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*D*reams to *K*keep



Veronica Towers

Dreams to Keep
by Veronica Towers

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Chapter One

Her strength was waning when she saw the lights up ahead; she dug deep inside herself for a reserve of strength. The snow swirled around her and the cold nipped at her nose and cheeks. A gust of wind parted her cape and stole the last of her warmth. She approached the lights and she saw it was the place she sought. It appeared somehow sinister; she felt a shiver go down her spine not entirely having to do with the cold. This was the castle of Sir William, her sister's former betrothed only he did not know it yet.

Her sister, cute and dark of hair and eyes, was smitten with a courtier at King John's court. The elegant and dashing Sir Jack swept her off her feet and away from a less elegant match. Her sister Alyce did not appreciate the strong handsome knight that was Sir William. He was not the darling of all the ladies in waiting having arrogance to spare and very little time for the social niceties.

Her sister had prevailed upon the mercurial good will of the King to break her betrothal from Sir William and agree to the marriage between her and Sir Jack.

They had plighted their troth one week ago and were probably snug in bed at this moment. The bitterly cold wind emphasized the perceived differences of her circumstances. She laughed shortly. Her father, upset that he would have to return the bridal settlement and lose acquisition of such a rich knight, had prevailed to substitute his other daughter, herself, the Lady Amanda Grace Ellington.

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She had little value to him except as a housekeeper and chatelaine to his household. Now that he had married again, he thought to rid his household of an excess female as well as gain the rich son-in-law he craved. Her father, with an eye to the expenses, sent her north to the Welsh border to the castle of Sir William in a wagon pulled by a couple of pathetic nags. Her escort, such as it was, was two elderly servants and a soldier past his prime. She sighed; she knew when the coach had lost its wheel and the soldier fell off and hit his head that she would be the one to go for help. She looked back at the long expanse of white at her own tracks. At the rate the snow was falling, her tracks would soon disappear. She shook her head and trudged on...she had to be close to Napier Keep, the ale tavern where they took their nooning meal was said to have been only a few hours away.

She resolutely trudged on to the keep, she was strong and resilient but her strength was faltering. She could no longer feel her feet and her hands were numb with cold. She dreaded what she had to do; she had no idea what Sir William would do when he found out everything. She felt her eyes warm briefly with the sting of tears and then chill as one spilled down her cheek and froze. She scrubbed impotently at her cheek with her mittened hand. She was lucky she was able to find her way here. The stupid horses galloped away when she released them, before she could even attempt to ride one. She was so lost in her lachrymose thoughts she made a misstep from the road and tumbled into a snowdrift. She tried impotently to drag herself out of the drift but her exhaustion and the weight of her snow caked clothing held

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her down. She knew it was dangerous to give in to the beckoning sleep but finally she did. Her last conscious thought was at least she did not have to tell Sir William her sister jilted him...

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Sir William stalked back to the castle with a horse dragging the huge Yule log that was to burn the entire twelve days of Christmas. He always saw to the Yule log himself, he needed to leave the hustle and bustle of Christmas decorations to the servants. He was a warrior and a leader of men, he had fought hard for his king and country. In the winter he loved being within his own home, but it hasn't been a home since his mother died. Next Christmas he thought morosely he would probably be obliged to be at court for the holiday.

He looked forward to the wassail punch that was sure to be bubbling near his kitchen hearth and a hearty slice of plum pudding. As he approached the castle he noted a dark blemish in the snow. Maybe, he thought, it's one of the dogs from the stable.

He dropped the reins of his horse, knowing that his horse would stay still until he whistled. It was not a regular farm horse he used but his destrier. The animal was as cooped up as he was and needed to be exercised regularly. The animal snorted, puffs of steam blowing out his nostrils and pawed at the fresh snow. William patted the horse's neck to quiet him.

As he approached, the figure became clearer in the moonlight, he could see it was human and the dark of the

cloak partially obscured by snow. He cautiously stepped forward and knelt down in the snow.

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She was so comfortable she finally was warm, but someone was shaking her. Calling her, "Alyce's sister?

"Wake up now, I know you are Alyce's sister, where is she and the rest of your party?" a hard male voice demanded relentlessly. This last was delivered with a sharp slap to her face. Amanda's eyes flew open and saw Sir William, and she remembered what she had to tell him. She shivered, more from apprehension than from cold, then she could not seem to stop. She tried to force words out from her chattering teeth. "Only...servants...wagon...broken, need help!" She managed to get the rest out in a hurry.

He had to have understood what she was trying to say, because he glanced back at her rapidly disappearing footprints. Silently he helped her up and placed her on his horse, he untied the log that the huge animal was dragging and leaped up behind her.

She felt a moment of disorientation; she had never been on such a large horse before and was almost overcome with a wave of dizziness. Her world righted when Sir William leaped onto the horse and held her close in his arms. She had a feeling of safety and security; she knew he would find the wagon and servants. A warmth stole over her, which belied the bitter cold, but she knew it would never last. Soon she must tell him her news—all of it.

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Chapter Two

She leaned back against Sir William's chest and burrowed into the snow-flecked wool of his fur-lined cape. He obligingly opened his cape and wrapped it around her. Just for a little bit she wanted to be the one receiving care, instead of the caretaker, she thought. She casually, as though warming her face, rubbed her cheek against his chest. The fresh scent of man mixed with sweat assailed her nostrils. She looked up at Sir William's chiseled features, firm jaw and well-formed mouth.

She knew under his fur hat his hair was brown and curly and his eyes were the warmest shade of brown. She knew when she told him the news she would see derision and scorn there in his gaze.

She closed her eyes and reveled in the strength in his arms and drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

Sir William carefully rode his destrier through the gatehouse of his keep. The grim stone structure was softened by the snow and given an artificial warmth by the torches at the entrance. This belied the very functional reason for his castle: to protect the borders of his king's territory.

A man came running down the steps from the main building of the keep and took the bridle of the gigantic warhorse. Sir William vaulted off the horse with his betrothed's sister in his arms. He looked down at her and

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frowned. There must have been some sort of tragedy for Amanda Ellington to venture out to his keep in the dead of winter, so near Christmas. He looked at her smooth visage so relaxed in sleep.

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He felt the tenseness of her body before she drifted off to sleep. He never had much to do with her the few times he had visited her family. The joie de vivre of her sister had totally captured his interest. After serving in the crusades, he enjoyed the girl's artful innocence. It led him to contract a marriage with her. He noticed that her sister Amanda had been the one to keep the household running smoothly. He hoped Alyce's natural effervescence would bring the joy back into his home. He hoped she would be an excellent chatelaine of his estates and handle the servants well...if not he had the wife of his second in command to do such things.

Other than the traditional wassail and plum pudding, there was very little display of the seasonal cheer in his keep. Illness and lack of a feminine mistress had taken a toll on his people. The tapestries were rotting and falling apart from having no one to take the proper care of them. He could not give guidance when he was not present and he currently had no wife to see to the extras that displayed a well managed and prosperous home. Alyce's father had promised many rugs and tapestries as a part of her dower. Sir William had in turn gifted Lord Ellington with two chests of exotic spices as well as a chest of salt as a bride price. Seasonings were worth more than coin, as the normal boiled and roasted meats

lacked flavor and were greatly enhanced with the addition of a little spice.

He mounted the steps and flung open the massive door to the great hall. The movement caused the lady in his arms to stir and open her eyes in alarm and surprise. They were suddenly the cynosure of all eyes. He shouted, "Mistress Sylvia, I need your help now!" The wind blew cold through the open door with stray snowflakes fluttering on the chill breeze. He again shouted, "Someone get the damned door, can't you see my arms are full!"

Amanda was startled to full wakefulness in his arms, and started protesting, "Please Sir William, let me down I need to show someone where my wagon has broken down. My servants are old and my guard was given strict instructions by my father to watch over my goods."

Sir William looked at her with surprise and a bit of coolness, "Why would you be coming with goods? Where is my betrothed, your sister?"

Amanda's face grew pink and she bit her lip and attempted to change the subject, "Please Sir William, it is much too cold for them out in the snow. We can discuss the rest later..."

She attempted to slide from his arms but he held her tightly and her limbs, stiff with cold, hampered her efforts to get away from him.

He looked at her suspiciously, but turned to two of his men, and instructed, "Jordan, Lansing, take out the cart and horses and bring back the lady's goods and servants. Her tracks were from the north road, take some furs with you, they will be quite cold waiting in the dark."

He looked at her again with questions in his eyes, and strode to a kind of anteroom. He opened the door and easily kicked it shut, only then did he allow her to slide from his arms. Amanda crossed her arms around herself as though she were still affected by the snow. Truth be told, her body was chilled and the snow caked on the hem of her bliaut was slowly falling onto the floor rushes, but the chill she was experiencing was a chill of heart. If Sir William repudiated her, she would be in disgrace and would have nowhere to go. She walked across the small chamber to the fire and stared into it willing the man to go away.

He came behind her and turned her to remove her cloak. He said gently, "Tell me what has happened to my betrothed and the rest of the family...has fever taken them?"

Amanda turned her head and looked at the fire and gave her head a small shake, she tried to find her voice, "No, fever did not take them."

His voice was a harsh whisper in her ear, "Well then explain how a well born spinster finds herself on the road two days before Christmas with only three elderly servants? Are you in disgrace, did your family cast you out?"

Stung, her chin lifted and she stepped away to glare at him, "I beg your pardon!"

Sir William glared back at her. "Explain yourself, it is not uncommon for a maid to succumb to the blandishments of a dashing young scoundrel..."

"I did not succumb to the blandishments of the scoundrel," she said with emphasis. She turned to warm her back at the

stone hearth while she watched his reaction with some trepidation and a tiny spark of defiance.

His eyes widened with realization, and said with quiet intensity, "She is my betrothed I will avenge her honor. It is my fault I left her at court too long." He sighed, "Dare I hope she is not got with child?"

Amanda's mouth dropped open with shock, and the words came out in a rush, "No, the situation is different. She and Sir Jack fell in love!"

"Love!" he snorted, "Lust more like! What of my betrothal contract?"

Amanda swallowed nervously, her earlier ire burned out of her, she said cautiously, "They appealed to King John and he decreed the betrothal dissolved."

He swore, "Hell! What am I to do now?" He seemed to forget she was there, and started pacing. Maybe she could avoid telling him for a little while, she thought briefly, then she knew her servants would be sure to inform his men.

She watched him as he stopped his pacing as he realized there was something left out in the telling. Slowly he turned to her and said, "Why did they not tell me by messenger?"

"There is more," she added timidly. He looked at her with his eyebrow raised. The silence stretched out between them.

"Well? Am I now betrothed to you?" he demanded.

"No you are not my betrothed..." she said, she knew he was not going to respond well to the news.

"So why precisely are you here?" he asked impatiently. His sharp eyes watched her closely.

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"Do you recall when you requested to marry my sister by proxy?" she asked diffidently, as though his answer would not matter, as though his reaction might not shatter her into a million

pieces. She knew at that moment why she agreed to cooperate with her father on his plan, as she watched comprehension dawn then swiftly change to rage. She loved Sir William.

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Chapter Three

"We are married!" he snarled at her.

"Ah, well...Sir William...." she stammered.

"You are a party to this...I did not want to marry some plain spinster," he said through clenched teeth. "I wanted someone young and alive to brighten up the keep. Your family tricked me and I am not going to abide by this bargain!"

"I had nowhere to go, what was I to do?" she protested with tears in her eyes. "The king was enchanted with my sister and favored Sir Jack, his godson."

"Do what you always did and take care of your father's house," he exclaimed exasperated. "I swear I am going to Rome and get this annulled."

"It will do you no good," she said quietly. "Remember the interdict, we were married in a civil ceremony...Rome has no jurisdiction."

He fell silent, and she took that opportunity to go over to the crackling fire and hold out the full skirt of her bliaut to help it dry.

He said, "I want to be free of this marriage but not by your death, I will have one of the castle ladies find you a dry dress." He raised both eyebrows at the fine wool material and the gold trim on the full sleeves. "It won't be as fine as what you are wearing, but as we are not expecting the king to visit before Christmas, it should suffice," he said with a hint of bitter sarcasm to his voice.

Amanda was slow to anger, but when she lost her temper she was uncontrollable. His scorn was the spark to her flame, she reached behind herself and before her good sense could engage she unlaced her damp dress and dropped it on the floor. She dared him with a look to try and stop her.

She stepped out of the dress and crossed her arms over her barely less damp chemise. She glanced at him and was surprised to find a look of appreciation on his face. Perversely she declared, "You don't want to be married to me, you should be chivalrous and turn your back!"

He glanced over her in a manner that made her regret her impulsive gesture. The damp cotton was revealing in a way that the woolen dress never had been. He stared at her chest in a way that had Amanda warmed and her nipples starting to prickle. He walked over towards her and said with a husky voice, "Look your body is reacting to the cold..." He gently massaged her nearly bare arms with his hands as he bent down and blew his hot breath over her puckering nipple.

She was mesmerized by the sound of his seductive voice and was unresisting as his hand stroked up her arm. The calloused tip of his finger was continuing, as it stroked along the edge of her chin, tilting her head. She looked into his eyes and was lost in his heated gaze.

The door to the anteroom swung open and a plump woman marched in carrying a tray with two steaming cups of a fragrant drink. It broke the spell he had cast over Amanda and she jumped back. The woman took in the situation at a glance and quickly set the tray down on the table and quickly

curtsied. She turned to hurry out of the room, but was stopped by Sir William.

"Mistress Sylvia, this is the new chatelaine of the keep, my wife Lady Amanda of Somerset formerly an Ellington. Could you see to some dry clothing for her please?" he said, never taking his eyes from Amanda's flushed face.

After the woman left the room Amanda grabbed up her dress and hissed, "What were you thinking...you were going to repudiate me."

"The idea of keeping you suddenly appeared to have merit," he said looking at her with the devil in his eyes. He gently tugged the gown out of her stiff fingers meeting some resistance.

"Just moments ago you wanted to marry my sister, you were angry enough to fight for her, now it seems I am an acceptable substitute?" she queried backing away from him. She stood with her back to the fire with her hands crossed over her bosom, not realizing that the backlight silhouetted her figure in detail.

"More than acceptable," Sir William said approaching her slowly, his deep brown eyes holding hers. "I happened to know that you are a capable manager of a large household and you appear to be a fair armful under all that cloth you usually wear."

Pain struck her heart, crippling in its intensity, and she blinked back tears. Was she never to be seen for herself? She was only a servant in this household as well, another slave to the will of others. A convenient vessel to breed an heir while Sir William went off to war once more. There was always

some war... She turned her head away from her husband and mastered her feelings.

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"What is the matter now?" he said impatiently, he had been without a woman a few months. She should be grateful for his condescension.

She looked at him with a guarded expression on her face, "I don't know you well...it was my sister you courted, she was the one who compelled you to ask my father for her hand. I would wait until such time that I know you see me, not anyone else..." Her voice trailed off.

She was acting as though she were the injured party? What cheek! Then he looked and saw the hurt she was trying to hide of always being overlooked. He felt something similar when he came back from the Crusades and found his keep in disarray and half his people dead of fever. He had been doing the will of his king, just not this king. If his keep had not been way up on the Welsh border, he might have found not only his betrothed given to another but his legacy as well.

He said finally, "Very well, a courtship you will have but...." he paused for effect, "we are married and I will try to convince you to allow me more."

He saw the flash of alarm on her face, as she said, "No, a lady is shown how she is valued during her courtship. You can not go beyond what is proper for courtship..."

His temper sparked with annoyance as he responded, "You are not the only one in this courtship, I pursued a maid, tendered to her all the courtesies of courtship and when I

came north to make a place suitable for my betrothed, my lady abandoned me for another and my king plotted with your father and gave me Leah instead of Rachael."

He saw her wince at the comparison. He continued to his point, "Unlike Jacob in the scriptures I will not get Rachel as well and I sure as hell would not be allowed the comfort of a maidservant."

He saw his point well made as she hung her head in consternation. He added softly, "How do I know that you did not engineer this romance between the dashing Sir Jack and your flighty sister? Mayhap you liked what you saw of me when you tended to my bath that time..."

Her face flooded with color and her eyes widened with shock, as she spluttered a denial, "I-I did no such thing...I was merely tending to my duty as the lady of the house..." Then she narrowed her eyes at him and said slyly, "Maybe it was you who manipulated the situation, you who set Sir Jack to sniffing around my sister. As I recall, there was some rather large evidence that you enjoyed my attentions in your bath a trifle more than is customary?"

His reply was cut off by the arrival of Mistress Sylvia with the dry clothing. As he left the room he made a parting comment, "Obviously, I was aware of you even then."

Amanda just stared open mouthed unable to respond as Mistress Sylvia was looking at her quizzically.

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Chapter Four

Amanda looked around the small room as she changed and noted there was no Christmas greenery. She had been too cold and preoccupied with the dread of imparting her news to Sir William and she had not noticed if the great hall had been adorned with bows of greenery and a ball of mistletoe overhead.

She dismissed the thoughts and enquired about her escort, "Have my people arrived with my goods?"

Mistress Sylvia shook her head and sighed, "Aye the auld man be still knocked up but me man Clancy says he thinks he'll be fine. Those servants of yours be old but wily. They had gone and had a fire besides the wagon and had gotten one of your fine rugs to rest upon."

Amanda saw that Mistress Sylvia had been giving her a worried look. Amanda laid her hand on the older woman's arm and said, "Good, I wanted them to stay warm while waiting for help."

Her main worry disposed of, Amanda next asked about Christmas preparations. "Is the Christmas greenery up in the keep and has a boar been brought in for Christmas dinner?"

Mistress Sylvia sighed and shook her head, "This be the first Christmas we have seen Sir William in many a year. We don't have none o' that here but we do have a plum pudding and a fair bowl of Wassail punch."

Amanda reached up to touch her hair and found that her hair was mussed and carefully separated the tangled skeins of

hair with her fingers and began braiding it. "Why haven't the traditions of Christmas been kept?" Even her uncle, that miserable skint, had greenery at his keep in the north, she thought.

"When his lordship's mother passed on his father did not see the point in decorating, and the local clergy frowned on such pagan rituals as well," Mistress Sylvia said as she produced a matching head piece to go with the dress. "This dress belonged to Sir William's mother, one of her favorites," she said with another long sigh. "I think she would have enjoyed having you wear it."

Amanda looked at the soft material of the gown and the flattering way it draped her form. She smiled and thanked the woman for her help and walked out into the great hall.

It seemed that the hall was a bustle of activity with people hurrying to and fro, fetching hot drinks and food for the late arrivals. The crossed spears over the fireplace seemed ominous and the unadorned stone of the walls lent a somber air to what should be a season of cheer and goodwill.

She could see the dark of the night and the occasional twinkle of stars through the arrow slits. No Christmas greenery was on display as Mistress Sylvia had said. Sir William was nowhere to be found either. Then the door to the keep again banged open and Sir William and the two men dispatched to help her escort hauled in a huge log. Amanda was glad to see that the tradition of the Yule log was being kept. She realized that tomorrow was Christmas Eve and the log would be set alight to burn until twelfth night.

Sir William directed the log be placed near the hearth to dry out and be made ready for the holiday. He turned and looked at Amanda, first he appeared startled then he smiled. "My lady mother's gown favors you much better than those sacks you would wear in your father's house."

To her surprise he crossed the room and kissed her hand in a far courtlier manner than she had ever seen him exhibit for her sister. She decided to try her luck and asked, "Sir William, would it be possible to collect greenery to decorate the keep in the morning? It would make for a merrier Christmas..."

He laughed, "We have only been married a short while and you already are complaining about the style in which I keep you!"

Amanda was alarmed; she had not meant to start out complaining. She was usually more circumspect; her sojourn in the snow had addled what little wit she possessed. "I-I'm sorry Sir William I did not mean to complain. Mistress Sylvia had mentioned that the clergy..." She retreated from him twisting her hands.

"She told you about that old curmudgeon Father Guinness?" he asked approaching her once again. He glanced over her head and added, "No one pays attention to him, and we do have one decoration up in the keep."

She followed his eyes and saw that she was standing under an elaborate kissing bough. Her lips parted with surprise and Sir William took full advantage by drawing her into his embrace and covering her mouth with his. The first touch of his lips sent her spiraling into a frenzy of sensation.

Then his tongue slipped into her mouth and fiercely mated with hers. Her arms crept up his heavily muscled chest as his stroked down her back. They might have been alone for all the heed they paid to the habitants of the great hall. He grasped her hips and ground his manhood into the juncture of her thighs.

"Ahem." A man cleared his throat rather loudly. Startled she stepped back hurriedly and broke away from the kiss. She touched her mouth with wonder, but could not meet the eyes of her husband.

"I beg your pardon, my dear, I lost track of where we were," he said gallantly and she felt hope flicker in her heart. Then he doused it like a candle when he added, "I have been without a woman far too long..."

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Chapter Five

He saw the hurt in her eyes after he had kissed her. What on earth did he say that put her so out of curl? He looked around at his people and he noted the married men looking at him and shaking their heads and all of the women looking at him with scorn and Amanda with pity. He saw her bite her lip and turn away. She said, "I think I would like a little something to eat, if you please."

He would give her credit; whatever it is that is bothering her, she was not going to enact a scene in front of his people. He glanced at his man Clancy and gestured to him to come with him outside.

After they went out the door Sir William turned a cautious eye to his second in command and said, "Okay, how did I spoil my lady's moment?"

Clancy looked up at the starry sky and blew out a long steamy breath. "Women don't like to be reminded of a man's former love life." He turned and walked toward the stables where the men had managed to put the goods they took off of the damaged wagon.

Sir William trudged across the snow after him. "That's ridiculous, she had to know I have had other women around." Sir William saw Clancy wince and shake his head. He said exasperated, "Clancy, I have been around exclusively knights and foreign whores for years. Why was she so happy and bemused one minute then distraught the next?"

The two men lifted the cover on the wagon and slid out a long roll. Clancy tried to change the subject, "Do you think your lady wife will have some fine rugs to replace the rushes on the floors in some of the rooms?"

"Clancy..."

"Oh all right! Ye implied that your strong show of affection for your wife was from abstinence and not from her charms," Clancy said shortly. He turned and hoisted the roll by himself and set off for the main rooms of the keep.

Now, it was Sir William's turn to wince and shake his head at his own stupidity. She already was skittish because she wasn't his first choice and then he insulted her. He paused to pick up a smaller roll from the wagon and sling it onto his own shoulder. How could he convince her that he was glad he did not marry that flighty bit of goods that was her sister? He turned that thought over in his brain as he made his laborious way through the drifting snow in the courtyard to the great hall.

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An older woman approached Amanda; she had been one of the women who looked at Sir William with disappointment rather than scorn. Amanda was seated by the fire eating mutton stew. The woman curtsied and asked, "My lady, would it be to your likin' if I rested me old bones by this fire?"

Amanda discarded her worries like an old slipper, and smiled at the woman in welcome. "Please have a seat," she said with determined cheerfulness.

The woman looked at her wisely and said, "I would like to tell you something."

Amanda looked expectantly at her, "Please feel free."

"No man is made of stone," the old woman said with a cackle.

"What do you mean by that?" Amanda said puzzled.

"When I was younger than you, every girl in the village wanted Joshua, the baron's commander," the woman said with a far off look in her eye.

"As did you?" Amanda asked. Amanda hoped there was a point for she was tired and feeling disheartened. The keep was gloomy and the people a little cool towards her, she wanted to go home to her father's house. Her escort had already left the great hall for their beds.

"I wasn't the comeliest of maids but my mother told me: no man is made of stone. I did not wait for him or waylay him I just made sure I was handling my chores near the areas where he was want to practice," the old woman smiled mischievously.

It was infectious and Amanda smiled back. She looked into the woman's eyes and saw the young girl lurking there. Amanda prodded, "Yes?"

"It is amazing, how clothing clings while damp," the old woman said with a twinkle in her naughty eyes.

Amanda said, "It is amazing how damp one could get while say...dressing after a swim in the river or washing clothing."

"Exactly," the old woman wheezed and coughed.

An extremely tall and handsome man, who had gone to help bring in her servants to the keep, stepped forward.

"Grandmother, you tire yourself, let me take you up to bed," he said as he kneeled next to her. His hair was dark and his eyes were blue and if she were not already in love with Sir William she would have been dazzled by this warrior.

"Just a minute, young man!" the old woman snapped at him. The young man smiled fondly at her and stood to his feet. "This is my grandson Peter; he is visiting me from Lauderdale. My daughter married a fine Baron who earned his spurs on the battlefield."

"I will give you five more minutes before I carry you upstairs to grandfather, he gets querulous if you are not next to him when he retires," he said with exasperation laced with fondness.

She laughed her funny cackle and said, "He does at that..." She turned back to Amanda, "The keep is very cold at night and ye should seek company to stay warm—a fine lady such as yourself can not sleep downstairs by the fire." This last was said with a wink.

Amanda glanced at her with surprise and heard the door slam and saw Sir William place her tapestry roll on the floor. He shrugged off his outdoor clothing and removed his snow caked footwear. She placed her trencher aside and stood and shook out her gown.

Sir William crossed to her and said, "You are the most desirable woman I have seen in many a year...I never even thought to place a chaste kiss on your sister's mouth while I wanted to..." He looked around the room at the people standing casually pretending to mind their own affairs.

Amanda threw off her inhibitions and met him half way. She reached up and placed her hands on his face. "Sir William, I have it on good authority that the keep gets quite cold at night."

He looked surprised, then he smiled a wolfish grin at her, "It does indeed, now I would not wish my new bride to be caught with an ague..." He surprised her and swept her up into his arms and strode to the stairs. He paused before he ran up the stairs and turned so that all in the keep could see their glowing faces. "Lady Amanda and I wish to be wakened early to see to the Christmas preparations of the keep. We will need to cut greenery and someone should fetch the mummers from the next village over. We will be making rather merrier than we have in many a year."

Amanda touched the chiseled features of his handsome profile and whispered in his ear, "Maybe not so early..."

Clancy shouted, "Let's here it for our lord and his lady!" A cheer went up in the great room that would have shaken the rafters of a lesser-built dwelling. "We won't be waking you in the morning as we all know what is to be done. We wish you both a Merry Christmas and bid you goodnight for you both have dreams to keep." He and his wife exchanged smiles of fond remembrance and Amanda knew no one would intrude upon their bridal bower until summoned.

* * * *

The door to their room closed behind them, with a loud slam. Some wise servant had come upstairs and started a fire in the bedchamber. The bed was huge and dominated the

room. The posts were carved with ancient Celtic symbols of what, Amanda did not know. Sir William set her on her feet and saw her looking at the strange carvings.

"Those are fertility blessings, one of my ancestors found some Celtic texts and, wishing to bless his marriage to an Irish girl, commissioned a bed carved with the symbols," he said with a grin as he pulled off his leather jerkin.

Amanda felt shy as she watched the firelight play off of his muscles. He looked like the Roman god of war. She felt too shy to disrobe in front of him. He looked down at her with understanding in his eyes. He gently reached out his hand and gently removed the matching veil to her borrowed dress. She slowly, shyly reached behind herself and untied the lacing to her dress for the second time in his presence. Her hands shook, even though everyone in the keep was aware of what they were doing, she felt cut off from them. All of her own insecurities came rushing back to her. "I want to be a good wife to you Sir William, you need to help me," her voice sounded squeaky and unsure, even to herself.

Sir William laid a hand on her chin and stroked a thumb over her lips. "Amanda, I saw your sister first, and requested her hand," he said quietly. "But I came to admire your strength and character. That time in the tub I had already requested your sister's hand else I might have grabbed you, tossed up your skirts and plunged myself deep inside you."

She turned away from him, for all of a sudden she was hearing things she wanted to believe with all her heart. "You were very kind to me and I find it hard to credit that you were attracted to me while betrothed to my sister."

"I am a man of honor and I had to abide by my word," he said coming up behind her and sliding her gown to the floor. "I am a man of action and honor, I find it hard to speak flowery phrases like a court nobleman—I love you truly Amanda. This is a Christmas miracle, I think I delayed going to get your sister for as long as I could hoping against hope that something would happen so that I could be with you."

She scoffed even as he reached around her and untied the ribbon to her undergown and slowly lowered it to the floor, "Why were you so angry? I did not mistake what you said!"

Her back suddenly felt bereft as he backed away, she bit her lip, and crossed her arms in front of herself. She listened for the sound of a door opening but all she heard was the sound of two boots hitting the floor and the rustle of clothing. She turned to look and found that he was as bare as she. She noticed his rampant erection and unlike that day so long ago in the bath when she had to pretend not to notice...she could look her fill.

"Actions speak louder than words Amanda. I was afraid that you were coerced into wedding me and could hardly believe my luck," he grimaced. "I have a damnable temper and at times say things I do not mean." He took her into his arms naked skin to skin. "Trust me I never felt desire for your sister or the least need to touch her the way I crave touching you..." His voice had dropped to a seductive whisper. She felt a shiver trail down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold. She felt her hands touch the hard muscles of his chest; it was as though she had no power over her own body. His lips descended on hers and she felt life surging through her. A

burning need built up in her as he once again lifted her in his arms and then placed her on the bed. He followed her down and looked into her eyes. The intensity in his eyes was so strong that the soft glow of firelight could not diminish it.

"William..." she said tentatively she felt him nip at her neck.

"Hmm?" his voice vibrated against her neck in a delicious way.

"I need to tell you something as well," she said a bit breathlessly. He was too busy to answer having found the taste of her skin very much to his liking. "I was glad my sister fell in love with Sir Jack." He stilled and brought his intense gaze to hers. "I did not throw him in her path but I did nothing to prevent the awareness from blooming into love."

"You didn't?" he said hoarsely.

She sighed, "No, for I too felt that I needed a miracle to attain my heart's desire. I loved you for so long and I only just acknowledged it today. After all, what sort of woman lusts after her sister's betrothed?"

He said, "The kind too honorable to act upon her desires apparently. I am gratified that your sister broke her pledge...but my darling, the time for talk is past and we do indeed have dreams to keep."