

A KNIGHT TO REMEMBER

BY KARIN TABKE

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# ONE

*Wessex Coast, February 1068*

Mercia trounced along the path to the jagged cliffs overlooking the churning Irish Sea. Frustration dueled with a deep sense of melancholy. Frustration with her father, Lord Cedric, for not only losing the family's fortunes, but also for packing her off to the nuns at Drury Abbey. *"I have not a piece of silver to offer for your hand, Mercia. A bride of God, ye'll be!"*

Angrily she kicked at a stone in her path. "Jesu!" she cursed when she stubbed her toe. She had the decency to make the sign of the cross and ask the Lord for forgiveness, but she also asked for forgiveness for the next time. There was always a next time.

She did not want to spend the rest of her life on her knees, her hands clasped, repeatedly whispering prayers and vows! She was a child of the earth, of the senses. Aye, and a noblewoman without so much as a milk cow to offer a potential groom.

Her gaze spanned the silver-white beach below. Dark chunks of wood wrapped in seaweed and other debris had washed ashore from the recent storm. The harsh winter wind tore at her braid, freeing the

long golden strands from the worn velvet ribbon. Her threadbare cloak did naught to warm her, yet she did not want to bide her day at Wendover. 'Twas her home, but it had lost its luster, though her father tried to hide the fact.

Indeed, he toiled tirelessly to keep up the appearance of prosperity. Prince Rhodri of Dinefwr was on his way to claim his bride, her sister, the beautiful and ethereal Rowena. Would he want her when he learned she came with only the clothes on her back? Rowena's beauty was renowned, and her blood among the finest in all of Saxony. She would make any man a worthy wife. She would beguile the prince for sure. He would not care that she came to him destitute.

Mercia's anger waned. She could not begrudge her sister anything. She prayed for her daily, and hoped that once she was settled into her new home in Wales, she might call upon her only sibling for companionship. But knew she would not. A single woman was an added expense. Nay, she would remain at Drury Abbey, and this summer take her final vows. 'Twas a small victory. When all of England bled she would be safe and go to her bed each night with a full belly.

Aye, when she became the rational girl she knew she must be, even with all of England's woes aside, she would force herself to be content at Drury Abbey. The Abbess Avril was kind, and while Mercia found it hard to pray on her knees for hours on end, she tried. She tried very hard to be a good servant to God. But there was that wildness in her still, the wildness to ride bareback along the coast, to run barefoot through the loamy forests, to dance and laugh and be merry.

'Twould pass, the Abbess told her, it always did. God only tempted her with these pleasures of the flesh; she must not succumb to them, *ever*, for God would be harsh in his penance. 'Twould be her undoing if she were not more obedient.

*Obedient!*

She shook her head as the devil speared the angel in her, and looked over her shoulder for her maid, Agatha. From the moment Mercia told her of her desire to see the beaches, the old woman had complained and had not stopped until finally, unable to listen to her mewling, Mercia set off at a brisk trot. She shrugged at the empty path behind her. She would catch up.

She gave no heed to the churning water below as she angled down the steep trail like one of the shaggy ponies she'd ridden as a girl. Her frustration spurned her forward, and she gave no more thought to Agatha, who no doubt stumbled through the forest. The old woman did not understand that she wanted out of the stuffy old manor house. She'd been aghast at its dilapidated state when she returned home just four days past. Father's fortunes had dwindled considerably since the coming of the Normans. He hoped that by the marriage between the house of Wendover and the great house of Dinefwr, not only would his fortune be restored with such a wealthy son-in-law, but the melding of Saxon and Welsh would fortify them against the encroaching Normans.

Throwing in his lot with Earl Edric had been disastrous for her father. But he had made inroads with the Welsh, and had just this past autumn ridden to Dinefwr and offered his prized possession, his daugh-

ter Rowena, as wife to the prince's only son, Rhodri. His train had been due to arrive several days ago. But with the storm they were detained.

As she reached the cold damp sands of the beach, Mercia continued her frustrated stride, oblivious to everything around her. She wrestled nightly with her destiny to become a bride of God, and not live the life she had dreamed of. One of sunshine, and children, and a husband who cherished her. A fool's dream, to be sure. She wanted to scream, to run as far and as fast from her life as she could. She should just march right into the sea and swim to the wild shores of Ireland. Father would not dare come for her, so scourged was the sea with pirates.

But she could not. Mercia was as wild and untamed as the sea, but she had given her oath to England, to the Abbess and to God, and she would do all in her power to honor it. So intent was she on her march to the churning waters that she did not see the large piece of driftwood. She stumbled over it and landed with a resounding thud in the damp sand. She gasped and spit out gritty pebbles and wiped the stinging salt from her eyes. The wind blew sharply against her, bringing harsh tears to her eyes. As she rolled over and stood to brush herself clean, she stopped and screamed.

'Twas not wood she had stumbled over but a turned skiff dug into the sand, and a man, half-naked, inside it. She turned to run, but curiosity got the better of her. She halted her flight and stared. He posed no threat. His body lay still, as the elements assaulted him. Intrigued by his long muscled body and angled

face, she moved closer. A deep gash marked his chest, another smaller one slashed his shoulder.

She swallowed hard. Only braies and chauses covered his lower body and long legs. Closer still she stepped, until she could see the fine dark hair on his chest. She followed it down to where it tapered to his . . . she blushed hotly. His long black hair was wet and sand-filled, obscuring most of his beard-stubbled face. She bent down and gently pushed it away, and gasped a second time. Despite the new beard growth, he was most handsome. Dark brows slashed above eyes she envisioned to be as deep and penetrating as the sea. High cheekbones framed full lips. She could not help but wonder how warm and soft they might feel upon hers. She blushed hotly again. She had never been kissed, but since she was a young girl and had her heart set on her father's young vassal, Sir Bertram, she had wondered how it would feel to be held by a man, and kissed by one. Rarely did she allow the thought freedom; she was, after all, promised to God.

Tentatively, she pressed a hand to his chest and recoiled at the heat that emanated from him. Fever. His chest rose in slow, shallow heaves. He moaned when she pressed her palm more firmly to him. Aye, his skin, despite the chill of the air, was hot to the touch.

Mercia looked up to the path she had just traversed, then to the cliffs. He would die if left exposed. And if there was one thing that could be said of Lady Mercia of Wendover, it was that she could not bear to see even a sparrow in pain. She looked closer for an indication of who he was. His hair was long in the Saxon mode, but his face, though a dark stubble haunted it, was

clean-shaven, like a Norman's. He bore no sword, no other weapon, no signet ring. Save for his undergarments, he was bare. And yet, despite his disheveledness, instinctively, Mercia knew he was a noble.

Tension nagged at her brow. She chewed her bottom lip, unsure what to do. She could not take him to her father. He would complain of another mouth to feed, and he would forbid a strange man to take refuge inside Wendover. The man moaned, moving slightly in the skiff. Mercia bent down beside him and nearly lost all composure when two eyes the color of smelted silver stared back at her. Something deep inside her moved at that exact moment, all the way to her womb.

His hand touched hers. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a hoarse curse came forth. Pain radiated from his eyes, and something else. A silent plea for her help. He reached out a shaky hand. "Help me," he said hoarsely. The quiet desperation in his voice turned the tide. She could not deny him. Slowly Mercia stood and looked around, unsure what to do. There was an abandoned hut upon the cliff, where she had gone many times as a girl and watched the waves crash against the sand. But there were also the caves.

"Let me find shelter for you," she said. As she moved from him, his fingers wrapped tighter around hers. Another jolt of something so unfamiliar speared through her nether parts. She felt her cheeks flame as hot as his skin. "Please, sir," she begged. He released her hand and closed his eyes. Quickly she ran to the bottom edge of the cliff and through the scrub, found the opening to one of the many caves she had hid in



as a child with her sister. Rowena had not been nearly as intrigued as Mercia, always complaining of ghosts and pirates. But Mercia had found them fascinating. And as the youngest daughter, her poor aging sire had not reined her in as sharply as her sister.

Mercia ran back to the man who lay as still as stone. "Sir, I will need your assist. I cannot drag you nor can I carry you. Can you stand?"

His eyes slowly opened. He swallowed and nodded. In what was a Herculean effort, Mercia managed to drag the wounded man to the cave. She pulled her cloak from her shoulders, laid it upon the sandy floor, and settled him. "A drink," he said in broken English. She could tell from his accent that it was not his native tongue. Though she could not place it, it was vaguely familiar to her.

There was a small shallow pool just beyond the cave, fed by an underground spring. In the summer time she had spent many hours in it, splashing and swimming, fending off the oppressive heat. "I must go for it. But I will return."

Mercy flew from the cave. As she came to the foot of the path, she nearly collided with Agatha, who thankfully had insisted upon bringing a small basket of food and wine. She snatched it from her nurse's hand and was rewarded with a glare. "Stay here, Agatha." Then she hurried back to the man.

He was as she had left him. She dropped to her knees and pulled the wineskin from the basket. Gingerly she lifted his head and dribbled some of the brew between his parted lips. He coughed, grabbing her hands, startling her. But once his convulsions eased,

he released her and drank in small sips. When he had had enough, he pushed the skin away. Carefully she lowered his head to her cloak.

The snapping of a twig caught her attention. She hurried to the opening of the cave to find Agatha peering in. "What are you about, lass?"

For a long moment, Mercia stood silent, debating on sharing her secret with the old nurse. In the end, she decided Agatha would be a good foil to keep her father from nosing around. For Mercia would come here daily to see to the handsome stranger's welfare. Not only because she could not leave him to die, but because when his hands had grasped hers, her entire body warmed at the thrill of his touch. And while she knew she played a dangerous game coming to him, she could not help him if she stayed away. Her gut told her he was not a nefarious man, but one who had suffered grave injuries, and without her assist he would surely die. Had there not already been enough death since William's invasion? Aye, and there would be more, she was sure, but she would do her small part to save even one life.

"Come, Agatha, 'tis a man, he is hurt."

Mercia grasped the old woman's hand and led her into the dim cave. As the man's body emerged, the nurse hissed in a deep breath. "'Tis a Norman? Yer father will have yer head, lass."

"He will not know, *will* he, Agatha?" Mercia threatened. The nurse refused to go near the man. "Aggie, please, his wounds are grave; I would know what poultices and herbs to use."

"Nay, I will not aid you. I will not save a Norman

when they took so many English lives.”

“Bah!” Mercia threw her hands up in the air. “Who is to say for sure he is Norman? He could be Irish or Welsh. I will tend him myself.” She turned on the old woman and narrowed her eyes. “But one word of this to anyone, I’ll send you across the sea and let the pirates have at ye.”

Agatha was old, her sight dimming as well as her hearing, but she had not lost one part of her wits. She set her wrinkled lips, but nodded. “Good. Now stay put while I see what I can do.”

# TWO

Mercia needed a needle and thread. She needed balm and healing herbs. She needed linens and warm furs. The nights were frigid, and if the wounded man was left as he was, he would succumb to the elements. As much as she did not want to leave him, she did. Emptying the contents of the basket, she set the food and wineskin close to his side. But she doubted he would eat or drink. He had fallen into a deep sleep.

She hurried back to the manor, ignoring her sister's calls and her father's grumblings. The late meal was about to commence and she knew there was no way to get out of it. If she claimed a headache, Rowena would know she used it as a ruse when she retired, for Mercia would be gone. And nosy Ro would not rest until she was found! So she prepared to sit through a miserable meal, refusing to make eye contact with her nurse.

"Papa, I worry there has been no word from my betrothed," Rowena said softly.

Mercia glanced at her sister. The beautiful, graceful, alluring Rowena. The lady all men desired, but could not have. "*She is worthy of a prince,*" her father had

crowed, hedging his bets, when, finally, he had negotiated a coup. No sooner had the betrothal contract been signed, he lost all that he promised as her dowry. War was costly. Cedric had given everything first to Harold, then to Earl Edric; 'twas the last campaign that broke him. Now his fields lay untended with no churls, no money to pay freemen. Barely a horse in the stables, and what coin could be spared was spent on fine clothes for Rowena. She must appear to be a prosperous lady when her prince came to claim her as his bride.

Mercia glanced back at her father, who impatiently waved the servants away so that just he and his two daughters sat at the lord's table. "Aye, your betrothed is late, Rowena. Not even an outrider to announce his coming. I fear he has found us out," Lord Cedric complained.

"What is to become of me, then, Father?" Rowena cried. "I will not submit to the nuns!" With her words, Ro sent her sister a silent apologetic look.

Cedric patted his daughter's hand. "Fear not, puss, the prince's father himself signed the contract."

"Bu—but, Prince Rhodri was not informed until recently. Mayhap he is angered."

Cedric shrugged. "Mayhap, but a contract is a contract. Hyclon will not break it. With the Norman king we must ally with the Welsh to protect what is ours."

"But Father," Mercia interrupted. "Prince Rhodri will surely discover your trickery and retract the contract."

Cedric slapped her across the face, his face clouding red with rage. "Do not speak of it! I have forbid-

den you to do so!"

Hot tears sprang to Mercia's eyes. She rubbed the throbbing hot spot on her cheek. Casting her eyes downward, she nodded. "Forgive me, Father."

"I should not have allowed you to return for your sister's marriage. You would ruin everything with your words. Keep silent, child or I'll return you immediately to Drury Abbey."

Mercia raised watery eyes to Rowena, who sat silent but empathetic. She dared not defend her sister. Cedric was wild and unpredictable since his return from the battle of Hereford. He was a man used to having control, but since the Norman duke's coming, he never knew if he would wake up with a garrison of Normans taking up permanent residence or if he'd be hanged for his traitorous deeds. For at every turn he sided against Normandy.

Cedric turned his attention back to the daughter who would resurrect his fortune. "I suspect the prince's train has been delayed with the storm. I pray you seek him out immediately upon his arrival, Rowena, and beguile him. We have not even a day to waste. Get yourself with child, and he will not care you come to him with only your beauty and the clothes on your back."

Mercia gasped, as did Rowena. What their father proposed was that Rowena seduce the prince even before they were to wed! 'Twas preposterous and vile. But it proved just how desperate he was. He looked to his youngest daughter. "I expect, Mercia, that you will assist your sister in every way possible."

"Aye, Father, I will lead the stud directly to the

mare. I will even hold her tail up for him to mount her." Her comment earned her another resounding slap. This time Mercia did not flinch, nor did tears sting her eyes. Defiantly, she glared at her sire.

"You are the devil's spawn, Mercia. God help you."

"Aye, Father, God help us all."

She wanted nothing more than to rise, but could not until her father excused her. When he did a short time later, she ran to the solar she shared with her sister, and angrily threw linens about.

# THREE

'Twas no easy feat sneaking from the manor. Mercia glanced up to the soft glow in the night sky, grateful for the brightness of the moon. Having roamed the land all her life, she could find her way to the caves blindfolded. Though burdened with furs, food and healing herbs, Mercia made swift time to the cave.

'Twas dark, and though she did not think it wise, she had no choice once in the cave to build a meager fire. She could not see in the dark! When the small space glowed in a low orange light she saw the man had moved from her cloak. Carefully she touched his chest and recoiled. It burned hotter than the fire's embers. Quickly she unpacked her store and got to work. She sewed his wounds, though 'twas not easy. In his fever, his body twitched and fidgeted. She was relieved to see his wounds were not as bad as they appeared. Once done with her repairs, Mercia set a small pail of water to warm, and bathed him. As she rinsed his hair, her fingertips discovered a hard lump at the back of his head. 'Twas not open, but she knew such an injury could kill. It wasn't until she got to his belly she paused in her chore. She debated on whether to



strip him of his damp braies and chauses, and though heat filled her cheeks, she knew the clothing needed to dry. Wet and cold as it was, it only added to his discomfort.

Carefully and with substantial effort, she undressed him, doing everything she could not to look at what made him a man. When she pressed her fingertips to his skin, she recoiled. Not from the heat, but from the hard smoothness of his skin. She did not expect it to feel so—so nice. She opened her palm and pressed it to his belly, marveling at the strength beneath her hands. Her fingers splayed wide, liking the feel of the soft downy hair that ran from his chest to his belly and beyond where she dare not look. Inch by inch, she touched his exposed skin, from his cheeks to his toes, but making a wide detour around his hips. Her imagination ran wild with thoughts of him waking and taking her into his strong-muscled arms.

Mercia mentally shook her daydreams from her head. He needed more from her now that her girlish thoughts of romance.

Finally, as she bathed his thighs, she could not help but look at what made him so different from her. She swallowed hard. He was very much a man. His thick member snuggled up against dark downy fur. Instinctively she knew he was a prideful man, and many a maid had seen him and succumbed to his glory. More heat flushed her cheeks. She ignored her attraction to him and finished her cleansing. She spread out the furs and rolled him over onto them. His skin was dry and hot, and she knew only one way to break a fever. She dumped the pail of bath water, poured cool

clean water into it, and slowly began to press the cool clothes to his body. They immediately absorbed his heat. She gave no care to the time spent. It wasn't until his thrashing became uncontrollable and his teeth began to chatter that she knew he was chilled. She threw every pelt she had brought on him and stoked the fire.

His fever raged. He tossed and turned, throwing the pelts from his body. Concern bit deeply at her. "Sir, you must not thrash about so. Stay still and let the pelts warm you."

He stilled at her voice. She pressed her palm to his cheek and softly caressed him. "Let the warmth in, 'twill help you." So long as she spoke softly and touched him, he stilled. Even so, his body contorted with hard shivers. She moved closer to give him some of her own body heat. Yet he continued to shiver. Finally, she lay down next to him and pressed her body against his. Yet it still was not enough.

In a jolting realization, Mercia knew if she pressed her bare skin against his and could keep them wrapped in the furs, she might finally draw the chill from him. She hesitated as embarrassment warmed her body to hot. But she shucked her clothes, even her shoes, grabbed the larger pelts and pressed up against him. The skin-to-skin contact shocked her in its sensuousness. He was hard, yet smooth. She could feel the power of his body.

Mercia closed her eyes and held her breath, imagining what it would feel like to be possessed by such a man. She knew he was no churl but a warrior. He had a noble face and the few words he had spoke, even in

a different language held an air of nobility.

As he twitched, she pressed closer, wrapping her arms around him, caressing his back and his arms, speaking softly in a soothing voice.

His body relaxed. His breaths evened, and she felt an odd sense of contentment. She had always found herself in her sister's shadow, the plain sister, the smart one, the one lads looked at as a playmate, not a life mate. It felt good to be in the arms of a handsome, virile man. A hard jag of fear followed the contentment. 'Twas wrong what she did. She was promised to God, and this man was a stranger. She recoiled, pulling away from him, knowing she was as forbidden to him as he to her.

Strong arms tightened around her. "Nay," he said, his voice thick and husky. Mercia stiffened. His arms tightened around her waist as he pulled her tighter to his fevered body. He moved his head, burying his nose in her thick hair. Her skin flushed hot, and her body tingled in a delightfully distressful way. Her nipples puckered against his hard chest. Warmth filled her womb. She closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the moment. His hands pressed her back, his long thick fingers splayed across her rounded bottom. Mercia's eyes flew open. His manhood had awakened. She felt it thicken against her thigh.

Panic seized her. She pushed against his chest, careful not to touch his wound. He said something in his native tongue and she knew from the pleading in it he begged her to stay. She could not. Thoughts raced through her head of what could happen if she allowed it. In his delirium, he would not remember,

but she would, and she could not return to the abbey impure.

"Please, sir. Release me," she whispered.

His hot lips pressed against her cheek, then to her lips. The shock of the contact immobilized her. She dared not move. "I cannot," he said in thick, accented English. "You have bewitched me."

His fingers pressed into the tender flesh of her bottom; as he did, his hips moved against hers, his hot and swollen manhood moved against her belly. She nearly swooned: the feeling of his power was so tempting that she held her breath.

His lips captured hers once more, and this time, he probed her lips with his tongue. Hot shards of desire speared to the apex between her thighs. She moaned beneath him, the new and exciting sensations intoxicating. His kiss deepened, his fingers explored, her breasts filled and suddenly became so sensitive she yearned for him to touch them with his mouth. She gasped at the thought.

"Please," she pleaded.

He rolled her over so that now he lay fully against her. His silver eyes shone bright with fever, and something else. Desire. "Tell me your name, sweet angel of mercy. Tell me your name and I will release you."

"Rowena," she blurted.

"Rowena," he softly said, and it sounded like a caress. Her body stilled. The way he said it made her feel as if she were the only woman in the world, Eve to his Adam. A sudden desire to be so cherished by this man and this man only nearly overcame her. 'Twas foolishness. Why she did not tell him her real name, she did

not know. But 'twas better this way. Once his fever broke, she would leave him and never return.

"Your name, sir?" she quietly queried. She would know her dream lover's name and hold it dear to her heart for the rest of her life. For never again would she feel so cherished by such a man.

His dark brows knitted in confusion. His struggle to recall his name was apparent on his face. Slowly he shook his head. "I cannot remember."

Tenderly she touched the bump on the back of his head. He winced. "'Tis common with such an injury. The fever does not help. Once you are well, you will remember."

He sank back into the furs, bringing her with him. Mercia held her breath, unsure what she should do. Her body warmth drew the chill from his. Yet she could not lie naked with a strange man who was fully aroused!

She opened her mouth to plead her case, when his arms loosened. She leaned up on an elbow, her full breasts dragging across his hard chest. She bit back a moan, embarrassed by the heat that overcame her. She dared to look at him. His eyes were closed, and the tension gone from his face. His deep, even breaths filled the small space. Finally, he slept.

Mercia slid from him, and as she did a deep sense of longing filled her. If she could make her own choices she would slide back beneath the furs and lie with him until he awoke, then allow nature to take its course. Regretfully, she hurried from the cave just as the gray fingers of dawn pushed back the night.

As she slipped into her chamber, she stopped short

to meet Rowena's suspicious eyes. "Where have you been all night, sister?" she demanded.

Mercia shrugged and walked casually into the solar. "I have spent the night on my knees in the chapel, praying your prince will come. I am weary now and seek some rest."

# FOUR

Mercia woke to the feel of strong, rough hands on her breasts. The luxurious feel of his callused thumbs as they brushed against her sensitive nipples elicited a soft moan. Warm breath above her cheeks and the hard smooth heat of a man's chest against her soft skin were enough to make her cry out.

"Mercy!"

Mercia woke with a start to find Rowena's suspicious gaze hard upon her.

Sheepishly she said, "Ro, I— Did I sleep through the morning meal?" She moved to slide from the bed. Rowena grabbed her arm.

"Do you have a lover, sister?"

Hot guilt washed in waves through her. Never had she lied to her sister. She took a deep breath. There was a first time for everything. Mercia nodded. Rowena gasped. She grasped both of Mercy's hands. "Tell me! Tell me all!"

Mercia swallowed again. She cast a glance around the empty room. Conspiratorially she whispered, "There is a boy, nay, a man, at Drury Abbey, the local lord's squire, Sir Ashton. He—" Mercia batted her eyelashes and feigned the coquette. "He, is most

handsome, and before father's outrider came to fetch me, we shared a kiss."

Rowena gasped and pulled Mercia to her. "Was it magical?"

Mercia swallowed again, suddenly feeling terrible for lying to her sister. But if she denied what Rowena suspected, hiding the truth would be more difficult. Give her what she wanted and she would be satisfied. She hoped.

Mercia managed to blush and nodded her head. "'Twill not happen again. I take my final vows before the harvest."

Rowena's beautiful face morphed into sadness. "Mercy, I am so sorry father has so mismanaged your life. I would take you with me to Dinefwr if I could. But I do not know the disposition of my husband-to-be. He might be ogrely and resentful."

Mercia slid her hands from her sister's and stood. "Do not worry about me, Ro. I will be content at the abbey." Another lie. They came too easy to one pledged to God. She quickly bathed and dressed and set about her chores. All the while, the scent of the man she had left just that morn clung to her senses, and she could barely keep herself from flying back to his arms. But she could not. She found Rowena's eyes on her throughout the day, and her father, sullen as he was, paced a long furrow in front of the manor doors, awaiting for word of the prince's coming.

Finally, just as the sun began its daily decent into the churning sea, a half score of men on horseback approached the manor. Lord Cedric set out to meet them, Mercia following close behind. Rowena stood



nervously at the threshold.

She recognized the boar standard, the boar of Dinefwr. The prince had finally come? Mercia looked past the tired contingent, but none of them sat regally upon their steed as a prince would. Nay, their faces were grave and haggard.

"Lord Cedric of Wendover?" the standard-bearer demanded.

"Aye," her father said, stepping forward. "I am he."

"I am Morgan of Dinefwr, steward to milord Prince Rhodri. Our flotilla met with pirates upon the sea and we have been separated from the prince. Has he preceded us?"

Mercia caught a gasp, her father cursed. "Nay! There has been no sign of him!"

Anger at her father seethed. He was not worried over the prince's welfare, but for his own loss should the prince have met foul play.

Morgan's face blanched white. He dismounted and handed the reins to his squire. "We caught the brunt of it. Pray his ship was just blown off course from the storm. My lord is healthy and strong. He will surface. We will await him here."

Her father scowled, no doubt counting in his head how much it would cost to feed the train of ten hungry men. He bowed and said, "Of course, Sir Morgan, I would have it no other way. In the morn, we will send out a search party for the prince."

Mercia hurried to give her sister the news. Rowena nearly fainted. Mercia took her to their chamber and settled her, as she too worried. With no husband, Ro

would suffer the same fate as Mercia.

It was not until much later, when the manor had quieted, that Mercia was able to slip from her chamber and back to the cave. She was relieved to see the man still there. He lay still beneath the heavy mound of furs, his breaths even, and she could see he had not disturbed the food she had left behind.

She set the fresh stores she had managed to steal beside the wineskin. He shot up from his slumber and grabbed her. She screamed when he covered her with his large body. "Nay!" she cried. His silver eyes looked wildly about, but when he settled them upon her, they cleared.

"'Tis I, sir, Rowena, come to see to your health."

He stared hard at her, and confusion reigned supreme in his gaze. "Rowena?" he hoarsely said.

Slowly she pried his fingers from her arms and nodded. "Aye, I pulled you from the surf and have nursed you these two days past."

Realization dawned, and with it, he smiled slowly. "Aye, I remember now, you pressed your body to mine to draw the fever." He pulled her closer. "It still rages."

Heat flashed across her skin as if he had caressed her. "Sir, 'twas a last resort."

Regretfully, he released her and lay back against the furs. They had come down to rest just below his belly. Despite his illness and wounds, he fetched a most manly sight. Embarrassed by her thoughts, Mercia moved away. "You must eat if you are to gain your strength."

"I have a great hunger, Rowena, but 'tis not for

food."

She turned her back to him, flustered, and glad for the compliment. "If you cannot control that hunger, I will not return to see to your needs."

"I am a man of honor. I give you my word I will not press you." He leaned up on one elbow and looked at her, his silver eyes brilliant in the low firelight. "But let it be said, I would give you every possession I own to have you naked and willing beneath these furs."

Mercia gasped in shock. "You are too bold, sir!"

"Nay, I am but honest."

She handed him a chunk of salted meat and a piece of crusty bread. "Here. Eat while I tend your wounds." He smiled and slowly took the food from her hands, his long fingers brushing her skin stoking her to hot. She shivered at the contact, wondering what was wrong with her. She had never felt such giddiness when Sir Bertram favored her with a smile or took her hand to assist her. Why this stranger? She slowly withdrew her hand.

"Sir, last night when I asked you your name you could not remember. Do you now?"

He scowled and bit off a chunk of bread and slowly chewed. "Nay." He swallowed and looked directly at her. "Where am I?"

"Wendover on the Wessex Coast. I found you upon the beach." She touched a fingertip to the wound on his chest. "'Tis a sword wound."

He scowled deeper as he tried to recall who he was and why he had battled.

"English is not your native tongue," she said. "Are you perhaps Irish? Or Welsh?"

He shook his head, but when he spoke, his words were foreign. Then he said in English, "I speak Welsh and Irish with equal ease."

A sudden terrible thought occurred to Mercia. What if he were one of the pirates who had attacked the prince's flotilla? His wounds were recent, and admittedly, he spoke Irish with ease. His knowledge of Welsh would make sense as well. Many pirates spoke the language of those they preyed upon. She moved back from him, suddenly afraid.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. He dropped his food and grabbed her by the wrists, jerking her to his chest. "Nay!" she cried out. In one swift move, he was upon her, pressing her back into the soft furs. His long naked body infused her skin with his heat. His head dipped to her lips. Softly he said, "You do me grave dishonor, Lady Rowena. I may be a pirate, but I will not harm the woman who drew me from the sea. I owe you my life."

Stark relief flooded her body. "Sir, I—"

He shook his head, his warm breath caressing her cheeks. Wild images of their naked bodies tangled and glistening as they lustily mated flashed before her eyes. She gasped, and arched into him. He growled low, and lowered his face into her hair, which she had left unfettered. "I may be wounded, my sweet, but I am still a man with a lusty appetite for a woman. Especially one such as yourself. Do not tempt further or I may play pirate and ravish you."

"I have never been ravished," she softly admitted.

Her words shocked him, she could see. Not that she had not been ravished but that she said it as if it

were a bad thing. He smiled, showing strong white teeth. His eyes sparkled mischievously. "I can remedy that, sweet Rowena."

Instead of demanding he release her, Mercia lay still and silent, allowing her imagination to run away like a startled stag who sensed hunters. She wanted to know how it felt. She wanted the experience, for when she returned to the Abbey and took her final vows, she would never, not even for her freedom, break her oath to God.

"I—I give you permission to kiss me," she stuttered. His eyes opened wider before they narrowed.

"Do you play with a dying man's heart?"

She slapped him playfully and giggled. "You are not at death's door. You have but two cuts and a bump on the head. In another day or two you will be fit to swim to Ireland."

His lips lowered to hers. She could feel the hard thump of her heart in her throat. Suddenly her lips were dry. She licked them. He growled low. "Are you as innocent as you appear?"

She nodded, never wavering from his gaze. She felt him swell against her belly, and knew she played with fire. She did not care if she was burned. "Kiss me," she softly demanded.

And he did. A slow, deep, hot kiss that curled her toes and took her breath away. His long fingers dug deep into her hair, bringing her closer to him, so close she felt as if they were a part of each other. So close she could feel the solid thud of his heart against her chest. So close she had but to lift her skirt and—she tore her lips from his, her breath caught in her throat,

she could not draw a normal breath. She pushed away from him and sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees.

He lay there in all his naked glory, not bothering to cover his erection. It was all she could do not to stare. More heat infused her skin. She crab-walked backwards, then stood.

"Sir, it appears you are most capable of fending for yourself. I must go. I will not return." She flew from the cave, then into the darkness, and wanted with every part of her body to return. When he called her name, she stopped and turned. He stood naked at the cave's entrance, his arm extended, his palm up.

"Return to me, Rowena."

She shook her head and ran as fast as her legs would carry her back to the safety of Wendover.

# FIVE

She tossed and turned, no position comfortable. Too many times to count, she moved to leave the bed, her desire to return to the stranger so insistent she nearly screamed her frustration. But she did not go to him. Not that night, nor the next morning, nor the next afternoon. But once the sun sank and the moon rose, like a Siren's call, in her dreams he called to her. And she went to him.

She went to him, she told herself, because the food she had left for him had surely run out. She went to him, she told herself, because though he was out of the woods as far as his fever and wounds were concerned, he was not strong enough to hunt, or even defend himself. She went to him, she told herself, to help him return to where he had come from. She went to him, she told herself, because if she did not, he would perish.

The cave was empty. Only the low glow of embers illuminated the space. But she did not need the meager light to tell her he was gone. A deep aching void opened up in her gut, paining her worse than any bellyache or any heartache she had ever endured. It pained her more than the day her father told her she

would be going to the abbey where she would spend the rest of her life a virgin bride of God.

Anger came swiftly. Did she mean nothing to him? She had saved his life! Did not that account for something? Of course it didn't, she told herself. She was plain and boring, and he a virile, handsome man women fawned over. What interest did a man such as he have in a girl such as she?

She moved into the cave and sank down onto the furs, bringing them to her nose. She inhaled deeply. They smelled of him. Clean, and potent, like the sea. Hot tears stung her eyes. She was a silly girl with foolish dreams of love. Foolish dreams she had no right dreaming. She flung the furs from her and angrily stood. Humiliation wrangled with her anger. She told herself it didn't matter. It could *not* matter. He was a stranger. She was a noblewoman, of a noble albeit impoverished house. Women such as she did not cavort with pirates. Indeed, with any man unless she were properly wed.

Still, the tears stung. And yet, despite it all, she yearned for him as she had never yearned for anything in her life, including freedom. He *was* freedom. He could give her a taste of what it meant to be truly desired. It would be enough to see her through to the end of her days.

A small sound behind her startled her. She whirled around and nearly cried out. 'Twas he. Standing in the cave's entrance, clad only in his braies, a wild hare hanging limply in his hands. His eyes burned hotly into hers.

"You came back," she whispered.



"Did you think I would leave you?" He dropped the rabbit and strode purposely toward her. Mercia caught her breath. Instantly she was in his arms. His lips captured hers in a hard, unyielding kiss. His arms wrapped around her, pressing her softness against his hardness. In that instant she let go. Of everything.

Digging her fingers into his hair, she pulled his mouth to hers, unable to get enough of him. Like a blind man wanting to memorize every part of her, his hands were everywhere. Her cheeks, her neck, her shoulders, her back to her bottom, then up her belly to her breasts. His hot touch left a fiery wake, awakening her dark, dormant sensuality. He pulled her down to the furs, sinking with her onto the softness. Mercia moaned as his lips and tongue plundered hers, his hands cupped and caressed her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples to stiffness. Wild abandon filled her, coiling tightly inside, wanting to be released. The power of his touch terrified her as much as it aroused her in a way she never thought possible. She arched against his lips as he sucked a nipple through the thick cloth of her chemise. Moaning, she closed her eyes, reveling in his touch. In one swift motion he pulled her clothing from her and untied his braies. When next he touched her they were as naked as Adam and Eve. He swept a large hand down her belly and pressed his palm to her warm mons. "Rowena," he breathed. "You are every man's dream."

Her eyes flew open. His eyes had darkened to black, but they burned hot with passion. When he said her sister's name, guilt washed over her. She wanted to hear *her* name roll from his lips in such sweet pas-

sion. She bit her lip, almost telling him the truth. But she did not want to spoil the moment. And besides, 'twould not matter in the morn. She could not come back here. For if she did she would never leave.

"And you, milord, are every girl's dream."

He smiled that sensual smile that melted her heart, and lowered his lips to her breast. She gasped as his lips touched the swell, his tongue was hot, his teeth nibbled. His hand pressed more firmly between her thighs. Her entire body quaked in tension, the feel of his hands and lips against her body so sublime she thought she would faint from the pleasure of it. He kissed her nipple. Mercia gasped. The sensation nearly undid her.

But what made her swoon was the delicious sensation of utter sublimity as he slid a long, thick finger along her slick nether lips, then gently rubbed against the hard, hooded nub hidden there. "Dear Lord," she gasped. Her body thrummed with awareness. When he touched her there, it was as if he caressed her entire body. Wave after wave of desire burned through her. He suckled her breast, while his finger explored deeper into her. Such an intimate touch. So close they were, so delirious was she. Her thighs tightened around his hand. She held her breath, unsure if she could endure more. Because instinctively she knew there was more. And more would beget more.

"I will be gentle, Rowena, relax," he softly said against her breast. She wanted to, desperately, but knew if she allowed him further trespass there would be no returning. His lips traveled from her breast to her shoulder, then to the bend in her neck. He laved

his teeth along her vital vein up to her jaw. His hand replaced his lips on her breast as his lips once again claimed hers.

In slow, savoring kisses he drew her with him. His hand on her mons did not push, nor did it retreat; instead he kept a steady pressure. His kisses drowned any fleeting reservations; slowly, she relaxed against him and parted her thighs.

When his finger slid gently into her, her hot wetness allowing him easy entry, she moaned. He stiffened against her and pressed his forehead to hers. "Jesu, you are tight, Rowena. I fear I will hurt you."

She did not understand what he meant. She only understood she did not want him to stop what he was doing. "You could never hurt me," she whispered, pressing her hips against his hand.

He groaned and slid his finger deeper into her. She caught her breath, the feeling so incredibly delicious she wished she could remain suspended like this for all time. In a slow rhythm, he moved his finger in and out of her, his thumb rubbing the wetness around the hardened nub in a slick cadence that set her poised to shoot to the stars. Her breath came shallow, as his fingers moved back and forth, the rhythm quickening. He kissed her long and deep. His body warmed and grew slick with sweat. When he took a nipple into his mouth and lightly bit her, she screamed as a harsh wave of something she had never knew existed crashed hard inside her body, as wave after wave of intense pleasure overcame her.

Panic overtook her. She was shocked, and awed, and terrified. What had he done to her body? Limp

as a rag, she hung in his arms, her body as slick with sweat as his. He smiled down at her in silent wonder. She licked her dry lips. "What did you do to me?" she breathlessly asked.

His deep eyes were serious, not what she expected. A frown worried his brow. "Did I disappoint you?" she asked, suddenly feeling inadequate.

For a long time he stared at her, so long she became increasingly uncomfortable. She squirmed beneath him. "Please, do not look at me so."

He shook his head and smiled, his bright teeth glowed in the low fire. He smoothed the hair back from her face. She could smell her sex on his hand. Embarrassment flared hot.

"Never apologize to me for what just happened. 'Twas beautiful, Rowena. You looked as if I gave you the greatest gift a man could give a woman."

More heat washed across her cheeks. "I want more," she boldly demanded.

His smile nearly split his face in two. He moved his hips against her side. He was full, hard, and warm. She reached out and touched him. When he hissed in a sharp breath, she recoiled. "Did I hurt you?"

He laughed low and took her hand in his, then guided it back to his cock. "Aye, I ache because of you. And only you can relieve the hurt."

In silent fascination, she wrapped her fingers around the girth of him. He was warm, hard, and surprisingly smooth. She rubbed her thumb over the soft fleshy tip to find it slick. She moved to look. He hissed in another sharp breath. Innocently she looked up at him. "It looks painful, milord. How can I make it go

away?"

He rolled over onto her. "Make love to me, Ro. Then and only then will the ache subside."

She dug her fingers into his long hair, pulled his lips to hers, and parted her thighs, offering herself up to him. Gently he probed, the wide head of him pushing easily into her slick folds. Mercy held her breath as he pushed farther in, then gasped as a sharp pain shot through her. He caught her cry in his kiss, but continued his slow gentle entry. For a tense moment, Mercy lay stiff beneath him, unsure of what other pain would follow. "'Twill not hurt again," he promised. "Relax, love, relax and give me all of you."

Mercia loosened her thighs, then the muscles in her back. He pressed deeper into her until he was as deep as he could go. He did not move for several long moments, allowing her body to become accustomed to him. She felt the pulse of his heart beat inside her, and found a true glory in it. Every part of her thrummed with desire, white-hot passion. Every part of her wanted more of what he had given her. Every part of her never wanted him to release her.

Wrapping her arms tighter around his neck, she moved against him. When he pulled slowly away from her, she cried out. When he thrust into her, she screamed. He covered her noise with his lips, and with his tongue, he mimicked the slow, sensual slide of his hips against hers. He took her on a wild ride, the thunder and excitement of their bodies oblivious to only themselves and the heat they generated. Sparks flew like embers from the Beltane fires. Wild and heady and headlong into a furious frenzy of desire.

Never had she imagined the joining of a man and woman could be so glorious. So addictive, so deliciously pure in its glory as she felt with this stranger, a man she would forever be bound to by this one act alone.

In one cataclysmic moment, her body shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. The magnitude of her release sent her plunging from the heavens into the stars. Mercy gasped, gulping for air, her lungs expanding, needing it to survive. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, fearful if she let go she would float away. All around her she felt the stranger's body quicken, then tighten just as hers had, and then he too shattered.

"Rowena!" he called, his voice husky in passion. He gathered her to him, as his body spasmed and jerked against hers. As they both floated back to the earth, their slick heat cooled, their heavy breaths slowed, their bodies still joined remained motionless, as each of them savored what had just occurred.

\* \* \*

He did not know his name, nor his heritage, nor did he know if he possessed a wife or a title, but what he did know was that no matter how many women he had had in his lifetime, never had he been taken to such heights as he had gone to with the lovely innocent Rowena. He rolled onto his back, bringing her with him. She was just a mite but she had the heart of a lioness. Her body was smooth, supple and sensuous. And he had been her first. He wanted with all his heart to be her one and only for the rest of their time on earth. He frowned, the feelings foreign. He knew

instinctively he was not a man to lose himself over a woman. He knew in his heart he had closed a door, but she had kicked it wide open. His arms tightened around her.

A small squeak erupted from her. Instantly he loosened his hold. He looked down at her parted lips and her flushed cheeks, still damp from their love-making. His cock tingled inside her. He was young and virile. He wanted her again. Now. He bent down and kissed her nose. Then her long thick eyelashes that shaded eyes the color of the Irish Sea. Her long, honey-colored hair hung in thick damp chunks between them. He smoothed it away to look at her. He smiled when her nipples puckered. He glanced up at her face to find her wondrous gaze upon him. His cock thickened.

"Do not look at me so, my sweet, or you will find yourself at my mercy."

She smiled sheepishly. "I do not mind."

Her words fueled his hunger for her. She gasped as he filled inside her. His lips dropped to hers; hungrily he kissed her, wanting all of her, here, now. Forever. He took her again, and then once more before exhaustion claimed them both.

The baying of a hound broke the early morning silence. He sat up with a start, instinctively reaching for his sword that was not there. Rowena stood, grabbing her worn clothing to her breast. "I must go!" she cried, panicked. Moving to the opening of the cave, he watched as a search party of sorts scoured the beaches. He frowned. The boar standard of one of the horsemen tugged at his memory. His head ached in a sud-

den wash of pain. Absently, he rubbed the back of his head. The bump, though reduced, still pained him.

"I must go," Rowena said softly. She looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes. "I cannot return." She stood up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. His arms encircled her, drawing her close.

"Nay," he whispered against his lips. "I cannot let you go when I have just found you."

She pulled from his embrace. "We cannot continue. Please do not follow me." She moved past him, but he grabbed her to his chest. Heat filled his body.

"You are mine, Rowena!" he shouted, louder than he intended. "I will not release you!"

His voice carried a sharp authority that came as natural to him as his dark hair.

She gasped at the ferocity of his outburst, but shook her head. "Nay, I am not." She pressed her lips to his one last time. As she drew away from him she softly said, "We can never be. I am promised to another." Then she turned and ran from the cave. He ran after her, but stopped short when the men on horseback approached her.

Were they a threat to him? *Was* he a pirate? Would she reveal his hiding place? He moved back into the shelter of the cave, but watched. She shook her head and pointed down the beach. The group of men took off at a gallop. She turned and looked up at him. For one long moment, he thought she would come back to him. He moved outside the cave. Her body jerked when she saw him.

"Rowena!" he called and ran toward her. She turned from him and ran. And in that instant of clar-



ity he remembered. Dinefwr, sailing for Wendover to claim his bride. The pirate attack, then the storm that destroyed them all. He was Rhodri of Dinefwr! A prince! And she, Lady Rowena, was his betrothed! Elation filled him.

His men! They searched for him! He whooped and threw sand up into the air. He hurried back into the cave and donned the meager clothing she had brought for him. With hope and love flying high in his heart, Rhodri took off down the beach to find his men. Anticipation burned in his belly, creating a nervousness he had never experienced. This night would find him wed and abed with his secret angel.

# SIX

“Mercia! Where have ye been?” Lord Cedric demanded, as she hurried up the dirt path to the manor. He cuffed her harshly when she passed him without a word. He yanked her hair so hard her feet flew from beneath her. His red face puffed in fury. “Where have ye been, wench?”

She could only shake her head as she came to her feet. She could not tell him. He would see her nailed to the manor doors. Knowing the one thing her father could not abide was tears, she broke down and flung herself into his arms. He immediately recoiled. “Off me, girl!” He turned to Agatha, who stood nearby wringing her hands. “Take her, old woman, and see her to bed. Do not let her out of yer sight!”

Mercia’s heart broke into a million tiny pieces. The pain was so great she did not know if she could survive it. Never had she thought such emotions hid inside her. Never had she thought she could love so deeply. Never had she dreamed of a man such as the dark stranger she had run from.

Agatha steered her into her chamber. Mercia refused to allow herself to be undressed. His scent clung to her clothes, to her hair, to her skin. She would never

bathe again. She wanted always to be surrounded by him. Her tears for her father had been a ruse, but now they flowed freely, hot and thick, unending. Rowena's weak attempts to soothe her sister went unwarranted. Agatha's insistence she eat was ignored. As the sun rose, Mercia's heart sunk into the deepest, darkest pit of despair.

Desperately she wanted to leave this place and fly into his arms. Desperately she wanted to feel his hard strength. Desperately, with every part of her being, she wanted to spend the rest of her days with him in that little cave where no one or nothing would disturb them. But she could not. She was promised to the church. And 'twas there she would die!

\* \* \*

"Mercia!" Rowena squealed. "He's here! He's here! My prince has come!"

Mercia rolled away from her sister. She did not care if the king of England made an appearance. She would not move from her bed. Not for her sister, not for anyone.

Rowena grabbed her hand and pulled her from the bed. "Ready yourself! Father insists we greet him together."

Mercia rolled over and looked at her sister's exuberant face. It was lit up in true happiness. Mercy scowled. Did Rowena not know that her heart had broken into tiny, unfixable shards and she cared not one whit what happened to anyone?

"Please, Mercy. I beg you. Ready yourself in your finest dress. He must think we are prosperous."

Mercia could see Rowena had donned her finest

gown, save for the one she would marry in. "Come, puss," Agatha softly encouraged. "Let me ready you."

Trancelike, Mercia allowed them to bathe and dress her. Rowena's excitement only deepened Mercia's despair.

As they were escorted down the rickety stairway to the open hall, Mercia nearly fainted. The contingent of the prince's men stood proudly, surrounding the stranger in the cave. He had washed and his handsome face was clean shaven. He wore splendid clothing, and stood regally looking up at her. When their eyes met and locked, he smiled. *Nay!* This could not be her sister's betrothed! *Nay!*

She stumbled. Her father jerked her harshly to him, keeping a firm hand on her arm. Rowena was on the other side of him, but the prince had eyes only for Mercia.

Every other eye in the hall was on Rowena, who beamed like the moon. Prince Rhodri cut a most dashing figure in his velvet and fur clothing.

Mercia held her breath as they descended the last step. They bowed. Lord Cedric cleared his throat, and made the introductions. "Prince Rhodri of Dinefwr, allow me to present my daughter, Lady Rowena."

The prince did not once break his gaze with Mercia. She could not have looked away if she tried. Visions of them locked in a passionate embrace as he moved inside her clouded her vision. Her cheeks flamed hot.

The prince stepped toward her and extended his hand. When Rowena bowed deeper and her father placed Rowena's hand in the prince's, Mercia wanted

to disappear into thin air. The prince halted.

"Nay," he said, turning to Mercia. "*She* is Lady Rowena."

"Indeed, my lord, she is not. 'Tis Mercia, my younger daughter, who is promised to God." Cedric moved in front of her, obscuring the prince's view, and soundly placed Rowena's hand in his. "My daughter, Lady Rowena."

Prince Rhodri stiffened, refusing to take Rowena's hand. His dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What subterfuge is about?" he demanded. Mercia shrunk farther back as all eyes turned on her.

Lord Cedric looked as if he were about to combust. Tears filled Rowena's eyes as shock and sudden realization dawned. Mercia shook her head. "I—I did not know, Ro. I'm so sorry." She turned then and fled the hall, heedless of the furious calls for her to return.

She ran as fast and as far as she could. Blindly. She had no idea where she could go or where she would end up. She could not return to her home, and now as a soiled bride of God, she could not return to the abbey. Shame filled her. She had disgraced her family and her God. But despite all that, Mercia's deepest pain was that of knowing her sister would marry the man she herself loved.

She found herself standing at the entrance to the small cave. The place where she had come alive. The place she felt if she went into she would die. The memories haunted her, they would come to fruition if she stepped inside. Yet, knowing that, she moved into the cave.

The scent of their lovemaking assailed her senses.

She could see him lying here, naked, full of desire for her. The furs she had brought lay scattered about as they had left them this morn. The fire was cold, the wineskin empty. Sucked dry like her heart. Mercia sank into the soft pelts, pulling them around her as his scent filled her senses. She lay down and let the tears flow. She could do naught but mourn what she dreamed of and what surely could never be.

\* \* \*

"I demand to know what trespass you have committed against my daughter!" Lord Cedric shouted.

Rhodri stood silent, too stunned to move. The realization that the woman he had dreamed of these past few days, the one who saved his life, nursed him back to health and who had given herself freely to him, was lost to him forever, tore his guts up. He had never been a man to pine for a woman. Indeed, he had made a vow long ago never to surrender his heart. His father loved a ghost, and his mother, though she had given all to Hyclon, was miserable because he loved another. Rhodri had vowed never to tread into dangerous waters, yet here he stood in a ramshackle manor, promised to a lady he did not want. How could he desire her when he longed for her sister? She was all that he wanted in a woman. Now, he understood perfectly how his sire felt. If he wed the fair Rowena, she would suffer the same fate as his mother. A lonely miserable existence, knowing her husband loved another.

He looked candidly at Lady Rowena. She was a beauty, to be sure. Serene, and composed despite what had transpired. She met his gaze, willing by her stance to accept him still. He realized there were some

things love could not conquer. A betrothal contract. Anger shredded his innards. He was a man of honor. He would wed Lady Rowena, for he was bound to her by a contract. Yet 'twas her sister he wanted, and would take in her stead if she but allowed it.

Rhodri turned his attention to the blubbering Lord Cedric of Wendover. He noticed for the first time that the man's clothes were skillfully patched. He looked beyond him to the manor, and saw that beneath the layers of fresh rushes and cleaned walls it was in a state of disrepair. When they had ridden up from the beach they had seen the fields lay fallow, no churls to tend them. The stable had been bare of livestock. Morgan voiced his suspicions on the ride to the manor. Rhodri had ignored them, thinking he would have the woman he wanted, and would take her if she came to him with nary a piece of silver.

"Lord Cedric, may I speak with you in private?"

Cedric looked to his daughter, then to Rhodri. "Of course."

As the hall cleared and only the two men stood face-to-face, Cedric said, "I insist you wed Rowena immediately to still the waging tongues. She is as pure as the new morn. Not a careless wench like her sister."

It took a great effort for Rhodri not to strike the insufferable lord. "Do not speak of Lady Mercia so. She saved my life. I will not have her slandered in her own house by her sire."

Cedric's eyes popped from his head. "Eh? What say you? How?"

Rhodri swept past him, waving his question off. "Show me the chest of silver promised me, and the

charters for Lady Rowena's dower lands."

Cedric sputtered. "Why, 'tis—'tis an insult to ask for such things before the vows are sealed!"

Rhodri turned on the stammering lord. "'Tis customary in Dinefwr. Show me."

"I—I cannot. 'Tis hidden at Drury Abbey. 'Twill take a day to retrieve it."

"I am a patient man, milord. I will not honor the betrothal until I have seen with my own eyes all that was promised to Dinefwr."

Cedric panicked. "You have deflowered Mercia! She was to say her final vows in three months' time! The nuns will not take her now! Rowena's silver will be demanded for her virgin's blood! I cannot wed the wench as she is now. You owe me for that!"

Rhodri grabbed the greedy lord by his tunic. "I owe you nothing, milord. Not when you are in breach of our contract."

He pushed Cedric from him. "Why did you not find a suitable groom for Lady Mercia?"

Cedric pursed his lips. Rhodri nodded. "Aye, it is apparent the house of Wendover has fallen on hard times. You could not afford another dowry, so you packed her off to the nuns. Did you think to trick me into marriage, sir? "

"Nay! Mercia heard the call of God! She begged to go! Rowena is the prized daughter. In her veins flows the bluest blood in all of Saxony! Her beauty alone is worthy of a prince such as yourself!"

Rhodri shook his head and pushed past Cedric. "On the morrow we ride to Drury Abbey!"



# SEVEN

Mercia woke to darkness. The distant sound of the waves as they crashed against the beach drowned out her sadness. For long hours she lay there, unable to think, only to feel the pain in her chest. On every turn Rhodri's scent taunted her. On every turn, she prayed with all her heart she would open her eyes and he would appear.

She closed her eyes and lay still, wondering if he had already said the vows to her sister, and if now as man and wife he touched Rowena as he had touched her. Jealousy flared. She could not help it. That Rowena would have him through eternity was more than Mercy could bear. She opened her eyes and sat up. A scream tore from her lips. A shadowed figure stood at the entrance to the cave.

He raised the small torch in his hand. She nearly died of happiness.

"Rhodri," she breathed.

His handsome face was drawn in a dark scowl. But the brightness in his silvery eyes belied his wrath. He stepped into the cave. Slowly she stood.

"Why did you lie to me about who you were?"

She cast her eyes to the ground, then looked up at

him, ashamed to admit the truth. "I have dreamed of being my sister, of being the beautiful one, the one all men longed for, of having a man such as yourself desire me."

He dropped the torch to the pile of cold embers, and the fire flared. Rhodri reached out a hand and smoothed his fingertips along her cheek, then into her hair. He cupped the back of her head and he drew her to him. "You sell yourself short, Mercia. You are more of a woman."

Mercia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled. A mighty battle raged inside her. She wanted to melt into his arms and beg him to run away with her, but what little honor she had left she stood on. She steeled herself. "Please, milord, do not dishonor my sister by touching me so." She backed away.

"Tell me, Lady Mercia, how is it that the times you came to me you were clad in nothing but rags, yet upon our meeting today you wore this finery, expertly patched as it is."

"War is costly, sir. My father has given generously to Harold, then to Edric."

"To the point of being destitute?"

She gasped, and she knew by her slight hesitation he knew the truth. She grabbed his hands. "You cannot deny Rowena! 'Twill break her heart! She is a worthy wife!"

He scowled. "Would that you could take her place, would you?"

Wide-eyed, she looked at him but shook her head. "I cannot. I am soiled, and I am promised to the nuns

if they will still have me."

"What of me, Mercy? Of us? What we shared? Does it not mean anything to you?"

"*Aye!* It means everything to me!" She grabbed his hands and brought them to her lips. "I gave myself to you because I knew there was no one else for me. I gave myself to you because I knew in my heart you were promised to another. But I could not have stayed away if my life had depended on it." She kissed his hands. "I am yours always, Rhodri, but by contract you belong to my sister." She looked up into his eyes, and something deep and powerful moved within her. She loved this man she had known only for a few short days, with all her heart. "I am promised to the church, Rhodri."

He pulled her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. "I journey to Drury Abbey at first light. Your sire and sister will accompany me. I desire your company as well."

She pulled away from him. "I cannot face my family! I have disgraced them. And the abbess will be most disappointed if I arrive with the object of my impropriety."

He grabbed the torch and pulled her gently along with him. "Never fear, my love. You belong to me. I will not allow any man, woman, or child, kin or no, to slander you."

She tugged at his hand. "Rhodri. I cannot be seen with you. 'Twill destroy my sister."

"Then I will send you ahead this night with a few of my men. Your presence will be required as I sort all this out."

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And so Mercia found herself the next morning at Drury Abbey. An odd sense of contentment filled her as she stepped into the cold stone edifice. Immediately she flew into the abbess's arms and confessed all, begging for forgiveness. The old woman hugged her close and shushed her.

When her family and the prince's train arrived, a dark pall held court over the stone and wooden structure. Her knees ached from the hours praying in the chapel. She prayed for her sister, for her father, for her prince, and lastly for herself.

When they all had gathered in the vestibule outside the chapel, Rhodri called for the chest of silver to be brought out. Nervously Mercia watched her father's face redden.

"Show me the charters!" Rhodri's voice boomed.

The abbess bowed, wringing her hands. "My lord, we have no charters or chests of silver."

"'Tis not yours I request, but those of Lord Cedric that you keep safe for him."

The abbess looked from Cedric, who had turned a pale shade of yellow, back to the prince. "We have no such treasure or documents."

"He lied!" Rowena burst. "He lied so that you would wed me! We are destitute and cannot honor the contract!" She fell into a simpering pool of angst onto the stone floor. Mercia rushed to her sister and held her. Rowena flung her away. "How dare you touch me after what you have done!"

Mercia sat back, shocked and hurt. Rhodri came to her and offered her his hand. She took it.

"Abbess Avril, is it possible for a novice not to make her final vows?"

The old woman shook her head. "Once promised to God, it would take an act of God to stay it."

Rhodri smiled. "Would one thousand silver pieces soothe God's disappointment?"

Everyone gasped in shock. The abbess nodded. "We are poor here at Drury Abbey. 'Twould be a welcome gift."

"Then consider the gift a sign from God through me, and the order have one less novice. The Lady Mercia will no longer reside here."

Mercia gasped. Cedric sputtered, Rowena howled. Rhodri turned to Cedric. "You have lied to me, sir, and therefore I retract my betrothed contract for your daughter Rowena's hand."

"How dare you!" Cedric cried.

"I dare whatever I like. You broke your oath! I am free to negotiate a new contract." He looked down at Rowena, who glared at him through swollen eyes. "I would give you five hundred silver pieces as a dowry to another groom of your choice."

Another collective gasp rent the air. Rhodri turned to Cedric and brought Mercia's hand to his lips. "For this daughter, I will accept as her dowry the clothes on her back and nothing more."

Mercia's knees shook, and had Rhodri not held her so tightly she would have joined her sister on the floor.

Cedric sputtered. "You mean you wish to wed Mercia? But she is—"

"The woman I choose. Do you agree or not?"

"I—take Rowena, she is more worthy."

Rhodri stepped into Cedric's face. "'Tis Mercia I desire. Do you give your permission!?"

"Father!" Rowena cried as she came to her feet. "Do not come between my sister and her happiness. For if you do I will cut my hair, rend it with ashes and wear rags, so that no man, not even for five hundred silver pieces, will want me."

Mercia's heart filled with love. Cedric nodded, but grunted his true feelings.

Rhodri turned to her, and dropped to one knee. He took her hands into his. "Will you have me, Lady Mercia?"

Joy filled her so completely that Mercia thought she would burst. She threw herself into his arms. "Aye. I will have you, from this day and every day that follows!"

He grabbed her up to him and kissed her. Long, hard and intimate, giving no care to those who stood and gaped around them.

When they separated, Rhodri shouted, "Call a priest! I will see this night a wedded man!"

And so it was to be. Lady Mercia of Wendover found her prince. And he, Prince Rhodri of Dinefwr, sworn to never love, discovered on the frigid beaches of Wessex the one woman who would become his princess and change his world forever.

They returned to Dinefwr, where they began a dynasty that endured for centuries.