not stoop to murder?

They rode back to the house in silence. Isolde felt the weight of guilt and fear pressing down on her. What had she done? She had betrayed Henry. He would hate her if he ever learned the truth... and that would give her pain. She could not bear to look into his eyes and have him know her shame.

Tears stung behind her eyes as she left Robin in the courtyard and went to her solar. She was a whore! She had committed a terrible sin, but worst of all she had forfeited all right to her husband's respect.

Why did that hurt so much? Isolde only knew that her mouth tasted of ashes. She wished with all her heart that she could change the past few hours, but knew it was impossible.

For a few sweet, stolen minutes, she had thrown away her honour and it could never be regained.

Isolde's courses started that night. In the morning, when she saw the bright red blood staining her night shift, Isolde wept bitter tears. She had been almost certain she was carrying a child, but now realized her hopes had come to nothing.

Or was it God's punishment for her sin?

Had she lost Henry's son because of what had happened in the woods? The thought terrified her. She prayed on her knees for forgiveness, but she dare not confess her sin to Henry's chaplain. Not because he would betray her to her husband, for the secrets of the confessional were sacred, but because it would shame her. She would forever see her guilt reflected in the eyes of another.

Without confession, she could not be cleansed of her sin. Isolde knew it would be hard to bear alone, but it must be her punishment, that and the loss of her child.

She was determined never to return to the glade with Robin. No matter how much he might try to persuade her, she would not give in.

The archery contest was in progress. For a full week, the men had practiced by the waters of the Tarn, their wild drinking bouts abandoned in their eagerness to prove their skill and claim the prize.

It was a warm day, no hint of a cloud in the sky. Isolde had had tables set up near by. Food had been brought from the house, also barrels of cider and ale. She had sent servants to tell the villagers that they would be welcome to attend and there was food enough for all.

Isolde watched the contest without real interest. She was conscious only of Robin and Ondeline watching her. Ondeline suspected something!

No, no, she could not. Isolde had not returned to the glade, despite all Robin's demands. Even so, his attitude had undergone a subtle change towards her. Sometimes he behaved almost as a jealous husband might, taking his place beside her as a right. And he had neglected Ondeline.

Isolde realized this neglect must have aroused the other woman's suspicions and her jealousy. She felt a flicker of unease as she saw the dislike in Ondeline's eyes. She must speak to Robin, make him see his behaviour was reckless.

"Oh, look, my lady." Griselda touched her arm. "Shall I send someone to drive the wretch away? Such a foul creature should not be allowed at the feast lest she spread her evil diseases to others."

Isolde glanced in the direction her maid was indicating. Her heart caught with pity as she saw the woman. Her face was grotesquely disfigured by some horrible scarring, the skin clustered with running sores and scabs. She was hovering at the edge of the crowd, obviously afraid to come closer for fear of being driven away.

"Fetch me bread and meat," Isolde said, "and a cup of wine."

Giselda looked at her in horror. "You do not expect me to go near her?" She faltered at Isolde's look of anger. "Forgive me, my lady, but I am afraid of taking the disease from her."

"Bring the food to me," Isolde commanded, "and I shall take it to the woman myself. I do not fear to touch her. She is not a leper, despite her scars."

"How do you know, my lady?"

"Because I have treated others like her at the Lazar house." Isolde turned impatiently to Mary. "Go back to the house. In my solar, you will find a casket of salves and lotions. Bring it to me. I shall do what I can to ease this poor woman's suffering."

Both women hurried away to do her bidding. Hearing a great cheer behind her, Isolde saw the archery contest had reached its conclusion. She took the purse of silver from beneath her surcoat and handed it to Ondeline.

"You must present this to the winner. I have other work."

Ondeline looked surprised, then pleased. Isolde would have spoken further, but seeing Griselda return with a bread trencher filled with succulent meats, she went to meet her.

"You need not come with me."

Leaving her shame-faced maid, Isolde approached the afflicted woman. As she came close, the woman held out her hand in warning.

"Unclean! Unclean!" she cried. "Do not come nearer, Lady Isolde. I am not fit to breathe the same air as you."

Isolde stopped, her heart wrung with pity. "Do not be afraid of me," she said. "I am not afraid of you. I do not believe you have God's curse. I think I may be able to help you."

"You must come no closer," the woman insisted. "I thank you for your goodness. Put the food on the ground and I will take it when you step back."

Isolde did as she asked, then moved away slightly. The woman approached cautiously, swooped on the food and retreated. She ate greedily, pushing the food into her mouth in such haste, it was obvious she was close to starving or afraid of having it snatched from her.

"Where do you live?" Isolde asked. "I shall have a basket of food sent to you twice a week. My woman is bringing salves and lotions. If you use them regularly, they will help to heal your skin."

"Why do you wish to help me?" The woman stared at her, wiping her greasy fingers on the filthy kirtle she wore. "My own people drove me off. I live in the woods in a shelter I made myself. Your servants could not find it."

"Then the food will be brought here to the Tarn. Can you collect it at noon, on the day before God's holy day and two days later?" Isolde smiled as she nodded. "Here comes my woman. Stand a little nearer that I may explain what you must do with these cures."

"Not until she has moved away." The woman was looking at Mary, whose face reflected her disgust. "Put the things on the ground, Lady Isolde. You must not touch me."

Isolde took the casket from her maid, removing a small vial of dark liquid and a large jar. She returned the casket to Mary, who retreated to a safe distance. Isolde walked towards the other woman, who moved back and held out her hand in warning.

"You must add two drops of this to the water you drink," Isolde said, holding up the vial to show her. "You should wash as often as you can in clean water, then apply this salve to your skin. If you do this regularly, I believe the scabs will dry up and in time, may heal completely."

"God bless you, Lady Isolde." The woman bent to pick up the pot and vial. "May the child you carry be a son."

"Child?" Isolde felt goose bumps all over her. "I am not with child. I have seen my courses since... since my man was with me last."

"Yet you do carry his child." The woman's manner was odd. "I have the sight, my lady. For others, not myself. This child will be a source of both joy and grief to you."

"How can it be?" Isolde took an eager step towards her. "Can you truly tell the future?"

"Come no nearer!" The woman glanced towards some villagers, who had gathered near by and were muttering restlessly amongst themselves. They dare not stone the outcast while their lord's wife spoke with her, but they did not like her to stay so long near their homes. "They are angry. I must go."

Isolde cried out that she should stay, but she swept up the jar and vial and fled back towards the woods whence she had come.

"Come away, my lady," Mary warned, as some of the villagers edged nearer. "They want what you gave to her. She is not the only one to suffer here. You have aroused their jealousy by seeming to favour a woman they have cast out."

"I will help those I can," Isolde said. "Bring the casket, Mary. If my salves and cures can ease their suffering, I will give them gladly."

"Lady Isolde!" Griselda came running to her. "Sir Henry has returned. You must hasten to the house at once."

"My husband has returned?"

"Yes, my lady. He wishes to see you immediately."

Isolde turned to Mary once more. "Give them the salves for the toothache and bruises," she said. "But make sure they know how to use them properly."

Isolde began to walk back to the house, but as she did so, Robin came after her, catching at her arm to detain her.

"Where do you go, Isolde? The feasting is about to begin."

"Henry has returned. He sent for me. I must obey him."

Rebellion flared in Robin's eyes. "Let me go in your place, Isolde. I will challenge him to fight for you. Let the winner take the prize."

"No!" Isolde was angry. "You broke your promise to me. You swore to leave here if I... It is over, Robin. I shall never lie with you again. I swear it on my life!"

For a moment, there was such anger in his eyes that she thought he would kill her, then he released her arm and stood back.

"Go to him then," he said. "If you betray me with him, Isolde. I shall kill you both."

"You talk so wildly," she replied. "Henry has the right to command me. Because of you, I have lost my honour. Better I should die than live as your whore."

"So be it." His eyes were as cold as the Tarn in winter. "You will regret this, Isolde. I promise you. One day, you will beg me to come to you and I shall remember this moment." He turned and walked away from her.

Isolde stared after him. Her heart felt as if it were breaking in two, but she could not find the words to heal the breach between them. Their love was a sin. She had done Henry a terrible wrong, but she would not continue to deceive him. There must be no more visits to the secret woodland glade.

Her heart was heavy as she walked into the house. How could she face her husband? It would shame her to look him in the eyes! She was a whore. She had taken a lover while her husband was away. Her wickedness was like a stone inside her, weighing on her conscience.

"Isolde!" Henry's smile of welcome as she walked into the hall made her heart stop, then race on wildly. "Forgive me for taking you away from the feasting, but I have news."

"The feasting matters not, my lord. Indeed, I was about to distribute medicines to the villagers. Not your precious medicines, my lord, merely salves and cures I have made myself."

"Your charity pleases me," Henry said. "It is your skill with healing that has brought me here to fetch you. Queen Philippa has some malady she will not confide to her physicians."

"The Queen is ill?"

"I believe it may be an ailment, which affects women. She refuses to allow the physicians to examine her, but says she would be pleased to have your advice. I have come to take you back with me, Isolde."

There was such pride in his look. Isolde could not bear to see it and know herself unworthy of his respect. She must confess her sin and beg his forgiveness!

"Henry..." she said, and took a step towards him, her hand outstretched. Her head felt so strange. She faltered as the floor seemed to swim up to meet her. "Forgive me." Her voice was no more than a whisper as she fainted. "Henry..."

Isolde came to herself to find Griselda hovering over her. She looked for Henry, but they were in her solar and he was not there. How had she come here? What had happened? Had she confessed her sin before she fainted?

"Where is my husband?"

"He went to fetch something, my lady. He says it will restore you."

Isolde pushed herself up against the goose feather pillows as Henry came back into the chamber. He was carrying a little silver cup and looked at her so indulgently that she knew she had fainted before she could confess.

"This is something to help you cope with the faintness, Isolde," he said. "I had it prepared by a physician well versed in the art of caring for women in your condition. I can vouch for it that it will not harm the child, so you need not fear to drink it."

"The child?"

Seeing her look of bewilderment, he smiled. "You surely cannot still doubt it? We were almost certain before I left for Court, and now your faintness is proof. Do not look so troubled, my love. All will be well, I promise you."

"I...I pray so, my lord."

As Isolde gazed into his eyes, her heart caught with pain and she knew the moment when she might have confessed had passed. If she was indeed with child, she must say nothing for the child's sake.

"Trust me, Isolde," Henry said. "It is not unusual for a woman to faint at such times. I shall wait a few days before returning to Court. The Queen's malady is not urgent. She will understand the delay, for she has borne the King's children and will know how you feel."

"And you will take me with you when you go?"

"Yes, for I have found I do not wish to be parted from you, Isolde. I missed you these past two weeks."

"And I you, my lord. I wish you had taken me with you the last time." He would never know how much she wished it!

Henry laughed. "It pleases me you feel this way. Do not fear, Isolde. I have no intention of leaving you again until we sail for France. It is possible some of the ladies will accompany us, as they did the last time Edward made war on France, but you must return to Urswick. I would not risk my son by exposing you to danger or hardship."

"You speak of a son, my lord, what if I should bear a daughter?"

"I do not doubt you will give me a son. I had wondered if God would grant us a child before I was forced to leave you, but now I know it was meant to be." Henry bent closer, kissing her on the lips. "When I wed you, I did not love you, Isolde. I had no time for such things, but I have learned to care. Far more than you may ever know. I am not a troubadour to sing you love songs or make up poems in your honour. I am more

skilled in the art of combat than of seduction, but I do honour you."

Isolde felt the tears trickle from the corners of her eyes. Oh, how it shamed her to hear these words of tenderness from him. She had once thought him harsh and cold, but now she understood him. He loved her truly, though he might never find the words to express his feelings.

And she had betrayed him! Her shame was almost beyond bearing, because now she could never confess it for fear of hurting him.

"Do not cry," he said, wiping a tear from her cheek. "I demand no more than before, nor shall I burden you with my thoughts again."

He would have left her, but she caught his hand, holding it to her cheek. "Forgive me," she whispered. "I shall try to be all that you would wish in your wife."

"You are everything I desire." Henry gently released her hold on him. "You are overwrought, Isolde. I shall leave you to rest."

Isolde lay back against the pillows as he went from her chamber. She felt the silent tears stream down her cheeks. What had she lost? A love so much finer and nobler than she had ever imagined might have been hers had she not listened to Robin's tempting.

What a fool she was! How could she respond to her husband's new tenderness knowing herself unworthy of his love?

The pain twisted and turned inside her. She could never confess the truth or beg for forgiveness. It would kill her to see the warmth in Henry's eyes turn to ice. He would hate her if he ever learned the truth!

Henry had insisted Isolde should stay in bed for two days. He visited her twice, bringing her small gifts of sweetmeats and perfumed oils he had brought back with him, but he did not come to her bed.

"You need rest and care," he told her. "Griselda told me you gave salves to a leper near the village. You should not have risked your person or the child, Isolde. I shall have the woman driven off if she comes near again."

"She was not a leper," Isolde said. "I have promised her food, Henry. Do not, I pray you, punish her for her misfortune. She... she told me I would bear a child that would bring me joy."

And grief!

Isolde recalled the woman's words of warning, but did not repeat them aloud for fear of angering her husband.

"Very well, for your sake I will allow her to collect the food, but only if you give me your word not to go near her. I do not want you to risk yourself again, no matter what ails her."

"I promise I shall do all that you ask."

"Such an obedient wife." Henry nodded, a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. "I have news I think will please you. Your kinsman has asked my permission to wed Ondeline. I have given it and the wedding will take place as soon as you are well

enough to attend. Sir Robin wishes to take his bride to Lynston before we leave for France."

"Sir Robin... to marry Ondeline?"

"Why so surprised?" Henry raised his brows. "You must have noticed him paying attention to her. Philip had already spoken to me about it before I left to attend the King."

That was before Isolde had lain with him in the woodland glade! He had sworn an oath that he would have none but Isolde to wife, but she had made him angry by refusing to leave her husband. Was this his revenge?

Would that he had wed Ondeline weeks earlier! Isolde felt the bitterness twist inside her.

"Are you not pleased, Isolde?"

"If it pleases you, my lord."

"It pleases me well enough," he replied, frowning a little over her lack of interest. "Sir Robin is of good birth and fortune and Ondeline, will be happier in her own home. I shall find another woman to take her place here. Mary has a younger sister. I dare say she will be happy to serve you and we shall need a nurse for the child."

"Then I am happy for Ondeline."

"She was jealous of you when you came here first," Henry said. "But she has been warm in her praise of you this day. She told me that the contest to amuse the men was because you had scolded Philip. You were displeased when he allowed the men to drink too much."

"Philip has not your strength, Henry. He could not command their respect as you do."

"My cousin is weak. Ondeline has more spirit than her brother. It is because I knew Philip weak that I became desperate for an heir." Henry reached down to kiss her cheek. "You have courage, Isolde. If I should die in battle, I know you would protect my son. And you would have Bishop Walden as your advisor. Though of late, I have thought you might do well to make Sir Robin your protector if I am dead. The men respect him, and your relationship would bind him to you."

"Please do not speak of dying, Henry. I pray you will return to your child and me."

"I say these things only to guide you. For your safety and that of my son."

Once again, Isolde was filled with regret. Why had she betrayed this man? If only she had understood him sooner! Yet could anything have saved her? Robin had been determined to have her and now he was to marry Ondeline.

Why? Was it only to punish her for sending him away? If that were so, she feared for the future and the happiness of both Robin and his wife.

Isolde watched as Robin and Ondeline were married in the chapel where she herself had taken her vows. Ondeline looked pale. Isolde wondered at it. Did she truly love the man she was marrying, or was it merely because she wished to escape from Urswick

and her own unhappiness. at seeing her cousin wed to another?

Only once did Robin glance at Isolde. He turned his head in her direction as the priest began the blessing, meeting her eyes for the briefest time. There was such anger in his face, she felt sick with fear. Did he hate her so much? Was his marriage meant to hurt and shame her? To cause her pain?

Her own feelings were confused. She felt regretful and sad, as if something beautiful had died within her. Yet there was also relief. It was far better that Robin should marry Ondeline and leave them. His wild talk of challenging Henry to fight for her seemed to have been forgotten. She must be thankful her fervent prayers had been answered. Once he had left Urswick, perhaps she could subdue her own guilt and begin to build her life anew.

All through the feasting, Isolde was not quite at ease. She feared Robin might say or do something to betray her, but it was not until he came to say goodbye that he spoke.

Looking directly into her eyes he said, "I know you will think of me with my bride, Isolde, as I shall think of you and Henry. You cannot wish for me anything I do not wish for you. Remember me always, for I shall not forget you."

Isolde felt cold all over. There was a strangeness in his manner that frightened her. She had thought he must have ceased to care for her, but the light of obsession was in his eyes. He *had* wed Ondeline to punish her, but it was not over. She sensed that he had not finished with her.

What reckless plan was in his mind now? Isolde had no way of knowing his thoughts, and yet she knew somehow he would bring them all to ruin one day.

"You must not waste your time in thinking of me," she said. "Give all your care to your wife, sir. As I shall give mine to my husband and child."

Robin's eyes seemed to glitter as he bent his head closer, whispering in her ear, "But is it his child or mine, Isolde? Can you ever be sure?"

Isolde gasped, the colour leaving her cheeks. It was the fear that had haunted her in her secret thoughts for days. Her courses *had* come after they had lain together in the woods, and yet she was with child. How had that happened and how could she be certain whose child she carried in her womb?

Mary had told her some women did see one or more of their courses after conceiving a child. So it was not so strange or unusual as she had first thought.

It must be Henry's child. It had to be!

Isolde gave no sign that Robin's parting arrow had struck home. She was carrying her husband's child, and she would try to forget she had ever betrayed him. Perhaps if she pushed it to a far corner of her mind she could make herself believe it had never happened.

Henry was looking at her. "What did he say to you that distressed you, Isolde?" he asked, as Robin and Ondeline rode away.

"He merely wished I should bear you a healthy son, my lord. If I am pale, it is because I feel a little unwell."

"You are not faint again?"

"No, merely sick."

Trial by Fire

Isolde felt the vomit rising in her throat. She summoned Mary urgently and was led away to a private corner of the courtyard where she relieved her nausea.

After a little while, she returned to where Henry was watching two of his men in hand to hand combat. He gave her a sympathetic smile but said nothing.

Isolde realized her life had returned to normal. Henry cared for her but he was devoted to his work. She was the wife he needed; he was proud of her and what he believed her to be. He would never speak to her of love as Robin had. Never swear his love for her was more than life itself to him. Though his love-making pleased her, it would never carry her to the place she had visited once in a woodland glade.

Isolde could only be grateful for the calm after the storm.

Chapter Eleven

Ally

Ally paced the floor of her study, feeling restless. She wished Brian was coming that evening, but he had promised to visit a friend and would be away for a few days.

"When I come back, we'll have a special night out together," he had told her, kissing her tenderly on the mouth. "I really like you a lot, Ally. I think we might have something special going, don't you?"

Ally had smiled and kissed him back, because she wasn't sure yet how she felt. She enjoyed Brian's company and they were good together in bed and in other ways. But she still hurt over Tony's death and all the grief she'd known during their relationship.

In all that time, her brother had been the one she'd turned to and she was missing him like hell. Indeed, she felt guilty about neglecting him, as though the time she spent with Brian was somehow a betrayal of Paul—but that was ridiculous!

Paul was her brother for goodness sake, not her lover or her husband. Was she letting this story of Isolde get to her too much? Perhaps Paul had been right, and she ought to leave this place, yet she knew she could not do it. Isolde's story gripped her day and night, and she felt she would never rest until she knew its outcome.

Enough! She must get back to her own work. She was here to write something commercial, a book she had already agreed with her agent, who had half promised for a couple of months ahead. If she stood here dreaming much longer, she would never finish it!

She sat down at her computer and began to type, the words seeming to flow out of her in a steady stream.

'I am grateful to you, Lady Isolde,' the Queen said. 'The salve you gave me has eased the itching. It was terrible at times, but now it has almost gone.'

'I believe it to be something many women suffer,' Isolde said. 'It may return, but I have given the recipe to your woman. She can make sure you have the mixture always by you, should you need it.'

'Again, I thank you.' Queen Philippa smiled at her. 'Would that I could persuade you to stay with us at court, but I understand your reasons for wishing to return home.'

Isolde looked down at her swollen body. She was not more than four months gone with child

and yet already she felt huge.

Ally read through what she'd written, then made a few notes for the next chapter. She'd given up on her original book, after discovering she kept drifting back to Isolde's story. It was obvious she wasn't going to be able to concentrate until it was finished, so she might as well stop fighting. Isolde was too strong for her anyway.

Since doing some research on the period, she knew Henry must have gone with the King to France that October.

Was she writing this book herself, or was Isolde writing it for her?

It was a question that troubled Ally quite a bit. It felt as if she was gradually being taken over by Isolde? No, surely that couldn't be right! She knew people talked of reincarnation, but she was certain she wasn't Isolde, had never been her. Yet she almost seemed to be reliving the other girl's life, feeling her pain and her doubts. Sometimes it was frightening. She wanted to be Ally, a modern woman who lived in the twentieth century.

She was startled out of her reverie by the ringing of the telephone. Her heart lifted as she heard Paul's voice at the other end.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Fine..." He sounded a little odd. "How about you? Still writing that historical?"

"Yes. I can't seem to leave it alone," she admitted. "I think the best thing I can do is to try and finish it as quickly as I can and then get back to the book I intended to write."

"I still think you ought to find somewhere else to write," Paul said. "I worry about you being there alone."

"Brian is up the road," Ally told him. "Actually, he's away for a couple of days but I'll be seeing him when he gets back."

"I'm not sure he's right for you," Paul said an odd note in his voice. "Too much like Tony..."

"No, you can't think that," Ally replied. "He's generous and not at all arrogant. I enjoy being with him."

"Well, I still think you're a fool-remember what you've been through."

"I'm not likely to forget," Ally said, feeling a little hurt he could say these things to her. It wasn't like Paul at all, not the real Paul. He seemed to be changing. "But Brian is someone I can trust."

"Well, please yourself," Paul said and sighed. "I'm not interfering even if it sounds like it, Ally. I just care what happens to you."

"Yes, I know that, Paul," she said. "I love you. You've always been special to me. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, of course..." His voice sounded strangled. "I have to go now."

Ally heard the receiver go down with a snap at the other end. So he was at home, not on his mobile. She wondered what was worrying him, thinking about the odd incident that had forced him to leave in a hurry. Surely, he wasn't still thinking he was Robin.

She prayed she was wrong, but it would explain his jealousy.

For all their sakes, she'd better get this book done. She returned to the computer,

opening up at the page she'd last saved. Had she written all this? No, she was sure it hadn't been there when she'd saved and closed. There was a whole new chapter she had no memory of at all.

Ally shivered as a chill spread through her. For a long time she had thought Isolde might be a product of her imagination, a secret desire to write a book she knew probably wouldn't sell. But she knew for certain she hadn't written this. It hadn't been checked for spelling mistakes and some of the words looked odd to her, though as she read them, the meaning became clear to her.

For a moment she smelt a strong odour of burning. An unpleasant acrid smell that made her choke. She went through to the kitchen to check that she hadn't left the stove on—it was a bit like cloth burning. No, everything was quite safe, besides, the smell had almost gone now.

Returning to her computer, she began to read through what Isolde had written and correct automatically as was her habit.

Isolde

The news came as Isolde lay resting in her solar. The King had sailed for France and Henry had gone with him. Isolde read the message her husband had sent her with a courier.

'Edward was much affected by the death of Robert Artois; who, as you may know, was a favourite with him. Robert was also a friend of my own. We go to avenge him. Our cause is just and I believe we shall prevail.'

Isolde laid the letter aside with a sigh. She was approaching the last few weeks of her pregnancy and feeling all the discomfort of her condition. Swollen ankles, backache, and tiredness had all plagued her increasingly through the summer and early autumn, despite the excellent advice of the physician Henry had sent to her.

She knew that Robert of Artois had set sail for France with forty-odd English ships earlier that year, in answer to the Countess de Montfort's pleas for more help in her struggle against the usurper to her son's rightful inheritance. The English forces had divided into three and Robert Artois had been trapped in Vannes by a large French army. He had managed to escape, but his injuries were such that he had died soon after reaching England.

After that, it had been a matter only of time before Edward went to war to avenge him. All the discussion and indecision was at an end. Now, an army of some twelve thousand men was on its way to France, and Isolde's husband was with them.

"Are you ill?" Mary asked as Isolde sighed again. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you."

Isolde smiled wearily. Henry's physician had advised rest, and because she was so tired and felt so heavy and uncomfortable, she had acceded to his suggestions, but she hated the enforced idleness.

"I wish this child were out of me," she said, suddenly angry. "Or that I were a man. Oh, Mary, what a wretched thing it is to be a woman. I would I had never conceived!"

"Hush, my lady, you do not mean it," Mary replied, amused yet shocked. "It is natural you should feel restless at such a time."

"I can lie here no longer," Isolde said. "I feel as if I shall go mad from idleness! I must get up and go for a walk."

"Do you think you ought?" asked Mary anxiously. "The physician advised rest, because of your size."

Isolde looked at her huge belly in distaste. She was too heavy to feel comfortable whether she stood or lay still.

"I have rested and rested. I must do something or I shall die in this bed."

Mary crossed herself. It was unsafe to tempt fate. Too many women died in childbed. Isolde was narrow in the hips, and so big in the belly that her child would not be easily brought out of her. Mary had been secretly worrying for weeks about the birth. Sir Henry would be angry if anything happened to his child.

It was said he was fond of the Lady Isolde, but wives were easily come by and men often remarried within weeks or months of being widowed. If it came to a choice between her mistress and Sir Henry's son, Mary knew who she must save.

"Help me," Isolde commanded as she struggled to rise. "I want to walk in the garden. I have need of some fresh air."

"As you wish, my lady – but you must take care."

Isolde was irritated by her fussing. Once she had gained her balance, she refused the woman's help. Oh, she could not bear this! Months of uncertainty and regret had made her resentful of the child she carried. She wanted to be free of the burden, to have her old energy and vigour back.

"Take care on the steps," Mary said, following behind. "You should not..."

"Oh, be quiet!" Isolde cried, her patience at an end. "Stop your clacking tongue, Mary. Stay there. I shall go alone."

"No, my lady. Please..."

Mary took a step towards her. Isolde gave an impatient shake of her head, moved suddenly and somehow missed her step. She let out a shrill scream of alarm and fell two steps to the curve in the stairway. Mary screamed even louder and ran to her, kneeling on the cold stone and bending over her.

"Oh, my lady. Are you hurt?"

"I am merely shaken." Isolde opened her eyes. "Help me to rise... Ahhh!"

She felt the pain strike deep in her belly as she moved. It bent her double, taking the colour from her face and made her gasp.

"It hurts... It hurts, Mary."

"Let me help you to your bed," Mary said. "I think the fall has brought on your labour, my lady."

"So soon?" Isolde stared at her, fear creeping along her spine. "Surely it cannot be yet?"

"It is not unknown for a child to come early, especially after a fall."

"Will it harm the child?" Isolde's pupils dilated in her distress. She clutched at herself as the pain tore at her. "What have I done, Mary? What have I done?"

"It may be for the best," Mary comforted. "You have not carried well this past month or more. It may be better if the child comes before you have exhausted your strength."

Isolde knew her woman was trying to comfort her. How could it be better for the child to be born too soon? She was gripped by fear. She had wanted the child out of her, resented the discomfort it had given her—but she did not want it to die.

"Please let my baby live," she whispered as Mary helped her back to the bed. "Punish me for my sins if you wish, God, but let my child live."

"We should do something," the voice said. "She cannot survive much more of this."

"If I use instruments on the child, its head could be damaged, and Sir Henry would not thank me for that."

"If you do not, they may both die. Save the child. Sir Henry needs a son."

Isolde heard the whispers from far away. She had been in labour for so many hours, she was barely aware of what was going on around her. She had never dreamed there could be such agony. When would it be over? She wanted only to give up her child and die, to end this torment.

"Oh, Robin," she murmured. "Why have you failed me? Why do you not come to me?"

But Robin would not come to her. He hated her now. The innocent love they had shared as children was all spoiled, destroyed by their sin.

"We are trying to help you," a man's voice said, and she knew it was Doctor Janus, the physician Henry had sent to care for her. "Drink a little of this, lady. It will give you strength."

Isolde could hardly swallow, but she tried to obey. She believed she was dying. It was God's punishment for her wickedness.

"You must save the child," she whispered. "Save Henry's son."

Isolde felt the pain bearing down on her. She was too tired. Too tired to respond. They were urging her to push. She thought she heard Henry's voice above the rest.

"Give me my son, Isolde. You have betrayed me, but you can redeem yourself. Give me my child!"

"Henry!"

Isolde screamed his name as the pain became unbearable. She knew she must push even though her strength was all but gone. Somehow, she must get this child out of her, then she could die.

Isolde could hear a child crying lustily. The sound was irritating. She wanted to sleep, to drift away to that dark place where she had been a short while earlier, but the

crying tore at her, pulling her back to the pain of life.

"You have a son, my lady. A fine boy."

Mary was bending over her, smiling, urging her to do something. The child was in her arms, nuzzling at her breast. She felt its mouth close about her nipple, tugging – and life flowed into her.

"My child," she whispered. "Henry's son..."

A bewildered wonderment filled her mind as she began to be fully aware once more. Something strange had happened – she had given birth twice.

"Where is the other one?"

Mary glanced at the physician. "You should rest, my lady. Rest and sleep. You have a fine son."

Isolde caught her wrist as she would have taken the child away. "I remember there were two babies. One followed hard upon the other."

"The second child was born dead," the physician told her. "You were so large this past month that I wondered if you might be carrying twins, but the second babe was too small to live. It was not as it should be." He crossed himself. "God have mercy on its soul."

Isolde closed her eyes. She had conceived two babies. One was alive and obviously healthy, the other had been malformed in some way.

"Was it a boy or a girl?" she asked, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Tell me, I beg you."

"Another boy," the physician said. "You must not grieve for him, Lady Isolde. It was God's mercy that he did not live to suffer."

Or God's curse.

The words were only in her head. Isolde knew she had not spoken them aloud. She would keep her secret grief to herself, and the fear.

Two babies. One much smaller than the other. Was it possible that the second might have been Robin's child? Had Henry's son taken over her womb, squeezing the second babe, restricting its growth... killing it?

Such thoughts could lead only to madness. Isolde had no idea whether or not it was possible to conceive the children of two different men a month apart. She knew that the idea came out of her guilt... that she must forget it.

"God forgive me," she whispered, making the sign of the cross over her breast. "It was a punishment for my sins."

"Rejoice that you have a healthy son," the physician said. It was well known that Lady Isolde was a pious, good woman. She would naturally blame herself at such a moment. "It is not your fault the child was born thus. Many babies die at birth especially when there is a second child in the mother's womb."

Isolde closed her eyes, drifting back to sleep as Mary took her son to his crib. The child had ceased to cry, her milk had satisfied him for the moment. Henry would have the son he craved when he returned from France.

Henry received the letter Isolde had sent him as the King's forces lay encamped before Vannes. Edward had made the same mistake as the earlier invading armies of Sir Walter Manny, the Earls of Salisbury and Pembroke and Robert of Artois. By laying siege to Vannes, Rennes, and Nantes, all at the same time, the English were too weak to succeed at any, and it seemed they had reached a stalemate.

"Sir Robin?" Henry looked up as the flap of his tent was pulled back. "What news? Has Edward decided to move at last?"

"I have heard nothing," Robin said. "A messenger came from the Pope with an offer of mediation, but I do not know whether His Majesty will listen. I came to ask if you cared to hunt. Some wild boar have been seen in the forest. It would be good sport to hunt them."

"Yes." Henry smiled at him. "I am in the mood for celebration. Isolde has given me a healthy son."

"You are to be congratulated, sir." Robin's expression gave nothing away, no hint of anger or pain.

"We have been fortunate," Henry replied. "There were two babes, but one did not survive, apparently it was smaller, too weak to have been healthy had it drawn breath."

"At least you have your heir."

"And Isolde is young. God willing, she will bear more children."

"Such a woman is a blessing."

Something in his tone made Henry look at him. He sounded dissatisfied, angry.

"I have not asked, how is Ondeline?"

"Well enough when I left her."

"She has sent no word?"

"None. Nor do I expect it." The shuttered look in his eyes warned Henry to ask no more questions. "Come, sir, shall we hunt or not?"

"Indeed we shall," Henry replied. "I have a fancy for the taste of boar meat. And this waiting irks me. If Edward does not mean to fight, I am for home. I want to see my son."

Isolde bent over the wooden cradle. How beautiful little Harry was. She touched his head, stroking the soft, fair hair. He yawned, opened his eyes and gazed up at her with his blue eyes. Such a beautiful child.

"He favours you, my lady," Griselda said, pausing in her work to admire the babe. "It is strange..."

"What do you mean? Why should he not look like me?"

"I did not mean that." Griselda blushed. "The other one... was darker, like his father."

"You saw him?" Isolde's heart caught with pain. "They took him away. I never saw him... never touched him."

"Do not distress yourself." Griselda's dark eyes held sympathy. "I should not have

spoken of it."

"What was wrong with him?" Isolde felt the sting of tears. "You must tell me. Please. I keep thinking of him... wondering."

"His head was too large for his body," Griselda said, "as if the rest of him had ceased to grow. But he was not ugly. No, his features were well formed but his body had been stunted." She bit her lip as she saw Isolde's look of pain. "Forgive me, I have upset you."

"No, no, I know it was best he did not live. I am fortunate that Harry was perfect."

"Yes," Griselda agreed. "I have never seen a more lovely child and so greedy for life. He grows so quickly. Mary says she has never seen a child thrive like this one."

"Yes." Isolde smiled lovingly. "He is very strong and always hungry."

"Your own milk alone would never be enough for him," Griselda said. "We are fortunate in having found a wet nurse."

"Yes. I..."

Hearing a commotion from outside in the courtyard, Isolde went to the window of her solar and looked out. Several of the servants had gathered round a closed cart. It seemed they had visitors, but who would arrive in such an odd style? Such transport was usually employed only for baggage or... Isolde's heart caught as she saw one of the servants point towards her solar. The others were lifting something from the cart... a litter on which lay the body of a man.

"Henry..." The icy chill spread through her body. "Henry has been wounded!"

"But we have heard of no battles," Griselda said. "Some skirmishes perhaps, but..."

Isolde's face had drained of colour. "Henry is hurt," she said. "Look after my son, Griselda. I must attend to my husband."

"Yes, my lady. God be with you."

Isolde did not hear her. She walked quickly from the room and hurried down the stairs. The men had brought the litter into the great hall and were standing awkwardly, unsure of what to do next. As Isolde approached, they stared at her in silence, waiting, then parted ranks to let her through.

"Henry!" She bent over the litter. His face was very pale. She could see his tunic was stained with dried blood and rent, as if by a sword or a knife. Moving it aside, she discovered a filthy rag covering what looked like a stomach wound. "What happened to him?" She looked about her. "Who brought my husband home?"

"I did, Lady Isolde."

The voice sent shivers through her. She turned her head and saw Robin standing behind her. His expression was so odd, triumphant, that she felt faint from fear.

"What happened to my husband, sir?"

"He was gored by a wild boar while hunting in a forest near Vannes," Robin said. "The creature took us by surprise. It had been hiding in the undergrowth and suddenly attacked. I shot it with an arrow but did not bring it down. Maddened by pain, it went for Henry. I managed to kill it with a bolt from a crossbow... but not before the damage was done."

"You have done this," Isolde accused, her lips white. "This was your fault."

"No... No, Isolde." Henry's whisper was barely audible, but she heard it and swung round. He was looking at her, his hand moving feebly as if trying to reach hers. "I was... careless."

Isolde knelt by his side. She took his hand in hers, holding it to her face, her cheek wet with tears.

"Henry," she murmured. "I thought you dead."

"Not yet." A flicker of a smile showed in his eyes. "Shall you nurse me, Isolde? You may save me if you try."

"I will do all I can, my lord, but you must help me. We shall need your medicines."

"Take me to my chamber," Henry said. "Come with me, Isolde. I would have none but you tend me."

Isolde gestured to the servants. "Carry him carefully," she instructed. "Fetch Mary to me and bid her bring my casket of salves."

She followed as the servants carried Henry's litter through the hall towards his apartments, her heart heavy with grief. She knew he was sorely wounded. Was it possible to cure him of such a terrible injury? Sister Bertha would not have tried. She would have said his life was in God's hands.

Isolde would try. She would use what little skill she had and Henry's own learning to save him. Pray God it was enough! Walking by the side of Henry's litter, she was aware of Robin watching her, but she would not look back. No matter what Henry said, she was certain Robin had done this. Somehow, he had brought about the accident that might yet cause her husband's death.

What could he hope to gain by it? Even if Henry died, he could not hope to wed Isolde. He was married to Ondeline. No, no, she was surely wronging him! It would require two deaths to bring him Isolde and surely he would never contemplate anything so wicked?

Isolde dismissed all such thoughts from her mind as the servants laid Henry on his bed. She bent over him, then took the little knife that always hung from her girdle and cut away, first his tunic, then the stained rag beneath.

The wound was deep and jagged, the skin pushed open where Henry's organs protruded. The sight of it made Isolde sick to her stomach. It was some days since the boar had ripped his belly, and there was a yellow puss oozing from the flesh.

"Wash away the blood and filth." Henry's eyes were open, watching her.

"I fear it will cause you pain, my lord."

"Nonetheless, it must be done. You must sew the flesh together, Isolde. Push the intestines back inside, then pull the flesh over and sew it in place. You will find all you need in my storeroom, and bring the black jar with the Arabic script. It was given me by a wise man from the East. He told me it might save my life one day. There is a powder inside. Sprinkle it on the wound before you bind me. I know not what it is, but I believe it helps such wounds as this."

Isolde was doubtful. Now she had seen the deep gash in his belly, she was doubtful that any of her arts could save him. The wound was already infected, and she knew that most died with such hurts.

"It may be poison," she said fearfully. "How shall I know how much to use? I cannot read Arabic script."

"I shall direct you, but if I faint while you are tending me, use only enough to cover the open flesh."

Isolde turned as Mary entered the room. Directing her to fetch water and clean cloths, Isolde went into Henry's storeroom and selected what she needed. She carried it all back to his bedside, and told Mary to hold the bowl while she began to cleanse the wound.

It was work to turn the strongest stomach. The blood flowed as Isolde's fingers pushed the protruding organs back inside the cavity and gathered the skin over them. Henry had made not one sound as she worked and she knew he must have fainted. As she began to push her needle and thread through his flesh, Mary made a gurgling sound, rushed to the other side of the chamber and vomited into a basin.

Isolde felt sick herself. She was trembling, almost faint as she stitched the wound, rolling the skin over like the edge of a blanket. It looked raw and ugly when she had finished, but she could do no better. She cleansed the flesh around his wound with lotions she knew to be beneficial in healing minor wounds. Then she opened the jar and shook a little of the black powder into her hand. It smelt strong, almost like sulphur and she hesitated, wondering if it might do more harm than good. Henry believed it would help him. Taking a deep breath, Isolde sprinkled the powder over the wound, then placed clean cloths over it.

Then she took a small vial from the purse at her waist, pouring two drops of it on to Henry's forehead. She drew the sign of the cross and murmured a prayer for his delivery. Mary had returned in time to see what she was doing. She frowned as she half heard the words and misinterpreted them, was her mistress using the black arts? If so, was her intent to help her husband or to kill him?

Chapter Twelve

Ally

Ally yawned as she finished reading the chapter Isolde had written. She had corrected it, using modern words to fill in the gaps, but she was sure she had interpreted that last bit right, and she felt fearful for Isolde. Her research had told her that women who performed the healing arts in those days could be thought of either as saints or witches.

A chill crept over Ally as she recalled the smell of burning the previous night. Was that what had happened to Isolde? She felt sick and uneasy and wished that either Paul or Brian were with her.

Suddenly overcome by a feeling of restlessness, she went upstairs and changed into a warm tracksuit. It was cold out and she needed some exercise. Perhaps a really hard run would clear the cobwebs and sense of impending danger from her mind. She was frightened by what might happen to Isolde if her husband died.

It was late in the evening, the moon giving a silvery light to the country lanes as Ally began her run. She felt better as the hard grind of jogging began to take over from her thoughts, increasing her pace, the rhythm of her pounding feet setting up a beating in her head.

How odd she felt, disorientated, as if she were in another world or time... Mists were falling around her and the moon had gone behind a cloud, yet it was still light. She could see as if it were day... a cold winter's day with icicles on the branches of the trees. There were no houses... no buildings or roads...except for the castle up ahead of her.

Henry's castle! This wasn't real. It wasn't happening. She had never experienced anything like this before. Always she had seemed to come out of a drugged sleep, remembering only snatches of what she had written, but now she was actually there, she was witnessing whatever was about to happen.

People were coming from the woods—and yes, she could see there was a village now, small huts with thatched or mud roofs. She could hear the people talking and muttering.

"He was a good man..."

"A fair master..."

"We shall miss him..."

"They say she killed him, his wife. They say she is a witch."

"No!" Ally cried. "She isn't a witch. She was trying to save his life, that's all."

The man standing nearest to her looked round and then crossed himself. He had obviously heard Ally's voice but could not see her.

"The Lady Isolde is not a witch," Ally said and one or two others looked in her direction. They all appeared scared and began to murmur amongst themselves.

"It is proof of her guilt" one of them cried. *"See how she makes voices come from nowhere to deceive us!"*

"Yes... and she cured that woman of the scourge," another woman cried. *"It is not natural..."*

Ally wanted to protest again, but she realised she couldn't expect these people to understand that Isolde was merely using practices of the future. In fact she was making things worse for Isolde, by helping to spread the myth that she was a witch.

She followed the crowd as they went to the gates of the castle, standing there as they mourned and wept for their lord who was no more. And then suddenly the mood began to grow ugly. Someone shouted that the Lady Isolde should be made to pay for her wickedness.

"Bring her out," one of the men cried. *"We'll show her what we do with witches. She should be stoned to death."*

"Or ducked to see if she floats..."

The cries were all around Ally now. She felt faint and she could smell the dreadful stench...of flesh burning.

The sound of screeching brakes brought Ally back from wherever she'd been. She blinked as she found herself staring at a car's headlamps, and then the driver was getting out, coming round to investigate if she was harmed.

"For goodness sake, Ally." Brian's anxious tones got through to her. "You must have seen me. What on earth were you doing standing here in the middle of the road?"

"Oh, Brian, thank goodness!" Ally cried, half falling against him. "I don't know what happened; it was such a weird experience. I was running and... I don't know. I seemed to be transported back in time. I wasn't here but somewhere else..."

"You've been working too hard, my girl," Brian said and took hold of her firmly. "You're exhausted. Come on, get in the car. I'm taking you home with me."

Ally was too shaken to resist. A part of her knew she had to get home, because Isolde would be trying desperately to reach her. She had a feeling that time might be running out for Isolde—but what did she want of Ally? If all these things had really happened, there was no way she could change them—was there? You couldn't rewrite history—or could you?

Was Isolde begging for help? Ally felt drawn to this woman from long ago in a way she couldn't describe, and she was desperately afraid for her. Afraid that something awful was going to happen.

Isolde had been terribly afraid when Henry died after all she had done to try and save him, and stricken by grief and guilt because she could not.

"It was strange, my lady," Griselda said to her when they found him lying stiff and cold in his bed. He seemed so much better yesterday and he was not in pain."

"That was the medicine he asked for," Isolde said. "The Sisters sometimes called it the juice of death, for too much can kill rather than heal."

"But you were careful not to give him too much," the woman said. "If anyone asks I shall swear that you measured exactly what my lord ordered into his goblet of wine."

"Thank you." Isolde was touched by Griselda's loyalty. "But do you know what happened to my lord's goblet? It stood by his bedside when I went to rest. I left him for only an hour... But I should not have deserted him, I should have remained by him." She sighed, feeling weighed down by her grief, and the pain at her temple.

"You were weary and you had your child to think of. Your husband would want you to think of the babe now, my lady."

"Yes, I must think of Harry," Isolde sighed. "You may leave me now, Griselda. I shall rest for a while..." She lifted her head as she heard the sound of shouting from outside. "Are those people still there? I thought Philip had sent them away."

"He did, my lady, but they came back. It is nothing. Just some nonsense. They will grow tired of it before long."

Isolde nodded and went to lie down once more. No one had told her what the shouting was about, but there was an odd atmosphere in the castle. Some of the servants had looked at her strangely, and one or two had crossed themselves as she passed.

There were some that would blame her for Henry's death. They would not understand that she had tried all she knew to save him, and she had believed she was succeeding, but it had been too little or too late. Yet just before she had given him that last draft of the powerful medicine he had requested, Henry had smiled at her and held her hand, telling her he would soon be well and thanking her for her care of him.

Tears stung her eyes and she felt the grief inside her harden like a stone. Henry had been a good husband to her despite their unfortunate start and she had betrayed him. She had wished a thousand times that she could go back and undo what she had done, but...

"Isolde... are you asleep?"

She sat up with a start as she heard the whisper. "Robin! What are you doing here? You should not be in my chamber. It is foolish... dangerous!"

"I had to come..." His eyes gleamed with a kind of obsessive madness as he looked at her, chilling her. "You are free now, Isolde. Free to come away with me."

"How can you say that? My husband is hardly cold in his grave."

"God be praised!" Robin cried. He came to her, seizing her about the waist as she stood up, pulling her hard against him. "You shall be mine now, as you ought always to have been."

"You have a wife," Isolde reminded him, wrenching away sharply. "I may be a widow for my sorrow, but you have a wife."

Trial by Fire

"Ondeline means nothing to me," Robin dismissed his wife with a flick of his fingers. "It is you I love, Isolde. It has always been you."

"No!" she cried as he tried to take her in his arms once more. "Do not touch me, Robin. I am grieving for my husband."

"You thought not of Henry when you lay with me," Robin said, eyes narrowed and angry. "You are mine, Isolde. I shall never give you up."

"I do not belong to you or any man," she replied fiercely. "Nor shall I ever again. I have my husband's child and my position here is secured. Philip is too weak to keep order alone and he knows it. He will stand as guardian to Henry's son and..."

"Will you deny me and our love?" Robin's gaze intensified. "I have done things that will ensure I burn in hell for your sake..."

"What?" Isolde looked at him fearfully. "What have you done?"

"Do you imagine Henry's death was an accident?"

Her cheeks paled and she felt pain strike at her heart. "I knew it. I knew you had done something..."

Robin was triumphant, unnaturally so. "I deliberately wounded the boar... It was in my mind that Henry should die."

Isolde's hand shot out. She slapped him hard across the face.

"Go!" she cried. "Leave me! I command it. I never want to see or speak to you..."

She got no further for Robin was on her, lifting her, carrying her towards the bed. She knew his intent but though she struggled against him, beating at him with her fists, he was too strong for her.

Her scream was smothered beneath his greedy mouth, and then she was lying on the bed beneath him, crushed by the full force of his weight as he took possession of her cruelly. She fought him to the last, resisting his fierce attack with all her strength, but at last, she lay still as he rolled away from her, panting. She turned her face to the pillow, refusing to look at him as he rose and stood staring down at her.

"Isolde..." he said, and now his voice was choked with the horror of what he had done. "Isolde... I'm so sorry..."

She would not look at him, though he begged her. For several minutes he stood there, then knelt by her side, taking her hand in his and begging for forgiveness but still she would not look at him. She did not speak one word, nor did she stir when Robin went from the room.

Ally

Ally sighed and stood up, taking a turn about her study as she felt the ache in her back. She'd been working for hours now and had almost finished the last chapter of her novel, the one she had intended to write when she took the cottage.

It was so odd, but Isolde had gone from her. It had happened after the night she'd had that strange experience, when she had believed herself transported back in time.

If she had gone home immediately, would Isolde have come to her? Ally did not

know. She had spent the night with Brian at his home, and then he had insisted on taking her to Scotland for the weekend. When they returned the cottage had seemed a different place, all sense of Isolde's presence gone.

"Isolde has gone," she told Paul when she telephoned him in New York a few days later. "I can't feel her in the cottage now and she doesn't come to me when I'm writing."

"Thank goodness for that," Paul replied, sounding very much like his old self. "It's just as well, Ally. It was making you ill... me too. I kept having these weird nightmares, but they seem to have stopped at last."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, very much so," her brother said. "In fact, I'm flying to England next week. How about coming up to London for the weekend? We could go to the theatre, have a meal somewhere nice. You could bring Brian with you. Give us all a chance to get to know each other properly." He hesitated, then said, "I think I may have been a bit out of order recently, Ally. I don't know Brian so I shouldn't try to put doubts in your mind about him."

"It was just you doing your big brother act I expect," Ally said and laughed. "It's forgotten and Brian doesn't know so don't let it worry you. I'll ask him if he's free, but I'd love to come anyway."

"Thanks," Paul said, sounding relieved. "I'm sorry if I've been a pain since Christmas, Ally."

"Not your fault, forget it," she said. "It was the atmosphere in the cottage. It got to us both somehow." She sighed. "I'm not sorry Isolde has gone in some ways, but in others, I miss her. I shall never know how her story finished now shall I?"

"You can write what you want," Paul replied. "How are you getting on with the book you intended to write?"

"Almost finished. I shall read through it later today and probably send a printed copy to Sara in the morning."

"So you'll be giving up the cottage soon?"

Ally hesitated. It made sense to say yes. Brian was already talking about her moving in with him. They had discussed it over the delicious meal he had given her the previous evening.

"We could give it a try, living together," he'd suggested. "You could get a flat in London and we could go up sometimes or you could stay up there when it's necessary for your work. If things work out..."

"Let's take it by stages," Ally had suggested. "But I will think about it when the book is finished."

"Probably," she told her brother. "I don't suppose there's much sense in staying here, though I want to try and bring Isolde back one last time if I can."

"That sounds dangerous to me," Paul said, a note of alarm in his voice. "What do you mean bring her back? Finishing her story your way is one thing but don't dabble in anything. The black arts and that sort of thing. It's dangerous, Ally, believe me."

Ally laughed. "I wouldn't know how to try," she said. "No, I was merely going to clear my mind of everything else and then just think about her, try to clear a path for

her to come through."

"Well, it still sounds dangerous to me," Paul said. "If I were you I should let her go. If she broke contact with you, she must have had a reason."

"I think she's in trouble," Ally replied, knowing she must sound ridiculous. The whole idea of a woman from the past trying to reach her was improbable, and it was unlikely she could do anything to help. "I want to help her if I can."

"Well, I don't suppose I'll be able to stop you," Paul said. "But take care. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"It won't, don't worry," Ally promised. "Whatever happened was a long time ago, Paul. I don't suppose I can help her, but at least I'm going to try."

Isolde

"What is wrong with her?" Ondeline stood by the lady Isolde's bed and looked down at her with dislike. Isolde had taken Henry from her and now he was dead. Now she was married to a man who lusted after this woman, and did not love his wife. "Why does she lie there and refuse to feed herself or her child?"

"I do not know, my lady," Mary said, looking at her with frightened eyes. "She has been here for two weeks, since..." She broke off as she recalled to whom she was speaking.

"Since what?" Ondeline's eyes narrowed with temper. She had arrived here in search of her husband on learning of her cousin's death, but Robin had hardly spoken to her since her arrival. He never touched her, had not done so since three days after their wedding. "Tell me, wench, or I will have you beaten."

Mary trembled. She had overheard the terrible scene between her mistress and Robin Mortimer, but had not dared to speak of what she had witnessed to anyone.

"Forgive me, my lady..." She hung her head, afraid to speak, yet knew the Lady Ondeline, would carry out her threat to have her beaten if she did not comply. "It concerns your husband..."

Ondeline's hand snaked out, slapping her hard across the face. "Loosen your tongue, wretch, or I shall have it loosened for you. We shall see how a few hours in the torture chamber will change your mind."

"No!" Mary's scream of fear penetrated even Isolde's mind and she stirred, opening her eyes as Mary fell to her knees. "No, I beg you, lady, not that. I shall tell you..."

"Mary-what is it?" Isolde asked, sitting up in bed and staring at her. "What goes on here?"

"Nothing for you to worry over," Ondeline said, gripping Mary's arm. "I am taking this insolent wench with me and she shall be punished for not attending to you properly."

Isolde stared after them as they left the chamber, then lay back against her pillows and closed her eyes. She ought to make some effort to get up, but she could not be bothered... and yet a voice was calling to her in her head. She had heard it for some

time now. Mary's scream had pierced the mist of apathy, that had lain over her since... her mind shied away from Robin's betrayal.

His rape of her body had touched her little. Henry's first possession of her had been little short of rape, and she had learned to care for him, to respect, even to love him. No, it was Robin's admission that he had killed her husband that writhed like maggots in her brain, eating at her so that she had fought to close herself to all conscious thought. Now she was remembering what Robin had said, and the memory of his gloating face sickened her.

He had deliberately maddened the boar so it would attack Henry... Had he done more? Had he poisoned Henry's wine by adding more of the lethal medicine to it while she slept?

She desperately tried to dismiss the thought but it would not leave her, returning to her mind, over and over again, until she thought she would scream.

She could not lie here a moment more! She must get up and see to her child. And she must see what Ondeline was doing to her serving woman. She was the mistress here, not Ondeline, and if Mary had done something wrong, it was for her to order the punishment.

Chapter Thirteen

Ally

Ally sat down at her computer, staring at the empty screen as she willed the words to come. She had thought she was reaching Isolde earlier in the day, but now she seemed to have retreated once more. It was no use, she couldn't write Isolde's story without her help, because it would not be the true story, only a figment of her imagination.

Ally wandered over to the phone and dialed Brian's number, but all she got was the busy tone. She toyed with the idea of ringing her brother in New York but decided against it. She would see him at the weekend, and she was looking forward to it, because Brian had agreed to come too and make a special treat of it. As she turned away from the phone, it rang suddenly, startling her.

"Hi," her agent's voice came through to her. "I've read the book, Ally. It kept me up all night-but it's great. I'm sure we have a winner here."

"Good, I'm glad you like it. It took me longer than I thought..."

"It was worth it, the best you've ever done, I think. You've got new depth, Ally. I really think this is your best so far."

"Thanks. There was a time I thought it was never going to get done."

"What about the other book you mentioned? Have you had any more thoughts on that?"

"Oh, I doubt if it would be publishable," Ally said. "You wouldn't want to handle it, as it's in the realms of fantasy, time slip. Not my usual style at all."

"Well, let me read some of it if you're still stuck on it."

"I'm thinking I'll probably pack it in. I may be giving up the cottage soon...moving in with someone."

"That's the new man in your life? I'm really pleased, Ally. It's time you moved on, to put the past behind you."

"Thanks... I'll probably introduce you at the weekend. We're all coming up for some fun and it would be great to meet with you, too."

"Yes, why don't we do that? Give me a ring when you arrive and we'll fix something."

They talked for a little longer, then Ally replaced the receiver and walked over to the window. It was a bright day and warmer than of late. She would go for a run. The air would clear her head and she could do with the exercise.

Isolde

Isolde looked at Philip. He was staring at her awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable with what he had to say.

"I am requesting you to hand over the keys to my cousin's strong room, Lady Isolde. Please do not make me ask again."

Isolde was puzzled by his attitude. This was so unlike him, he had always been pleasant to her. Even after Henry's death, he had treated her with the respect due to her standing as the mother to her lord's heir.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked. "It is my right to hold the keys, Philip. Henry gave them into my keeping. You know he trusted me to take care of things here while he was away. We rule here together now, but it is still for me to hold the keys."

"My cousin was a fool to trust you..." a cold voice came from behind Isolde. "But he did not know you had betrayed him with another man. Nor that the child you bore was not of his blood but that of..."

"No!" Isolde cried, her face white with shock. "How dare you say such things to me? How dare tell such wicked lies?"

"It is not I who lies to protect my sin with another man," Ondeline said. "I have proof that you have lain with Robin Mortimer... my husband."

"You...cannot..." Isolde whispered, her throat closing as she saw the hatred in Ondeline's eyes. "It is not true..."

"I have a witness who saw you with him in your own chamber. He made love to you while your husband was still unburied."

"No! That is not true. I did not lie with him..." She trembled as she saw the scorn in the other woman's face, then her head went up. "I was the victim of rape. Your husband forced me."

"Listen to her lies!" Ondeline whirled on Philip in a rage. "Are you a man or a boy? She is convicted out of her own mouth. She lay with Robin Mortimer and it was not for the first time. They had been lovers for months." Her malevolent gaze fixed on Isolde once more. "And she killed her husband. She gave him poison in his wine."

Isolde saw the hatred in the other woman's eyes and was suddenly very afraid. She had given Henry medicine that could kill, and it was in her own mind that she might somehow have given him too much.

"No..." she whispered. "It is not true. I gave Henry only what he commanded. Ask Griselda. She will tell you the truth."

"Yes, we should have Griselda tell her story," Philip agreed uneasily. "You should not accuse Isolde of such wickedness unless you have proof, Ondeline. One woman's

word is not enough."

"I have a witness who will swear she saw this woman add more poison to the wine, and hold it to Henry's lips as he lay sleeping," Ondeline said, and only she knew how that confession had been bought. She smiled strangely. "And Robin Mortimer will swear to it that she bewitched him into lying with her."

"No!" Isolde cried, a shiver running down her spine. "I am innocent of Henry's murder—if he was murdered. And I am not a witch. I have no magical powers."

"You have healed ailments that no other would touch," Ondeline said. "And your own serving women have seen you perform your spells. They will swear to it at your trial."

"My trial?" Isolde stared at her in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? I have committed no crime."

"I have accused you of witchcraft and of Henry's murder," Ondeline said coldly. "You will be held here as a prisoner until you are taken away to be tried and condemned."

"No!" Isolde's hand crept to her throat. She could feel a constriction and she knew it was her fear that was choking her. Ondeline hated her. She had loved Henry but he had chosen Isolde, and now she was determined to have her revenge. "Philip...surely you do not believe these lies? You know I nursed Henry devotedly. I loved him. I would never have harmed him."

Philip looked at her unhappily. He could not believe her guilty of the crimes of which she was accused, yet the people of the village called her a witch. They had gathered at the gates every day since their lord's death, crying out she should be punished. Who had begun these rumours? Not Ondeline, for they had started before her arrival... no one else had wished her harm so mayhap it was because they were true.

Philip had been prepared to ignore the villagers, believing they would forget in time. He had accepted Isolde's right to hold the keys, knowing she would allow him to share in the guardianship of his cousin's son.

If the child was not Henry's...then he, Philip, was the true heir and he would rule here alone. Yet he could not believe in Isolde's guilt. Surely, she had not killed her husband?

"I am not sure," he began uneasily.

"It is not for you to decide," Ondeline snapped. "She will be taken before the judges and they will hear her case. If she is innocent, I shall leave this place and enter a nunnery, but she is guilty. She must be punished according to the laws of this country. Would you protect a murderess... or has she bewitched you too?"

Philip blanched. It was a mere step to being accused of complicity in Henry's murder. He suddenly saw that Ondeline was ruthless. She would let nothing stand in her way.

"Give me the keys, Isolde," he said. "It is my duty to arrest you in the King's name. You will be confined to your chamber until such time as your trial can be arranged."

"In my chamber..." Isolde stared at him in distress. "But what of my son? What of little Harry?"

"He will be cared for as my own. I give you my word," Philip said. "Whatever happens..." He faltered as her clear eyes seemed to accuse him. "I shall care for and love him. He shall have the best of attention."

"No..." Isolde started towards him, but at a signal from Ondeline, two men came into the chamber and seized her. "Philip!" she screamed as they began to drag her away. "Do not let them do this to me. I beg you. I am innocent... I swear I have done nothing wrong."

Philip stared after her and she could see he was torn by guilt and pity, but Ondeline was triumphant. She had what she wanted now and she would not let Philip change his mind.

Isolde did not struggle as they led her to her chamber and left her there alone. She felt cold and dead inside. What did it matter if she was tried and found guilty? She had been betrayed by all those she cared for... all those who should have cared for her. Ah no, Henry had never betrayed her. She had betrayed him.

Sinking to her knees, Isolde wept bitter tears. Only now it was too late had she begun to realize all that she had lost. Henry had loved her. He had always treated her kindly, only losing patience with her once... and he had tried to win her back with kindness, healing the breach between them. Indeed, in the end she had been happy with him. Why then had she lain with Robin?"

Perhaps it was the memory of their childhood, when their love had been innocent and beautiful. She recalled, Ondeline had accused her of bewitching Robin. Were those his words or those of his jealous wife?

"Robin, help me," she whispered brokenly as her tears dried. "If you ever loved me, help me now."

Ally

Ally finished typing the sentence, then sighed and stretched her shoulders. She'd been writing furiously for hours, ever since Isolde had decided to come back to her.

So now she knew Ondeline was Isolde's enemy, and it was she who had brought her to trial, bullying Philip when he would have relented out of pity. Poor Philip. Ally felt sorry for him. He was not a bad man, simply weak. He had not wanted to condemn his cousin's wife, whom he loved in his own way but he was afraid of Ondeline's tongue. He was also afraid he might be accused of being involved in Henry's murder.

Ally felt Isolde believed Henry might have died of an overdose of the medicine she'd given him. She was afraid she might have killed him, though not deliberately.

Was it possible someone else had tampered with the wine in the cup... the cup she'd given to Paul as a Christmas gift! A chill ran through Ally as she remembered her strange dreams about the cup. When she'd thought if she could scrub it clean, she could wipe away the terrible thing that had happened. No! Surely it couldn't be the same one? Yet Paul had been haunted by the dreams too after she'd given it to him.

Before she'd bought the cup, all Isolde's communications had been happy ones. The

odd happenings had begun with the cup, the cup that had been used to poison Henry.

Pacing the floor, Ally tried to work out what might have happened. Had Henry woken and asked for more medicine? Had one of the serving women given him what he asked for and been too frightened to confess it? Or had Robin taken his chance to finish his rival off while he lay helpless in his bed?

From what she'd learned so far, Ally thought this the most likely solution. Robin's mind had obviously been affected by his desire for Isolde. She wondered how he had felt when he realized she was to be put on trial for the murder. Was he stricken with guilt or did he hate her now?

Isolde

Isolde looked round the chamber where her trial was to be held. It was a huge room with wooden benches on two sides. At one end was a platform with a table and three chairs for her judges. Behind her, was a roped off area where the common folk had gathered to witness her trial.

She could hear them murmuring as she was brought in, and knew from the cries of 'Shame!' that they had already condemned her. On the benches to either side were people of rank and fortune. She searched for a friendly face... someone who might help her. At first, she could see no one, but then she caught sight of one of the Queen's ladies in waiting. Had the Queen heard of her plight? Would she do something to help Isolde?

The judges were arriving now. Isolde did not know the first two, who were clearly men of rank, but the third was familiar to her and as his gaze fixed on her, she felt the ice spread through her veins. It was Brother Friedrich. She remembered him all too well, and knew he remembered her.

Isolde knew then her fate was sealed. No matter how much she protested her innocence, she would be found guilty. The certainty stayed with her as the questioning began.

"You are Isolde of Lynston?"

"Yes, sir. Wife to..."

"Answer my questions, Lady. Do not speak other than as you are bid."

"But I answered with truth, sir. I am the wife of Henry, Lord..."

"Be quiet!" the judge thundered at her. "You stand accused of murder and witchcraft. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"She lies!" a voice in the crowd called out and was joined by others. "Burn her. Burn the witch!"

Isolde raised her head proudly. Of what use was it to plead? They had all decided she was guilty. She looked directly into the eyes of the judge, not caring that he would think her bold.

"I am neither a witch nor a murderess," she said. "But condemn me if you wish, my lord. I care not whether I live or die."

"Silence, woman! You have been warned before. Know that it is within my power to have you chastised if I so choose—death is not the only punishment you may receive this day."

Isolde's eyes did not drop. Let them do as they would with her. She would not beg for mercy. She hated them all... all those who had betrayed her.

She stood, silent now as they began to bring in the witnesses to speak against her: people from the village, ignorant folk who had reason to be grateful to her but had turned against her in their fear and superstition.

Then the next witness was called.

"Ask Sister Anne to come in."

Isolde turned her head as she saw the nun enter. She was wearing a heavy black habit and veil, her face hidden from the world, but her voice was clear and well remembered as she condemned Isolde.

"You know the accused?" asked the judge who had warned Isolde earlier.

"Yes, my lord. She is proud and wicked and she denies God."

There was a horrified gasp from the onlookers. Brother Friedrich leaned forward, his cruel eyes narrowed, manner intent.

"Explain your meaning, Sister. In what way does she deny God?"

"She believes she has the power to heal. She denies it is God's right to choose who shall live and who shall die."

"Is this so, Isolde of Lynston?"

Isolde met Brother Friedrich's cold gaze. "I deny nothing of God's right," she said. "I try only to heal where healing is possible. Surely that is God's work, not the devil's?"

"She condemns herself," Brother Friedrich said and sat back with a satisfied smile. "The case is proven."

"Yet we shall continue..."

A stream of witnesses followed, some of them people Isolde had never seen or spoken to in her life. She knew it was useless to challenge them as they accused her of all kinds of wickedness.

What did it matter? She was already found guilty in the eyes of the world.

Ondeline gave her evidence, telling the judges she believed Isolde to have bewitched her husband into lying with her.

"Why do you believe your husband was bewitched, Lady Ondeline?" Brother Friedrich asked, leaning forward, his eyes gleaming. "Sin is always present. Men often lie with women other than their wives."

Isolde wondered why the priest should say something in her favour, but Ondeline's next words were so shocking that they robbed her of the power of thought.

"Because they share the same father," Ondeline said. "The blood tie prevented the marriage—Robin Mortimer of Lynston told me this himself. Had he not been bewitched, he would never have committed such a sin."

Isolde heard the gasps. Robin was her half-brother... Lord Mortimer, her father. Why had she never been told? But she ought to have guessed it long ago. She saw it now. This was the reason she had been sent away and Robin had known. He had known

Trial by Fire

even as they lay together...

The sickness swelled inside Isolde. The pain was so intense that she wanted to die. She willed this farce of a trial to be over...

Ally

Ally sat staring at the last line she had typed. Robin was Isolde's half-brother and he'd known it even as he lay with her!

She remembered Paul's odd behaviour at Christmas. But that hadn't been Paul. He had been possessed by Robin as she was by Isolde.

What kind of a man had Robin Mortimer been? Ally tried to understand his nature. Was he evil, or a man desperately in love with a woman he knew he could never have?

She knew Isolde's story was nearing its conclusion, but as yet there had been no mention of Robin's feelings in all this. It was possible Isolde had not been allowed to see him. Would he have been punished, or had Ondeline kept his part in Henry's death to herself?

Ally wondered if Robin had stood in court to condemn Isolde with the others, if so it had not come through to her. Was he her enemy, or had he tried to help her at the last?

She was too tired to continue this evening; reaching Isolde took so much out of her that she felt physically and mentally drained. Perhaps there would be time to finish in the morning before Brian came to collect her for their visit to London.

Yawning, she banked up the stove in her study. It was an old-fashioned thing that burned wood and heated water. Because she found it chilly in the evenings, Ally often used it instead of the immersion heater, but you had to be careful not to overdo it or it might set the chimney on fire. Brian had warned her once when she asked him about using it, showing her precisely what to do.

Ally was thinking about Brian as she walked upstairs. Once Isolde's story was finished, she thought she would move in with him. She wouldn't sell Tony's house just yet, or her own apartment, but she was almost sure now that she wanted to be with Brian. He was a generous man, kind and generous... rather like Henry in some ways.

Brian woke suddenly as the telephone rang beside his bed. He picked it up, instantly alert as the woman's voice spoke.

"Your cottage is on fire. Ally is asleep."

Brian flung back the bedclothes, leapt out of bed and thrust his feet into slippers, pulling on his dressing robe as he ran down the stairs. As he left the house, he could see smoke rising through the roof of the cottage.

He began to run, heart pumping with fear. Let him be in time! Oh, God, don't let Ally die. He loved her. He didn't want to lose her. It was that damned curse again!

He smashed his way in through the glass door at the back of the cottage, pausing

only to pick up a towel to cover his mouth and nose as he went out into the hall. The smoke was billowing from beneath the door of the room Ally had been using as her study. It was that blasted wood burning stove!

He started for the stairs, coughing and spluttering as the smoke caught at his throat.

"Let Ally live," he said aloud, and he didn't know whether he was praying or inciting the devil. "Whoever you are, don't take her from me. Surely it's time to let the curse go? Do you hear me? She hasn't done any harm to you, damn you!"

Brian hardly knew what he was doing or saying as he burst into the bedroom and scooped Ally from her bed, holding her suspended over his shoulder as he started back down again. Her room had started to fill with smoke but it wasn't as thick here as downstairs in the hall.

"Come on Ally, wake up," he begged her as he carried her downstairs. "Wake up, my darling... please."

He went back the way he'd come. The fire had begun to burst through the door of the study, and the flames shot out, narrowly missing him as he headed for the back door. Another few seconds and the stairs would have been alight. He would not have been able to get to her.

Oh, let her be all right! He couldn't care less about the damned cottage. It could burn to the ground and he wouldn't lift a finger to stop it.

Brian carried Ally away from the house. He could hear a siren in the distance. Someone had called them. He hoped the ambulance was on its way.

"Oh, Ally," he choked. "Wake up!"

As if in answer to his fervent plea, she began to splutter and cough, and then her eyelids flickered.

"Thank God," he muttered. It seemed he'd been just in time.

Only later, when he was sitting beside a much-recovered Ally, holding her hand on the way to the hospital, Brian realized he wouldn't have been in time if the phone call hadn't woken him.

Who had made that call?

Ally sipped her coffee and looked round the comfortable sitting room. Brian was fussing over her like a mother hen with one chick, even though it was a week since the fire and she was feeling fine.

"At least the fire made up my mind for me," she said, smiling at him as he handed her a plate of sandwiches his housekeeper had prepared for them. "Why won't you let me do anything?"

"Because I want you to be fit and well before I ask you something important."

"And what is that?" Ally's heart beat faster as she looked at him and guessed what he wanted to ask. "You don't have to wait, Brian—and the answer is yes."

"You mean it? You're not just feeling grateful because I pulled you out of the fire?"

"No—not even because I feel guilty at burning the cottage down," she said ruefully. "I

must have banked the stove too high. You did warn me not to."

"I should have had a modern one installed." Brian frowned. "I couldn't care less about the cottage—but all your stuff has gone, Ally."

"I can buy a new computer, and the rest doesn't matter."

"What about the book you've been writing?"

"It was Isolde's story, not mine. I would never have published it." She shrugged. "I may never know how it ended and I'm not sure I want to. If Isolde dies in a fire...I don't think I could bear to go through that with her."

"No!" A shudder ran through Brian. "It's a bit too close for comfort..." He looked at her oddly. "Would you think me mad, if I said I thought your Isolde had warned me you were in danger?"

"What do you mean?"

Ally listened as he explained about the phone call.

"I think it may well have been her," Ally agreed. "She woke you so you could save my life...but what does she want of me? I have to do something in return, Brian."

"What can you do?" Brian asked. "You know what Paul said when he came to the hospital."

Ally nodded, thinking back to her brother's visit. Paul had warned her of the dangers of inviting Isolde back into her head. She recalled his words, his warning to beware Isolde's hold on her.

"If she is a witch..." Paul had said. "You must be very careful, Ally. I'm not sure how these things work or if they do—but she might gain possession of your mind...send you insane."

"Is that it—you think I'm going mad? Perhaps I started the fire myself!"

"Don't be foolish, love. I believe you, that's why I am warning you to be careful."

"She wasn't a witch! How could you think it? She was a woman who was cruelly betrayed by everyone who should have cared for her."

"Then how has she managed to cross time and space and take possession of us, Ally? How could she get so far inside our heads if she isn't a witch?"

"I don't know," Ally admitted. "Maybe it isn't Isolde who has been forcing the bridge across the centuries...it might be someone else. Someone who inhabits this earth because his conscience will not let him rest."

"A restless spirit..." Paul's eyes narrowed. "Do you think Robin?"

She nodded. "He might be even more dangerous."

Ally hadn't pressed the argument further then. She'd still felt a little strange, the shock of coming so close to death was very effective in disorientating one's mind.

Recalling her thoughts to the present, she looked at Brian. "I have to try and go back," she said. "I'm not sure how it happened the last time."

"Do you remember the day I found you in a daze?" Brian asked. "You said you thought you'd been back in time."

"I'd been running."

"You'd been running on the ruins of Lynston."

"They're under the road?"

"A part of the abbey that was burned down is certainly still there."

"It was evening," Ally said. "If I went there again..."

"Are you strong enough?" Brian asked doubtfully. He looked as if he regretted having spoken. "Remember what Paul said, about it being dangerous."

"I have to do it-she saved my life. If she hadn't woken you..."

"Yes." He nodded. "I'll be there, close by. If you scream or call to me, I'll come."

Ally smiled at him. "I shall feel better knowing that-but don't interfere. If I'm in a trance, let me come out in my own way. You have to promise me, Brian."

He looked at her in silence for several minutes, then nodded. "I won't bring you out unless you call to me."

Ally got out of the car, turned to wave at Brian and then started to run. It was probably madness to imagine she could simply go back to Isolde's time just by willing it to be so.

Maybe she wasn't running fast enough? She needed to exhaust her body so that her mind took over...that was better, she was getting that odd feeling now. She was panting. She could feel pain in her chest and it was difficult to breathe-was she feeling Isolde's pain? It was all over her, consuming her. She could hardly bear it!

Ally felt a dizziness sweep over her. She was going to faint. She felt so ill. She had never felt so ill...

The pain in her chest was easing. She wasn't outdoors now, she was inside a building. A building made of rough-hewn stone. It was a chapel...part of the Abbey of Lynston. She could see a man kneeling before the altar. He seemed very distressed. She watched as he made the sign of the cross and then stood up. As he turned towards her, she knew him. It was Bishop Walden.

All at once, Ally understood what she must do.

"You have to help her," she said. "You know Isolde is innocent. She is your sister's child."

Bishop Walden looked startled. His fearful gaze travelled round the chapel and she knew that he could hear her but not see her.

"Where are you?" he asked and made the sign of the cross once more. "Show yourself. Are you a demon or an evil spirit?"

"I am your conscience," Ally said. "You will never see me, but I shall haunt you if you do nothing. You must help her or you will never rest easy-even in your grave. You will linger on this earth, never reaching Paradise."

"My conscience, only my conscience," he muttered. "I thought I was doing right by her, but I have brought her to this."

"You must help her!"

"But she has been condemned to burn. No one can save her. The Queen asked for a pardon but it was not granted."

"You must find a way."

Trial by Fire

Ally felt herself being tugged away from him. The Abbey walls were dissolving and she was drifting...

"Ally!" Brian was bending over her as she lay on the roadside. "Ally, are you all right?"

She blinked at him and put a hand to her head.

"Ouch! I've got an awful headache—but yes, I'm all right."

"You've been gone more than an hour," Brian said, looking at her anxiously. "I found you ten minutes ago. I know you asked me not to bring you out of a trance but I was worried." He helped her to her feet, putting his arms about her, holding her close as he stroked her hair. "Paul was right. It is too dangerous. I can't let you do this again."

"No, I shan't," Ally said and smiled at him. "I'm almost sure I found the key. It was her uncle... his conscience wouldn't let him rest. I believe he will do something for her now."

"Let's hope he did," Brian said and kissed her. "I'm taking you home—and then you're going to ring Paul and tell him we're getting married very soon."

"Yes." She touched his face. "Thank you for loving me."

"The pleasure is all mine." He put his arm around her waist, pulled her close to him and began to walk her back to the car.

Isolde

"It is time, witch. Take her to the fire..."

Isolde turned to follow Brother Friedrich from the cell, then stopped as she saw someone else had come in.

"You will give me a moment alone with the Lady Isolde, Brother?"

"She goes to the fire." The priest glared at him. "None can save her. She is a confessed witch and a murderess."

"I have come not to save her body but her soul."

It was a request even Brother Friedrich could not refuse, though he gave way reluctantly. "She refuses to listen...she will not repent."

"She will not confess to you perhaps," Bishop Walden replied. "Go! Leave us alone for a moment and I may yet gain a victory over the evil spirit that inhabits her body."

The priest gave him a dark look but went, leaving them together. Isolde stared at her uncle, waiting for him to speak.

"I am sorry to see you thus, my child."

"I shall not confess. I am innocent."

"I know it. I have not come to force you to a lie, Isolde."

"Then why..." She stared as he took a small black phial from inside his tunic and handed it to her. "The juice of death."

"It is strong," he told her. "Swallow it as soon as they set the torch and you will feel no pain."

"I know." She smiled at him, tears in her eyes. "May God bless you for your mercy,

sir."

"It is *all* I could do, child."

"I know." She lifted her head bravely. "I am not afraid to die, indeed I shall welcome it—but I did fear the pain."

"I feared it for you. Had I done nothing, I would have suffered eternal agony."

"Bless me," she said suddenly. "For I have sinned, but not as they say of me."

"Others have sinned more against you," he said and reaching out made the sign of the cross on her forehead. "Go in peace, Isolde. God loves the innocent—as I have ever loved you."

Isolde watched as he left the room. She lifted the tiny flask to her lips and swallowed all it contained. It might take longer than her uncle knew and they might bind her hands.

"So witch—he has not saved you."

Brother Friedrich was glaring at her, but Isolde merely smiled. His spite could not touch her now. She was free... free of earthly pain.

She stumbled as she walked. The poison had contained other drugs that robbed her of feeling, and she was losing consciousness.

Isolde was aware she had been lifted bodily and was being carried to the stake. She knew they had bound her to it with thick ropes, but she was dead before the first flame touched her bare feet.

She did not see Brother Friedrich's rage and disappointment, when she made no sound as the flames began to lick around her body. Nor did she see Robin Mortimer of Lynston, run out from the crowd and, in an agony of mind and madness, try to snatch away the burning wood until the fire caught at his clothes and consumed him, and he went toppling into the fire. Nor did she hear Ondeline's scream and see her walk blindly away, never more to be seen again outside a nunnery.

Isolde was free and running through the beloved woods of her home.

Ally wandered towards the ruins of the cottage. It was over a year since the fire, and a year since she'd married Brian. And this morning, she'd learned she was to have a child.

"But I thought it was impossible?" she'd said to her doctor, half-fearing he was wrong.

"You were told it might not happen," he said. "But these things sometimes right themselves, my dear."

She wasn't sure what had brought her to the ruins, but as she drew near she saw primroses were growing amongst the debris. She could smell their perfume. No, that was Isolde's special perfume.

She heard a young girl's laughter behind her and felt a breeze on her cheek as something ran past her. Then she heard a youth's voice close by.

'Why do you always smell of flowers, Isolde? I love you. I shall always love you...always...'



About the Author

Anne Ireland has been writing for more than twenty years and has over eighty books published, most in print and some e-books. She lives in England, is happily married and enjoy taking holidays in Spain with her husband.

Available now from Eternal Press

Too Hot To Handle

by Linda Sole

Sylvie is vulnerable. She's been badly hurt so when the dynamic Rafe Wilde comes into her life she tries to stay clear of him. The arrogant man thinks he has the right to walk over others, but Sylvie is having none of him-so why does she go weak at the knees every time he comes near her? When she flies to England from Paris for her uncle's wedding, an encounter with Rafe in the garden makes them both aware of the magnetism between them, but Rafe only wants an affair, and she needs that like a hole in the head.

However, when they meet again in Paris, their affair becomes too hot to handle!

"Hi," Helen said, emerging from the bathroom wearing her towel sarong-style over her lithe body. She was an attractive fair-haired girl dedicated to keeping fit, and it showed. "Anything interesting in the post?"

"A royal command," Sylvie sighed heavily. "Uncle Nick is getting married. I've been summoned to attend."

Helen looked thoughtful. She could see the shadows in Sylvie's eyes. Wide clear eyes with soft gray irises. It was her eyes that made Sylvie Penrith remarkable. She was, her friend thought, beautiful in her own way. Not that she did anything to enhance her looks, quite the opposite! Sylvie's long dark locks were at that moment dragged back off her face secured in a rubber band and her skin scrubbed clean of make up, but nothing could deny the perfect bone structure-or those eyes.

"Will you go?" Helen asked. She understood Sylvie's uncertainty, knew what it had cost her friend to rebuild her life-what it was still costing her.

"It's Uncle Nick," Sylvie said, her smile tinged with bitterness. "Christine must have

persuaded him to have the wedding at Penhallows. She knew that nothing else would make me go back."

"Write and tell your grandmother you can't get time off," Helen suggested. "You could ring Nick, apologize, and fly over to London to meet him. Take him and his fiancée out for a meal."

"If it was anyone else, I would," Sylvie said. "But Uncle Nick is special. If he is getting married at last, Louise must mean a lot to him. He would be very hurt if I wasn't at the wedding. She knew that, of course."

Helen nodded. Christine Penrith was a force to be reckoned with, and she had tried every other means of getting Sylvie to visit her without success. It had been almost a year before Sylvie had even told her grandmother where she was living. She had done so then only because Uncle Nick had insisted.

"He's right, I know that," Sylvie had told Helen after a week of painful heart searching. She had been thinking constantly what to do for the best since the invitation arrived. "I suppose Christine didn't intend to hurt me. She just did what she thought was best for everyone."

"She still ought not to have interfered," Helen replied, her blue eyes narrowed. "You knew the affair wasn't going anywhere. Paul was never going to leave his wife. You would have made the break yourself when you were ready."

"Would I?" Sylvie's mouth dragged with the effort to control her emotions. "I'm not sure I would have had the courage. If Christine hadn't threatened to tell Mary Hutton..."

Once again, she remembered the terrible scene with her grandmother, Sylvie closed her eyes against the rush of grief. It was impossible to shut out the memories: Christine's anger, her own stubborn refusal to accept the truth. Then her desperate flight. It had been raining hard when she left Penhallows that night, the swipe of the wipers across the screen hardly able to cope with the force of the water. Sylvie wasn't entirely sure how she had managed to keep the car on the road.

She had driven the short distance to the next village where her uncle had his medical practice, ringing his front door bell furiously in her blinding pain. She had been drenched through when he opened it at last. Cold and desperate, she had demanded the truth from him, only to collapse into his arms as he confirmed her grandmother's story.

"It's true," Nick told her. "I can't tell you the details, because they are confidential as far as I am concerned, but Mary Hutton is ill. The diagnosis was confirmed a couple of weeks ago. Christine is right; Mary's husband should give her all his support. She is going to need it." Nick looked at Sylvie from eyes much like her own, except that they were framed by gold-rimmed glasses. "Paul is older than you, princess. He isn't a bad man, despite what he's done to you. Mary didn't want to tell him yet, but when he knows..."

Sylvie hadn't needed him to elaborate. She knew that Paul would never leave his wife once he learned of her illness. He had felt terribly guilty at snatching a few kisses from Sylvie, and it was his guilt that had prevented him from taking all she offered. If she were honest, Sylvie knew it was she who had pushed him into declaring his passion

for her. And perhaps that was all it was on his side. Verging on nineteen, Sylvie was thirteen years younger than him, a fresh, lovely woman on the threshold of her sexuality-a woman in the making, and a very sensual one at that. Paul had been married for twelve years to a wife who seemed to have lost her appetite for lovemaking and was always tired. When he understood the cause of that tiredness, Paul's conscience would force him to end his tentative relationship with Sylvie.

It would have been too painful for them both. Sylvie had known she could not force Paul to make the decision. She had to leave, go away, and put as much distance between them as she could. In the end, she had taken up Helen's offer to share the tiny flat in Paris. She had not been back to her family's home since that night.

Trial by Fire

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Sea of Hope

by June Anne Monks

Gabriel Armstrong, a successful business man, owner of a fleet of fishing trawlers came from a harrowing background. Only an elite sporting prowess and the money it generated dredged his mother and brother from a life of poverty and abuse. Retirement from competitive sport has left him with untold wealth and a body to die for.

Cassie Stevens opts out of life in the fast lane when her fiancé is killed. Carrying a lot of emotional baggage from her career as a foreign correspondent, the last thing she needs is to be attracted to Gabe. When he reveals a hatred of journalists she realizes they have no common meeting ground. Despite this, they grow closer, in the process facing up to the obstacles in their lives that stunted their emotional growth.

Is it possible for that closeness to develop into the all consuming love they both unconsciously crave?

Anne Ireland

Available Now From Eternal Press

Paging Dr. Jones

by Ginger Simpson

Catherine McGuire ends up in the hospital, beaten by her husband, and eyes bandaged from her injuries. Her world seems upside down. When the bandages come off, she never expects to stand toe-to-toe with such a startling sight.

She tried, to no avail, to stop the painful chattering of her teeth. Finally, a nurse covered her with a warmed blanket. The chill passed, but now her temples pounded in rhythm to the fearful beat of her heart. She silently prayed. Lord, please let me be okay. I'm so scared. The chorus of shouted directions in the examining room eventually melded into one loud voice, but none of it made sense anyhow. Her eyelashes fluttered as she fought to stay conscious, but the din grew muffled as darkness beckoned to her. The last thing she heard was someone yelling, "Quick, get the code cart!"

