



YEARNING HEART

ZELMA ORR

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

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The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

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By

Zelma Orr

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Chapter One

Sir Stephen Lambert was tired. In fact, he was exhausted. His trips into London became more complicated with each passing fortnight, and on this late summer day of the year 1166, he decided that, as King Henry's favorite manorial officer, he was destined to starve to death or become ill from lack of sleep.

The king and queen argued like two spoiled children, each demanding Stephen's ear, complaining of insults real or imagined one from the other.

Queen Eleanor. Such a lovely woman. A headstrong, determined, lovely woman. Stephen sighed, struggled with the laces on his waistcoat, and bent to remove his boots.

And the king. Never the twain shall meet, he muttered to himself. As wife of the king of France, Eleanor must have presented an irresistible challenge to King Henry, someone he must win and claim for his own.

"Now that you have her, what do you propose to do with her?" Stephen's dark mutterings filled the room.

King Henry was energetic and too intelligent for his own good in Stephen's estimation. The king's efforts to establish a workable judicial system for his country, no matter how good the idea, was going to cause him no end of worry. The church courts had already condemned him for his recently issued Constitutions of Clarendon limiting the jurisdiction of the church. It was going to get worse.

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King Henry and the Archbishop of Canterbury had been close friends until the Constitution was signed. Now, Sir Thomas Becket was putting a crimp into that friendship by withdrawing his support.

Still, the king is right, Stephen thought as he stretched out across the bed in the room prepared for him. The church clerks cannot be exempted from capital punishment. If guilty of murder, they're guilty, church clerks or no. Everyone must abide by the laws if they are to work. Everyone.

He was between sleep and waking when the knock sounded on his door.

"Who is it?"

"Sir Oliver. A game is commencing in the great hall. Join us?"

Stephen cared little for gambling, but he needed something to distract him from his royal worries.

"I will join you within the half hour," he said.

In spite of only a short rest, he felt his energy returning. If he could find something to eat, he'd feel better. It seemed all the day he had been too late for a meal or too early.

He did get a portion of fresh bread and roast meat from a sympathetic servant down the hall, and then settled in to enjoy the game of chance with Sir Oliver Grinwold and three other gentlemen he'd met in the past.

At the end of several hours, Sir Oliver was into Stephen for a goodly sum of money.

Stephen was about to suggest an end to the games when Sir Oliver laughed loudly.

"Well, Stephen, I have you now. I call you and raise one thousand pounds."

An indrawn breath came from around the table as the others placed their cards face down and pushed back in a gesture of defeat.

Stephen looked at the rotund man across from him, his double-chinned face alight with expectancy. From experience, he knew the man was an accomplished gambler but was prone to foolish betting. Stephen's eyebrows drew downward in deep thought as he tried to decide whether to call the man's bluff or withdraw, thereby saving Sir Oliver from embarrassment.

"I will see you, Sir Oliver," Stephen said.

When the cards were shown, Sir Oliver lost the bet. Stephen watched the color drain from the man's face in disbelief.

Sir Oliver chewed on his full red lips. He made an offer.

"One more hand. All the money against my lands."

"Sir Oliver," Stephen said. "Mayhap..."

"You know my land holdings, Sir Stephen," Oliver said, his voice deep with rage.

"Yes, but you..."

"They are worth more than the money."

"I know and, for that reason, you should think about this. I will hold your note until you can pay."

"No. This is the better way."

The bet was made. Sir Oliver lost.

* * * *

Sir Oliver followed Stephen to his room and once inside, slumped on the chair near the door.

"I will have to deed the lands to you from Gloucester if you will trust me."

"Of course, Sir Oliver. Your word is good."

Stephen, a brooding look on his face, watched the other man. Sir Oliver was almost round, product of over-indulgence in food and drink, and sitting at a table rather than overseeing his lands. There were two sons, Stephen knew, who took care of the land holdings at Grinwold. Sir Oliver needed to use his own body in performing physical labor.

"You are a widower, Stephen?" Sir Oliver said.

Stephen grew still. He did not discuss his past life with anyone. Especially with this man—he would not talk about his beloved Mary.

"My wife died several years ago," he said.

The other man gave him a probing look.

"I will give you my daughter in exchange for the debt."

Stephen looked his surprise. The Lady Grinwold he remembered from a brief meeting a year or so ago was a skinny young woman whose big blue eyes overflowed a plain face.

"And what would I want with the Lady Rebecca?"

"She is good at work in the house. She sews, cooks and is learned from two years in Suffolk School in London," Sir Oliver said. "She is young and will make a good wife."

The man groveled as he expounded the virtues of his daughter. Stephen, disgusted, turned away. He'd heard that men bargained for wives, but he had no desire for a wife, no

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matter how accomplished or how young. What man would trade a daughter for a gambling debt, be it small or large?

"I will be ruined if I lose my lands. Elizabeth will never forgive me." Oliver buried his face in pudgy hands.

That would serve you right, Stephen thought, but he didn't tell that to the man in front of him.

Instead, he thought of the big house in Glastonbury, long without the touch of a gentle woman to place flower cuttings in dark corners or one to meet him when he returned from the tiring trips around the royal kingdom. Mary had been everything to him, but she was dead, lo, these many years.

He had not thought to marry again. His tired brain fumbled with the idea. There would be gains for Stephen with such an arrangement. Mayhap ...

"Very well. I will arrive at Grinwold seven days hence to pick up the Lady Rebecca."

Long into the night, he pondered his sudden insanity in making such a foolish agreement. My mind is becoming unsettled between the constant royal battles and collecting more and more taxes that the king's subjects can ill afford, he decided. But, he reasoned, Sir Oliver will have a chance to think over the arrangement and change his mind. Or Lady Elizabeth will refuse to let her daughter go for such a reason.

He could only wish it would be so.

The summons from King Henry came early. Stephen faced his royal highness without enthusiasm, recognizing his reddened countenance as a mark of the king's well-known fits of temper.

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Without benefit of a greeting, the king faced his senior manor officer.

"What say you, Stephen?" The king waved mighty arms in the air, his large round head on a short neck shaking from side to side. "What say this young upstart I gave all to? Even to my son he teaches as he wishes. And to what end?"

The king stomped across the room, tearing at the reddish hair behind his ears.

"I put him in the highest office of my lands, yea, even above me, and he insults me."

Stephen silently sympathized with Queen Eleanor as he watched her husband's awesome display of temper. Who could blame her for straying afar from the castle grounds?

The king, aware of Stephen's silence, turned. He shook the paper he had crumpled in one big hand.

"Sir Thomas begs to inform me—*inform* me—that I have no rights toward ruling the church, that townships, castles, farms, everything must be returned to the church or—" The king unfolded the offending letter and read to Stephen. "Otherwise, know for certain that you shall feel the divine severity and vengeance."

"I will speak with Sir Thomas, Your Highness, and ask his rethinking the problem," Stephen said when the king lapsed into a sullen silence.

King Henry eyed him for a moment, and then waved thick arms in dismissal.

"You are my rock, Stephen," he said, and retreated morosely to his private rooms.

His talk with Sir Thomas Becket was as fruitless as he'd known it would be. How could two men, formerly close friends, end up in such obstinate disagreement? Would that I could quit this thankless job and live out my life at Glastonbury where there's no quarrel between the church and me, Stephen thought as he waited for Sir Thomas to reply to his request he visit the king to soothe him.

Sir Thomas turned sorrowful eyes to Stephen.

"I knew if I accepted this post, I would lose either the favor of God or that of the king. I warned King Henry of the nomination. Now it seems I should have refused as I thought to."

"Yes, Sir Thomas," Stephen said, not agreeing, only letting the archbishop know he was listening. He thought there was substance to gossip Sir Thomas envisioned himself as important as Jesus Christ, at the least. Stephen had not succeeded in bringing the king and his protege any closer together. It would take a bashing of heads to get their attention.

King Henry had made a mistake he was unwilling to admit. His headstrong appointment of his friend, Thomas, chancellor at the time, as archbishop, was a perfect solution to reconciliation of differences between church and state ... so reasoned the king. By combining the two offices, Henry had counted on a pawn at Canterbury to favor him, but his pawn was asserting his independence much to the king's royal displeasure.

If this problem is ever resolved, Stephen vowed as he left London, I shall retire and live out my old age at the manor

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house in Salisbury—should the king ever allow me time to complete it. No, that is too close to the royal grounds. I shall dwell at Glastonbury, even with its sad memories. His body swayed inside the carriage as the driver sought to miss the deepest holes in the narrow roadway between London and Gloucester. Stephen shook his head, wondering as he had a thousand times what possessed him to accept a young woman in exchange for Sir Oliver's vast lands. He would have been better served to allow Oliver to oversee the lands until such time as he could arrange to buy them back.

Do I not have enough trouble with the king and the archbishop that I should gain an unwanted wife in the bargain? For a certainty, I am insane, he thought now, as he watched the desolate scenery they rode past.

In truth, he reckoned, there were times having a wife would benefit him. Perchance it would keep the ladies of the royal court from inviting him to their bedchambers. And he could satisfy his own desires at home rather than depend on favors. The favors, he acknowledged, were satisfactory enough, but it was the sly offerings of marriage later that he found hard to combat. He had no wish to marry again.

I can take the Lady Rebecca home with me and keep her for my pleasure. It will not matter to Sir Oliver whether I marry her. He has his lands back, which is what he wanted most.

Stephen leaned back in the carriage to give it some thought.

* * * *

"You cannot do this, Oliver," Lady Elizabeth said.

Her face had whitened and for the first time in years, a rebellious expression replaced the usual indifference.

"Rebecca is but sixteen. She does not know the ways of a wife. Or does he plan to keep her and not marry? The royal ladies of the court gossip that Sir Stephen is not interested in marriage, only in sleeping with many to satisfy his desires."

"It does not matter, my wife." Sir Oliver growled at Elizabeth as he paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. "It is all I could do to hold onto my lands. What would you have me do?"

"Mayhap you could one time think of your family before engaging in such games." There was bitterness in Elizabeth's voice as she stood to walk from the room.

Sir Oliver whirled but one look at her face stopped him. Elizabeth never disagreed with him no matter the subject. Never had she argued about his decisions where Rebecca was concerned. He had found her crying when he sent Rebecca to school in London for two years, but she did not object. Today was different.

"You will not argue with me, Elizabeth," he said and started across the room to her.

"I do not argue, my lord." Her voice was quiet, disturbing. "I am saying that you are a stupid, arrogant, selfish man who will do as he wishes no matter it hurts his family. You are the reason Richard lives alone across the hills, the reason Peter and Margaret come to this house to visit only at Christmas time." Her head lifted. "Perhaps you do Rebecca a favor. Mayhap Sir Stephen will be a gentler master than you."

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She picked up her skirts and, ignoring her husband's spluttering protest, walked briskly from the room.

* * * *

Rebecca knelt carefully, knees locked for balance. One eye closed, she sighed, bit her tongue between small white teeth. The singing twang of the arrow sent a quiver through her body, a thrill of knowledge that she had handled the heavy bow with more skill than usual. As the young rabbit scampered away, the arrow caught him cleanly, and he dropped.

"Allo, Rebecca. Great shot." Her brother, Richard, emerged from a grove of trees, his face wreathed in a big grin. "Mayhap papa will be happy for fresh meat on the table for which he does not have to part with money."

Rebecca skipped to meet Richard. He was her favorite brother, gentle, kind, patient with his sixteen-year-old sister who tagged after him in the fields when she could escape Lord Oliver's watchfulness.

Papa expected work from her, sun up to sun down, with no time out for pleasures such as sitting with Richard as he tended flock or walking behind him along the straight rows he plowed. Richard was not one to run to Papa with tales, and she was safe to enjoy small things such as riding one of the pastured horses bareback, writing poems and reading them aloud to Richard, laughing over silly words, and sometimes being serious. Richard was fun, a brother who returned her admiration and love full measure.

"Hark!"

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Richard cupped his hand to his ear.

Rebecca heard it, too. Papa's command blast on the horn: *Get yourself hither, young lady*, was the content of the angry sound.

Rebecca reached up and kissed Richard's cheek.

"I must needs go before Papa cracks his crown," she said.

Richard rumbled her tangled blonde curls and laughed.

"Take the rabbit and papa will forget his anger."

Rebecca knew better. Papa needed no reason to swat her backside other than to remind her that she was his daughter to do his bidding at all times.

Richard watched the slight figure race away, the rabbit dangling from her small hand. Rebecca was such a lovely, sweet child, and he resented Lord Oliver's treatment of her. That was why he had built his two-room lodging on the far side of Grinwold's acreage and seldom darkened his father's door.

He looked now at the crumpled page of vellum Rebecca had left him. One of the many poems she wrote for or to him or about the school she'd attended years before. Words where she could wish for her own knight in shining armor. One more reason for papa to take a whip to her should he find such nonsense on her person. Mayhap one day some kind gentleman would come by Grinwold and take Rebecca away to a better life. Richard wished with all his heart that this would happen.

Rebecca hurried through the wild tangle of rushes along the small stream, jumping from stone to stone, missing one and muddying her already dirtied slippers. Papa would be

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unhappy about that. Papa was always unhappy. She couldn't remember ever pleasing him in her entire sixteen years. The only way she could have made him happy, she guessed, was to have been a third son.

Richard, she loved dearly. Peter, the oldest, married to Virginia, was distant and cold—like papa—and Rebecca did not care that he visited Grinwold seldom.

* * * *

"What is this?"

The angry roar stopped Rebecca in her tracks, and she looked up to see papa. Bushy brows drew together in thunderous disapproval, and she had no time to dodge as he lunged toward her, swinging her around by her arm to lay his thick hand to her backside.

"Canst not remember that young ladies do not hunt in the fields like a lowly serf? Richard causes such disobedience."

Papa's hand fair stung her bottom, but Rebecca blinked back tears, defiantly refusing to say Richard was with her. She held out the rabbit to Sir Oliver.

"Would make fresh meat for the evening meal for you and mama," she said.

"Take it to the cook room and make haste to the front hall," Sir Oliver said, his lips curling in distaste. He turned and strode away from her, grumbling his displeasure.

Rebecca made her way to the big room where the meals were prepared and left the rabbit with cook who was cleaning vegetables by the back door. Then she went toward the room where papa waited.

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Rebecca stopped outside the heavy door and knocked, pushing inward at the strident command from within. Her father stood in front of his desk, black waistcoat gaping over a protruding stomach. His ruddy face shone as though polished with the oil Nora used on the ugly dark wood furniture. A self-satisfied smile pulled thin pink lips back over too-perfect teeth. He smiled—until he saw the condition of his daughter.

"Rebecca!" His shout was enough to halt her slow steps just inside the door.

Inwardly, she sighed, looking down at her soiled shoes, dirt-spattered skirt, and blood from the rabbit streaking her hands. She pushed at her blonde hair with one hand and blew upward at the straggly wisps falling into her eyes. She could well imagine what her father saw when looking at his only daughter. She did not really care. Since the day she was born, she had never pleased him.

Hand upraised, Sir Oliver grunted in rage as he took a step toward Rebecca. She closed her eyes, waiting for the blow.

"Sir Oliver." The words were soft-spoken, but they stopped her father. He sputtered, thrusting his hand behind his back.

Until then, Rebecca hadn't noticed the other man standing across the room. She opened her eyes as he moved toward her and stopped, bowing from the waist.

"Stephen Lambert, Lady Grinwold," he said. For a moment, a sympathetic grin touched his mouth and deep blue eyes sparkled with laughter as he took in her smudged nose and tousled hair. His expression once again solemn, he faced Sir Oliver.

"You have told Rebecca of our agreement?"

"She will agree."

Sir Oliver rubbed smooth hands together, a confident smile making small eyes disappear into cheeks grown fat through overindulgence.

The man glanced once more at Rebecca.

"I would speak with milady about the arrangement."

Sir Oliver frowned at her, his black eyes promising punishment should she say the wrong thing.

"Go change your clothing, Rebecca." Papa didn't just speak, he ordered.

"No need. I will speak with her now."

"Of course, Sir Stephen."

Her father's frown disappeared as he answered his guest. With a last threatening scowl at her, he walked behind his desk out of her line of vision. She could feel him hovering, waiting to strike should she disobey him in some way.

She stared at the man who introduced himself as Stephen Lambert, wondering at his ability to make her father listen to him. She had not known anyone to override Oliver Grinwold's temper as this stranger had done. Her gaze went over the tall, straight figure, recognizing the best quality of material in the well-cut, light-blue waistcoat laced over matching pants tucked into shining black boots.

"Rebecca?" The deep, even tone of Sir Stephen's voice interrupted her thoughts.

She brought her gaze upward to meet dark blue eyes set wide apart in a rough-angled face. Blond hair, the color of the ripe grain in her father's fields, curled away from his face and

lay on his coat collar. His chin beneath a dark blond beard was square and hard.

She dipped her head. "My lord."

A deep chuckle brought her head up once more.

"You say that with doubt, Rebecca."

"Nay, my lord." Her denial was quick, hoping Sir Oliver wouldn't bellow his displeasure at her attitude. It would not do for him to hear her voice with less than respect for this man.

"Then you do agree with the plan?"

"What plan is this, my lord?"

"Sir Oliver has agreed to give you as my wife." But why in hell did I ever agree to it? he wondered. She is but a child.

Rebecca stared at Sir Stephen, eyes widening to overflow her thin face. She should not be shocked, but she was. She should have known ... the pursing of papa's narrow lips when he looked at her, appraising dark eyes disappearing behind soft flesh as they went over her slim body. She looked around at papa, and then back at the stranger she was promised to.

Sir Oliver was finally getting rid of his unwanted daughter. He didn't need a daughter; he needed a third son to work his vast land holdings. Richard and Peter could use help in the fields. She would gladly have worked alongside Richard, the gentle one, but she was not allowed because she was a woman. She was only capable of doing housework, a chore she detested as much as Sir Oliver disliked her.

Rebecca lifted wide eyes to meet the questioning look in the man's expression. How like papa to marry her off to a

complete stranger, trade her like the cows and pigs on market day. Her throat clogged, and her eyes stung.

"And what does Sir Oliver get in exchange for a skinny, ugly, unwanted daughter?" she said.

She stood straight, turning once more to stare into her father's face, took a step closer to him and continued. "More lands for Peter to lord it over? More sheep you can skin the wool from the way you have long wanted to skin me? An empty bedroom to house pilgrims and minstrels to bring in money where you must, at the least, feed me? What?"

The triumphant look on Sir Oliver's face disappeared in an angry frown. His hands made into fists, and he started to raise them, but looked instead at Sir Stephen.

"It is not your place to question a business transaction between Sir Stephen and me."

"Not even when I am the one traded like an unhealthy cow?"

"Rebecca."

Sir Stephen put a hand on her arm. He had thought to take her and not marry, but now he knew he could not. I will have to marry her, he concluded to himself at that instant. She would not make a good mistress. He felt reluctant sympathy for her and couldn't bring himself to quiet her, as he knew he should. It was a cold, heartless contract viewed from the child's eyes.

Rebecca whirled on Stephen. Tear-glazed eyes fastened on the third hook of his waistcoat as she shook off his hand.

I will not go with you, she thought. I will run away. I will hide in the next carriage to pass and ...

"Be good enough to pack what you will need for a three-day journey. I will wait for you here," Sir Stephen said. "I must leave for Glastonbury today."

"Today?"

She meant her answer to be loud and protesting, but it was only a whisper. How could she run away if he took her now? Her eyes locked with the stranger's and for a moment, she imagined sympathy in the brooding look he gave her.

"Now," he said brusquely, turning his back on her to walk to the window. "I have paid well for you. Do as I say."

So. I trade one master for another, she thought, smarting from his cold order. At least, he is more handsome than papa. But to marry. It meant sleeping with him, allowing him to fondle her body and ...

Head high, she whirled. Sir Oliver stepped from behind the desk, but she shoved him aside as she rushed out the door and up the stairs to the small bedroom assigned to her. However grudgingly. Left to papa, she would have been bedded down with the sheep.

Inside the room, she looked around. Small, yes, but her own privacy. Her dreams began here and went with her the miles she walked and ran through papa's lands. He didn't allow her to ride, but she did anyway, smiling her way past the smitten stable boy when papa was away on business. Elizabeth never asked where she had been. She didn't want to know should Sir Oliver inquire as to *her* daughter's whereabouts.

Glastonbury, Sir Stephen had said. The only thing she knew about the distant city was what Sister Emilie taught in

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Suffolk School. It was on the coast, a rocky, rugged coastline twisting its way along the water, misty and forbidding, of poor farmland, of scattered sheep and few human beings.

Among them, one Sir Stephen Lambert. Soon-to-be husband of Rebecca Grinwold.

She crossed the room to drag a carrying case from the narrow closet. Inside it were the sheets of manuscripts kept hidden from Sir Oliver, treasured to read over and over. He had seen she was educated enough to justify being his daughter, but he knew nothing of the precious parchment pages she kept pressed beneath her mattress.

If Sir Oliver ever discovered the pages and learned how she came by them, he would beat her, and then take them to offer ingratiatingly to some nobleman in exchange for a gambling debt. Or just to show Rebecca she was going beyond reason in owning such treasures.

There had been a fire at school over a holiday when she was not allowed to go home because Lady Elizabeth was away with Sir Oliver for an extended trip. Rebecca had been asleep when fire broke out in the classroom. She, along with a few other students, ran down the steps to gawk at the brilliant flames.

Men fought the fire, passing buckets of water from hand to hand as students watched. Rebecca, standing near a small desk not yet ablaze, spied the vellum pages curling at the edges. She grabbed them, protecting them with her heavy woolen gown. She started to hand them over to someone but was paid no attention. She held the treasured writings to her

for a long time, and then quietly went back to her room and hid them in the case with unused clothing.

A secret smile curved her lips now as she gently covered the pages with old clothing. They were hers. She would never leave them for papa to profit from. Even if Sir Stephen took them later, she would rather give them to him than to Sir Oliver.

A plain brown, woolen dress, a linen chemise, a black skirt and white high-necked top were placed over her prized possession. Her black slippers were dusty, having been worn only to church. She wiped them with her hand, made a trough on either end beneath her clothing and poked them down. There was a red shawl, the only colorful piece of clothing she owned. She rolled it into a corner under the dark dress.

A hesitant knock came at the door.

"Come," she said, and her mother stepped into the room. They stared at each other, and then Rebecca ran into her arms.

Lady Elizabeth patted her shoulder.

"It is best for you, Rebecca."

"But, Mama, I do not wish to go with him. I know nothing. I..."

"Papa has made the bargain, Rebecca. You have to go."

"But—can you not—please, tell papa it is not right to, to trade me. For what? More land? I have never seen this man, Mama, and I do not wish to marry him."

Eyes bright with tears, she pleaded with Lady Elizabeth, knowing it would do no good. It was the way of the master. His word was law. Elizabeth had never defied her husband.

What he decided would take place, no matter the pain for Rebecca.

"You will be happy with Sir Stephen. Papa says he is a rich man and influential with the king."

Rebecca sniffed and pulled away to look up into her mother's vacantly pretty face. Lady Elizabeth had never been her champion where papa was concerned, but at least, she lamented not the fact she had given birth to a daughter instead of a son—the way papa did. Elizabeth had taught her to cook, how to plan good meals, to sew, to garden, but they did not talk of a girl's duties in marriage. Marriage to a stranger.

"It is far away, Mama," she said in a small voice.

Lady Elizabeth nodded, and Rebecca waited for a word of reassurance.

When none was forthcoming, she said, "Will Richard come to say goodbye?"

"I think not, Rebecca. He must go to Worcester trading today."

Her throat tightened as she turned away from her mother. She would not, *would not*, let them see her cry. Mayhap it was best not to see Richard. Had he known about Papa's bargain? No. No, Richard would have told me. He would have objected.

Sadness such as she had never known settled in her heart at the thought of not seeing him again. She would miss Lady Elizabeth, of course, but Richard was her staunchest support in the cold Grinwold family. If she had but known she

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wouldn't see Richard again, she would have hugged him more tightly ere she left him.

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Rebecca stood stiffly by as Sir Stephen's driver lifted the one case to the top of the carriage. A hand touched her arm, and Sir Stephen helped her inside. She turned once to look for Lady Elizabeth, but her mother was not there. Sir Oliver stood smiling benignly at the prancing horses in front of the carriage, but he did not look at Rebecca as the driver shouted to the team, and the carriage lurched into motion.

Rebecca huddled in the far corner of the carriage, looking across the cold, winter-dead fields. They looked as she felt—abandoned.

"I thought you were eighteen," Sir Stephen said after they had traveled miles in silence. "You are young."

"I will age in time, I should imagine," she said, still turned away from him.

Long fingers lifted her chin and directed her to face him. Deep blue eyes beneath thick brown brows smiled at her, and a wide mouth opened slightly to reveal white teeth, one of them crooked out of line with the others.

"I daresay that is true." A slim forefinger brushed across her mouth. "It will be all right." Abruptly, he released her chin and looked toward the road in front of them. "Try to rest. It is a long journey."

They stopped at a roadside inn for the night and were served cold lamb and dark bread by the innkeeper. Rebecca was surprised when Sir Stephen bade her goodnight and went

into a room across the hall. She had no idea what to expect from this stranger but assumed he would take her body whenever he pleased. He had paid for her, had he not? He was not required to wait for marriage to sleep with her.

She undressed, drawing on the only sleeping garment she possessed, a rough material of an ugly shade of rose. Some distant cousin had left it with Mama and nothing was to be wasted, so she now owned the plainly made wrap. It was warm, the only worthwhile thing about it.

She turned back the woolen quilt, crawled into bed, and hunched against the pillows, her arms around knees drawn up to her chest. A hard lump formed in her throat, and her eyes felt tight. There was little love at home to miss, but at least the small bedroom was her own, with its bright coverlet Lady Elizabeth made while she carried Rebecca for nine months.

And Richard. She sorely missed him already. Would he forget her immediately as she knew papa would?

A knock sounded at the door and made her jump. Her heart thudded, and she didn't answer right away. Sir Stephen was coming to claim his rights.

"Rebecca?" a quiet voice said, and then the door swung open to reveal the man who would soon be her husband. His big frame filled the doorway, and he lowered his head to enter without bumping. He stood just inside the room, staring at the small figure huddled on the pillows, missing nothing in the forlorn face with tear-bright eyes.

"You are comfortable, Rebecca?"

"Yes, my lord," she whispered over the pain in her throat.

Two steps brought him to the foot of the bed.

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"Do not cry, Rebecca."

She shook her head, afraid to speak.

"How old are you?" he said, pursuing his earlier question.

"Sixteen, my lord."

He frowned and uttered a word she did not understand, but he continued to look at her. "Do not be sad to leave your family. We will visit them within the year."

"Yes, my lord."

It wasn't papa and mama she missed. It was the warm aloneness of her room, the wide-open fields she roamed, dreaming and singing soft melodies she built in her head. And, if she found Richard on the far side of papa's land, joining him to eat fruit as he rested or just being quiet and comfortable together.

Richard had never wished she were another brother or criticized her for her lack of restraint as she ran through the fields or rode bareback on one of the horses left to pasture.

An odd gentleness filled Sir Stephen's face, then he straightened to say roughly, "Goodnight, Rebecca. We leave at first light." He left her, closing the door quietly behind him.

She let go her breath and lay back, dragging the cover over her. Soon, Sir Stephen would not leave her at night. Soon, he would stay and ... she squeezed her eyes shut.

What will it be like to have a man touch me so? she wondered. The poems and songs Sister Emilie read aloud in school awakened her romantic dreams. The manuscript pages spoke of tender love, of touches and affection between man and woman. But she was a bought and paid for wife. There

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was no love or tenderness to be hers. Only to be claimed by her lord and master. Sir Stephen was big, he would hurt her.

Her hands moved over her small body, over barely existing breasts, a flat stomach with bones protruding on each side, thin legs. She knew a man coveted mostly that part between her legs. She touched herself hesitantly, drew in her breath and pulled her hands from beneath the covers. She could not imagine how it would feel for a man to put his big hands—and more—on her. She shivered and covered up, head and ears. Soon, she slept.

* * * *

Rebecca couldn't eat the next morning. Her stomach seemed to be in knots and her throat too tight to let pass anything other than the strong tea served by the innkeeper. Sir Stephen watched her small efforts but said nothing.

Outside, the sign overhead rasped and groaned as the wind whistled around the corner of the old inn. Clouds hung low overhead like gray drapes. She looked at the sky as their travel cases were loaded onto the top of the carriage. Sir Stephen helped her aboard, springing lightly behind her. She felt old and heavy and ugly, a parcel traded to the highest bidder. The weather, angry and dark, matched her mood.

Sir Stephen didn't talk as they traveled. Instead, he removed a ledger from the satchel he carried and turned pages to stare at columns of figures. She studied the uneven features, his well-molded mouth beneath a heavy mustache.

What would it be like to have him kiss her? Fascinated by the thought, feeling warmth in her cheeks, Rebecca put her

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hand to her own soft mouth. She had never been kissed. All she had ever done was dream.

She turned to look out the carriage window. Brown fields stretched in all directions, windswept, dreary fields. Sheep grazed near the road as they came upon a small village.

"We will have tea and walk a bit to stretch our legs," Sir Stephen said.

She didn't answer. She was accustomed to obeying and did not question him even though she didn't want anything. Her stomach craved to be left alone.

"Hot tea will relax you," he said as though reading her thoughts.

It was nearing dusk when the carriage stopped, and Rebecca sat up, startled at the sudden quiet, to realize she had been dozing. She glanced at Stephen who smiled at her. Rebecca smoothed back her hair and tried to smile in return, but her face muscles were frozen.

Nearby, a few dark shapes of small houses stood near the highway. The inevitable ale sign hung over a rough-hewn building where the carriage stopped. Inside, it was warm and comfortable, the dimly flickering candles giving the hallway a welcoming glow.

The beaming face of an old woman peeped from the stairway.

"This way, my lord. I have a comfortable room at the top of the stairs."

Rebecca swallowed hard. One room. The time had come when ...

"We would have two rooms, if you please," Sir Stephen said.

The woman looked from Stephen to Rebecca, her mouth opened in mild surprise, but she nodded. "There is another across the hall, my lord," she said, and Stephen followed the bent figure into the other room.

Rebecca went into the small clean room, noting the bed with its dark quilted coverlet, a shuttered window barred against the night, one candle casting shadows. She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her slippers, so dusty now she could no longer be sure of their color.

"Mrs. Heaton will bring us tea and stew she has left from the evening meal," Stephen said from the doorway.

"I do not wish to eat."

Sir Stephen stepped into the room.

"I will not have your death from starvation on my conscience, Rebecca," he said. "You will eat, and you will drink the tea."

"Very well, my lord."

She ate the stew and it tasted good. She took a drink of the tea and immediately, the stew and everything eaten the past week spewed from her stomach. Gagging and coughing, she watched in horror as the mess spread over the spotless wooden floor.

Then she was being lifted and moved away from the ugly remains of her meal. A soft cloth wiped at her mouth. She pulled away, tried to get her feet on the floor to go look for something with which to clean.

"Be still," Sir Stephen said. "Stay there. Do not move."

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Shivering, Rebecca remained on the edge of the bed where Stephen left her. A few minutes later, Mrs. Heaton came in, clucking her tongue, working industriously all the time.

"I should ha' known," she said. "So pale. So young to be with child." She clicked her tongue once more. "Men. They know nothing of how to care for a wife when she carries their seed."

Rebecca stared dumbly at the woman, and then realized Mrs. Heaton thought her with child. She gagged. Soon enough, it would be so. That's what women were for—carrying cases for man to bring forth sons into the world.

She thought the woman would never finish cleaning, but still, she was thankful Mrs. Heaton did the job. Papa would have beaten her before making her clean up her own mess. At least, Sir Stephen did not beat her—yet. Mayhap as his wife, she would present a better target.

"Rebecca?"

She raised her head.

"I am sorry, my lord."

"I should have known your stomach was not settled enough for food, but you have not eaten since we left Grinwold. I am afraid you will become ill."

She was already ill, but it mattered not.

"How much longer to Glastonbury?"

"We will arrive late on the morrow."

She went completely rigid. Tomorrow night, Sir Stephen would ...

His hands on her shoulders forced her to look up at him.

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"Rest tonight. You will be all right once we get you settled in your new home." He spoke as to a small child and brushed his mouth across the top of her head. "Go to sleep now. I will see you early the morning."

* * * *

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Chapter Two

They reached Glastonbury late the afternoon of the third day of travel. It was raining and colder than when they left papa's house. The horses pulling the carriage snorted and blew mist from their nostrils as they struggled up the steep hillside to reach the dark gray building overlooking a rocky cliff.

Rebecca eyed the forbidding structure that stood in silent vigil over the waters of the rugged coastline. Several outbuildings loomed a distance away from the main house.

"We are home, Rebecca." Sir Stephen's voice was gruff as though expecting an argument.

Her mouth twisted. Did not papa tell you he never allowed argument? She wanted to ask. She accepted his hand as he helped her from the carriage. Her legs trembled mayhap from weakness. She still hadn't eaten.

He led her, without speaking again, inside the rough stone house, into a high-ceilinged hallway with a stained glass window letting light in from the top of a stairway. If the outside presented an imposing, almost hostile appearance, the inside of Sir Stephen's home welcomed her. The wide hallway was not cluttered with dark, ugly furniture as Grinwold was. Instead, there were wall hangings of bright wools, resembling paintings she had seen of rugs from the unknown country of Persia.

Chandeliers, a dozen amber candles shining in each of them, hung from wide-spaced beams. The stairway curved

after six steps, reaching the second floor way above them into another wide hallway. She could see two doors closing away other rooms.

To their right an archway led into another high-ceilinged room where she could see a harp, dark shiny strings reaching higher than Rebecca's head. She stared, fascinated by the same type instrument Sister Emilie had taught her to play after her book lessons were finished. For that one reason, she had loved the strict discipline and did well in school work in order to be allowed to continue playing. Her fingers tingled, remembering the lilting tunes Sister Emilie had taught her to play.

"Welcome home, Sir Stephen," a soft voice tinged with an Irish lilt said.

Rebecca turned to see a tall, red-haired woman standing in the doorway just left of the bottom stair step.

Stephen smiled, his expression relaxed and warm as he said, "Malvina, this is Lady Rebecca. She has not been well and will need a bit of care before she can hold food."

He took Rebecca's cold hand, rubbing it between both of his.

"Malvina is your personal maid, Rebecca. Whatever you need, ask her." He bent to touch her cheek with his lips and his warm breath stirred a tendril of hair pulled loosed from the combs. "Rest before dinner."

It was an order, but Rebecca cared not. She was exhausted. She followed Malvina's black clad figure up the stairs, turned once to look back at the vast expanse of hallway. If the house was built on the same scale, it must be

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furlongs wide. The beauty and luxury took her breath. Papa's house was comfortable, but this ...

Stephen stood near the steps looking upward, and he met her quizzical glance with his own solemn one. She stopped to stare down at him. He was a man of culture, a handsome man, presumably with plenty of wealth or land or both. Why did he choose a plain, sixteen-year-old daughter of a landholder as his wife? He must be more than twice her age, but wives die young, Lady Elizabeth had said. Childbirth, disease, beatings ...

According to her stolen manuscripts, there was love and romance to be found with men. According to Lady Elizabeth, such things were hard to come by. Standing there in the strange house, staring down at a strange soon-to-be husband, Rebecca thought her mother more right.

Malvina moved ahead of her and entered a room at the end of the long hallway. Rebecca followed to stand just inside the door, her gaze taking in the mellow warmth of the room. The oil wick in a milk glass lamp gave off enough light so she could see the bed cover of pale orchid with green sprigs laced in tiny white blossoms. The heavy chest was covered with a matching cloth, and two milk glass lamps sat on each side of the beveled mirror.

Malvina opened the clothes case and pulled out the ugly garments, one by one. Rebecca watched her, tempted to laugh at the disapproval on the older woman's face.

"Will my lady sleep in this?" she said, holding up the rose-colored gown.

"I suppose my lady will, Malvina, since that is all my lady has."

Rebecca sat on the bed, running her hand across the rich material.

"Tell me, Malvina. Why has your master chosen me as his bride? I bring nothing, not a dowry, not even knowledge of what a bride does with a husband."

Malvina stared.

"You are married to Sir Stephen?"

"Not yet."

"Oh."

Malvina turned away to hang dresses in the closet, which ran the width of the room. The maid worked quickly, not looking at Rebecca, and when her task was completed, the clothing took up a pitiful amount of the generous space.

"Oh, what? Oh, what in the world does Sir Stephen want with this ugly child? Oh, how could Sir Stephen be taken in by such innocence? Oh, she must be with child and Sir Stephen is a true gentleman and has taken the blame?"

Rebecca slid off the bed and walked across the room so when her newly assigned personal maid turned, she was directly in her path.

"Oh, what, Malvina?" Her head reached only to Malvina's straight nose, so she had to tilt her head backwards to see the other's expression.

"I, I'm sorry, my lady, I meant no harm."

They stared at each other, and then Rebecca smiled and retreated to the bed. It was none of Malvina's affair what her master did. Like Rebecca, she had no say in the matter.

Rebecca was so tired, she did not care what Malvina thought, cared not what Sir Stephen would do with her, did not care if they dumped her over the cliff into the waters below them, did not care ...

She flung herself on the bed, buried her face beneath the ruffles on one of the plump pillows. As she lay there, she felt the dusty slippers being removed and her woolen hose pulled from stiff legs.

"I will pour my lady's bath," Malvina said. Her footsteps moved away.

After a moment, Rebecca gave a shuddering breath, got up and followed Malvina into the anteroom. Mayhap a bath would rid her of grime, but would it ease a sore and uncertain heart?

The enamel on the tub matched the bed cover, pale orchid with green sprigged leaves. She shrugged out of the scratchy wool skirt and white high-necked blouse, and stood still as Malvina unfastened the chemise and slid it away, pulling the next layer of clothing off along with it, leaving her thin body completely exposed.

Rebecca had never undressed before anyone save Lady Elizabeth, but she offered no objection, as Malvina looked her over. What difference? Next, it would be Sir Stephen ...

Tears tightened her throat, but she swallowed over them, refusing to let her maid see she wished she were back at Grinwold even with papa's disapproval.

The water, bubbling with something Malvina sprinkled into it, was hot. Thankfully Rebecca sank beneath it, leaning her head back over the curved edge of the tub. She kept her eyes

closed as the woman rubbed her body with a thick cloth, passing it between small breasts as though they were not there. Over her belly, her thighs, her feet. It was a luxury just to lie there and let someone wash her, something she had never experienced. She could almost laugh, thinking of papa parting with enough money to have servants other than Nora, their one maid, to take care of everything at Grinwold.

When she finally emerged from the tub, scrubbed and pink, Malvina covered her with a thick wrap.

"Sir Stephen brought a bowl of gruel and a muffin he wishes you to eat."

"Sir Stephen cooks?"

Malvina giggled. "No, my lady. Cook thought perchance Sir Stephen would reach home today and kept things warm. There's more solid food if you can abide it."

Rebecca walked barefoot into the bedroom and looked at the steaming tray by the table. Her stomach rolled in protest.

"You eat it, Malvina," she said. "I just want to sleep."

"Perhaps not until Sir Stephen comes to say goodnight."

"You tell him for me," Rebecca said, let the wrap drop from her body and slid between the heavy muslin sheets. They smelled of moor winds and damp sunshine.

Please don't let him touch me tonight, she pleaded to that God she prayed to occasionally. Please.

"I prefer you to say your own goodnight, Rebecca." A quiet voice spoke from the doorway.

Malvina had conveniently disappeared.

Rebecca watched Stephen cross the room, met his dark blue gaze with her own rebellious one, and wondered how

long he'd been there before he spoke. She was too tired to care.

"Goodnight, my lord."

He didn't speak for a long time, his eyes going from the untidy fall of bath-tumbled hair to the faint outline of her body beneath the covers.

Please don't touch me. She felt sixteen—too young for the world papa had thrust upon her. She must accept whatever Sir Stephen offered, but tonight, she needed to be left alone.

"You did not eat."

"I am not hungry."

He tugged the sheet up around a bare shoulder.

"Mayhap your appetite will return once you are rested from your travels."

He didn't smile, but continued to look steadily at her face. She thought this man with the sad eyes did not smile often.

"Goodnight, Rebecca." He turned and moved to the door.

"Why?" she asked of his back.

He turned. "Why?"

"What could you possibly have that you would trade to papa for me? You must have wanted badly to be rid of it."

"It is between Sir Oliver and me, Rebecca. Do not trouble yourself."

She sat up. "How like one of papa's friends. 'Do not trouble yourself, Rebecca,' he says, 'that we trade you between us like an unwanted cow. Do not—'"

"Be quiet."

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He was by the bed in an instant, staring down into the pale face, at the blonde hair tumbling past thin shoulders, suspicious moisture brightening her eyes.

"I will not be quiet," she said, fists balled beneath the covers. "Tell me, or is it of such little worth you are ashamed to admit it?"

Why do I argue with this, this child? he wondered and sighed.

"Nay, Rebecca. You are payment for Sir Oliver's gambling debt. A large gambling debt." His voice was cold as he grudgingly answered her questions.

She knew papa gambled. Sometimes she heard Lady Elizabeth quarreling after one of his trips when he must have lost goodly sums of money.

"How much?" Her voice was only a whisper. *How much am I worth?* she wanted to know. *Papa placed little value on me until now.*

Sir Stephen looked her over for long moments before he finally said, "At the royal court not long ago, I was in several games of chance with Sir Oliver. He knew not enough to quit, and I won a large portion of his land. When it was over, he offered you in exchange for his debts."

Rebecca's heart hurt. Sir Stephen could not know how it felt to be bartered by your father for a piece of dirt. She swallowed before she could speak.

"And you accepted without ever seeing me?"

Papa came out a grand winner, ridding himself of his biggest liability while retaining his beloved land.

Stephen moved to the door.

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"I remembered seeing you from the holiday ball last Christmas. You reminded me of a small elf."

An elf. How quaint.

"Still you accepted me as payment?"

"Why not?" His glance strayed around the room and came back to rest on her resentful expression. "These dark halls could use an elf to liven them. I do not need more land, and I can use a wife."

Use. He could use a wife. How forthright of him.

The door closed behind him.

* * * *

Stephen frowned as he saddled the giant prancing horse. Why had he made such a remark to that sad-faced child last night? An elfin face with haunted blue eyes—she was that, indeed, but his light words did not make her feel better. If anything, her face twisted as though she might cry. Perchance she would feel better if she did cry. Would not he—taken from everything he loved and was familiar with—taken by a strange man who planned to marry you to settle a debt?

Many men took advantage of trades and debts to find a wife, sometimes to rid themselves of one. It didn't make him feel better knowing the child in his house did not hold him in high esteem. It did not matter. She was not required to do so. He shook himself to remove the disapproval he felt over his own decision.

Stephen yanked on the strap beneath the horse's solid chest, and the steed snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Sorry," he said. He adjusted the strap to a more comfortable tightness, and then threw a long leg across the saddle.

"Now, boy," he said, flipped the reins lightly this time to set the horse off in a slow trot.

Tor, a light chestnut, carried him easily, taking the trail they often rode over to the cliffs, down the straggly path slanting to the water. Along the narrow beach of pebble-strewn sand, through the mud where water stood at high tide, around the sharp jutting edge of Cloud Reef, so named because low clouds obscured its jagged edge during winter storms.

His mind stayed on Rebecca. She was a mistake. He should have given Sir Oliver back his notes and escaped with the knowledge he had best be more careful the next time he gambled. He could satisfy his body's demands with more experienced women and come home alone without the burden and worry of a wife.

This was certainly the worst decision of his life, and he wondered at the solution he had chosen.

So engrossed in his thoughts, he took no notice of the low-hanging clouds until they were almost close enough to touch. He swore as rain suddenly pelted him.

* * * *

There was no sun when she awoke. Instead, a soft rain patted against the shutters. She pulled the coverlet with her, wrapping it around her nude body, and went across the room

to open the door leading into the hall. Such quiet. She did not even hear animal noises as she did at Grinwold.

"Good day, my lady," Malvina said as she appeared at the top of the stairs. "Did you sleep well?"

Rebecca backed into the bedroom and sat on the small rocking chair near the bed. Malvina placed a tray across her knees and removed the snowy cloth from over the dishes. There were muffins and orange jam, a coddled egg, gruel, a slice of meat, and warm goat's milk.

Sir Stephen will be angry if this does not stay in my belly, Rebecca thought as she took the first bite. Then the second. Then a drink of milk. Her stomach trembled a bit, and then settled. She ate slowly.

"Where is Sir Stephen?"

Malvina was making the bed, eyeing her new mistress as she picked at the plate of food.

"He has gone to the village market place. He said you are to rest until he returns in the afternoon."

"I could have gone with him."

Malvina straightened. "You have not the proper clothing to go anywhere."

"Really?"

Rebecca placed her near-empty tray on the bedside table and stood up. "Then I suggest you get me some of your clothing to wear. I want to see my new home."

Malvina threw back her head and laughed, causing Rebecca to smile at her obvious glee. The thought of the skinny young lady in her clothing was comical indeed.

"No, my lady," Malvina said. "You would be lost in my garments."

"Then I shall wear what I have."

She walked to the closet and removed the black skirt and top, then pulled out the red shawl. A few minutes later, she stood in front of the mirror, checking herself over. She looked just as bad here as she did on the farm at Grinwold.

"Which way?" she said.

"Which way to what, my lady?"

"To Sir Stephen's property. His animals. Whatever he has that I am now a part of."

"You are not part of his property and animals, my lady."

You're wrong, Rebecca wanted to say. Not only am I a part of it, I *am* his property. After a few days, I shall be his wife, even more a piece of property. Replacement for lands he does not need.

Instead of speaking her mind, Rebecca went into the hall.

"You cannot go outside. It is raining," Malvina said.

"Oh. Well, in that case, I suppose I can go downstairs. Or am I forbidden the use of other parts of the house?"

Malvina stared at the child in front of her, dressed in one of the plainest garments she had ever seen. Who purchased such clothing? she wondered. Colorless and without style. Then she thought of her master bringing Rebecca in unannounced. Was she a stray he had picked up some place, one who had no money or family? But to marry her?

"Why should you be forbidden to go any place you wish, my lady?"

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Rebecca shrugged. What did she know about where or why she could go any place? She walked down the steps and at the bottom of the stairs, turned to her left toward the room where she had seen the harp. It was the same type instrument she had played while at school. Those two years between twelve and fourteen when she was happier than she had ever been.

A line from a poem she had composed ran through her mind. It had been for Richard, and she had set it to music her last year at school, had brought it home for his Christmas present. It had been on one of her sheets of vellum papa burned when he came upon her daydreaming beside the stream with the paper in her hand. She had never been able to duplicate exactly the words of the poem, so she had never given it to her beloved Richard. It went something like, 'Let no one judge me for what I hope to be. Let no one see me for less than I am. Only ...'

"Oh, Richard." She whispered his name as her forefinger drifted across the strings, leaving a soft melody echoing behind it. Three days ride from Grinwold meant papa would never allow Richard to take time off just to visit her. Twelve whole months before she saw her brother. For the others, it mattered not, but she sorely missed Richard.

A clatter of hooves brought Rebecca's attention to Malvina as she opened tall doors of the front hall. It was a few minutes before Sir Stephen entered the house, removing his hat and coat to shake them before handing them to Malvina. She took his black topcoat then several packages from the

driver who stood just outside the door beneath the roof overhang.

Sir Stephen looked up to see Rebecca watching and smiled as he strode toward her.

"The skies have opened up," he said. "We need the rain, but by heavens, a bit easier would be to my liking."

His gaze went over her figure, completely hidden beneath the ill-fitting dress. She thought his expression softened a bit, and then he frowned, turning away.

"I went into the village to do some shopping," he said. "They have little to chose from, but whatever I have must be an improvement over the clothing you have."

Rebecca smiled at his back. "Yes, my lord."

He whirled. "My name is Stephen. Do me the courtesy to learn to pronounce it before we become man and wife."

She opened her mouth to repeat the automatic 'my lord,' thought better of it and set her teeth into her lower lip to prevent utterance of the words. His angry gaze swept over her once more before he turned and picked up the packages on the floor.

"You must try these on as I guessed at the size. Some may have to be exchanged." With that, he strode up the stairs and down the hall to the bedroom where she had slept.

For the first time, she wondered where Sir Stephen slept. There were several closed doors along the hallway, but she had no idea which one might be his. When she reached her room the packages were open and garments scattered over the surface of the bed. Malvina stood nearby, touching the material with awe, glancing from beneath her eyelashes at Sir

Stephen as he removed a small box from his pocket and laid it on the stand.

"The priest will dine with us tonight, Rebecca, after he performs the wedding ceremony."

She gasped. "Tonight?"

He looked hard at her. "Would you wait longer?"

Forever, she wanted to say, but she shook her head. Why wait? Finish with it.

"Good. 'Tis settled then. Malvina will help you choose what to wear for the ceremony if something fits you."

"And if it doesn't?" she said.

"Sir Oliver said you were a good seamstress. Make something fit." He turned and stalked from the room.

"My lady, the dresses are beautiful."

There was a strange note in the maid's voice, but Rebecca did not notice.

"Yes," she said without looking. Her resentful gaze was on the empty doorway where Sir Stephen had disappeared.

She chose the white wool. After all, I am a virgin. She lifted her chin. Is that not what the romantic words say? The bride wears white to show her purity?

Malvina had washed her hair the night before, and now she brushed it until it lay like shiny gold satin on her shoulder. Then her maid helped her dress. The tiny hooks down the back of the dress took her a long time, and when she finished the task, she pulled Rebecca to the mirror where she could see.

The dress was lovely. It even made Rebecca look good, made her look older than her years. It emphasized her small

waist and flared over narrow hips. It didn't matter what she looked like. Sir Stephen had bought her, he was stuck with her, and it was no matter that she looked like a milk maiden.

"My lady will make a beautiful bride," Malvina said.

Rebecca's heart thrust against her ribs. Tonight, she would belong to Sir Stephen. Tonight, he ...

Malvina saw her uncertainty. "You are a virgin, my lady? Of course it will hurt the first time, but then you will be eager thereafter. You will see."

Rebecca doubted. "There is much pain?"

Her eyes fastened on the maid's face. A strange expression appeared as Malvina knelt in front of her, and then it was gone.

"It is always so, my lady, but you are young. You will heal quickly. Sir Stephen is the gentleman, he is. He will not be so rough."

How do you know this? Rebecca wanted to ask of Malvina. How can you know about Sir Stephen's gentleness in this—in this? She shut her eyes tightly, shivering.

Lady Elizabeth had never confided any of the duties of a wife in the bedroom. Rebecca had asked, but there was never the right time or the right place for her mother to discuss such things with her, so she knew nothing. She had no friends her age, no one to exchange gossip or experiences.

"What will happen, Malvina?"

Malvina shook her head.

"It is not for me to tell, my lady. Sir Stephen will instruct you."

"You do not know," Rebecca said.

Malvina laughed. "I am not the virgin, my lady."

"You are married?"

Rebecca had not seen her maid except in her room and the hallways. She had always been alone.

"No, my lady." Malvina took a pin from her mouth to tighten the waist of the white dress.

"Then how could you ...?"

She stopped, heat flooding her cheeks. She stared down at Malvina's heavy hair, the color of rusty metal at the roof's edge, its thick curls bouncing with energy.

"There." Malvina stood up and turned Rebecca to face her. "Do not despair. It will not seem so bad once your lover's arms are around you and ..." She rolled her eyes and made as though to swoon.

Lover. But Sir Stephen was not her lover. He was her purchaser.

"You must open Sir Stephen's gift, my lady."

Numbly, she did as the maid suggested, and stared at the thin chain curved over the satin liner of the box. A single exquisite pearl hung delicately from the center of the chain.

"It is beautiful, my lady," Malvina said.

Another payment? Rebecca wondered. And soon I must repay everything. The emptiness in her chest hurt worse than the pain of leaving home. Did Sir Stephen consider her a bargain? Land is valuable, but Rebecca ...

I paid well for you, Stephen had said. Knowing papa, he most certainly paid dearly.

When she finally moved to the stairs and started down, Rebecca had locked her fright deep in her chest, and her head

was high, determined not to let Sir Stephen know how afraid she was, that she was sixteen—lots of young women were mothers at her age. Had not Lady Elizabeth told her so?

Voices from the room where the harp was told her visitors were already there. She stepped to the doorway just as Sir Stephen looked up. She blushed, but he walked toward her, taking her hand to press it to his lips as his eyes rested on the necklace. He turned to introduce her to man behind him.

"Rebecca, this is Father Umbreth. He will perform our marriage ceremony."

Rebecca nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"My lady," Father Umbreth said. He was young. Rebecca thought all clergymen were old like the one who droned on and on every Sunday morning at the small chapel near Grinwold. The black cloth collar emphasized his paleness and made his brown eyes even darker. She read sympathy in his smile, but it did nothing to dissolve the lump in her throat.

Then she was standing by Sir Stephen, Malvina and cook behind them, repeating the words and finally, Sir Stephen placed a wide gold band on her finger and gave her a matching one to slide on his strong tanned one.

"I pronounce you man and wife," Father Umbreth said, and her new husband bent to touch her mouth with his.

Her breath caught as a tiny thrill sped from her lips to the bottom of her stomach, rippling through her to leave her shaking.

Was she going to be sick again? Surely not. Surely she would not embarrass Sir Stephen that way. Papa would take a

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strap to her should she dare, but would Stephen? Her husband, Stephen.

She gazed up at him, meeting the suddenly blazing blue of his eyes. His lips were parted, and he stared at her as though he had not seen her before. His hands at her waist tightened and, as though realizing they were not alone, he released her, stepped away and tucked her cold hand in the crook of his arm.

"Allow me, Lady Rebecca," he said formally, and led the way into the great room where cook was waiting to serve them.

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Chapter Three

She thought the evening would never end, yet she was afraid it would—and much too soon. Father Umbreth was to stay the night, it seemed, and he and Stephen talked about the church and business. The gossip about King Henry and Queen Eleanor quarreling over their children, the whispers about the king's many women as he traveled afar from his court. About sheep, the wool processing business, farming, markets— everything except the fact that Stephen now had a new wife who sat wondering what was expected of her.

Idly, Rebecca followed the comments on the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury by the king and Stephen's opinion doubting the benefit from it.

"Sir Thomas was King Henry's friend," Stephen said. "But conflict is building between them as the laws of the church and the laws of the land differ."

"Ah, Stephen, do you not believe the church should be first to benefit from our lands? After all, it is the right of the church..."

Rebecca stirred and smiled a little as her husband's rich laughter filled the room. Half asleep, she watched him. He was a handsome man. She had never really looked at him fully, not for long. She was unwilling to stare when he was watching her, and when her resentment blazed, she did not see clearly. Now she did.

His hair was a shade darker than Rebecca's. His mouth wide, teeth white and well- cared for, and she thought the

one a bit out of line made his mouth more attractive. His lips were the color of rich wine, not pinkish and soft like papa's, but firm. How would they feel against her mouth?

Startled by the realization that she wanted to know, she pushed away the thoughts and listened to Stephen answer Father Umbreth.

"You do not get me between my two loyalties, Father. In all fairness, do not seek my answer to such a question. It is the king's subjects I am responsible for, not the kingdom of God. I leave that to you and with my blessings."

Father Umbreth's reply droned on and on, and Rebecca lost interest in the conversation.

* * * *

"You are tired, Rebecca." The voice was close to her ear.

She sat up, realized she had been dozing. On her wedding night, in the company of the priest and her new husband. Rebecca cringed to think she had fallen asleep in their company. Papa would—when would she stop thinking what papa would do or say? She belonged to Stephen now.

"I am sorry, my lord," she said and looked around the room, empty except for the two of them.

"Father Umbreth has a long ride ahead of him tomorrow and has gone to bed. Would you like to go to your room now?"

Sir Stephen's voice was quiet, without censure. His big hand covered hers where it rested on the arm of her chair.

She wet her lips. "Yes, please."

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It was only a whispered response, but her husband smiled and tugged at her arm to help her from the chair. Her legs trembled, but she stiffened them, putting one foot in front of the other. She was not ready for her wedding night, but she might as well get it over with and after tonight, she would know what was expected of her as a wife.

At the door to her room, her husband hesitated. "I will send Malvina to help you undress."

Rebecca started to protest, but decided against it. Sir Stephen would do whatever he wished just as papa did before him. Men are the same, so her mother had told her. Everything is done their way, for their pleasure. She was only sixteen. Someone must tell her what to do.

She quelled the rebellious thrill that swept through her at having no say in what concerned her feelings, her body, and moved away from Stephen into the bedroom. She stood stiffly, holding her head at a haughty angle just in case he was watching.

"M'lady?" The soft question came from her doorway, then the swish of Malvina's skirts as she came closer. "I will help you."

When the maid would have unfastened the necklace around her throat, Rebecca caught her hand.

"Do not remove it." She wanted Stephen's gift to remain. It was something bought for her and her alone and lay warm against her throat.

After a moment's hesitation, Malvina went on with her task.

When all her clothing was removed, Rebecca turned to look at the maid who was taking something from the wide drawers of the chest. She turned, and Rebecca gazed at the pile of pale green fabric in her hands.

" 'Tis beautiful, is it not, m'lady?"

Rebecca swallowed. Sir Stephen was dressing her up for his pleasure.

"Indeed, it is lovely," she said.

The softness slithered down her body, cool and pleasant where it touched her bare skin. Malvina pulled Rebecca's hair back and began to brush it.

"You know about a man and woman, Malvina?"

The maid laughed. "Of course, as I told you. For many years, m'lady."

"But I thought—you said—you have no husband."

"No, my lady. My man went to the king's war and did not return."

"Oh, Malvina, I did not know this."

"A long time since. There's no harm."

The maid stood up and stepped around in front of Rebecca.

"Fit for a king, you are, m'lady." She laughed a teasing laugh. "Or at least, for the kings' favorite reeve."

"What does a reeve do, Malvina, other than act as servant to King Henry?"

"Sir Stephen is not a servant. A reeve is important, a job few men can fill well. Sir Stephen is the best the king has ever had. And the king trusts him as his voice to the queen when they quarrel."

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Malvina brushed and straightened, smoothing Rebecca's hair, tucking an errant curl behind her ear.

"Now for the best part," Malvina murmured, and reached into her apron pocket to bring forth a tiny bottle. She uncapped it and tilted the bottle against her fingers, then touched Rebecca's throat and in front of her ears. She took Rebecca's hand and turned it so she could rub the liquid inside her wrist. The soft, fresh fragrance floated on the air, and Rebecca inhaled deeply.

"Oh, it smells lovely, Malvina. What is it?"

Malvina laughed a bit breathlessly. "It will intoxicate your husband, m'lady, and make him your slave forever."

In spite of her nervousness, Rebecca laughed. "I somehow doubt the truth of that." She could not imagine Sir Stephen as slave to anyone, lovely scented perfume or not.

Malvina was busy adjusting the thin material of the gown, smoothing the fullness of the skirt over Rebecca's narrow hips.

Her voice was muffled. "You will see, m'lady. Sir Stephen will be quite affected by your beauty and the fragrance will make him enjoy you all the more."

Enjoy me? What is there to enjoy? A thin body hidden beneath soft material and sprayed with expensive scent is still a thin body, an inexperienced body.

"Men always seek the companionship of women, Rebecca," her mother had told her on several occasions. "It is as though they must prove they can attract their attention. Wives are not always the source of a man's pleasure."

Sir Stephen was no different, Rebecca was sure. Even though married to her, he would seek the company of other women. He knew so many experienced, beautiful women. She was surprised to feel a stirring of dislike inside her at the thought of his being with another woman while married to her.

"There, Lady Rebecca," Malvina said. "I will leave you now so your husband can come see his beautiful bride."

Malvina was smiling, but Rebecca wondered at the look in the green eyes. They looked so—so accusing, as though she did not quite approve of her master's choice. She smiled at Malvina's retreating figure then sat on the bed to stare at her bare feet peeking from beneath her gown.

No matter Malvina's opinion of Sir Stephen's bride, it could never match the bride's own thoughts of how unlikely a union they presented. Sir Stephen had everything: looks, land, and money. Rebecca possessed none of these desirable qualities.

"Rebecca?" The door opened this time to admit Sir Stephen into the room.

Her head came up quickly, and she was forced to face her husband with nothing between them save the thin material of her night garment. She was now his to take, she belonged to him. She swallowed hard but could say nothing.

Sir Stephen hesitated, his eyes sweeping the small figure hunched on the side of the bed. He had taken off the braided silk waistcoat worn for the wedding ceremony and wore only a white shirt fitted neatly into black pants. Her frightened gaze took in his wide shoulders tapering to a narrow waist

and hips, his long, tightly-muscled legs displayed well by the close fitting pants tucked into shining boots.

She chewed her lower lip.

"You look lovely," Sir Stephen said.

He crossed the room and stopped a short distance from her, his eyes hidden as lowered lids allowed him to take in her slim figure, made to look fuller by the extra folds of her gown. One hand came up and touched the pearl nestling as though for warmth in the hollow of her throat. A smile lifted one corner of his mouth behind the thickness of his mustache.

Slowly, Stephen went down on one knee in front of her, picking up one limp hand from the bed. He held the small upturned palm to his lips, smiling into her widened eyes, and she imagined that the sadness she had seen was not quite so deep.

Suddenly, his body jerked, going rigid, and he frowned, his mouth straightened into a sharply defined line. He sucked in his breath.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded in a voice so cold it raised prickles on her arm.

Rebecca stared, first at her husband, and then at the hand he grasped tightly enough to bring pain.

"Wh ... what?" She trembled, amazed at the sudden change in his expression. There was neither sadness nor pleasure in the flashing blue eyes now.

He dropped her hand and rose to tower over her. Her head went back to follow his height, and the coldness in his face only added to her uneasiness.

What in the world had she done?

"You will do me the courtesy of never using the perfume again. Do you understand?" The tall, straight figure actually shook, he was so angry.

"But ... but I ... I thought..."

"Then do not think."

He whirled from her and strode to the door, disappearing into the hallway. An instant later, he reappeared and, giving her a thundering look, said thickly, "That was a stupid trick," and yanked the door closed with a thud.

Rebecca looked at her hand, wondering what had offended Sir Stephen.

"Don't use the perfume," he had ordered. But Malvina had assured her it would make her more appealing to her husband. She was surprised at the pain in her chest, pain of rejection. Not only did papa sell her off to a stranger, the stranger did not even want her after paying—what was it he said? "I paid well for you." All of that land Sir Oliver loved, and Stephen gave it back in exchange for someone who resembled an elf. And wore a lovely fragrance he forbid her to ever use again.

A sharp sound came from her throat. She was unworthy of satisfying that male desire she read about in poems, that Lady Elizabeth assured her was topmost in men's minds at all times. Not even expensive perfume could make her attractive to a man such as Sir Stephen. His purchased bride was turning out not to be much of a bargain.

She looked down at her feet, covered now with the filmy material. She couldn't see her toes, and she wiggled them to see if they were as stiff as she felt. They moved, at any rate.

Her gaze traveled upward until she looked straight down at the chest, its boniness hidden beneath layered folds of the soft garment Malvina had wrapped her in.

Malvina.

Rebecca's eyes narrowed. Had she known Sir Stephen would not like the fragrance she gave her? The odd light in the green eyes—she recalled the disbelief in those same eyes when Rebecca told her she was brought to Glastonbury to marry the owner of the Lambert property.

Was Malvina in love with Sir Stephen? Was she jealous of Rebecca? Had she done something that would displease her master and hurt Rebecca at the same time? It did not seem likely. Malvina was attentive and jumped to do Sir Stephens's bidding like any loyal servant. Surely she would not cause trouble on his wedding night.

Rebecca sighed. For whatever the reason, she had not pleased her new husband. She loosed the tie on her wrap and shrugged out of the garment, letting it fall to the floor.

Her wedding night.

It was not what she had thought it would be.

* * * *

Stephen found it hard to breathe as he stormed from Rebecca's bedroom. How did it happen she used the same fragrance as Mary? Two such different women he could not find had he looked all the lands and oceans of the world. Mary, her green eyes contrasting with hair the vibrant shade of an oak leaf in late autumn. Her soft, rounded body a

wonder to see and a joy to touch, to kiss and caress as they shared their love.

What madness bade him accept this—this plain elf, this bony child, as payment for valuable lands? He should be horsewhipped for letting sympathy for Sir Oliver take the place of plain thinking. He could only believe that long hours of work for King Henry and extreme exhaustion had played a big part in numbing his brain.

I deserve that what I got, he muttered into the darkness. The pain subsided as he let thoughts of Mary fill him, remembered the happy laughter always ready when he returned from long journeys, and the hours spent loving her. It was all gone, those times. Mary was lost to him forever and all he had left was the child using his favorite fragrance to enhance an unappealing body. Even for release of his male needs, he could not take her tonight.

Throughout the wedding ceremony as Father Umbreth cautioned them to love one another, he had been pleased to find his thoughts very much on Rebecca, wondering at the response he would get from her, questioning a man his age taking a virgin as he knew Rebecca to be. He did not have to ask. All he had to do was look at her to see the uncertainty. He had heard her sharp intake of breath as Father pronounced them man and wife, and he had bent to kiss her. It was there in the deep blue eyes, the wonder and distrust—and the fright.

He had wanted to reassure her, to tell her he would be as gentle as he could, but he meant to take her for his wife that night. Her unwillingness would not matter. He wanted her

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with a heated need he did not try to deny. He could not recall when the first hint of desire touched him, mayhap when he finally accepted the fact he would have a wife in Mary's place, something he'd sworn would not happen. As he and Father Umbreth discussed the royal family, his eyes had strayed often to the small figure sitting nearby, and a curious thrill went through him, triggering a thoroughly male response as his body hardened.

The fragrance Mary used all their married life had come from Troyes, and had sharpened his already glowing passionate longing for her.

Where in hell had Rebecca found the one scent he could not abide on anyone but Mary?

He heard Tor's snicker of welcome as he strode toward the outbuildings. There was a soft bump as the great head of the stallion greeted him by nudging the door. Inside the stable, he spoke quietly as he threw a blanket across the broad back, and hooked the bit into his mouth. A moment later, he guided Tor into the moonless night and across the moor toward the cliffs standing like sentinels over the waters below.

He rode hard, finally pulling the stallion to a walk, both of them breathing rapidly. A light mist blew from Tor's nostrils as he slung his head, and Stephen patted the strong neck. He slid from the horse's back and leaned against him, staring into nothing. The breeze coming from the water chilled him, and it seemed he smelled the fragrance from Rebecca's small hand.

* * * *

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She didn't sleep well and was awake early. She lay in bed listening for signs of others stirring in the big house. The thick walls deadened sound. There was only a little light in the room, and Rebecca slid from the bed to cross to the window. She unbarred the shutters and swung them open, shivering as the damp air struck her nude body.

It was dark cloudy, a misty rain falling, and foggy along the cliffs she could barely see in the distance. Turning, Rebecca found the clothing from the day before and slipped on the heavy blouse and skirt, stockings and shoes. She closed the shutters, picked her way to the door and pulled it open.

Two flickering candles dimly lit the hallway, but she could see well enough to reach the stairs. The huge chandelier lit the lower hallway. At the foot of the stairs, she turned toward the room where the harp stood. No one was in the room, but a bright fire crackled in the fireplace.

Rebecca turned as footsteps sounded behind her and was disappointed to see Malvina instead of Stephen.

The maid smiled with her friendly gaze going over Rebecca's figure.

"Good morning, m'lady. Did you sleep well?"

A knowing smile touched the full lips and avid curiosity brightened the deep green eyes.

Was there malice in the question? At the moment, Rebecca didn't care.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "Is Sir Stephen about?"

Malvina's brows raised in surprise.

"I supposed you knew, m'lady. Sir Stephen goes early to check the workers and tools and to see what animals are ready for market." A smug look settled around the older woman's mouth. "I should think a new husband would tell his bride where he was going. Or were you too busy to talk of such small details?"

Rebecca thought Malvina rather cheeky to mention such things, but she shrugged.

"I suppose that is true. Do you think Cook would have some warm bread and milk?"

"Yes, m'lady. She has a meal for thee."

Rebecca ate in the big room where everyone dined, guests as well as the inside help. Wide fireplaces glowed at the end of the open area where meals were prepared and kept it pleasantly warm. When she finished eating, Rebecca drank the warm goat's milk and rose to leave.

"Thank you," she said politely to the servants nearby.

They watched the new mistress of the house, wondering what she would demand of them. Sir Stephen demanded loyalty and hard work, but some of their friends and relatives were not so lucky. They were beaten for no reason other than the wife or lord and master needed someone upon which to vent anger. And so they wondered.

Rebecca strolled from the great room down a hallway and toward a bolted door. A man appeared in front of her and she stopped to look him over. Short, his face twisted by a scar from temple to chin, his mouth open in a wide grin, he blocked her way.

"Good morning to you," she said, and took a step backward to see him more clearly. She smiled in answer to his grin. "I would like to go outdoors."

"Of course, m'lady." In contrast to his rough appearance, the voice was gentle and friendly. "My name is Aubin, Lady Rebecca, and I am at your service."

He bowed low, and she could see the thinness of gray hair over a pink scalp. From her vantage point above him, his ears appeared pointed with white hair growing along the rims.

When he righted himself, Rebecca curtsied and watched his mouth drop open in amazement. "You are kind, Aubin. Now, please open the door for me."

Before he could carry out her order, Malvina appeared.

"My lady, you cannot go out there. It is not done by ladies of this house."

"And why not?"

Malvina looked flustered.

"I mean—I mean it is raining and there is mud underfoot."

"I want to see the animals in the stables," Rebecca said, thinking of the outbuildings noted the day before. Sir Oliver's animals lived in a lean-to attached to their house with only a walkway between living quarters and the smelly pens. Now she knew the reason she hadn't heard any animal noises. Sir Stephen's house was well separated from any other buildings, and she was curious to see what it was like on the outside.

"But Sir Stephen ..."

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"You did say he is working, did you not? And will be back late?" Rebecca started

through the door Aubin held open. "I will return ere he does." And she walked away from the protesting maid.

"Dost m'lady wish me to walk her to the stables?"

Rebecca smiled at Aubin. "No, I am capable of finding my way."

She did not turn to see what he did, but had she done so, she'd have seen a silly, infatuated grin on the face of Sir Stephen's manservant. He liked his master's childish new bride. Her clear blue eyes, the wisps of blonde hair visible beneath the plain gray wimple, small white teeth gleaming as she smiled at him.

Yes, he liked the Lady Rebecca Lambert.

By the time Rebecca reached the stables, the rain had stopped, but her feet were wet and muddy. It did not matter to her. She crossed the pathway to a fence, leaned over it to peer inside, and found herself face to face with a young man pitching hay into bins.

Startled green eyes fastened on her face. Odd, she thought, how many green-eyed people live around here, and then she smiled at the stable boy who appeared to be about twelve years old.

"Good morning," she said.

The boy gulped. "G-good morning, my lady." He reached up to grab the old soft hat sitting low over his ears and snatched it from his head.

"What is your name?"

"B-Bundy."

"Put your hat on, Bundy, before you catch cold," she said.
"Are there horses?"

"Yes, my lady." He pointed. "In there." As she started away, he said, "But, but, you cannot go..."

Rebecca was already pushing up the bar from the next stable. She had seen a handsome stallion, his hide only a shade darker than her hair, and she wanted a better look.

"Th—that is Tor, m'lady." Bundy tugged on her sleeve.

"Tor? Oh, I like his name."

Rebecca laughed, looking across the low railing separating her from the horse that blew through his nose and slung his perfectly shaped head upward.

"He belongs to Sir Stephen," Bundy said.

"I thought Sir Stephen was out riding this morning. Why is he not on Tor?"

"He rides many horses. Tor is his favorite."

"I think mine, too."

Rebecca stepped closer and put out her hand. Between her fingers was a slice of the apple saved from her earlier meal.

"No, m'lady, no, do not..."

Rebecca was not listening. She stepped up on the lower rail of the enclosure, leaning so that her extended hand reached almost to the big horse eyeing her with a hostile gleam in his eyes.

"He is not friendly," Bundy said and pulled at Rebecca's sleeve. "He bites."

"Has he ever bitten you?"

"Many times."

She turned to look at the boy. His eyes were wide, causing the pupils to look like purple grapes. "Why did he bite you? Did you beat him?"

Bundy moved his head side to side. "No, m'lady. Sir Stephen does not allow animals to be beaten. But Tor does not like anyone but Sir Stephen. Sometimes when I clean the stable and Tor is there, he nips the seat of my pants."

Rebecca's delighted laughter rang out.

"You give him a good target, Bundy. He cannot resist. I will not present him with such a gift."

She murmured directly to the animal in front of her, and he rolled his eyes, snorting. Rebecca chortled words at him, holding out the bit of fruit. Tor pranced, pawing the ground, swinging his head.

"I mean you no harm. And you cannot nip the seat of my pants, so come get the apple."

"My lady?"

She spoke without turning. "Get to work, Bundy, or Sir Stephen will scold us both for idleness."

Bundy watched the young woman a moment longer, and then turned back to his work. Once in awhile, he lifted his head to watch the two of them: Rebecca was sitting atop the rail and Tor alternately pawing the ground and inching closer to the tempting fruit in her small hand.

Bundy heard her laugh, turned to look, and stared at the sight of Rebecca sitting astride the broad back of his master's favorite steed. No one save Sir Stephen could approach the big stallion without loud protests from the horse or without taking precautions against nipping teeth and flailing hooves.

One of Rebecca's hands clasped into the horse's thick mane while the other caressed the strong neck. Her skirt had pulled up over her shoe tops, revealing dark blue stockings.

Bundy gulped and closed his eyes. When his gaze found the unlikely pair a moment later, Rebecca was again on the fence with Tor standing close to her munching on the remains of her apple. She leaned over, spoke softly into Tor's alertly lifted ear. The horse blew gently through his nose, and Rebecca rubbed the sleek space between black eyes. Then she patted his neck and hopped down from the rail.

"When can I ride Tor?" she said.

Bundy could barely speak.

"But, my lady, Sir Stephen does not allow anyone to ride Tor. He would never..."

"Bundy," she said in a patient voice. "Sir Stephen does not have to know everything that goes on here, does he?" She smiled and won Bundy over completely.

"He would be most angry."

"I know," she said, "but I will be careful and ride only when he is away on his travels." She had enough experience evading papa's orders that going against Sir Stephen's rules was a simple exercise of ignoring those she chose not to obey.

"But if Tor hurt you?"

"He never would."

She turned to look at the horse that had moved to put his head as far as he could reach across the rail toward Rebecca.

"Would you, Tor?"

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Black eyes surveyed the young woman, and then he lifted his head to whinny. If he did it just right, mayhap there would be more apples for him.

"See? He likes me already."

She went toward the house leaving a confused and smitten young stable boy behind her.

Rain was falling once more, but Rebecca did not hurry as she made her way back to the main house. She stopped to stare at the almost square building, gray stone walls posing a forbidding sight. To her right a stone fence enclosed what she supposed was a garden, and she started toward it, stopping when she heard waves beating along the bottom of the cliffs.

She was anxious to walk near the water, but not today. The rain was cold, beginning to penetrate her woolen cape, and the wet air crept beneath her heavy skirt. She went on to the open gate leading into the garden and stepped inside.

It was drab looking now, but it must have been a fair sight during the flowering season. Scraggly honeysuckle vines intertwined with thorny rose bushes along the stone wall. Piles of leaves and trash had been raked to the side of flowerbeds ready to be picked up as time permitted.

Papa would have a stick to me if I left such as this, Rebecca thought.

Bundy said Sir Stephen did not whip anyone. She shivered, remembering the cold expression on his face when he forbid her to use the perfume again. Bundy might be wrong in her case. Sir Stephen had appeared angry enough to strike before he stomped from her bedroom. So angry he did not even bother to test his bride to see if she were a virgin.

Rebecca knew what being unwanted was like, but from Sir Stephen, it hurt more than ever.

She avoided the servants and made her way back to her bedroom. Her bed had been redone, the room cleaned and dusted.

My manuscripts. She ran her hand beneath the rustling shuck mattress, and sighed thankfully. The precious sheets of paper were still there. What would the servants, especially Malvina, say if they found such treasures as written pages in Lady Rebecca's room? Malvina would reveal her secret, she was certain.

Would Steven forbid her to hold and read them? Even if she were learned in reading skills, it was not a popular thing for women to own valuable papers such as these.

Even though Malvina was now her personal maid, Rebecca was beginning to have doubts as to her loyalty. Her first loyalty was to Sir Stephen, and who could blame her? He was her master and source of all her worldly goods, why should she not nurture his pleasures?

Rebecca's heart twisted.

When would she find someone who cared enough to be loyal? Was her situation any better now than with papa? She had always been able to understand people, to guess at their intentions, but had she been wrong about Malvina? She had been married a whole day and night, had not slept with her husband, and he had left the household without instructions as to how she was to pass her time until he returned.

Her new life was proving to be confusing in a very short time.

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Chapter Four

Rebecca searched for something to occupy her until it was time for Stephen to come from the fields. The servants had taken care of cooking and cleaning. There was much work to be done outside, but with the stormy weather, no one ventured onto the grounds.

It had been a long time since she had read the manuscripts, so now she closed the bedroom door and pulled them from beneath the mattress. She decided it would be a mistake to allow Malvina to know she kept the coveted pages between the mattresses of her bed, and in the spring when beds were hung out the windows to sun, she would have to find a new hiding place.

Her mind wandered from the writing she had thought so precious. What matter was it that there was love and tender romance in the laboriously written words? What about her life? Sixteen, married to a handsome man of wealth. She should not have to turn to stiff parchment for entertainment. She dreaded giving her body to Stephen, but was it not better to make herself useful than to be idle? Papa would never allow idleness, the devil's housekeeper, he said. But she was no longer bound by papa's harsh rulings and would have to stop comparing her present life to the past at Grinwold.

Growing restless with her thoughts, Rebecca left her room to walk down the wide hallway toward the closed doors. One room, she knew, was Stephen's, but which one? Curious to see what sort of room her husband slept in, she stood outside

a heavy door, hesitating before she put out her hand to turn the brass knob. The door swung inward, and she stared at a room twice the size of hers with an enormous square bed. The cover was deep blue and heavy drapes of the same linen material were pulled back from glazed glass windows. Underfoot was a thick navy and wine carpet the likes of which she had never seen.

She crossed the room to an open door. Inside was a long wooden tub with an upholstered stool beside it. Sir Stephen's private bath. Across from her was another door as though he could go into an adjoining room. Backing away, she let her gaze roam once more around the bedroom, quite plainly a man's room with its heavy, expensive furniture. Double doors on the opposite wall might shut away his clothing. She didn't investigate. Instead, she hurried back out into the hallway. The room was intimately Sir Stephen's, and she felt like the intruder she was.

She pulled the door closed behind her and, after a moment's hesitation, went to the next door. It was locked. Frowning, she stared down at the brass knob identical to the one on Stephen's door.

Why would a guest bedroom door be locked? Surely, Malvina was required to clean and dust occasionally to keep it fresh.

She looked back to Stephen's bedroom, then toward the stairway leading down into the great hall. Malvina was busy with downstairs duties and would not be up until she called Rebecca to eat hours from now. With a determined lift to her chin, she went back to the room she'd just left, opened the

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door and closed it behind her. Quickly, she crossed once more into the bathroom, past the large tub, to the closed door on the other side. The knob turned easily.

Rebecca stepped into the room and stopped still. It was as though someone had just left it. The bed was freshly made, the white muslin curtains crisscrossed over glazed glass. A white chest with a crest of gold wings across the top drawer stood opposite the bed. Double doors indicated another closet.

Entranced, she moved past the bed, trailing her fingers over the soft cover of white lace. By the chest was a single door, its brass knob as shiny as though recently polished. She opened it, staring into a small room that had nothing in it save for a small wine-colored rug in the center of the floor. At its edge were long scratches in the wood where something, perhaps a tub, had once rested. A small stand was in the corner. On its marble top was a delicate crystal decanter.

She picked it up, sniffing at the top. She closed her eyes and took another deep breath. It was the same scent Malvina had given her on her wedding night.

She replaced the bottle and, leaving everything as she had found it, made her way back into the hallway.

Malvina.

Were she and Stephen lovers? If so, why had he married Rebecca when he could have married Malvina? Or just continued as her lover. It was his home. He could do as he wished. Had Malvina given her the perfume so that Stephen would be reminded of her? Was that why he raged at her?

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Inside her room, Rebecca leaned against the door and looked at the bed turned back for her to get into and rest. Rest. She had never been so rested. Her body was rested. Her mind could not.

The guest bedroom—with its single bottle of perfume, perfume Sir Stephen forbid her to use. Whose fragrance?

She started as the knock on the door vibrated against her backbone. She opened the door to look straight up into Stephen's dark blue eyes. She took a step backward and inclined her head.

"My lord," she said.

His hair was plastered close to his scalp, drops of rain sparkled in his beard, and she could smell the wetness of his clothing.

He stepped into the room.

"You are well, Rebecca?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I am your husband, not your lord, Rebecca."

His hands came up to yank her to him, and his mouth was hard against hers. His lips, wet and cold, ground into hers and his hard tongue forced her lips apart.

She didn't like to kiss that way. She struggled and twisted away from him. But Stephen was strong, and she had little chance to free herself if he wished to hold her. His mouth gentled on hers, his tongue withdrew as his lips brushed back and forth across her mouth, stirring an odd shivering within her. His big hands bunched the material of her dress under her arms, his thumbs resting beneath her breasts. She felt his

warm breath in her mouth, the stiff brush of his beard on her chin.

She was suddenly free, and she stared at the man who was her husband.

"I have been hard at work, Rebecca. Surely it is not too much to ask for a kiss of welcome?"

"N—no, my lord." She couldn't help the stammer.

"I will have to give lessons, I suppose, in teaching you my name." He turned toward the door. "I am in need of a bath and food. Ask Malvina to see my meal is ready within the hour."

"Would you desire help with your bath, my ... S-Stephen?"

His steps slowed, and then stopped. He turned, his gaze sweeping her slight figure, and a roguish glint brightened his eyes. He bowed from the waist.

"I would greatly enjoy it, Lady Rebecca." He stood aside to let her pass. "This way." He took her elbow and guided her across the hall through an open doorway.

"I have not asked Malvina to bring your meal," she said, unable to meet the probing directness of his steady gaze.

"Food can wait," he said and pulled her into his arms. His mouth descended swiftly, catching Rebecca's lips parted. His tongue darted into her mouth and, as though remembering her withdrawal, he slipped his tongue over the surface of her teeth, over her lips, and finally pressed his closed mouth firmly over hers. She felt the hard demand, and then over the demand, she sensed a restraint as though he would go easy with her.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Squeezing her eyes shut, Rebecca pushed her face against Stephen's and her lips parted without thought from her. A strange warmth like the path of a shooting star trembled through her stomach, fluttering beneath her ribs. Stephen's hands slid over her buttocks, pressing her into a body hard and irregular to her flat stomach. She gasped as she realized what the rock hard thing was between them.

"Ah, Rebecca."

His mouth left hers to trace a moist path down her cheek, his tongue whisked lightly into her ear, and he nibbled at the lobe before kissing her neck. He shivered and held her more tightly.

Rebecca's eyes were wide open, staring at Stephen's thick hair ruffled over his collar. What else is there to making love? Is this all? She wondered. She sort of like it this way.

Stephen's voice snatched her away from such thoughts.

"Help me undress," he said and pushed her far enough away that she could reach the hooks on his clothing.

Once she had helped undress Richard when an angry bull hurt him. She knew how the shirt came off, but she had trouble with pants. Impatiently, her husband pushed her clumsy fingers away and almost immediately, stood naked in front of her.

She gasped at the size of him. His shoulders were wide enough to block out the candle sputtering on the chest against the wall. His waist was narrow, flaring slightly to form tight-muscled hips. Fascinated, her eyes dropped, and she took a step backwards.

"Do not be afraid, Rebecca," he said. "I will try not to hurt you." He tipped her head back. "First, you must bathe me. Come. Aubin left water in the tub for me."

Taking her hand, he led her into the small anterooms she had investigated on her own while Stephen was away from the big house. Without looking at her again, he stepped into the water, hunkering down with his knees drawn up so he could fit inside.

Kneeling beside him, Rebecca took the rough cloth and began to bathe her husband.

* * * *

She never knew how he got from the water, or picked her up and crossed to the big bed with fresh smelling linens on it. His hands ripped at her clothing, and she was vaguely aware that he wadded them into a ball and threw them across her into the floor. Then she was crushed in his arms, his mouth moving roughly over hers, his hands seeking parts of her body never before touched by anyone.

She whimpered but didn't pull away. Stephen whispered words she had not heard before. His breathing was heavy and rough, and then he was kneeling over her, spreading her legs with unsteady fingers. Gently, he touched her quivering softness.

He looked into her wide, frightened eyes and kissed her lids closed.

"I will try not to hurt you, Rebecca," he whispered.
But he did.

His gentle probing changed into hard pressure, then into a frustrated struggle to enter her tight body. He pulled away for an instant, and then a sudden plunge brought forth a scream from her as pain tore through her body. His mouth muffled her cries as she felt the hot rush of his fluid inside her. He moaned deep in his throat, his entire body shuddered, and then went still.

Rebecca's breath came in short, quick puffs, her eyes moist with tears, fingers clenched into Stephen's ribs. She had never hurt so, not even when papa whipped her with a wet rope. This pain was inside, and she felt as though she were torn into small pieces, bleeding from all of them.

Stephen withdrew the powerful instrument from her body and sat up away from her. He turned away then back to let his gaze rest on her bare thighs. He winced and slowly let his eyes come up to meet hers, wide and dark in a small white face.

"I will send Malvina to help you," he said and stood up to reach for his shirt.

"No."

Rebecca sat up and almost cried out at the sight of blood on her belly and legs, dripping onto the white sheets. "I ... I can do it."

"You should have help, Rebecca."

Her head came up. "No. I do not wish to be helped by Malvina."

"That is what she is here for. She knows what to do, and it is her duty." Stephen brought her gown and draped it over

her shoulders. "I am sorry, but it could not be helped. It is always so with a virgin."

She turned away.

"I suppose you have had many such encounters."

He laughed. "Not too many virgins, my lady, but I have a bit of knowledge about women."

She climbed into the water he had left after his bath. It was cool, but it felt good to her aching body. She stiffened as Stephen's hands slid over her, bathing, moving down to her stomach to her thighs. Gently, he swished the water back and forth, and then lifted her to wrap her in the rough toweling he had used. He carried her across the hallway to her bed and placed her against the pillows and sat by her side.

"Now you are my wife in more than name only. Your body is also mine."

"Yes, my lord."

"And if you say 'my lord' once more, I will thrash you roundly, my pretty one."

She forgot his threat.

"Do you think me pretty?" Never had anyone described her thus.

Interest lit his eyes. It surprised Stephen to realize he did think her pretty. The crushed softness of her mouth, cheeks pink where his beard scraped, eyes a deep, deep blue, full of wonder at his words and at what he had done to her body.

"Do not tell me all young ladies think otherwise. But, pretty or not, I mean what I say about a thrashing. Remember that."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

With that, he pulled the cover up, kissed her mouth hard and turned to stride from the room. She did not see him again that evening. Instead, she lay staring into the darkness, thinking of the torment her body endured at Stephen's hands. It was certainly what every bride suffered according to her mother and Malvina. But Malvina said it would not hurt past the first time.

Still, it wasn't too unpleasant. There was something warm about Stephen holding her tightly, forcing himself into her, and crying out when he spent his seed inside her.

Would she be pregnant? It would be weeks before she knew since her flux had only just ceased.

* * * *

In the days that followed, Stephen came several times to her bed, to caress her body and to strain himself against her before giving in to his desire and plunging time and again into her. His appetite for love satisfied, he sometimes raised himself on elbow to look at her with questions in the deep blue eyes.

One night he asked, "Do you not enjoy my body, Rebecca?"

"Yes, of course."

"Of course?" He looped her hair around two fingers and with those two fingers, lightly caressed her lips. "Tell me how you want me to love you to make it more than just 'of course.'"

"I do not know what you mean."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

"Women have been known to enjoy the act as much as a man."

Rebecca stiffened, not wanting to hear about other women Stephen had done the same things to as he did to her. She did not want to know of his intimacy with another female body. Even if it had happened long ago, she did not want to hear about it.

"I do not know how else to say I like what you do, Stephen."

His features softened.

"All right, my sweet. If you say that is true, then I will believe you." He kissed her on the mouth. "Goodnight, Rebecca."

She lay in the dark by his side listening to his slow breathing. Oft times, he left her to cross the hall to his own room and she thought he went down the hall once toward the locked door. She did not hear his return, and she wondered if Malvina waited there for him. With the perfume Stephen did not wish Rebecca to use.

She thought of Grinwold, of Lady Elizabeth still a prisoner of Sir Oliver. She, Rebecca, had escaped. She might still be owned by a man but, at least, Sir Stephen did not use a strap on her. And he was as gentle as any man could be, she supposed, who demanded a woman's body for his pleasure.

Her biggest regret was not being able to see Richard, to sing to him, to recite silly poems to him—and sometimes, serious ones. Yes, she sorely missed her gentle brother, the only one at Grinwold who had truly loved her.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

She sighed and turned her head on the pillow to look at Stephen as he slept only to see his eyes wide open looking back at her.

"Is something wrong, Rebecca?"

"No, Stephen. Nothing."

His long arm slid across her to pull her close to him. He pushed her thick hair back and pillowed her head on his shoulder.

"Then go to sleep," he said.

They slept all night in each other's arms and were still wrapped closely together when Malvina opened the door the next morning.

The maid stared at the couple a long time before she stepped closer to the bed.

"Sir Stephen, a messenger from King Henry awaits you in the great hall."

King Henry's message summoned Stephen to London and after a fortnight, she had heard nothing. It was the first of many summonses, and Rebecca learned that when the king sent for Stephen, it meant immediate departure, sometimes for long periods. Surprised, she realized she missed him and did not like sleeping alone as much as she once did.

Impatiently, she awaited Stephen's return.

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Chapter Five

Winter swept in cold and blustery, and the rocky cliffs rose bleakly through constant fogs. Rebecca roamed alone over the broad lands of Stephen's property, walking along the rough coastline, climbing the jutting rock cliffs at water's edge. She rode Tor who, after his first suspicious acceptance of her, became a loyal follower.

Bundy gave up trying to convince her she would come to harm with the unpredictable animal and watched as the two, girl and huge stallion, became close friends.

He envied Tor.

Rebecca rode Tor short distances at first, and then they ventured farther and farther until sometimes they returned home at dusk on the short winter days.

Malvina disapproved.

"Sir Stephen will come home one day and catch you riding Tor," she told Rebecca more than once.

"Will he beat me?"

"No, my lady, he will not beat you, but he has a most fierce temper, and he will be angry."

Rebecca had seen him angry.

"Anger does not hurt, Malvina." She turned to look at her maid. "You were right that it doesn't hurt to sleep with Sir Stephen now. I like it."

To her surprise, Malvina blushed and hurried away. Rebecca watched her go, and her heart felt funny. Malvina

had been Stephen's lover, she was certain now, and plainly, was still in love with him.

It is sad we cannot have the ones we love, Rebecca thought. Malvina loves Sir Stephen, but if he loved the tall, auburn-haired woman, why did they not marry? He does not care that I do not say I love him, and he never tells me he loves me.

She sighed.

At least, we do not lie to each other. But she wondered at the odd emptiness inside her just the same.

* * * *

The weather improved and Rebecca worked with Aubin in the garden, cutting away dead brambles and dragging the summer's trash into neat piles to be hauled behind the outbuildings. Dead rosebushes along the tope of the stone fence needed to be removed to allow for new spring vines, and she had climbed on a box to pull them away.

"Rebecca! What the devil are you doing up there?" The boom of Sir Stephen's voice was unexpected.

Surprised, she whirled and her foot slid over the edge of the box. She tried to catch the top of the wall but succeeded only in grabbing the bush she was clipping. She gave a cry as dry thorns ripped the palm of her hand as she tumbled into Stephen's arms.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded, holding her close.

She whimpered.

"My hand."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she stared into his face so close to hers. "Oh, Stephen, I am happy to see you." Her arms went around his neck, and she snuffled into his collar before giving him a teary smile.

He stared for an instant into tear-brightened blue eyes, and then kissed her hard on the mouth.

"Let me see your hand." He stood her down and examined her palm. He picked several thorns from the soft skin, and then kissed it. Blood stained his lips. "Come, Rebecca, let us attend this."

Inside the great hall, Malvina hurried to meet them.

"Sir Stephen, no message came you were to arrive. Your room..."

" 'Tis not important, Malvina. Bring ointment for Lady Rebecca's hand."

Malvina hesitated, and then turned away. Stephen had barely smiled at Malvina after all his time away from home.

"Come, Rebecca." Stephen led her toward the front parlor. Once inside the room, he turned to her.

His mouth was bloodstained where he had kissed her hand. The sight of her own blood on Stephen's mouth sent a tremor of something akin to pain into her small breasts, and she felt them swell. They ached. She wanted to touch Stephen's mouth. Even more, she wanted his mouth on her aching breasts. Her eyes widened as she stared at him.

What's the matter with me? Without any effort at all she remembered the last time Stephen made love to her the morning before he left for London. Her body had ...

"Stephen?"

"The poultice, my lord," Malvina said, handing him a soft cloth laden with thick ointment.

Without a word, Stephen placed the cloth over Rebecca's palm, rubbing gently to remove blood and any stray thorns remaining there.

"I will have food, Malvina," he said, finally giving the maid a smile. He looked back at his wife. "Have you dined, Rebecca?"

"I am not hungry, but I will sit with you." She smiled at Malvina and saw her blush before turning away. "You did not answer my question, Stephen," she went on as he bound her hand.

"And what question is that, Rebecca?"

"Did you solve the royal problems?"

"I think not. Both are right and both are wrong. One mere man cannot hope to reconcile them."

"But you are not a mere man, my lord, you..."

"Rebecca," he said, "have you forgotten my name again so soon?"

"Forgive me, Stephen." She half-curtsied and smiled. "You were gone so long I remember you only as 'my lord.' I will do better."

"See that you do. Meanwhile, I will refresh your memory in other things."

At his words, the heat returned to her body. She moistened her lips and wondered how to tell Stephen her feelings.

He had been looking at her hand, now he raised his head to meet a hot, liquid blue gaze from his wife. His body

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

hardened instantly. Rebecca had never looked at him that way. He hadn't known she could. It was definitely the expression of a woman who wanted the man who held her.

He rose slowly, pulling her with him. "My lady."

He'd never spoken to her in that tone of voice. It set her heart to pounding, her pulse to fluttering. Her body turned to liquid, hot liquid, and melted against him. He wrapped his arms around her, nudged her head back and stared into her half-closed eyes.

"You're mine, and I want you. Right now. I can't wait. I want inside of you, Rebecca, want to be wrapped around you, all of you."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Her arms were around his neck, her mouth seeking his.

When his lips crushed hers, hers parted, and his tongue darted inside, boldly in and out, touching off flames in secret parts of her that she didn't know could burn. She wanted his hands and mouth on every part of her. The bed rustled as they fell across it, Stephen holding her on top of him.

"Stephen, Malvina. Your food."

"Can wait." He pulled her blouse open. "I can't." His mouth closed over her nipple. She shivered and began moving over him, her heated center rubbing against his thick arousal. His mouth moved to the other breast, and he sucked hard, drawing the small swollen flesh as far inside as he could get it. He slid his tongue over and around the nipple, strewn kisses across to the other side, sucked and pulled, kissed and sucked again.

"Stephen."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

He muttered something she didn't understand, and then he rolled over so that he was on top of her.

"Help me get you out of these clothes." He struggled with hooks and buttons, and finally ripped her blouse away, yanking off the skirt and her underclothes. Then he sat back on his haunches and looked at her. His eyes started at her head, the rumpled hair, swollen lips, unfocused gaze. He bent to kiss her forehead, her nose, her mouth, trailed kisses down her throat, hesitated at her breasts. He couldn't resist them and ran his tongue across them again and again.

She shivered and felt hot between her legs. What was happening to her?

Stephen's caresses moved down across her flat stomach, kissing, licking, and torturing her. She moaned and reached down to tangle her hands in his thick hair. She didn't want him to stop, but was it right for him to kiss her thighs?

His mouth moved away from her, and she sucked in her breath, relieved that he'd stopped, but somehow disappointed.

It was then he put his mouth to her heated center and his tongue slid inside her.

She couldn't breathe. Her heart actually stopped, she knew it did. Then as he kissed and sucked and caressed with his tongue, she felt as though she were being lifted on a cloud, her body completely melted. Tremors shook her. She screamed and held his head tightly to her until she simply flew apart.

Then he was inside her, plunging in and out. A hand on each hip, he hung on as he drove into her. She had no

strength to move, but he moved for them both. Even as she knew he was about to collapse on her, her own body reared up and demanded another release. She brought her legs around, locked them over his pumping hips.

"Now," he said and plunged.

It was Stephen who shouted as he poured his seed into her, and she would have cried out if she'd had the strength as they catapulted off the earth and into a shattering unknown.

He lay on top of her, unable to move. She became aware of his weight, knew that he was still inside of her, and she wanted to keep him there.

She kissed his throat, running her tongue alongside his ear. He shivered and groaned.

"Will you do this to me again sometime?" she said.

He raised his head to stare at her.

"Rebecca." He couldn't think of anything to say. He'd made love to her as he would to a more experienced woman—and she wanted it again.

He laughed and kissed her.

"Yes, my lady. Anytime you like."

"Are you still hungry?"

"You satisfied my most ravenous appetite, but yes, I still need food." He sat up. "I imagine Malvina is keeping the food warm."

Rebecca blushed. It didn't seem right that Malvina should know when Stephen made love to her. But then, she was his wife. It was his right to make love to her anytime, anywhere, wasn't it?

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Stephen made few demands on her as the months passed. Often, he was gone, acting as emissary for the king or in his position as the king's reeve, taking care of the vast kingdom. On his return journey, he stopped in Salisbury to go over progress on the new manor house being constructed there. When it was finished, he could then spend part of his time nearer to London and not have so far to travel when on his king's business.

When he came home to Glastonbury, he was preoccupied with things other than his wife and spent hours behind the closed doors of the large room at the front of the hall, working on books and papers. Rebecca didn't bother him, neither did she return to the locked bedroom. She went willingly into his arms now and looked forward to the times he made love to her, sometimes gently, sometimes as though he lost control as he had that one time when he'd bound her bloody hand. But he didn't mention it again.

* * * *

Spring and summer passed swiftly, and Rebecca spent her time riding Tor or in the garden with Aubin. She reveled in the giant-sized horse's acceptance of her, in his obvious enjoyment of their outings. In truth, she knew he endured her because of the choice morsels she brought him, but she preferred to deceive herself just as she did when Stephen came to her bed. As though it were for her alone, rather than satisfying a demanding male need. Then there was no further use of her. She did not know why this knowledge caused a small sadness in her, but it did.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Aubin had become as her shadow. Simple and kind, the big man watched after Rebecca as though she were a child rather than the lady of Sir Stephen's manor. She loved the outdoors, as did Aubin who cared naught to be inside thick walls whether the sun shone or cold mist swept in from the cliffs. He and Rebecca wandered the lonely, forbidding shores, and often their voices were raised in spirited ballads, off-key and raucous, startling the gulls and wild geese along the rocky span, their laughter free and uncaring.

* * * *

Stephen swung from atop Tor, ran his hand along the strong neck, talking to the big horse. They had galloped for miles, enjoying the brisk air of late fall, the misty smell of the water coming over Moon Cliffs. He had few chances to ride his favorite steed and had been afraid the horse would grow lazy and fat without exercise. But Tor seemed fit, seldom breathing hard unless they climbed many of the hills on his vast land holdings.

"Good boy," he murmured as he brushed the sleek muscled body. He looked up as Bundy came in sight.

"I will brush Tor, my lord," the boy said.

"I like brushing Tor, Bundy. You take care of him all the time and it does not bother me to work a bit."

"Yes, my lord." Bundy thought better of telling him he seldom brushed Tor. Rebecca performed that chore just as Sir Stephen was doing now. She took much care of the big stallion she loved to ride.

Stephen finished his task and gave Tor a pat on his rump, sending him into his stable. As he turned, he saw Rebecca walking towards him.

A year has changed the child, he thought. The clothing purchased that first week in Glastonbury was much tighter, hugging a still-small waist, but one at least an inch larger than a year ago.

Seventeen.

Was that her age now? He did not know her birth date. He frowned. He knew little about his wife. He knew her body, it was young and tender, and he still winced away from remembering when he took her that first time. It had to be. He had been long without a woman and was not interested in having a wife. But when Lord Oliver bargained for the return of his lands with a sixteen-year-old daughter, Stephen had suddenly become insane and agreed. Since they were married, it was senseless to not satisfy his natural needs with his own wife.

It was actually a big advantage having a wife at home. When he traveled to the courts in London or Troyes, he no longer had to give reasons for not wanting to sleep with willing ladies. He merely kept his hand with the wide gold band in evidence. It did not hinder all the invitations, but he claimed a deep love for his wife and his wish to remain faithful. Few believed him, but he cared not. He had no desire to play stud to their sexual desires.

He watched Rebecca now and recalled their lovemaking weeks ago when she'd surprised him with her wild response. Her body had been hot and wet and ready for him, and his

complete satisfaction afterwards still brought a contented feeling inside.

Rebecca waved to him and started on a run down the hill. Her hair, loose and far below her shoulders, blew back from her thin face. The full skirt fit against her body as she ran into the wind. She was laughing, reaching out to him.

A strange tightness filled his throat, and before he realized it, his loins filled with hot desire for her. She flung herself into his arms, and he brought her tightly against him, pushing his hardness into her. He looked down into the bright blue eyes and saw them change. Her lips were parted and very pink over the edge of her teeth.

"Stephen?"

He bent to place his mouth over hers. He picked her up and carried her around to the back stall where fresh hay had been piled to feed the stock. He put her down and lay lightly on top of her, his body barely touching hers. She was pink and white, fresh and clean, like a just-bathed baby. Her mouth was warm and wet, her arms tight around him, eyes wide and expectant.

"Say you want me."

Rebecca stared into the deep blue eyes so close to hers. Was this, then, what wanting was? This tightly urgent feeling in the bottom of her stomach, this coiling inside, ready to spring loose at Stephen's touch? At the entrance of his hard arousal into her body? Just like the other time when his mouth had touched her all over. Just like ...

"I w-want you, m-my lord," she whispered. "Please do not be angry, my lord. I do not know how..."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Her voice drifted away as his mouth found hers and his hands moved with surety. He did not undress them but shoved clothing aside enough to allow his body to touch hers.

"Bundy." She tried to protest and grunted as Stephen found the entrance to her body and pushed himself deep inside her.

He lay still, partially raised on his elbows, staring into her face. "If Bundy does not know a husband and wife do such things, it is time he learned."

"Yes, my lord."

She couldn't explain to Stephen why she insisted on 'my lord,' could not tell him it was her substitute for 'my love' when he was inside her. It was a part of the odd yearning she felt so often.

"Rebecca." He spoke her name with strength, and then forgot what he was going to say. He moved in and out slowly at first, then more quickly, and then buried his face in her hair to muffle the uncontrollable shout as he drove himself time after time into her softness.

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Chapter Six

Rebecca was unhappy.

"You'll be away for Christmas, Stephen? But, 'tis our first one together.

Surely..."

He leaned across the corner of the table where they were eating hot bread with honey and cupped her small chin in one big hand.

" 'Tis the king and queen's wish I attend their Christmas celebrations since it is one of the few times they are at the royal palace together. You may travel with me if you like." He smiled as her eyes widened and became bottomless blue lakes.

"Oh, could I?" She frowned. "I have no clothing suitable. My wedding dress would not..."

"No, it would not. You will pack only what you need for the journey, and we will purchase suitable clothing for you." His eyes teased as they swept her breasts, fuller now than a year ago and pushing impudently against the blouse she wore. "It would seem it is time to do so."

She blushed, following his glance, and felt the warmth through her body as though he touched her. Several times lately, for no reason, she recalled the afternoon they made love in the stables. Since that day, she could not smell the pleasant aroma of fresh hay without remembering his fierce possession of her body, or her own response. The

strangeness inside her was new. She did not recognize the gentle ripples of feeling he left after loving her.

For days afterwards, she would catch herself smiling and would run her hands lightly over her body, almost feeling Stephen's hands caressing, searching, and exploring her most intimate parts. A delightful shivering sent waves of strange sensations racing through her body. They were satisfying, whatever they were, and she liked to think of them—and she wanted more.

"May I have a gown such as fancy ladies wear?" she said.

"Several, if you want them, Rebecca." He watched her lively expression. "You should buy clothing enough so you may visit Sir Oliver and Lady Elizabeth as soon as the weather improves."

"And Richard." Rebecca leaned her elbows on the table.

"Oh, I really would like to see Richard."

Stephen's brows climbed. "What about Lord and Lady Grinwold?"

She shrugged. "Yes."

He didn't miss the brief look of hurt that surfaced before she looked down at her plate. Rebecca had not forgiven Sir Oliver for trading her to pay a gambling debt, or Elizabeth for letting her go without protest. She never spoke of home, did not mention missing her parents, and did not refer to the bargain that had made her his wife.

Stephen continued to look at Rebecca. Mayhap she did not forgive him for accepting her in exchange for his lien against her father's land holdings.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

A pang of sympathy caused him to sit up straight. What was the child thinking? She didn't whine or complain. She came into his arms when he demanded it of her, but she had never offered herself to him of her own free will. When he cried out passionately, whispering emotional words as he claimed her body, she responded by holding him tightly. Other women he had made love to might shout or cry out or moan or call his name, but Rebecca seldom made a sound.

The one exception, he recalled, was the day he'd practically eaten her alive. That day, she'd cried out his name, her body had writhed in response, her arms had held tightly. She'd been everything he could want in a woman, returned hot kiss for hot kiss, until they both moaned, until both bodies had sizzled with pent-up emotions. He couldn't remember ever being as satisfied as after that coupling. His body hardened at the memory.

Strange child, he thought now as she rose to leave the table. He got up and followed her, turning once to glance at Malvina who had stopped in the doorway of the food preparation room. When he walked on toward the stairway, he found Rebecca waiting for him, deep blue eyes swinging from him to Malvina. A strange thrill shot through his heart at the look in her eyes and familiar heat raced through his already aroused body.

Inside Rebecca's bedroom, he hesitated.

"May I stay?"

"I am yours, my lord."

Eyes glinting darkly, he strode to where she stood and looked down into the upturned innocent face. He sat on the

edge of the bed and yanked her across his knees, pulling her skirt up as he did so.

"I promised you this, Rebecca," he said, "if you could not learn to call me by my name."

He smacked her bare bottom three times before she could utter a protest, then he shoved her off and grasped her shoulders to hold her up to him.

"Yes, you are mine, but I am *not* your lord. I am Stephen, and I am your husband."

He pulled her roughly into his arms, his lips closing over hers, opening and closing again, feeling the softness of her full lips, the wetness of her open mouth. Even as he closed his eyes against the sight of her startled expression, he could see the pale roundness of her bottom, the pinkness left by the striking of his big hand on firm flesh. The memory set flame to his desire, and he was forced to remind himself to be gentle with her, else his roused passion would punish Rebecca rather than please her. He bit along her jaw, her ear lobe, his tongue roughly caressing her throat, dipping beneath the low neck of her blouse.

He hooked two fingers into the material and ripped it. The fullness of her breasts hung invitingly near, and he unhesitatingly fastened his mouth over the brown circle with the tiny nubbed center.

"Ah-hh-h." He moaned and covered her with lingering licks, sucked hard, then kissed gently. She clung to him, one hand holding his head against her, and he heard her tight gasps of breath.

He pushed her onto the bed, yanked her skirt away and lay on top of her. His hands slid along her sides to the flare of her hips, his thumbs moving over her belly down to her thighs. Raising himself, he moved his hands until his thumbs met over her belly, then slowly lowered them until they rested over the silky fur triangle between her legs. He parted the soft flesh, letting the edges of his fingers press into the fresh moistness of the opening.

He feasted his eyes on the picture in front of him, lifted his gaze to meet the languid expression on Rebecca's face, and inched upward so their bodies met thigh to thigh.

"Put me inside of you." His command was a hoarse whisper.

She hesitated, her tongue whisking over her lips to leave a moist shine.

"Do as I ask, Rebecca. Do it now. I cannot last much longer."

Her hands slid from his shoulders, along his bare chest to the flatness of his hard stomach. There she encountered the huge pulsing organ.

Stephen closed his eyes.

"Yes. That is the way. Now, now ... please."

He wanted to go slowly, told himself to wait, but with each passing moment, it became more difficult.

He had never begged for her caresses before, and Rebecca stared at the strained expression on his face, unaware of his inner fight to be tender, at least this one time, be tender in his possession of her. She closed her fingers around him, and

they gasped together, he in ecstasy, she in surprise at the smooth feel of her husband's hardness.

"I will help you," he said. "Just, just ... yes, ah-ahh-aaah."

It took a long time for him to settle completely inside her, Rebecca thought, touching his face easily, tracing her fingers through his beard, and placing her hands on his shoulders once more. He filled her, but still he strained to go deeper, pushing his hips down, down, until she was sure her print would be forced into the mattress.

He cupped her hips, holding her so that they were as though nailed together, not room for a breath of air between their bodies. Then he began to move, slowly, slowly, but only for a moment.

"Rebecca, Rebecca." His entire body quivered, and then he was lost, his pulsing, blood-filled instrument beyond control. "Put your legs over me, help me, give me all of you. Move with me."

"I can't"

"Yes. Yes, you can. Do it. Now." He ground his teeth together, straining to withhold his final plunge, knowing he couldn't last.

She brought her legs up and moved her hips, then stared into his face, and saw sweat on his brow.

"Oh."

"Oh, yes, oh, Rebecca." His mouth crushed hers and he plunged time and again until he exploded, flooding her with his hot juices.

Their bodies shuddered and shuddered until finally Stephen collapsed on her. Rigid jerks continued for a time, and then he gave a long drawn-out sigh and lay still.

Beneath him, Rebecca continued to hold his shoulder, sliding her fingers over the hard smooth flesh, somehow enjoying just the feel of Stephen inside of her. Her body vibrated from the sting where he had swatted her to the tips of her fingers. It would be nice to sleep like this.

It did not last long, the quiet enjoyment of his body. He began to move inside her once more and this time, he didn't have to urge her to move with him. She moved in rhythm with him, her legs across his hips, meeting each thrust with her own, delighted at the power she had to satisfy her husband.

She heard his rough gasp and opened her eyes to stare into the tense face above hers. He smiled and his mouth came hard on hers, tongue thrusting into her mouth, his moans echoing in her throat. He made a last deep plunge, holding fast as he filled her with his hot seed.

* * * *

"You travel to London with Sir Stephen?" Malvina smoothed the heavy wool skirt she was packing for Rebecca. "You will be in the royal court at Christmas time?"

"Yes." Rebecca brushed at the blonde tangle of hair she had unpinned, wondering what she would do with it to curb its wildness when she met the king and queen. She turned to Malvina, holding the long fall away from her head. "Do you not think I should cut a little from this?"

"Sir Stephen prefers long hair."

"For truth, Malvina?"

She eyed the thick length of deep rust-colored hair on her maidservant's head. Really, she envied Malvina. Her own hair was fine as silk and the color of grain as it ripened, separating in strands across her thin shoulders if not braided properly.

I suppose you know he prefers long hair because you keep yours just for him, she thought as she turned to look once more into the mirror. Stephen liked to play with her hair after he made love to her. Did he do the same to Malvina? She winced away from the thought. She could not bear to think of her husband with her maidservant.

Sometimes she was certain Stephen went to the door near his room, the locked door. Was Malvina there waiting for him? She wondered, but she did not ask. She did not look. She did not wish to know.

"It would be easier to arrange were it shorter," she said.

"If I had a dressmaker's shears."

She didn't have shears, so what was the use of thinking? She twisted her hair into a thick rope and wound it around her head, pinning it tightly, then turned to find Malvina watching her, green eyes bright with the strange look Rebecca had seen before.

"Rebecca?" Her husband's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Malvina moved to the door and opened it to admit Stephen. He stooped to prevent bumping his head and smiled as he moved towards her.

"We are ready to leave."

"Malvina has everything ready to go on the carriage." She watched the maid as she fastened the clothes case.

"A pleasant journey, my lady," Malvina said when they reached the outside. She stood back as Stephen took Rebecca's arm and helped her into the carriage.

Rebecca waved to Aubin who sat on the driver's seat, straight and neat in his gold-braided waistcoat, his scarred face twisted with the familiar happy expression he wore when about to drive his master's carriage on a trip to London. Today, even more so.

Rebecca settled into her side of the coach, thrilled at the thought of the trip with Stephen. It had been a long time since her last visit to London, only once since she was in school, and that had been one of the times mama didn't have any money to spend because Sir Oliver had gambled it away. This would be different. New clothing, Stephen said, to wear to the Christmas celebrations and to meet the king and queen.

"Will I really meet Queen Eleanor?" She was almost bouncing with happiness.

"Yes. And King Henry."

She hesitated over her next question. Stephen did not encourage questions about his work, but she knew part of his job as the king's trusted manorial officer was to work to keep the royal couple from quarreling. Most of the quarrels were over their children, but a lot were over the king's lady friends.

"Do the king and queen quarrel during Christmas, Stephen?"

"They always quarrel, Rebecca. I do not think they could abide each other without doing so, but do not worry, little one. We will keep them separated as much as is possible so quarreling will not be easy."

"Is it true what the London gossips say?"

"And where do you hear what gossips say in London when you live a great distance from them?"

"Malvina has a cousin who has a cousin working in the royal courts and a letter now and then tells about the king and a lady friend." She glanced from beneath long lashes at him. "A lady friend who is not Queen Eleanor."

His hand rested on the wool mantle covering her lap. "Do not heed gossip, Rebecca. Especially do not heed gossip about the king and queen."

"But they are the best subjects, are they not?"

He nodded. "Still, do not pass along words you do not know to be true. We are subjects of the king, and we owe our loyalty and our lives to him. Is this not true?"

"I suppose so."

She frowned and turned to look out the window at snow-covered fields, a lone shepherd's shack with a thin gray plume of smoke the only dot on the desolate land. After a long moment, she turned to find Stephen's eyes on her.

"I would not like to live with you and quarrel all the time. I would not like you to have a lady friend."

His eyebrows climbed and formed jagged peaks above his eyes.

"We will not quarrel as long as you do as you are told and are a good wife, Rebecca. Nor do I need a lady friend as long as you are in my bed."

Heat colored her cheeks, and she could not meet his eyes. It seemed lately he came often to her bed, and there were times she waited for him, her body alive and longing for his touch. He had taught her how to respond to him, and she believed she was getting good at it. It felt so good to give her body to him. He was mostly gentle except for those times he seemed to want her so badly he could not take time to be gentle. Even those times were enjoyable and made her feel as though her body were alive, really alive.

Was he saying Malvina did not interest him as a woman? What of the nights he went to the locked bedroom down the hall?

"Does the knowledge make you happy, Rebecca?"

"Yes, my lord," she said, then quickly, "Yes, Stephen."

He laughed—a deep sound in his chest beneath the embroidered neck of his chainse. The fur-lined pellice opened enough so Rebecca glimpsed the width of his shoulders. He was a strong man, her husband, but even with his strength when he struck her bare bottom, he had not hurt her. Still, she did not care to incur his wish to take such a liberty with her in the carriage with Aubin sitting above them.

"You will learn, my lady," he said.

They stopped for the night at a crossroads tavern. The old woman who showed them to a small room separated from the great room where other travelers slept grinned at them to show toothless gums.

" 'Tis clean," she said, her words not quite plain. "'Tis small, but clean," she repeated, then added, "Bread and cold lamb will be served should you want food, my lord."

"Thank you, Madam," Stephen said, holding the door for the old woman to pass through.

She stared at him, unaccustomed to politeness coming her way, especially from someone who was unmistakably from the upper class. Mumbling to herself, she shuffled down the hallway and down the stairs.

Rebecca sat on the edge of the bed, bouncing a little to make her feet touch the floor.

"You are tired?"

"No, Stephen. I am happy."

He frowned as he looked down at her. "And are you not always happy, Rebecca?"

Her hands had been sliding back and forth over the bright squares of the bed cover but now they ceased their movements. She stared at her slippers, muddy from walking through the courtyard of the tavern with puddles from a recent snowmelt.

How could she tell him she liked being with him away from Malvina? How could she say how glad she was he saw fit to let her travel with him this time? Would he scorn the feelings of warmth she felt when he took her arm to help her into or out of the carriage?

"Yes, my lord," she finally answered and looked up to see the familiar glint in his eyes. She smiled and slid from the bed. "Stephen, my husband," she said and curtsied.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

He swooped her up in his arms, kissed her soundly on the mouth, and put her down once more. "I am starving, woman. Let us go eat before they feed it to the dogs."

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Chapter Seven

Stephen had never seen the queen look lovelier, nor had he noticed before the lines gathering near the intensely alive gray eyes. She still shared her coquettish smile, showing small white teeth, with royalty and burghers alike, favoring them with looks designed to bring them to their knees. Stephen was no exception. After six children, her body was tight and slim with firm breasts, and he found it hard to imagine her youngest son had been born only the previous September.

Queen Eleanor was partial to the man who looked after her husband's vast holdings, and she was not ignorant of the fact Sir Stephen played a big part in keeping peace in the royal family. Now, she looked down on Stephen's bowed head, at the thick blond curls lying along the collar of a chainse of black, embroidered with red and gold silk threads. Few men could wear black and look well. Stephen could.

"Sir Stephen." The queen watched him rise. Beside him was Lady Rebecca, his wife of little more than a year.

Last Christmas, he had come alone, but this year he had asked permission to bring Rebecca. Graciously, the queen agreed, but now wasn't certain she had done the right thing. Stephen's time would not be all hers when she needed him. With Henry's newest ladylove settled into the best rooms in Woodstock, she needed all of Stephen's courtly attention. Henry had long since forgotten she was his wife of many years, but chose to bring his new lovers even into the home

that had once been her favorite. No more. The queen's heart twisted. She would never live in Woodstock again because it would always have the smell and feel of one of Henry's many lovers. Her chin elevated. She would not weep any more over a faithless husband, even if he were the king.

"Bring Lady Rebecca to sit with me, Stephen," Eleanor said. "You may go play games with your king while we talk as women will."

Stephen realized he was being dismissed, but he hesitated a second, his glance straying to Rebecca. He took a second look. Instead of the shy woman-child who did not care for strangers and who claimed to be unable to talk to royalty, his wife gazed in open admiration at her queen. Her eyes were bright with questions, and he had no doubt that Queen Eleanor was in for a lively conversation, that she would have to pay attention to keep up with Rebecca's quick mind.

He could only hope Rebecca would refrain from mentioning the king's obsession with women other than the queen. If he let himself wonder, he might spend an uneasy evening in the presence of the king.

He seated Rebecca, careful of the long silk skirt of purple he had purchased only the day before and spread it so it would not bind. He straightened, looked at Rebecca then at Eleanor, thinking Rebecca is lovelier than the queen. And has a much better temper. Of course, if he had to put up constantly with King Henry's moods, he would not be easy to live with, either. At least he could leave the royal company and go home when his business with the king was finished. Nor did he have to wonder if Rebecca were waiting for him.

She always was, and though he wouldn't care to admit it to her, his first thoughts upon arriving at Glastonbury were of Rebecca.

Now Stephen bowed, murmured his goodbye which neither woman heard, so involved were they already in female subjects. He found his way to the great room where he knew a game of chance would be in progress. He glanced around, happy to find Sir Oliver was not among the gentry gathered for the Christmas celebrations. He wished Rebecca to enjoy her stay in London, and having Lord Oliver there would not be to her liking.

"When do you move into the new manor house, Rebecca?" Eleanor said.

Her maidservant had just placed tea and pastries in front of them, and she watched the younger woman study the tempting foods. She glanced down at her waistline that had expanded after giving birth to six children. Then she looked at Rebecca's slender frame and sighed with envy.

An adorable child, she thought. But Stephen deserves such a wife after losing Lady Mary many winters ago. He is too young not to have a good wife. Still, he had not lacked for female company and, she was sure, a bed companion as well. She herself, thought at one time ...

Eleanor leaned back in the gold velvet chair designed especially to enhance her coloring and smiled at Rebecca.

"Stephen says the manor house will not be ready soon if he does not find the time to..."

Rebecca raised guilty eyes to the queen. She had been about to say 'time to oversee the ordering of stone.' Stephen

had once grumbled that King Henry's demands left little time to tend his own affairs.

Eleanor nodded because she agreed with Stephen and did not find fault with the complaint.

"You will be closer to London, so you may come more often with Stephen." She leaned forward. "Tell me, does Malvina still reside at Glastonbury?"

"Yes, Your Highness, she is my maidservant." She did not add her misgivings about the woman's attention to her husband. Stephen would not like her to gossip with his queen. Especially about Malvina.

"She quite often accompanied Stephen and Mary when they came to court."

Mary, Stephen's dead wife. He never mentioned her and the one time Rebecca asked Malvina about Mary, she had seemed loathe to talk about her.

"Stephen's wife. What was she like?" Learning about Mary surely would not be considered idle gossip.

"Mary was beautiful. Red hair and green eyes. A gentlewoman. Stephen did not soon get over her."

If Stephen still loved her, Rebecca should, at the least, know the woman she could never replace.

And what about Malvina? Rebecca wanted to ask of her queen, but that would be gossip, which Stephen forbade.

"Come, let us talk about happy times. Minstrels will gather at evening meal to celebrate. I have a friend who is a troubadour, and he will read for us."

Rebecca forgot Malvina. Not since school had she heard a reading of poetry and her heart speeded up at the thought of enjoying it once more.

"Oh, I will so love it," she said and was rewarded with Eleanor's approving smile.

"I will send a maidservant to help you dress, my dear," the queen said. "It is only fitting that Sir Stephen's wife have her own attendant."

The queen inclined her head at Rebecca's sweeping curtsy and watched the graceful movements of the slender body as she walked away.

Ah, Stephen, she thought. I somewhat envy your young bride the times in your arms. Many are the moments I have spent thinking of such, but ...

"Henry's romantic thoughts seem only to surface at Christmas." She had complained to Stephen in the few moments she engaged him in conversation. "I take great pains not to become with child again at my age."

Stephen had nodded in agreement with her but didn't speak. Indeed, she did not wish an answer. This special reeve of his majesty was the only one she would speak her mind to and know he would not repeat her words. Her thoughts had been centered on other things as she went on speaking of Henry.

"He allows his own feelings to interfere with his duties, Stephen. I do not like Sir Thomas, but Henry appointed him as archbishop, and now he must live with his mistake. Sir Thomas thinks himself lord of all and above the kingdom itself. Henry is a hard man to understand in the best of times,

but Thomas pushed him so it was certain to come to this. Now Henry tries to wreak childish vengeance on Thomas because he feels betrayed by someone he brought out of poverty to the highest honor. You have not seen rage such as when Thomas fled to France before Henry could bring charges against him."

She seemed to shake herself before adding, "But somehow, Henry's feelings toward me have been a bit better since that time. Mayhap it took his friend's betrayal to let him know I am here." She smiled at Stephen. "You must listen to our tirades each time you visit, so it is no wonder you wait until summoned before visiting the royal chambers."

"I am at your service, your majesty," Stephen said.

What Eleanor said was true. The only time he appeared in London anymore was when summoned or time for his reports came. He much preferred staying at Glastonbury, seeing to his lands, talking with the men who worked them—and going home to Rebecca at the end of each day.

"I am your friend as well," he said.

That the queen sometimes thought she'd like him to be more than a friend never crossed Stephen's mind. She was his queen, she was royalty, and he did not think disloyal thoughts of either the king or queen.

He was happy the queen made no mention of the new lady in the king's life. It was enough that gossip of the mysterious Lady Rosamond passed among servants and attendants. He preferred not to contribute to Eleanor's misery.

"Yes, Stephen, you are a good friend, and I thank you," the queen said.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Why could not Thomas be as Stephen—a friend as well as a loyal subject to King Henry? And why could Henry not desire her as Stephen's eyes said he desired Rebecca?

* * * *

The young woman Queen Eleanor promised her appeared to help Rebecca dress just as the bells began to ring heralding the beginning of the evening's festivities. The room given to Rebecca and Stephen was in the back of the castle with a wide window overlooking a garden, a garden now ragged and dark-streaked from yesterday's light snowfall.

Stephen told her he had used this same room on other trips into London so as to be near the king while giving his reports on royal holdings.

"I'm happy to have you with me this time, Rebecca," Stephen said.

She stood in front of him to straighten the gold embroidered chainse. So handsome, she thought, as she secured a hook. Stephen is better looking by far than King Henry. She giggled. The king had this ring of rusty hair around the edge of ...

"And what is funny, Rebecca?" Stephen's hands came up and fastened on her hips.

She tilted her head back and looked into Stephen's eyes, so dark, with black lashes framing them. Oh, yes, very handsome. And he's mine. At least, all mine for this journey. She refused to think of Malvina waiting back at Glastonbury.

"Funny, my lord?"

His hands tightened and pressed her against him. He forgot what he'd asked her as he gazed into her laughing eyes. He wanted her with a sudden fierce heat that hardened his body.

"I haven't time, Rebecca," he said. His breath was coming rapidly, and he opened and closed his fingers around her arms.

"Time for what, my lord?"

"Time for you." He yanked her to him and closed his mouth over hers, slid his tongue inside her parted lips, and suckled.

She went limp against him, but her arms went up and she linked fingers behind his neck. Her body moved in sinuous rhythm with his, and she delighted in the feel of his arousal pressing into her belly. She sighed as he lifted his head.

"Rebecca?" By God's eye, he wanted to relieve the desire he read in her eyes and rid himself of the clawing demand inside his own body.

"Stephen." She opened her eyes—saw the fiery emotion in his face. Her heart soared with the knowledge she could make him look that way.

He set her away and muttered something she didn't understand, grabbed his gloves from the table and stalked to the door. With the door opened, he turned. His eyes went up and down her slender figure, to the wide eyes, parted pink lips. He shook his head.

"I'll be back," he said.

Rebecca stood with clasped hands and whirling mind and watched him go.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

* * * *

Stephen had gone to present the king with details on taxes and crop yields. And to listen to his complaints about Eleanor, their children, and not the least, Sir Thomas Becket.

"You have collected the taxes well, Stephen," King Henry said, nodding at the papers scattered over the table in front of them. The king drank from a silver goblet at his elbow, peering from beneath thick brows at his noble officer.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Stephen kept his own counsel as to the way his burdened subjects received the king's increased demands. The people grumbled against the vast amounts spent for royal pleasures. For marriages. For knighting of the king's eldest son. For ransom, in case the king should be kidnapped.

Silently, Stephen agreed with them.

"My queen desires to travel to Poitiers immediately after Christmas." Henry scowled into his wine goblet. "The country has taken all my time, and rebellion is still a cross I must consider." He looked up. "Would that you were a knight, Stephen, I would take you into battle, for it is sure to come."

Stephen went still, a thrill of fear for his king and queen uppermost in his thoughts. Had the king's open break with Sir Thomas unsettled his mind? The man who was once Henry's closest friend accused of betrayal, somehow binding the accusation by running away in the middle of the night. The king's thundering condemnation of Sir Thomas had rung through the palace halls, bringing unease to all who heard.

Stephen did not want to think of open warfare that would destroy England.

"I would make a poor soldier, Your Highness," he said. "My hands cannot hold a sword steady as the pen."

"Aye, 'tis true. I need you to do the good job you always do for me." Henry suddenly smiled. "Go then. You have listened enough to my ramblings. Go to Rebecca. Ah, a lovely woman, a lovely woman. You should be proud."

Stephen gratefully took his leave. He would not want his king to know the thoughts he'd had of Rebecca whilst he sat listening to the king's tirade. The heat stayed inside him, and he was anxious to satisfy the need he had for Rebecca. Surprised, he realized she had stayed on his mind most of the time since they'd left home. Usually, he could work on business matters, think about ways to help the king work out his problems, plan different phases of the house in Salisbury, wonder about the planting of crops in the spring.

Lately, he thought a lot about Rebecca.

* * * *

At the royal dinner and dance that night, Rebecca sat at a table between Penelope, Lady Bickford's youngest daughter who giggled at everything, and Lord Botsworth, whose sweaty hands strayed to her knee beneath the table. Tempted to slap his face, Rebecca instead pushed his pudgy fingers away and moved out of his reach.

If he touches me again, I shall spill my water into his lap, mayhap cool him off.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

She raised her head, clear blue eyes searching for her husband and found him easily as he stood head above the men surrounding him. He was smiling at someone's remark, his teeth flashing beneath the thick mustache, when he glanced across the room.

Rebecca stiffened, startled by the deep slash of feeling in her stomach. She wet her lips, conscious of Sir Stephen's darker blue eyes still on her. She recalled vividly his remarks that morning, the way their bodies blended, and the almost vicious wish to have Stephen inside her.

Her cheeks heated, and she looked away, turning to answer Penelope's giggling questions.

Her thoughts remained on Stephen, recalling the odd yearning inside at times after he made love to her. He did not profess to love her. In truth, she knew he did not. She was a wife, a bought-and-paid-for possession one was not required to love. Still, there were times when his tenderness left her dreamy and unsatisfied. When she could never get enough of him, his kisses, his body pounding into hers. She did not know what was wrong with her.

"My lady," Stephen's voice interrupted her musings. "I would have you dance with me."

Encircled by his arms, Rebecca moved to the music of the royal musicians.

"The gown is most becoming, Rebecca. You are lovely."

The gown was blue velvet, one she had chosen their first day in London. It flowed around her, tight over her slim waist, sleeves full and pointed over her small hands. The color

reflected in her eyes and enhanced the pale rose of her soft mouth.

She smiled with pleasure but didn't answer him. Even after he released her to someone else for a dance, he remained nearby. She was conscious of Stephen watching her. Every time she looked up, his eyes were on her. It was early by royal standards when Stephen told her he was ready to leave.

"I have listened to complaints and politics until my ears ring," he said. "I am not paid well enough to linger in this madness."

They wished everyone well and left the great hall.

In the dimness of the hallway, Stephen's arm wrapped around Rebecca as he led her toward their room. Inside, a candle glowed by the bed and another on a table in the adjoining dressing room. The white velvet cover was turned back to reveal pale yellow sheets.

Luxury, Rebecca thought. Oh, it's lovely.

"Would you like me to unhook your dress since Malvina is not about?"

The name brought a slight chill to her but she dismissed it. Malvina was in Glastonbury. Stephen was hers alone, at least for a few more days. She felt his hands at her neck, and then the looseness as the clasps gave. The soft material slid from her shoulders, and his lips brushed the exposed flesh.

"I'll be with you in a few moments," Stephen whispered. "Be ready for me, Rebecca." He moved toward the dressing room.

She gazed at the broadness of her husband's back, the same startled feeling she had at the dance tightening her

stomach. One small hand pressed the flatness beneath the velvet cloth, and she wondered at the difference inside her body.

Her gown put aside, Rebecca went to sit on the side of the bed to brush her hair. It crackled and flew with each stroke of the brush in the cold air. Smoothing it with her fingers, she wound the long gold fall of hair into a single thick rope and let it hang in front of her shoulder. She took a gown of pale blue shimmering cloth from the chest, one she had picked for herself. Stephen had not yet seen it.

"Beautiful."

She turned to face him as he lounged in the doorway. He neither knocked nor signaled a warning when coming to her room, but appeared whenever he chose. It was his right of possession to do so, and Rebecca did not mind.

His waistcoat had been removed, and the richly embroidered silk shirt was unbuttoned and pulled from straight-cut woolen trousers. He crossed the room and pulled her into his arms, his big hand fastening into the fairness of her hair.

She pushed his shirt aside and laid her cheek on the broad chest. The same fiery feeling went through her stomach, but this time, it lingered and slid into her thighs. Her body quivered.

"What, little one?" he said, lifting her chin with one finger. "Mayhap you are glad I share your bed tonight." He brushed her lips with his thumb. "You appear warm—and willing."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Stephen did not often smile so she stared up at him, into laughing blue eyes, a strong wide face, straight nose a bit long over a hard mouth, softened now by the teasing curve.

He was right. She felt the need of his body as much as he needed her—for different reasons. He wished to show his male dominance. Hers was a gentler, uncertain need.

"Yes, Stephen." She brushed her lips across his, and then leaned back to look into his eyes. "I am ready for you. I need you." His eyes widened. "Am I wrong to say such to you?"

"The right words, Rebecca. Those are the right words to say to me, especially tonight."

For weeks, she had known a restless, uneasy contentment around Stephen. She wanted to be with him and dreaded the times he had to be away, even overnight. When he made love to her, she responded, glorying in giving him delight if only for minutes at the time. Sometimes an unholy thrill wracked her body, but Stephen didn't notice nor did she mention it. He appeared not to care whether she responded to his lovemaking as long as his body was satisfied.

Tonight was different. Stephen knew this, as did Rebecca.

He feathered kisses over her forehead, found her ear to breathe words she blushed to hear but reveled in just the same. His hands roamed her body as he kissed her, probing with his tongue. She had become accustomed to that kind of kissing from Stephen, had even learned to enjoy it and, tonight, she opened her mouth willingly, seeking an end to the yearning inside her. She became aware of Stephen's hand tearing at her gown, and then she lay naked beneath him.

"You are lovely," he murmured as he found small breasts waiting for him. He took one into his mouth, suckling, wrapping his tongue to pull until she gasped his name, her body twisting, pushing upward against him.

Releasing her breast, he raised himself over her, his eyes traveling downward. He kissed the flat paleness of her belly and moved so he could view the dark blonde nest between her legs. With a deep growl, he buried his mouth in her warm center. Rebecca cried out, and lost her breath as his tongue plunged inside her. Her body arched upward, and fire consumed her.

An instant later, he was up on his knees over her, parting her thighs, mounting her. He entered her quickly, but only part way, hesitating until her eyes opened,

begging—and he knew it. He smiled but he, too, was trembling, his throbbing hardness eager to be sheathed inside the soft moistness of his wife. A second longer, he restrained himself, and then plunged to bury himself fully inside her. Someone cried out. He neither knew nor cared who as their bodies became one.

She had never been like this, not in the entire year of their marriage. Not even in their recent torrid lovemaking had she responded like this. She was different, special, and she was driving him insane. Her hands were everywhere on him, her mouth open and seeking, her tongue moving with lightning strokes in and out of his mouth, hips surging upward to meet his lightning-quick strokes.

Beneath him, Rebecca writhed, hands pummeling his shoulders, balled fists rubbing up and down his back, then her

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hands opened and fingernails scraped his skin, digging. He did not notice. His heart pounded as he gave into savage desire to possess her, a desire that sparkled and shimmered beyond anything he had ever known while Rebecca went wild under him.

"Stephen, oh, Stephen, my love," she cried out.

He kissed her hard as he drove her against the bed with powerful and uncontrolled thrusts, muffling his own shouts in her hair.

His loins burst, flooding her with his hot seed.

And, so it was the night Rebecca realized she was in love with her husband, the night she conceived his son.

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Chapter Eight

Excitement added color to Rebecca's cheeks as she peered from the carriage window at the snow-covered countryside. Only a few hours and she would see Richard again. And Sir Oliver and Lady Elizabeth, too, of course.

"I will be gone more than a fortnight, Rebecca, as I must see to the finishing of the rooms at the manor house. I will send Aubin with you to travel to Gloucester for a visit with Sir Oliver if you wish."

She was disappointed Stephen did not invite her to go along with him. The trip during the Christmas holidays still warmed her thoughts as she recalled meeting beautiful Queen Eleanor, talking to her about the troubadours who entertained them with songs and readings.

She blushed even more as she remembered Stephen's passionate lovemaking and her own unrestrained response in the large room of the royal palace. For her, it had been special. The way he'd held her, cried out her name as he emptied himself into her. Not once, but several times. The memories were sweet and she held them to herself. She was not sure if it affected Stephen in the same way, and she was reluctant to ask.

Suppose he did not know what she was talking about? Suppose he laughed at her, saying she was becoming wanton as she grew older. No, she would keep the tender yearning for her husband as her own secret.

"You do wish to visit your parents, do you not, Rebecca?"

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"Yes, of course," she said and went to help Malvina lay out what she would take with her.

Now it was only a matter of a few hours until she would arrive at Grinwold again.

Well, she thought, gazing into the snow-covered distance. At least, I do not have to worry about papa trading me. And, for a moment, the old hurt surfaced as she recalled the cold business transaction that made her Stephen's wife. Traded. To settle gambling debts. Only sixteen and turned over to a stranger without a thought for Rebecca's feelings.

It has not been so bad. She could admit it now. Stephen is a much better master than papa. Even if he doesn't love me, he takes care of me, buys me pretty gowns, things papa had never thought to do.

* * * *

Sir Oliver had changed little except to grow rounder at this middle. His lips were paler, pursing thinly as he gazed at his daughter. He grunted and turned away as Lady Elizabeth hugged Rebecca and shed tears of happiness at seeing her.

"And where is that husband of yours?" Sir Oliver said as they sat in front of an open fire.

The room was dark and gloomy compared to the great room in Stephen's home. It smelled of disuse, as though it stayed closed without sunlight. Of course, with the cold weather ...

"Sir Stephen is seeing to the manor house he is building near Salisbury, Papa. He will also see King Henry about new taxes he must collect."

"Hmmp. And where are we supposed to get money to pay more and more forfeiture to the king's coffers? Foresooth, and he could lower taxes if he would but stay in the palace and rule as he is chosen to do."

Taxes were unpopular, and Rebecca knew Stephen worried about the constant increase in the king's demands. Still, she could not change anything. Besides, it was Stephen's job.

"Will Richard be home soon?" she said to turn Papa's mind from the king.

"On the morrow," Lady Elizabeth said. "He was sore disappointed when you left with Sir Stephen and did not say goodbye to him. It will be a good surprise for him to find you here."

Rebecca refused to remind her mother that it hadn't been her fault she couldn't see Richard before Stephen took her to Glastonbury. Resentment still rankled after all this time.

"Did Peter come for Christmas?" She changed the subject to get her mind off her bitterness at papa's selling her to Stephen. It was over—and she was the one who had gained from the exchange.

"No, they didn't visit. They are expecting a child within a fortnight, and Virginia is not able to travel." Lady Elizabeth eyed Rebecca's slender figure. "Are you with child?"

Sir Oliver turned sharp eyes towards her as she answered.

"No, Mother."

"And what is Stephen waiting for?" Sir Oliver demanded to know.

"There is no hurry for children, Papa. It is a bad time in England with all the trouble brewing there and in France."

"What do you know of trouble?"

"Stephen worries about King Henry and his disagreement with Sir Thomas. There is much bitterness between the men who were such close friends."

"For once the king is right," Sir Oliver said. He glared first at Rebecca, then at Lady Elizabeth as though daring them to dispute his words. "There should be that separation between church and state. Sir Thomas has no cause to claim everything for the church."

"It will work itself out," Lady Elizabeth said. "Come, Rebecca, you must be tired. I will make your bed ready."

Rebecca was standing at the small window in her bedroom when she saw Richard pushing through the snow. With a small cry, she darted from the room and down the steps, slamming open the heavy door outside the great room. She hurled herself into her brother's arms before he could brace himself, and they went down into the snow.

"Richard, oh, Richard, I am most happy to see you."

"Rebecca! It is you! Where did you come from? Let me look at you. You have become a lovely woman." Richard hauled himself up, clutching Rebecca with him. He laughed and gathered her closely to him and dragged her along into the house.

"Not a good reason to leave the fields, Richard," Sir Oliver said.

"I left plenty of food for the cows and sheep, Papa," Richard said and turned from his father.

There had been no change in their relationship, Rebecca saw. Papa still harped at Richard for little or nothing. He

never spoke that way to Peter. Like Rebecca, Richard had given up long ago trying to please Sir Oliver.

"I went to the royal palace for the Christmas festivities, Richard, and there were troubadours and jongleurs and music of all kinds. I sat with the queen while Stephen took care of the king's business."

"Did you read Queen Eleanor one of your own poems, Rebecca?" Richard laughed at the thought. "Chances are they're better than the people she pays for such things."

Rebecca laughed, too, remembering the silly poems she wrote for her brother, ones she'd read to him as they sat together tending the flocks on the far side of papa's lands.

"I brought a poem for your birthday, but you must read it after I have gone. It is, well, rather silly, you know."

"All poems are silly," Sir Oliver said. "You waste time writing when you have no use for such frivolity."

Richard opened his mouth, but Rebecca slipped her hand through his arm and pulled him towards her room.

"I brought you something else, too," she whispered as they walked down the hall.

Inside the small, dark room that was hers for sixteen years, Rebecca dragged open her clothes case, putting her hand into a side closure, bringing forth a small package.

Richard took it, smiling at his sister, thinking how much she had grown in the near two years since he last saw her. And more beautiful. How he'd missed her sunny smile and happy disposition. He tore open the package and stared at the small cigars, packed with dark tobacco.

"Rebecca, these cost much, and a woman cannot purchase such. Where did you get them?"

"Stephen got them from King Henry and I took them from his waistcoat. I do not like the taste of them when he kisses me and so..."

She stopped, startled at what she had said to her brother. Blushing, she shook her head.

"Is Sir Stephen good to you, Rebecca?"

Richard's voice was gentle. He had not met Sir Stephen when he came for Rebecca, and his parents did not speak often of him. Nor of Rebecca. It was as though she was gone forever and could be forgotten. But after months of absence, Richard sorely missed his beloved sister, her visits to his fields, her lively chatter, and her delight just in being with him away from Sir Oliver.

"Yes, Richard. You would like Stephen. He is generous and much the better man than Papa."

"And you are happy?"

It had been a long time since she thought of whether she was happy or not.

"I am content to stay with Stephen, Richard, but I do miss you still."

"As long as you are happy, do not have regrets, Rebecca. You are right. Papa is not a pleasant man to live with. That is why I stay on my piece of land instead of at home."

Her expression brightened.

"Oh, Richard, you would love Stephen's home. It is big, and there are many kitchens and bedrooms. His animals are all in sturdy buildings away from the main house. And he has

this giant stallion he calls Tor. I ride him while Stephen travels. There are not many moors near his lands, but there are the Moon Cliffs and a rocky beach. You cannot swim in the rough waves, but I walk along and pick up shells."

Richard watched as Rebecca talked, her eyes shining and alive, telling him more of her happiness than she could ever say in mere words. He had sorely missed her when Papa gave her to Sir Stephen, and he'd often wondered if she were happy.

Now he knew—and he would not worry about her anymore.

"You love Sir Stephen, Rebecca?"

She had been barely sixteen when she married the stranger from Glastonbury. Now eighteen, she had grown from a thin child to a lovely woman.

She turned away so Richard could not see her troubled expression or the yearning in her heart to have Stephen return her love. Love she had just discovered for herself. Richard's hands on her shoulders turned her back to face him, and she knew there was no use denying that love to him.

"Aye, 'tis true, Richard. But, Sir Stephen, he knows not ..." she tried to smile.

"...'Tis thought he is still in love with Mary, his dead wife. Queen Eleanor tells me he did not get over her easily."

"In time, Rebecca. In time, he will love you, too. Stephen cannot help but love you." He pulled her close and held her until the trembling in her body ceased.

* * * *

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

She did not know she would be so happy to get home, but Rebecca's heart lightened even though she worried about Stephen as she went about the wide halls making sure every room was straightened and fresh for him. She saw to the baking of fresh loaves of bread should he be hungry and, too, she loved the smell lingering in the rooms from the baking.

The weather had been unusually harsh with heavier snows than she remembered. Banks of the heavy whiteness lay between her and the stables. She couldn't reach Tor to talk to him and pass along part of her fruit left from her meals.

She tried not to think of where Stephen might be, whether he was blinded by the windblown snow and could not see the road to travel. More than one traveler had been lost on the narrow roads between Salisbury and Glastonbury. More than once, she smiled to herself. She was the same as any ordinary wife, worrying over her husband.

There was another reason, a very important one, to have Stephen home again. There was something she had to tell him.

She stood by the open window breathing in the icy air blowing in from the water. Excitement stirred within her as she thought of her own news.

Soon, she would bear Stephen's son.

She heard the shouting and stomping near the back hallway and hastened down the stairs. Malvina met her and together, they held the door open as Stephen stumbled in. Aubin had gone forth to meet the travelers, and he came in with Stephen, snow blowing in behind them. Others in the

party went on to put the horses to stable and to bed down there.

They shed garments in the hall and only then could Rebecca see Stephen's face. His beard was frosted with ice and snow, as were the thick brows over red-rimmed eyes.

"Oh, Stephen, you're frozen."

He placed his cold mouth over hers and whispered, "Ah, but you can warm me, my dear."

She felt the blush suffuse her body, but she clung to him, feeling his big hands close around her. She laughed, holding onto him.

"The great room is warm from baking and there is hot bread and honey. You and Aubin must eat. The others will dine at home?"

"Aye." He grumbled. "Truth, a woman can say no in many languages. But." He turned his head to smile at her. "But, my lady, it will do thee no good. You are mine. And soon."

"Yes, m'lord," she said and curtsied.

* * * *

They lay tangled in each other's arms even though it was still light outside. Rebecca felt warmly sinful, being in bed with her husband before the candles were extinguished for the night.

Stephen, satisfied, held her close, smiling as he remembered her unbridled response. He loved the wild, bold Rebecca whose body absorbed his needs. Even so, he felt the gentle, endearing softness of her.

"My husband?"

"Rebecca." Such sweet formality. She is so young, he was thinking. A mere child.

Tell me you love me, Rebecca begged silently, but he did not speak again. A small hand crept upward to lie on his throat, stroking the roughness there.

"I am with child."

She felt the muscles in his throat move as he swallowed, but it seemed a long time before he spoke.

"Are you well?"

"Yes, Stephen."

He pulled his arm from beneath her head and pushed her away. "You should have spoken sooner."

"But ... why?"

Bewildered, she saw him withdraw from her. She had thought he would be pleased to be expecting a son to carry on his name. They had been married two years. It was time for a child.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his back to her.

"I might have hurt you."

She laughed, relieved that was all.

"Oh, my lord, of course you would not hurt me."

His back remained stiff as he replied, "I might. All women cannot abide men when—at this time."

His own father had told him this, justifying the many times he found a lady friend to care for his needs during the months preceding the births of four children, none of whom lived past infancy, save Stephen.

"Woman cannot tolerate a man's touch of their bodies when they carry a child. Remember, that, son," the elder

Lambert said. "It seems they do not want an intruder inside to disturb the baby. It is best to seek a more willing substitute until such time as you can return to your own bed."

When Mary told him she was with child, he did not have much time to think about sleeping with her. He had been gone a lot, chasing after King Henry as he plotted to gain the Aquitaine dowry through his theft of Eleanor from the King of France. He had thought it best to be away although he longed to hold Mary close and tell her he would always be there for her. Instead, Mary left him, taking the child with her in death.

Now there was Rebecca to worry over. She was small. Could she carry a child those long months? Would he lose her as he had Mary? Why was he not more careful? Why had he not talked to Malvina and Lady Ginsburg, those who knew about the flux times and when it was best to withhold his seed?

He had waited too long and now Rebecca was carrying his child, mayhap a son. He deeply wanted a son, but not enough to lose Rebecca in exchange for one. He would have to be careful. He would have to withhold his strong urges to relieve his passionate desires inside her small body.

Beside him, Rebecca spoke quietly.

"You are sometimes in a rush, but never have you hurt me, Stephen."

She thought of her father who, when Elizabeth was carrying his children, looked elsewhere for his pleasures. Her mother had not revealed this to her. She had heard Sir Oliver talking to Peter when his wife was carrying their first-born.

"I can introduce you to women who will care for your needs, Peter," Sir Oliver said as Rebecca passed the door to the great room. "Virginia will be happy to have you seek favors elsewhere."

Peter sighed. "She is already making that known, Papa. I thought it would be later that she was uncomfortable, but she doesn't like me to touch her anywhere."

"Bear with her, Peter. It will be enjoyable going to a new body, you will see."

It had been some time before Rebecca realized what they had been discussing. There was another reason men stayed away from their wives during this time. The heavy bodies no longer enticed their husbands, and wives were often tired when husbands came in from their work or their journeys.

She watched Stephen now. Would he think her ugly when she waddled instead of walked? Would he seek another?

No. I do not wish him to go elsewhere. I will make him love me while I carry his son.

Rebecca reckoned without Stephen's stubborn determination. He spent more time in the fields as the weather improved. He traveled often to the site of the manor house that would be their formal residence when completed. When he was at home, he often stayed in the room where he kept his business papers, closing the door to keep her outside. He no longer sought the warmth of her body.

She looked at her slender body with only a slight swell to show she carried a child. It could not be that she was ugly yet. The small mirror Malvina held for her showed light color in her cheeks, full rosy lips and eyes the color of the spring

sky. True, there were faint lavender shadows beneath those eyes, but she looked little different than she had a year ago.

Rebecca was wrong. She did, indeed, look different.

Stephen watched her when she wasn't looking his way. The shiny crown of hair resembled a rope of gold. Her voice lilted as she gave directions for the kitchen workers to make meals for them. Her laughter trilled as she stood with her arms deep in flour, making bread, which had become a favorite activity.

Small breasts, firmly pushed against her dark blouse, had swollen and even to his gaze, appeared tender. He wanted to hold them and caress them, to kiss and suckle. He jerked himself upright as the familiar heat stirred in his loins. Most of all, he wanted to grab her up in his arms and stride up the stairs and take her to bed, there to fill her with his hard, demanding muscle, to spill his seed into her womb already carrying his child.

With an oath, he slammed the king's property books closed and hurried out the back hall toward Tor's stable. Only activity would keep him from driving himself insane wanting Rebecca.

* * * *

Rebecca heard Stephen slam out the door and watched his long strides towards the stables. A little later, she saw Tor depart the stable, Stephen astride him, running like the wind towards the cliffs above the water. He did not return until the end of the day.

She was tired. She had baked bread until almost time for the evening meal, hoping Stephen would return and speak to her. When he did come in, he went straight to his bedroom to emerge only when Aubin summoned him to eat. Now, she sat listlessly pushing at the roast meat on her plate, Stephen eating silently beside her.

What had happened to them? Had she only imagined his attention at the Christmas celebrations? Had the night she had gone wild in his arms in the royal palace been only her pleasure? Had the look in his eyes when he returned home from the long journey only been because he needed her body? And when he found she was carrying his child, he no longer needed her.

"You do not eat enough to nourish the child, Rebecca," Stephen said.

She turned quickly to him, but he was looking at his plate, still filled with meat and the hot bread she had baked.

"Is the bread not to your taste, Stephen? It seems you eat little as well."

He pushed the plate away.

"I am tired and do not need food. But I have only myself to feed. It is different with you. Eat." His order was given in a cold voice as he might to a lazy servant.

She ate without tasting and when he rose to leave, she followed him up the stairs. He stopped near his door, watching her slowly approach him.

"Stephen, have I done something to displease you?"

Seldom had she seen him so angry, a harsh frown tightening the mouth that could turn her body into molten response.

"Do you not know how to prevent getting with child?" Icy disgust was plain in his questions.

Her face lost its color. "No," she said. "No, truth I do not."

"After this one comes, ask Malvina to instruct you. If she does not know enough, go to the woman back of St. David's Mission. I have heard she grows herbs known to bring the flux when needed."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and entered his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

For a moment, Rebecca stood stiffly, staring at the door that had slammed between them. A closed door had come to be a common thing, something that happened each time Stephen came home from the fields or from a trip for the king.

She hated it.

Teeth pressed into her lips, she waited for her temper to subside, for her blood to calm so that she wouldn't shout at him, so that she could think what she'd done to alienate her husband, what she could do to bring him back so he'd come to her bed once more. She needed him.

The temper she'd tried to hold onto got away from her. With her head high, she marched to the closed door, grabbed the shiny, brass knob and yanked hard. Before she could think what might happen, she shoved the door open and walked into the room. A room she seldom saw. It was Stephen's private domain where she didn't intrude. If he

wanted her, he came to her bedroom, or took her in the great room, or the hallway, or anywhere else his desires could be met.

By God's eye, he had a nerve. Shut *his* bedroom door in *her* face, would he? She'd never, but *never* turned him from her bedroom. Why should she allow him to refuse to let her into his?

At the sound of the door hitting the wall, Stephen whirled. His brow lowered over angry-bright eyes.

"Rebecca?"

"Yes, Stephen. Rebecca. What in the name of the king is wrong with you? Why are you angry with me when I've done nothing wrong? We're going to have a baby, Stephen. We. You and I. It isn't something I did alone. You were there also."

"And I won't be remiss again, I can assure you, Rebecca. Now if you're through throwing your tantrum, I'm busy."

"Too busy to talk to your wife? To tell her what your troubles are? Is it the king's demands making you hard to deal with? Is it because you don't want a son to carry your name? What, Stephen? It's best I know in what way I have insulted you so that I can make amends."

He came to her, his fingers dug into her shoulders. She flinched.

He let her go, all but shoved her away.

"See, Rebecca. I do not need to handle thee whilst carrying the child. Do not come in here or I might forget and handle you roughly." He turned toward the bed and began to unfasten hooks to the gold chainse.

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Rebecca's mouth quivered, her heart hurt. There was her answer, for a certainty. Stephen not only didn't love her, he could no longer stand the sight of her. She turned blindly to the door, said not another word, and left Stephen alone.

When she'd gone, Stephen's fists clenched at his sides.

Dear God, what will I do without her, he wondered? If the baby causes me to lose her, I will never forgive myself. I must ... I must leave her alone for now. I could not live without Rebecca.

Numbly, he realized it was true.

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Chapter Nine

Stephen's legs trembled as he leaned on the heavy door he had slammed against the sight of Rebecca staring at him, shocked by his command. It mattered not. She must be made to be as careful as he intended to be to prevent another child. He could not go through this nightmare again. No matter that Rebecca thought he should be happy about a child, mayhap a son. He could not, would not, take a chance on losing her, just for the sake of having a son. This child would be the last one for them, no matter if it was a girl child.

He had lost Mary. If Rebecca could live through having the first child, no matter how much he wanted a son of her body, there would not be another. He could not live with the thought of losing her. She had become more important to him than anything in his beloved country. Even King Henry and Queen Eleanor. Everything. She was more important to him than his own life.

He loved the wife he had thought only a convenience. She was only the payment of a gambling debt, just a body he could use for his own satisfaction. He groaned at the memory of that business transaction, a cold settlement for lands he did not need, did not want. He did not need money. He did not need anything, anyone, save Rebecca. Shaken by the knowledge, he bowed his shaggy head over crossed arms, wishing he knew the words to tell Rebecca how he felt.

But he was afraid.

* * * *

Stephen tried every way to keep from thinking of Rebecca, but none was successful. Workers in the wide fields saw more of him than ever before. He toiled alongside them, sweating and dirty, from the sun's first appearance until he could no longer see a straight furrow. He trudged over his lands, talked to his workers, discussed grain and ways to work and harvest more valuable crops. Discussed the breeding and care of animals, worked in the stables until he was weary to the bone.

What he would not do was journey to London on extended royal business, nor did he stay more than overnight where the manor house was being built in Salisbury.

He spent long hours riding Tor, then brushing the strong stallion until his coat shone. Sometimes the pale hair beneath the stiff brush reminded Stephen of Rebecca's blonde tresses, and he would press his face against the patient horse.

It was here Aubin found his master after a hard ride on Tor along Moon Cliffs. Stephen had watched Aubin become Rebecca's willing slave, and though Stephen sometimes came second to his wife, he did not quarrel. Aubin had never shown affection to another human being that Stephen had noticed. He was a simple man who preferred the stables where animals were his companions. So Stephen approved his attention to Rebecca. She would be safe as long as Aubin was close.

"What say, Aubin?" Stephen said.

Aubin bowed.

"Malvina, my lord. She is with Lady Rebecca and wishes you to come straight away."

His heart tightened, and then pounded. It is not the baby's time. That could not be the reason for this summons.

"What is it?"

"I do not know, my lord," Aubin said. "Lady Rebecca was at the table peeling fruit when she stumbled."

He stared at Aubin. Stumbled at the table? How so? Stephen dropped the brush and ran towards the rock wall of the garden, crashing through the closed gate as though it wasn't there. It was the straightest way to the workroom off the kitchen where they dined.

Inside the big room he saw no one at first, and then he caught sight of Malvina on her knees with Rebecca. He knelt beside them.

Rebecca's eyes were wide but they looked through him at the high ceiling.

"What? What is wrong?"

"I do not know, my lord," Malvina said. "She fell from the bench without a word. She has not yet spoken."

"Stephen."

He had to bend to catch Rebecca's low words.

"Stephen." She reached up and caught his arm. "My chest hurts."

"Rebecca, my darling."

He was unaware of the endearment. He caught her hand, holding tightly, and watched in horror as her eyes closed, and she gasped for breath.

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by Zelma Orr

He picked her up and carried her up the stairs into his room and placed her on the big bed where he had made love to her so many times. She was so quiet, and though he murmured words to her, stroked her cheek and her arms, she didn't respond. She was tiny and pale. The bed dwarfed her.

Malvina was there as he straightened. She warmed a cloth and placed it over Rebecca's forehead, then bathed her cheeks, holding the dampness against her lips.

Malvina did not look at him as she said, "Best you get the Lady Dinsmore. She is the best with childbearing."

"It is not time," Stephen said.

"It is Lady Rebecca's time. Send Aubin."

* * * *

As soon as she opened her eyes and saw the curtains blowing at the open window, Rebecca knew what had happened. The baby was no more. The baby she had wanted so badly, the one Stephen would have prevented.

Her mind went over their conversations of fortnights ago when he instructed her to find someone who knew how to keep from getting with child. She remembered every word, every instruction he'd practically shouted at her, all of the things he'd coldly announced she would do. Because he did not want a child from her body. Mary had died in childbirth, therefore he refused to allow Rebecca to have one.

Was that why her body rejected the one she already carried? Was that the simplest way of fulfilling Stephen's wishes?

She did not know, and she cared not. Her body rid itself of the baby for Stephen, and that was the important part. At least, to Stephen. For her, it no longer mattered.

Stephen came to see her when Malvina told him she was awake, but as soon as she heard his voice outside the door, Rebecca closed her eyes, pretending sleep. He stood by the bed a long while, then his footsteps moved away and the door closed once more.

She was in Stephen's room, in his bed. Idly, she wondered how she came to be here, but that did not matter, either. The important thing was that Stephen no longer had to worry about the child she carried for so short a time. And she had orders to be careful she did not nourish his seed within her body again.

Slowly, day by day, Rebecca regained strength. Lady Dinsmore told Stephen the deep lung fever Rebecca suffered weakened the baby's system until it could not survive.

Rebecca knew better. Her heart had simply refused to support the child because Stephen was displeased.

A message came from the royal palace that Stephen should sit on the new council for raising taxes on royal lands, but he would not leave Rebecca. He visited her room often, but she seldom spoke or looked at him. Her paleness frightened him, the deep shadows under her eyes, her lack of industry. Rebecca, who was always busy at something, lay like a rag doll in the center of his bed, making no effort to dress herself. Sometimes she ate bread. Most times she drank the thick soup Malvina brought and that was all.

How did this happen? How did it happen she became so ill, and he took no notice? Rebecca did not complain of feeling unwell, but he should have taken note of the weariness in her face, pale cheeks and dull eyes. He was to blame. He'd been determined that she would obey him and find ways to keep from becoming with child, that after this birth, if she lived through it, he would never have to worry about losing her again. The very thought of living without her turned him stiff with cold.

"I can send Aubin for Lady Elizabeth, Rebecca, if you would like her to visit," Stephen said. He sought desperately to interest her in something.

A slight smile passed her lips and was gone.

"Papa is taking her to Genoa this summer. He does not offer her a vacation often, and she would not want to miss this one."

"You should allow me to tell her you are ill."

"No." Rebecca coughed and caught at her chest, then turned her head away. "I am much better and there is no need to worry her."

"Rebecca?"

But she had turned on her side with her face to the window and did not answer. After a bit, Stephen walked from the room, turning once to look at the still, small figure of his wife before he closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Stephen sat near King Henry, listening to his Royal Highness explain the new rules for his courts.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

"In a trial the sheriff will call in twelve men to give evidence, not just hear it as before. Trials by jury will result in justice served rather than pushed aside."

When the meeting was finished, Stephen followed King Henry into the Royal Court. For the first time in fifteen years, Sir Stephen Lambert's mind was not on royal business. It was centered in the big bedroom in that gray stone house which Rebecca had made into a home.

And where she had lost interest in the house, Tor, the garden ... and Stephen.

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Chapter Ten

A bellow of rage from a wounded bear in the forest, Rebecca was certain of that.

It would be Sir Stephen Lambert's first reaction when he found her gone. His second likely a mimic of King Henry—*By God's eye, Woman*.

No woman, *no* woman leaves a good husband. It was not written that the husband must love his wife, only that he be a good husband. That might include laying a hand to her backside in order to assure obedience.

Rebecca thought herself a good wife, albeit one who wanted her husband to love her. If he could not, then the union needed to change. She would change it.

Without a glance, she passed Stephen's closed bedroom door in the midnight quiet. He wasn't there. He was on some grand errand for King Henry. Their strained relationship since she lost the baby gave Stephen good reason for more frequent and longer trips. He seldom came to her bed, and they no longer spent hours just talking.

Her leaving would relieve him of a tiresome duty.

She had tried everything she knew to bring Stephen back to her the way he had once come willingly. Her last bit of determination left the day he returned early from his journey to London and found her riding Tor. She slid from the bare back of the stallion and ran towards Stephen, happy to see him home safe again.

He was not happy. Deep-set blue eyes flashed fury at her such as she had never seen.

He raged.

"I forbid you to ride Tor ever again. How dare you take my own steed to ride along the cliffs? He could break a leg on the rocks and dips."

Rebecca stared at him as his fingers dug into her arms. He did not know that she frequently rode Tor, and that both were surefooted, trusting each other.

He cared not. Hauling her with him up the path, he half dragged her past startled servants up the stairs to her room. He pushed her onto the bed and glared down at her, his cheeks pale beneath the thick blonde hair lying on his forehead. The wide mouth, the lips that had taught her how to kiss, then to love, thinned into a straight line.

"Never," he said in a cold, deadly voice. "Never let me see you on Tor again."

He turned and stormed from the room. It was only later that the ache began, the ache at the loss of what she had never really had. Stephen worried not about her hurting herself, but about the giant horse. Something valuable. She should have remembered that she had been traded for something more valuable those years ago. It seemed such a long time now. So much had happened. She'd fallen in love with her husband, become pregnant, lost the baby—and her husband as well. How could one's heart break and it not be seen? How could all the love disappear and leave one so empty? Why could he not understand that she loved him

more than life—that he was the real reason she lived? How could he not know?

She did not go down to the great hall for the evening meal but later that night, she went looking for Stephen. Something had been troubling him of late. Mayhap the king and queen were putting too many of their troubles on him. Not only did he try to keep peace between Eleanor and Henry, but he tried even harder to heal the breach between Henry and Sir Thomas. He kept track of royal lands and taxes, traveling many miles to visit landowners to remind them what was due the king. He was tired.

Tonight, she would massage his back when he finished with his bath. Tonight, she would tell him of her deep love for him and ask that he love her in return.

Strangely, the door to the room usually locked was open and, hearing a sound from within, Rebecca stopped, and then pushed the door inward. Her eyes rested on the two people there and breath left her. She could only stare.

Stephen sat on the bed with Malvina kneeling in front of him, his arms clasping her shoulders. He cried, his wide shoulders shaking. Malvina murmured all the while her fingers stroked his hair. Her face was near to Stephen's, close enough that his tears wet her cheeks.

For the longest time, Rebecca did not, could not, move. Numbed, she took in the long fingers working in the dark fabric of Malvina's blouse, heard the woman's whispers, saw her wipe tears from Stephen's cheek.

There had been times when she wondered if Stephen and Malvina were lovers, but it had been many months since she

had thought about it. Loving Stephen so much, waiting for the baby—she had not seen the warning signs.

Quietly, she retreated.

The pain disappeared and emptiness descended.

There were warning signs. Stephen's preoccupation when he was home, his long rides alone on Tor when she became pregnant and his refusal to sleep with her except when his body demanded it. His pretense that the baby she carried did not exist.

In the days that followed, Rebecca avoided Malvina, unable to face the woman who, she was now certain, was her husband's lover. She did not have to avoid Stephen. He left before the first day's light and came home long after candles were extinguished for the night. There was no reason to wait up for him. He came in quietly, ate without talking to the servants, even Aubin, and went to his room.

Rebecca waited, but Stephen did not come to her.

One day a message from King Henry summoned Stephen to London to go over the new taxing measures his majesty was planning to impose on the already overburdened people. Rebecca knew for a certainty that Stephen welcomed the chance to leave Glastonbury.

He spoke to her briefly as they ate the evening meal. "I must go to London on business. I do not know how long I will be there."

Rebecca turned to look at him, but he kept his eyes on his plate.

"I am well enough to travel with you, Stephen. It would be good to leave here for a fortnight." Good for me, good for you to be away from Malvina.

"No," he said.

That was all. No. Not wanted. How plainly one word could speak volumes. Would she never learn that she had no place in Stephen's life, that she was only a chattel in his home, something that had to be kept because it belonged to him? Necessity, not desire and certainly not love.

Only her thoughts kept her company during the days Stephen made ready to travel. King Henry beckoned, and he must go. It had always been thus. She stood at her bedroom window watching the carriage being prepared for his trip, watched Aubin stack the cases behind them and caught her breath as Stephen stepped into her view.

He carried his black hat in one hand, a satchel in the other. The black of his coat emphasized the blond hair and darker beard. As she watched, he raised his head to stare at her window as though to make sure she saw him go. As though he knew it would be the last time she would watch him leave her.

Stepping back from the window, she lifted her fingers to waft him a kiss, a kiss he didn't see.

* * * *

She could not live this way. Rebecca's decision had already been made, but she repeated it to herself several times during the days after Stephen's departure. The ache inside

her was unbearable. Distance from Glastonbury was her only hope.

The last servant went down the hall, his footsteps fading into the great room, then silence as the heavy door closed behind him. The first light of another day found her still sitting by the window, hands idle in her lap.

Nights passed in this way while she made her plans. A woman in her position had no rights. Her husband could demand a divorce or demand that she return to his abode, but she would not live with Stephen. He could do as he wanted about a divorce, but Rebecca would not stay in Glastonbury.

She ate fresh fruits and vegetables from the winter cellar. She walked up and down the steps many times each day. She lifted baskets of clothing and food, moving them about the storehouse. She carried heavy wood for the fireplaces, shrugging away any servant's protests her ladyship should not do this labor. If her plans were to work, she had to be strong.

And her plans must work if she were to survive.

A sound startled her and she leaned against the wall, holding her breath. It came again. Thunder. She breathed more easily. The storm would help her. She took the small bag she had packed with a few pieces of clothing, enough food so that she wouldn't starve before finding work of some kind. Wherever she journeyed. She didn't care as long as it was away from Glastonbury.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

At the back door, she listened once more, and then stepped outside. The spatter of raindrops beat on the roof, and she welcomed the coolness on her feverish cheeks.

Clouds and rain turned the night into pitch blackness, but she knew every step of the path to the stables. At the heavy door, her fingers searched for the latch and she pushed upward to release it.

Tor whinnied and blew out his breath in a sluffing sound.

"Steady." She whispered to him as she slipped him a piece of apple saved from her evening meal. His whinny was softer this time as she gave him the second slice and heard his big teeth cut into the fruit.

She found the tether where she had left it the day before, thankful Bundy, the stable boy, had not been around to put it in its proper place. Tor lifted his head, and she quickly slipped the rope on him, murmuring quietly all the while. She put a booted foot on a stud in the wall and swung on the horse's broad back. He snorted, but she patted his neck, soothing him with her soft voice as she guided him through the door she had left open.

She held the rope tightly, trying to keep the big horse from breaking into a trot as he loved to do when she rode him bareback without the heavy saddle to slow him. He took her along the edge of the forest, across the pond road, along the cliff's edge.

Rain slanted into her face, and thunder rumbled quickly behind the blue-orange flashes of lightning. Even so, she could hear the surf slapping at the rocks far below. It was a

guide for Tor as he took the familiar path they often rode when Stephen was away.

Would Stephen care? Only if she didn't return Tor.

She tossed her head and kept her chin elevated at its most stubborn angle. He would be angry, of that she was certain. No woman left a good husband. She had no right to leave him. He saw that she was fed and clothed. He came home to her when he had no arguments to settle between Eleanor and Henry or savage bouts to referee between Henry and Sir Thomas. They were like children, arguing and quarreling over everything or nothing.

She would not worry about what Stephen might think. From this moment on, she would think of her own life, not a life tied to Stephen, smothered by what she must do for him or for their king and country. She had given him two years of her life. She had given him her love and, in return, he betrayed her with Malvina. She would not share him with Malvina—or anyone. To know he did not love her was one thing. To know he loved Malvina shattered her.

The sudden pain made her jerk on Tor's reins, and the horse sidestepped, shaking his head.

"I am sorry." She leaned down on the strong neck. "You could not know how it hurts to love and not be loved in return."

She straightened, aware now that her tears mixed with the rain. This time, she did not bother to wipe them away.

She traveled that night, and late in the morning, stopped behind a grove of trees to change to dry clothing. She ate the bread and meat saved for two days before she left home. She

was several miles beyond the small village where Malvina visited friends when she came to a barren road she only knew headed away from Glastonbury.

Tor stood patiently waiting for her. She looked at him, put her face against his.

"Go home, Tor. Go home."

She turned him in the direction from whence they had come and breathed a sigh when he trotted away. He was soon lost from her sight.

Her wool clothing smelled of sheep. Her hair hung in soggy strings over her shoulders. Cold and hungry, she sat near a stream of water behind the trees where two carriages passed one after the other. She dared not cry out to attract attention. Suppose it was a highwayman such as she had read about? Or thieves to set upon her as Stephen said happened regularly to people on the road alone.

She was not afraid, nor did she have anything that might interest thieves. Suppose they wanted her? That happened, too, Malvina had told her.

She shivered. She wanted no man save Stephen to touch her, and he made it clear he did not share her desire.

What attracted such a man as Stephen to Malvina? Was it because she had served Mary before she died with child? Was there something about her dark auburn hair with its heavy waves, her fair complexion with barely a freckle? Malvina's teeth were perfectly shaped, she was tall and healthy

Many men preferred dark hair to the pale blonde of Rebecca's ringlets dipping down the front of her blouse. Her eyes were as blue as the summer sky after a storm while

Malvina's were as green as the quiet depths of the waves beyond Moon Cliffs.

Before Papa brought Stephen home and gave her over to him for his wife, Rebecca had exercised her independence simply by ignoring whatever Papa said until he tired of raging, and then went on with her dreams. Two years ago she was a child. Today she was a woman without dreams. She would be on her own, all alone, without guidance or consolation of any kind.

If she couldn't have Stephen, she'd as soon be alone.

She could take care of herself. She had never had to make her own way, but she would learn how. Soon she would be as strong as ever after losing the baby. She could find work as a maidservant in London. It was a big city. There must be jobs for someone willing to work. She was schooled. She could teach if need be. Papa liked to boast of a daughter who had been to Sister Emilie's school, who could read in two languages and do figures.

She was setting out to prove Papa right.

Voices raised in song startled her. Who would sing on such a miserable evening? The sound of merriment came closer. Voices broke into conversation, words she did not understand. French. The hard lessons she had studied with Sister Emilie came faintly back, and she caught words here and there. The voices were light. Gay laughter followed.

"Ah, 'tis fine to be alive," a deep male voice proclaimed.

"Hugo, you rascal," a female voice teased. "Every day's a good day to be alive for you. Be it fair or foul, 'tis all the same to you."

"You're right, Mam'selle," came the same cheery voice. "To live at all is to experience the ultimate. To live and love at the same time is exquisite rapture."

"The voice of the minstrel sends forth his soul to reach the heavens—or the heart of an unsuspecting maiden," another male voice joined in the merry exchange.

Had she not been so miserable, Rebecca would have laughed along with them. She stared at Bundy's muddy boots, too big on her feet, hoping the people would pass close enough to her that she could see their appearance. Not that it would help her much.

What could she tell from looking at strangers from a distance? And, if they were highwaymen who robbed travelers, what then? She had nothing save her life. Perchance they would take that had she nothing more valuable to offer.

She thought of getting up to move farther into the forest, but she was exhausted. Her body ached, her face felt hot, and she blinked rapidly to keep her eyes open. Pushing herself upright against the tree trunk where she had rested, she lifted her head at a nearby sound and gasped.

A short distance away was a tall man with a staff in his right hand. Merry black eyes surveyed the dismal creature in front of him. Black hair touched his shoulders and a dark beard covered most of his face. His skin was brown—what she could see of it, with a broad nose separating high cheek bones. With the staff he pushed back the soft, wide-brimmed hat, reminding Rebecca of a ship's captain she had once glimpsed on a London street.

"What have we here?" he murmured in French. "Methinks I've come upon a damsel in need of friendship?" It was a question as he continued to look over the figure propped against the tree.

"What, Hugo? Do we linger this near the highway with the likes of Nathan abroad. That barbarous robber will take what food we have ere he..."

The voice broke off as another man appeared beside Hugo. Flamboyant red hair framed a face covered in rusty freckles, a wispy beard straggling over a pointed chin. His mouth formed a perfect 'O' as he, too, stared down at Rebecca. He was shorter than Hugo with stubby legs ending in muddy leggings from which peeked bare feet, dirt oozing between the toes.

"Mon dieu," the red-haired one said. "Perchance 'tis the vision my sainted mother, rest her soul, said would appear afore me one day." He stepped closer to the forlorn figure. "What say, Hugo?"

"She is but a child, Gerald." He laughed again, not unkindly. "Where's your mother, Small One?"

Rebecca eyed the lumpy pair in front of her—a mislanded sea pirate and some beggar's orphan, probably. But they were the only humans she had seen since leaving home.

"I am tired and hungry, my lord," she said.

There was no mistaking she told the truth. The blue eyes were dull, her creamy complexion smudged with gray mud, blonde hair tangled beneath the wimple which had once been pale blue, covered now with layers of gray dust, stiffening as it dried. Her soft mouth drooped at the corners, and she raised a limp hand to push stringy hair from her cheeks.

Hugo dropped the bag from wide shoulders and knelt beside her. Keeping his eyes on Rebecca, he thrust one large hand into the bag and withdrew it to extend a handful of figs.

" 'Tis not much, my cabbage," he said. "We will stop here for the night and mayhap Gerald can fetch us a rabbit to roast."

Gerald laughed.

"Surely you jest, my friend. I aim at the ground and hit the stars."

Rebecca glanced up from the figs she was devouring. In spite of her misery, she smiled, and then spoke boldly.

"I am a good hunter."

Hugo's black eyes widened.

"You, my Cherie? Surely you are too weak to hold the bow and arrow."

"My brother, Richard, taught me when I visited him on the far side of papa's land."

"Do not feel badly, child," a female voice said. "Hugo thinks all women should be home in their husband's bed and not allowed out into the world."

Rebecca looked at the woman who now stood beside Hugo. Her red head reached almost as high as Hugo's, the tallest woman Rebecca had ever seen. The dark gray tunic hid most of her body, but one could see she was thin. Bright green eyes sparkled at the world from a face covered with the same rust-colored freckles as Gerald's.

"Ah, my Margaret," Hugo said, his voice chastened. "You do me an injustice." He looked back at Rebecca where she sat, her hand near her mouth with a half-eaten fig in it,

staring at the other woman. "Mayhap you can tell us why you linger in such misery alone. Do you not know the dangers in this place?"

Rebecca clasped her hands together, looking down. "I am from Gloucester. She hesitated, twisting her hands and glanced up at three interested faces. "I ... Papa—"

"Gloucester?" Margaret said. "That is many days from here."

Rebecca nodded.

"Papa." She hesitated. "I was with child and papa sent me to London to hide me because I would not tell the father's name. I shamed them." Her voice quivered, and she swallowed. "The baby did not live, but I cannot return home to cause them more suffering. I ran away."

She sat with her head bowed, squeezing her hands into fists.

The pain was not pretense. She hurt as though the tale were true. The hurting was real if her story was not.

"Do not cry, little one," Margaret said, kneeling in front of her. "Each of us has a burden to bear so we help each other. We do not condemn a body for being human." She picked up Rebecca's clenched fists and rubbed them with long, freckled fingers. "You are welcome to stay with us. What say?"

Her heart stilled within her. They were strangers ready to take her in, strangers who questioned not whether she was a good woman or not. Even with her lies, they took her for what she said she was—and without blame.

She lifted her eyes, swimming with tears.

"You are most kind. I will try not to be a burden."

"Never," Hugo said, helping her to her feet. "Are you able to walk? We have two animals to carry our goods, but the Big One can carry a bit more weight such as yourself."

"We are on our way to London," Gerald said, "but we will hide your beauty beneath a jongleur's outfit, lass. No one will know you."

"Ha," Margaret said. "She is much too pretty not to be noticed. Mayhap we can use her as a dwarf. She's that small."

"We are on our way to London to perform for Queen Eleanor. She is fond of our entertainment. But," Hugo said, bending to pick up Rebecca's small packet of belongings, "you will go as one of us, and you will not be noticed as being different."

The jovial conversation went on as the horse Hugo called Big One was brought out of the trees where he had been tied while a meal was prepared. A smaller donkey, not much bigger than papa's largest sheep, trailed along behind.

"I can walk," Rebecca said.

"You are weak from loss of the child and tired, lass. Here. Up with you." Hugo lifted her onto the broad back of Big One and handed her a rope. "No need to guide. He will follow us." His hand remained on the horse's rump. "What are you called then?"

"Rebecca."

There was no need to invent a name. She would not be searched for in the company of minstrels making their way into London along England's back country roads.

Hugo's long legs took them down the muddy tracks and Gerald trotted a few feet behind while Margaret stayed near

Big One. Rebecca's body ached, but she said nothing as the hours passed. She was thankful she did not have to walk.

Rebecca lost count of the days and at night, lay wearily on a sheepskin spread over piled rushes, unable to sleep. She tried not to think of Stephen but to think only of the beginning of a new and different life. The minstrels lived simply, far from the comfort of the Glastonbury home she had left. For Rebecca, it mattered not. She would not be alone, and the offered friendship gave her a warm feeling of belonging.

"I am lucky the child did not live," she often whispered to herself, ignoring the ache even as she spoke the words. "I would not want to raise him in a home without a loving father, and Stephen was not pleased that he was to have a son."

She heard Hugo stirring and saw him tend the fire. When he finished, he moved to where Margaret lay, there was a murmur of voices, then he slipped beneath the sheepskin with her.

Rebecca looked away, envying Margaret and Hugo.

* * * *

Rebecca looked down at the stream at her feet. It was cold, very cold. But she needed a bath. Her clothing stuck to her with dampness and mud caked the bottom of her long tunic. Color was no longer distinguishable. Tomorrow they would be in London, and Hugo would give her a jongleur's robe to appear before the queen. It was a long gold wrap with matching hood to hide her pale hair that had grown too long

to let hang down her back. She could not abide putting her unclean body into the clean clothing.

She had brought her sheepskin with her to wrap in once she bathed. She discarded it and, taking a deep breath and holding it, slid into the icy water.

"Ohh-hh-ohh," she moaned, her teeth chattering.

But she stayed, splashing water over her until she became numb enough not to notice the cold so much, then she went underwater, washing her hair as best she could. She stayed as long as she dared then stepped out to wrap the sheepskin around her. Her teeth chattered, but she laughed lightly. How good it felt to be clean! Ah, it was lovely.

Numbness slipped away as she rubbed her body dry, and she hummed one of the old ballads she once sang to Richard. Her voice rose, its lilting melody carrying through the early morning quiet.

In camp, Margaret lifted her head. Across the breakfast fire, Hugo and Gerald listened.

"Bring my love, though darkness fall, bring my love to me. Hold thy nearness, thy dearness, hold me eternally."

Rebecca's clear voice lowered until its softness brought an ache to the throats of the three listening. It was warmth and sweet pain and a deep longing all mixed in the clearness of her words.

The sound stopped, but the three of them sat staring at each other. When Rebecca stepped into the clearing, wrapped only in the sheepskin, they looked at her as though she were someone they had not met.

Rebecca, unprepared for an audience, stopped, her mouth open in surprise. She had hoped to find the robe Hugo put aside for her and be dressed before the others saw her.

Now they watched her wonderingly.

"Where did you learn to sing like that?" It was Margaret who first found her voice.

"Oh. Oh." Rebecca smiled. "I learned music in Sister Emilie's school in Suffolk. I cannot sing, but I do like music."

"Dost perchance play an instrument?" Henry said.

"Only the harp. I could never learn the flute. I kept bumping my teeth."

"You have a lovely voice, Rebecca." Gerald gazed at her as though entranced. "Have you ever performed?"

"I sang to Papa's cows and sheep." She laughed. "They did not complain of my noise."

"Minstrels and jongleurs are favorites of Queen Eleanor. She loves stories and songs. You will help us in the Christmas celebration."

"But, I have never ..." She knew Eleanor loved songs and stories. Last

Christmas ...

Would Stephen be in the royal palace this holiday season as in years past? As last season when she first realized she was in love with him? The same Christmas she became pregnant with a son he did not want.

"No one will recognize you, Little One," Hugo said. "You'll perform with robes and a mask."

She trusted him. She trusted Margaret and Gerald without knowing why. They were strangers, but they had saved her

life and were willing to care for her. The least she could do was help them entertain.

What had Stephen told her about entertainers?

"Are not jongleurs banned by the church? With trouble between the archbishop and the king, will we be allowed to perform? Sir Thomas is strict in such things."

"Ha," Hugo said. "That is why we are invited. The queen loves us all the more because we are a thorn in the side of Sir Thomas and will cause her king anguish."

"I think perchance Queen Eleanor doubts her husband's love and mayhap looks for ways to make him unhappy."

"It will be good to make her happy for a short time."

"What dost know of royal unhappiness, my child?" Margaret said.

"Only gossip. The king's affairs are talked of even in the country."

"Aye," Hugo said. "'Tis true, but let us not talk of such. We will prepare a royal performance to brighten the queen's day."

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Chapter Eleven

It was the bellow of an angry boar.

"Lady Rebecca is not about? What say ye, vassal? She has departed to what place?"

Stephen's body fairly shook with outraged disbelief.

"I know not, my lord."

The manservant knelt in front of Stephen, awaiting the whip on his back. He had dreaded lo these long days when his master would return. It was best to be over and done with his punishment.

Stephen grasped the man's mantel, drawing him upward until he stared into the frightened eyes.

"Speak, vassal," he whispered hoarsely. "Tell me wherefore the Lady Rebecca has gone or, by God's eye, I will have your head."

"Sir Stephen." Malvina spoke behind him.

He whirled to face her. "Well, sayeth the truth!"

Malvina curtsied.

"She left two days hence your departure, Sir Stephen. We sent word by a traveler when one passed. Didst not get the message?"

"I left London early."

He had been in a hurry to return to Glastonbury. To Rebecca.

"For what reason does she depart this house while I am absent?" Stephen stood tall and wide above the two servants. "Has she perchance gone to Gloucester?"

"She left no word, my lord," Malvina said. "I went to awaken her the morning, and she was gone. She took only two garments. And Tor."

"Tor?" The great hall shook with the thunder of Stephen's rage. Had he not forbid her to ride the stallion lest she get hurt? "She took the stallion?"

"The steed has returned, Sire," Jonan, the manservant spoke timidly. Mayhap the safe return of Tor would lessen the master's anger.

Stephen looked over the servants gathered to welcome him home, their faces expectant, albeit fearful. He was a good master, but all knew his temper, not often shown. Since the arrival of Lady Rebecca two years before, he had been given to less displays of rage. But Rebecca had left the great stone house, and they did not welcome the emptiness. Nor, it seemed, did their master.

With a final roar of displeasure, Stephen climbed the steps to his bedroom.

Rebecca gone? How dare she leave a good husband for no cause? When he returned her to his house, she would know not to soon disobey him.

He stood outside his bedroom but did not enter. Across the hallway was the room Rebecca kept for herself. Once he visited her with regularity but since her illness, he had stayed away. Slowly, he moved to the closed door, turned the knob, let it fall open and walked inside.

There was only the bed with its shucked mattress, a stool and small rocking chair Aubin had made for her. A chest for clothing.

Near the cold fireplace, he saw an object and bent to pick it up. A bone pin she used to hold the long braids of blonde hair. He stood in front of the closet with clothing he had purchased for her when she journeyed with him to London for the royal holiday festivities. The lovely gown of blue velvet to enhance Rebecca's eyes. How light she had been in his arms. How hot-blooded she had been that night as he made love to her. Vibrant, alive, something to behold.

She had become a woman.

He stumbled to the bed and sat down, moving his hand over the pillow, beneath the coverlet that held Rebecca's soft fragrance, of outdoors, of honeysuckle she loved. With a curse, he rose, shoved his hands beneath the mattress and threw it into the floor. With a wild bellow, he reached for the rushes piled beneath the bed for softness.

Papers flew through the air.

Paper. Vellum. Expensive vellum. Page after page had been spread beneath the mattress so as not to wrinkle. He sat on the floor and gathered the pages. They were faded from much use.

He read. Rebecca Grinwold, Suffolk School. Miss Emilie Goodfield. The year of our Lord, 1163. Rebecca would have been thirteen that year. He turned the page.

When he read the last page of the manuscript, Stephen laid them on the rushes as they had been, replaced the mattress atop them, and spread the dainty coverlet.

He, too, had read the romance of Homer. He, too, had nurtured romantic dreams and had found them in Mary. When she died, his romantic dreams died, too. Or so he'd thought.

Until now.

A hoarse moan was born deep in his chest.

Rebecca's search for love spilled into the much-read manuscript. She did not know that he, too, loved but had denied her that knowledge because it seemed another weakness among all weaknesses he suffered. He did not let her know he grieved for the lost child—that he worried over her. His selfish despair, his neglect, drove her away from him.

Where would she go? She had no money, no possessions save those he had given her. She knew no one in this desolate country outside Glastonbury.

Shaking with grief, anger and helpless rage, he strode from the room, bellowing for Aubin to make ready for a journey.

* * * *

Wide fields cultivated and cleaned for spring crops bordered the road to Gloucester. Stephen didn't see any of the preparation that would result in crops by which he might collect the king's taxes next year. He thought of the day he took Rebecca away from Grinwold, her small, scared face, big eyes stretched to hold back tears, hoping Lady Elizabeth would speak up in her behalf so that the big blond stranger did not take her away from all she knew and loved.

Where is she now? Is she hungry? Has some stranger done her harm? Rebecca had been sheltered all her life. Not loved, but sheltered.

Stephen shivered.

It was nearing dusk when Aubin drew the horses to a stop in front of Grinwold. Two years of wear showed on the untended shutters over the front windows. And on the gabled roof with its cracked tiles. The steps needed repair, the hinges rusted on the heavy door.

Stephen's fist shook dirt loose from the porch beams. His lips curled in disgust at seeing Grinwold rotting into waste because Sir Oliver gambled away money made on his vast land holdings.

He raised his fist once more when the door opened and a woman stared at him. A gray wimple hid her hair, but her face was old, it's aging not from years but from work or worry or both. Gray lips pursed with distrust.

"My lord?" The voice whined the question at Stephen.

"I am Sir Stephen Lambert. I would see Sir Oliver."

The flabby chin quivered. "Sir Stephen? Aye, 'tis Lady Rebecca's husband." The whine became almost a voice. The bundled figure retreated, holding the door open, and curtsied. "I will fetch Lady Elizabeth."

So. Rebecca is here, he thought with satisfaction. The pain inside him retreated, and anger began to build. He would teach her to run away and cause him worry. Impatiently, he strode across the room, and then whirled as footsteps sounded behind him.

Lady Elizabeth came towards him, hands extended, a smile lighting her pale face. Blue eyes, faded where Rebecca's were dark, looked behind him as though for someone else.

"Sir Stephen," she said.

He bowed over her hand as he took it in both of his.

"Lady Elizabeth." He straightened and frowned down at her. "I would see Rebecca."

"Rebecca? But Rebecca is your ... Rebecca ... is not here." Her voice faltered. I thought mayhap you had brought her to visit ere we left for Genoa. We travel within the fortnight."

He was not listening. "Rebecca is not with you?"

"I have not seen Rebecca since her visit a year hence. Since before she ... the baby." Her hands twisted together.

"Why didst think she was here?"

He did not like telling Lady Elizabeth, but he could not avoid it.

"Rebecca left Glastonbury while I was in London. She did not leave word as to her journey."

Lady Elizabeth sank down on the velvet chair.

"Why? She seemed happy with you. Mayhap someone took her."

The two years since he had last seen Lady Elizabeth had not been kind to her. The powder for enhancing her features had settled into the lines of her face and resembled crevices of powdered stone on Moon Cliffs, Stephen thought unflatteringly.

"Rebecca was not happy since she lost the child. I asked if she would have you visit her, and she told of the Genoa journey you were taking with Sir Oliver. She would not trouble you." His anger disappeared, and he was only weary.

"Is Sir Oliver about?"

"He is over to see Richard to instruct him what is to be done while he is away. He will return ere darkness. You must stay the night."

He did not want to remain overnight, but it would be an insult to Sir Oliver to leave so quickly. He owed the man nothing, but he was his father-in-law. Gentlemanly manners demanded bending a bit. Too, he was tired. He had driven himself long and hard to get to Grinwold thinking he would find Rebecca.

"My driver will require lodging and food also, my lady," he said.

"Nora will see to him," Lady Elizabeth said. "Come. I will show you to a room."

* * * *

Sir Oliver came as the sun struck low clouds over the ragged roof of the outbuildings. The man was rounder than when Stephen last saw him, and he moved with a graceless limp. His waistcoat hung open and a huge belly sagged over dusty black pants. From a distance, Stephen could hear his grunts and heavy breathing, mark of a man not accustomed to working.

"Sir Oliver."

Sir Oliver stopped, a thick hand propped on his knee, as he made ready to aid his slow progress up the low hill from the stables. Dark eyes, sunk into folds of pink flesh, darted over the straight figure in front of him. He recognized Stephen, smiled, pink lips stretching tightly over his teeth.

"Sir Stephen. 'Tis surprised I am." He looked beyond his son-in-law. "Things are well, I trust?"

"If you mean Rebecca, I fear not, my lord," Stephen said.

"Aye. 'Tis trouble the girl has been since birth." He shook his head. "I thought perchance marriage would do her well."

"Where is Rebecca, my lord?" a quiet voice said, and Stephen looked behind Sir Oliver to a younger man. He stepped closer. "I am Richard, Rebecca's brother."

Ah, yes, her favorite. The gentle farmer, blond hair long on his shoulders, deep blue eyes so like Rebecca's.

"Where is she?" Richard repeated his question.

"I know not. I thought mayhap she would be here. She left Glastonbury while I was in London on business."

"Let us go into the house," Sir Oliver said. "I am tired and thirsty." He stepped past Stephen. "Come."

Stephen's eyes met Richard's, and the younger man grinned, lifting his hand to point to the path his father followed. Oliver led them into the room where Stephen had first met Rebecca. The furniture was shabbier, the rug not too clean.

"A drink, Richard. See to Stephen's wishes."

Richard poured whiskey into heavy glasses and placed one in front of Sir Oliver and handed the other to Stephen. He took nothing for himself but looked from one man to the other.

"What say that Rebecca is not with you?" Richard said.

Stephen retold the story. He did not wish to hear complaints from Rebecca's family. Indeed, he blamed himself enough without adding more.

"Rebecca was happy when here," Richard said. "Why would she leave without notice?"

"Loss of the baby affected her much, and she has been unhappy since."

Richard eyed his brother-in-law.

"She loved you, Sir Stephen. Mayhap you did not return the love and thus she left. Let her go if you cannot love her. Rebecca needs, aye deserves, love she never got at home."

Oliver growled in protest, but Richard heeded him not.

"Leave her to whatever life she has chosen."

Stephen slammed the glass on the table. "I need no such advice from you, Richard. You know not what I've done for Rebecca"

"Nor what you've done to her."

"I did not mistreat her. You are mistaken in thinking thus."

"There are ways of mistreating other than beatings as Papa often did. Love not returned, to a romantic such as Rebecca, is punishment enough. She rightfully expects love from you. She needs a gentle love, not one of convenience."

Richard's words burned into his soul. He had thought to be gentle, mostly, but he had not told Rebecca of his love for her. Richard was the only name his wife ever used when she talked of happier times. She was right about her brother: He returned her love without demands on her.

He wondered what Rebecca felt for him, her husband. No matter what Richard said, she did not love him was plain although there had been times he thought she might harbor warm feelings for him. He had not asked, he had not said he loved her. She had left him, which was his answer.

Stephen departed Grinwold as angry and uneasy as when he had reached Rebecca's home place.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

* * * *

Bells rang in every church. In each fireplace a log fire burned, sending warmth and light through the halls thronging with revelers. Laughter and jokes and light-hearted jostling cheered the revelers.

Rebecca stood in back of Hugo and Margaret as they waited to be presented to the queen. She wore the gold-threaded jongleur suit with a hood covering her hair, her eyes hidden behind a gold-sequined mask. She was to perform as a dwarf as Margaret suggested.

Queen Eleanor would not recognize Lady Rebecca Lambert from a year ago.

Gerald stood beside Rebecca dressed in the red satin suit of a troubadour. He, too, wore a gold mask.

Rebecca's eyes swept the crowded hall, seeking the blond head of her husband above the others. She wanted to see him yet dreaded it. Suppose he was with the queen? Could she curtsy and bow and murmur greetings with his questioning eyes on her?

Several fortnights had passed since she had left Glastonbury. The road the minstrels traveled did not take them to cities where they would hear gossip about the wife of Sir Stephen Lambert. Mayhap he did not even see fit to report it. Mayhap he did not care enough.

Rebecca blinked and brought her eyes back to the activity in front of her. Her life was here—here in the company of troubadours and minstrels who entertained royalty. It was

Christmas, and they were in the royal household to perform for Queen Eleanor and King Henry.

"Rebecca," Margaret whispered. "Come."

With scarcely a show of trembling, Rebecca followed Margaret and Hugo down the wide aisle towards Queen Eleanor and King Henry.

"Your royal highness, Queen Eleanor, and his majesty, King Henry, presented to the Royal Troubadours of Troyes."

Her turn came and Rebecca curtsied low in front of Eleanor, murmured the required holiday greeting, and moved behind Hugo and Margaret. Her heart beat rapidly in her throat, and her breath came in short gasps.

The queen's deep-set gray eyes had looked straight into Rebecca's for a long moment. Was it her own fright that caused her to think Eleanor stared a bit more than ordinary? Or was her disappointment at not seeing Stephen making her more aware of the queen's attention?

King Henry glowered as though blaming Rebecca for his forced stay on the throne near his queen. Perchance he would prefer even now to be in Woodstock with his lover. Rebecca could not remember the name of the woman gossip said lived in the halls, which had once been the queen's favorite.

She turned away from King Henry's probing gaze.

She was disappointed. But suppose Stephen had been there? She might have grown so agitated as to stumble or not be able to utter a single word. She glanced quickly down at her small body encased in the flowing suit. No one could determine if she were man or woman.

"We go to find substance to fill our bellies," Gerald murmured in her ear. "Hungry?"

"Yes," Rebecca said. In truth, she was not, but to use her hands for holding food was better than twisting them together in anguish. She followed Gerald through the great hall where they were joined by Margaret and Hugo.

"Do not eat as though thou hast not eaten in weeks, Gerald," Margaret said. "'Tis not good to fill thou belly before tumbling in front of the queen."

Gerald's jaw poked out filled with delights the likes of which he could not always have. Roasts, pans of rich gravies, breads and pastries replaced his usual fare of beans and mayhap a rabbit turned on a tree-branch spit—should they be lucky enough that Rebecca would bring one down with her bow and arrow.

"Aye, Margaret," Gerald said after ridding his mouth of its tasty burden. "Mayhap the chance will not come again, and I must keep my strength, eh?"

Across the table, Rebecca laughed at the two of them as they argued pleasantly. She eyed the feast spread out on table after table and wondered how much more in taxes Stephen would collect from the peasants to pay for such lavish banquets.

Jongleurs, troubadours, mummers all gathered on the grounds assigned to pitch their tents. A chill wind whipped the flaps and spits of snow cut her face when Rebecca stepped outside without a wimple to cover her head. Picking her way to Margaret's tent, she glanced upward and shivered. A pitch-

black night, which threatened to turn even worse before morning.

"It is good the festivities will be in the royal great room, Rebecca," Margaret said, stirring a thick stew in a black kettle. "The chill is indeed bitter."

Rebecca was not cold. She had other worries.

"Will we be near the queen as we sing, Margaret?"

"What is this? Thou art worried?" Margaret laughed. "Fear not, Rebecca. Thou hast a lovely voice, and Queen Eleanor will be entranced."

It was not the queen Rebecca thought of. She huddled near the open fire, her arms wrapped beneath the black cloak Margaret loaned her.

"Art thinking of the father of the child?"

Rebecca's heart quickened. "Dost show?"

"Aye, but do not cry over that which is done, Little One. We cannot always love the one we should."

"I must confess that the truth is I am married. My husband was the father of my child. He did not want the child. Nor me. That is why I left."

Margaret stopped stirring and looked at her.

"You love him?"

"Yes."

"If you love him, Cherie, find him and tell him so."

"To be laughed at? Nay, Margaret, I want to be rid of him, as he wants to be rid of me. It is better so."

Margaret tended the stew, lines drawing between her eyes in thought. "The great lessener of grief is hope, Rebecca."

"I have waited years for naught. There is grief without hope. There is something wrong with me that I am not loved. Papa. Peter. My husband. No one has loved me save my brother Richard."

She sighed and closed her eyes.

"To see him once in two years is not enough to keep even hope alive." She held out her hands to the fire. "Hast been in love, Margaret?"

"Many times."

"How so? Love is for once only."

"You are an innocent. Love of the heart is only in the written pages by men who dream."

"You know of books?"

"Ah, Rebecca, I was once in school but what can a woman's mind do to improve her lot? I am happier on the road with Hugo." Margaret laughed. "And we eat well."

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Chapter Twelve

From the great hall and the revelers, Stephen followed King Henry into the room isolated so as to give them privacy. For talk of taxes, courts, separation of the church from the kingdom, the queen, the royal couple's children, and Sir Thomas Becket.

Stephen's arrival came after the introduction of the minstrels and troubadours the queen so enjoyed, and the king, bored by the festivities, dragged Stephen away from the crowds.

Stephen did not care. His mind was not on royal business. He was remembering, instead, the Christmas he had brought Rebecca to London with him, her childish delight in everything they did, the heat of her young body when he made love to her. Memories haunted him and, instead of thinking of Mary's loss as before, he found Rebecca constantly on his mind and in his heart.

The force of his memories staggered him. Indeed, there were times, such as these, when he thought his mind completely gone with the disappearance of his wife.

Stephen faced the king without enthusiasm, recognizing his reddened countenance as the mark of the royal bad temper.

"We are recalling the students home from France, Stephen. The presence of Sir Thomas there is hindering my influence."

"Did you not make peace with Sir Thomas when you met in the summer, Your Highness?" Stephen knew strained feelings even now built daily between the two. Neither stubborn man would yield.

The king ran freckled fingers through thinning red hair.

"Aye, 'tis supposedly so, but 'tis an uneasy peace. I do not trust Sir Thomas." He grunted and swung beefy arms about. "Nor does he trust me. By God's eye, I could wish I'd never let love for that scoundrel visit such a bad decision on me. My subjects even now object to paying what must be collected in order to support their kingdom. Sir Thomas is the cause of much unrest and brazenly embarrasses the papacy by absolute insistence on property rights of the church while the pope seeks an amiable compromise."

King Henry's face turned an ugly red, contrasting with fading red of his hair.

"What sluggish knaves I have brought up in my kingdom! Is there not one who will rid me of this turbulent priest?"

Stephen did not contradict the king, nor did he remind Henry how many times he had been warned of the folly of appointing his friend as archbishop. The king did not wish to hear such things.

"Mayhap a lowering of public taxes would bring sympathy from your subjects, my lord," Stephen said into the silence. "In my travels of late there is a reluctance to give freely as before. It is thought less royal luxuries would require less taxing of the peasants."

"Peasants do not know the costs of running a kingdom. It is of great import that they give full support."

Stephen leaned forward.

"Insurance and ransom monies could be greatly reduced, Your Highness, if you and the queen will but remain at castle instead of journeying to unfriendly territory. Mayhap..."

He was beyond his position, Stephen knew, in speaking thusly, a direct chastisement of the king.

The king did not take offense but shook his head.

"Even now the queen prepares to journey to Poitiers. That is why her troubadours and minstrels and silly clowns are tumbling around the castle grounds now instead of the usual Christmas foolishness. So she can be gone once more. You cannot keep her at home even the Yuletide season for families to enjoy together." He pounded one fist into the other. "It is your duty to see that the taxes are collected from royal subjects."

Stephen bowed his head, too tired to argue, knowing it useless.

The king stared at the man in front of him.

"There has been no word of Lady Rebecca?"

"None, your majesty."

Stephen blocked out the sudden pain that accompanied questions of Rebecca. He did not share his sorrow with others—especially did he not wish to burden the king who had enough troubles of his own.

"You think her kidnapped?"

"There has been no ransom demand, your majesty."

In these troubling times of kidnappings and violent attacks by rogues and highwaymen, almost certainly someone would have demanded money for Rebecca. If she were still alive.

Stephen shuddered.

"Ah." The king frowned at his pudgy hands. "Perhaps another suitor took her?"

"There was not another man in her company, Sire."

Stephen had wondered the same in his unhappy rages following Rebecca's departure, but he could think of no acquaintance who would have taken her. No one he knew disappeared at the same time as Rebecca. She had vanished, leaving him with no one to blame or on which to vent his anger. Save himself.

King Henry sighed.

"Go to the celebration, Stephen. Mayhap a young beauty awaits your request to bed her."

"Sire."

Stephen bowed low and left the king. He had no intention of searching for another woman. Had he not enough trouble without adding feminine wiles to them? Even with no woman in his bed since Rebecca, he did not hunger for such.

Tired and feeling anger again after its brief absence, Stephen sought a servant with a tray of bread and meat. He sat at a long table near the end of the great hall, watching the cavorting of the jongleurs as he chewed on his first solid substance of the day.

Queen Eleanor loved minstrels and troubadours and often housed them in royal chambers during festivities of Christmas while they performed for her. For this group, a special courtyard had been prepared where tents were assembled because it was October and the weather not overly severe.

Too, the royal suites were being cleaned and prepared for the Queen's absence.

Stephen watched as a tall couple danced to music supplied by someone playing a harp and the thin accompaniment of a sad wailing flute.

Behind the couple came the jongleur, tossing balls and colorful articles into the air, bounding to catch them, somersaulting and coming upright to grab swords appearing above him. The merry crowds cheered as the next minstrel appeared.

Stephen remembered this one. A small figure in sequined gold, curtsying before the queen in the anteroom before his meeting with the king. He watched with interest as the dancer ran gracefully around the jongleur, dodging his outstretched hands, tumbling feet over head, to escape capture.

Finally, she missed a tumble and ended up as prisoner in the jongleur's arms. In pantomime, she pleaded for release, but to no avail.

"You will sing for me, my pretty," the voice behind the jongleur mask commanded.

"Thou must release me ere I sing, kind sir," the soft voice answered.

Stephen leaned forward, frowning. He had heard the voice before this time. Ah, yes, when she gave the queen her greetings. He listened as the lilting notes rang into the quiet hall.

Rebecca had no wish to sing a romantic ballad. Queen Eleanor, she knew from court gossip, was unhappy. She had seen the king's wandering eye, too. She would sing

something to cheer the queen during this unscheduled appearance of the minstrels. There was one song she thought might be the one to help.

She backed away from Hugo and curtsied toward the throne, then sang a comical verse, accompanying her words with pantomime.

"Take a look and you will see
What betakes a bite of me."

Rebecca pulled up the full material of her jongleur suit, showing a tiny bit of her leg. There was a murmur of laughter at this show of bawdiness.

"So what do I do? I flee the flea."

Rebecca whirled and picked up a braided rug from beneath her feet.

"But in the warmth he hath dug
To wrap up in the woolen rug.
To rid him of his powerful bite
I'll smother him to death tonight!"

She flapped the rug, then rolled it into a tight ball and sat on it.

The crowd went wild as Rebecca cavorted around Hugo's dignified figure. Stephen looked at Eleanor to see her applauding, a look of delight on her royal countenance. His eyes sought out the small minstrel once more, but she had disappeared.

Finished her part in the evening's entertainment, Rebecca slipped from Hugo's hands, curtsied in four directions, and bowed her way to the edge of the crowd. Familiar nausea filled her stomach.

Stephen was seated at a table at the back of the large hall, his eyes fastened on the performers.

Beloved Stephen. His shaggy blond head was held straight, the darker beard neatly trimmed against the chainse of black. Stephen was one of few men who could wear black well. Rebecca had always known this, but tonight, his face was even more eloquently handsome. Wide shoulders, strong arms, big hands resting on his thighs. He had not changed.

Did she expect him to change? Did she think he would mourn her? That he would sorrow and pine away for a plain child bride who could not even carry his seed till birth? Had he found another wife? Did he end their marriage and find another to warm his bed? Or did he satisfy his body with Malvina?

Chilling desolation settled against her spine, and Rebecca straightened. Inclining her head slightly toward the royal audience, she left the stage. As she turned away, her eyes strayed across the crowds to the door where Stephen had escorted her from the dance that faraway Christmas, up the stairs to the room set aside for them in the castle.

She stumbled, righted herself, and walked on.

"What sayst thou, Rebecca? Art ill?"

Hugo questioned her because he had seen her steps falter as they left the royal presence.

"Nay, 'tis only that I bowed too quickly and was dizzy. It has passed."

"The queen was entranced, Rebecca. Come, let us celebrate as well." He took Rebecca's hand. It was cold and damp.

* * * *

Stephen took the queen's hand and bowed over it.

"My lady, you grow lovelier with each passing year."

Eleanor laughed.

"Ah, Stephen, my very favorite subject. I adore flattery though I recognize it as such."

Stephen smiled. Eleanor is lovely, he was thinking. Having six children and King Henry as husband is a heavy cross to bear, and she bears it well.

" 'Tis not flattery, Your Highness, but the truth."

The queen motioned him to sit on her right and, gratefully, Stephen rested.

"Did you enjoy the performance?"

"Aye. They are not the same as last year's minstrels. Who is the small one with the delightful voice?"

"The troupe is lately from France by way of St. David's," the queen said. "The leader is Hugo Benet, but I have not heard the one in gold ere this time." Lively gray eyes watched Stephen, and the queen admitted a small twinge of jealousy of her husband's reeve. She changed the subject.

"You will visit my daughter when you arrive in Troyes, will you, Stephen? Alix has not been well of late, and mayhap news of my coming visit will cheer her."

"Yes, Your Highness. I travel there then to Salisbury. Mayhap before the Yule holidays, I can lay some stone."

The manor house would soon be complete, but Stephen felt no happiness as he had once thought would be true. That was when he had a wife to ...

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

"You hear nothing of the Lady Rebecca? Even after a year?"

He stiffened.

"Nothing," he said.

Eleanor sighed. Should she, herself, disappear forever, Henry would have great cause for celebration. His latest paramour could be moved closer to his royal bedroom.

At that moment, she envied Lady Rebecca Lambert, wherever she might be, for the love of a man like Stephen.

"Go in peace, Stephen," she said. "I wish you well."

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Chapter Thirteen

London, October 1170

Rebecca's heart yet ached with the loss of her husband, but it was near two years since she departed Glastonbury. She no longer looked for Stephen each time they performed in towns where he might journey. She no longer wondered if he missed her, or indeed, bothered to search for her.

She stood in the great hall of the royal palace, taking in the bright decorations, ribbons furled across ceiling of halls and great room, royal guests in richly decorated clothing, dancing, singing, drinking.

Instead of the circus grounds they had stayed in the year before, a special invitation had come from Queen Eleanor and this year, Hugo's minstrels and troubadours were housed in a separate building behind the palace. It was spacious, warm and alive with merrymaking as only Hugo's troupes could make it.

Rebecca was a part of them. Truth, she could scarcely remember the time when she wasn't a part of the big rollicking family. Through good times and bad, through plenty and not-so-plentiful times. Not the comfort of Glastonbury, of having Malvina await her needs, or Aubin to carry a flower basket for her. Not Bundy to saddle Tor for a ride along Moon Cliffs.

Her heart twisted at such thoughts, and she turned instead to the trials of life on the road. Here, she was not protected from gossip as Stephen tried to do. Here she was face-to-face

with that which must be done in order to eat, or have a dry place to sleep, or how many miles one must journey each day to reach the next village. And, of course, gossip and tales of the Plantagenets.

Rumors abounded that King Henry and the archbishop had settled their differences and were again friends. It would make Stephen's job easier, Rebecca thought, as she let her mind go into pathways she usually avoided. If 'tis true. But Rebecca doubted that it was. She had listened and learned much in the past two years.

Queen Eleanor agitated the children to go against the king. Whispers abounded on Henry's whoring ways. The man knew not the ways of fidelity.

" 'Tis the way of man," Margaret said. "His lust is as he breathes."

"And woman, Margaret? Are we not, too, allowed to indulge our bodies when we long for attention?"

"And hast thou indulged thy lovely body, Rebecca? Hast taken to lusting after gentlemen who even now seek notice from such a beautiful damsel?"

Rebecca laughed. "Gerald thinks no one is good enough for me. One young man approached to only ask a question when Gerald took him by the shirt collar and sat him down somewhat heavily. He was sore appalled at the treatment and did not return to visit."

"Aye, Gerald does think he was born to be thy protector, Rebecca. He adores thee even more so than the others who travel with the jongleurs."

"My lady?"

Rebecca turned at the soft question. A maidservant she had seen in the lower hall stood in front of her.

"My lady, Queen Eleanor would have you appear before her ere you leave the performance this night. She will be in her bedchambers. Please to conduct yourself there in due time."

"Tell her royal highness I will be there."

Every third candle in the hallway was extinguished when the same young handmaiden who brought orders for Rebecca's appearance before Queen Eleanor led her to the door of the royal bedroom. The girl knocked softly and entered the room, standing aside for Rebecca to walk past.

Queen Eleanor lay in bed, soft blue linen pillows behind her brushed hair, delicate hands folded on the matching sheets. Her smile was bright as Rebecca curtsied and moved to stand near the bed.

She is lovely, Rebecca thought. Why does the king lust after other women? Does he not know what he has at home? He had stolen her from the king of France, yet he neglected her in his conquests wherever he traveled. How so?

The queen did not recognize Rebecca as the wife of Sir Stephen Lambert. Indeed, even without her jongleur disguise, she might not have done so, but Rebecca could not chance that and had not changed her costume before her command appearance.

"Your performances are indeed a pleasure, my dear. I love your 'Flea' poem. You must leave a manuscript of it." The queen laughed softly, and then the smile faded. "Hugo tells me the troupe is to Troyes upon leaving London."

Rebecca nodded and murmured, "Yes, Your Highness."

"I would have you visit with my daughter, Alix, whilst there. Your performances will cheer her, but I wish you to speak with her in person and tell her that we are well. Alix has been depressed since losing her son, and I fear she will become ill if care is not taken. Tell her I will travel directly for an extended visit and to see that her health is restored ere that time."

"Yes, Your Highness. Dost travel soon?"

"Nearer to the Yuletide so as to gather the family at such time. This should cheer Alix."

"Yes, your highness. 'Tis certain that it will."

Rebecca backed away, curtsied, and moved to the door.

The queen's gaze followed the small, sequined figure, and as it disappeared into the hall, she frowned. Although it was not the season for such, there was the scent of honeysuckle in the room.

* * * *

The weather was in keeping with Rebecca's mood. Gray skies hovered low as preparations went on for departure from royal grounds. Thick mist clung to her hair, which she had left uncovered. It was warm for such a late October day, and even in the rain, voices lifted in song.

Their performances for the royal family were well received. The queen had ordered the extra food be given the minstrels and Hugo had seen to the fair distribution among the groups. Full bellies made the hard work of packing and moving seem like child's play.

Rebecca worked without rest, packing her cases then helping Gerald gather the props for his juggling act.

"Thou art a performer of much talent, Rebecca," Gerald said, his short arms taking the box from her and hefting it into the cart. "Methinks in Troyes, thou couldst perform for the opera and work in a clean, dry house, not the muddy arenas. King Louis favors such things and, mayhap, Hugo would speak to him. Didst know they are distant cousins?"

"Nay, Gerald, 'tis not for me even should Hugo inquire of the king."

Rebecca straightened, pressed both hands into her back and brushed straggly, wet hair from her face.

"My place is with this group, not the opera with its powdered wigs and fancy dress. A jongleur suit meets my needs most fair."

"Ah, but 'tis the opera house where thou meets the kind of man thou should marry."

Gerald did not know she was Stephen Lambert's wife. She had told only Margaret that she had been married, not to whom, and she was certain the information had been given to Hugo, but not to Gerald. Her secret would not leave the troubadour family.

Any thought of Stephen affected her still, but as time passed, the hurt lingered less and less. Rebecca forced a laugh past the tightness of her throat before she answered Gerald.

"Not to worry about a husband for me, Gerald. I wait for thee to grow up, to hie thee away to my castle there to romance forever."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Gerald bowed low.

"Ah, Rebecca, my love, my heart awaits thou capture and wishes thou castle were nearby so that thou couldst hide me from the rain."

For truth, he did love her, Gerald thought, but 'tis not for Rebecca to know. She still sorrowed over yon devil who betrayed her.

Arms clutched around each other, Rebecca and Gerald staggered through the mud, singing one of Gerald's bawdy songs and laughing merrily.

Margaret and Hugo, struggling with heavy trunks, stopped to watch the pair make its way towards them.

When they came close, Hugo said, "'tis a waste of strength to sing such, Gerald. Couldst be of help to Margaret and me?"

"Ah, Hugo," Gerald said, releasing Rebecca and bowing. "'Tis a beautiful day to sing, not so for working." He eyed the flapping cover over a trunk and shook his head. Beads of moisture formed on his forehead and ran down his cheeks. "Mayhap a strong hand would be to thy liking. Perchance Margaret has woman's work to do."

So saying, he lent willing hands and back.

Gratefully, Margaret gave over her hold to Gerald and followed Rebecca across the ground to the place set aside for cooking. Rebecca gathered wood, which had been covered against the rain and added it to the low fire to begin evening meal.

Tomorrow, they would begin their journey to Troyes.

* * * *

Rebecca did not like the sea.

The rushing water was much too near for comfort with waves lifting even closer to her face. Her stomach tilted with the ship, and her appetite deserted her. Food was not plentiful, so she gladly gave her share to Gerald.

" 'Tis pale thou art, Rebecca," Hugo said. "Could you drink strong tea?"

"Do not worry thyself, Hugo. I partook of plenty in the royal feasts so that a missed meal will do me no harm."

Hugo looked over the slender figure and shook his head.

"Nay, Rebecca, you need to double your food, not lessen it. When we reach Troyes, you shall come with Margaret and me to the market stalls where there be treats to calm the soul and fatten the body."

Rebecca laughed.

"Ere that happens, my belly must sit still a full day."

Finally, the shore was reached and their belongings loaded on carts and mules. Rebecca breathed a relieved sigh as they started on the trek to Troyes. She knew of the city from Stephen's talk, but Hugo's minstrel troupe had only reached Paris the year past, and she had not visited the markets and fairs of which he spoke.

"How do we know where to reach Alix?"

Margaret and Hugo sat across the open fire from Rebecca. They were holding hands. Gerald went from tent to tent visiting those known from fairs in other towns.

" 'Tis easy. She is Princess Alix, and she lives in the king's court. I will send a message that we are here."

* * * *

Stephen's carriage arrived at the apartment where Alix resided early in the evening. A young maidservant opened the door to his knock.

"I am Sir Stephen Lambert with a message to Her Highness from Queen Eleanor."

The girl curtsied, backed away, smiling. "This way, Monsieur."

Stephen followed behind the maidservant, climbing a short stairway to his right where they stopped. The girl knocked and when there was a murmured answer, opened the door and stepped aside.

Facing Stephen was a wide glazed window with pale green panels blowing in the gentle wind. In a white, high-backed velvet chair sat the raven-haired Alix, a tiny smile on her lips. She held out a small hand.

"Sir Stephen. How good of you to postpone your business to see me. Most surely Mama forced you to accept such an order to visit."

"Your Highness, it is with pleasure that I do this."

Stephen had known Alix since she was a child, not unlike Rebecca when he first carried her to Glastonbury. A stabbing pain tightened his chest.

Alix thought Stephen had never looked more handsome. The pale cream waistcoat over dark trousers set off his blond hair that curled over his collar. Deep-set blue eyes gazed straight at her, not avoiding her teasing gaze as most British subjects did.

"How are my mother and father?"

"They art well. The queen wishes to tell you that she will visit just past Christmas while repairs are being made to the royal chambers."

While she makes needless and costly changes to her apartments, Stephen wanted to say. While she uses tax payments for other than what they are intended, and King Henry visits more collections upon his already overburdened subjects.

"And the king yet fights with Sir Thomas?"

"Aye. It is so," Stephen said. "The two are destined to do battle over rights of each."

Alix moved her head weakly from side to side.

"They argue between themselves, and their argument invades even the beautiful shores of France."

Stephen inclined his head. "'Tis true. I have talked long of the good to come of settlement, but naught has come of it"

"Thou art only one man, Stephen, and 'tis thought it will take the kingdoms of England and France."

Worry sat plainly on the lovely features of Alix, and Stephen did not wonder at such. Her loyalties must be stretched beyond her young reasoning.

He said goodbye and left Alix staring unhappily at the ceiling. His business needs beckoned, and he had not the time or patience to squander trying to undo damage done by his king and queen. That he loved them and paid homage to them as well as paid the same taxes he collected from all their subjects was true, but he sometimes chafed at his burden. Like now when his time for business was wasted on them.

His carriage stood by the curb with Aubin sitting stiffly atop it.

"What say, Aubin? Canst get me away to the market in haste? I would see Monsieur Cormand at the wool stalls."

Aubin grinned at his master.

"For truth, Sir Stephen. 'Tis well you do business within the hour as the rain threatens again."

Did it not always happen so? Stephen wondered, staring at the dark clouds squared off by the carriage window. They looked ugly and out of sorts such as how he felt. Before they reached Monsieur Cormand's display of materials, thunder rumbled quickly behind lightning flashes, then the rains poured and the horses sent sprays of muddy water from beneath their feet.

Merchants struggling to set up stands and tables to show their wares cursed steadily at the peasant workers and animals. Aubin stopped beside an enclosed stall and climbed down to open the carriage for Stephen.

"God's eye, Aubin, get thyself in the carriage or a covered stall. Wilt catch they death of chills and fever. Come for me within the hour."

"Yea, 'tis evil, my lord."

So saying, Aubin climbed back atop the carriage and guided the team towards shelter.

Inside the stall, Stephen went to meet Monsieur Cormand, a man he had traded with in years past. They spoke in French, a language Stephen knew from his journeys as well as through Aubin whom he had plucked off Paris streets where he roamed without family. Stephen thought at the time

that Aubin was a boy of ten or twelve, stealing and digging in alleys for his food. He had taken Aubin to Glastonbury where he trained him as his manservant and driver. Aubin would die for Sir Stephen.

"Welcome, my friend," Monsieur Cormand said, giving Stephen his hand. "It has been long."

Dark hair lay on his shoulders, but a peak centered his forehead, giving a sense of dividing a round face. Thick beard and mustache hovered over a smiling mouth with white, even teeth. Deep brown eyes surveyed the slim straight figure of the Englishman and he smiled at what he saw.

Monsieur Cormand saw one of the few real smiles he had for anyone these days. "Too long, Monsieur. I trust thee and thy family are well."

"Yes, yes, thank you."

The Frenchman reached beneath a shelf and brought forth a decanter of whiskey, good whiskey, Stephen knew because the man did not drink cheap spirits.

"Ah, Stephen, 'tis good to see thee. Such a miserable day that some good must come of it."

He poured rich dark liquid into delicate crystal and handed one to Stephen. They touched glasses and sipped as Cormand motioned him to a straight chair and then sat on a square stool in front of him.

They discussed business this way, the Frenchman quoting prices on his wool. Stephen nodded at the price, swiftly calculating what he would need and the cost. His eyes lifted to the shelf behind Monsieur Cormand where bright silks were stacked.

"Ah, Stephen, some lengths for the Lady Rebecca. And, too, I have the necklace just for her lovely throat." He got up and went around the counter, leaning down to open a safe.

"Do not bother, Monsieur," Stephen said quietly. "I no longer have a wife."

The Frenchman jerked upward, eyes wide with shock.

"For truth, Stephen? 'Tis thought ... where is she?"

Stephen wanted to curse, to shout at the man, to kick the table of expensive goods, but he did none of this.

"She disappeared two summers ago. I have no word on her whereabouts." He waved his arms when Monsieur Cormand would have spoken. "'Tis a tragedy I do not wish to speak of."

"Of course, Stephen. I sorrow for you." The Frenchman turned away from the fierce anger in the Englishman's eyes.

His business with Monsieur Cormand finished, Stephen walked through the market place, down the alleys between foodstuffs, household goods, wool, cotton, linen. Fine jewels, perfumes. The rain had stopped, leaving the air heavy and filled with the smell of people and animals. He stopped near an old woman with a dirty shawl around thin shoulders, a wimple so faded as to be colorless pulled low over a wrinkled forehead.

"A length of satin for thy lady, my lord?" The husky voice was strangely musical. "'Tis a lovely color, is it not?"

Stephen looked down at the cloth the old woman held up for him. It was a pale purple, a color Rebecca favored over all. It softened her young face and reflected in the deep blue of her eyes, giving them a gentle tint of wild violets. The lusty

night of love in London that long-ago Christmas, she had worn such a gown.

A violent spasm of pain shook his straight body, and he swallowed the shout of anguish that would have frightened the old woman out of the few years she had left in this world. Stephen shook his head and moved on, then stopped. A thin vial of perfume lay amidst the lace and silk of a filmy scarf. A black butterfly, etched into the bottle, hovered over a violet flower. His hand moved toward the fragrance, hesitated, and dropped to his side.

Wherefore need he purchase such a frivolous gift? For whom?

" 'Tis a wonder of a scent, sire," a quiet voice said, "and costs little."

Blindly, Stephen searched in his waistcoat and brought out money.

"Take what is needed for all of it," he said, pointing to the handkerchief and scarf.

The merchant scurried about, murmuring at Stephen's good fortune in finding such a gift for his lover, but Stephen stared at him without speaking. When the man had finished with the wrapping, Stephen took the package and departed in haste.

"Here you are, for royalty and peasant alike, yea, for all who wander the streets. Come to the feast and fun with the likes of that never seen in minstrels. Sweet music and clever jokes, a bonny lass to sing. Follow me to the stage set for your pleasure."

The clown in front of Stephen walked on tall tree limbs with carved notches for his feet. Dressed in stripes of red, purple and gold, a jongleur's costume with full legs, he dragged the poles along, giving out bits of wisdom and tomfoolery to make the crowds laugh.

It worked. They followed him behind the market stalls and tables to an arena surrounded by carts and wagons that could be used as seats. In the center of the compound a company of minstrels cavorted, tumbling, balancing pieces of wood on fire, a tiny dog jumping a turning rope, and another clown juggling clay pots. They frequently slid in the mud whether on purpose or not, it made the crowds livelier.

Stephen stopped long enough to catch his breath, to admonish himself for being stupid buying trinkets for a woman, a woman he did not have. He found a cart to lean against and watched the show, smiling at the childish antics he had seen so many times. At royal court, before the queen, in the alleys and main roads of country villages. Their performances were outlawed by the church, by Sir Thomas Becket, nonetheless flourished in the kingdom.

It was innocent entertainment. Stephen saw no harm in the glitter, the pretense that pushed troubles out of the way for a time. Poverty and denial were ways of life, but by God's eye, the workers of the kingdom should have a bit of entertainment. 'Twas only fair. Sir Thomas did not deny himself. Why then, should royal subjects fare worse?

"And, now, that for which you have long waited. The master of minstrels, Hugo, and his companion."

The clown bowed low, turned a backward flip, and galloped four-legged off the stage.

Stephen turned to go when he frowned and looked back. Queen Eleanor had said, "He is Hugo Benet, late of France."

Interested now, he watched as the tall minstrel waltzed onto the boards, holding a small figure dressed in red. They moved as one, turning, dipping, swaying and bending, then the tiny dancer sailed through the air to land, cat-like, tumbling end over end, around the edge of the stage back into the tall one's arms.

The crowd cheered.

Stephen's eyes disbelieved the movements as much as any of the audience. It seemed an impossibility that a human body could bend and twist into as many shapes as the small one did. Shaking his head, he turned away. He had promised Alix to return to the royal apartment for dinner and one more talk before he left Troyes the next morning.

* * * *

Aubin settled to wait for his master, but he was remembering the Lady Rebecca. From the first sweet smile she gave him, Aubin was smitten and, in time, had grown to love her mayhap even more than he cared for Sir Stephen. Sir Stephen did not smile, nor tease, nor laugh at silly things. Never had he sat atop the carriage seat, as the Lady Rebecca loved to do when he drove her into the village those times Sir Stephen left her alone.

Aubin would not leave the Lady Rebecca alone had she been his wife. Never would he have let the lovely lady out of

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his sight. He thought Sir Stephen grieved for Lady Rebecca, but he could not be certain of such because his master did not speak of his departed wife. Aubin's heart ached with their loss.

He huddled in a sheltered corner and waited for Sir Stephen.

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Chapter Fourteen

" 'Tis good of thee to bring news from the queen," Alix said. "I want to see mama and papa, but illness keeps me here." She sighed, and then smiled at Rebecca. "How art my half brothers and sisters? Dost rave and rant at papa as before?"

"In truth, the queen did not say, Your Highness. I am not in her confidence for such things."

"Aye, but who knows what treachery those vixens plan? 'Tis the king's own fault, 'tis true, but loyalty to one's own should be without force."

Rebecca watched Alix, wondering if she knew all that went on in the British kingdom. Mayhap not. How could one so far away see the many wrongs being committed? But she, Rebecca, could not speak of such things.

Alix should speak with Stephen. He would know what to say to ease her worries. But would he?

Stephen did not talk with Rebecca of government and change, of threats and hypocrisy, of King Henry and Sir Thomas. She knew from gossip and from listening in on conversations she had no business to hear.

" 'Tis planned that the younger children will travel with the queen as she visits France, Your Highness. She wished me to convey her best and to give assurance she will be here just past Christmas."

"Thank you." Alix frowned at the figure in gold, a sequined mask covering her face, misty black lace hiding her hair. "And who art thou?"

Rebecca curtsied.

"None but a minstrel, Your Highness. I have performed at the royal palace for the queen who enjoys entertainment furnished by our group. She knew we were to Troyes and wished to send the message straightway."

Rebecca's heart pounded. Alix could well demand she remove the mask and veil, but she did not. She was unhappy and thought only of herself at the moment.

"Thou art a part of Hugo's troupe of minstrels? Mama has naught but praise for your dancing and reciting of poetry. The king has many worries and cares not for such, but if it pleases Mama, he is happy." Alix looked long at Rebecca, and then said, "I look forward to the evening's entertainment, and I thank you for your news."

There were no more questions, and Rebecca breathed a sigh as she was dismissed from the room. On trembling legs, she made her way to the tent where Margaret made preparations for their performance before Alix.

"I was fair frightened she would ask me to remove the mask," Rebecca said.

"Why? Alix hast never seen thee. What matters she should see thy lovely face?"

" 'Tis true. There is no worry." Rebecca frowned.

Why did it seem she should avoid being recognized by Alix? She did not know, but the uneasy feeling lingered.

Mayhap 'tis only the ugly weather, she mused as she exchanged the gold sequins for a red silk top and black silk pants, legs ballooning to full gathers at her ankles. Black satin slippers, light and useful for running and dancing, adorned her small feet.

Hugo expects the rain to cease, Rebecca thought now, and if it knows its place, it will do as Hugo commands. She stepped outside her tent and faced a small crowd waiting patiently for the clowns to appear. She waved and blew a kiss and curtsied when they applauded. Opposite her, Gerald balanced on a whiskey barrel, waved to the crowd and promptly fell head over heels into the wooden platform, rolling over and over until he came to a stop at Rebecca's feet.

"Ha, knave," she taunted. "Thou art a clumsy clown. Didst learn thy tumbling from the circus bears?"

"Aye," Gerald said. "The trained bears are the ones to imitate, eh?"

He pulled himself upright, swayed as though drunk, then reached backward to pull Rebecca with him as he somersaulted end over end. They came to a stop at the edge of the makeshift stage, teetering, arms wrapped around each other, struggling to keep from falling into the mud.

At that moment, Hugo entered, raising long arms to accompany his songs, strolling innocently along the stage. The aria he was singing stopped abruptly as he spied the figures about to fall into the mire surrounding them.

"What say ye? Wouldst let your clumsiness lose the little one in the mud? What knave is this who would do such?"

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He backed way to sing his displeasure.

Gerald bent near Rebecca's face, which was hidden by a black satin mask. He spoke in a loud, harsh whisper.

"Ere I let thee go, thou must sing for thy supper."

He pulled Rebecca away from danger, and she dropped to her knees in a begging position. Her song began softly, telling the story of her troubles, of the loss of her parents, her child, her husband. Then her voice trembled and deepened, rising above the sudden stillness of her audience. So sweetly the words poured, so grave and solemn and true that no one moved.

Gerald stood coldly by, a haughty and proud posture, ignoring her pleas. Then as she sang, her voice beautifully sad, he began to take notice, and big bubbly tears ran down his painted cheeks.

Rebecca stopped singing to stare as Gerald pulled out a white linen handkerchief, blew his nose loudly, waved the handkerchief and it turned to red. Another wave and it became yellow, then green. He stepped close to Rebecca and dabbed at her mask. It turned red and green and yellow.

The crowd cheered and laughed as Gerald left a colorful path all along Rebecca's face, over the red blouse and down the black pants. When she saw what he had done, Rebecca ran after Gerald who grasped a pole behind the stage and slid down it, lost his footing and rolled in the mud.

Rebecca stopped, eyed the messy minstrel, threw back her head and laughed a silken, happy sound that entranced her audience.

Applause rose with calls for more and more.

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* * * *

Stephen walked with head bowed, paying little attention to his direction. He had talked to Alix as Eleanor wished. The young woman did, indeed, seem depressed. Stephen didn't know how to make her happy without lying about conditions in London. He thought Alix too intelligent to believe untruths he might tell of the king and queen's relationship. So he avoided telling an outright non-truth that had not helped Alix's disposition.

For once, he wished desperately for a drink of whiskey if for nothing else than to deaden his clear thoughts. He preferred them muddled to dealing with that which hurt others. He rounded a corner, trying to remember where the bar was which the merchant, Cormand, recommended.

At first, he did not know what the noise was. He neared an outdoor performance of minstrels and heard laughter and singing. He smiled a little.

By God's eye, at least the peasants had a bit of pleasantry to banish thoughts of high costs of materials and sorry crops because of drought. Mayhap the storm lingering tonight would, at the least, help the farmers.

Stephen stopped at the edge of the crowd to watch a small minstrel dressed in red and black as he knelt before a richly frocked figure who, by the movements of his arms, was about to condemn for some sin, real or imagined.

There was something familiar about the two cavorting jongleurs, and Stephen watched along with the crowd. He stood head and shoulders above most of the audience, hands

linked loosely behind his back, uncovered head tilted to the side, thinking of where he might have seen this performance.

The rain started again, and Stephen was about to resume his quest for a drink of whiskey when the small minstrel dropped to kneel in front of the taller one and started to sing. Stephen forgot the drink, ignored the rain, and realized the voice was the one he'd heard in the palace performance for Queen Eleanor.

Entranced, he stood still until the taller figure ran, slid down the pole out of his sight, then he made his way around back to the biggest tent in the middle of the arena set aside for the performers.

A tall woman, her deep red hair wound around her head, freckles across her straight nose and a wide mouth stretched in a smile, stood at the entrance, gazing toward the performing minstrels. She turned at the sound of Stephen's footsteps.

"Good evening, my lady," he said, bowing. "I would speak with the leader of yon minstrels."

Margaret's deep green eyes went over the richly attired man, the pale blue waistcoat over darker blue pants, blond head bared to the elements. A thick mustache, darker than the hair, did not hide a wide, sensitive mouth softened by the half smile.

"My lord," Margaret said.

She glanced towards the cavorting figures on the stage and back at the handsome stranger. She hesitated, aware of a reluctance to do as this man bid. She did not know him, had

not seen him except this one time, but a question of his intentions caused strong temptation to ask that he be gone.

How could she do that? He might have a part in their pay and, should she be distant to him, make it hard for them to collect their monies.

"Dost know Hugo?"

"I know of Hugo Benet from his performances for the King and Queen of England before I sailed for France."

Margaret smiled. There was no need to worry if 'twas Hugo he wished to see on business. She pulled aside the tent flap and bade Stephen enter.

"Hugo is changing his costume if thou wouldst wait."

"Thank you."

Stephen was about to speak of the singer when Hugo came through the back entrance of the tent.

"Margaret, I would have the ..." Hugo's voice ceased as he caught sight of Stephen.

Stephen bowed.

"I am Stephen Lambert. Thou art Hugo Benet, leader of this minstrel group?"

Hugo looked from Stephen to Margaret who watched Stephen with a worried look.

"I have seen your group perform before the king and queen, and the same small one sang in London and again today." He nodded toward the outside. "I would meet the performer whose voice is so beautiful."

"My lord, the small one is shy and does not wish to meet with strangers."

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Instantly, Stephen's eyes became as the cold blue lakes of the English countryside.

" 'Tis not asking that much, Monsieur Benet. I will meet her." Stephen's appearance bode ill for refusal of his request.

Hugo bowed.

"I will bring her when her performance is complete, my lord."

* * * *

Rebecca laughed as Gerald helped her through the mud. They would both have to change costumes before the later performance, but the crowd's happiness made them feel good. When the audience enjoyed their antics, their tiring routine came more easily for them.

Rebecca's efforts to stay on her feet went for naught when Gerald stepped on the deep folds of her pants legs and both tumbled into the muddy ruts.

"Oh, Gerald, 'tis a clumsy one you are," Rebecca said when she caught her breath.

"Ah, Rebecca, I am a bumbler, I am. Forgive me." He looked at her from his painted clown's face and laughed. "'Tis a beauty you are even with mud and paint to adorn thee." He dragged himself up and pulled Rebecca with him. "Let's go to the wagons to wash our faces."

Gerald's short, sturdy legs steadied them as they made their way to the wagon where a round tub held water for cleaning up such as this. He took a soft cloth and wiped her face, and then she did the same for him. When finished,

Rebecca kissed his cheek and smiled when he blushed beneath the coppery freckles.

"Rebecca."

She turned to see Hugo come from the back entrance to the main tent.

"Didst like our reception, Hugo? It seems to get better with each audience, eh?"

"It is indeed so, Rebecca, and you have a special admirer who would meet you."

She shook her head.

"Nay, Hugo, thou dost know I do not enjoy meeting strangers. Tell him I am glad he likes my performance, but I cannot grant audience to him.

"It is not a request, but a command," Hugo said. "Methinks Stephen Lambert is not a gentleman to be ignored."

Rebecca, in the act of hanging the cloth on the side of the tub, whirled. Her face drained of color, her hands pressed to her breast. She stared in disbelief at her friend.

"What say, Hugo?" she whispered. Her heart pounded and her ears rang. She swayed, and Gerald, standing behind her, placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Stephen Lambert. Dost know him?" Hugo's dark eyes had not missed Rebecca's shock.

Rebecca swallowed, trying not to retch.

" 'Tis only that I do not wish to meet him. Or ... or anyone."

How many times had she thought of meeting Stephen once more? How many nights her heart ached for just the sight of him, for a touch of his fingers on her cheek, to hear his deep

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voice as he spoke to Aubin, or Bundy, yea, even Malvina, who had been his favorite, after all.

How did he come to be at the tent of the minstrels? Did he not have a rich man's rooms in Troyes where he spent great amounts of money for market goods?

Rebecca's heart twisted as did her hands.

She turned away, catching the legs of her costume up so as to move quickly. No matter if Stephen wished to meet her, he could not know she was Rebecca, his wife, and he must never know.

She stumbled and a hand reached to help her. Mumbling her thanks, Rebecca looked up into Stephen's stern face.

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Chapter Fifteen

Stunned, Stephen stared into Rebecca's face, hers no longer the face of a child, but a beautiful woman. Spots of paint lingering along her cheek reminded him of the day he took her from Grinwold in her sixteenth year. Blood from the rabbit she'd slain with a bow and arrow had stained her fingers, face smudged with dirt and dark rings beneath her fingernails. He'd thought her a plain little urchin then.

Rebecca was no longer plain. The wheat color of her hair had lightened from hours spent in the sun and all kinds of weather. The blue of her eyes had deepened, or perhaps it was because thick lashes were blacker and curled at the ends. The childish features had disappeared, and in their place, was a lovely woman with thin, high cheekbones, a generous wide mouth and lips the color of the roses atop the arbor she and Aubin worked so diligently the long days he left her alone. Her body was slight, but there was a gentle swell to her breasts and a defined flare to her hips that he did not recall.

This is Rebecca, he told himself, but she has changed.

For many fortnights after Rebecca disappeared, Stephen had railed and cursed her, had blamed her for his misery and unhappiness, his inability to take care of the smallest duties. Everywhere he looked, he saw reminders of the woman he had married under duress, the one who made his days pleasant and his nights delightful. The servants spoke in whispers lest he chastise them for idleness and gossip. Aubin

watched him with worried eyes, hovering to make sure Stephen was comfortable.

Finally, he'd admitted to himself that it wasn't entirely Rebecca's fault. He had been remiss in reassuring her that he cared for her, that he truly enjoyed having her near him, was glad she was his wife. Oh, yes, he had meant to tell her such things, but the time had never presented itself.

Then the loss of the child. He didn't know how to console Rebecca in her sorrow, didn't know how to tell her he, too, felt the emptiness, the pain, the sadness that a child would not fulfill her wishes. He knew, deep down, he knew that Rebecca needed someone, something of her own, to love. He had not given her the things she needed most, and she had left him.

There were many words he could have spoken, reassurances he could have given, had he not been too prideful, too caught up in his own unhappiness to give Rebecca the support she needed, yea, deserved. And so, long since, Stephen had taken most of the blame for his own unhappiness in losing his wife. A wife who, years before, had been unwanted, unneeded, even resented. And, even yet hard to admit, one he had learned to love. With Rebecca, you could not help but love. She had given him her innocence, her unbridled passion after he took that innocence. And he had given her naught but neglect.

Yea, Stephen thought now, how much I would change had I but the chance to do it over again. Regret went deep.

Without taking his eyes from his wife's face, he said, "I will talk with the Lady Rebecca alone."

"Who art thou that canst come here and demand such of Rebecca?" Hugh said.

"I am her husband."

Margaret opened her mouth but no words came.

Hugo shook his head, then murmured, "'Tis true, Rebecca?"

She pushed Stephen's arms away and stepped back, turning to face Margaret and Hugo.

"Aye, 'tis true."

She clasped her hands together to prevent their trembling, but her voice was low and uncertain. Her friends knew she had been married but did not know her husband.

"We will not leave thee alone with him if thee art afraid," Margaret said.

"Nay, nay. I am not afraid. It is well that we talk. He will not harm me."

As Margaret and Hugo left, Rebecca swung around to face Stephen. It was beyond belief that she was standing in front of her still-beloved husband. The strength of his hands had bit into her arms, and she rubbed them, trying to hold the warmth to her. The old yearning returned a hundred fold, the old love so well hidden, all the feelings nurtured in her two years of living with this man. How could he be standing in front of her with his usual demands? The resentment he felt when burdened with an ugly, unwanted bride, filled the air around them. Even so, she was his wife, and she was duty bound to remain with him no matter the circumstances. No matter her heart belonged to him and he didn't care.

How many times had she dreamed of such a happening? How many times had she awakened with wet cheeks after her dreams and fantasies? The years that had passed since her last sight of Stephen faded as she watched the blue eyes darken with anger, saw his fists clench at his sides. No doubt he would love to use them on her, but being the gentleman, he wouldn't. She wouldn't have cared. At least, then he would have had to touch her.

Ah, Stephen, you and I did, indeed, miss our chance at happiness. And who, I wonder, could we blame but ourselves?

Her chin went up. "How art thou, Stephen?"

"I am not here to speak of myself, Rebecca. Give me reasons why I have looked for word of you for near two years. Why didst leave without cause?"

His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Without cause, my lord?"

Rebecca drew in her breath to chastise him. But for what reason? Their marriage was over and done. Stephen had made his choice, and there was naught Rebecca could do. He had been forced to marry her, mayhap not at the point of a sword, but just as binding. Why shouldn't he resent her? Why shouldn't he wish for a wife who lived to please him, who should be thankful she had a home, food on the table, and a fire on the hearth?

In Stephen's eyes, she had everything any sane woman could want. Well, mayhap I'm not sane, she thought as bitterness left a bad taste in her mouth. Here was Stephen,

demanding as always. Thinking himself right as always. He would never change.

"I thought perchance it would make the way easier for you should I go."

"You speak in riddles, Rebecca. Say clearly thy meaning."

Stephen folded his arms simply to prevent his reaching out and drawing her back inside them. His tall body trembled, but he would not let Rebecca see this. His breath came through parted lips, hurt his chest, aroused pain he had buried lo, these long, long days and nights since Rebecca's departure.

"Riddles, my lord? How so? Dost not remember the unwanted child I carried for you? Dost not remember days, nights, fortnights, away from home because you could not bear the sight of me growing big and clumsy with your son?" She turned away. "And forbidding me to ride Tor?" She glanced across her shoulder, and Stephen was surprised to see her smile. "Tor was my best friend at Glastonbury, and I was forbidden to ride him because you believed harm would come to the steed along the rocky shores of Moon Cliffs. Thou didst not worry about me, so why say ye that I caused later worry?"

Once more, she moved away from him, this time pulling aside the tent flap and dropping it behind her before Stephen could enter. Margaret and Hugo were not there, and Rebecca turned as Stephen slammed his way inside, his mouth a straight, angry line, his eyes sparking blue fire.

"You have no right to speak that way of me, Rebecca. You will come home with me straightway, and you will do as I say. I am your husband, the wronged one, and..."

"You purchased me as a chattel, Sir Stephen. That I refuse to be. I was an innocent, but no more. I learned by living that men are loud braggarts, egotistical adulterers, loving no one but themselves. My manuscripts are wrong. Being a man's possession is not romantic." Rebecca watched him unsmiling. "You went as King Henry's messenger to soothe his queen's feeling, but he sent no love to her. He sends you whilst he has women in every city."

"You cannot argue the king and queen's business, Rebecca. That is not for you to question."

With chin lifted, eyes smoldering, Rebecca refused to answer.

Finally, Stephen said, "Your voice. You never sang at home."

"You were never there, my lord. How wouldst thou know? I was but a chair to be pushed aside when not needed for your male greed. One cannot hear a chair sing when one sits upon it."

She could not bring herself to mention Malvina, his lover. Some things cannot be spoken.

"Not so, Rebecca."

Stephen tried to remember the things Rebecca accused him of, but he recalled only the warmth of her body, how it was to hold and possess her. Anger built, not at Rebecca as much as at himself. Why had he not realized how much she meant to him? Why had he not known that he would not want to live without Rebecca?

His voice grew stern.

"You are my wife, and you will journey to Salisbury with me. I will return within the hour. Prepare yourself straightway."

Stephen stalked away, his temper rising with each step through the muddy arena where the jongleurs still carried on merrily for the French audience. Damn the woman, he thought. She is mine, and she will return to my keeping.

Doubts beset him.

Had she met men who gave her attention? Who said romantic words to her that he had never thought to give? Only when her body gave him satisfaction had he spoken tender words, and even then, the words were only in the heat of the passion she caused to burn in him. His mind had known what he should say, but he had, in his arrogance, ignored them.

Regrets. He had many regrets.

His clothing was packed, already waiting for Aubin to put aboard the carriage, which would take them to the ship for sea passage. His purchases were to be shipped later and would go to Glastonbury.

A knock came at his door and Stephen barked, "Come."

Aubin stepped inside. "My lord."

Stephen motioned to the cases and boxes near the door. "Make these secure and then return to me."

While Aubin heaved and stored his merchandise, Stephen stood at the window, staring towards the arena where wagons and carts made a circle for the minstrel performers. He could not realize Rebecca traveled with such persons, rowdy, dirty, living in hovels on the road, in tents. She was used to a

gentle life with her needs taken care of. With servants to do her every bidding, a husband to care for every expense she wished to make.

How dare she? he fumed. How dare she insult me by preferring their company to mine? Why would she leave a comfortable abode and live as a gypsy in a cold and barren world?

He slammed a big fist into his open hand. I should have dragged her with me here.

A maddening thought came. Suppose she runs away again? She's capable of it. Suppose she ... oh, yes, if Rebecca wished to disappear, she would, as she had proven she could do.

"Aubin!"

Not waiting for an answer, he was through the door and on the street. His manservant stared from beneath a huge box.

"Sire?"

"Make haste to follow me," Stephen said, and strode off across the muddy tracks towards the minstrel's tent. At the opening, he stopped, swallowing to prevent his fright from showing, fright that she would be gone. Aubin puffed to a stop behind him.

"Monsieur Benet?" Stephen said.

The tent flap lifted.

"My lord." It was Margaret, not Hugo, who stood there.

"I would see the Lady Rebecca," Stephen said.

"Rebecca will not..."

"It is well, Margaret," Rebecca said from behind her.

She had had time to think since Stephen's departure, and she knew what she must do. She would go with him. There was no other way. Should she fight to stay with Margaret and Hugo, Stephen could—and would—make trouble for them. He had the power to stop their performances, the means by which to cause them financial distress, and this she would not willingly do. She could not hurt the only friends she had. They had taken her in when she was penniless, had fed her when she was hungry, had paid her for appearing in their shows for royalty as well as peasants. They were real friends who would stand by her no matter the danger.

She stood now in the doorway of the tent, not inviting Stephen inside, with no pretense of politeness to King Henry's favorite manorial officer. Nobleman with a cause. Her lips curled in scorn.

"Do me the courtesy of allowing me to say goodbye to my friends," she said.

Stephen's temper soared.

"Rebecca, I will have thee..."

"If I am to accompany you to Salisbury, be kind enough to allow this farewell to the best friends I have." Her wide blue eyes did not blink. "Please." There was no entreaty in her 'please' but a disdain Stephen could not ignore.

"I will return shortly. Do not think to deceive me again, Rebecca."

"No, my lord," she said, curtsying.

* * * *

The trip across the water to England was no more pleasant for Rebecca than the first time. Indeed, less so, because this time, Stephen stayed by her side, scarcely leaving her for any reason. He did not touch her, but each time she lifted her head, it was to meet his eyes, calculating how far he could trust her, knowing he could not. His anger was such that she could feel it, knew that he ached to strike her to insure her attention, that he strained at the resentment he felt toward her, toward Hugo and Margaret. Toward anyone who had known her in the two years they had been apart.

Aubin guarded her door when Stephen was not about, his face wreathed in a happy smile to see Rebecca once more. He did not question her. He only did her smallest bidding before she ever made a sound. His big, rough hands were gentle as he held her shawl for her to wrap her head against the wet wind coming off the water.

"I have missed thee, Aubin," she said. "Is Bundy taking care of Tor?"

Aubin grinned.

"Glastonbury has not been the same since thy departure, my lady," he said. His smile vanished. "Sir Stephen was as a wild man when he found you gone."

"Indeed? I did not think he would take notice."

Rebecca watched the simple driver's expression as he struggled for words.

" 'Tis notice he took, for truth. He is unhappy and does not accept kind wishes from me or even Malvina. The servants cannot speak or move without he threatens punishment, my lady."

Rebecca could not imagine Stephen beating anyone because of her, and it gave her a cold feeling to think she might cause such pain. Most of Stephen's servants she knew only by name, but Malvina and Aubin and Bundy had been as close to her as family, closer than Sir Oliver ever came to her. Even as dread filled her at what was to come once they reached Salisbury, she was anxious to see Stephen's household once more.

Salisbury. She had never seen the city.

"Salisbury is close by London, is it not, Aubin?"

Aubin was nodding by the door to the cabin where Stephen held her prisoner. He did not chain her, but his looks promised such if she dared disobey him in any way. Aubin gave her his sweet smile.

"Aye, 'tis but two days from London, my lady. Sir Stephen stops by the wayside inn for the one night, then 'tis an easy ride to Salisbury. 'Tis easier for Sir Stephen to reach the king in case he summons him in the middle of the night."

Of course. King Henry and his demands. When trouble threatened, Stephen was the only name the king remembered it seemed to Rebecca. Were not there other reeves, noblemen, and officers of great ilk who possessed talents that could be lent to their king? Was Sir Stephen Lambert the only name registered in the royal trouble book?

Rebecca sat on the small stool beside Aubin, her chin resting in both hands propped on her knees.

"What is it like, this manor home Sir Stephen is building?"

Aubin frowned, fumbling with words to describe the house for Lady Rebecca. His short arms, ending in thick hands and

gnarled fingers, spread wide. His lash less eyes became round when he looked at her.

" 'Tis big. So big. The roof is steep with many chimneys. It has the kitchen over here and a great room across the wide hallway." He was drawing in the air with his crooked fingers. "There is a staircase which goes in curves like so." He made an S sign. "There are many big rooms up the stairs with wooden beds." He grinned. "Real wooden beds with cloth mattresses that have feathers in them. Feathers shipped from Troyes."

Rebecca could not imagine such. For more than a year, she had slept on rugs, wrapped in animal skins, and out in the open with nothing over her save a piece of cloth. The shuck mattresses in Stephen's house in Glastonbury were comfortable, but what would a feather one feel like against her body? It would be softer when Stephen's body pressed hers into it.

Her skin burned with the thought, and she turned away that Aubin might not see her flushed face. He would think her a fallen woman should he be able to see what she was thinking.

Aubin talked on.

"There are chandeliers from every ceiling with many candles. Some windows have wooden shutters, but most have the glass that shows the outside garden. It is most beautiful, my lady. You can work there for many days when the weather turns warm and dry again. The roses, milady, they will bloom most beautiful for you."

Aubin leaned towards Rebecca, the gentle smile he reserved for his very favorite person lighting his pudgy features. "And, best of all, my lady, Malvina is there to care for you."

Rebecca stiffened, and although she was suddenly cold, her body was bathed in sweat. Malvina. Stephen had moved his lover into his new manor house. He desires his wife *and* his lover in the same place for his pleasures. Aubin could not know the anger and hurt his words brought forth.

By God's eye, Stephen has his nerve.

* * * *

"I will see the king and queen to relay news of Princess Alix, Rebecca," Stephen said.

They were to stay one night at an inn just outside London before journeying to Salisbury. Aubin remained on guard outside her door.

Rebecca curtsied.

"Indeed, my lord, I would expect it of you even as the king demands it."

Stephen stepped into the room.

"Rebecca, I forbid you to speak of his royal highness in this manner. We are his subjects and it is our duty to serve him."

"It is *thy* duty to serve him, my lord, and do not forbid me to speak whatever I wish. I cannot say thus as your wife, but as Rebecca Lambert I can voice my own thoughts. You cannot stop me."

Stephen reached her in one long stride, and his hands closed on her upper arms. He yanked her close to him,

staring into the taunting eyes, lips parted in a matching half smile. He meant to chastise her, to order her to rethink her statements, but he forgot what he was about to say. He forgot everything except the woman in his arms.

He bent his head, finding her soft mouth yielding and moist.

He went mad with wanting her, his body reacting to months of denial of manly desires, all because of Rebecca. He had not wanted another woman while she was gone, his mind unwilling to accept she would not return to him.

Rebecca could be faulted for all of his pain.

His hands moved down, taking Rebecca's blouse with them. The cotton material ripped easily in his strong fingers, and his wife stood before him with her outthrust breasts bared to his vision. He moaned, bending his head to place his mouth over the brown nipple, sucking wetly. His body rose in wonderful torment as shock after shock of wanting showered his body.

She smelled of honeysuckle and rose petals, of the tall grasses that grew along Moon Cliffs, of freshly bathed skin and simply woman. Smelled of nights when her love filled him, when he filled her body with his own needs. The scents belonged to him as her body belonged to him. She smelled of sunshine, of flowers, of love.

She smelled like Rebecca.

There was to be no stopping him now, his body burning with such heat that even a summons from the king would be ignored. Everything, his duties, his loyalties, his love, was

centered in the arousal that threatened to explode ere he could claim her.

Rebecca fought the flood of feelings threatening to overcome her. At Stephen's touch, she melted inside, but still she struggled to hold herself away from him. His mouth, hard and demanding, started a fast beat in her chest, and when his lips closed over her breast, she could not stand straight. Her blouse material disappeared beneath his roaming hands, and Rebecca leaned against him, moving her body so that he could push her skirt away.

Somehow, Stephen had her on the bed, both of them naked, the words he spoke making no sense to her at all. She tried once to push him away but he whispered hoarsely, "Nay, Rebecca, I will have you. Do not fight me."

And she did not.

She did not fight, and she tried not to respond. It was as though fighting the wind over the rough sea waves they had just sailed. And just as useless.

So many nights she had dreamed of Stephen's arms, his lips tender and speaking words that turned her heart over and made her love him all the more. There were no words of love now, but the sounds she heard were hot and demanding and ruthlessly taking what Stephen considered rightfully his.

He knelt over her, and Rebecca opened her eyes to see his face, beads of sweat formed on his forehead, wetting the heavy hair that had fallen over his brows. His breathing came short through parted lips. Eyes, bluer than skies over Dover, stared with fiery intensity into hers. His hand slid between her

legs, pushing them apart, as he guided himself into her. She clung to him while his body pushed harder into hers.

His entrance was not easy. It had been a long time since they had made love, and Rebecca was small and tight. Stephen gained entry partway into her, and then he stopped, looking into her face where he could read nothing. No response, no desire, no denial.

"Rebecca," he whispered. "I do not wish to hurt you. Help me."

Her hands came up and pushed damp hair from his face, and she let her fingers slide down his cheek to his lips. One finger moved over his lips and into his mouth. She found his tongue and gently caressed it with her fingertip. It hardened instantly, then wrapped itself around her finger, sucking.

His face changed, softened. He closed his eyes, his breath coming in great rasping gasps, but still he sucked, his body held rigidly above Rebecca. Reluctantly, she withdrew her finger, but the arousal of her body's response centered between her legs. She pulled her knees up, clamping them against Stephen's hips, resting her heels on the backs of his legs. Slowly, she raised her hips, tightening her knees over Stephen at the same time.

He gave one gentle push, and then thrust strongly so that Rebecca grunted. He lay there, deep inside her, looking into her moistened eyes. Then he kissed her. Over and over, he opened his mouth, clasping her soft lips, running his tongue inside, sliding it beneath and around hers, sucking it into his mouth, biting gently. He released her mouth to kiss over her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead, down to her chin.

With a deep moan, he once more found her breast and suckled, hard and fast, until they strained against each other, until murmured words blurred and senses soared

His body could not wait. He began hard and fast thrusts and, suddenly, he shouted her name, hoarsely, and his mouth crushed hers as his seed spurted hotly into her pliant body. He shuddered and felt the answering response from Rebecca. No matter she didn't want to, her body answered for her.

Stephen lay for a moment, slowly withdrew, and lie, shaken by his feeling for her, for the longing he had that she feel the same for him.

"Rebecca?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Didst feel anything?"

His voice was demanding, not what he wanted it to be at all, but it was said and he could not recall it.

"Yes, my lord."

He waited, but she did not tell him her feelings. Why could he not say gentle, loving words to her, those he felt as he claimed her for his own after all this time? "Well? Sayst what they felt."

"That you wanted my body for thy satisfaction, and that is what I trust you got."

Had he been a man to beat his wife, Rebecca would have felt his wrath at that moment. Fire still raged deep inside him. He wanted her to be filled with desire, this flaming hunger that raged unabated even after he had possessed her. He stared into the insolent eyes, closed his own for a moment, and then opened them once more.

"Nay, Rebecca," he said softly. "Not nearly satisfied."

He placed his hands to each side of her face, bent to place his mouth over hers.

"I want more. Much more of you, and I shall take what I want since you are so willing. I will have you as much as I want since you are mine. Mine alone, Rebecca."

He raised himself up, brought his hands down to slide along the side of her breasts, his thumbs resting beneath them. He caressed the taut nipple, slowly, watching his thumbs as they moved. A soft moan escaped his lips as he bent to take the brown tip into his mouth. He suckled, licked, suckled again then went to the other side to repeat his movements. His body was as though set with fire, and he trembled as, once again, his body hardened with desire.

Rebecca's eyes closed, and she fought to keep from responding to him. But as he kissed and licked his way down her belly, down so that he could reach her spread thighs, she trembled, and held her breath. Until he reached her hot center, then she could no longer withhold the moan that eased from her throat.

"Stephen."

"Rebecca."

Then his mouth touched the moist heat, his tongue circled, touched deep within her, suckled the soft flesh, and she cried out. Her back arched upward from the bed to meet his kisses. Her eyes were wide, staring at the ceiling, but she saw nothing, her mind blanked by the torture of Stephen's lips, his arms, his hands, taking her to places she'd never been, to

gardens where only love grew. Her heart reached outward to Stephen, wishing, hoping.

He brought himself back to look down into her face as he eased himself back inside her.

"You are mine, Rebecca. No other man will touch you. No other man will have you." He pushed himself deep into her.

"Wrap your legs around me and hold me tightly."

She licked her lips, and then pressed her teeth into them.

"Do it, Rebecca. Now."

Slowly, she brought her legs up to cross them over Stephen's hips. Her arms slid around his neck.

"Hold me. Hold me, Rebecca."

He began to move, easily at first, watching Rebecca's expression. When her lips parted and her eyes widened, Stephen smiled.

"You will enjoy me, Rebecca. You cannot do otherwise."

With that, he crushed his mouth to hers, his body began pumping with rapid in and out motions. Rebecca's mouth opened, accepted Stephen's thrusting tongue, and matched his movements with her small body. She didn't think about it, she couldn't think. All she knew was that she was in Stephen's arms where she longed to be, that Stephen was loving her as he had years ago. His body and hers were bound together in this one instant, this one forever, with love as the only tie.

For this one night, at least, he was hers.

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Chapter Sixteen

For a long time Stephen lay over Rebecca, his breathing harsh, hands beneath her shoulders clasped tightly. Neither spoke.

When Rebecca's body shuddered, Stephen raised his head to look straight down into the dark blue eyes. They were wide, stunned, questioning. He had no answer for her. He was dazed by his own actions, the fierceness with which he'd taken her body, the unbelievable rapture that filled him as he possessed her. He'd practically devoured her, stimulated beyond reasoning by just holding her in his arms again. It had been so long, too long, since he'd held her, since he'd felt that softness beneath him, felt the unbridled response of her young, lovely body.

How he loved the woman he held. Why could he not tell her this? He shook his head, unable to answer his own questions.

"Did I hurt you?"

Her lips parted, but she didn't speak. She couldn't. Her heart and body still belonged to Stephen. Her response had been unplanned, had in fact, been denied, but her feelings had not listened. He was the only man to ever touch her, the only one she'd loved, the one to which she belonged, body and soul. It was a wrong love, one-sided, but she didn't know what to do about it.

"No, Stephen," she said. "You did not hurt me. Do not worry thyself about me."

His body pressed into her as he lifted his hands to frame her face. "I needed you, Rebecca. You belong to me, and I will not give you up. I have been denied a woman too long."

A woman? Just any woman? Rebecca wondered at his words. What about Malvina? She dared not ask.

"Art satisfied then?"

He brushed his mouth over hers. "Yes. And you?"

She didn't answer immediately, and Stephen kissed her hard.

"Answer me." His eyes blazed like blue fire into hers.

"Answer me truthfully, Rebecca." There was a hard demand in his voice.

"Yes," she said. And that was all.

At Rebecca's quiet answer, Stephen stared for only an instant, withdrew from her body, slid away, gathered his clothing, and left the room without a word.

She lay where he left her. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she did not wipe them away. They were the first ones to be shed since that day long ago when she left Glastonbury and Stephen. The ache in her chest did not lessen with the flow of tears nor did the useless love she had for Stephen. Her body trembled still from her response, from the savage loving they'd shared. Stephen was no more to blame than she for wanting to share her body. He demanded, and expected, that Rebecca give herself to him. Demanded. Did he ever think about her feelings, any at all? Not that she could tell.

She would love him always, but his slave she would not become.

And in his new home where he was taking her resided his real love, Malvina.

Arising, Rebecca used the soft cloth by the enamel basin Aubin had filled to wash away the scent of Stephen's lovemaking. Still, she felt him inside her. A half smile touched with cold satisfaction, parted her lips. Stephen would never know how much her body had enjoyed his. She would never tell him the wild desire he roused in her, or the blinding heights he had taken her to. He would never know how being full of his thrusting maleness had released a sweetness that slashed through her thighs and her belly, meeting his hot suckling lips at her breasts and exploding once more deep in her thighs as his juices flooded her.

She laughed out loud.

"What sayst that to feelings, Sir Stephen?" she said into the silence of the room.

Then she turned to dress.

* * * *

Morning mist turned to steady rain as the carriage swayed over the muddy road. Rebecca, a pale blue shawl over her hair, peered through the curtains drawn around her and Stephen. They had not spoken since leaving the inn.

" 'Tis not pleasant for Aubin to ride thusly, Stephen," she said.

"Aubin is healthy. He will not suffer." Stephen's voice was cold, unfeeling. "Thou art warm enough?"

"Yes, my lord."

Her body was indeed warm enough, but her heart was cold. Cold and alone. She hadn't felt so abandoned since the day Stephen forbade her to ride Tor.

Her hands were wrapped in a fur muff to match the shawl over her hair. A deep blue rug lay across her knees and Stephen's. They barely touched, but for all their closeness, he could still be in London and she in Grinwold: furlongs apart.

"How much longer to Salisbury?"

"We will arrive late afternoon."

They had stopped one night at a wayside inn as Aubin said Stephen was wont to do on the trip from London to Salisbury. Rebecca had waited for Stephen to come to her and demand her body once more, but he did not. It had been past midnight when she finally slept, a restless sleep with wild dreams in which Stephen told her he loved her.

When she awakened, there was the salty taste of tears in her throat.

Stephen's head was turned away from her, and Rebecca feasted her eyes on the hard line of his jaw. Heavy locks of dark blond hair curled over his ears, and she thought Aubin needed to take scissors and trim a bit. It would curl more, she knew from past observations. Her gaze lingered on his mouth, set in a stern line as though he gripped something between his teeth.

No doubt thinking I need a good tongue lashing for speaking my mind, she thought, and turned back to look out her side of the carriage at the slanting rain. As far as the eye could see, there was deserted countryside, everything wet and cold.

She shivered in sympathy for Aubin.

Aubin, wrapped in a smelly wool rug, sat happily atop the carriage. Everything would go back to the old way, the happy way, with laughter and song, now that Lady Rebecca had come home. The servants in Glastonbury would be most happy to have her lilting voice raised in sometimes naughty songs inside the gloomy stone walls. Malvina would stop frowning with my lady's long, blonde hair to brush, her clothing to care for, the bed to make in Rebecca's bedroom rather than to dust unused things as she had done for so long.

Perchance Sir Stephen would smile again.

Aubin huddled inside his rug and thought of happier days.

* * * *

"What do you call it?"

Rebecca stared at the towers on each end of the stone building, which was Stephen's new manor house. Colorful stone, the likes of which she had not seen before, adorned the high walls like gentle flowers set among rock. The house sat within but apart from stone walls, wide yards filled with green shrubs and beds prepared for a spring planting.

Rebecca's hands itched. There would be lovely gardening days in store. But she did not plan to be here the spring season. Let Stephen turn his back, and she'd be gone once more.

"New Sarum is the name. You may call it something different if you like."

Stephen stood behind her, and she could not see his face or know what he was thinking. She could feel him, his warmth, even the reluctant touch of his hand on her arm. His voice showed no feeling, no warmth, no coldness—nothing.

In truth mayhap that is his true way, Rebecca thought. Did I once think he was warm with feelings for me, if not of love, then perchance a friendly tenderness? Did I dream that one day he would love me? That love would conquer all? Nay. Those were her daydreams, not Stephen's.

He has no feelings for the house, its name ... or me.

"I would call it cold, my lord," she said and started up the stone steps toward a wide door with stained glass arches. Accustomed to cavorting on stage with Hugo and Gerald, Rebecca's feet skimmed lightly upward ahead of Stephen. As she reached the doorway, it opened and Malvina stood there.

Rebecca stopped.

I should not be surprised, she thought. Aubin so warned me. I cannot abide this woman, yet she belongs here, not I. New Sarum is more Malvina's home than mine.

Stiffly, she curtsied to the other woman.

Malvina's green eyes widened, and her mouth was open, as she stared, shocked, at Rebecca's appearance. She had had no news that Rebecca had been found. Sir Stephen had not sent word nor had any gossip reached the new manor house.

Color drained from Malvina's face, and she moved forward.

"M-my l-lady. Oh, Rebecca, it is good to see you home. Welcome." She curtsied to Rebecca, and then enfolded her mistress within strong arms. "Oh, my lady."

Rebecca's shoulders remained stiff although she smiled a little as her face buried into the thick auburn tresses.

Stephen liked long hair, did he not? She glanced around to find Stephen's eyes fastened on her, his countenance stern and unreadable. Did she want to know what he was thinking? His wife and his lover in a warm embrace? No, mayhap not.

"Hello, Malvina." Rebecca's arms remained at her side. She would not be a hypocrite and profess gladness where there was none. It would have suited her much the better for Malvina to be two days away in Glastonbury. It would have been better had she not ever had to see her maidservant again.

"Lady Rebecca will remain with us, Malvina. Be good enough to show her to the orchid bedroom and provide for a bath forthwith. We will dine within the hour in the great hall."

Interested, Rebecca looked over New Sarum. They had entered on the first level, but from the shape and size, she guessed at four floors when complete. Malvina led her across the stone floor to a stairway that curved upward to another hall with two large windows at the end. They entered a great hall with two long tables and benches to one side, a fireplace gracing the far end.

By the fireplace was a doorway, and Malvina went through to lead Rebecca into a narrow hall to a closed door. The maidservant pushed the door open and stepped aside for Rebecca to enter.

She moved through the doorway and into a wide and deep bedroom, its high bed covered with orchid lace, matched at

the high window with linen curtains. A soft furry rug lay on the floor by the bed. It, too, was orchid.

Rebecca bent to remove her soft boots and walked barefoot across the cold floor. When she stood on the rug, her toes curled into the fur, and she stooped to put her hand on it as well. How warm. A shame the owner did not have that warmth.

" 'Tis truly a lovely room, is it not, my lady?"

Rebecca arose and turned. She had forgotten Malvina. Odd, that for a moment she could forget her husband's lover stood within arm's reach.

"Indeed, it is lovely," she said. "Is it for royal guests?"

"Why say you that, my lady?" Malvina frowned at her. "'Tis yours."

"Why would it be mine, Malvina? Sir Stephen did not look for me to return, did he? Especially did he not expect me at New Sarum."

"Sir Stephen looked for you everywhere, my lady. Do not think because he says naught that he did not miss you sorely."

Rebecca sat on the bed and sank into it. So soft. Nothing like the rattling shucks she was accustomed to at Grinwold and at Glastonbury. Soft—for yielding bodies. Mayhap that was why Stephen sent her here—she would be nigh to hold when he needed her body again.

She looked up at Malvina.

"Yes, I can see that he missed me, truly I can." She laughed and lay back on the lace coverlet. "Tell me, Malvina.

How long hast thou lived at New Sarum? And where is your bedroom?"

Or do you share his? She didn't really want to know.

"My room is on a higher floor, my lady, near the guardrooms and an oven. There is much to New Sarum that you have not seen. Mayhap when you have rested, I could show you how well Sir Stephen has built the house. It is said he is near genius to design such a building within protective walls and to have many vaulted rooms each with one for bathing. There is an oven on the top floor and..."

A knock interrupted Malvina, and Stephen came into the room. He met Rebecca's angry look with surprise.

"Didst increase taxes accordingly to pay for a rich man's lodgings?"

Stephen's mouth hardened. "Leave us, Malvina," he commanded without looking at her. His anger-brightened eyes fastened on Rebecca as the door closed behind the maid. "Can you not say any words that do not criticize, Rebecca?"

"Yea, my lord," she said and slid from the bed, curtsying deep, not paying attention to the fact she was barefooted and her appearance was not formal. "I can say thou hast done thyself proud with your wages from the king. It pays well for thee to run to London when there is a royal summons." She stood straight. "Those are not critical words, my lord, but truth. Do you not agree?"

"The time you have been gone has not improved your tongue, Rebecca." He locked his hands behind his back to keep from reaching out.

Rebecca struck back without thinking. "And my body, my lord? Has improved also?"

His jaw tightened, and his throat moved as he swallowed hard. "Yes, for truth, it has. Mayhap from more experience?"

Furious, Rebecca went at him, fists raised to strike.

"How dare you say such to me? How dare you say of me the things you do? Have I not the same right? Do I not deserve someone to love, someone to hold me, the same as you?"

She choked over the hurt in her chest, over the thought that Stephen would accuse her of being with another man, of letting someone else use her body for pleasure.

He caught her hands easily, lifting her against him with the same movement.

"Dost hunger for more, Little One? I sorely need thee again."

Her body was brought up and forward, crushed to his chest, his pelvic region grinding into hers, the hard uncoiled muscle thrust into her flat stomach. There was no tenderness in his mouth or in his hands searching beneath the silk of her traveling dress. She heard the pull of loops as buttons tore through, felt the sweep of his wide hand down her body, taking layers of garments with it. His mouth took hers furiously, forcing her lips apart, his tongue thrusting fully inside. They fell together across the soft mattress. In moments she lay naked beneath him. He disposed of his clothing, and his knees forced her legs apart. His breath came harshly as he mounted her, and she felt the force of his strength as he impaled her with his rock hard organ. He lay

still, but he covered her face with kisses, roughly spoken words lost their meaning as his hands stroked down her hips, shifted them so that they fit him better. He found her breasts, sucked one fully into his mouth, groaning his pleasure.

Rebecca closed her eyes and let herself go, giving him what he demanded, murmuring words she knew he didn't hear, wouldn't want to hear. Her feelings soared way above ordinary feelings, and she abandoned any pretense that it was Stephen, alone, who enjoyed their fierce mating.

Stephen released her breast, threw his head back as his vigorous thrusts drove her into the warm folds of the soft mattress. He shouted her name, plunged deep, and held her tightly as he emptied himself into her.

When it was over, she lay there, stunned and ashamed. Stunned at the heights Stephen had taken her. Ashamed of herself for she had provoked Stephen. Like a naughty child denied a request.

Stephen rolled off to lie beside her, his breath harsh and gasping.

How she would have loved for him to hold her close for a few minutes as he used to do when they finished loving. She longed for the impossible.

"I am truly sorry, Rebecca. It is not your fault I have turned into a lusty animal."

The bed moved, and she heard the rustle of clothing, then Stephen's steps, and the door closed.

Would it always be thus? She would drive Stephen to anger, and then he would punish her by possessing her. How

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could she live with the knowledge she was useful only for release of his male desires?

She couldn't. There would, one day, be a chance to escape again. And this time, this time when she left, Stephen would not find her.

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Chapter Seventeen

Her face was too pale. Rebecca knew this from the beveled mirror mounted above the carved stand in her private bathing room. Candles glowing in amber glass rested on shelves or tables placed throughout the room, giving off enough light that she could see her reflection and past that reflection, the bedroom beyond, which had even more candles.

It was a lovely room, something she had never dreamed of having for her on those long-ago days in Gloucester. Once it would have made her happy to live in such luxury. Once she would have thought herself lucky to have such to call her own. It didn't mean much when there was no one to care whether she enjoyed it or not.

Stephen sent word by Malvina that he expected her to join him within the half hour.

"Tell Sir Stephen I must needs dress before dining," she said.

"Very well, m'lady. I will help."

"No, Malvina. I do not need help. My thanks, but I will be along directly."

The maid hesitated, appeared about to speak, but withdrew and closed the door.

Rebecca stared at the door and resentment stirred her into a temper. Whirling, she walked to the clothing closet, a spacious area that Stephen had filled with garments of all colors. Dresses, gowns, slippers, blouses, skirts—whatever a woman could wish to wear hung in that spacious closet.

Why? Did he think she'd return one day? Did he expect her to just come back and pretend nothing had changed? Sleep with him on demand, yea, he came, he saw, he took what he wanted. No matter that she had wishes of her own. No matter that she coveted his love above all else. No matter. Nothing mattered except what he, Sir Stephen Lambert, wanted.

Defiant, she stood looking at the dresses. She reached and withdrew a pale blue silk dress, high at the neck, long fitted sleeves with colorful embroidery on the cuffs and around the bottom of the flowing skirt. It felt wickedly exciting as it slithered down her body. She walked to the mirror, stared at the slender figure adorned with the elegant gown, purchased by whom? Stephen? Malvina?

Her lips twisted. She preferred to think Stephen had selected the garments, but she did not trust herself to ask the question—uncertain of the answer. Better left unknown.

Anyway, she approved of her reflection whether Stephen did or not. She found slippers to match, fitted them onto her slender foot, stood to twirl around and let the skirt settle over her slender hips.

With a lift of her chin, she opened the bedroom door and made her way towards the stairs. Stephen stood waiting for her, his eyes going over her figure as she neared him. She wasn't certain it was approval in his eyes. He merely nodded, offered his arm, and moved with her down the steps. Her fingers on his arm were stiff, and she dared hope he couldn't feel her trembling.

The furnishings in the great hall were heavy wood, inlaid tables and leather-backed chairs. They smelled new, unused.

Servants moved around the room, candles were lit, sparkling dishes were set for guests who might come by and need food and warmth ere they finished their journeys.

She touched one of the chairs and thought of the royal bedroom where she and Stephen once stayed at the palace in London. Withdrawing her hand, she walked on behind Stephen. He stood beside her until she was seated, then took his place at the table head.

The eating area of New Sarum was different than the familiar small warmth Rebecca remembered at Glastonbury. New faces appeared performing new tasks, eyes meeting Rebecca's curious ones, then glancing away. Gossip about the Lady Rebecca had been whispered about the empty rooms of New Sarum, but they knew not how to greet her other than a brief curtsy or bow and a murmured, "My lady."

Rebecca glanced around, curious about her surroundings.

At the next table, there were three men, one with a shepherd's coat, the other two dressed in black waistcoats and linen shirts. They talked and laughed, making comments about the young women who served them roast meat and hot, thick loaves of bread.

One of the young women rounded the table and served Stephen, then moved to Rebecca's place.

"I do not wish meat, thank you," Rebecca said.

"Beg pardon, my lady?"

Rebecca smiled at the puzzled look on the girl's face.

"I do not wish meat. If cook has greens, I will have a serving. If that is not possible, I will have bread and honey with an apple."

"Rebecca." Stephen's voice rang sharply through the room, causing the men to turn towards them. "You will take meat to eat with the bread. It is for your health."

"I do not wish meat, my lord. Please do not offer it."

Stephen laid down his fork.

"Do not argue, Rebecca. Have you not learned it is folly to do so?" He spoke with a cold arrogance, reminding her he was too powerful to resist.

She said nothing more but leaned against the leather chair back to watch the servant place a slice of meat on her plate, a piece of bread beside a small pitcher of honey, and the greens she had requested. She lifted her head when Stephen's knife and fork clanged against his plate.

"Is my lady ill?" he said.

"Mayhap," Rebecca said.

Stephen arose, walked to her side, and offered his arm. She stood up and placed her hand on the extended arm, lifted her skirts and waited until he moved then matched her steps to his.

They did not speak as he led her up the stairs, past the open gallery of the main hall and into a room twice the size of the orchid room. A wide bench with fat pillows scattered over it and two straight-backed velvet chairs were arranged in front of the stone fireplace where a fire roared. It seemed to argue with the winds outside.

"You have returned home after a long absence, Rebecca. It is a time for celebrations. Do me the courtesy not to become ill this close to the yuletide season."

She stood with hands clasped behind the back of the blue silk dress.

Christmas.

Recent events, coming face to face with Stephen, saying goodbye to Hugo and Margaret and Gerald, the trip over rough seas, all had driven the calendar season from her mind. Stephen was right. She should not become ill at this time.

"Yes, my lord."

Stephen frowned, turned on his heel and went to lean against the mantle. He did not speak but continued to glare.

"Will you journey to London for the royal services, my lord?"

"Nay. That is why I stopped to see the king as we passed through London. I did not wish to return so soon."

"But you always go for the yuletide festivities. Does not King Henry demand your noble presence there?"

"Watch your words, Rebecca."

"You were there the year last, were you not? And certainly the year before that. I faintly recall the Christmas season that year."

"Yes," Stephen said. "So do I remember."

He came towards her but stopped short of touching.

"Why? Why did you leave me, Rebecca? Some other man offered more? I did not give you enough money for expenses? For frivolity? I did not feed thee well enough? Why?"

The last was a demand, fury growing with each word.

"If I must explain, my lord, you would not then understand, so do not waste time. You have much business to accomplish for your king."

"Art jealous of my king, Rebecca? Of the time I must work for him? Dost wish I were but a field hand, a peasant with naught but bread to eat?"

"Nay, Stephen," she said, using his name for the first time since he'd taken her away from Hugo's troupe. "I do not wish that of thee. I am glad you are the king's favored nobleman or manor officer or reeve or warrior or whatever he chooses to name you. It is just that—that—you understand everything save what I try to tell you. You owe first allegiance to King Henry and Queen Eleanor, for truth, but as your wife, do I not deserve something?"

Stephen did not move but stared with fixed blue gaze at Rebecca's pale features. Finally, he spoke.

"A wife deserves a good husband who provides for her. Nothing more."

Her head lifted, chin pointed. "Not love?"

"Love? Thou art bought and paid for. The cost was plenty for a wife to serve me." Stephen wondered at his own words. Bought and paid for. How cold, how thoughtless of him. He remembered vividly the young girl he had taken from Grinwold—so long ago. She had been so young, so innocent. Even now, after four years, she seemed the same. How could he say such to Rebecca? This woman he'd made love to the past days as though it were the end of time? As though he'd never had a woman before?

He hadn't ... not a woman such as Rebecca.

"Ah."

Rebecca's one word was steady, but her legs trembled, and she suspected her mouth quivered. How could she have

forgotten that Stephen had paid a huge price to Sir Oliver for her? How could she have forgotten she was his possession the same as Tor? Or Aubin. The servants. Sadness flowed through her like the warm honey over the bread at the evening meal. Her eyes lowered to the laces on Stephen's gold silk waistcoat.

Gold, satin, linen, laces, clothing of the richest materials. Furnishings for a new house, which must have cost an amount, she could not imagine since most were shipped from France or Italy. Building stones that had not been long in use on England's foggy shores. Every material used was the best because Stephen refused to have less. He must feel cheated in his dealings with Papa, to have come off with only a skinny, outspoken child who had naught to offer him except an untried body. One who couldn't seem to learn her place in this home of luxury.

Her love for Stephen was wasted, yea, not even desired. It mattered not that she had lost her heart to him even before she carried his child. Nothing had really changed since that long-ago day close to four years past.

"Why do you keep me, Stephen? Surely there are women willing to sleep with you on demand, women who would cost less, would give you less cause for worry."

"You are my wife. That is answer enough."

She rubbed her hands along the folds of her dress, stuck her hands behind her back and paced the room. How could she love a man like Stephen, a man with no feelings in his heart for her, nothing but hot desire for her body ... only

because she was his wife. What is wrong with me that I cannot attract even my own husband?

I can give him my body, which is perchance, less than a man deserves, but I have no choice. It's what I was born with, all I have to offer.

She was hurt and angry, and so she fought back.

"You should get on well with papa, Stephen. You are so alike. Your worldly goods, your horses, lands, servants, women. Possessions."

She smiled at him but there was no happiness in it.

"You are successful, Sir Stephen, therefore, because you are a man, you are happy."

He said naught to deny her accusations.

"I visited with Sir Oliver and Lady Elizabeth while searching for you."

So he had looked for her at Grinwold, the last place she would go.

"How is Lady Elizabeth?"

"In good health although time has not been kind to her."

Rebecca laughed and touched her hair.

"Nor to any of us."

"Thou art changed only in being the lovelier, Rebecca."

She shrugged. Her mirror reflection showed a plain face with freckles across a small straight nose, fair teeth, blue eyes that stared at the world with curiosity. Nothing to excite the heart of a nobleman, or even a peasant.

"I do not expect that you saw Richard."

"Yes, I talked with him."

Her eyes brightened. "Tell me what he is doing."

"He was sore worried about you and still angry with his father for giving you to me. He was to take over care of the land whilst Sir Oliver and Lady Elizabeth journeyed to Genoa."

Wonderful, sweet Richard. How she still missed him.

"I am sorry to have worried him."

"And cared not that I worried?"

"About what, Stephen? I sent Tor back to you. 'Twas only the steed's well-being over which you worried, so I took care to return him to you."

"Rebecca, I care not to talk of your childish complaints about things of which you know naught." He wanted to grab her, shake her, and hold her close. Instead, he folded his arms. "Wouldst like a glass of wine before sleeping?"

"Yes, thank you."

She sat on the bench, sliding one hand over a plum-colored velvet cushion. A glass of wine might cause her to sleep and keep her from dreaming of Stephen. Or from thinking that he might make love to her. If he wanted her, there would be nothing she could do to keep him from her bed. It would not be love, but lust. However, he was in New Sarum now where Malvina resided also. He would not need Rebecca again so soon.

Her thoughts punished her, so she clenched her fists and waited for Stephen to return with the wine.

* * * *

Stephen idly watched his hands tremble as he handled the wine flask and two delicate glasses. He turned the glasses around in his hand, seeing the sparkle of expensive crystal, a

prism of light flashing. Rebecca would not be impressed that the glass she drank from was costly or that it was shipped from France. He frowned. Nothing impressed her, it seemed. Not New Sarum, more spacious and comfortable than Glastonbury. Not the numerous servants to do her slightest bidding. Not him, who loved her beyond thought. And could not say the words for fear she would laugh at him.

He missed the light laughter he had become accustomed to in the two years Rebecca lived in Glastonbury. He wondered at the light steps she took, always in haste, as a child, anxious to see what was behind the next door, over the next hill. They were missing, those light moments. She walked as a woman, quietly, assured, distant.

Distant.

His body was suddenly hard and tight, his breath rasping and quick. Rebecca's body was that of a woman's not the child's he had bought from Sir Oliver. Satin-skinned curves beneath the rough clothing in the gypsy camp, the gold and silver sequined jongleur outfit. The lovely gown she wore tonight. Anything she wore, she made beautiful. Even when wearing nothing ...

He glanced to where Rebecca sat, unmoving, on the velvet covered bench. Her head was down, and thick golden ropes of hair fell over her face so that he could not see her expression. Her eyes were closed, her lips moving as though in prayer, but Stephen did not see it. He saw only the straight, insolent appearance of his wife of four summers.

He breathed deeply and sought to control the raging desire he felt for her. He could take her if he so chose. He had done

so a few hours before, over and over, but the next time, Rebecca would do the begging. He would see to it.

Stephen strode back and stopped in front of Rebecca. She looked up, curled black lashes shadowing her eyes, causing them to darken. Without speaking, she took the glass from his outstretched hand.

"To your safe return, Rebecca," he said. "And to our continued happiness."

"Art happy, my lord?"

"Aye. And thee?"

"Do I dare be otherwise?"

Rebecca got up and moved across the room to the windows. There were four of them, unusual in a manor house sitting room, she imagined. Mullioned, they reflected the candlelight broken into light and shadow and, in the center of the wavering reflection, stood Stephen, tall and wide-shouldered.

How she had missed him. All the endless days and nights, roaming the countryside, performing in rain, sun, wind and snow, he had lingered in the background of her life. Just to look at him, just to know he was nearby, even though he still used her as a chattel and demanded obedience, her heart longed for him, for his attention, for a word that would mean he had missed more than her body's favors, more than someone to greet him when he returned from long trips, more than someone to take to bed until his desires were quenched.

She longed to be the cool drink to help him survive. She wanted his arms reaching for her because she was the only one who could fill them to his satisfaction. If a love song

wafted on the air, she wanted to be the one he turned to for enjoying the sweet music of love. She wanted, oh, how she wanted, and she dreamed. After all these years, after all the disappointments, she still dreamed.

Stephen was surprised to see a smile light Rebecca's face. He could not know she was laughing at herself for her romantic dreams, dreams that remained with the jongleurs where she could sing and dance and think thoughts of love with Stephen the center of them. Where she could remember all those long-ago hours spent in his arms, carefree and loving, believing that he returned that love. She could build her own dream world with Stephen the center of it, pretending he returned all the love she held in her heart for him.

And no one knew or cared.

"Who remains at Glastonbury to care for your animals and lands? Who tends the garden Aubin and I worked?"

"There are servants to tend the house. I gave land to the older serfs in payment for services, and they likewise, tend to what is mine."

"And Tor?"

"Bundy is there yet." Stephen drank the last of his wine and reached for Rebecca's glass. It was full. "The wine is good, Rebecca. Finish it."

"Yes, my lord." She tilted the glass and sipped, paying no attention to the frown forming on Stephen's face. She well knew his anger when she called him 'my lord' but she cared not. If he took his hand to her, at least he would have to touch her.

"Dost Malvina like New Sarum?"

"Yes. The house is bigger, there are more servants, and she has a separate room with place for bathing, and the ovens are nearby. Why would she not like a place more comfortable and easier to care for?"

"Why indeed?" Rebecca murmured.

She drank her wine and passed the goblet to Stephen.

"If it pleases you, my lord, I am tired and would go to my room."

Stephen set the glasses atop the table and opened the door to the hall, allowing Rebecca to walk past him. She moved quickly, entered the gallery, passed another fireplace with roaring fire, and on into the orchid room. She paused and glanced over her shoulder.

"Good night, my lord."

"Good night, Rebecca."

Uncertain, she stood there, wondering if he would follow her into the room.

"Wouldst care for me to join you?"

"Nay, my lord."

She closed the door and leaned against it, her head back, her eyes fastened on the vaulted ceiling. How could she endure this kind of life? How much punishment and rejection could her heart take before it shattered into tiny pieces?

She had changed, but Stephen was the same man. She could not explain her feelings, could not account for loving him, knowing full well he cared naught for her. Instead of a child worshipping him, she was a full-grown woman, loving him with all her heart.

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But Stephen would never know.

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Chapter Eighteen

Stephen did not return to her room. She didn't see him except at evening meal, sitting at the head of the table, talking to passing pilgrims who stopped for the night in the shelter and warmth of New Sarum. There was gossip about the Plantagenets, about Sir Thomas Becket, about ever-increasing tax demands from the king. Rebecca listened and wondered how long it would be before Stephen's presence was demanded back in King Henry's court. Not long, if past experience was an indication.

Snow blew in from the hills, covering the meadows, frosting the glazed windows, icing the courtyard, and forming peaks on the stone walls. Malvina brought fresh-scented boughs for the halls and, one day, left a vase of berry-laden branches for the stand in Rebecca's bathing room.

Rebecca, inhaled the fragrance, looked from the rushes to Malvina, but she did not speak. Where she had once asked her maidservant questions of every kind, she could not now bring herself to talk of everyday chores. It was too much to remember that Malvina and Stephen ...

She turned back to the linen piece she was embroidering, a troubled frown wrinkling her forehead. Sometimes, she thought she would scream at the dullness of her life here with no one to talk with, nothing appealing for her to do. How long must she suffer being near Stephen and keep her useless feelings of love to herself? 'Twas only pride that made Stephen refuse to let her go. He didn't love her, so why was

he such a stubborn man to hold onto one he didn't care for? She'd asked herself the questions over and over, and she feared that neither she nor Stephen would ever answer them.

" 'Tis near the Christmas season, my lady. Wouldst like to help with the cakes and sweet loaves to give to the peasants who have naught?"

"Are there those who live on Sir Stephen's lands without food, Malvina?"

"No, my lady, but on the moors and in the villages, the poor are many. Sir Stephen orders that we bake and deliver to them."

"Only during the yuletide?"

"Nay. Each fortnight."

Rebecca smiled at Malvina for the first time since arriving at New Sarum. There was a good side to Stephen after all.

"I will help."

* * * *

Stephen remained cold and distant, speaking with Rebecca seldom, working in the stables and shops during the day and disappearing into his rooms after the evening meal. He did not demand her body, and Rebecca accepted his not wanting her as meaning he took his satisfaction from Malvina. If her heart ached at his neglect and the thought that Malvina had replaced her in his arms, she hid it well. If the hurt inside was sometimes unbearable, she suffered quietly.

She watched and waited, but she saw no way she could venture forth into the country alone and on foot with the snow falling daily and the cold gnawing its way into the far

recesses of unheated rooms of the huge manor house. Her escape would have to wait until spring when the weather improved. If she didn't die of boredom before then.

Rebecca stood near a vat of stew, stirring with a long wooden spoon. She watched a tiny girl crawl beneath a table and pick up a bread crumb to poke into her pink mouth. Had her son lived, he would have been two years old. She would have someone to love and to hold, someone who would love her in return. Stephen had spent his seed inside her several times. Was she even now with child? Was that the reason he avoided her? He did not wish to repeat his mistake of long ago so he stayed away.

"Dost not know how to keep from getting with child?"

Rebecca yet tasted bitter regret, a distant grief, over Stephen's words when he learned she would bear his child. Since then, she had heard ways to prevent such, but she had not the proof it would do so. No man had touched her—before or after Stephen—to challenge such precautions. Until now. She would have to wait and see.

Margaret had offered what Rebecca thought the best advice.

"If thou wouldst truly prevent getting with child, Little One, you will not sleep with a man," Margaret had said one day when they talked, as women will. "That is the only way to be certain."

Rebecca believed her, but she had not to worry. Men approached her in towns and villages, their bawdy remarks plain in their meaning, but Hugo or Gerald had been there to frighten them away. They were never allowed to get close

enough to talk with her much less to touch. Rebecca had always laughed at them. She had no desire to give herself to a man.

Stephen took what he wanted, and he had taken her then left her alone and, she supposed, that was all he wanted of her.

She sighed, tested the stew and called one of the servants to take over the stirring. As she passed a bench, the baby she had noticed moved into her path. Rebecca stopped, then reached down and picked up the child. Her face was dirty, but a wet smile spread over her tiny mouth, and a finger came up to touch Rebecca's cheek.

A tremor ran through her as the baby's exploring hands played with the lace at the throat of her blouse. She had forgotten how empty her arms were, the sense of loss at not holding her own child. She had thought to put behind her the desire to love Stephen's child, but no, cuddling the warm body to her own, Rebecca knew failure. Would the feeling never go away?

"Nay, my lady, 'tis dirt she will put on thee," a voice said, and a young woman reached for the baby.

Rebecca smiled but released the child to its mother, watched her retreat, speaking quietly to the infant. Her throat felt tight, her eyes burned, and there was a deserted feeling somewhere deep in her chest. She would get over it. Hadn't she always? There was no choice, so why punish herself?

She turned, walked towards the gallery off the kitchen, passed through the arched walkway, and looked up to see Stephen leaning against the stairs, watching her. His eyes, for

just a moment, strayed into the great hall where she had placed the baby in its mother's arms, and then he looked back at Rebecca. She could not read anything in his face.

He looked tired, his hair still held flakes of snow, and he removed rough gloves from reddened hands. Rumors were that Stephen worked with the rock masons in the cellar where a well was being dug to provide more water for all the rooms of New Sarum when it was completed. She had seen the trap door for entering such, but no one save those who worked there was allowed inside.

Rebecca was not of a mind to go below ground, so it did not bother her to be forbidden to do so.

"Good evening, my lord," she said and walked past him up the steps.

"Rebecca?"

Stephens' voice was weary and, she thought, a bit uncertain. It was not like Stephen to be unsure of himself, and she wondered at the reason. Mayhap trouble in the royal palace. Or discontent among the king's subjects who objected to higher and higher taxes. Or the queen complained of too many lovers in her husband's life.

Poor Stephen. Such a cross to bear.

"Rebecca?"

Midway of the steps, she turned to look down at her husband.

"My lord?"

"Malvina tells me you have helped with Christmas baskets for the peasants, and that you have worked with the servants

so that no one would be cold or hungry this season. You are most kind."

He slapped the gloves across his hands and watched her for some response. She made none.

Stephen spoke again. "Christmas is two days' hence. I would invite you to the revelry for the household on the morrow. The celebration begins early."

And what are we celebrating? The birth of a holy child or that we have survived one more year? That you have brought home your erring wife? That you have nearly completed this monstrosity of a house so as to remain close to your beloved king?

She trembled with sorrow for what she did not have and with regret that what she wanted was not to be.

"Aye, Stephen," she said. "I thank you for asking me." She curtsied and continued on to the orchid room.

* * * *

Rebecca sat on Stephen's right. Across from her was Father Umbreth, the same young minister who had performed the marriage ceremony when she and Stephen wed. His habit of thrusting long, thin fingers through the straight hair resulted in removing a part of it. She could see his pale scalp when he bent over his plate. More than four years since she had seen him. It didn't seem possible that she had been Stephen's wife that long but had only lived with him two of those turbulent years. And had never been loved.

She watched Father Umbreth, deciding that he, like she, had aged a good bit in those years. He seems hungry,

Rebecca thought. He is thin, he eats quickly, and a servant had refilled his plate on three occasions. Mayhap his ministry did not pay well.

She turned to look at Stephen, surprising his eyes midway down the front of her gown.

Had she dropped sauce on herself?

Rebecca looked down but saw nothing to draw his attention. She blushed when she realized the gown emphasized the small outthrust of her breasts, the obvious curves of her body in the tightly buttoned, gold satin bodice. She picked up her glass and held it in both hands so that her arms hid the curves Stephen eyed so boldly.

Stephen chuckled, but when she looked up again, he was leaning to hear Father Umbreth's words. Both men stood and Stephen waited for Rebecca to rise before turning towards the stairs.

Rebecca had not been up the second set of stairs where Stephen's rooms were. Now, as he guided her with a hand on her right arm, speaking to Father Umbreth who walked ahead of them, she took in the comfort and luxury afforded here.

A vaulted ceiling covered the width of the rooms, a circular gallery with buttresses contained padded stools and velvet chairs in shades of red. Scattered on the wooden boards of the floor were bright rugs, some round, some square. Matching hangings graced the walls where there were no windows.

She had not seen so many windows in a room, and she wondered what a spring day with flowers blooming outside, birds singing, and a warm sun would do to the open space.

Wall sconces, wreathed in fragrant rushes and filled with glowing candles, gave the room the semblance of day. Against one wall stood a harp, its strings glimmering in the light.

Rebecca stopped when she saw the harp, and Stephen was forced to stop with her since she was holding his arm. Father Umbreth continued on to stand by the fireplace, holding his hands out for warmth.

"How is it that you are not at the royal court tonight, Stephen?" Father Umbreth asked.

Stephen urged Rebecca forward, led her to the straight-backed couch and waited until she was seated before he answered.

"I paid my respects and gave Queen Eleanor news of Princess Alix ere we journeyed to New Sarum, Father. The king does not expect me to return for a fortnight yet."

"Good. 'Tis good."

The minister's questioning glance rested on Rebecca.

" 'Tis well thou art home for the yuletide, my lady," he said, and then stammered an apology. "I do not mean..."

"Thank you for your welcome, Father," Rebecca said and smiled at his discomfort. She well knew his feelings. How many times had someone spoken of her being home, and then was stricken at his own words. "'Tis a comfortable place to be during the cold season."

Stephen spoke of other things, and Rebecca lost interest as the men drank wine and discussed business. She leaned back in her chair and studied the results of Stephen's long days and weeks of labor on New Sarum.

The rooms they were in boasted rushes and sweet smelling herbs for the celebration of Christmas. Somewhere in another hall, voices were raised in song. The smell of baked breads, pies and cakes filled each floor of the big house. Outside, the wind blew and snow fell in big, feathery flakes.

Rebecca thought of Hugo and his band of jongleurs. They were to be in London for the yuletide season, but there had been no room in the royal houses because so many guests would be there. So the entertainers for Queen Eleanor and King Henry would be in the arena grounds where the wind whistled through tents and the ground would be frozen solid, and cold would cut through their blankets. Hugo and Margaret would not mind. Their arms would warm each other.

In the cozy comfort of New Sarum, Rebecca envied her friends.

"A prosperous and happy Christmas, Father Umbreth," Rebecca said along with Stephen as the hour past midnight came. The young man went off to bed, and Rebecca started towards the door of the great hall.

"I would have you wait, Rebecca," Stephen said.

She stopped but did not turn.

"For what reason, my lord?"

"It is Christmas. You must needs have a gift for the occasion." Before she could say nay, he was by her side, holding out a small parcel wrapped in red-and-green satin ribbons.

When she only looked at the package, Stephen said, "Open it."

"I did not purchase any such gift for you, Stephen."

"Indeed, it is not needed, Rebecca," he said, his voice impatient.

Rebecca bent her head. Even in this, Stephen hurried to get finished with her. Malvina must await his pleasure.

Trembling fingers moved over the ribbons, tangling them, but finally they fell away. In her hand was a flat crystal bottle with decorated top, a pale golden butterfly etched into it. The writing was in French.

Perfume.

She almost dropped the bottle, but bit into her lower lip and tried to work her fingers. The top came off. Already, she could smell the scent, like the outdoors in spring, like the wild violets near Richard's house across Papa's lands, like the honeysuckle and roses growing along the stone walls she and Aubin tended in Glastonbury.

It did not smell like the bottle Malvina gave her on her wedding night.

"Thank you, Stephen, and good holidays to you."

"Is that all? Mayhap a kiss for the season."

"I ... no, it is perchance not the time for..."

One hand curved around her arm, the other lifted her chin as Stephen moved against her.

"I will not be denied this," he said and bent his head.

Rebecca clasped her gift to her as Stephen's arms closed around her. She would not respond. Let him have his kiss. For such an expensive perfume, he should have one kiss as payment, but she did not have to kiss him in return. She held herself stiff, willing herself not to feel anything, not to wish for that which she could not have.

Stephen's mouth was warm on hers, and she tasted the wine he had drunk. He kissed gently, rubbing his mouth over hers, letting his tongue touch lightly. She shivered at the feelings tumbling through her body, just at such a brief caress. She squeezed her eyes closed, clamped her lips together and refused to let Stephen's tongue inside her mouth. He kept nibbling, breathing his warmth into her. One hand moved over her hips, up and down, with each movement pressing her more closely to him. She tried to back away, but both hands cupped her buttocks, forcing her to stay as he pushed himself against her.

She tried to say no and opened her eyes to give Stephen an angry look, but his eyes were closed, dark gold-tipped lashes lying on his cheek. She saw the heavy lock of hair falling to peaked brows, the straight line of his nose. She pushed on his chest with both hands, the bottle still clasped between them. Her efforts were useless.

She opened her mouth to speak.

Stephen's tongue instantly thrust between her lips, and one hand left her hips to fasten at the back of her head, holding her so there was nothing she could do avoid his kiss. His tongue, hot and wet, slid along hers to the back of her mouth, striking gently at her throat. She shuddered as a hot feeling twisted from his seeking tongue to the place between her thighs.

"Ah," Stephen whispered. "Ah, Rebecca."

His mouth moved from hers to her ear where he bit the edge, and then his tongue slipped inside.

She whimpered, wanting relief from the heat of her belly and from the emptiness inside. She wanted Stephen, wanted his body to take hers, to give her joy as he took joy from hers. She wanted love from Stephen.

Her mouth opened to cry out, to beg him to stop, but Stephen was not to stop. His mouth closed over hers, his tongue forced her lips farther apart, flicked inside her mouth, along the edge of her teeth. Her dress felt tight over her throbbing breasts, and she wished for Stephen's mouth to take them and suck as only he could suckle, driving her from her mind.

Stephen groaned, and then suddenly, she was away from him.

The perfume was still in both hands, held in front of her as though to protect her rigid nipples. She stared up into his face; saw the tightened lips beneath his mustache, the stiff set of his shoulders.

"Goodnight, Rebecca," he said. His voice was even and unruffled. His reaction that of one who had just kissed a child.

Her body grew cold in that instant, and she lowered her gaze to hide any feelings mayhap reflected there.

"Goodnight, Stephen. Thank you for the perfume."

She turned and left him.

* * * *

Aubin came in and extinguished the candles save one on the distant wall near Stephen's bathing room. Stephen bade him a good yuletide and went to stand by the window, staring into the cold, windy, snow-filled darkness.

His body was taut, his arousal blood-filled and needing release. Release into Rebecca's body, wanting to fill her belly with his seed. He was losing his mind over his wife, his desire for her, his wish to talk with her, laugh with her as they did those years past at Glastonbury. He wanted her with a fierceness heretofore unknown, wanted to know that she loved him as he loved her. How long he'd waited to admit, even to himself, that he was madly in love with Rebecca. If he admitted to her that his love had grown and multiplied over the years, what would she say?

He shuddered.

Once he had given in to the hot feelings, had loved Rebecca as many times as he needed her, pouring his seed into her, leaving his son there, causing him to worry that he would lose both. He had lost the son, for truth, and just as well, Rebecca. She had not been happy after losing the child, had never given him love again as he had grown to expect from her.

And then, she had disappeared.

Now, another Christmas, she was back in his house, in his arms, but where was Rebecca's heart? Had she left it with Hugo? With the other minstrel—Stephen could not recall his name—but the strange-looking, red-haired one.

Rebecca was in New Sarem but not by choice. She was here because he had brought her here by force. She chose this life no more than she had the one at Glastonbury when forced to marry him. But he had thought her happy at the big, cold house near Moon Cliffs. There had been many hours

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of loving her, of having her come to him with warm, wet lips and a slender, writhing body to satisfy his needs.

He looked down the front of his trousers to the bulging muscle and swore. Servants struggling to their rooms with too much to drink heard heavy footsteps on the stairs then the slam of the courtyard door as the lord of the new manor house sought surcease from his hot-blooded thoughts.

* * * *

Rebecca lay stiffly on the soft mattress of the new bed. Her mind would not rest but wandered back to those long ago days at Glastonbury. She'd been unhappy there, and she'd been happy there. It had seemed that happiness would last forever—that Stephen had fallen in love with her, enjoyed her company as well as her body, her endless questions when he returned from London, her generous response to his lovemaking.

Thinking back, she acknowledged that all of the love had been on her side, that Stephen had seemed caring because he had his way at all times. She didn't argue, she didn't demand new clothing or to travel with him, didn't refuse him when he came to her bed. She was the perfect wife and so he had no reason to be displeased with her.

Until she became unhappy enough to run away.

She had brought Stephen's disapproval upon herself. It had been something she must do, get away from the husband who wanted nothing out of life that she did, who bore no likeness to the man she had married. It mattered not that she hadn't punished Stephen by her disappearance.

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Her heart had shattered in the process.

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Chapter Nineteen

The snow stopped falling, and a weak sun tried to outrun the clouds, but the fields were like white glass. Wisps of fog, like silent ghosts, veiled the tops of trees back of the outbuildings. Workers with their heads wrapped against the numbing cold looked like small animals as they bustled about the courtyard on errands or chores that couldn't be postponed because of bad weather. Animals had to be fed and cared for, and ice had to be broken from the troughs in order to give them drinking water.

Rebecca longed to be outside, just anywhere, doing anything that would get her out of the house, out from under Stephen's watchful eyes, away from Malvina's knowing looks. Rebecca imagined that her maidservant knew every time Stephen made love to her, every time they quarreled, every move they made. And she resented it. Oh, yes, she fair hated the thought that she couldn't breathe that Malvina didn't know—and report it to Stephen.

Rebecca, standing near the wide window back of the ovens where servants hovered over simmering pots, saw the horseman enter the courtyard, saw the guards question him, then hold the prancing steed while the man stiffly dismounted. He rubbed his shoulders and back, slapped heavy gloves along his legs, and followed Aubin towards the house. He stomped his feet, and Rebecca imagined they must be near frozen. Aubin opened the courtyard door, and the two of them disappeared.

He brings ill tidings, she thought. 'Tis not the time for travel nor visiting in the country. Travel is not done in severely cold weather unless there is extreme need. It means trouble for Stephen. Blackness seemed to cover the struggling sun, and Rebecca shivered.

She moved quickly, passing Malvina as she talked with cook near an open fireplace. Malvina made as if to speak, but Rebecca did not look at her. At the steps, she hesitated, and then gathering her skirts, she ran, reaching the upper hall before the stranger entered.

Stephen came down the stairs from the floor above hers, and Rebecca waited until he came close to her. Her breath caught at the way he looked at her, his eyes going over her figure in the full-skirted dress that hugged her small waist. Those eyes said he wanted her, and before long, he'd have her. His lips curved in a smile.

"What say ye, Rebecca?" Stephen said. "Art hurrying to greet me, mayhap?"

" 'Tis trouble the messenger brings, is it not?"

"Messenger? What nonsense is this?" He glanced toward the great hall below them, then back at her.

"There is a man coming, he brings ill tidings. Something bad. Stephen, you cannot ..." She wanted to stop him from meeting the messenger, wanted to beseech him not to listen to whatever tale the man brought. Of a certainty, it could only be bad news.

Behind her, Rebecca heard the courtyard door open, the shuffling of feet, voices raised in greeting, and then in question.

"I must see Sir Stephen," the man said. "I have a message from the king."

* * * *

Stephen and the king's messenger were behind the closed doors of Stephen's rooms a goodly length of time. Rebecca walked from the window to the staircase that led to Stephen's rooms.

Malvina came to her. "My lady, there is hot soup awaiting. You must eat."

She shook her head, paying little attention to the maidservant. Whatever part Malvina played in Stephen's life wasn't important just now. Her worry was over what she would hear once the traveler had finished talking with Stephen.

"But, My Lady—"

Rebecca whirled. "Leave me, Malvina. I'll let thee know when I am hungry." She didn't even watch the woman stare in astonishment at Rebecca's sharp words, didn't notice when Malvina went slowly back down the stairs.

When the door to Stephen's rooms opened, Rebecca stood by the steps, waiting with Aubin. She had not been able to remain in her rooms, had been unable to sit still, knowing something was wrong for such a visit. She waited anxiously for Stephen's words.

He and the traveler reached the bottom of the stairs where she and Aubin waited.

Stephen's eyes sought hers, and then moved to Aubin.

"See that Alwain is fed and given a place for two hours' rest. Then give him a good horse and food to see him to London."

He turned to go back up the steps, and then swung around.

"Come, Rebecca," he said. "We need to talk."

He placed his hand on her arm and walked by her side until they reached his door, then he stood aside to let her enter.

"Thou art right. There is trouble."

Stephen walked away, stood with his back to her, a fist clenched against the wooden mantle, his head bowed as he stared into the bright flames.

"What dost the king demand now?"

Stephen turned and shocked, Rebecca stared at the sadness in his face.

"Sir Thomas Becket has been murdered by four of the king's knights."

She swayed and gasped. Of all the horrors she would have imagined, this was too far from reality to believe. The king had not had problems before this, this outrage. What could this mean to Stephen? The queen? Their children?

What could be done after this to salvage the kingdom? Trouble, yes, she had known, but not this shocking murder. The entire kingdom has been taken with insanity.

"Oh, Stephen. Canst be mistaken?" She wanted to go to him, to take his head to her breast, and comfort him. How he must hurt for his beloved king and queen. Even if she did

sometimes scoff at his loyalty, she knew that Stephen did, indeed, honor the royal pair.

"Nay. 'Tis true. The king asks that I return to London. I must go, Rebecca."

"No, Stephen. King Henry is frightened for what will happen once the people find what has been done in his name, but he will use you to shield himself. Let the king suffer his own penance." She spoke quickly lest Stephen deny her the right to do so. "The men who killed Sir Thomas were trained and paid from the royal purse, and 'tis the king, not you, who must see that justice is done. King Henry wishes you there to defend him against what he knows is coming. He deserves to face this trial without you to protect him."

"Do not think to tell me what I shall do, Rebecca. It is a duty of the king's officers to serve him in troubled times as well as when things go right in the kingdom."

"Why must thou be pigheaded? When has the king perceived that things go rightly enough that he doesn't need you? Hast thou not been in the king's business, yea even his love life ..?"

"Be quiet, Rebecca," Stephen said. "Thou art my wife, not my advisor. Thou knows nothing of running a country or of keeping the people content. King Henry is a great ruler, albeit he makes mistakes. He ascended the throne in greatly troubled times and has succeeded in restoring peace to the country. He has brought about a revival of learning, of using logic, given his subjects prosperity and laws to protect them." His fists clenched and unclenched, his lips pressed together as

though in pain. "My loyalty lies with the king because he has earned it."

Rebecca knew Stephen spoke the truth most times, but this incident could turn black and deadly, and he would be caught in the middle. Danger was very real for anyone trying to intervene in such a crime as the murder of an archbishop. The king would be in danger, and so would Stephen. Why could not he see this? Why did he rush to the king's bidding even into danger?

"Mayhap his marriage to Eleanor did the king no harm since she was a rich heiress. The king's lifestyle has not suffered for this. And mayhap he thought if he were rid of Sir Thomas, it would leave him an easier road. His sins are being visited upon his head at last."

"Thou art reveling in business far beyond your knowledge." He rubbed his hands over his face, scrubbing at his eyes. "Leave my chambers, Rebecca, as I must prepare for my journey. I do not know for how long."

Rebecca talked as though to herself even as she tried to convince her husband not to rush into dangerous problems.

"In truth, Sir Thomas deserved to be defrocked." Rebecca spoke to Stephen's back as he turned away. "He condemned our jongleur performances as evil without cause. Really, Stephen, all religions should be banned as heresy." She went on, ignoring Stephen as he swung around to give her a strange look. "I do think murder is going afar."

"The archbishop's office is the highest of royalty's vast kingdom. What dost thou know about such things?"

Stephen stared at Rebecca, wondering at her education in the company of minstrels, gypsies, and jongleurs. She was an innocent, schooled to be sure, but uncorrupted by the politics of a kingdom. He wanted to protect her from such, did not wish her to be exposed to wrongs committed by those in high offices.

She was his wife now, a lovely woman, but once Rebecca was an almost-ugly child with pale skin, large blue eyes and colorless hair. The once-dull hair now hung in glorious disarray over her shoulders, and her thin face had bloomed into lightly tinted creamy skin accenting eyes the shade of the evening sky above Moon Cliffs.

He scarcely heard his own questions as he looked at Rebecca, the one he wanted with fiercely heated loins. The one he loved beyond hope. He stepped closer to her.

"Why say this ... these outrageous words?" he said.

She turned, her lovely face serious, eyes darkened by her thoughts. She faced him, smiled, and Stephen's breath caught. He had not seen her smile for him in lo, such a long time. He could not believe her beauty.

"Methinks, Sir Stephen, the church is not as deserving of everything as Sir Thomas would have it. Do you not work hard for your keep?"

"My keep is not in question, Rebecca. It is King Henry's..."

"I do not agree with the king's beliefs, either." She turned away once more. "He is a prostitute, a man who has no loyalty to his wife or his children."

Stephen's eyebrows climbed at Rebecca's language.

"A prostitute? King Henry? A prostitute is a woman who..."

"A prostitute is a person who tastes of sex from those to whom he is not married. The king is a prostitute."

Stephen was tempted to laugh. He had not thought of the king's sexual appetite as prostitution, but there was truth in Rebecca's words. He felt like snatching her up into his arms and bellowing with laughter, albeit the situation was not a comedy. She was too much an innocent to have such wicked thoughts.

Stephen swallowed hard before he said, "I must go, Rebecca. Send Aubin to help pack."

"It is a dangerous road that you travel, Stephen. The king demands you come at such times he feels the need of support. Stay at New Sarum. Do not go. He deserves to do penance alone."

"You do not understand the tragedy, nor that it will spread wide dissatisfaction throughout the kingdom. There will be need for level heads from someone the king trusts, so I must go." He started into the next room, and then turned around.

"Kiss me goodbye."

She did not move, startled by his request. He walked to her and waited. They were but a breath apart, so close she could see silver hairs threaded through the dark blond, and a web of laugh wrinkles at his eye corners. His lips were firm, warm looking, as he awaited her answer.

Her eyes locked with his and a tingle ran between her breasts as though Stephen caressed them. It seemed they filled with a hot juice that caused a tender ache. A warm quiver touched between her thighs, and she felt wet. He could

do this to her just by looking, just by a request for a kiss. But a kiss from Stephen led to

"Put your arms around me and kiss me." The demand was soft. "Kiss me hard, Rebecca, so that I ache with wanting you."

He waited.

"Dost know I ache for you?"

"No, my lord."

As I ache, she wished to add, but did not.

Rising up on the tips of her toes, Rebecca placed her hands on his shoulders, her mouth on Stephen's, felt the brush of his mustache. His lips remained closed, hot and firm beneath hers, and she felt his body tremble. Opening her mouth, she slid her tongue across his lips, then timidly, she pushed into the warm, moist inside of his mouth. She gasped at the heat that drew her legs together.

Still, Stephen waited, his lips parted just enough to let her tongue remain inside his mouth. She made to withdraw, but he moved, drawing her tongue back into his mouth, sucking hard and fast. His arms were around her, crushing her to the thickness of his arousal. He released her tongue and kissed hard, his teeth grinding into her lips, biting, sucking until her mouth swelled and grew tender. Her breasts hardened and strained against her dress front. His lips slid over her chin, down her throat, licking, sucking, pulling, into the opening of her dress where buttons tore loose, letting him root until he found a tight nipple. The nipple disappeared into his mouth where he suckled, let go, wet it with his tongue and suckled again.

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Rebecca's knees gave way and, together, they sank to the floor. Stephen's hands tore at her clothes, and she pulled at his shirt hooks without looking, her head thrown back and her body arched to the shape of his. Their bodies met flesh to flesh and both of them moaned. It was only a slash of time before she felt his hands probing her center, a finger entering her body to go in and out, in and out, until she throbbed with pleasure.

"Stephen, oh, Stephen," she whispered.

He pulled his mouth away from her breast to look into her face, the wanton face of a lover who could not wait until he served her.

And he did.

Kneeling over her, he once more stroked her thighs, caressed her, caressed the warm depths of her center with gentle fingers. She trembled as he guided his swollen organ into her.

He groaned, the pleasure almost more than he could bear as he slowly sank deep inside her until their bodies locked together. He pulled her legs up and went deeper, withdrew, then thrust quickly, and immediately his juices spurted into her. A shout of triumph burst from his throat even as he fell onto her.

Beneath him, Rebecca twisted and her body surged upward to meet his driving force. He felt her lunge, and her legs climbed over his back to lock there. Her mouth sought and found his, her tongue inside his mouth, taking the juice from there as she had taken it from his loins. Had he not known better, Stephen would have thought he was sobbing

with painfully exquisite feelings surging through him. Her hips pumped upward, her fingernails dug into his back, and she whispered his name over and over. His eyes were open when hers widened, became darker. Her head went back, her eyes closed tightly as she clasped him to her. She shouted his name as he covered her mouth with his.

Under him, Rebecca lay still although her breath came in jagged gusts. His bare chest flattened her breasts, but he felt her ribs expand and retreat, his hard belly pressed into hers. Her legs slid over his hips onto his legs, her heels finally resting on the backs of his knees.

His face buried in her hair, Stephen smelled Rebecca's scents, honeysuckle from a long summer past, the yeast from the bread she had kneaded, and the remains of the small amount of wine she had hours ago.

The shattering explosion of his love satisfied him, but only for that moment. Long fingers slid along her ribs, closing over a firm breast, stroking its tight nipple. He licked her throat and kissed his way down to her breasts. Teasing, he nipped and flicked it with his tongue, sucked and fondled until the rosy tip strutted into his mouth. His arousal rose strongly inside her wetness.

Rebecca marveled at the intensity of Stephen's lovemaking, at the way her body molded to his, the way she became a frenzied, uncontrolled animal beneath him. Stephen going wild between her thighs gave ecstasy such as she had never dreamed of, started a glowing sweetness inside that demanded satisfaction. Even now, her body relaxed, she

quivered, wanting him to stay deeply imbedded in her stomach.

When his mouth moved over her once more, Rebecca sighed, giving in to the hot desire Stephen brought so easily to her. Inside her, she felt him swell, filling her, stretching her. Her mouth opened as though to cry out, and Stephen kissed hard, his tongue thrusting.

He rolled over, taking her on top of him, murmuring words, telling her how to please him, but she did not listen. Her mind was filled with as much pleasure as her body, and like any wanton trained in such things, she began to ride Stephen, pulling herself far enough away from his plunging body to lower herself, and with one hand, placed her breast in his open mouth.

Stephen's eyes had been tightly closed, but now they opened wide, and he stared into the brightness of Rebecca's gaze. He suckled, watching her. She moaned and threw her head back, her thick hair falling over her shoulder, tickling his ribs as it brushed his side. He wanted to shout, to cry out, to yell, to pour out words of purest joy, but he could not.

Instead, he pushed her breast away and fastened his hands to her face, bringing her open mouth to his, kissing hard, drawing her tongue to him to bite and lick with his own.

She was on her knees now, her fingers grasping his shoulders as their kisses sizzled and burned each other. Stephen's hands moved over her back, sliding down to fasten on her slender hips. He held her there and began pumping. He wanted to wait, but he couldn't last. His moans were lost in her throat as his hot juices poured into her.

Rebecca's thighs tightened around him and her body thrashed. She cried his name, and then slumped onto his belly where their love mixed and spread over their quiet figures.

* * * *

Stephen bathed her tenderly, all the while staring into Rebecca's dreamy blue eyes. When he squeezed water onto the tender area between her thighs, she quivered and a soft moan escaped her lips. Her smile was tremulous as he gently kissed her. He lifted her, and using a towel lying nearby, dried her with soft pats. Then he carried her to the bed and placed her on it.

He straightened, his eyes going over the body stretched in front of him. It looked tenderly ravished, and again, desire flowed through him, hardening as it went. He drew in his breath. Without thought, he lay beside her, turned her to him and held her tightly. He wanted to slip into her, stay deep in her warm center, and not move for hours, days even. He wanted to whisper love words to her, but somehow, they wouldn't come.

He kissed her parted lips, sighed, kissed her once more, and then released her to stand, gloriously naked, beside the bed.

"I must go, Rebecca. Be good enough to get clothes on so that I cannot be tempted beyond reason."

With that, Stephen went quickly into the next room and closed the door.

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Chapter Twenty

It was after Stephen left New Sarum for London that Rebecca fully realized what had happened and just how serious the consequences could be. Those who disagreed violently with the king could cause real trouble, could even attack Stephen should they know he was traveling along a certain road. Highwaymen didn't need any cause to attack, only the fact that a carriage held one of the king's reeves.

She was uneasy and, at the same time, angry with Stephen for hastening to London in this troublesome time. But, as he said, King Henry depended on him, had always trusted him, so he must go.

Why? Why would the king's knights kill the archbishop? Sir Thomas was not that popular, but surely he had never done harm enough to warrant murder. Had the king ordered Sir Thomas killed and called Stephen to London to prevent reprisals? Would the queen stand by him in this catastrophe, as she had not done heretofore? How would the royal family explain to the children such actions by the king's knights?

Rebecca walked the hallways, thinking of Stephen in the cold halls of the palace, spending hours reassuring King Henry and Queen Eleanor, trying to find ways to prevent complete hysteria and mass violence. He would be without regular meals, sleep or any kind of rest until the king was reassured that he would not be held personally responsible for the archbishop's murder. He would be exhausted before the end of this turbulent affair.

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Too, she remembered the love before Stephen left. Was it love or his needs only that brought him to her? And her? Rebecca blushed. Even her body became fiery with the memories of those hours before Stephen's departure. Her love for Stephen had heated her response to a torrid degree, had made it impossible for her to resist. If she spoke words of love in the heat of his loving, would he have heard her? Would he have taken notice? Or cared that she spoke from her heart while giving her body to him?

Stephen had taken her body and, along with that body, the heart that had belonged to him long ago, liberated itself for awhile, now his to break again. How could she endure such torture? For two years, she'd pushed aside her love, had refused to let herself remember the wonder of his lovemaking, and had worked to forget all that she could of her life with Stephen. She had thought never to return to his arms, yet here she was again, more in love with her husband than ever.

And resenting every minute of it.

Rebecca made her way into the kitchen and began to make bread. Activity kept her from the restless walking around the big house, still and lonely after the yuletide celebrations—and with no Stephen to watch for, to argue over being held prisoner in a place she hated. No one to love.

Malvina was there, however, and Rebecca kept out of her way, using one of the ovens in the cooking area off the great hall, one that Malvina seldom used. She cleaned the worktables of flour and scraps of dough, brushed crumbs from the floor, stood at the heavy tub and washed dishes. If a

servant protested, she merely smiled and went on with what she was doing.

"I must do something or lose my mind in idleness," she told one of the older women who begged her not to labor in the kitchen. "Go tend thy family, now, and care for them."

The woman curtsied and backed away, but her worried eyes watched Rebecca. She was sore afraid the master might return and find his wife doing the work servants were supposed to do.

Rebecca thought of her manuscript, of perhaps writing a poem for Richard. Evenings were long and dark with nothing to do save embroider, and she had no desire for such tonight. A battle of wills with Stephen would be welcome though she seldom came out the winner. Like Henry, he ruled his domain, right or wrong.

Removing the cloth wrapped around her middle to protect her dress, she shook it to rid it of the flour and looked up to find Malvina nearby.

"My lady."

"Good evening to you, Malvina," Rebecca said and started around the maidservant. She would talk to Malvina if she could not avoid it, but she would not stop for such. It would not help her feelings to be with the woman she suspected was her husband's lover.

"I wouldst speak with thee, my lady," Malvina said.

"Then speak for I am in need of rest."

"Mayhap I could go to thy room."

Rebecca's brows peaked. "I am not in need of thy services, Malvina. I can bathe alone."

"Not to attend thee, my lady, but perchance to visit."

"We have not the need for neighborly visits, Malvina." She refused to be a hypocrite and profess to like the maidservant. If Malvina didn't know she mistrusted her, she wasn't paying mind to Rebecca's words.

"I beg a small amount of your time, my lady."

"So be it."

Rebecca went up the stairs and heard Malvina walking behind her. At the door to Rebecca's room, Malvina stepped around and opened it for her. Inside, Rebecca stopped and waited for the other woman to give reasons for her request.

Malvina curtsied, something she had not done recently. Rebecca regarded her with surprise.

"My lady, thou art angry with me for such reasons as I know not. How have I displeased thee?"

" 'Tis late for such a question, Malvina."

"Why sayst thou this?"

Rebecca did not know how to tell the woman she knew of her late night trysts with Stephen. She did not know how to tell her she did not wish to share her husband with anyone, especially her own maidservant. Her breath caught as she remembered the last lovemaking with Stephen. At least, he had not the time to bed Malvina before he left for London. Rebecca had, at the least, been the last one he bedded ere he left New Sarum.

It gave Rebecca little satisfaction to think such thoughts. She did not want Stephen to share Malvina's bed. The hurt she had hidden for these years was a festering wound in her heart and soul. The hurt had subsided during the time she

traveled with Hugo and Margaret, but facing Malvina now brought it all back.

Malvina had not been her friend.

"There were fortnights thou couldst have been gentle after the baby, but thou didst not have the time for me. Why dost worry now after I have long since learned to care for myself?"

"Sir Stephen had need of me after the baby's death, my lady. He had the king and thee to worry over. It was my duty to be at his service."

Rebecca walked to the window and gazed into the darkness. She did not like winter nights. They were long and dark, without end, when Stephen did not walk the halls. The days were bearable because there was work to be done or one could walk outside if snow did not become too deep.

"The king is always in Stephen's thought, Malvina. I think that he has no time for thee or me or anyone save the royal pair. Aye, 'tis enough trouble for one man without adding a troublesome wife."

"Wouldst answer me a question, my lady?"

"What question is that, Malvina?"

"Dost think Sir Stephen in love with me?"

White-hot anger shot through Rebecca and stiffened her shoulders. Slowly, she turned to face the maidservant, and they stared at each other.

"Perchance not, Malvina. Perchance he only desires thee as he does his own wife. Lucky is he that he has us both in his own house. Stephen is a man with a healthy appetite for such things, dost agree?"

Malvina drew back and her green eyes widened in dismay. She blushed.

"I, I know not, my lady. He does not approach me with such things."

"Then why sayst that I think he might love you?"

" 'Tis the way you look at me, my lady, then look at Sir Stephen." Her auburn head lifted, and she stuck her chin outward. Her hands twisted into her skirt. "Thou shouldst listen to me."

"I have heard enough, Malvina. It is not pleasant to hear such things."

"You will listen to me, Lady Rebecca, or I will shout for the household to hear."

Malvina's voice took on an authority out of character for her, but she stood straight and defiant two steps away from Rebecca.

"Then speak, if thou hast something I must hear."

Malvina inclined her head slightly and murmured, "My lady." Then she looked straight into Rebecca's face and spoke quickly.

"Sir Stephen's servants and workers did not know he would bring you to Glastonbury. He did not plan to marry again, he said many times, after the death of his wife. He did not desire another woman in his home," Malvina said.

"Sir Stephen could have refused my hand in marriage, Malvina. He is a nobleman of the king, and he should have claimed Sir Oliver's debt. It was an honest game, was it not? No one forced him to marry me."

"Nay, my lady."

"I would have been most happy to stay at Grinwold."

Rebecca turned away. What would have been her fate had Stephen not taken her from Sir Oliver's unhappy house? Would she be there yet doing hated housework and needlework, stealing hours across the field on papa's horses and at Richard's heels?

Had she not been Stephen's wife, she would never have known the sweetness of his love, the joy of waiting to hold his son. She would not now be waiting to hear how he would solve King Henry's latest problem, the worst one to be imagined—murder of the archbishop by the king's knights.

Stephen would support the king. If the problem had a solution, Stephen would find it for his royal highness.

Malvina had no knowledge that Rebecca was payment for her own father's gambling debt. A big debt.

"I paid well for thee," Stephen had told her.

Ah, yes, Stephen 'tis a vast amount thou hast paid in trials and care of an unwanted bride, one who argues with you and runs away when you are unable to love her and do not wish her body to carry your seed.

"It must have made Stephen unhappy to accept me as payment for papa's lands," Rebecca said. "If he did not desire a wife, his decision was wrong. Papa deserved to lose the land, but then, he was glad to rid himself of a plain, arrogant daughter and in doing so, gained it all back." She laughed a little. "Stephen won the games of chance but he lost his precious aloneness."

"There is more, my lady."

"I care naught to hear more woeful tales, Malvina. I tried to help Stephen by leaving, ridding himself of at least one problem, but he returns me to this, this..."

She wanted to think New Sarum cold, but the weeks spent here almost a prisoner had changed her mind. In the spring the courtyard with its flower beds would be beautiful, the colorful stones set in the walls, stained glass windows to catch and reflect sunlight, and walks for strolling in the moonlight. Mayhap ...

But Stephen must ask her, not order her, to stay or she would be gone once more. She doubted not that she must have his love, and know it was hers, ere she could remain in New Sarum.

"I left Glastonbury because I could not be happy there, and Stephen would not admit to his mistake. I can admit such. It does not bother me to say our marriage is not a good one. When a wife is forbidden, so many things ..." she looked up at Malvina. "Did you know he would not like the scent you gave me to enhance my body for him on our wedding night, Malvina?"

"I am ashamed, my lady. I thought he would enjoy it on thee, but he did not."

Rebecca smiled. "He did, indeed, not like it on me, Malvina. I thought he would beat me ere he could rid me of the perfume. Thou canst not imagine how unhappy he was on our wedding night."

"I am sorry, my lady." Malvina's voice was but a whisper as she stood, head bowed, hands clasped tightly in front of her. "Sir Stephen loves thee, for truth."

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Rebecca's heart pounded, slowed, then beat painfully in her chest.

"He, he loves me?"

"Aye, my lady."

"He has said naught of love. He ordered me to stay away from Tor, to keep out of his way, to visit Mama and Papa, to learn ways to keep from getting with child so he would not have to bother with a son or daughter. He has never mentioned love."

"Thou didst misunderstand, my lady. Sir Stephen wished only to keep you safe and healthy."

"How couldst I be happy when he did naught but forbid me to do that which I wanted? I dared not love him nor get with child nor ride Tor nor journey to London save one Christmas." Even to Rebecca, her many complaints sounded childish.

I am a woman of twenty summers, she thought, her eyes fastened on Malvina's worried face. I fret like the child of sixteen I was when Stephen ...

Why am I at New Sarum when Stephen is in danger even now in London? The idea clicked into her head, and she moved.

"I wouldst have thee pack clothing for a fortnight, Malvina," Rebecca said. She stepped to the clothing shed to remove a black case. "I am going to London to be with Stephen."

"No, my lady. 'Tis no place for thee. Sir Stephen will be most angry."

"Aye, 'tis true, Malvina, but I am going. It is a wife's place at her husband's side in time of trouble. Mayhap I can see Hugo and Margaret if they art performing for the queen."

Malvina protested, but Rebecca went about throwing dresses and undergarments on the bed for the maidservant to pack.

Would that Stephen's pants fit me, she thought. 'Tis the only way to dress in such foul weather.

" 'Tis snowing yet, Malvina?"

"Nay, it is rain now, my lady. Not a good time to journey to London." Malvina folded the clothing Rebecca flung at her, watching her mistress with worried eyes. "Sir Stephen..."

"Malvina, thou knowest Sir Stephen well, but I am his wife, and I love him. I will not abide seeing him face such hardships alone."

Malvina had stopped packing and sat on her heels.

"Thou admits to loving your husband, my lady? Hast told Sir Stephen?"

Rebecca laughed, a merry sound that caused Malvina to smile. The long, wide halls had long been without laughter, and it was good to hear it once again.

"I shall tell him the moment I see him."

She turned to Malvina, her smile fading.

"Dost think he will be happy?"

"Aye, my lady. Methinks Sir Stephen will greet thy confession with much ado."

Michael, a peasant who farmed a parcel just outside New Sarum, drove Stephen's team to the village to meet the

carriage going to London. Malvina rode with Rebecca to the village, worrying about my lady's journey alone.

" 'Tis not far," Rebecca chided her.

" 'Tis true, my lady, but unrest is dangerous after the murder of Sir Thomas. Sir Stephen will not be happy we let thee go."

"Sir Stephen will not lay the blame to you, Malvina. I will speak the truth that I and only I can be faulted." She patted the maidservant's gloved hand. "Take thee home now out of the rain. I will return within the fortnight. Do not worry."

Malvina watched the carriage from sight before turning back to Michael's watchful eye.

" 'Tis a stubborn child, the Lady Rebecca," she said. "And I pray no harm comes to her. Sir Stephen would have all our heads."

* * * *

Rebecca's thoughts scattered as she huddled in the carriage between the rounded figure of a monk and a velvet-covered nanny hovering over a sleepy five-year-old girl. Across from her, a man in gray topcoat, its fur collar turned high on his neck, eyed Rebecca's black velvet cape, her matching muff, and the coil of pale hair slipping from a loose fitting wimple. Wide pink lips pursed, blowing tiny bubbles, and then his tongue flicked out as though to catch them.

Rebecca thought he looked not unlike the fat pigs cleaned up before slaughter, rooting into the troughs and blowing bubbles around their pink snouts. Her insides curled with

distaste and she closed her eyes, pretending sleep. Mayhap a bit of sleep would help pass the time.

The jouncing of the carriage ceased, and Rebecca sat up, wide awake. The rain was only a drip now, but fog closed in, wrapping the cottages and low buildings in a ghostly veil. She did not know this place.

"Art near the courtyard where the jongleurs perform outside the city?" Rebecca asked.

"Aye," the monk said, his friendly features wreathed in a smile. "Careful thou dost not get too close. The gypsies there love beautiful young women such as thyself. They will take thee far away, and thy family must pay ransom for thy return."

Rebecca laughed. She could not imagine Hugo or Gerald or Margaret or Bevin or Dolan or the beautiful gypsy fortuneteller, Lilith, harming anyone. Stories went around, she knew, but Rebecca had lived with the gypsy families and feared not that they would do her harm. They were her friends.

"I am not afraid," Rebecca said.

She pulled the dark lace across her mouth and lowered her head to peer with sultry and mysterious gaze at the man.

"I will cast my spell upon yon gypsies and hie them away to my castle to be my servants. Thinkest thou they would steal me blind, my lord?"

The monk nodded. "Aye. Blind and remove thy teeth also art they not fastened well."

Rebecca was about to launch forth with another tale when she looked into the big brown eyes of the little girl huddled in

the circle of her nanny's arms. Rebecca smiled, dropped her lid in a wink, and placed her forefinger against her mouth.

"Shh-h. Give not the minstrels and gypsies ideas on making trouble. Methinks they can find enough of their own."

The little girl blinked, and then turned her head against the voluminous robes of the older woman. Rebecca smiled at the monk and the man sitting next to him, pulled her cloak around her, and made ready to depart the carriage.

The carriage driver removed her case and placed it at her feet.

"Art certain this is the place for thee, my lady?"

"Aye. 'Tis safe enough, thank you."

She waited until the carriage moved away, then she took her case and stepped over the muddy tracks, past three small tents into a larger, black-and-white striped awning-covered space. Inside, a swirl of jongleurs and clowns practiced, sang and danced, and the noisy acting brought a smile to Rebecca's face.

It felt like being home again.

"Rebecca?"

There was a shout and a green-and-yellow dotted figure tumbled over two plank tables and landed in front of her.

She laughed.

"Gerald. Thou art a wonderful sight."

Gerald grabbed her up and squeezed her, his hand, gloved in an oversized yellow mitten, brushed the wimple from her hair and ruffled the soft bloneness.

" 'Tis a sight for mine eyes, thou art."

"Gerald, my love," Rebecca said. "Hast missed me?"

"For truth, but come, Margaret and Hugo would see thee."

He led her across the busy grounds into a corner of the tent where a fire burned, sending smoke curling upward. Pieces of iron surrounded the fire, hot and sending warmth into a larger circle than open flame would. Hugo studied a program while Margaret stirred a kettle of soup hanging from a wire down to the flames.

" 'Tis a royal guest I bring, Margaret," Gerald shouted.

"Gerald, thou art the noise of the world when thou wishes to be. What say a guest in this hovel?"

Margaret stopped stirring and looked up. Her mouth opened and she dropped the spoon into the kettle.

"Rebecca? Is it really you?"

Margaret was around the fire and folding Rebecca to her.

"Ah, 'tis good to see thee, child. Hugo, come forth and see Rebecca."

Hugo's grin matched his big strides until he reached Rebecca's side. He hugged her, and then held her away.

"Why art thou in London? 'Tis an unsettled place with the murder of Sir Thomas."

"Give the child tea, Gerald." Margaret pushed Rebecca onto a stool and sat on a blanket near her feet. "Yea, 'tis troubled times. It is rumored Sir Stephen Lambert is closeted with King Henry and no one can see them. Is it true?"

"Aye, Stephen left New Sarum days ago, but I know not where he and the king are. How dost the queen see the tragedy?"

"Ah, Queen Eleanor." Hugo shook his big head, and concern lit his dark eyes. "Palace gossip sayeth she urges

their children to rise up against their father. Should she not stand behind him and support him in his anguish? Canst see a mother causing grief to her children in such a way as this?"

Rebecca could see it in the royal family. By Stephen's word, the king and queen had set examples of distrust and jealousy throughout their marriage and had never loved each other. What other path might the children follow?

Mama and Papa mayhap did not have the perfect marriage, Rebecca thought, but Lady Elizabeth did not seek to turn Rebecca against a non-loving father though there had been times she could have. Sir Oliver was not a man to seek love. He did not need it, nor did he have it from Rebecca. Nor Richard. Richard respected Sir Oliver as his father, but he knew him for the shallow man who thought only of himself.

Certainly the royal couple Stephen loved and protected and worked for was not perfect. Their faults caused alienations and accusations among subjects of the kingdom, among the pillars of the church, among their children. Long years before King Henry had stolen Eleanor from the King of France, but once owning her, seemed to have forgotten his burning desire.

"The queen is stubborn, but she is protective of her children." Rebecca spoke slowly. "She has borne much sorrow at King Henry's hands, and he has flaunted his women in Eleanor's face. 'Twould be easy to hate him, do you not agree, knowing his latest lover slept in the apartment where your husband once bedded you?"

Rebecca stared at her small hands clasped around the clay mug of tea Gerald had brought her. Should Stephen flaunt his

loves in her face, perchance she would kill him had she not the means to leave his household. If he was Malvina's lover, at least he did not flaunt their unions.

Does the queen love King Henry the way I love Stephen? she wondered. No, else she would be at his side, protecting him with her life, and though the king was far from perfect, their children would be waiting to welcome him home with open and loving arms.

King Henry and Queen Eleanor did not seem a pair of loving parents.

"Where sayst Stephen and the king are now, Hugo?"

"Sir Stephen is said to be searching for a safe house for the king to hide until such time as he can make a journey of penance and be forgiven."

"Where would such a place be?"

"I have been looking at the problem from here," Hugo said. "What sayst thou that we offer the king a place in our humble dwellings?"

Margaret laughed.

"Canst see King Henry sitting on a stump for a throne? Or eating from a tin cup washed in a mud puddle? Aye, 'tis a good thought, Hugo, but Sir Stephen will find better for his royal highness."

Rebecca thought differently.

"It would be a wise thing, his staying in your tent, Hugo. No one would think the king common enough to mix with gypsies and minstrels. How will you ask him?"

"Gerald can approach the back door of the royal kitchen where he has a lady friend. 'Tis said she is smitten with the

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redhead and will do much for him. Eh, Gerald?" Hugo pounded the smaller man on the back. "What say you to this?"

Behind the clown mask, Gerald's face was serious. "'Tis true, Hugo. Leona will see me, but how to approach Sir Stephen as his whereabouts are not known?"

" 'Tis simple," Hugo said. "The stables will have the royal team ready when the king is about. See to that ere you go to Leona."

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Chapter Twenty-One

King Henry paced before Stephen, restless hands linked behind his back, his shaggy head bowed. For two hours, Stephen watched his king, never before seen to be so uncertain. For truth, he had reason for uncertainty. His kingdom was in an uproar, his former best friend dead at the hands of the king's own knights.

Stephen doubted that even he, as the king's highest ranked manorial officer, could settle this latest debacle. Even though the king had known nothing of his knights' intention, he was accountable for them. In the eyes of the courts and the people in the royal kingdom, it was the king's responsibility to prevent such a tragedy.

"Eleanor has turned the children to hostile thoughts of me, Stephen," the king said, his voice low, disbelieving. "How couldst she desert me in this time of need? I, who have done much for her, loved her much, cared for her inheritance."

He swung his big arms.

Stephen heard as though they were the words Rebecca spoke. "Marrying the richest heiress in the land did not hurt King Henry." No, Rebecca would not agree with the king's words, not any of them. She was suspect of the king's love and care for the queen. Oh, yes, she'd say, he did, indeed, take care of her inheritance. He spent it.

Ah, Rebecca. Even in misery for his king, Stephen's body awakened hotly to thoughts of his wife. If ever I return to

her, if ever I can see her again as she was in my arms this time. If ever ...

The king spoke again. "I must do penance soon, Stephen. The church and the country demand it of me. My conscience demands it of me." He swung around. "What say ye, Stephen? Thou art my most trusted servant. Tell me what I must do."

" 'Tis my humble opinion, Your Highness, that we find a safe house for thee until such time as a pilgrimage of penance can be safely planned."

"Hide?" King Henry frowned. "I? King Henry, hide as the common criminal?"

" 'Tis only for a short time, Your Highness. And 'tis necessary."

The king stopped pacing, staring at Stephen. His wide form stood over Stephen who, though not a small man, was not the size of the king. A low growl of impatience issued from the king just as a knock sounded. He whirled around as a guard opened the doors into the great hall.

"A Monsieur Benet to see Sir Stephen Lambert, Your Highness."

"Dost know this man, Stephen?"

"Aye. 'Tis the leader of the minstrel band Queen Eleanor hired for yuletide entertainment at the palace. The same who performed for Princess Alix the year past."

The king waved mighty arms. "Send him to the queen. I have no use for such."

"Monsieur Benet wishes to speak with Sir Stephen, Your Highness."

"Speak then, Stephen, in haste as we have work to do."

The king stalked to the end of the dais, muttering profanities at his queen and their children and the world in general.

Stephen turned toward the great hall door in time to see Hugo ushered into the room. The Frenchman bowed low and murmured, "Sir Stephen, I am Hugo Benet. We met in Troyes when..."

"I know who you are. What is your business here?"

"It is rumored thou seek a safe dwelling for the king whilst unease rages in the city. Mayhap I can help."

"In what way?"

Stephen did not like this man. Rebecca had spent much time in his company, aye, more than a year, and she told Stephen naught of their acquaintance. In his jealousy, he refused to question her, but by God's eye, she should say aught of their time together.

"No one would think to search our humble tent for his royal highness, my lord. If the king would honor us with his presence, we would protect him with our lives."

"Dost agree that King Henry is innocent of murder even though his knights killed Sir Thomas?"

" 'Tis not my judgment, Sir Stephen. I do this because of our friendship with Rebecca whilst she was in our midst."

"What know ye of Rebecca?"

Hugo looked surprised.

"That she is thy wife, Sir Stephen, but she was a friend and hard worker whilst journeying with our band of minstrels and entertaining. She is well-loved by all."

"Well-loved, thy sayst?" Stephen took a threatening step towards the Frenchman. "Thou art in love with Rebecca?"

Hugo smiled, showing whiteness behind a thick black mustache. "Ah, Sir Stephen. To love Rebecca is not to be in love with her. She dost not encourage such things. Methinks the lovely Rebecca loves her husband and none other." Hugo bowed, still smiling.

Stephen's heart jumped but a frown remained on his countenance. This man must not see how affected he was by knowledge that Rebecca loved him. She had not spoken of love for her husband, not even when their bodies united with heat.

"What dost offer as dwelling for the king, monsieur?" Stephen said.

" 'Tis only a common tent, my lord, but there is fire to warm him and food to eat whilst awaiting other provisions for his safety. His royal highness will be welcomed by my troupe and no one will allow an enemy in the camp."

Stephen bowed his head, his thoughts dwelling on the king's danger, knowing the ugly whispers would become outraged cries if justice for Sir Thomas' murder was not sought, and quickly. There were few paths open to them.

"I thank thee for thy kind offer, Monsieur Benet," Stephen said. "Willst wait in the hall until I have talked with the king?"

The door closed behind Hugo and Stephen walked slowly towards King Henry. He repeated Hugo's plan. "Your majesty, I respectfully say thou should accept Monsieur Benet's offer."

The king spun around, the two men stared at each other. Finally, the broad shoulders slumped, and the king said,

"Thou art right, Stephen. I must leave here." He brooded at the backs of his freckled hands. "Ere we go, wouldst see Eleanor and ask that she not provoke the children against me? 'Tis only right she give me support in this tragedy."

"Aye, Your Highness," Stephen said and, bowing deeply, turned and left King Henry alone with his troubled thoughts.

* * * *

"Nay, Stephen, 'tis not the king's right to our support. He has long neglected our children and me. Yea, even to bringing that ... that woman into my own apartment and tumbling into bed with her on all occasions." Queen Eleanor's countenance was vengeful, her gray eyes sparkling with anger and a glowing triumph.

Stephen winced inwardly. For all these years, he had fenced his feelings between the royal couple, keeping peace when there was no peace to keep. Shifting his personal opinions to fit those of his lord and master. Would that he had never heard of King Henry and Queen Eleanor.

He was tired. He was frustrated by royal demands. Just ... tired. Tired of it all.

If Rebecca wishes to return to Glastonbury and ride Tor over Moon Cliffs, that is what we will do. New Sarum be damned. I do not need to be closer to London after this—this damnable thing by the king's knights.

He looked at the queen's haughty stance, her face half turned from him, her nose pointed upward. Her hands were clasped in front of her, her body proudly straight. She did not wish to listen to the king's entreaties.

" 'Twould be a brave thing if thou would support King Henry during his trying times, your majesty. Knowledge of his children's love would see him through this horror."

Queen Eleanor smiled, not a friendly nor a pretty smile, but a taunting smirk.

" 'Tis late for Henry to look for love in the family he has neglected lo, these many years, Stephen. Thou knowest as I do it is only that he is frightened, that he feels alone and to blame for the archbishop's murder. And well he should." She sniffed and turned away. "Henry was warned not to put his friend in such a high place, that only ill could come of it. Methinks Henry's condemnation is well deserved."

Stephen remained kneeling in front of the queen, and now she looked down at him, a real smile softening her lovely features.

"Ah, Stephen, we art lucky to have such a friend as thee." She sighed. "I promise to keep the children calm for awhile, but Henry must do his penance alone. I will not be a part of it."

The queen's promise was more than the king could rightfully expect, Stephen thought, making his way back to the king's room. He gave his report and added what he must.

" 'Tis my thoughts thou wouldst be safe with Monsieur Benet for the nonce, Your Highness."

It was plain the king did not wish to hide in a tent, but if Stephen said he should, then he would agree.

"Aye, Stephen, make the arrangements, and I will accompany thee to this—this minstrel's tent."

He grimaced in distaste as Stephen bowed and left.

* * * *

"King Henry is being cared for in the main tent, Sir Stephen, and Gerald will guard him with his life. No one will get near nor have any knowledge of who lives there."

Hugo stood outside another tent where he had moved his and Margaret's belongings to give their room to the king.

"I thank thee for thy help, monsieur. And now, I must needs leave London. If there is trouble ere I return, send a messenger to New Sarum."

"Margaret is preparing tea with freshly baked bread. Mayhap thou wouldst join us before departing." When Sir Stephen saw his wife was about, he would be much happier, Hugo thought as he turned away to enter the tent.

"I thank thee for I am sore hungry."

Stephen sat on a log bench in front of a rough table and rubbed his chin, blinking weary eyes at the dreary sky. It would be good to get home to warm fires and dry clothing.

And Rebecca.

"Good evening, Stephen."

Stephen's head jerked upward, and he stared at a smiling Rebecca holding out a steaming mug to him. He gaped, mouth open, at his lovely wife.

" 'Tis good to see thee well, Stephen," she said. "I was sore worried about thee."

"What dost thou here? In this tent with Monsieur Benet?"

"I followed thee, Stephen, because..."

He stood, snatched the mug from her hands and set it roughly on the table. "Get thy things. We leave immediately for New Sarum."

He was no longer tired or hungry. All had vanished with his anger at finding Rebecca in this man's camp.

"Do not speak to me in this tone, Stephen," Rebecca said. "Hugo and Margaret and Gerald offered me friendship when I had none. I will not leave ere I have reason to."

Stephen turned.

"Aubin," he shouted.

Aubin appeared at his side, his crooked grin wide at the sight of Rebecca.

"Take the Lady Rebecca to the carriage. We depart forthwith."

"Nay, Stephen, I will not go thusly. Thou art cold and unfeeling, and I will not return to New Sarum. Art not happy that Hugo has offered safe lodging for the king? I thought it kind of him."

Rebecca bit into her lower lip. This was not as she intended it to be. Stephen should be happy to see her, happy that Hugo provided protection for his beloved king. But, nay, he was the same rough and cold man who demanded that which he wanted. Aye, even her body. Malvina's notion that Stephen would welcome Rebecca's love was sorely misplaced.

Her head lifted. She would not shed tears over this.

"Take her," Stephen said to Aubin through clenched teeth.

Aubin looked from his master to Rebecca. "My lady," he pleaded.

"Nay, Aubin," she said.

Stephen's hands closed on her arms, and he pulled her against his chest. "Thou will do as I say, Rebecca. Thou art my wife, do not forget."

"How canst I forget when dragged by thee hither and yon whenever thou wishes." She flung the words at him, hurt and wishing she knew a way to make Stephen hurt. "I was right to leave you. There's no room in your life for a wife. What thou needs is a willing prostitute such as thy king has at his beck and call."

Stephen, his face like thunder, did not reply as Hugo stepped through the tent opening with Margaret behind him.

"What say, Sir Stephen, we are about to sup." He looked from Stephen's raging expression to the haughty lift of Rebecca's chin.

"We will away to New Sarum and eat at an inn along the way."

Stephen turned Rebecca towards Aubin who offered his loosely clothed arm to her. Eyes sparkling dangerously, Rebecca took the arm and walked towards the carriage. She looked back once at Hugo and Margaret and lifted her arm in farewell. She would not satisfy Stephen by fighting in front of them.

But he had not heard the last of her.

* * * *

Stephen's cold countenance showed his displeasure, but Rebecca offered no words of explanation or apology. He deserved none. Her throat choked with unshed tears, and her

heart ached for what she wished for and could not have. Wasn't it always so?

Very well. As soon as she could pack, she would leave. He would have to chain her to keep her at New Sarum.

"We will stay the night at the inn near the crossroads," Stephen told Aubin. "Thou will sleep outside the Lady Rebecca's door."

Stephen did not need to worry. Rebecca was tired and cold from the dampness. And it was here she found she was not with child as a result of her wild matings with Stephen.

"The gods perchance are looking after me," Rebecca told her reflection in the cracked mirror, a mirror showing an unflattering image of pale face, big eyes and forlorn droop to soft pink lips. "Stephen does not need to worry about having a son, and I shall see that there is no other chance for such. As soon as a few favored things are packed, I will be gone."

She slept little, and down the hall, Stephen lay wide-eyed, his body stiff with anger. How dare she leave a safe place such as New Sarum to journey to London to see Hugo Benet and his motley group of minstrels? How dare she disobey him?

He arose and walked around the small room. There was no window where he could stare into the darkness, and if he opened the door, Aubin would awake and wonder at his restlessness.

At least, the king is in a safe house. He stopped. Hugo Benet's offer was generous, and he should not condemn the man for his love of Rebecca. Hugo had said they were friends

only. Mayhap he told the truth. But how could a man not love Rebecca?

Stephen continued to pace and only towards morning did he lie across the lumpy mattress to close his eyes in sleep.

* * * *

It was barely morning when Aubin readied the carriage and Stephen helped Rebecca inside. Gathering her skirts closely around her, Rebecca huddled away from him. The wind across the low-lying hills cut into clothing, and her fluxes had her irritable and fussy. She wished for a hot drink, something warm to hold, something to take her mind from Stephen's cold and unfeeling demands.

"Thou art comfortable, Rebecca?"

"Yes, my lord."

Rebecca steadied her voice, unwilling to let Stephen see her misery.

"We will reach New Sarum by mid-afternoon, and thou..."

There was a yell from Aubin, wild whinnies from the horses, and the carriage swung wildly.

Rebecca slid across the bench to Stephen, arms flailing as she tried to balance herself. Stephen caught her, pulling her upright.

"What trouble is this?" he muttered.

He pushed Rebecca into her corner and threw the lap rug from his legs. He reached to open the carriage door when it flew outward.

Now they saw horses, three of them, their riders wearing masks. Each rider held a heavy club and the one nearest the carriage pointed a short sword at Stephen.

"Dismount, my lord," a cold voice ordered Stephen. "Thou wilt part with thy purse or thy head. Mayhap both, eh?" The cold voice turned into a high-pitched laugh, echoed by men on either side of him.

Rebecca stared with wide, disbelieving eyes at another figure behind the three. He was clothed entirely in black, even to the mask on his face. A heavy sword hung from his saddle scabbard.

"Thy money, my lord," the black clad figure said. "Dost hesitate your man will lose his head." He lifted the sword towards Aubin who sat like stone in the driver's seat.

"I have little money, knave," Stephen said. "Thou art welcome to it." He lifted a purse from the case at his feet. Stephen knew enough not to argue with highwaymen and would give up his money ere his life, or allowing Rebecca and Aubin to be hurt. This robber, there was something strange about him. He swayed in the saddle as though weak from hunger, as though he lacked enough sleep of late.

Stephen frowned, studying the masked face, letting his gaze drift over the men nearest the carriage. He had heard the man speak ere this meeting, but he could not recall the voice.

"Ho, what of the lovely maiden, sire? Shall we search for gems on her lovely person?" The man who had opened the carriage door peered in at Rebecca.

"Aye, and the garment she wears is worth more than my lady's complete wardrobe," another voice said. "What say I remove it for my sweet Caroline?"

"Take as thy will," the bored voice said. "But make haste. Get the money, and then do as thy will with the passengers. Mayhap they have returned from London where they visit fancy shops and have much we can use." The black clothed rider urged his horse closer to the carriage. "Perchance did see the king whilst in London, my lord? Is it true he cringes in terror over revenges planned for the murder of Sir Thomas Becket?"

Stephen then knew who the highwayman was, and he turned cold with the knowledge—King Henry's son, the one called 'The Young King' by all who knew him. Henry's namesake, a scapegrace with his own band of robber barons. Sir Thomas Becket had taught Young Henry while he and the king were still friends. Is this, then, what the archbishop had taught him? To rob and torment weary travelers?

"King Henry even now plans a penance worthy of his royal highness. He is not afraid." Stephen watched closely as the big horse pranced and drew near to them.

"Ah, yes, penance. Sackcloth and ashes and loud laments for the soul of Sir Thomas." The man laughed, the laugh cut short by a wracking cough. It was a moment before the man spoke again. "William, put monies and jewels in the knapsack. Aye, and take the lady out that we might see her beauty."

"Nay," Stephen said. He jumped from the carriage to catch the rein of the young king's horse. "Nay, thou canst have all

the money and jewels but leave Lady Rebecca alone. She is not to be harmed."

One of the robbers swung a club, hitting Stephen behind the ear. He fell heavily and lay without moving.

Rebecca was out of the carriage, kneeling by her husband, when the same robber yanked her to her feet. She fought, dropping her black velvet muff, her hands out with short nails raking over the man's mask. Her body twisted, arched and stiffened, and her arm hit the ground, scraping painfully. The man grunted and cursed as Rebecca broke loose and swung her fist, which clutched a stone she grabbed from the mud at their feet. He let go, and Rebecca tumbled beneath the carriage wheel. Above her, Aubin fought with the frightened horses, and then she was pulled upward once more and forced against the heaving sides of one of the animals.

"Ah, the female tiger, she is," the hoarse voice of the black-robed rider said. "Tie her up and bring her along."

Her hands tied behind her, Rebecca was thrown astride the leader's horse. She looked back to see Stephen lying still beside the carriage and Aubin struggling with the reins to restrain the animals.

* * * *

They camped deep inside the woods out of sight and hearing of the road. Horses, carriages, pilgrims and peasants could pass nearby never knowing Rebecca was being held against her will. She could see no hope of rescue.

She huddled near the fire, willing herself not to be frightened, but the ugly language and brash looks afforded

her from the group were not to be taken lightly. Stephen had once told her of being robbed and beaten by highwaymen who had later been caught by the king's knights and hanged in the public square.

With heavy heart, she thought of Stephen lying unconscious in the mud, hurt mayhap badly while trying to prevent harm coming to her. How hurtful were his wounds? She shuddered to think how painful they might be.

She stared into the fire, her mind going over plans to escape, discarding them, and turning to another. What could she do against four rough rogues who had not good intentions? With her hands tied, she could not even scratch or throw stones. Anger erased the helpless feeling. She would wait, and she would watch. Sooner or later, they would make a mistake.

"She will bring fair ransom, Henry," one of the knaves said. He held a tin cup filled with spirits, sloshing it over his hands as he talked. "'Tis a lovely damsel we steal. Mayhap we can have our pleasure ere she is rescued, eh?"

I will cut out thy evil heart ere you rape me, you ... you scoundrel, Rebecca thought, but she kept her eyes downcast on the fire. Already, she had seen the knife lying beside the one called Henry, the leader of the band of rogues. Her fingers tingled to hold such a weapon. She had not used a knife since leaving Grinwold where she cut thick bushes from the pathways around the animal pens or dug into the damp earth for worms to fish when she and Richard sat on the lake shores during moments stolen from papa's demands.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

"Aye, 'tis useful she will be but hold thy desires until we are away from this place."

"Wherefore art taking her?"

"No one will suspect the city of stones as a hiding place. It is thought to house ghosts and evil spirits so pilgrims and travelers avoid it."

Raucous laughter made Rebecca look up. She had heard of this dreary place, but knew naught about it. She, too, recalled stories about its evil face, its sudden appearance from nowhere. A place known only as Stonehenge where no human beings lived, and no one knew how the stones formed nor for what reason.

They reached the place of stones on the second evening. Rebecca stared at the somber columns standing higher than a house. The taller ones were shrouded in mist, and it seemed evil swirled over the uneven shapes. The stone stood as grave markers, unmoving, lifeless, filled with murky perils, indeed, like a dread disease.

What fate awaited her here in this lonely place?

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Aubin waited fearfully until the thundering hooves of the highwaymen's horses faded before he jumped from the carriage seat. Stephen lay in the mud between the wheels, bright red blood dripping into his beard.

Aubin choked. He had never before seen his master lying so still. He struggled but could not lift Stephen, so dragged him from beneath the carriage and stretched him against a tree. From the carriage seat, he took the lap robe and as he turned, stooped to pick up Rebecca's black velvet muff. He held it to his wide chest and blinked away the sting in his eyes.

What would they do to the gentle Lady Rebecca? he wondered. There were rumors repeated to all who would listen of the things highwaymen were capable of, especially with women. Should harm come to Rebecca, he could not foresee what his master would do to the guilty ones. It would be a terrible thing to watch, he was certain.

He covered Stephen, then took a cloth from his pocket, wet it in a stand of water, and began to wash his master's face. There was a deep cut from temple to ear, blood matting into Stephen's thick hair. Malvina would have to work with the wound in order to stop the flow of blood.

His face puckered into a worried frown, Aubin worked until Stephen moaned and pushed his hand away.

"Nay, Sir Stephen. Thou art hurt and must needs lie still."

Stephen's eyes blinked open. "Rebecca? Where is Rebecca?"

"I am sorry, my lord. The robbers ..." Aubin sat back and waited to be yelled at. He would have saved Lady Rebecca if he could, but there had been naught he could do with four highwaymen standing by with clubs and swords.

Stephen sat up quickly only to groan and lean over, retching. Aubin held his head then gently lowered him back to the lap robe. Stephen lay gasping, reached up to touch his face.

"The head wound is deep, my lord. Thou must take care."

"Aye."

Stephen's voice was a low murmur. He had acted foolishly in his worry over Rebecca. Aubin was right. If he were to be of any use in finding her, he would have to move slowly. Everything within him urged speed, but neither his body nor mind responded the way he wished.

If the young king or his henchmen dared harm Rebecca, he would take the son's head to his king. That, he meant with all his heart.

* * * *

Rebecca sat on the cold ground deep within the giant circle of stones so big she had not seen any end to them. Fog hung around the tops of the stones, and mists swirled low to the ground. Overhangs afforded protection for the dirty horsemen who had taken her from Stephen's carriage.

Two of them lay snoring in the blackness of midnight. The one she thought the leader stretched out by the fire, a flask

of drink in his hand from which he sipped long and often. One other stood guard somewhere out amid the stones.

Rebecca had not slept. Her bound hands were numb from the tightness, and the thin robe beneath her let the cold fill her body. The men did not talk to her, but their muttered words among themselves and loud laughter when they glanced her way served to cause uneasiness. If they chose to use her body, there was naught she could do about it. But, if she could somehow get the leader's sword or the knife She had not a notion of what she could do with them, but she would cause injury to some of the knaves should she get her hands on any weapon.

At first light, Rebecca opened her eyes from a brief sleep to see one of the robbers kneeling in front of her, a tin cup of steaming gruel in his hands. He placed it on the cold ground, untied her hands, and sat back on his heels. He was dirty, and she wondered at what filth he carried with him.

"Eat."

Round black eyes glittered from deep sockets, and his thin lips grimaced over broken teeth. With a thin-bladed knife, he cleaned beneath his fingernails, slowly raking black dirt out and wiping it on stiff leather britches.

She was hungry but the thought of eating what this unclean rogue had cooked was sickening. Rubbing her wrists to restore feeling, Rebecca boldly eyed the man. His gaze ran over her body, but she would not look away. He licked his lips and laughed.

She tilted the cup and took a swallow of the thin soup. It tasted like the water New Sarum's dirtiest dishes were

cleaned in, but Rebecca forced it down. If she planned to escape, she must have strength to run. There must be a rock nearby which had not lain in the same place for a thousand years and could be lifted to strike. If they but left her hands untied ...

"Ho, William," a gruff voice spoke from the dimness. "Dost crave yon tender maiden."

"Aye, my lord. 'Tis long we have been without the flesh of woman to satisfy needs."

"Thou must wait a while longer." The leader stepped into the dim light afforded by a flare burning on the wall, sending dark smoke down to choke them. "We must send a message to the lady's husband and to our beloved king."

"Canst wait until our use for the damsel is finished?"

Rebecca cringed, awaiting the man's answer to William. It was slow in coming, and she squeezed the cup of ill-tasting liquid.

"Nay, 'tis haste we need."

He knelt in front of Rebecca. He no longer wore the face cover, and she stared at the waxen features, almost as though carved from stone. Light gray eyes were surrounded by red veins, causing a pinkish cast. His wide mouth was without color, almost as the mud on the highway. He looked ill.

"What nobleman is thy husband, my lady?"

" 'Tis a manor officer, not a nobleman, sire."

"Ah, one of the king's favored servants, is it true?"

"Sir Stephen Lambert, my husband, is a friend of his royal highness," she said.

"Friend?" The man shook his head, and his mouth drooped sadly. "Nay, the king has no friend. 'Tis a bastard, he is."

Rebecca eyed the man with disfavor. How dare this ... this highwayman speak thus of King Henry? She was not enamored of him as Stephen was, but this man spoke blasphemy.

"Art such a wonder of a man that thou canst speak evil of the king?"

The man laughed.

"I am known as the young king, namesake for his majesty, King of England."

Rebecca tried to hide her horror but could not. "Thou art the one taught by Sir Thomas ere he became the archbishop?"

"The same, my lady. Training of the highest caliber was not too good for the young king. As thou canst see, I have been taught by the best."

"Art sorry for they father to stand so accused by the entire country, even though he had naught to do with the murder?"

"It matters not to me who killed Sir Thomas. I hold captive the wife of one of the king's most trusted servants. And should Sir Stephen not wish to ransom thee, then I shall inform the king he wilt receive thy lifeless body if he dost not deliver that which is asked for thee. There is much money in the king's coffers, and his majesty can share it with his son, can he not? Especially to rescue the wife of one of his most trusted officers."

The young king rummaged around in his loose fitting coat and brought out a silver flask. He tilted it, drank deeply and

wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Then he coughed, a thick rasping sound, a cough which caused Rebecca to take a deep breath as though to aid the man in his breathing.

"What plans have thou to get money from the king? Sir Stephen has lands but money is not easily found until lands and sheep are sold."

The young king smiled at Rebecca in an almost fatherly way.

"Thou wilt write the note, my lady, and when the honorable Sir Stephen sees the handwriting, he will find a way to get money for return of such a lovely body to his bed." His gaze, sad and, Rebecca thought, most weary, slid over her body and back to meet her questioning blue eyes. He smiled. "Do not worry thyself, Rebecca, the money will be forthcoming." He lifted his head with an effort. "William!"

William shuffled forth, eyeing Rebecca with glittering desire. "Aye, Henry."

"Fetch the paper from the bag, and we will fashion a ransom note."

"We have no nib, Henry. How thinkest to write?"

Henry reached into the edge of the fire and removed a charred stick.

" 'Twill do," he said.

William took the cup, now cold, from her hands and gave a rolled script sheet to Rebecca. Henry passed the burned stick to her.

"Write that we expect one thousand pounds ere we deliver thee to London alive and well," Henry said.

"Stephen will not be blackmailed for such a sum, my lord," Rebecca said. "I am not worth that to any man."

"Methinks thou art wrong. Methinks Sir Stephen or the king will make haste to pay for thee so as not to add another murder to the archbishop's."

Rebecca was not yet afraid they would harm her, but she did not wish Stephen to pay so large a sum of money to these rogues.

"That is too much," Rebecca said. "Surely one hundred pounds would be enough to buy food and drink for thy band."

William laughed.

"But 'twould not buy favors from ladies, eh, Henry? And our bodies crave such after much delay." He winked craftily at her. "Unless thou seest fit to favor us?"

Rebecca shuddered and bent to write the note.

When the note had been fashioned to suit young Henry, William hurried from the circle of stones, and Rebecca heard lowered voices, then the sound of horses leaving. Two, at least. That left a man outside to guard and Henry inside with her. He had not retied her hands, and Rebecca sat quietly so as not to remind him. She could do naught with bound hands, but if she could find a knife or even a rough stone, something with which to strike.

The young king moved from her sight, then returned past a tall, rounded stone at her side. He regarded her silently, reddened eyes brooding as he sipped from the silver flask. He turned away, walking with hands behind his back, the flask held between thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Rebecca's stomach rumbled, and she was reminded of the discomfort of her fluxes while sitting on cold dirt and unable to move. She slid her hand across her stomach, slightly swollen during these vexing times, and felt the pouch she carried with herbs Margaret had fixed for her when she journeyed with the minstrels. If she took double the potion Margaret told her to, she became dizzy, sometimes retching, but it lessened the pain. It was potent when taken in certain ways.

As she watched, Henry drank from his flask.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Stephen grumbled as Malvina fussed over him. She bade him drink from the bowl of liquid she had made from herbs to which she had added a potion known only to the old witch who came to New Sarum by dark of moon. To keep Malvina from quarreling so much and causing his head to ache more, he sipped the vile-tasting tea.

" 'Twill ease the ache in thy head, my lord," Malvina said, working quietly to cleanse and examine the ragged wound. The club had cut deeply, and Malvina had summoned Lady Witherstone from a nearby village to stitch the red flesh. Now she bathed the wound, checking the neat threads holding it. There would be a scar but that could not be avoided.

Stephen grew still, knowing Malvina would have her way as long as she thought to soothe his pain. For the first time in a long while, he thought of Mary. It had been long since he'd thought daily of Mary. His thoughts recently had been of his wayward wife, and even before she left, he had gone days without thinking about the woman he'd grieved for so much. Gentle and loving Mary, Malvina's sister. The two were alike in that they wished to serve the ones they loved.

Rebecca was different. Oh, indeed she was. She could be gentle, but sometimes her temper wasn't easily controlled. She seemed sometimes not to care for Malvina, watching her with clear blue eyes, refusing to smile even when she met one of Malvina's own. Questions she would turn on him and he, not understanding, refused to ask the meaning. If he

forbade her to argue, she gave him a look that spoke more loudly than words. When they loved, he often thought she returned his feelings, but Rebecca did not speak of such. He had wanted her to, had often thought of asking, but he had never done so.

How he had missed her all those long nights she'd been gone.

"Rebecca is in danger," Stephen said.

"Art sure 'tis the king's son who did this?"

"For truth, Malvina, and I wish it were not so, but there is no doubt that is who led the highwaymen. Dost not the king and queen have trouble aplenty without a renegade son to do penance for?"

Malvina gazed at Stephen, noting the tired voice, the deep worry in narrowed blue eyes. Mary had loved this man more than life itself, as did the Lady Rebecca. But the Lady Rebecca had grown cold, had chosen to leave them, for what reason Malvina could not fathom. Stephen did not beat her. Indeed, at times he indulged her as a child, Malvina thought.

Did he not come to Rebecca when he needed a woman? Not all husbands lay only in their own beds, she knew from gossip. Especially gossip about the king and queen. Oh, but Stephen forbade such talk. Still, the Lady Rebecca did forsake them without cause. Her own feelings had suffered, but she hurt more for Stephen who searched for his wife so many months before finding her in Troyes. In a minstrel camp. Rebecca gave no explanation, offered no reasoning. Indeed, she refused to speak of times spent on the road with minstrels and gypsies, would not talk about things she had

done, places she had seen. Malvina wanted to hear, she hungered to know of things outside of the villages, outside of Glastonbury and New Sarum. London was a rich and powerful city. Many things happened there that would make wondrous stories. But Lady Rebecca did not allow questions, even refused to talk with Malvina as she once had done. It saddened her, but there was naught could be done about it.

When Stephen first brought Rebecca to Glastonbury, little more than a child, she had not welcomed the confidence of her handmaiden although she had offered friendliness to Malvina for a time. The loss of the baby had somehow changed her back into a little-known person, someone Malvina could not talk woman talk with as they once had done.

"The young king, he would not hurt the Lady Rebecca, would he?" Malvina shuddered to think of the gentle Lady Rebecca in the hands of robbers and rogues. She would be at their mercy, and it would be more than Stephen could bear to have his young wife hurt.

"Young Henry is severely ill from drink and hard living. I do not know his personality. From the looks of his followers, it is a rough group of highwaymen, and highwaymen are sometimes cruel to victims they steal."

Stephen seemed to be speaking to himself, and as he said the last words, he winced and squeezed his eyes closed. "If he should harm Rebecca, I shall have to kill him, no matter the king and queen's feelings."

"What dost thou plan, my lord?"

Malvina finished tending Stephen's wound and took the pan of dirty water and bloody wrappings from the floor near them.

"Aubin tells me he heard the young king give orders to ride to the place of rocks two days east of New Sarum. I will take Aubin and three of the strong young farmers from the village, those who do not fear danger. I will not tell them they must go but that they canst refuse, and no harm will come to them."

"Thou art a beloved nobleman, my lord. Thou hast only to ask for help."

For the first time in days, Stephen smiled. "Thou art a true friend, Malvina, to say such. Mayhap you will find Aubin and have him go to the village and inquire. Tell them we leave two days hence at first light."

"Nay, my lord. Thou art weak and thou needs be strong for such a task."

"Aye, 'twould be foolish at other times but this will not wait. Each day, yea each hour, puts Rebecca more in danger. I do not trust the young king to keep his party of rogues in hand many nights." Stephen lay back. "Go, then, see to it, Malvina."

* * * *

'Tis no wonder the king and queen need Stephen's strength, Rebecca thought, as she watched the stumbling steps of the young king. If the other children are as unstable as this one, their problem is multiplied six-fold.

What would Queen Eleanor do in my stead? She is strong, she would not be afraid. She is intelligent—she would use her head to determine a suitable path to follow. For truth, she would not cringe in the dark and do nothing.

Rebecca's hands lay across her unsettled stomach, massaging gently at the deep ache on each side. She fondled the bag of herbs, wondering at their strength if mixed with the spirits in the young king's flask. She must find a way to get some into his drink and pray it would somehow affect him.

The largest of three fires the highwaymen had built burned against two long stones, cornered together, a height to reach Rebecca's waist. Nearby, on a dingy sheepskin, was a pewter cup alongside a leather tankard.

"Dost hate the king and queen?" Rebecca said.

Young Henry did not turn but scoffed gruffly. "'Tis not worth the energy to hate such. Truth to say I do not love them, but to hate? 'Tis strong language." His voice became distant as though deciding if he needed to say more. He did not for a long time.

"Dost hate Sir Stephen because he serves the king?"

Young Henry laughed and turned to look her way. The dimness of the close standing stones hid his eyes, but his voice was low and rough, as though it hurt to pass his throat.

"I do not know Sir Stephen except by name. 'Tis only his poor luck he was in the first carriage to pass our camp, and our good luck he had with him his lovely wife."

"If he dost refuse thy demand for ransom?"

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

"Do not think thus, my lady, for if 'tis true, thou art the one to suffer." He walked away, putting distance and stones between them. It was the same as closing a door.

Rebecca stared into the emptiness the young king left behind him. She was the one who would suffer, he said, so she was the one who must find some way to put an end to her danger. Her eyes rested on the flask and cup.

Ears and eyes attuned to sound and movement, she slid one hand between blouse hooks, between her breasts, to the waistband where the pouch of ground herbs rested. Perhaps a half portion remained. Quickly, Rebecca withdrew her hand and remained still, listening, and then she moved to the flask, shook it and heard a faint gurgle. The wooden cork had swollen and resisted her efforts to pull it out but came loose suddenly with a loud pop. She held her breath hoping the sound did not carry far enough to be heard by the young king.

Wind whistled around stones with a sound like the moaning of someone in pain. A gust made its way through the place Rebecca stood, whipping at the flames and sending sparks fluttering at her feet. She shivered. Such a cold and lonely place, this city of stones.

Where is young Henry? she wondered, but she was too busy to linger on the question. Pushing the opening of the cloth pouch into the flask neck, she shook the contents into it, moving the wine container back and forth to dissolve any solid particles. The herbs were bitter when taken only with water but, mayhap, the wine would hide the sharpness.

A thick, rasping cough sounded and Rebecca laid the flask back in place and, rolling the pouch into a ball, pushed it into the fire. A blue blaze sizzled for a breath and was gone. Rebecca knelt by the fire, hands extended as though for warmth, and looked up as her captor appeared like a somber ghost from the shadows.

"Art cold, my lady?" His voice sounded kind. "Perchance thou wouldst like a drink to warm the insides. The drink is good for such."

"Nay, my lord," Rebecca said. "I am warm." She spoke boldly now. "Mayhap a drink is not what is good for thee. 'Tis a pox on one's health I hear to use a quantity of such spirits."

Young Henry laughed. "'Tis kind of thee to worry after my health, my lady, but I fear 'tis late. Too late."

He sighed and picked up the wine flask. Staring into the fire and mumbling to himself, he slowly moved the container back and forth, back and forth.

Rebecca stared, fascinated, hearing the faint slosh of liquid, her heart beating fast, knowing his unconscious shaking of the flask would further dissolve the drug she had put there. Let there be enough to make him sleep, she prayed. At times, it had taken but a small amount to cause her to doze when her body was not quite right, and other times, it changed little.

This potion must be extra strong else her work had been in vain, and her life perchance forfeited. She did not wish to die. If Stephen did not want her, Hugo and Margaret did, and she could make a good life with the gypsy band of minstrels. There were worse things.

But life without Stephen will be empty, she thought with sorrow.

Young Henry sighed and Rebecca looked at him. His head lay against a curved stone. His eyes were closed, mouth slack, and a thin trickle of liquid slid over his beard. He lifted his right hand with the wine flask in it, and tilted it. Rebecca watched his throat move as he swallowed once, twice, thrice, then his arm dropped, his fingers clasping the long flask neck.

* * * *

Rebecca awakened with a start. The fire had died down, and she was stiff with cold.

Across from her, the young king sat in the same place he had been when she dozed. His eyes were closed and he did not move when she stood over him. Stepping back, she looked about, bent to pick up the wine flask and shook it. It was empty.

How long had she slept? She could not guess if the other highwaymen would soon return nor if the one left as guard would come to where his master slept. Slept? Had the potion worked double with the wine? She wished it so.

Young Henry carried a knife, she knew. What other weapon was there? A goodly supply of stones. There had been bows with well-honed arrows, but there was not one near Henry. He had not carried one. It had been his fellow rogues who handled the heavier weapons.

Rebecca bent over Henry, her fingers probing lightly over his loose fitting cape. His shirt was leather, stiff and cold, and her hand slid easily around him, closing over the handle of a

knife stuck into a sheath. Her face was close to his and she could smell the sourness of old food and wine and the musky scent of the drug.

I must remember to write Margaret and tell her of my deed should I escape from this mad scoundrel. Surely, there is a poem to be written of such adventures. If it were not for being frightened to death, 'twould be comical.

The loud beat of her heart would surely awaken young Henry even from the drugged sleep. The sound seemed to echo around the stones and return ten-fold on the moaning wind.

The knife stuck, and Rebecca tugged. Henry grunted, and slapped at her hand. She jerked away, but as his arm flopped once more, she grabbed the weapon and worked it back and forth until it loosened. Slowly, she pulled, and came near falling as its full weight rested in her hands.

Rebecca backed away from the young king, looking around to see what there was she should take with her. Her cape lay where she had used it for cover at night, and she picked it up to fasten it beneath her chin. She had lost the black velvet muff and the lace wimple. Her hair hung limp over her shoulder, curly pieces sticking to her face where cold sweat had poured as she struggled with the knife.

She looked down at her feet. The rogue called William had removed her boots, and she knew not where they were hidden. Only heavy stockings protected her feet from the bitter cold, and they had been useless except she had her feet near the fire. It was not to be helped.

A leather string was attached to the wine flask, and Rebecca removed it, tying it about her waist. It could be useful should she reach the outside of this maze of stone rooms. She had no way of knowing how she'd get away from this place, but it was something she had to do. If she were to survive.

She gave one last look at the sleeping Henry and made her way past the flickering torches pegged to the stones, turning one way, then another, trying to keep a straight course. She did not remember their way in, only that she had been tired and half asleep when dragged through the narrow passageways, sometimes lifted over low stones, and then made to walk again.

Exhaustion soon made her slow her pace, and she leaned against a stone as tall as the second floor of New Sarum. She looked up at the awesome height, wondering at the appearance of such work long before any person now living had been on earth. Her imagination did not stretch far enough to think how a city of rocks emerged from nowhere, and only a little had been taught about this desolate place in Miss Emilie's class those long summers ago.

Rebecca shook herself, and then trudged on until, suddenly rounding a long stone, she saw light. Surprised, she realized it was not night, as she had supposed. Torch and firelight did little to relieve the cave dimness, not enough to tell day from night.

Her stocking clad feet made no noise on the dirt floor as she reached the opening. There was a guard, but where? Wishing to have both hands free to climb if need be, she had

stuck the knife beneath the leather string around her waist. Now she removed the knife, holding it in both hands until she became used to the weight.

She was too short to see over the rocks, and she did not wish to walk into the open space where the guard might be waiting to pounce. She wished surprise to aid in her attack on the highwayman. Lifting her head, she studied the shape of a nearby stone, its side smooth, and its top almost out of sight. She moved slowly, rounded the towering rock, and slid her free hand along the surface. It stopped at a rough spot. She could get her foot into that and climb.

The knife went once more beneath the leather string, and she clasped the rock, pulling herself upward. Her unshod foot found another foothold and, slowly, she made her way around, stopping often to search for another ledge upon which to put her foot. The next crevice she found was shallow, and she held her breath as she inched her way around. She gasped as her foot slipped away and she hung precariously before reaching another ledge. With her eyes closed, she waited until her heart stopped pounding and her legs stopped trembling. Carefully, she eased forward, making sure she had a foothold before she turned loose of the one she was on. When she reached the corner, she heard breathing and hesitated before inching her head around to see what awaited her.

William sat on the ground against the stone, his legs out to the fire. Should he raise his head, he could not help but see her and 'twould take but one lunge from his powerful arms to reach her.

What do I do now? she wondered. I've come this far, I cannot, must not, give up. She swallowed over the dryness in her throat. What would she do if he came at her with a weapon?

Do not imagine such, Rebecca, she told herself sternly. If thou art to escape this madman ...

Her foot slipped, her hands would not hold her, and Rebecca cried out as she tumbled, struck William's black head with her shoulder, and found herself sitting in his lap. William's mouth opened in astonishment and, for the moment, he did not move. It saved Rebecca. Her mind cleared, and she knew it was now that she must act.

She did.

Grabbing William's hair, she yanked him towards her, and then slammed his head backward against the stone. He groaned and his eyes crossed. Then, with a roar, he lifted big arms to grab Rebecca and dumped her onto the ground. Her hands scraped painfully on small stones, but her fingers closed on a large rock. As William came at her, she brought her arm around with all her strength and struck his temple.

He was on his knees, snarling, his teeth bared, when the rock hit. William slumped, falling half across Rebecca, knocking her flat to the ground. She pushed and shoved, struggling to get free of his tremendous weight. It took all her strength to move him away and crawl from under him. She sat still to catch her breath, listening. She wasn't sure if William was breathing, nor did she care. He was one more hindrance out of her way of escape.

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

Near the fire lay a knapsack. Rebecca opened it and took out a piece of stale bread. She took it along with a sheepskin flask of water. William's knife was stuck into the back of his belt, and she removed it to put it with the first one at her waist.

She looked at the big man lying with his face in the dirt. He had on boots, too large to stay on her small feet, but she could drape his sheepskin vest over her shoulders. It took long minutes to work the vest off him, and when she put it on her, the smell was not pleasant. But it kept out the icy wind whipping through the rock formations.

It was then she heard the horses. The highwaymen were returning, and William would be the first thing they saw when they entered the rooms. Her chance of escape would be gone when they discovered him. Yea, mayhap her life, too, when they found the young king asleep from herbs and wine.

Quickly, Rebecca turned, threading her way past high and low formations, through dim caverns where tall stones loomed above her, where flat crosspieces went from tower to tower. She did not stop to see if she could climb them, instead going away from the sounds of riders nearing the tombs.

She glanced over her shoulder, stumbled across a many-sided stone, and sat down heavily. Her side ached and her breath came in dry sobs. Her feet were numb with cold and felt as though they were bleeding from walking on rocks and rough ground. She stared at the rock, and then up at the tall pillar it rested against. She had conquered one of those stones—it seemed she was to be tested again.

She dragged herself upward, crawled over the lower rock and, standing on tiptoes, caught a ledge to lift herself. She moved her feet into grooves, held on tightly, and then moved her hands an inch at the time until she felt the flat top. She had not the strength to pull her body over the edge. Exhaustion drained her, left her weak and unable to climb up or down. Her cheek rested against the rough surface, and tears slid down her cheek.

She would never see Stephen again. Nor Aubin. Nor Tor and Bundy, the clumsy stable boy. Not even Malvina whom she swore she did not care for. Just now, she would give her all to see them.

Even Papa.

Rebecca's eyes flew wide in astonishment and she laughed. If she were so bad off as to wish to see Papa, there must be a way out of this so she would not have to do penance, as the king would needs do. She would escape, and she would not want to see Papa. Richard, yes. Papa, no. Lady Elizabeth. Yes, she supposed, she might want to see her mother.

With renewed effort, Rebecca slid her foot upward until she found a small crevice. She stopped thinking that she would not accomplish that which she must, did not use weariness as an excuse to give up, and worked until she lay on the flat pinnacle. Motionless, catching her breath, she listened for the horses. There was no sound.

When she was able to move, she crawled to the edge and looked down. There, looking up at her was Stephen. His head was bound, but he was sitting straight astride a big black

horse. Behind him was Aubin, and lined up among the huge stones were four horsemen wrapped in black so that she did not recognize them.

She was safe. She was being rescued by her beloved husband.

"Art hurt, Rebecca?" Stephen said.

"Nay. Only scratches."

Stephen guided the stallion closer.

"Jump into my arms, Rebecca."

It was far. Her voice was an unsteady whisper.

"I do not think I canst do it." She wet her lips and fought against panic.

"No harm will come to thee, Rebecca."

"No, Stephen, 'tis frightening."

Had she not put herself in danger to escape the highwaymen? Had she not fought one of them, drugged their leader, suffered bruises and scratches in her efforts to get back to Stephen? Was there not a limit to one's strength?

"Do as I say, Rebecca," Stephen commanded. "We do not have time to waste whilst you cower." He held up his arms.

"Jump," he ordered.

Even when my life is in danger, he must yell and order me to do as he wishes. Rebecca's eyes narrowed on the figure of her husband. He commands, thus he expects me to obey.

I hope I break both your arms, you unfeeling servant of the king.

She flung herself downward.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Rebecca's body struck solidly in Stephen's arms causing him to grunt. Her head butted his chin, and blackness danced in front of her. Her cape ripped, and the skin on her arms burned as they grazed the cold sheepskin of Stephen's coat. She tasted blood as her teeth bounced against her jaws and lips.

"Rebecca?"

Stephen's voice was uneven, broken with emotion, as he whispered her name. But before she could look askance at his face, he said roughly, "Find a safe place behind yon taller stones whilst we finish our business here."

He released her from his arms, and she stood by the prancing stallion, looking up at him.

"Stephen, the young king is asleep and William, one of his rogues, is sleeping from a stone at the temple. Two of them art missing."

"Asleep? The young king is asleep? Then 'twill be no fight to capture him. What happened to William?"

"I hit him with a stone."

"Thou?"

She grew impatient.

"There was naught else to do, my lord. Let us leave here." She looked around and shivered. "It is a dark place filled with shadow demons."

Stephen got down from the horse to stand beside Rebecca. He wanted to take her in his arms, wanted to hold her tight

just to make certain she was safe. His fingers ached to circle the slender throat where he could see scratches, longed to touch the bruises on her arms. Anger surged through him at the thought of someone wounding her. His feelings would wait until a later, more convenient time.

"Rebecca, thou makest no sense. Demons? Where is the other highwaymen?"

"Delivering a ransom note that begs delivery of money so I can be released."

"A note to me?"

"Aye. One to thee and another to King Henry."

Rebecca glanced around to see Aubin moving his horse closer. She smiled and lifted her hand in greeting.

Aubin's wide grin answered her. "M'lady." He bowed his head.

Stephen regarded his wife with wonder. He had thought to find her hysterical and frightened. Instead, she jumped, unhurt, into his arms, and spoke of a sleeping captor and one who has been hit by a stone—thrown by her arm.

She was not unhurt. Her chin was red and swollen, and a trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her mouth. Her ripped cape disclosed a deep wound on her arm. He could only guess at what had happened to her slender body beneath the torn clothing. Rage filled him at the thought of her pain. He turned to Aubin.

"Take the Lady Rebecca to yon bush and care for her wounds."

"Stephen, I do not wish..."

Stephen had already turned away, motioning the four riders to follow him as he gave his reins to Aubin and disappeared between the boulders.

Aubin swung down, looked her over, and then led Rebecca away from the path Stephen and the others had taken. Rebecca's temper flared, and she breathed hard through her mouth, tasting blood now that she had time to be aware.

"Thou master is a stubborn man, Aubin," she said as he worked on the dark red flesh of her arm.

Aubin had taken supplies from a pouch strapped around his horse and now, he placed a wet powder on the wound.

Rebecca winced.

"It has a sting."

Aubin nodded. "'Tis a potent herb Malvina gathered at Mrs. Witherstone's. 'Tis said to heal well." He tended the scratches on her face, patting the herbs onto her skin with gentle fingers. His heart ached that his favorite lady had suffered at the hand of rogues.

Rebecca heard the sound of horses first. She pulled at Aubin's loose sleeve.

"Listen. The others return. Stephen will be in danger."

He frowned towards the faint hum he could not even distinguish as horses. The Lady Rebecca had sharp ears.

"How far to the young king and his henchmen inside the tombs?" Aubin asked.

"In truth, I do not know. It is a goodly walk on the path. I came over the rocks."

"Come."

Aubin pulled Rebecca with him until they passed several tall pillars.

"Stay here," he said. "Hold the animal and do not let him speak."

Before she could protest, he was gone, vanishing around stones and into the dimness towards where Stephen had disappeared. She tried to hear the horses again but could not. Aubin's horse stood patiently, blowing gently through his nose.

Rebecca looked around and found a small twig growing in a crevice. She looped the horse's reins over the small branch, and then placed a fist-sized rock over that. Climbing onto the tall animal's back, she stood unsteadily, swaying until she spread her feet for balance. From there, she could step onto a low column with ridges slanted enough to hold her feet. The stockings were now filled with rips and tears, and her toes peeked through, allowing her to dig them into the shallow ledge. They were so cold as to be almost numb. She only hoped she could keep them anchored to prevent falling to her death on the stones below.

She leaned far across a chasm, grabbed hold of another pillar, found as she did that her fingers were so cold she could not hold fast. Her breath came hard, making a mist in front of her face. She hung, half on one rock, half on another.

The galloping hooves were suddenly close, and she looked down to see the young king's note bearers rounding four stone columns. The man in the lead looked up to see Rebecca clinging to the wall of rock.

Mouth opened in astonishment, the man stared upward, and then he let out a bellow of laughter.

"See, Simon," he shouted. "The she-cat has escaped young Henry and even now hangs above us for the picking."

He lifted his sword to point at Rebecca, the tip of the blade almost reaching her foot.

The second rogue joined his friend.

"Shall we pick her, then, George? 'Tis plain the young king dost not wish her for his own or he would not let her escape, eh?"

Rebecca's temper erupted. Here she was, hanging like a pig to be butchered, and these, these lechers make light of her discomfort. They knew not what she had been through, nor did they care. She'd suffered from cold, from hunger, from many bruises and scratches, from fright, and yet she was to be put to more mishandling.

Measuring the distance with cold calculation, Rebecca half turned, slid over the curved stone, and onto the shoulders of the first knave. He yelled as the sword he held over his head clashed against his skull and bounced onto his horse's neck. The animal bolted, spilling George headfirst against a pillar. He lay still.

Rebecca landed on her bottom, felt her bones jar all the way to her teeth. She shook her head, looked up as Simon came toward her, waving his sword. He would run her through, she was certain, because there was nowhere for her to go. With her back against a rock, her legs spread awkwardly to the side, and her arms numb from the fall, she was unable to move.

She closed her eyes and waited for the deadly blow to fall.
It never came.

There was a thundering of hooves, a maniacal yell, and the clatter of metal on metal. The knave attacking her disappeared from his horse. The horse reared back on his haunches, gave a screaming whinny and tore off through the twisting path between the giant pillars of stone.

* * * *

As Rebecca had said, the young king lay peacefully asleep. Stephen knelt by him, touched his throat. He was alive. Stephen frowned, and then bent closer. The odor of wine and something else. A drug. Yea, even the royal family was guilty of overusing strong herbs and tonics, and mixed with wine, it could do much damage.

Stephen motioned his companions through the maze of stones, and they searched until they found William stretched at the bottom of a pillar, a bloody rock nearby.

"A sound, Sir Stephen," one of the young farmers spoke.
"'Tis horses, I fear."

Stephen and his companions left William where they had found him and followed a winding path through the dim caverns between tall, rounded stones and alongside flat, smooth ones the size of the courtyard at New Sarum. Stephen stopped and raised his hand so the others reined in their mounts. They listened, but there was no sound of other animals.

They had started forward once more when a wild yell brought Stephen around. He listened, motioned with his arm,

and his men turned with him in the direction of a second scream.

Stephen's mount struggled to make sharp turns, his breath showing gray ahead of them. The horse skidded, reared, then surged ahead on a clear path when Stephen saw a rider coming at break-neck speed toward him, leaning in his saddle, sword raised to strike at something on the ground.

He yanked on the reins, swayed to the side, and turned the big horse into the oncoming rider. The two animals collided and Stephen flung himself into the other man. They went down together. Stephen saw a snarling mouth, teeth gritted and bared, and big hands coming to encircle his throat. He lowered his head and pushed his feet against the stone at his back, lunging upward. His head cracked beneath the other man's chin, and Stephen heard the gurgle as his enemy tried to swallow. Stephen struck with both fists, and the man lay still.

He found it hard to breathe so rolled over on his back to lie blinking at a patch of blue sky far above the land of tombs. His head ached and his arms felt as though pulled from his shoulders.

"Stephen?"

Rebecca's soft voice brought his eyes wide open. She was leaning over him, hair tangled over her shoulders and falling into his face. Her cheeks were scratched, her mouth blood-flecked. She touched his jaw and ran fingers over his bearded throat. Then she bent and brushed her lips over his.

It was a scalding touch, a piercing stab of emotion that set his heart to pounding and, astonished, he felt instant arousal.

His body was tortured, his senses confused, his brain in turmoil, and he wanted Rebecca with a fierceness he could not explain.

"Kiss me hard," he whispered.

She was on her knees, hunched over him, both hands digging into his shoulders. Her eyes widened at his demand.

"Oh, Stephen, I thought thee hurt," she said, half laughing, half crying.

"I am hurt. Kiss me, Rebecca."

He didn't move his hands. For truth, he could not. They felt heavy and torn.

Rebecca stared at her husband. There was a thin streak of blood from the corner of one eye. Gray dust covered half of his beard. She bent her head.

She didn't know if it was his lips or hers that tasted of blood but, ignoring the unpleasantness, she opened her mouth and slid her tongue over Stephen's firm lips. Gently, she licked dust and blood away, closing her mouth to brush back across. Hesitating, she stopped, and then pushed the tip of her tongue between his teeth. With a low moan, Stephen opened his mouth, and Rebecca felt the slash of hot feeling pour into her stomach.

It was maddening, this wanting to be inside of Stephen, to have him inside her, in this wild and uninhabited place of ghosts and demons. She didn't try to stop but pushed her tongue deep into Stephen's mouth, withdrawing and plunging, conscious of his body jerking and twisting beneath her.

His hands fastened around her hips, pulled her onto him, and the thick, swollen arousal stabbed her through the

thickness of his clothing. He was kissing her now instead of her kissing him, and his mouth opened and closed, teeth nipping her tender lips. His tongue slid inside her mouth, wrapped around hers, sucking.

She whimpered and heard Stephen's strained groan.

He would take her here, here on the cold ground with both of them wounded, if he could but get his arms to move. His body responded with all the heat and wanting of a healthy man as Rebecca's hands slipped around his neck and her body lay atop his. He wanted her, he would have her if ...

"Sir Stephen, mayhap thou should look at the rogues ere we take them."

Stephen held onto her for an instant longer, and then pushed her to his side, one hand clamping her arm. He tried to sit up, and she disentangled herself to help him. He shook his head to clear it.

"All art accounted for?"

"Yea, my lord. The one called William cannot walk, and the young king is sleeping yet."

"How much drink has young Henry had, Rebecca?"

"Not a great amount, my lord, but mixed with a potion I use when unwell, it was as though the strength doubled. It did not take much to work quickly."

"And William?"

"I fell on him."

"Fell on him?" Stephen started to shake his head. It hurt.

"I was on one of the stones." Rebecca motioned with her hand. "He came after me, and I fell on the ground. There was a rock near my hand."

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

She smiled, and the smile turned her face into the elfin waif Stephen remembered from years back, made him want to snatch her up and kiss her breathless.

"There was naught to do but use it, my lord," she said.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

If Rebecca had thought Stephen's injuries would interfere with his royal duties, she found out differently. His wounds were not yet healed when he made ready to travel.

"Thou dost not needs go to London, Stephen," Rebecca said. "'Tis not thy place to take the young king to see his father on my account."

"Nay, Rebecca, I cannot send young Henry to London alone. It is necessary that I tell the king and queen what happened at the stones. They will believe me and punishment will be given."

"Of course, Stephen. What wilt the punishment be? Young Henry will be given a room in the royal suite and served a better wine than he can afford on kidnap ransoms he knows not how to collect? Wilt provide protection also for William and Simon and George?"

"Thy tongue has grown sharper in the two summers past, Rebecca. Thou knowest not what..."

Rebecca picked up the velvet skirt of the orchid dressing gown Malvina had brought her when she had her first hot bath in many days. Without speaking again, she reached the door and yanked it open. Her lips pressed together in anger.

"Do not walk away when I am speaking, Rebecca."

For answer, Rebecca swung the door as far back as her arm allowed, then slammed it with all her strength.

Stephen swore and went after her, but his hand refused to handle the knob. His wounds were still painful, and he did not

have the strength to do what he always took for granted that he would do. He stormed silently at Rebecca and at himself.

How dare she speak thusly to him after being rescued and returned to the comfort of New Sarum? How dare she think she could advise *him*, her own husband, who ranked high with King Henry? How dare she question his decisions, disagree with what he thought would be the better way to approach the king? How dare she ...

Stephen stared at the door and could not help but smile. Rebecca had grown up. Yea, not only is she a lovelier woman, she has the spice of two naughty children begging for punishment. And she will get her punishment. As soon as my business is done in London, I will return to take care of the Lady Rebecca in the way she deserves. She will learn to agree with her husband, will learn that she is to abide by his words.

The thought satisfied him for the moment, and he turned back to allow Aubin to fasten the garments he no longer had fingers to work. Another in a long list of things that irritated him these days. He was silent but, as Aubin finished, he turned.

"Bring Malvina to me," Stephen said.

Aubin worried over the look on his master's face. It bode ill for his favorite, Lady Rebecca. But he summoned Malvina, and then stood outside the door of Stephen's bedroom to listen to his master's instructions.

Stephen had been staring out the window until he heard Malvina enter his room.

"My lord?"

He turned. "I must needs go to London, Malvina, on business for the king. You know about the young king's trouble, that he was the one who kidnapped Rebecca?"

"Yes, Sir Stephen, I'm aware."

"Young Henry must be punished, but I cannot trust his journey with anyone other than myself." He paced from the window to the fireplace where a log burned, sending warmth through the huge room. "There is Rebecca." He turned once more to Malvina. "Rebecca is still hurting and tired, but the stubborn woman will not admit to pain. See that she is well taken care of, that she rests each day, and eats more than is her habit these days."

"Yes, my lord." Malvina smiled at the look of anguish on Stephen's face. It would behoove both her master and his wife to stop long enough to admit they loved each other, and then other problems would be simpler. As a maidservant, she could not offer such advice, but she wished it so.

"I cannot take her with me, she is not well enough." He went back to pacing. "Watch her, Malvina. Do not let her do any work until her wounds have healed completely. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Of course, you do." Stephen smiled and reached to touch her hand. "I trust you with my life, Malvina."

* * * *

Rebecca refused to go to the great hall for the evening meal and remained abed most of the day. Truth was that her body ached, and she touched many places that were sore.

Her scalp was tender, and merely placing the brush to her head caused her to moan with pain.

Her heart, too, seemed bruised. No matter what she did or said or asked, Stephen did not hear or see anything other than the error of her ways. His loyalties, his thoughts, his every wish, were for the royal kingdom. Truth, it was his job, and it paid for many extras, such as New Sarum, a team of strong horses for the just purchased carriage.

It did not buy love.

Restless, Rebecca pulled herself slowly from the bed, taking her time to ease the stiffness in her arms and legs. Her movement to the window was slow with short steps. Pulling the draperies aside, she blinked at the sunshine, so bright as to hurt her eyes. She hurt everywhere.

Stephen was away again. She'd heard the carriage before morning's light, orders called for various tasks to be completed ere they began the journey to London. One order, she knew, was to guard the Lady Rebecca lest she decide to leave New Sarum.

Were there the slightest chance, she would go. But with her soreness, the stiffness in her joints, she could not ride even a stolen horse, nor would she get far on foot.

She expected the knock on the door and did not turn from the window as she called, "Come." Without looking, she knew it was Malvina. A sour taste came into her mouth. Her guard, her jailor. She resented it greatly.

"I have brought food, my lady. Sir Stephen orders thee to eat."

"Leave it, then," Rebecca said.

"My lady, 'tis not good for thy body to do without food, especially since the injuries. Strength is needed."

"Leave the tray and leave me alone, Malvina. I promise not to run away or destroy the furniture or turn the servants against Sir Stephen."

Silence.

Rebecca kept her gaze on a distant hedge of low bushes where snow still lay in a rippled mound.

"My lady, may I speak?"

Rebecca turned.

Malvina stood straight in the center of the huge room. The deep auburn of her hair caught lights from the sun and shown like autumn leaves, deepening the green of her eyes.

Malvina is a handsome woman, Rebecca thought. 'Tis no wonder Stephen prefers her to me, a colorless blonde-haired elf. Mayhap instead of an elf, my resemblance is now to the witch who does the wrong thing to the wrong people. But he must choose between the two of us. I will not remain in the same house, nay, not even the same country, as his lover.

"Say what you will, Malvina. It is not my place to give thee orders. Sir Stephen left orders for you to observe things I do and to report such to him. 'Tis true?"

"Nay, my lady. 'Tis true I am to watch over thee, but he only wishes that you gain strength to heal your wounds, and that you do not leave New Sarum."

"Watch well, Malvina, for 'tis only a chance that I await before leaving this place."

She glanced around. It no longer looked cold, but she would not say this. The walls were warm with woven panels

Stephen had purchased in Troyes. Matching rugs lay around her bed. The colors were shades of purple, orchid and a deep rose, blending with the bed coverlet. A cheerful fire burned in the stone fireplace at the end of the room. Comfort was not lacking here.

Even the great hall, the dining hall, the kitchen with many ovens, all seemed warm and welcoming.

It was Stephen who did not welcome her except that he must because she was his wife. She would never admit to Malvina that she had begun to feel at home in the new manor house, that she no longer believed it cold and dark, but warm and welcoming.

"Thou art wrong to leave Sir Stephen when he is away on business for his king and must be gone from home."

"Ah, Malvina, thou art a true servant, one who defends her master in all things. Stephen is indeed lucky to have Aubin and thee and the others who work through the courtyard and beyond in the fields."

" 'Tis thee he loves, my lady."

Rebecca's heart skipped a beat then thudded beneath the silk of her gown. She wished with all her heart that what Malvina spoke was the truth.

"This has been said ere today. Why sayeth you this when Sir Stephen makes no mention of love?"

" 'Tis true, my lady. Sir Stephen bought thee, yea, when thou were but a child. Thou hast grown into a lovely woman, a woman Sir Stephen loves but knows not how to handle. Thou art willful and not to be trusted, he thinks. He will not give thee up, my lady."

Her maidservant had said that Stephen loved her, but how could Malvina know this when his own wife knew it not? When Stephen never spoke words of love even as he took her body and made it his? Even as he buried himself inside her, love was never one of the words he whispered to her. Only desire, only the satisfaction from the release of his aroused body. Never had he said he loved her. Never.

"Did Sir Stephen tell you he loved me, Malvina?"

"Nay, some things do not need to be told."

"I need to be told else my heart does not believe."

Rebecca turned back to the window. The sun was hidden behind a cloud, casting a gloom over the room, dulling the lively colors.

"Mayhap you can explain why Stephen holds you in his arms and cries but will not hold me when the baby does not live. When he forbids me to ride Tor or to do many things I enjoy because he trusts me no longer. He does not make love to me for fear I will be with child, a child he does not desire from my body. Yea, many things need explaining, Malvina, that Stephen cares not to speak of."

Even her body did Stephen's bidding, refusing to hold his seed after their wild mating. It was just as well. Were she to become pregnant, she could not run away as easily.

Malvina walked closer to Rebecca.

"When sayst Stephen cried in my arms? A long time hence?"

"Just after the baby came. We quarreled, and I went to his room to tell him I was sorry for my part. The room that is always locked was open, and inside, Stephen sat on the bed,

his arms around you, and he cried. Never has he cried for my sorrow nor for his son. Only in your arms does he shed tears"

"He cried for thee, my lady."

Rebecca whirled, her tear-bright eyes disbelieving, arms crossed tightly across her heaving bosom.

"Over me? He cried for me? Could he not have told me his sorrow?"

"Yea, for thee. He cried over the child and over thee because you were not to be consoled. Sir Stephen has been without woman since Mary, his wife, died, and he knows not the gentleness a woman wishes. But he is a good man, a fair man to his workers and to his servants, and he dost not beat thee."

"Thou art right, Malvina. He still loves Mary, so sayeth the queen when I visited lo, these Christmases ago. I thought mayhap he could come to love me but 'tis too late. He is in love with you, Malvina."

Malvina's mouth opened, closed, and she made a sound as though strangling. Then her head went back, and she burst with laughter. She clapped her hands and bowed from the waist. When she straightened, there were tears in her eyes.

"Where doest learn of this, Lady Rebecca?" She shook her head and laughed again. "Sir Stephen is one whom I do love, but he was my sister's husband, and he dost not love me as a lover, but only as Mary's sister."

"Thou art Mary's sister?"

"Yea, my lady."

Rebecca's throat closed, and she choked over the sudden realization that she had been wrong about so many things. Was she also wrong about Stephen's love for Malvina?

Stephen and Malvina. He did love Malvina, but only as family.

"Why was I not told this? Why did Stephen not tell me you were his beloved's sister?"

" 'Tis thought he did not want thee to be reminded of Mary every day, my lady. Sir Stephen is kind and thoughtful, albeit he does not explain his actions to his own wife."

The two women stared at each other until Malvina stepped forward and put her arms around Rebecca's stiff shoulders. She murmured soft words in Irish dialect, then pulled back to look at the stunned expression of her mistress.

" 'Tis all true, my lady. Sir Stephen loves thee though he does not speak the words thou wouldst hear. Mayhap he needs lessons in such."

"I wouldst needs believe thee, Malvina, but..."

"Thou dost love Sir Stephen, true?"

Would Malvina run to Stephen and tell such if she spoke words he had not heard from her? Rebecca sighed. Just now, she cared not what gossip Malvina took to Stephen. Perchance it was time to say what was in her heart.

"Aye. 'Tis true, Malvina."

* * * *

Hugo recognized Sir Stephen Lambert as the man stepped across water puddles to make his way to the main tent of the

minstrel group. He felt Margaret at his side and took her cold hand in his.

"Sir Stephen," Hugo said as King Henry's nobleman paused in front of him.

Stephen stopped, and then bowed from the waist.

"I would ask after the king."

"He is well, sire. Come this way."

Hugo slid his arm around Margaret and stepped aside for Stephen to enter the tent.

"He is there." Hugo pointed a big hand to a flap hanging from the center of the tent.

Stephen nodded. "I thank thee."

He stepped to the entrance of the makeshift room.

"'Tis Sir Stephen, your highness."

"Enter." The voice boomed from within.

Stephen pulled the flap back and entered the room as King Henry came forward, his arms out to embrace his officer.

"Ah, Stephen. 'Tis good to see thee. Hugo and his company have treated me well, but for truth, I wish to return home." He patted Stephen's arms.

"I am afraid I bring more sad tidings, your highness. Mayhap thou would sit down whilst I tell the story."

Dismay showed on the king's countenance.

"More bad news? By God's eye, Stephen, canst find no good tidings to bring? Is not paying penance for the archbishop's murder enough for an old man? Must thou bring painful additions?"

"I am sorry, my king, but 'tis necessary to tell thee ere the story gets to thine enemies. It is something that must be said, and I am sorry to be the one to bring sadness to you."

Stephen spoke quietly and quickly, his heart heavy as the king's face mirrored concern, anger and, finally, acceptance.

"The young king is another of Sir Thomas' failures, Stephen. He taught him well the indulgences of the flesh, methinks."

Stephen refrained from saying that young Henry did not have much in the way of parental guidance, nothing from his parents to show how a loving family should be. He was taught by Sir Thomas when he should have been learning affection at home.

They sat in silence, the king's thoughts far away, as were Stephen's. The king thought of the Plantagenet, his responsibilities, his failures, his triumphs, his queen and their children, his consort.

Stephen thought of Rebecca. What was he to do with such a woman-child? She was a woman when he loved her, a child in looks and sometimes in ways. But when faced with certain death at the hands of highwaymen, she'd turned into a fighter and had never given up.

If she would just not give up on him.

I must show her that her life is with me. Her love is mine, and she must not run away. We will talk, and I will tell her I love her. He finally realized it was so. And he must tell Rebecca. He loved the small waif who could be a hot-blooded temptress or a snarling tiger. He must hurry to New Sarum

and tell her just these things. It would be difficult to wait for that time.

* * * *

Calm settled once more over London and everyone seemed content that King Henry would be made to serve long and hard to avenge the archbishop's murder. There was no reason why the king could not live once more in his royal suite. Stephen had the king's word that he would deal with young Henry and proper treatment would be ordered.

Stephen convinced the king that Hugo and his troupe deserved a fair reward for protecting him until he could be returned to the royal palace to await his penance. The king agreed and had settled money and provisions on Hugo's minstrels, wishing them Godspeed on the way to their next performance.

Stephen left London on a raw February day, bound for New Sarum where Rebecca awaited him. She was to have been watched, not really a prisoner, but not allowed freedom outside New Sarum's courtyard. She thought New Sarum cold she had told him, but since her arrival there, Stephen thought it warm and real. Mayhap she had been right at one time. It held no warmth. True, until Rebecca's appearance. Then, everything changed.

The walls seemed lighter, candles glowed more brightly, laughter seemed to ring the halls more than before. Servants performed their tasks cheerfully. Good changes, and Stephen believed Rebecca's presence had been the cause.

If he could only make her happy.

Even though snow lay in dirty lumps along the road and the walls surrounding the house, even though activities were contained inside the big rooms and horses were not ridden except for gathering supplies, New Sarum seemed occupied by friendlier people, by servants who sang about their work and who smiled behind wimples or soft hats pulled low about the face for protection from cutting winds.

New Sarum was a different place when Lady Rebecca resided there.

He would have to make sure Rebecca was happy even if she preferred the old home place to New Sarum. It made him blink to realize that he wanted Rebecca to be happy no matter the cost, no matter where she chose to live.

That's what love does to a man. Stephen's mouth curved in a tiny smile. He loved Rebecca. Yea, that hot-tempered, tiny elf who could make his heart thunder and his blood boil. Who could arouse his body with one kiss and satisfy his desires with a night of wild passion. He trembled with wanting her.

"Ho, Aubin," Stephen called. "I will alight here. See to bringing the small case up the steps."

He stepped down, waved to the servants he could see, then walked alongside the railing, across the stone porch. The door opened ere he could reach for it, and he stepped into a warm, fragrant hall. He took a deep breath. Cooks had been busy with baking, and he was hungry. But not hungry enough to put off seeing Rebecca.

Malvina came through a doorway and curtsied.

"My lord, welcome home."

"I thank thee. Rebecca?"

He was sore afraid to ask, and he waited with held breath.

"The Lady Rebecca's wounds have healed, my lord. She is asleep."

"Art certain she sleeps?"

"Yea, my lord."

He took off the heavy hat and wiped his face with his sleeve. He was tired and hungry. And anxious to see, and hold, Rebecca.

"I will eat ere I see her."

Malvina's eyes searched her master's face. If 'twas her doing, she would send him up the stairs to Lady Rebecca to tell her of his love. She sighed. It was not her place to say such things, but she was sure her mistress would agree.

Stephen ate quickly, taking big bites of hot bread filled with butter and honey, and his empty stomach quieted. He took tea instead of spirits but did not admit it was because Rebecca did not care for kisses laced with wine. And Rebecca was to have kisses, whether she wanted them or not.

He stirred with the beginnings of heat in his loins.

Appetite appeased, Stephen made his way up the stairs and into the orchid room where Rebecca slept.

Rebecca did not move as Stephen sat beside her on the bed. She lay on her back, hands straight by her side, her face turned away from him. He sat a long time, watching the soft rise and fall of her breasts, the pulse in her throat. Her hair was unbraided, spread across the pillow, strands lying like silken threads over the linen sheets that were pulled to her

shoulders. He could not see if she still had bruises and scratches.

She was pale, and he wondered at her weight loss. She was a small woman, but she seemed to be lighter than ever. She had not spoken of all the happenings at the stone city where the young king held her for ransom. Instead, she had turned bitter coldness towards him and would not accept any offer of kindness or concern from Stephen.

For truth, he expected her to be gone when he returned to New Sarum. Even with loyal servants watching her, Stephen knew now the cunning mind of his wife and that she would find a way to get out of New Sarum if she so chose.

Why are you still here, my love? he wondered. Art unwell and mayhap hiding that from Malvina, saying thou dost not want to go? He shivered at the thought she might be hurt and would not let her maidservant know because she did not trust Malvina.

"Rebecca?"

He leaned over her, his breath stirring a wisp of hair on her cheek.

Rebecca's eyes flew wide. All sleep vanished as she stared at her husband bending over her. One hand came up to touch his cheek.

"Thou art home," she said simply.

"Aye."

"For how long this time, Stephen?"

"My plans are for a long time, Rebecca, but thou knowest when King Henry calls, I will go." He stood. "I need help to remove this chainse. Wouldst unhook it for me?"

Rebecca sat up and slid from the bed. She was clad in pale ivory satin and lace, the gown gathered tightly at her small waist, floating to the floor in thick folds. Stephen caught his breath at her loveliness, but stood so that she could manage the heavy hooks, then helped him remove the chainse.

He sat on the bed then, undoing his silk shirt. When he sat bare-chested in front of her, he held out his arms.

"I am tired to the bones, Rebecca, and need thy tender massage. Too, a kiss would be a nice welcome home."

Rebecca stepped backwards, hands behind her, chin lifted.

"Tell me," she demanded.

"I have told all thy need know," Stephen said. "Now do as I command thee."

"Command me, my lord? Nay. Answer me ere you command me to do thy bidding."

"And what wouldst have me say, Rebecca?"

"Tell me. Tell me thy thoughts, thy plans for me, thy feelings for me and if I may know some of these to ease my mind."

Stephen's temper flared. He was tired. He wanted Rebecca with a sudden savage hunger that wished not to be denied. Truth, he did not intend her to deny him.

Enough is enough, he thought savagely. He moved quickly, his hands hard on her arms, his anger uncontained.

"You should have red hair, you stubborn, lovely child," he raged, his mouth close to hers.

"I am not a child. I am a woman, and I am your wife. I desire to be treated as such, to have you speak true words to me if I am to remain here."

Entranced in spite of himself, Stephen looked into her bewitching eyes. They flashed bright blue fire and something else. An emotion he had seen but taken no notice of before now. Her pink lips parted.

"Knowest what thou asketh of me, Rebecca?"

Defiant, she remained stiff in his arms.

"Aye, Stephen."

"Then thou must accept my answer as the truth." His hands grew tender, rubbing the firm flesh of her arms. "I love thee, Rebecca."

Rebecca brought her arms up ready to strike, hurt anger filling the empty void where Stephen's love should be. At his last words, she went still, eyes searching his face, finding tender beseeching there, seeing for the first time the tired lines around his mouth, the worry in deep-set blue eyes.

"What say, Stephen?" Her voice quavered with hope.

"I love thee, Rebecca."

"For how long?" She hardly dared breathe.

"Forever, Rebecca. Mayhap since the day I first saw you with wet, muddy feet, dirt on your face and blood from the fresh killed animal on your hands. Since the first time I tasted of your warm beauty and your untouched body. The night our son was conceived and through sorrow when he was lost. All the endless days when you were away from me, I loved thee. When you fought the highwayman, thought your way out of the dangers from his rogues and fell into my arms. I have loved thee always, my darling."

They stared at each other, and suddenly, Rebecca flung her arms around him, knocking him off balance, and they fell

The Yearning Heart
by Zelma Orr

across the bed. They laughed together as he held her tightly to him.

"Oh, Stephen, thou sayest wonderful things."

"And thee, Rebecca. Dost love me?"

"Ah, my love, surely thou knowest that I could not have been so opposing of thy rules had I not loved thee greatly. 'Twas only to get your attention."

"Thou art a great success, my darling wife," he said.

He kissed her and groaned as Rebecca's warm response brought instant arousal. He cradled her head on his shoulder where he could whisper the tender words she wanted to hear.

"Might we engage in doing wonderful things together, my love?"

Her yearning heart opened, taking Stephen's freely given love, letting her lasting affection flow warmly between them. Trust and love bound them together, finally, as was meant to be.

"Oh, now and always. I love you. Forever, Stephen."

* * * *

The End