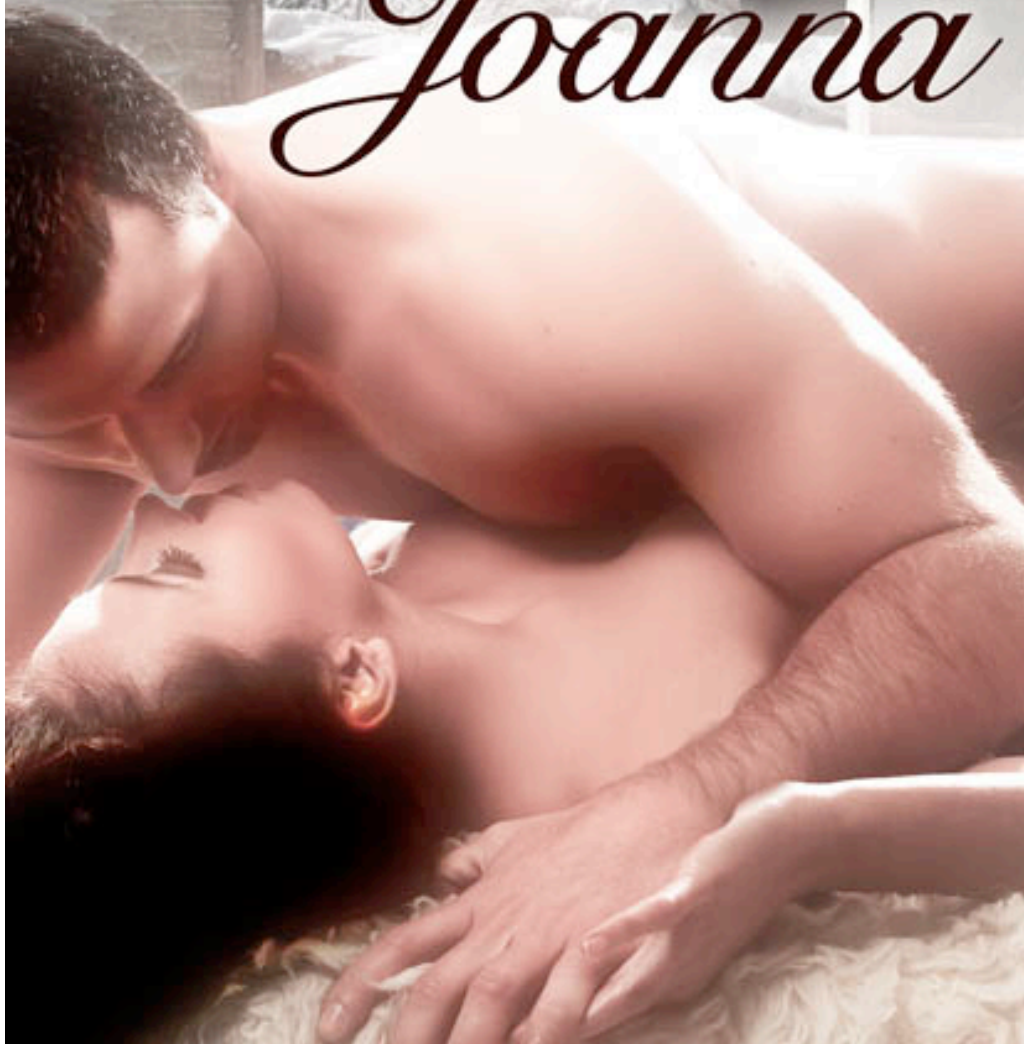


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



Kathleen  
Coddington

*Winning  
Joanna*



## Winning Joanna

Kathleen Coddington

The widowed Lady Joanna Leland wants nothing more than to be left in peace. When the king commands her to remarry, she informs him she has other plans. Those plans did *not* include getting trapped inside her manor during a blizzard—or the near-frozen stranger deposited outside her door, a man who awakens sexual yearnings she thought long dead.

Lord Hugh, the king's finest battle strategist, has been sent by the king to change Joanna's mind. As the blizzard roars outside, the temperature inside rises until the attraction between Hugh and Joanna ignites and they succumb to long nights of sensual delight. Tempting her body is only half the battle. He must secure her heart as well. But Hugh's been keeping a secret that could destroy everything he is fighting for...and winning Joanna is one battle he can't afford to lose.

Ellora's Cave Publishing



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Winning Joanna

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# *WINNING JOANNA*

**Kathleen Coddington**

*Dedication*

*To my friend, Joanne. And to Michael, who wooed and won her!*

## Chapter One

*Windsor Castle*  
*February 14, 1347*

Hugh Radcliff, the Earl of Reston, gazed out into the night. The courtyard of Windsor Castle lay quiet and empty below him. A handful of torches guttered in their brackets, sending flickering shadows across the paving stones. The day had been balmy for mid-February, but with the setting of the sun, the air had grown chill. He shivered and his skin rose in bumps as a slight breeze flowed over him. He rubbed his hands up and down his upper arms to warm himself, the thick scar on his left shoulder pressing into his palm. He'd received the wound in August at the Battle of Crécy. Nearly six months had passed since that hot, bloody day he realized.

*Time to go home.* He should have gone months ago, before the Yule festivities, but he'd lingered until another holiday rolled around. The first few weeks after he returned to England and the court, he'd used the half-healed sword slash to his shoulder as an excuse. It had been valid at the time, but the real reason for the delay had little to do with a physical wound. Instead, it lay within, in a heart where grief, guilt and regret tangled like the roots of an old tree. No coward on the field of battle, he dreaded looking into the accusing eyes of the daughter he hadn't seen for nine years.

"My lord, close the shutters and come back to bed, else I shall not leave a crumb of cake for you." A sultry feminine voice interrupted his musings.

Hugh pulled the heavy wooden shutters closed. As he turned to smile at the woman sprawled naked on his bed, his face held no hint of the emotional battle raging inside him. Lady Kate Selwyn was one of Queen Philippa's fairest ladies-in-waiting. Sun-kissed brown hair flowed over her shoulders. It shifted as she held out a linen napkin with the piece of almond cake they'd saved from the feast. The movement allowed a plump pink nipple to peek out between her silken curls.

His cock twitched and grew harder at the sight. He'd thought himself most fortunate when their names had been pulled from the lottery to share a trencher at the St. Valentine Day's feast. He'd felt even more fortunate when she'd been willing to leave the Great Hall early to celebrate the holiday in ways most suitable to a festival honoring love.

He crossed the room in two strides and stretched out next to her. With a teasing smile, he removed the sprig of yarrow, the traditional garnish for the St. Valentine's Eve treat and tossed it aside before biting into the corner of the proffered cake. He swallowed it then leaned forward and kissed her.

Kate gave a gasping giggle and tried to wiggle away. "Ooh, you be cold as an icicle." Her nipples puckered in agreement.

Hugh pushed back a lock of brown hair and nuzzled her ear. "I shall have to find some way to warm us." Lowering his head, he blew on one of the rigid nubs, heating it with his breath before he sucked it deep into his mouth. With his free hand he sought her other breast, alternately tugging at the nipple and massaging the firm globe gently until she moaned deep in her throat. Finished playing with her breasts, his hand skimmed down over her rounded belly and caressed her hip. "Warmer now?" he asked.

"Aye, my lord. Now 'tis my turn to return the favor." Her fingers stroked the length of his cock. It quickened and grew even harder under her ministrations. Her palm brushed over its swollen head and the muscles in his stomach tightened with lust.

He rolled on his side and slid his hand between her thighs to her woman's cleft. Her wet heat surrounded the finger he inserted. She was ready for him. Kate's quick response was one of the reasons he found her to be such a good bedmate. Spreading her legs, he covered her body and buried his cock deep inside her *queynt* in one thrust.

Kate wrapped her legs around his waist and they rocked together. Her breath came in short pants and with each thrust she groaned deep in her throat. His fingers sought the hard bump of desire and he rubbed it while continuing to pump into her. His balls slapped against her white bottom in a steady, satisfying rhythm.

Kate's whimpers and moans became louder. As she reached her pleasure, her inner muscles clamped around his cock. Hugh could feel his own release building. In a moment he'd lose all control and follow her over the edge. He sucked in a deep breath and withdrew just as his own fulfillment exploded through him, and spent his seed on the linen sheets. He had no intention of presenting Kate with an accidental present nine months from now. The French sheaths he carried in his wallet would have prevented conception just as well, but things had moved swiftly between them, so he'd settled on the more conventional method.

Hugh lay still for a moment, smoothed Kate's hair from her face and kissed her lightly on the lips. Then he rolled off her. She snuggled closer. He hugged her to him in the warm nest of covers and let his mind drift. On the verge of sleep, he was jolted awake by a loud rap at the door.

"God's Bloody Hell, 'tis near midnight!" He threw the covers aside and stalked to the door. Sir Miles Coverly stood outside. He raised an eyebrow, but made no comment on Hugh's nakedness. "You've been summoned. The king wants to see you." His gaze traveled past Hugh and the slow smile that set feminine hearts aflutter at the court creased his face. "Good evening, my lady."

Hugh glanced over his shoulder to see a sleepy-eyed Kate sitting up in bed smiling back at Miles. Light from the torches burning in the corridor fell across her. Although she clutched the sheet to her chest, her creamy shoulders were exposed amid the tumble of her silken curls.

Not at all chagrined by Hugh's dark frown, Sir Miles turned and sauntered away, adding over his shoulder, "Clothing might be in order."

Hugh glowered at Miles' retreating back, slammed the door and went in search of his shirt and hose. A short time later, appropriately dressed for a royal summons, he ascended the tower steps to the royal apartments.

\* \* \* \* \*



Hugh found the king seated at a table piled high with parchment. Edward acknowledged Hugh's greeting and bow with a curt nod of his head. He waved the piece of velum in his hand and then slapped at it. "Can you believe the impudence of the woman?" His scowl and the tone of his voice invited Hugh's reaction.

Hugh's glance moved to Queen Philippa, sitting by the fireplace. Despite the lateness of the hour, her hands were not idle. She smiled at him as she set a stitch in the piece of embroidery she worked on, but there was nothing in her expression that gave any hint of how he should respond.

"Exactly which woman would this be, Your Majesty?" he inquired in a carefully neutral voice.

Edward waved him impatiently toward a chair. "Lady Joanna Leland of Ashwood Hall."

"Sir Robert Leland's wife?" Hugh knew the name, had met the man once, right after Elayne's death. Even after nine years his chest tightened with the echo of old grief and guilt at the thought of his late wife. "I thought I heard he'd died."

"Aye, nearly two years ago. Time enough for Lady Joanna to have gotten over her grief. And so I told her when I wrote and offered my good news. And how does she reply to my generosity?"

Uncertain as to how to answer the question, Hugh raised an encouraging brow and made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat.

Edward rose and stomped over to where Hugh and the queen sat. The frown darkening his features did not bode well for the hapless Lady Joanna. Normally cheerful and outgoing, when provoked, Edward also possessed a devil of a temper. Hugh had seen it roused on more than one occasion. Edward slapped the paper in his hand again. "God's teeth, but I'm the bloody king of England."

"Edward, pray do not blaspheme," Philippa said, disapproval in her soft voice.

The king sat next to her and patted her hand. "Sorry, my love. Still, I can't believe the woman's audacity. What makes her think she has the right to refuse an offer from the king of England?"

*The Magna Carta perhaps.* Hugh thought it best not to voice that particular thought aloud. Instead, he asked, "What offer did the vexatious Lady Joanna spurn, Your Majesty?"

"A husband. And a damn good one at that. One who would raise her status to that of a countess."

Hugh suppressed a smile. "Aye, she sounds an ungrateful wench."

"Indeed. You'd think she'd be grateful to hand over the burden of running her estates for both the protection and companionship a husband can provide."

"Not to mention that marriage would preserve that piece of greenwood you're so fond of for royal hunting," Philippa remarked with a fond smile. She set her embroidery frame aside, filled three goblets with mulled wine and passed them around.

Edward's teeth glinted briefly behind his dark beard. "Aye, that too." His flash of good humor faded. "It appears the lady has other ideas for her estate." His expression said clearly what he thought of those ideas.

Hugh frowned into his wine. This Lady Joanna was indeed audacious. Or a great fool. The scent of cinnamon and cloves filled his nostrils as he lifted his goblet and took a sip. He savored the tang of the spices on his tongue as the warm liquid slid down his throat. "What seems to be the lady's objection?"

Edward exchanged a brief look with his wife. "Doesn't like the man I chose for her." Before Hugh could ask who the man was, the king added, "Worse yet she writes to say that she plans to give her estate to the abbey at Thornbury and move there to live in one of their smallholdings as a life pensioner. If she follows through, the crown will lose the right to hunt on that land."

Philippa's slender dark brows rose. "Can she do that?"

Edward's black scowl returned. "Unfortunately, yes. Having no living issue, Lady Joanna is Sir Robert's legal heir. She may dispose of her property as she sees fit."

Hugh tapped a finger against the side of his cup. "Unless the lady in question were to marry. Then her estates would come under the control of her new husband."

"Exactly." Edward slammed his hand down on the arm of his chair then shot an apologetic smile at his wife before adding, "There's the rub."

His goblet half-raised to his lips, Hugh studied the king over the rim. "Seems to me the man had better wed her and bed her before she has a chance to carry out her plan."

Edward's frown became a thin smile. "I agree. There's no time to waste. This is why I asked you here tonight."

"You want an escort for the man?" Hugh's grin broadened. "I can see why. This Lady Joanna sounds formidable. No doubt her future groom will need protection."

Queen Philippa exchanged a look with the king. "I fear you have misunderstood our meaning, my lord. 'Tis you who are the groom," she announced with a smile.

Hugh choked on his mouthful of wine, almost spewing it down the front of his best *cote-hardie*. "Me!"

Edward leaned toward him. "Have I not heard you say on more than one long night in France that you worry about your little daughter growing up without a mother?"

Hugh coughed and nodded. "Aye, my sister does her best I'm sure, but 'tis not the same." In truth he did worry about Meg and had been thinking a lot lately about finding a wife. Almost nine, his daughter deserved at least a few years with a mother's affection and training. It was the least he could do to rectify the mistakes of the past.

Queen Philippa sent him a teasing smile. "His majesty and I thought it a most elegant solution to both yours and Lady Joanna's situation. You are both widowed. You are in need of a mother for your child and Lady Joanna is in need of a husband. 'Twould be a good fit for both of you. Does it not seem so to you?"

"'Tis logical, I'll allow," Hugh said fighting to keep his expression bland while he worked out in his mind the implications of the royal couple's plan for his future.

"Lady Joanna also lost her son to the same fever that carried off her husband," the queen added. A look of sadness crossed her face.

"I was not aware of that," Hugh said. Unexpected sympathy for Lady Joanna's plight pulled at his heart. "But majesty, why select me for this honor?"

"Because it is well deserved," Edward said. Hugh was touched by the ring of sincerity in the king's voice. "As a warrior, few can compare with you. You are the best tactician I've ever seen on the battlefield. Your skills served me well at Crécy and helped to win the day. You stood as sponsor to our son, Edward, when he won his spurs."

"I did naught but my duty, Your Majesty, to you and to England."

"Aye and now you shall be rewarded for that steadfast loyalty, my lord," the king said. "Lady Joanna is reputed to be a chaste and godly woman. She will make you a fine wife and an excellent mother for your daughter. Ashwood Hall is small, but it has a good annual income. It will be a nice addition to your other properties."

"Nor should we forget that Lady Joanna is quite comely." Philippa picked up her needlepoint again.

"How old is the lady?" Hugh asked. If he was expected to marry the woman, he might as well know all the particulars.

Philippa paused in taking a stitch, her lips pursed and brow furrowed as she considered the question. "Twenty-six. Young enough to yet bear you an heir, Lord Hugh."

"Another point in the lady's favor. Yet, you remarked earlier, majesty, that Lady Joanna's major disagreement with your plan was me as the choice of her future husband."

Edward frowned and rubbed his beard. "Aye, very odd as I was under the impression that the two of you had never met."

Hugh shook his head. "I vaguely remember meeting Sir Robert here at court a long time ago, but if I'd ever met his wife, I'm sure I'd remember it."

Queen Philippa leaned forward. "I'm sure 'tis grief and mayhap a natural nervousness about the sudden rise in her station that is responsible for Lady Joanna's response. If she met you, I'm sure she'd soon see she'd made a mistake in refusing you. For what lady, Sir Hugh, could long resist your charms?" she finished with a smile.

Hugh looked from the queen's expectant face to Edward who was watching him with the same smug expression he wore whenever he knew he was about to win a game of chess. And for good reason, Hugh concluded, hiding his own wry smile. Besides the fact that refusing such an honor was out of the question, there was little Hugh could find in the plan to quarrel with. Their majesties were right. Wedding the Lady Joanna would be the solution to everyone's problems. It might even make the reunion with his daughter easier. He had a lot to make up to Meg who had gone without both father and mother for so long. Perhaps providing her with a loving stepmother would be the first step to correcting that.

Taking a deep breath, he expelled it slowly as he prepared to capitulate to their proposal. "Where exactly is this Ashwood Hall?"

"'Tis about ninety miles northwest of here," Edward said. "I'll have a map drawn up for you tonight."

Hugh mentally calculated the time it would take him to reach the hall on winter roads. "If I leave in the morning I can be there in less than a week." Still holding his goblet, he rose to his feet and bowed. "I always did like a challenge, your majesties. From what you both have said, I think the lady will be well worth the wooing."

Edward lifted his goblet. "To Lady Joanna then."

Hugh grinned and joined him in his toast. "To Lady Joanna. And..." he shot Edward a sly grin, "her fine piece of greenwood."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Hugh descended the stairs to his chamber, the full import of what he'd agreed to settled about him like iron mail. He was to woo and wed a woman he'd never met, and who for some puzzling reason, despised him enough to have defied the King of England. He found himself both irritated and intrigued by the notion.

His movement down the staircase slowed and then came to a halt. Once again he struggled to conjure up some image of Joanna Leland. He had a vague memory of Robert Leland, but Hugh was certain he'd never met the lady in question. Whatever her reasons, it was up to him to make the lady change her mind.

A cocky grin curled the corners of his mouth as he started down the stairs again. He'd assaulted more than one heavily fortified castle in his time—brought it tumbling down. From all that he'd heard about Lady Joanna, convincing her to surrender would be a most pleasant task. And one he had no doubt he would win. After all, wasn't he Edward's finest battle strategist?

As silently as possible, Hugh entered his room, stripped and climbed back into bed. Kate made a soft sound in her sleep and moved closer. She would be disappointed when she found out he was leaving. But not for long he thought, remembering the coy smile she'd given Miles earlier that evening, Hugh was sure she'd soon find another bed to warm.

Early the next morning, after bidding a tearful Kate farewell, he mounted his horse and set out. The spate of recent good weather continued and he made better time than he'd expected. Four days later he awoke before dawn at the Inn of Golden Pig. Another hard day's ride and he'd make Ashwood Hall before sundown.

Pulling on his clothes, he grabbed his pack and headed for the stable. His chestnut stallion, Sampson, greeted him with a low whicker. As he led the horse out of the shed, he glanced up at the sky. The moon hadn't set yet. It floated in the star-studded sky like a softly glowing pearl. A ring of icy white light surrounded it. *Weather's going to change soon.* Despite the unseasonably temperate days, snow was on the way.

Damn Lady Joanna. If she'd simply acquiesced to the king's command, he wouldn't be haring about the countryside in the dead of winter. Instead, he could have conducted this business in the spring, a time both warmer and more conducive to affairs of *amore*. He cursed Lady Joanna's name again at midday when the sun disappeared behind a wall of gray clouds. An hour later the first flake of snow fell.

## **Chapter Two**

Lady Joanna Leland stared at the storm raging outside her solar windows. A howling wind rattled the frames and she could hear the hiss and splat of snow as it struck the mullioned panes. The southern facing windows, the latest in a series of renovations made over the one hundred and fifty years of Ashwood Hall's existence, had been her husband's final gift to her before his death. They were the envy of her neighbors, but as much as she loved the light and the view the glass afforded, she would gladly have foregone them to have Robert and their small son with her again.

Pushing the sad thought away, she watched the white drifts piling up against the side of the manor house for a moment longer before making her way to the fireplace. "I pity any poor soul caught outside in this," she commented to her maid who was busy packing bed linens in a large trunk.

Alys, who also served as the manor's cook, looked up from the linen sheet she was folding. "Aye, 'tis a fearsome storm. Mayhap God is delivering you a message, my lady."

"Pray don't start," Joanna said. She took the sheet and placed it atop the others in the chest Alys had dragged closer to the fire so they could have warmth while they worked.

Alys sighed, her brown eyes sad as she looked at Joanna. "You are far too young to give up on life, my lady."

"Not that young. I am near twenty-seven."

"Oh, an ancient crone you be." Alys grabbed another sheet and began to fold it with jerky motions.

The corners of Joanna's mouth slanted upward. Since the other woman was nearly twenty years her senior, Joanna's protests did seem a bit foolish.



"Very well, perhaps, not ancient," she admitted, "but certainly old enough to know my own mind."

"And ye be of a mind to give all of this up to live at Thornbury Abbey with the likes of me, Walt, Gilly and Hal for the rest of your life?"

"I am. I have worked it all out." Joanna spoke firmly, but her resolve faltered for a moment as her gaze strayed toward the windows. Was it possible Alys was right? Was the storm a sign that she should reconsider her plan?

Almost as if she'd read her mind, Alys spoke. "It may be your plan, my lady but 'tis obvious that if our divine lord was in any hurry to get you to the abbey, he'd have continued with our nice winter thaw instead of bringing down this storm so near to our departure. And there is also the matter of the king."

"Such storms are common at this season. There is no reason to view it otherwise. As for the king, the manor and its properties are mine now that Sir Robert is gone and our son with him. It is my right to deed the manor over to the abbey and reside there as a life pensioner, if I so choose."

"I fear for you, my lady, defying the king's will about this marriage as you do."

"The last thing I want or need is a new husband, least of all the Earl of Reston." Her mouth drew into a stubborn line. Despite the weather and the king's ire, she was certain she'd made the right choice "Once my brother John arrives," she continued, "and I sign the papers, the king will have no more say in the matter."

And yet, as much as she hated to admit it, Alys had a point. It seemed that no sooner had she sent her reply to the king then the weather had consorted against her. First there had been days of bitter cold and ice. Her spirits had lifted when it had warmed a bit the past week, but scant days before John was to arrive to escort her to the abbey, the snow had begun. She had no idea where her brother had found shelter, but one thing was clear, he wouldn't be able to travel again until the storm stopped. And then the deep drifts covering the roads would delay him even more. It could be weeks before he made it to the manor.

The wind rattled the windows and she jumped. Alys glanced over her shoulder then back at Joanna. She sighed and spread her hands. "I pray ye be right, my lady. Still, I cannot help but think that a husband and a babe in your arms would be a better fate for one as young and fair as ye be. Nor can I see for the life of me how being the Countess of Reston can be thought a bad thing."

"Do you forget the earl abandoned his child but a few days after her mother's death?"

"Nay. But grief makes folks do strange things." Her look said plain that Joanna's own behavior was proof enough of that.

"Aye, perhaps I cannot fault him so much for that," Joanna agreed. "If 'twas grief that drove him from his home, rather than a desire for drinking, womanizing and gambling at court."

"You have reason, my lady, to think that's the real reason why he left his daughter behind so soon after her birth?"

Joanna shrugged. She did indeed have some notion of why she believed that. Not that she intended to share it with Alys. 'Twas something she'd not even disclosed to Robert. "Enough. I have made up my mind and I am resolved to carry through on my plans."

Alys' lips parted, but before she could say anything the door to the solar opened and Alys' husband Walt strode in. Something was amiss, Joanna thought. In all the years he'd served her, she had rarely known him to invade her private space without an invitation. "I'm sorry to intrude, my lady, but someone is knocking at the front door."

"In this storm?" Joanna's brows arched in surprise. "Are you sure 'tis not the wind?"

"The knocking is weak, my lady. Still, 'tis plain 'tis not the wind. What do ye wish me to do?"

Alys rose and brushed her skirts. "You dolt," she said with affectionate humor in her tone. "Go open the door. Whoever stands on our doorstep must be near frozen to death by now."

"Aye," Joanna agreed. "We must offer Christian charity to any traveler, especially on a night like this. We shall all go."

Walt and Alys followed her into the hall. Hal, the stableboy and the kitchen maid, Gilly, huddled together, eyeing the heavy oaken door suspiciously. They dipped their heads respectfully as Joanna approached them.

"Who can it be, my lady?" Gilly asked wringing her hands in her apron.

Alys grabbed Joanna's arm and drew her closer. "What if 'tis one of the king's men come to arrest you?" She looked nearly as frightened as Gilly.

Joanna's stomach clenched as she mentally counted the days since she'd sent her letter of refusal to the king. It was possible, she decided, if he had immediately dispatched someone. The timing was too close to be certain. A low thump sounded on the door. Taking a deep breath, Joanna squared her shoulders and nodded to the two men. "Regardless of who it 'tis, we cannot leave them to die on our front step. Unbar the door."

Hal lifted the heavy wooden bar as Walt grabbed the wrought iron handle and pulled the door inward. A blast of icy air struck them, dragging behind it a cloud of swirling snow that blinded them for a moment. A figure, rimmed white with snow from head to foot staggered toward them.

"God be praised. My horse..." The man gave a feeble wave before collapsing in a heap at Joanna's feet.

"Jesu save us," Alys said. One hand on her heart, she stared down at the body.

Ignoring the other exclamations of dismay, Joanna knelt beside the man who lay face down on the stone floor. She put a hand on his shoulder. He moaned slightly once then made no other response to the pressure of her hand. "We must get him warm. Help me to move him."

"Where shall we take him, my lady?" Walt asked.

Joanna hesitated. The fireplace in the Great Hall hadn't been lit for over a week. The kitchen was a possibility, but it would be a tight fit since that was where Hal and Gilly slept. Joanna contemplated the man lying in a puddle of melting snow at her feet. His boots were worn, but of a high quality leather. His cloak showed similar signs of wear, but was made of the finest wool. And he had mentioned a horse.

A gust of wind shook the door. *Poor beast.* She pushed her momentary concern away. The horse she would deal with later. The man came first. From her quick perusal of his garments he was most likely of noble birth. In which case she knew her duty.

"We will put him in my room."

"Are you sure, my lady?" Walt rumbled with a look of surprise.

"Aye," she responded, her voice firm.

It took all five of them, but eventually they were able to drag the tall stranger into Joanna's chamber, remove his boots and clothing and put him into her bed. Panting with the exertion, she sent Walt to fetch some braziers. The fire in her small fireplace would not be enough. She then dispatched Alys to the kitchen to make some mutton broth. Gilly she put in charge of drying the man's clothing while Hal had the unpleasant duty of facing the storm to find the man's horse and then fighting through the snow to the stable with it.

Dragging her chair in from the solar to the side of the bed, she sat down and took up the duty of watching over the man. Frostbite was always a danger. Now that she had the leisure to do so, she carefully checked his hands and feet. She heaved a sigh of relief at seeing a tinge of healthy pink already returning to his extremities.

Tucking the covers about him again, she examined his face. His eyes were closed so she was unable to determine their color. His hair was brown and untouched by any sign of gray, although she saw a little mixed in the stubble that darkened his cheeks and the strong line of his jaw. His sculpted lips still carried a blue tint from the exposure to the cold.

Alys entered with a wooden bowl full of steaming broth. "How is he?" she asked with a jut of her chin toward the inert figure in the bed.

"Most fortunate, I'd say. Had he not stumbled upon our hall, I have no doubt that this night would have been his last."

"Would have been no more than he deserved." Alys' brow scrunched in a frown as she peered down at the man. "None but a fool would travel in weather like this."

"Perhaps he had some pressing business," Joanna replied in a mild tone.

Alys gave a snort. "Well, whatever his reasons, he's alighted on our doorstep, so we must do our best by him."

With Joanna's help, she lifted the man and held the bowl to his lips. The warm steam and the aroma of the broth roused him long enough to take several sips before he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

"Find your bed," Joanna said. "I'll watch over him." Alys flashed a dubious look. "Go." Joanna made shooing gestures with her hands.

"Very well." Alys left the room, returning a moment later with a blanket from one of the chests in the solar before bidding Joanna good night.

Joanna stoked the fires in both braziers and added another log to the fire before wrapping herself in the blanket and settling back in her chair. The man lay unmoving, his deep, steady breaths the only sound in the room. To keep herself awake, she rose occasionally, tended the fires and paced, mentally going over the list of stores in the cellar that still needed to be packed.

After her third passage about the room she sank into her chair and laid her head back. *I'll only close my eyes for a few minutes*, she told herself. A slight noise roused her. Lifting her head, she looked around. Cold air fanned her cheeks. The fires she'd so carefully tended were naught but glowing coals. Her gaze moved to the bed. Beneath the covers, the stranger's body shook and his teeth chattered.

Flinging her blanket aside, she leaped to her feet and hastily added wood to the fireplace and the braziers. It would take some time for the chill air to warm again. Her patient needed heat now. She stripped off her gown, hose and shoes. Clad only in her shift, she pulled back the covers, slipped in next to him and wrapped her arms around his shaking body.

It had been a long time since she'd felt the weight and length of a man next to her. She could feel the muscles of his arms, thighs and back through the thin linen of her shift. It was difficult not to notice his lean, hard flanks pressing into the curve of her hips. The awareness sent a tingle of heat up her spine. She ignored it. There was naught that was lascivious about what she was doing. Using her body's natural heat to warm the bed was the sensible thing to do under the circumstances.

Gradually the stranger's body grew still. A low rumble escaped his lips. The corners of Joanna's mouth tilted. Men! Did one exist who did not snore in his sleep? Or worse? She stifled a giggle remembering some of the noises her husband had made during their nights together. Sighing with a contentment she'd not felt in months, she drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert came to Joanna in her dreams. Perhaps it was because she'd been thinking of him right before she fell asleep. She didn't care as long as he was there. Most of her dreams of him the past few months had been sad, some even nightmarish, filled with images of him wrapped in his grave clothes, his face gray and unfamiliar in death.

This one was different. His features were blurry, but the hands slipping beneath the neckline of her shift to caress her breasts were surely his. He found a nipple and teased it into a stiff peak. Her breath hitched in her throat and moisture pooled between her legs. She sighed and shifted her hips. It had been so long since he'd lain with her like this. Her body ached for more.

As he kneaded one breast, his mouth trailed hot kisses down her neck, then lower still to the other breast where his tongue made lazy circles around the tightly folded nipple. The slight roughness of his unshaven face both irritated and aroused her. Her belly tightened with pleasure at the light scrape of his teeth over her swollen flesh.

Instinctively she opened her thighs in invitation. A large hand skimmed down her side to rest on her hip. Hadn't Robert's hands been longer and narrower? His fingers found the pearl hidden between her legs and she forgot the question. 'Twas a dream after all.

He continued to tease her until she was in a frenzy of need. Joanna moaned and arched her back when he slipped one finger inside her woman's chamber. He quieted her with his mouth, his tongue ravishing the inside of her mouth as his questing fingers did the same below.

She dug her fingers into his back passionately returning kiss for kiss. He tasted warm and male and ever so faintly of mutton.

"Your lips are soft as rose petals." He licked the lower one. "And sweet as honeyed wine," he murmured as he used a knee to spread her thighs wider. His cock pressed at the opening of her core. "And your *queynt* is a warm nest for this randy bird of mine."

Joanna smiled against his shoulder and bent her knees to make him welcome. "Come, Kate, let me rest my cock in your chamber." He thrust forward as he spoke and the tip of his erection began to penetrate her slit as the name he'd called her sank into her drowsy brain.

Kate! Who the devil was this Kate he spoke of?

Not even in a dream would her Robert call her by another woman's name. Joanna's eyes flew open then grew wide in horror at the sight of the mysterious stranger kneeling over her about to impale her with his fully erect, very sizable cock.

"Get off me you great lout," she screeched, slapping and beating at whatever part of the man's body she could reach.

"God's Blood, woman, leave off," the man bellowed in return. He rolled off her with a muffled oath. They both came to their knees in the center of the bed, staring at each other in baffled anger and shock.

"How dare you accost me?" they demanded in unison.

Joanna grabbed the sheet. Holding it to her nearly naked body, she glared across the bed at her... Attacker? Seducer? She didn't know what to name him. Almost of their own volition her gaze strayed to his still rock-hard cock.

Seeing the path her eyes took, the man flushed, grabbed a pillow and covered himself. "It would seem that you have the advantage over me. Pray tell me who you are and what place this is?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Hugh's brows furrowed with puzzlement. His gaze moved slowly around the room before returning to the woman on the bed. His last clear memory was of wandering around in the storm, wishing the hell he'd stayed in Windsor. He recalled a fuzzy moment that included strange voices and faces leaning over him. Then all had been darkness until he'd dreamed of a warm, feminine presence snuggling close to him. Half-awake, he'd thought he was back at the castle with Kate. Staring into the white, angry face opposite him, he realized it hadn't been a dream at all.

In his drowsy state, he'd had only the vaguest of impressions of her. Fully awake now, he could see that she was a woman worth dreaming about. Dark brown hair with a hint of autumn fire tumbled in waves over her shoulders and down her back. Her shift was tangled about her hips, but behind the shield of the sheet she clutched to her breasts, he noted the slender curve of her waist and one smooth, milky thigh. As his silent assessment continued a rosy flush crept up the slender column of her throat to her pale cheeks. As of yet she had said nothing.

"Once again I ask, mistress. Who are you and what place is this?"



"I am Lady Joanna Leland. You are at Ashwood Hall." Both her gaze and her voice were steady. He admired her cool dignity in the face of a humiliating situation. He'd faced men in battle who'd displayed less courage.

Before he could respond, she slipped from the bed. Moving with swift grace, she retrieved her discarded garments and bundled them in her arms. "I will send a servant with something to eat." Apparently her courage failed at that point, for with those words she turned and fled from the room.

Hugh stared after her for a long moment. So this was Lady Joanna Leland. The queen had said she was fair, but now having seen her for himself, he decided that was an understatement. He scanned the chamber a second time. Other than the bed, a chair, a table and two braziers the room was empty. There were no chests for linens or clothing, no carpets on the floor. Small metal hooks on the opposite wall told him a wall hanging of some sort had once hung there. *So the lady's making good on her threat to move out of the manor.*

The king had been right to send him so quickly. If it had not been for the storm, the bird may very well have flown from its nest. Hugh flopped back on the bed with a gusty sigh. It was his task to persuade the lovely dove whose body had responded so passionately beneath his a short time ago to change her mind. Doing so might prove an even bigger challenge than he'd originally thought, but having seen Lady Joanna, he realized she might be worth wooing for her own sake.

The soft scrape of the rings as the curtain over the doorway was pushed back alerted him to the fact that he was about to have visitors. A young man entered carrying an armful of wood. The lanky youth bobbed his head. "Lady Joanna sent me to build up the fire." He made his way to the fireplace and piled the wood neatly to the left of the hearth then set about his task. Within minutes flames leapt above the logs. Sketching another quick bow, he turned to go, stepping aside for a young woman bearing a wooden tray.

"I've brought you a bowl of sops and a mug of cider to break your fast, my lord," the girl said in a cheerful voice. She handed the tray to Hugh then stepped back and examined him with unabashed curiosity.

"You look a sight better this morning than you did last night," she observed. "More of a corpse you were than a living man when we dragged you in from the storm."

While she'd talked, Hugh had taken stock as well. Eighteen or nineteen years of age, the young woman was dressed in a plain brown kirtle. Her blonde hair was neatly confined under a white cap. Her face and hands were clean, surprising for a kitchen slut, which he assumed she must be. Clearly Lady Joanna took her duties as chatelaine to heart.

"You're a bold wench. What's your name?" he asked.

"Gilly, my lord." She dipped in a curtsy. "I help Alys in the kitchen."

"Well, Gilly, would you happen to know the whereabouts of my clothing?"

"Aye, my lord. They be in the kitchen. I dried them by the fire myself," she said with a proud smile. "Eat your breakfast and I'll go fetch them." Turning she whisked out of the room.

Since there was naught for him to do until his clothing arrived, Hugh set about taking her advice. He sniffed the warm steam rising from the bowl of bread sops, inhaling the scent of nutmeg. He took a spoonful of the warm milk-soaked bread, savoring the taste of it. He ate quickly. All too soon his spoon was scraping the bottom of the bowl. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. He drained the cider and placed the cup back on the tray.

He'd barely finished when Gilly reappeared in the doorway with his clothing. The tall young man stood next to her with Hugh's boots. Gilly deposited the garments on the chair beside the bed then went and took the boots from the boy who thrust them at her, turned and almost ran away.

"What's wrong with him?" Hugh asked.

“’Tis just Hal’s way,” she explained with a shrug as she picked up the tray. “He’s shy. Far as I can tell he talks more to the horses than he ever does to us. Well, ’cept me, that is,” she added with a pert smile over her shoulder as she left.

Hugh straightened at the word horses. Samson! His gut tightened with worry. Had his mount been left alone to face the storm? He leaped from the bed and yanked on his clothes. Nearly ripping the curtain from its wooden rings in his impatience, he hurried to find someone who could tell him about his horse. In his haste, he stumbled and rapped his shin on the corner of a trunk that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“God’s holy tears,” he bellowed, hopping on one foot. When his vision cleared, he took in the island of chests near the fireplace, more proof of Lady Joanna’s preparations to flee to the Abbey.

He stomped past an open chest half-filled with folded linens. He eyed them with distaste. *Marriage with me can’t be that odious.* Once he checked on Sampson, Hugh decided, he had some serious questions to put before Lady Joanna. First, and foremost, what grudge did she have against a man she’d never met?

## **Chapter Three**

Hugh found his way to the Great Hall without any problems. It too showed signs of soon being vacated. As he rounded an ornately carved screen at the far end that hid the entrance to the kitchen, he came face-to-face with Lady Joanna. Ignoring the mouth-watering aroma of freshly baking bread, he demanded without preamble, "What's happened to my horse?"

Understanding lit Lady Joanna's eyes. "Put your mind at ease, my lord..."

Her voice trailed away and he realized she was waiting for him to supply his name. On his journey to Ashwood Hall, he'd planned a careful campaign of how best to approach Lady Joanna. Any woman bold enough to flout the king's wishes would not bend easily. Charm and sweet reason might attain more than threats and intimidation. First impressions were important. Landing as an unconscious, frozen lump on her doorstep had not been the impression he'd had in mind. Considering the unfortunate nature of their first meeting, and her puzzling antipathy toward the Earl of Reston, it might be best to temporarily hide his identity. A wily tactician, he had no intention of frightening off his quarry before he had a chance to state his case.

"Sir Hugh DeBracy," he supplied, using his mother's maiden name.

"As I was saying, Sir Hugh, your mount is safely stabled with my own horses. Hal tells me he is quite large."

Hugh's shoulders relaxed. "Aye, like the Samson of old, he's a giant. But his temper is mellow and he'll enjoy having the company of other horses."

Lady Joanna sent him a hesitant smile. "When the snow melts, I will have to see this mighty fellow for myself."

"That could be a while. From what I could see the storm shows no sign of abating."

She nodded and motioned for him to follow her. "I fear you are right, my lord," she said as they crossed the hall and entered the solar. She took a seat by the fire, leaving the larger chair, her deceased husband's he presumed, for him. He lowered himself with a grunt, rubbing absently at his shoulder as he stared into the leaping flames. The long ride and the cold made his old wound ache again.

Gusts of wind buffeted the windows shaking them in their frames. Not for the first time he sent up a silent prayer of thanksgiving that he and Sampson had found the manor before they both froze to death.

"If I may ask, Sir Hugh, how did you happen to be out in this storm?" Lady Joanna's soft voice drew him back.

"I've recently returned from France and was heading home to my family. I thought to beat the storm. When it overtook me, I took refuge at the tavern at Hollyford." Mostly true, except for the part about the tavern. And the fact that he'd been in England for months. He felt a stab of guilt at the lie. He pushed the feeling away. *I'll tell her everything once I know her mind.*

Lady Joanna picked up a piece of needlework. "You have a wife, then, and children?"

"My wife is dead, my lady. But I have a daughter, Meg."

Lady Joanna bent over her embroidery. "I am sorry for your loss. I lost my husband and my child nearly two years ago in the fever that swept through our village."

Pretending he was hearing this for the first time, Hugh said gently, "And I for yours, my lady. Two years is a long time. It cannot have been easy for you to keep the manor running all by yourself."

"I do well enough. I have Alys and Walt to help me. But I confess I miss my babe and my husband, especially during these long, winter nights." Her soft mouth trembled at this admission.

Hugh nodded, ordering his next words carefully before he spoke them aloud. In a casual voice he asked, "Have you considered marrying again? Surely a husband would ease both the burden of caring for the manor and your loneliness."

She raised her head and flashed him a startled look. Had he been too bold? He gave a silent sigh of relief, when after a long moment, her shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I desire no husband. And I have found my own solution."

He knew well what her solution was. He hid his knowledge behind a polite smile and a noncommittal, "I see."

"All the trunks setting about the solar cannot have escaped your notice, my lord." She lowered her embroidery to her lap and indicated them with a graceful wave of her hand.

He fought the urge to rub his sore shin. "Are you planning a trip?"

"I will soon be moving to the abbey at Thornbury. In exchange for a small house and garden on the abbey grounds, the abbey will receive the deed to Ashwood Hall."

"It seems to me you are a bit young to turn your back on the possibility of a loving husband and children playing by your hearthside. Frankly, my lady, it seems to me that the abbey is getting the better part of the bargain."

"Others have said as much." She spoke in an even voice, picking up her embroidery again as if to indicate she was indifferent to both his and their opinions on the matter.

"Perhaps they have a point. One day you may rue the decision to give away your husband's property so hastily."

Her mouth tightened in a stubborn line, but she kept her eyes on her work. "I did not make my decision in haste. 'Tis my property to dispose of as I see fit. No matter what the king says," she added. She jabbed her needle into the cloth she was working on with savage emphasis.

Continuing his feigned ignorance, Hugh lifted a quizzical brow. "The king? What has he to do with this?"

"His majesty hunted here once or twice with Sir Robert. He wishes to marry me off to keep his hunting preserve available." He heard the bitter note in her voice.

"Have you considered the king might also have your best interest in his heart as well?"

"My best interest at heart?" She gave a sputtering laugh. The vivid blue eyes that met his flashed with anger.

He wondered how it would be to have those eyes burn that bright with passion. His cock hardened at the image of her naked, her milky thighs spread wide beneath him. He had an overwhelming urge to drag her from her chair and kiss her until she begged for quarter.

He tamped down his desires and responded in a carefully neutral tone. "Ah, I begin to understand your dilemma, Lady Joanna. The king has selected a new husband for you."

"Aye, and told me to prepare myself for a wedding."

"And the lucky bridegroom?"

She wrinkled her nose. "The Earl of Reston. Do you know him?"

At last they'd come to it. The reason that had made her defy the king. He leaned back in his chair, attempting to exude nothing but casual interest. "I've made his acquaintance," he said with a dry smile.

After a moment's pause, she said, "Then you know why I do not deem marriage to the man as any great favor."

From the guarded expression her face, Hugh knew he had rushed his attack. It was clear she was uncomfortable sharing her intimate business with a stranger. A strategic retreat was in order. He glanced at the curtain of snow outside the solar. He had plenty of time to discover why Lady Joanna so disliked a man she had never met. As he sought a way to turn the conversation to a new path, Joanna set her embroidery aside, rose and walked over to the windows.

The fire was burning low. He stood up and tended to it before joining her. Her expression was pensive as she watched the falling snow, her full lips drooping with sadness.

"You love this place, don't you?"

She nodded. "Now that the time has come, 'tis harder than I thought it would be to give it up."

"Then don't leave, my lady. The earl has his faults, 'tis true, but I've heard good reports of him." He took her hand and turned her toward him. "If you were to give him a chance, he might prove himself a worthy husband."

The sensation of her warm skin against his own sent a jolt of excitement coursing through him. He'd willingly agreed to marry Lady Joanna when the king had proposed the match. Ashwood Hall was a nice addition to his estates, it pleased the king and, Hugh was in need of a mother for Meg and a wife to provide him with an heir. Looking down into her face, he decided, to add another reason to his list—he wanted her.

Now all he had to do was convince Joanna to wed him. A woman's mind was no easy thing for any man to understand. Her fingers trembled within his. He hid a smile. Her mind might be made up about the Earl of Reston and deeding Ashwood Hall to the abbey, but the faint flush on her cheek and the quivering of her small hand told him her body might be of another opinion.

Lady Joanna drew in a shuddering breath and pulled her hand free. "You have a persuasive tongue, my lord."

*Give me a chance and I'll show you just how persuasive it can be.* He managed to keep his rising lust under control, responding in an even voice. "Are you thinking of reconsidering your refusal?"

She shook her head. "Nay, I am resolved to carry out my plan." She dipped in a slight curtsy. "I have duties to attend to, my lord. Pray stay and enjoy the fire's warmth."



Despite her composure, her hurried exit made Hugh think of a deer fleeing before the hounds. He smiled remembering her blushes and her trembling hands. Wooing a woman was much like hunting. It took skill, cunning and patience. Something told him he would need all three to win Joanna's heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Exhausted by too little sleep the previous night and the long, wearying day entertaining her unexpected guest, Joanna sought her bed with a sense of relief. All during dinner Alys and Walt had watched her and Hugh. The older couple had said little, but it had been impossible to miss the speculative gleam in their eyes each time Hugh's dark head bent toward her.

Even harder to ignore were Alys' pointed comments later, as she brushed Joanna's hair, about the width of Sir Hugh's shoulders, his bravery in battle, the charm of his smile, his poor motherless mite. All intended to reinforce Alys' argument that Joanna's decision to retire from the world was a huge mistake. This is what you're giving up, the older woman was plainly saying—a handsome, virile, man to warm you at night and father your children.

Joanna frowned into the dark shadows above her head. She had known what giving Ashwood Hall to the abbey meant. But living as a pensioner was not the same as taking the veil. She could marry again. Although without a dowry it was unlikely any man would want her. Still, she could come and go as she wished, work in her small herb garden, even assist Brother Morgan with the preparation of tisanes and such for the infirmary. As for children, her brother, John, had a son and a daughter for her to lavish a loving aunt's attention upon. It was a good plan, or so she'd thought until the storm had deposited the man sleeping before the solar fire at her door. Now, for the first time in weeks, she wondered if Alys was right.

Joanna shifted again, her nipples hardening at the scrape of the linen sheet over her naked breasts. Her skin felt hot and prickly. Her *queynt* throbbed and she bit her lip. For almost two years she'd forgotten the needs of her body. Now without warning they

returned to torment her. She rolled over and drew her knees up to her chest, pressing her thighs tightly together. Closing her eyes, she said two *Ave Marias* to distract her from the lustful sensations assailing her. Slowly she grew calmer and drifted off to sleep.

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Warm arms surrounded her. She wriggled deeper into the embrace. Robert she thought, as feathery kisses brushed across her cheek, waking her to face the day. His kisses deepened, became more demanding. He forced her lips apart and plundered the inside of her mouth until Joanna was breathless. He traced a path down her neck with the tip of his tongue. "Sweet as morning dew," he murmured.

Cupping her breast with one hand, he kneaded it, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her nipple. It tightened. Heat coiled in her belly. His hand moved to her other breast. She pushed against him, seeking more of his caresses. His mouth followed his fingers and he sucked each nipple into a glistening peak.

Joanna moaned. It seemed as if ages had passed since she'd felt Robert's hands on her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a dark awareness tried to push itself forward. She thrust it back, giving herself up to the pleasure of his touch. As if he sensed her hunger, his hand glided down her side, over her belly, to the inside of her thigh.

Excitement raced along every nerve as he traced lazy circles with his fingers starting above her knee and moving closer to the seat of her desire. Joanna groaned her frustration. "Do not tease me so, my lord," she pleaded.

"Patience, my lady." His mouth found hers again, his tongue pressing its assault as his fingers stole beneath the curls at the apex of her thighs to stroke the sensitive nub hidden there. Moisture gushed between her legs. His lips left hers to nibble on her earlobe. She shivered, feeling a tug deep in her belly. "Do you like that, sweet my lady?"

“Aye,” she whispered. It was wicked to feel such lust. In the morning she would have to say many prayers, but at the moment she didn’t care. She opened her legs in a wanton invitation. “I would have your cock inside me.”

“Anything to please you, my lady.” He covered her with his body. She reached down and grasped his cock, rubbing her hand over its head. It swelled in her hand. He inhaled sharply and she smiled, reveling in the power she had over him. The thick head pressed against her entrance and he slowly thrust into her.

Joanna savored the sensation of him swelling and filling her. As he pumped back and forth he slipped a hand between their bodies and rubbed her rigid bud until she groaned. Her fingers dug into the muscles of his back, urging him on. Liquid fire flowed from her belly to the spot between her legs.

They rocked together. As the intense spasms rippled through her, she opened her eyes and stared up at her lover. Dark hair fell over his forehead and the eyes meeting hers were gray. His features were familiar, but they were not Robert’s. They belonged to Hugh DeBracy.

Joanna awoke with a jerk. Her legs were pressed tightly together and she could still feel the last spasms of her pleasure. Filled with consternation she rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the pillow. It was naught but a dream. An evil dream—perhaps a succubus sent by the devil to torment her with its lustful passions. She knew about such things from Father Timothy’s sermons. Crawling out from beneath her warm nest of blankets, she knelt by the side of the bed and prayed.

Knees aching and shivering with the cold, she crawled back into bed, assuring herself that the appearance of Hugh DeBracy in her dreams was nothing more than a cruel trick of one of Satan’s demons to lead her from the path she’d chosen.

## Chapter Four

Upon entering the solar the next morning, Joanna found Sir Hugh standing by the windows, hands clasped behind his back, his gaze on the gray, cloud-filled sky. His posture pulled the fabric of his dark blue *cote-hardie* taut over his broad shoulders. Shoulders she remembered caressing wantonly in her dream of the night before.

Filled with a mixture of shame and anger, she considered retreating into her bed chamber. As she took a step back, he turned and greeted her with a smile. "There seems to be a lull in the storm. As soon as I break my fast, I will see to the horses."

Joanna managed a nod and a weak smile in return. She moved closer, studying the drifts that rose above the sill. "'Tis fortunate you are so large, my lord," she said.

One brow darted upward. "Large? How so, my lady?" Joanna noted the corners of his mouth quivered.

She stared up at him puzzled as to why her comment might provoke his mirth. He was a tall man, after all. Long legs would be an asset to pushing through the snow. It slowly dawned on her that mention of his size could be applied to portions of his anatomy other than height. Fighting to keep her composure, she gestured quickly toward the windows. "Were you not so tall you might be swallowed up like Jonah before you reach the stables." Giving him no chance to respond, she hurried from room to find Alys.

Ignoring the older woman's curious glances when she arrived in the kitchen red-faced and slightly out of breath, Joanna ordered Gilly to deliver Hugh's breakfast. She filled a bowl with porridge, poured herself a mug of ale and carried them over to a bench by the hearth. When Hugh entered the kitchen a short time later, his cloak over his arm, she had regained her former equanimity. Walt wrapped in a threadbare cloak and Hal, a patched blanket around his shoulders, met Hugh at the kitchen door.

Joanna rose and went to stand in doorway with Alys and Gilly, watching the men struggle through the mounds of snow in the direction of the stable. Hugh led the way, using his broad body to plow a path through drifts that sometimes reached his waist. Walt and Hal followed in his wake bending forward into the wind that blew snow into their faces with every step. Despite his boots and heavy woolen cloak, Hugh would be soaked through and chilled to the bone once he returned, she realized. To her left, just inside the kitchen door, the large, wooden tub used for bathing leaned up against the wall. "Sir Hugh will need a warm bath. Best to start heating the water now, Alys."

While Alys filled the kettles and set them to boiling, Gilly and Joanna dragged the heavy tub into the solar and placed it in front of the fireplace. She sent the maid off with an order to put more pots on to heat. Sir Hugh was a large man and it would take a lot of water to fill the tub.

Joanna moved to one of the trunks and threw up the lid. She regarded the neatly folded linens with a puckered brow. Since Sir Hugh had been deposited at her front door, she'd been forced to take more and more items out of the trunks she'd so carefully packed. Soon she'd have to start packing all over again.

*Could it be a sign that my leaving is a mistake?* She thought about the events of the past two days—the storm, Hugh's arrival and now her careful packing all undone. Alys would certainly think so. Images of the previous night's dream flitted through her mind again. She pushed them away. If her dream was a sign, surely it was meant not as encouragement, but as a warning.

Squaring her shoulders she grabbed a pile of towels and slammed down the lid. The storm would pass and Sir Hugh would go home. She would launder and repack the linens and be on her way to the abbey, just as she planned.

Gilly appeared at the solar door, a wooden pail in each hand. "This be the cold water. We can add the hot once it's a boiling." Joanna set her pile of linens on a nearby stool and went to help the maid empty her buckets. Sending her back to kitchen to keep

watch for the men, Joanna busied herself with finding something for Hugh to wrap himself in while his clothing dried.

He was half a head taller than Walt. Although Hal was nearly the same height he lacked Hugh's well-muscled breadth. Robert had been shorter and of a lighter build than any of the men. Most of her husband's garments had already been divided among Walt, Hal and the poor box at the village church. The few items that remained were to be donated to the abbey for their distribution. Perhaps, Robert's winter cloak could serve.

Opening the trunk that held her husband's few remaining personal goods, she pulled out the cloak. She held it to her face and rubbed her cheek against the soft fur collar. It had been her last gift to him, commissioned from a local weaver and trimmed with fox. A costly present, but he'd given her so many over the years she'd wanted it to be special.

"My lady, Alys bid me say, the men be returning," Gilly said from the doorway.

Joanna straightened and shook the tears from her eyes. Carrying the cloak across the room, she laid it on her chair to warm by the fire then followed Gilly to the kitchen. The men stood in a huddled group by the hearth, brushing snow from their backs and stomping their feet. As Alys moved to close the door, Joanna could see snow falling again. The lull in the storm was over.

As Alys and Gilly clucked over Walt and Hal, Joanna moved closer to Hugh. "You are soaked through, my lord. I have had a warm bath prepared."

He smiled down at her as he threw off his wet cloak, sat on a stool and tugged at a boot. "My frozen feet thank you, my lady." He set his boots by the side of the hearth to dry and padded to the solar in his wet hose.

She waved him to a chair. "Pray sit, Sir Hugh."

Teeth chattering, he did as she ordered, holding his hands out to the fire. "You are most kind to think of my comfort, Lady Joanna."

Helping male guests to bathe was one of the duties of the lady of a hall. Joanna had done it several times over the years when she and her husband had entertained. "I would fail my duty as a hostess, Sir Hugh if I allowed you to become ill," she remarked with feigned indifference.

As she bustled about putting things in order, her gaze flicked to Hugh, his frame shook with violent shivers despite the cheery warmth of the fire. For the first time she fully considered what it would be like scrubbing his back. Memories of her fingers digging into those sculpted muscles, her hips wrapped around his in her dream rose in her mind. Delicious warmth suffused her belly and her pulse leaped in her throat.

Walt and Hal entered bearing two buckets of scalding water. Their red faces still bore the brunt of the cold, but they wore fresh, dry clothing. She turned her back to hide her flushed cheeks. "This will soon have your bones warm again," Walt said as he emptied his bucket.

"My...thanks." Hugh's words came slowly through his chattering teeth.

"Alys be making some hearty broth to warm our insides," Walt added as he and Hal left.

The solar door closed behind them and she heard the sound of Hugh shedding his clothing. Joanna kept her eyes averted until the sound of water splashing and a contented sigh told her he was seated inside the tub.

"God's Blood, my lady, but this feels like heaven."

Drawing in a deep breath, she moved behind him. Grabbing the sponge and the precious bit of soap she kept for such occasions, she knelt and began to wash his back. She glanced toward the solar windows and the falling snow.

"Have you ever seen a storm continue this long?" she asked, trying to distract herself from the solid male presence before her.

"Once, when I was a boy, we were snowed in for over a month. My mother almost went mad from being shut up inside so long. She thought never to see her garden bloom again."

"I understand. I would dearly love to see a touch of green."

"I've heard the gardens here at Ashwood Hall are lovely to behold in the spring."

Joanna's lips curved in a smile, her hands pausing on his back. "Aye, so they are. My husband had an interest in plants. He cajoled all our neighbors to send us shoots and bulbs for planting."

"Your late husband sounds like an interesting man."

"He was," she replied. Looking down at his back she noted a long scar that angled from his left shoulder almost to his spine. Without thinking she traced it with a soapy finger. "This must have been painful. What happened?"

"I turned my back too soon on an enemy," he said with a shrug, no trace of rancor in his tone.

The slight movement drew her attention to the hard muscles and contours of his back. His warm damp skin against her bare palm sent a tingle of excitement racing through her veins. She had an almost overwhelming urge to push his hair aside and kiss his neck and shoulder.

She bit back a startled gasp at the unexpected reaction. *What was wrong with her? This man was a guest and a stranger.* Yet since his arrival, her mind and body seemed to be in a conspiracy to awaken desires she'd thought had died with her husband.

"Is something amiss, my lady?" he asked. "I fear my scars may disgust a lady of your sensibilities."

"Nay, my lord," she hurried to say. Gathering her composure, she grasped the sponge tighter in her hand and continued washing his back. Determined to ignore her body's traitorous impulses, she sought for some benign subject to discuss. "You mentioned a daughter, Sir Hugh. No doubt she will be pleased to see you."

He hunched forward his elbows on his knees. "'Tis my hope. She'll not recognize me though since I have not seen her since she was a babe. I left to fight for the king in France shortly after...my wife died."



"You but did your duty, my lord. I'm sure she knows that."

"You are more understanding than my sister, Ann. More than once over the years she has chastised me for staying away so long." He sighed deeply. "Truth be told, I can't argue with her."

The sadness in his voice echoed the heavy sorrow in her heart. Thinking to comfort him she squeezed his shoulder. "I have no doubt, my lord that your daughter will rejoice that you have come back to her safe in body and limb."

He covered her fingers with his own. "You have a kind heart, Lady Joanna." Water splashed in the tub as he turned to look at her, revealing a large section of his chest and thigh and much more for her inspection. Seeming unaware of the extent of his exposure, he continued, his voice earnest. "Too kind and loving, I might add, to hide away behind some abbey's walls."

Despite her best efforts, her gaze slipped over his body to his cock nesting in the curly, dark hair between his thighs. Her breath caught in her throat and without her own volition her fingers twitched with the mad urge to reach down and stroke it. She raised her head and her gaze collided with his. Undisguised desire flickered deep within the winter gray of his eyes. He lifted her hand, turned it and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist. The warmth of his mouth set her pulse to leaping. Heat rose in her neck and crept up to her face.

"Perhaps some part of you lives after all, my lady," he said softly.

She rocked back on her heels and struggled to her feet, breaking his hold on her. Heart pounding, she backed away, her eyes growing round as Hugh stood up. Water sloshed onto the floor as he climbed out of the tub. He made no effort to hide his arousal. He grabbed the cloak she'd laid out for him and wrapped it around his hips then walked toward her. "Stay, my lady."

Joanna bit her lip and tried to turn—to run—to be anywhere but here in this room with this man, but her feet seemed nailed to the floor. She put out a hand to ward him off as he halted in front of her. "Forgive me. I...I fear you have misunderstood... It was

not my intent..." She struggled to formulate a coherent explanation for her unseemly behavior.

If he'd laughed outright it would have been better. Indulgent male amusement would have given her the impetus she needed to leave, but Hugh regarded her stumbling protest with solemn intensity. Before she could properly frame a more cogent explanation, he bent and covered her mouth with his.

For one moment, all thought fled as she lost herself in his kiss. Then sanity returned and with it came a scalding wave of shame. With a strangled cry, she ripped herself from his arms and ran as if Satan and his hounds nipped at her heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Unable to sleep, Joanna rose from her bed. Wrapping herself in a shawl against the chill, she added another piece of wood to the fire. She pulled a three-legged stool closer, sat and stared into the flickering flames. Her stomach gave an unladylike growl, reminding her of the meals she'd missed. After the bathing incident in the solar earlier that day, she'd taken refuge in her room, too ashamed to look Sir Hugh in the eyes.

Shame alone hadn't kept her cloistered in her chamber. Her mind still reeled from shock at her wanton behavior. She'd been so sure that all worldly, physical desires had been buried with her husband. After nearly two years, the discovery that human passion still existed deep inside her, had left her former equanimity in shreds. Somehow the idea of a small house with a garden, safe within the confines of the abbey's walls no longer held the same appeal as it had before.

*Damn the man.* Until the storm had blown him to her doorstep she'd been serenely confident in her decision. Now her mind was filled with doubt. Her stomach growled again and she felt a pinching pang of hunger. Alys had promised to keep Joanna's plate wrapped in case she grew hungry later. At the third rumble, she decided to go in search of her supper. She stood up, walked to the curtain separating her room from the solar, carefully eased it to the side and slipped through. She traversed the solar on tiptoe her

gaze on Hugh huddled beneath a blanket beside the fireplace. His breathing was deep and steady.

Joanna crept quietly out of the room. Breathing easier, she crossed the hall, the stone floor frigid under her bare feet. As she was about to step around the wooden partition that separated the hall from the kitchen, she heard the murmur of voices.

"Do you like that?" Hal's voice came to her.

There was a stifled giggle, and then Gilly's familiar voice responded. "Perhaps you need to keep doing it awhile so's I can decide."

Unable to contain her curiosity, Joanna peeked around the corner of the screen. In the red glow of the kitchen fire she saw the couple kneeling on a pallet spread out by the hearth. Gilly's shift was pulled up to her thighs and bunched down around her waist. Joanna could only see Hal from the back. Flickering flames highlighted the lanky youth's leanly muscled back and buttocks as he suckled one of the kitchen wench's plump pink nipples.

Joanna's eyes went round. She knew she should turn and leave, but her feet stayed planted firmly on the floor. Her shawl slipped unnoticed from her shoulders as she leaned one hand on the screen to support herself her attention focused on the scene unfolding before her. Hal's mouth moved on to Gilly's other nipple, one hand moving up to pinch and tug the one he'd abandoned. The servant arched her back and pressed his head to her with a soft moan. Joanna's nipples tightened in reaction and moisture gathered between her legs.

*Shameless. She was shameless.* The acknowledgement didn't propel her into leaving. Her skin warmed and she felt internal muscles clench with excitement as Hal lowered Gilly to the pallet and spread her thighs. Stretching out beside her he slipped his hand between them and began stroking the nub hidden beneath a triangle of short blond curls.

Without realizing what she was doing, Joanna leaned forward, her lips parted, her breathing growing more rapid. Memories of nights spent making love in her husband's

arms rose in her mind. She bit back a groan, her pudendum quivering with need as Hal inserted a long finger into Gilly's channel. She writhed with pleasure. Joanna's gaze strayed to his cock, which was stiff and obviously eager to follow the path his finger was taking.

Gilly reached over and stroked its swollen head. "Stop teasing me and come inside."

Hal chuckled. "Are you sure you're ready, Gilly girl?"

"Zwounds, yes." Her voice trembled with need. "Now, Hal, now."

Hal complied. Rolling over, he positioned himself. Gilly guided him to her entrance and he thrust forward.

The coiling heat in Joanna's stomach became a blaze. Her thighs quivered. Trying to ease the sweet ache between them, she slipped a hand beneath her shift and slowly rubbed her already swollen nub, her gaze riveted on the couple lost in the throes of their passionate lovemaking. *Sweet Jesu what is wrong with me?*

She nearly screamed when a warm hand covered her mouth at the same time a strong, male arm wrapped around her waist. "Quite a view, my lady. Who'd have thought such a skinny lad could sport such a magnificent cock," Hugh murmured close to her ear. His warm breath tickled the side of her neck.

Joanna squirmed in his hold, trying to free herself, all too aware of the weight and heat of his hand a hair's breadth away from her aching breasts.

"Shh, they'll hear us. Don't want that, do we?"

Joanna jerked her head in agreement and he took his hand from her mouth. She expected him to release her and had sharp words ready on the tip of her tongue once they were in private. Instead, his hands moved to cup her breasts as his tongue licked a path down her cheek to the corner of her mouth.

"Sweet as a treacle pie."

"Are you drunk, my lord?" She fought to keep her voice low. As embarrassing as it would be for the two servants to discover they had an audience, catching their mistress in a similar situation was unthinkable.

"Aye, my lady." Hugh's rough cheek pressed hers. "Drunk on the satin softness of your skin and your own sweet, womanly taste."

Despite her indignation at his effrontery, Joanna's pulse leaped at his words. It had been two years since any man had spoken thus to her. *Fool! Will you be cajoled by honeyed words?* She struggled to free herself. Hugh held her fast against his chest with one arm. She uttered a soft hiss of frustration, and whispered through gritted teeth. "Release me."

"Nay, not yet." His free hand cupped her right breast, caressing her nipple through her shift with the pad of his thumb. It stiffened under his steady stroking. "I wish to demonstrate something of import to you." He bent and nibbled at her earlobe.

A shiver of pleasure coursed through her to her toes. She prayed he hadn't noticed. She felt his lips curve into a smile against her neck. *He knew.* A hot flush crept up her cheeks. She clutched at the quickly fraying strands of her control and whispered, "There is nothing you can do that would be of interest to me."

His hand moved to her other breast. The added friction of the linen of her smock added to the torture of his swirling caress. "Your words say one thing, my lady, but your body tells another tale."

Fearful of drawing attention to them, she turned her head and shot him a scornful look over the curve of her shoulder. Looking not at all repentant, Hugh leaned closer and brushed his mouth over hers. "You think yourself dead to the pleasures of this world," he murmured against her lips. "But your body says that it would live."

As if to prove his point, he lowered his hand and stroked it slowly between her thighs. Joanna arched her back instinctively in reaction to the intimate caress. He slipped his hand up beneath her smock. His warm fingers glided up her bare thigh. Her

breath caught deep at the back of her throat, even as her mind filled with all the protests her lips should be making.

He placed his palm over her mons and gently pressed. A scalding heat centered where his flesh met hers. "Tell me to stop and I will."

Her lips parted, but the words at the tip of tongue faltered as her gaze rested on Hal's naked back and buttocks as he pumped into Gilly. The kitchen wench wrapped her legs around him and made muffled cries of passion with each thrust. Joanna's heart pounded and every ounce of her awareness focused on Hugh's hands on her breast and between her legs. Need sparked like embers from the fire. She leaned her back into his broad chest, head bowed, acquiescing with her silence.

Hugh pushed her hair aside with a movement of his head and kissed the nape of her neck then trailed kisses along her shoulder while he parted the curls at the juncture of her thighs and made small circles with his fingers around the swollen bud hidden there. Without thinking, she widened her stance.

His hard cock pressed between the two moons of her ass and she rocked back and forth, the fabric of her smock making a soft rustle each time she moved. He pressed his mouth to the side of her throat with a soft groan of approval. His fingers slipped down and he inserted one in her *queynt* and slowly moved it in and out in mimicry of the act of love. She ached with a hunger she'd thought she'd buried with her husband. She moved with him, her passion fueled by the sight and sound of the two servants coming close to reaching the height of their pleasure.

Mesmerized by the flickering glow of the fire, the sight of the two bodies moving in unison and Hugh's intimate caresses, Joanna floated in a haze of pleasure. The wave of heat building inside crested and her internal muscles clenched in a series of spasms. She clamped her teeth over her lower lip to keep her own cries of fulfillment from mingling with those of the couple reaching their own completion beside the hearth.

Hugh's hand withdrew. He lifted her and carried her into the hall, setting his back to the carved screen. Turning her toward him, he cupped her face between his calloused

palms and took possession of her mouth. Limp with the aftereffects of her pleasure, Joanna responded. Warm tendrils of desire coiled once again in her belly. Shocked by her response, she pulled away.

Breathing heavily, she put a hand on his chest, a weak shield to her virtue under the circumstances. It was difficult to see his expression in the dim light. He brushed a lock of hair back and looped it behind her ear then let his fingers skim down her cheek. He bent again and she pushed harder at his chest, trying to ignore the hard muscles bunching beneath her palm.

"Forgive me." Ducking under his arm, she darted from the hall. In the haven of her room, she added a log to the nearly dead ashes and stirred the fire back to life again. "Sweet Mother of God what have I started?" she groaned.

She sank down onto the stool in front of the hearth, her mind whirling with images of what had happened between her and Hugh. What had possessed her to allow physical lust to overcome all her good sense? And with a man who was hardly more than a stranger at that. Never in her life had she behaved in such a way.

Worse yet, she'd enjoyed every moment. Making love with Robert had always been pleasurable and she'd coupled with him eagerly. But he'd never touched her the way Hugh had, with such confidence and awareness of what her body craved.

Wind rattled the window beside her bed. A thin current of icy air flowed through the narrow gap where the shutters met and coiled around her bare ankles. Joanna shivered and moved closer to the fire. What was done was done. She could not step backward in time and change it, but it must never happen again she vowed as she sought the sanctuary of her bed.

She stared up into the patterns the flickering flames made on the canopy over her head, struggling to regain her earlier peace of mind. Deep in her heart she feared that her former serenity had gone forever, blown away by the storm. She closed her eyes and rolled over, refusing to consider which storm—the one outside or the one brewing in her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joanna awoke to a fireplace full of cold ash. The pale gray light filtering between the cracks in the shutters gave no hint of whether it was dawn or midmorning. She slipped from the bed and dressed in haste. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the curtain aside and walked into the solar. Hugh was gone, his pallet folded and neatly stored beside the fireplace. Her pent-up breath escaped in a deep sigh of relief. She would have to face him eventually, but she welcomed the reprieve. She needed more time to regain her composure before she saw him.

Her stomach growled a reminder that it had been many hours since she'd last eaten. She made her way to the kitchen in search of something to break her fast. Alys looked up from rolling out dough as Joanna appeared in the doorway.

"There you are. Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough." Joanna found a bowl and filled it with porridge from the pot set to one side of the hearth. "'Tis nearly midmorning. You should have wakened me."

"I thought the sleep would do you good." Joanna's face warmed under the scrutiny of the older woman's keen brown eyes. "It seems I was right. There are roses in your cheeks this morning."

Joanna lowered her eyes and scooped up a spoonful of porridge. "Where is everyone?"

Alys leaned on her rolling pin. "In the stables. Gilly's milking Bess and Sir Hugh and Walt are checking on the horses." She waved toward the diminished pile of logs beside the hearth. "Afterward they said they'd help Hal chop and carry wood." She pulled the pan toward her, lifted up the piece of crust and laid it inside, trimming off the overflow with a knife.

Joanna swallowed the last bit of porridge and washed it down with a cup of cider. "Is that for our dinner?"

Alys nodded. "Aye, Hal snared a hare yesterday when the snow stopped. I'm mixing it with a bit of leftover venison and making a game pie."



Joanna's gaze moved to the dead hare dangling from a nearby hook. "Poor thing came out to look at the world during the lull in the storm and now he's to be our dinner."

Alys shrugged. "The men will be cold and hungry when they finish with their work. I doubt you'll see any of them weeping over the loss of one hare."

Joanna smiled. "Always the practical one."

"Someone in this household needs to be. One thing I'll say for Sir Hugh," she added. "He's not too proud to lend a hand with the chores."

"I suppose he learned to be self-sufficient on the battlefield."

"No doubt. He's a handsome figure of a man too."

Joanna went to wash her bowl. "Is he? I hadn't noticed." She tried to sound noncommittal.

Alys gave a disbelieving snort. "Anyone with eyes to see can't help but notice his smile or those gray eyes of his. And he's widowed too – a fine catch for any woman."

Joanna set down the bowl and the cloth and faced the older woman. "And by that you mean me?" Alys' lips twitched but she said nothing. "What would you have me do? Smile sweetly, ply him with sweetmeats and..." Joanna waved her hands, sending a spray of water droplets into the air. "Game pie and entice him into wooing me?"

"It would be a start. Sir Hugh has a child and no wife and you are without child or husband. It almost seems as if heaven brought you together for a purpose."

"Some might think so." Joanna's voice was tart.

Alys shot back, her voice equally sharp. "The sensible ones would."

"I was lucky the first time. Robert was a kind and loving husband. It would be tempting fate to think I could be so fortunate again." Joanna shook her head. "Nay, the abbey is the safest place for me."

"Safe indeed, since there'd be no handsome widowers common as onions waiting to be plucked from the ground. A goodly place to fade from life, if that be your wish."

She looked at Joanna, her eyes filled with sadness. "Good for the old ones, my lady who have lived a full life, but not I trow, for one such as you."

Joanna bit back a smile at the image of a row of handsome men popping out of the earth in her garden, fully ripe and ready to be picked. Her amusement faded into cold reality. "Have you forgotten the king? If I were to pluck one of those onions, as you put it, I think he would not be much pleased, since 'twas not of his choosing."

"Mayhap he wouldn't care as much as you think," Alys said. "If his desire be to keep his piece of fine hunting ground out of the church's hand, then to my mind, one husband be as good as the next."

Joanna considered Alys' words. There was some truth in what she said. She put her arm around the older woman's waist. "We've had this argument before. I am still resolute in my decision."

Alys' lips parted, then closed upon whatever words she'd been about to speak as the kitchen door slammed open. Gilly entered, red-cheeked from the cold, carrying a pail of milk. The men spilled in behind her, stomping their feet free of wet snow as they piled logs beside the hearth. Joanna was thankful for the interruption, but one look at Alys' set face told her their conversation wasn't finished. Sir Hugh had found himself a champion.

## **Chapter Five**

Hugh shook the snow from his back and shoulders and deposited an armful of wood beside the hearth. As he straightened and shrugged off his cloak, his eyes locked with Joanna's. He remembered those eyes ablaze with desire the night before. As if she'd read his mind, a wash of color stained her cheeks. Her blush deepened beneath his continued scrutiny and she looked away.

No doubt she was ashamed of her response after having told him of her resolve to live a solitary life at the abbey, Hugh thought. But it was her response that pleased him the most. One look about Ashwood Hall had told him all he needed to know about Joanna's housekeeping skills. Her treatment of Alys and Walt and the other two servants displayed her kind heart. She would make a loving mother to his daughter. But her physical reaction to his touch proved that she would be a passionate lover as well.

Hoping to put her at ease, he bowed and flashed a brief smile. Nothing in his expression gave any hint to the others that anything had changed between him and their mistress. "Good morrow, my lady."

Joanna inclined her head. "Sir Hugh." She held out her hand. "If you will give me your cloak, I will spread it by the fire to dry."

"No need for that, my lady. I can do it."

"I'm sure you can, my lord, but what sort of hostess would you think me if I neglected a guest, especially one who has diligently worked for the welfare of my household? Hauling wood is not your usual pastime."

He laid his wet cloak across her outstretched arms. "Knights on a battlefield are called upon to do many things, my lady." He leaned closer and whispered, "You'll find your shawl on your chair in the solar."

Joanna's eyes widened. Another wave of color bloomed in her cheeks. From her expression, Hugh knew that until that moment, she'd forgotten all about it. "Thank you," she muttered as she brushed past him with his cloak.

Their dance of careful manners continued throughout the day. Despite her cool demeanor, Hugh sensed cracks in her defenses. He entered the solar later that afternoon determined to press his advantage. She returned his greeting with a polite smile then went back to her needlework.

Her seeming indifference was more sham than real for he saw her flick curious glances his way as he fetched a table and set it between them. Whistling a cheerful tune, he retrieved his pack, rummaged through it and pulled out a small, wooden box. He dragged his chair closer and sat opposite her. He placed the box in the center of the table and lifted the lid.

"Do you play chess, my lady?" he inquired.

Joanna raised her eyes from her embroidery. "Aye, Robert and I oft played it in the evenings." She put her needlework to the side and watched as he removed and opened a small, hinged board. He placed it on the table beside the box then began arranging the playing pieces on the black and white painted squares. She picked up a tiny, carved horse. "I've never seen such a small set before," she said, open admiration in her voice.

"'Tis meant for travel. My friends and I would while away the long, winter evenings in France playing with each other between campaigns. 'Tis an excellent means of learning strategy."

"So Robert always said." Her lips curved in a slight smile. "I warn you, my lord, that I oft beat my husband."

Hugh grinned. "I am not surprised to hear that, Lady Joanna." He motioned to her. "Since you have the white pieces, the first move is yours."

Joanna studied the board for a moment then carefully moved a pawn. Hugh's dark brows arched. He leaned forward, his lips pursed. "I think I understand your husband's

plight." Joanna's first move told him she had a fair amount of skill, but watching and learning about her was a far more compelling game.

They played in companionable silence for a short while. Hugh used the time to study Joanna. Firelight brought out the autumn tones in her hair. Her slender white fingers moved gracefully over the board. A sliver of heat glided into his belly as he imagined the feel of those warm hands moving over him. His cock stirred. He swallowed hard and tamped down his lustful thoughts. Now was not the time.

Joanna picked up one of her knights and placed it delicately on a black square, moving his pawn aside with her finger. She picked up the piece and smiled at him. "Tell me more of your daughter, my lord. Her name is Meg is it not?"

"Actually, 'tis Margaret for my mother, but we call her Meg." Instead of taking his turn, Hugh leaned back in his chair. "In truth, my lady, I know almost nothing of her, except her age. According to my sister's letters, she retained her blonde curls and has my eyes. Ann also says she has become quite accomplished on the lute and the hurdy-gurdy."

"Does she owe her musical talent to you or her mother?"

Hugh gave a snort. "Not from me. I broke the strings the one time my sister tried to teach me how to play the lute. And I fear my singing isn't much better. What of you, Lady Joanna?"

Joanna's merry laugh rang out, filling the room with warmth beyond that of the fire. "I fear I'm equally as poor a musician as you, my lord. My husband had all the talent. He oft entertained me with his singing and playing in the evenings." Her fingers tightened around the pawn she was holding and her expression grew sad. "Music is one of the things I miss most. You are most fortunate to have a daughter with such skill."

"I long to hear her play," Hugh confessed. "Although at nine it will not be many years before it will be her husband who will gain the enjoyment of her talents."

"Surely she is too young for you to think of betrothing her to anyone."

"I haven't given it much thought, but I know 'tis Ann's wish for her to make a good match."

"'Tis something to be desired, I'm sure, but our children grow so quickly as 'tis, and then they are gone from us. Under the circumstance, if I were you I would not be in too much of a hurry." She tilted her head and regarded him across the board. "'Tis clear you love your daughter, but you will need an heir one day to inherit your title and lands. You asked me if I had thought of remarriage, my lord. What of you?"

Hugh had known that question would come sooner or later. As they had spoken of her marriage plans, 'twas only natural she would wonder about his.

He gave the answer he'd carefully prepared if the question came up. "I have every intention of finding a wife, my lady. Meg deserves the happiness and security of a mother and a father, if only for a few short years before she marries herself."

"And have you a particular lady in mind?"

"I do, although I have yet to approach her with my proposal," he admitted, struggling not to smile.

"As the king seems much in the business of matchmaking of late, I'm surprised he has not found you a wife. But, then again, you are not a woman, so perhaps he does not see the need to interfere with your future plans." The sweet timbre of her voice had turned to acid.

Hugh fought not to squirm in his chair. He imagined her shock if she knew how close she'd come to heart of the matter. And that she was the bride Edward had chosen for him. With only a cursory glance at the board, he shoved a piece forward.

Joanna's face brightened. She pounced on it with her knight and scooped it up. "Beware, my lord. Your queen is within my sights."

"I think all this pleasant chatter is naught but a carefully designed ploy to distract me from the game, my lady." Hugh flashed her his most charming smile, relieved the game had intruded on the uncomfortable direction of their conversation.

Their gazes collided. Her cheeks grew pink under his scrutiny. The tip of her tongue swept across her bottom lip. An image of that tongue licking the head of his cock flashed before him. Once again it swelled with longing. His fingers balled into fists on his lap as he fought the urge to sweep the board away, drag Joanna to her feet and kiss her until she begged for mercy.

Joanna broke the growing silence between them. She gave a breathless laugh. "It seems I've been found out." She looked down at the playing piece in her hand and set it with the others she'd captured from him.

Hugh took a deep breath, forcing the lustful vision of her lying with her skirts flung up to her waist writhing beneath him with pleasure from his mind. "Since it worked so well, perhaps I shall try your tactic myself. There is something I've wanted to ask you."

Joanna nodded. "Very well, my lord."

"What is this antipathy you have against the Earl of Reston? He has the king's ear and is well respected at court. It seems odd that you would take such an intense dislike to a man you've never met."

Her soft mouth tightened. "I have met him."

A fist of surprise punched Hugh in the stomach. She spoke with certainty, but he was equally certain they had never met. Hiding his consternation, he commented casually, "Now that is odd, my lady. When he spoke of the coming match between the two of you, the earl indicated he'd never had the pleasure of meeting you." He shot her his most charming smile. "I confess I believed him, since after making your acquaintance I'm sure he could not have forgotten you."

The compliment bounced off Joanna like an arrow shot into a stone wall. Her full lips tightened. "I am not at all surprised that the earl professes no knowledge of our encounter since he was drunk at the time."

From the expression of disgust on her face, it was evident that even after nine years, she still remembered the incident. He, on the other hand, was at a complete loss.

"Where did this unpleasant event take place?" he asked, racking his mind once again for some memory of their meeting.

"'Twas shortly after Robert and I married. He was summoned along with many other lords, to a council with the king. Queen Philippa expressed a wish to meet the wives of her husband's supporters, and knowing that I had never been to Windsor, Robert took me with him."

Hugh lifted his bishop and slid it slantwise two spaces, barely glancing at the board. "So 'twas your husband who introduced you to the earl?"

She shook her head. "I saw him across the hall sitting with some other highly placed lords, but we were never formally introduced. We met by chance in the hallway outside my chambers later that night."

Hugh fought to keep his face expressionless. The time frame would have been a few weeks after his wife's death. Much of the time during that visit to Windsor he'd been lost in a drunken haze, trying to escape the grief gnawing at his heart. He glanced at Joanna. From the pinched look of her mouth and the angry glint in her eyes her memory of the aforementioned event was still crystal clear. And it was not a good one.

"What happened?" he asked, in a neutral voice.

Angry spots of color tinted her cheeks. "The earl was drunk and mistook me for one of the chambermaids. He tried to kiss me and put his hands down my..." Her flush deepened. "Well, I suppose you can imagine that part for yourself."

Hugh groaned inwardly. He had no doubt every word she said was true. Seeking comfort and escape, there'd been a string of faceless and nameless women whose beds he'd shared those few, terrible black weeks after Elayne's death—a fact that gave him no sense of pride. If Edward hadn't stepped in and given him a mission in France, Hugh might still be wallowing in a sea of ale and women. How to explain that to Joanna?



“’Tis no excuse my lady, but you did say he was far into his cups. And the upper halls are poorly lit. Had he been sober, I’m sure the earl would never have accosted a lady, especially one who was another man’s wife.”

Joanna swept his bishop from the board with a snort of disdain. “You may excuse his behavior, but I will not. His drunkenness I can forgive. I’ve seen Robert and my father in their cups, as you call it, on occasion.”

“Then what?”

She raised her blue eyes to him. “He’d just lost his wife, my lord. How could he even think of another woman at such a time? Even if he did not love her, he owed her a modicum of respect. The poor lady had barely grown cold in her grave. And he deserted their daughter as well, choosing to drink and lech at court rather than to stay with his poor, motherless babe. What respect can I have for such a man?”

Stung by her cold, hard words, Hugh stiffened. So this was the cause of her enmity. Believing as she did, no wonder she despised him. But she knew only a small part of the truth. Barely nineteen at the time, and newly wedded, what had she known about the agonizing grief of holding a loved one in your arms, while helplessly watching as their life’s blood drained away. Or the dreadful fear that your child would be worse off in your keeping than in another’s? Or the million regrets that weighed on your mind and heart as you lay under the cold stars on a distant battlefield?

He swallowed the spate of angry words that rose to his tongue. The shadows of grief that lingered in her eyes reminded him that life had since taught Joanna about the deep pain of death and separation. No doubt she too bore the burden of unfulfilled opportunities. If she knew the truth, perhaps she would not be so quick to condemn him now. *Then tell her – now before this goes any farther. You’ll have to tell her who you really are eventually.*

He weighed his choices. On the one hand, he dreaded the idea of seeing her blue eyes filled with disgust when she discovered his identity. On the other hand, sometimes

the most direct action was the best—like pulling a tooth—one hard yank and a jolt of pain. But it faded quickly and was soon forgotten.

As he debated the best course of action, she moved her rook. “I have your king in check, my lord,” she announced with a triumphant smile.

Hugh glanced down and moved the first piece that came to hand—his remaining knight.

She swept it away with her Queen. “Check.”

His attention jerked back to the board. After a quick perusal he saw that she was correct. He moved his king one space to the left toward her queen. She moved her rook to block his attack. They chased each other’s few remaining pieces back and forth across the board. After a time, Joanna sighed and sat back in her chair. “It appears that we have played to a draw, my lord.”

“Aye,” he agreed. *Stalemate! And not only in this game.* Each time he’d thought he’d made progress in his siege on her heart and body, she managed with deft skill to place another obstacle between them. Perhaps he needed to rethink his strategy. Once again he considered telling her the truth. But if he spoke too soon it could destroy the delicate balance he’d achieved. He would wait a little longer. Let her get to know him as plain Hugh DeBracy before he finally confessed his true identity. Once she knew him better, she’d be more willing to forgive him his deception. Or so he hoped. As a strategy it wasn’t much, but at the moment, it was the only one he had to go on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alys sat on the side of the bed she and Walt shared in their small chamber off the kitchen. Behind her she heard her husband as he undressed and went about his nightly rituals. The bed frame creaked and the mattress shifted beneath her as he climbed in.

“What think you of Sir Hugh?” she asked as she dragged a wooden comb through her hair.

Walt's yawn was followed by the sound of him smacking his pillow into shape. The bed shook again as he resettled himself. "He seems right enough." His voice sounded wary.

That was the problem with having been married for nearly twenty years. He knew her ways all too well. She laid the comb aside and began plaiting her hair. "He and Lady Joanna appear to be getting on well."

"Alys! Don't be meddling in our lady's business."

She smiled at the warning growl in his voice. When he was knight to Lady Joanna's father many years ago, the younger knights and squires serving under him had trembled when he spoke in that voice. She'd simply found it endearing. Flipping her braid over her shoulder, she scooted about on the bed so she could see him. "You have no more desire to see our lady living at the abbey than I do."

"True, but 'tis not our place to play matchmaker between her and some strange knight deposited on our doorstep. What do we know of him really?"

Alys ticked off Sir Hugh's finer points on her fingers. "One, he served the king in France so he must be well placed in court. Two, he's widowed and has a daughter. Three, he's a fair man and no doubt a decent master, else he wouldn't have set his hand so readily to helping you and Hal today. And..." Her lips lifted in a sly smirk. "Four, he's handsome as the devil."

Walt gave a snort. "Only a woman would think that a worthy consideration when choosing the proper husband."

"The flower with the brightest color and sweetest nectar attracts the most bees," Alys shot back.

"And would our lady be the bee or the flower?"

"Does it matter? My point is that Sir Hugh may be the answer to our prayers. If I'm right, our lady could find happiness again and we wouldn't have to leave Ashwood Hall. What harm can it do to encourage them a bit?"

Walt's graying brows drew together. "The king might feel differently. 'Tis the Earl of Reston he has chosen for our lady to wed. Not this Sir Hugh out of a snowstorm."

"All the king cares for is that bit of greenwood beyond our walls," she scoffed.

Despite her words, a momentary doubt nibbled at the back of her mind. *Was she being foolish for persisting in this?* Alys discarded the idea. She had a sense about these things. She could feel it in her bones that she was on the right path. It was everyone else who needed convincing. She hid a smile as she looked over at her husband. She knew just where to begin.

She tossed back her braid and crawled across the bed to Walt's side. The wide neckline of her smock slid down over one shoulder. She placed her hand high on the blanket covering his thigh. "I'm only suggesting that you talk to Sir Hugh about his future plans and see if our lady fits into them."

Walt's hazel eyes darkened at the sultry smile she sent him. He pulled the blanket aside. Dragging her smock over her head, she tossed it to the floor and slipped under the covers. Pulling her down on his chest he picked up the end of her long braid and rubbed it between his fingers. "Forget Sir Hugh's plans, woman. I have one of my own."

Alys widened her eyes and flashed him a pert smile. "And what would that be, husband?" Walt answered with a smirk. Before she could add anything he rolled over, pinning her beneath him. Her gasp of surprise turned into soft laughter as she felt his hard cock pressing into her belly. "Is this part of that plan of yours?"

Walt brushed his lips across her mouth before moving down to nuzzle the side of her neck. "Aye," he murmured. "What think you of it so far?" His warm breath brushed her ear and sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

"'Tis too soon to tell," was all she managed before he took her mouth in a deep kiss. Warmth kindled in the pit of her stomach. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer. Their tongues met in a teasing dance. She caught the tip of his and sucked on it. His breath hitched in his throat.

His mouth left hers and took a wandering path down her neck and across her breasts, settling finally on one nipple. He licked a circle around it then flicked at it with the tip of his tongue. It was Alys' turn to moan. "Ah, so you like that."

"You know I do."

Walt lifted his head and sent her the teasing grin reserved only for her. It still had the power to set her insides quivering with desire after all these years. He bent over her again and sucked her nipple deep into his mouth, while his hand massaged her other breast. The soft heat in her middle sparked into a fire. She dug her fingers into the lean muscles of his back. Despite being nearly fifty, constant labor around the manor house and its grounds kept him fit.

Kissing his way up her neck, Walt took her mouth in a demanding kiss that made her heartbeat accelerate. He pulled back and smiled down at her. "That should get the kettle simmering."

"It's a start." She slipped her hand between his legs and stroked his cock. It grew thicker beneath her fingers. "And I see you have the proper tool to stoke the fire to a boil." She tightened her grip, her lips curving upward at the sudden catch in his breathing.

"Comes of having a wife who's handy in the kitchen." His voice was husky. He nuzzled the side of her neck and sucked her earlobe into his mouth, letting his teeth scrape across its tender edge. Shivers of delight raced through her and her *queynt* clenched.

He set his attention to her breasts again, teasing each nipple into a hard, little peak. While his mouth was busy the fingers of his right hand slid down her side. He parted her folds with calloused fingers and found the swollen bud hidden beneath blonde curls and brought it to the same state. Heat flowed along Alys' veins. Moisture gushed between her legs.

"Hmm, now that's made you slick as goose grease."

Alys cuffed his shoulder. "What a thing to say!"

Walt lifted his head and sent her an unrepentant grin. "Certes I'm no minstrel, but 'twas meant as a compliment. I like you hot and wet for me." As he spoke he slipped a finger inside her channel and moved it slowly in and out.

Alys moaned at the delicious sensation and parted her legs. "Keep that up and mayhap I'll forgive you."

"Tell me what you want, love," Walt said, his breathing nearly as ragged as hers. Another finger joined the first one stretching her while his thumb massaged the swollen bud between her legs. She drove her hips upward, seeking more of the exhilarating friction. A tingle started in her belly and moved lower.

"Your cock...inside," she gasped, writhing on the bed as Walt continued his maddening assault on her body. She arched her back, letting her thighs fall open in invitation.

"Now or should I tarry a little longer?" Walt asked, a wicked glint in his eyes, his fingers moving more rapidly inside her.

"Now," Alys commanded. She reached and grasped his cock, moving her hand slowly up and down his erection before flicking the sensitive head with her fingertips.

Walt inhaled sharply. Straddling her, he brushed a kiss across her mouth. "Bossy wench."

Alys guided him to her opening and he pushed inside. He moved slowly at first and then pumped into her hard and fast. She wrapped her legs around his hips and his balls slapped against her plump backside with each thrust. Walt found her mouth. Their tongues dueled as he tugged a nipple with his right hand, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to her *queynt*.

Achy need became a voracious demand. Her inner muscles clenched and pulsating waves of exquisite pleasure surged through her. The spasms dragged Walt's cock even deeper until he banged against her womb. He buried his face in the side of her neck and groaned. A moment later his cock pulsed inside her and she felt his hot seed spurt into her as he found his completion.

They lay unmoving for a long moment their heavy breathing the only sound in the small room. Walt slowly slid off her and onto his back. He reached out and pulled her into the crook of his arm. "Sweet Jesu, but you're a lusty wench."

"Are you complaining?" she asked. She pressed a kiss into his bare shoulder.

"A man would have to be a fool to do so." She felt his lips on her hair. "And I'm no fool."

Alys snuggled deeper into his arms. "I wouldn't have married you otherwise. And you are also a fine judge of character. 'Tis why you will have no trouble discovering the direction of Sir Hugh's heart."

Beneath her cheek Walt's chest rose and fell. "No fool at all unless it comes to you."

She smiled sleepily and patted his arm. "Well, love, that's as it should be."

\* \* \* \* \*

Walt gave Lady Joanna's mare a forkful of hay, watching Sir Hugh from the corner of his eye. The two men were in the stable caring for the horses. Through the door they'd left open for light to work by, the softly falling snow was already filling in their tracks. The air was chill inside, smelling of animals, meadow hay, old straw and manure. He and Hal had moved Dove and Walt's brown gelding, Holdfast, into one stall. Hugh's huge stallion filled the next stall. Bessie and Brownie, their resident cows, were tethered nearby. The animals huddled together, using their body heat to keep warm.

Straightening, he leaned his wooden rake against the stall rail and gave Dove an absentminded pat. She nudged his shoulder with her nose, looking for her usual treat. Walt filched the withered apples from Alys' carefully hoarded supply. His mind preoccupied with other matters, he'd forgotten to grab one on his way out of the kitchen. Sir Hugh, the reason for his distraction, worked a few feet away, mucking out the area around his destrier.

"Sampson. 'Tis a good name and true. He's a giant of a horse," Walt observed.

Hugh looked up and grinned. "Aye, men have fled at the mere sight of him charging toward them."

"I'm not surprised." Walt reached out and ran an admiring hand down the stallion's thick neck. "My Crispin was a sturdy fellow, but he'd hang his head for shame if he were here."

Hugh leaned on his pitchfork. "You were a knight?"

"I served as squire and then knight for Lady Joanna's father. After I married Alys, he made me Lady Joanna's personal guard. When she married Sir Robert, Alys and I came with her to Ashwood Hall."

Walt continued to stroke Sampson as Hugh's keen gray eyes assessed him. "Why did you not say so? I mistook you and your wife for servants. Although 'tis clear you act more like..." His voice trailed away.

"Family," Walt supplied with a faint smile. "Alys is distant kin to Lady Joanna. We serve her in any way we can. Alys loves to cook and I'm a fair hand at running the estate. The manor is small and there are plenty of village lasses and lads to help out when needed."

"It appears a good life."

"Aye, Ashwood Hall is not as large as some of her neighbors, but the land is fertile, our orchards produce some of the best apples and cherries around. And then there's that bit of forest the king is so fond of. It provides rabbit, venison and boar aplenty for our small household." He couldn't keep his chest from swelling a bit with pride as he spoke.

"What think you then, Sir Walter," Hugh asked with a frown, "of your lady's plan to give all of this," he waved a hand, "to the abbey?"

Walt fought to keep his surprise from showing. He'd been looking for an opportunity to lead Hugh into conversation about Lady Joanna and the man had obligingly opened the door himself. Never one to question fate, Walt walked through.



“’Tis not what I would wish for Lady Joanna, but ’tis her right to make the decision. Under the circumstances the lady has few options.”

“She could do as the king commands and marry the Earl of Reston.”

“Aye, there is that. And so I’ve told her myself. But she’s dead set against the man. Her heart near broke when Sir Robert and little Robin were taken so fast with the fever. ’Twould add too heavy a burden to a heart already wounded to force her into a marriage with a man she detests.”

Hugh shifted his weight. “Perhaps if she consented to meet the man, her objections would soften. He’s not a bad sort. I believe he would treat your lady fairly.”

“Ah, so you know him?”

“Well enough.”

“If I remember correctly, the earl fought in France with the king and like you, he lost a wife. Seems to me that the two of you have much in common.”

Hugh averted his gaze for a moment then looked back with a shrug. “I never gave it much thought, but I suppose ’tis so.”

Walt stroked his chin. “Perhaps if the king were to choose another knight, Lady Joanna might be willing to comply.” He shot Hugh a hard look remembering what Alys had said the night before. “After all, it can’t make much difference to King Edward who the man is. ’Tis that fine piece of greenwood he’s got his eye on. Seems to me one knight would be as good as another if that be truly his desire. What think ye, my lord?”

Surprise quickly followed by an odd flash of what might have been guilt flickered over Hugh’s face before his features settled into a look of guarded neutrality. “You may have a point, but I’m not sure many men would like to test it.”

“True. Of course, if the deed were done properly with the blessing of the church the king would have to accept it.”

“Aye, at least for as long as it took for him to arrest the fool brazen enough to marry the lady without his say and then hang him from the nearest tree.”

"True, 'tis a risk. But an invitation to do a bit of hunting first would no doubt soothe the royal temper," Walt said with a grin.

An answering smile lit Hugh's face. He glanced at Sampson whose huge head was near his shoulder and scratched him behind one large ear. When he looked at Walt again his expression was bland. "'Tis an intriguing thought. And as you said, Lady Joanna might well be worth such a risk."

He leaned his pitchfork against the side of the stall and reached for his cloak slung over the top rail. He flung it around his shoulders and jerked his chin toward the half-open shed door. "The snow is picking up again. We'd best get that firewood we promised your Alys."

"Aye," Walt agreed.

He pulled his own threadbare mantle closer, his gaze sweeping over the horses one final time before he followed Hugh out of the shed and secured its door. As they headed for the woodpile, he studied the man tromping along at his side from the corner of his eye. Hugh was affable and well-mannered and bore himself with the confidence of a seasoned knight. Good traits from Walt's perspective. He had a home, a sweet daughter and a need for a wife. Also good. Yet, for all his easy-going manner and straight-talk, an odd look passed over Hugh's face whenever mention of the Earl of Reston was made.

They reached the woodpile and Hugh began filling his arms with logs for the kitchen fireplace. Walt frowned as he picked up sticks of kindling. He was still uncertain about the man. Alys, on the other hand, had no such concerns. She was sure Sir Hugh might be the salvation of Lady Joanna and Ashwood Hall.

Arms filled with wood, Walt tramped the new-fallen snow down on the path he and Hugh had forged earlier, stomping down his own worries at the same time. Alys knew about these things. Despite his own misgivings, he trusted her instincts. Besides, his mouth lifted in a wry smile, once she set her mind on something there was no

stopping her. A force of nature, his Alys was. If she thought Hugh and Joanna needed a bit of encouragement, then he'd help her find a way to do that.

## **Chapter Six**

The moment Hugh deposited his load of wood next to Walt's and disappeared through the kitchen door, Alys turned to her husband. "Well," she demanded, hands on hips, "what did you find out?"

Instead of answering her, Walt lowered himself onto a stool and stretched his feet out toward the fire. With an impatient huff, Alys dragged another stool closer and flopped down. She poked him in the side with the wooden spoon she'd forgotten to put down.

"Leave off woman." He pushed it away. Despite his rough tone, she saw the corners of his mouth quirk.

"Walt," she began in a threatening tone, spoon lifted again for another attack.

Her husband's mouth widened in a grin. He grabbed the spoon from her hand and tapped it on his knee. "That destrier of Sir Hugh's is aptly named. 'Tis a giant of a horse. Never saw the likes before."

Alys rolled her eyes. "I didn't send you to the stables with Sir Hugh to hear about his horse. What think you of the man himself, now that you've had time to talk to him?"

"He appears to be genuine in his regard of Lady Joanna. And yet..." His voice trailed away and he stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"And yet what?" Alys demanded.

"He seems uncomfortable whenever mention of the Earl of Reston comes up. He tries to hide it, but there's almost a guilty air about Sir Hugh, as if he knows more than he's letting on."

"Well, of course he looks guilty. After all, the earl is the king's chosen husband for our lady. Interfering in the king's business is dangerous."

"Sir Hugh was of the same opinion."

Alys sucked in her lower lip, considering. "Do you think that means he has no interest in our lady?" she asked.

"Oh, I think Sir Hugh's more than interested. He even indicated he might be willing to face the king's wrath."

"Lady Joanna is worth it," Alys maintained stoutly. "Still, I like Sir Hugh and would not wish to see him lose favor with the king, especially as he has a child to think of."

"Then why are we encouraging this?"

"Because 'twould be best for our lady. And for Sir Hugh and his daughter, as well, I think."

"And for us," Walt said with a knowing look.

Alys drew in a deep breath preparing to argue the point, and then slowly let it out. Her husband knew her heart all too well. "I love living at Ashwood Hall. We've been happy here. I have no wish to leave it. Nor, if you be honest, do you."

"Nay, I have no desire to leave. Still 'tis Lady Joanna's decision to make, not ours."

"'Tis a foolish decision," Alys cried out, tears trembling on her lower lashes. "Our lady will be miserable if she gives the manor to the church and moves to Thornbury Abbey. Even if she refuses to believe that, we both know 'tis so."

Walt put his arm around her in a comforting embrace. Alys laid her head against his shoulder. "Aye, but what can we do about it?" he asked.

"Encourage Sir Hugh to change her mind."

"You truly think he can do that?"

"Aye. I believe he may be the only one who can."

Walt regarded her with a raised brow. "Because...?"

"I can't say exactly, but there's something about Joanna when she's around him that gives me hope that her heart is not as dead as she would believe."

"So what do we do now?" Walt asked.

Alys' lips curved in a smile. Giving him, a quick kiss on the cheek she jumped to her feet. "Leave that to me."

Walt shook his head and groaned. "Poor Lady Joanna."

Alys snatched the spoon from his hand and gave him a playful tap on the shoulder. "Poor Lady Joanna, indeed. You'll see, if this works, she'll thank us one day."

"I hope you're right," Walt said, his tone of voice filled with less enthusiasm than hers.

"So do I," Alys muttered as she grabbed an apple from a bowl and began to peel it. The peel fell onto the table in the shape of a lopsided heart. A slow smile lit her face as she stared down at it. 'Twas a sure sign that heaven approved her plan. Pushing any doubts to the far corners of her mind, she picked up another apple. All would be well.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gray afternoon light was fading when Joanna walked into the solar heading toward the kitchen and the light supper the household shared at that time of day. She halted in mid-step, her eyes going wide at the sight of Alys putting the finishing touches on a small table with two chairs set before the fireplace. The crackling flames cast a warm glow over the crisp white cloth and the silver plates and cups Joanna had carefully packed a few days ago.

"What's all this?" she asked with a frown.

Alys looked up, her round face flushed from the heat of the fire. "I thought you and Sir Hugh might enjoy your supper here in the solar tonight." She flashed a cheerful smile, but Joanna noted the older woman avoided looking straight at her.

"The kitchen would have done as well. And put you to less work."

"Oh, 'tis no trouble. Besides it gave me something to liven up the day." She nodded toward the windows. Outside snow fell in a steady curtain of white. Alys pushed a salt cellar to one side to make a space for the wine pitcher in the middle of the table. More

items Joanna clearly remembered packing away, then with a quick bob of her head Alys hurried from the room.

Joanna walked over and examined the carefully laid table with a sigh. It was a sweet gesture on Alys' part, but if this kept up, they'd have to repack everything in the manor house. Her brow furrowed as she ran the tip of a finger around the edge of one of the cups. Was it possible that was Alys' real intent? The older woman made no pretense that she didn't approve of the move to the abbey. Mayhap she thought if their departure was delayed that the Earl of Reston would arrive and prevent their going at all. After all Joanna's entire plan hinged on signing the papers at the abbey before the earl arrived with the king's writ forcing her into an unwanted marriage.

A tiny ember of anger sprang to life as she contemplated the idea that Alys was deliberately trying to delay her. She pushed the unworthy thought from her mind. Alys might not approve, but Joanna knew she would never do anything that would make Joanna miserable. And marriage to the odious Earl of Reston would do just that.

The door opened behind her and Sir Hugh entered. He strolled over and surveyed the table with an admiring glance. "Whose idea was this?"

Joanna gave a rueful shake of her head. "Alys'. She thought our spirits needed to be lifted."

Hugh's mouth curved into a grin. "She's got a good head on her shoulders, your Alys." He picked up the wine pitcher and filled two cups. With a bow he handed one to Joanna. Lifting the other to his lips, he smiled at her over the rim. "Here's to Lady Alys and to lifting our spirits!"

She accepted the cup and took a sip. "I cannot help but notice that you call her Lady Alys now."

"Aye. Sir Walter told me he was once knight to your father and that she is a distant cousin. I thought it only right to use their proper titles."

Joanna found herself absurdly pleased by Hugh's acceptance of her dear friends as equals. Without thinking she smiled up at him, noticing not for the first time the glint of

silver in his gray eyes. His gaze darkened and she realized she was still staring up at him. A warm flush suffused her cheeks. "They have been family to me for so long that I no longer think of their titles any longer, but I am happy they are receiving their due."

The door to the solar opened and Alys reappeared. Gilly and Hal trailed behind her bearing trays. Alys quickly filled their plates with food from the various dishes, then curtsied and wished them a pleasant meal. Gilly stared at them with blatant speculation. She ducked her head and hid her giggles behind her hand when Hugh looked her way. Alys shoved both servants toward the door. Before leaving, she paused to light the candles in the wall sconces on each side of the fireplace.

As night fell, the soft candlelight joined the glow from the flickering flames in the fireplace. Their meal of baked onions, venison stew, bread, cheese and apples baked with raisins and honey was simple, but hearty. After eating in silence for a few minutes, Joanna picked up the pitcher and smiled shyly at Hugh across the table. "More wine, my lord?" He held out his goblet and she refilled it. She took a deep breath, her earlier tension easing as Hugh launched into a tale of a terrible meal he'd had on the battlefield.

She listened intently, sipping her wine and nibbling on a piece of cheese. She moved onto the apples, laughing heartily as he finished the story with, "And then Sir Alton's mangy dog who no one was watching made off with the whole haunch of mutton before any of us had so much as a bite."

She laughed so hard at his droll expression that she started to cough. As she reached for her goblet, the fingers of her right hand ended up in the dish of apples. Sputtering and coughing, she grabbed her goblet with her left and took a swallow of wine while holding her other hand up. Honey dripped from her fingers onto the table.

"'Tis good to see you laugh," Hugh said as she sought for her napkin to clean up the mess. "You should do it more often."

Joanna paused, her napkin half forgotten. He was right. It had been a very long time since she'd laughed and felt so free and easy. A wave of mingled guilt and sadness



assailed her. Her lips curved down. "In truth, my lord, I have not had much to laugh about."

"Aye, your losses have been a heavy burden on your heart. But 'tis no sin to laugh and enjoy life again, Lady Joanna."

The warmth of his eyes and the kindness in his tone brought a flood of unexpected tears. She rose and turned away to hide them. She heard the scrape of Hugh's chair as he pushed it back and stood up. A moment later his strong hands settled on her shoulders. He gently pulled her around to face him. Unwilling to let him see her tear-streaked face, she kept her head down. He lifted it with a hand under her chin.

"Forgive me, my lady, I did not mean to make you weep."

She clasped her hands in front of her. "Nay, 'tis me you must forgive. I've spoiled our evening."

His lips curled in a half-smile. "The evening is not over yet. I warrant before it is, I shall see your sweet smile again."

"Perhaps another night, my lord, but not this one." It saddened her to see the merry light fade from his eye, but what she said was true. All she wanted at the moment was the solace of her room.

She sniffed and raised her hands to dry her face. Before she could scrub her cheeks, Hugh caught her wrists, holding them captive. "You still have some honey on your fingers," he said in response to her questioning glance. She looked down, her eyes widening in dismay as she noted both hands were now a sticky mess.

"Let me help." Although his expression remained solemn a twinkle lit his eyes. Instead of using his napkin as she assumed, he lifted her hands to his lips and one by one sucked the honey from her fingers.

The sensation of the heat and moisture of his mouth on her flesh sent tingles of excitement skittering across her skin. She inhaled sharply, trying to ignore the wild fluttering in her stomach. Hugh finished his ministrations by turning her hands over and placing a warm kiss in the middle of each palm.

Joanna knew she should chastise him for his bold behavior, but the words stuck to the back of her throat. Hugh's mouth moved to her wrist. Her pulse leaped as his lips traced a slow path over the blue veins showing beneath the pale cream of her skin. She tried to pull away, but his grip tightened. Slowly he drew her hands behind her back. The movement brought their bodies to within a hair's breadth of touching. With her arms trapped behind her back, she was forced to tip her head to look up into his face. The smoldering caress of his eyes made her shudder. Her lips parted, but whether in invitation or protest she wasn't sure. Before she could think clearly about it, Hugh lowered his head and captured her mouth in a kiss.

If it had been rough and demanding, she might have found the strength to break free. But she wasn't prepared for the gentle almost tentative pressure. His warm lips moved over hers, giving more than they took. He tasted of wine and his own peculiar maleness. Joanna's heart beat wildly. The feel and taste of him awakened hungers she'd buried deep within. Her legs trembled and she feared she might fall. Hugh released her wrists. As if they had a mind of their own her arms lifted to twine around his neck.

His arms went around her waist. Without conscious thought, she pressed herself against him, wanting to feel every inch of his lean body against hers. *This is madness*, Joanna thought. Hugh kissed her again and she forgot to think. He dragged his mouth from hers raining kisses over her cheek and the line of her jaw, ending by sucking her earlobe into his mouth. Joanna bit back a moan, but couldn't control the shivers that raced up and down her spine.

Hugh kissed his way down the side of her throat. "You are so beautiful," he murmured. He raised his head and traced her lower lip with the tip of his tongue. "And you taste like warm honey straight from the comb."

Joanna's head swam. She leaned her head against his broad chest. She'd had too much wine. She could feel the rapid beating of his heart. Her own beat almost as fast. This was all wrong. But it felt so right. She felt him press a kiss to her hair. "Let me pleasure you, my lady."

His smoky voice seared through her. She trembled and felt his lips curve in a smile against her forehead. He gently forced her head back so that she was looking up at him. "I think —" she began.

"Stop thinking," he ordered, taking her mouth in a fierce kiss. His tongue slipped between her parted lips, darting in and out in teasing forays. Hers joined his in an intimate dance. Her insides quivered and her knees grew weak. He must have felt her sway for he swept her up in his arms and carried her in a few long steps to the doorway that led to her chamber. Barely breaking his stride, he swept the curtain to one side. He set her on her feet before the fireplace.

One hand to her breast, to still the pounding in her heart, Joanna watched him build up the fire until flames leaped high and the room filled with their crackling. Returning to her side, Hugh turned her around. Cool air touched the nape of her neck as he lifted her heavy hair to the side. He kissed away the goose bumps that had risen. With sure fingers he undid the lacing at the back of her kirtle. He drew it over her head and let it drop to the floor.

Warm lips pressed into the curve where her neck met her shoulder. "Don't move." Cold seeped between them as he stepped back. Soft rustling noises told her he was undressing. She jumped and gave a soft gasp when his large hands spanned her waist. He turned her to face him. Her gaze lowered, pausing at the sight of his erection.

The corners of Hugh's mouth quirked upward as he noted the direction of her glance. She swiftly looked away, her cheeks burning. "Nay, do not look away. I feel no shame in desiring you."

He cupped Joanna's face between his palms and kissed her. His lips moved over hers gently at first, then harder. One hand left her cheek and skimmed down her side then up and over her belly, grazing the curve of her breast. Despite the thin barrier of her linen shift she felt a jolt of excitement. Her heart pounded and her breathing grew ragged.

He broke off kissing her and gently pushed her down on the end of the bed. Kneeling, he removed her shoes then slipped his hands up her legs to the garters that held her stockings in place, stripping them from her legs in one smooth movement. "Lie back," he ordered.

She complied, her insides tightening with uncertainty. Was he planning to take her in this position, half on and half off the bed? Pushing her shift higher, he gently forced her legs apart and stroked the inside of her thighs. He parted her folds, bent and ran his tongue along her woman's cleft. Joanna gasped and warmth rippled through her at the unexpected sensation.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I learned in France."

His tongue slipped inside, tasting her like a bee sipping nectar from a flower. She sighed and opened her thighs wider. His mouth moved higher to lick and suck the swollen, aching bud between her legs. She jerked and moaned as the scrape of his teeth sent a jolt like lightning straight to her *queynt*. Moisture gushed and she could smell her own arousal. Shame swept over her and she stiffened and tried to close her legs.

"Let go, my lady," he whispered. "There's no need to hide your desire."

Hugh firmly pried her thighs apart again. "God created this beautiful body of yours and made it so that it could enjoy these sensations. He would not have done so unless he meant for you to find pleasure in lovemaking."

"I'm not sure Father Timothy would agree," she said breathlessly.

Hugh snorted, his warm breath making her aroused flesh tingle all the more. "Father Timothy doesn't know what he's been missing."

Stunned by such sacrilege, Joanna gasped. She pushed herself up on her elbows, her eyes round with shock. "Hugh, you'll burn for sure if you say such things."

Gray eyes twinkling, he agreed, "No doubt." One brow slanted and he sent her a wicked grin. "But I wager, you'll burn first, my lady."

Joanna's eyes widened at she took his meaning. Despite her shock, a strangled laugh escaped her. Her laughter became a gasp of pleasure as he stroked his fingers over her swollen pearl in a teasing foray. His mouth followed and she fell back on the bed. He did make her burn. Every nerve in her body seemed to be on fire. And she wanted more.

As if he understood, Hugh stoked the fires of her desires. He licked and massaged her flesh until she was in a frenzy of need. She thrust her fingers into his thick hair and rocked against his mouth seeking release.

He splayed one hand over her belly to hold her still while he lapped at her aching flesh. Scalding heat filled her when he slid a finger inside her channel and began to move it in and out. She groaned. "Don't stop," she gasped, startled to hear the husky tone of her voice.

A second finger joined the first. They plunged in and out in a steady rhythm that matched each lap of his tongue. Heat built and became a blazing fire. The slow steady tension that had been building inside her crested. "Oh, Hugh," she breathed as he sucked at her bud at the same time his fingers buried themselves deep inside. Joanna squeezed her eyes shut, seeing a burst of stars in the darkness beneath her lids as her *queynt* clenched then exploded in a series of spasms. Her hips jerked and her body shook at the intensity of the spasms that rolled through her.

Hugh was right, she thought as she floated in haze of pleasure, Father Timothy had no idea what he was missing.

Hugh eased his way up the bed until he lay beside Joanna. She turned her head and smiled at him from beneath heavy-lidded eyes still dazed with passion. Her autumn hair was spread over the pillow and her body lay with the limp abandon of a woman well pleased. He pushed himself up on one elbow, bent and kissed her.

"I can taste myself on your lips," she said with a hint of frown between her winged brows.

"Do you find it unpleasant?" Personally he loved the sweet taste of her lips mingled with her feminine musk.

"Nay, 'tis just different." She flicked him a considering look. "Do you taste the same?"

"That's a question you'll have to answer yourself."

"Perhaps I will." She started to sit up, but he caught her shoulders.

"Later." At her disappointed glance, he bent and swept his tongue over her half-parted lower lip. Not giving her time to protest further, he pulled her shift over her head and tossed it to the floor. "I have other plans at the moment," he added with a mock leer.

"Something else you learned in France?"

He made a face. "The French don't know everything about lovemaking. We English have a few tricks of our own."

He reached out, lifted a long chestnut curl from her breast and tucked it behind her ear. At the soft brush of his fingers, her nipple puckered, begging to be touched again. Unable to resist he sucked it into his mouth. Not wanting to ignore her other breast he lavished attention on it with his hand. Joanna pushed into him with a soft groan of pleasure that brought his cock to full attention. God's Blood, but he wanted to plunge it inside her welcoming woman's channel. He tamped down his lust. This was their first time together and he wanted Joanna to enjoy every moment.

He dragged his mouth away from her breast and took her mouth in a fierce kiss of possession. Their tongues met and dueled in a teasing dance that left them both breathing raggedly.

His fingers swept down over the silken skin of her belly, swirled around the perfect seashell indentation of her navel before dipping lower. He pressed his palm against her

mons then slipped his hand between her thighs. He found the bud hidden within the soft curls and rubbed the pad of his thumb over it until it was rigid with need.

He rolled over and covered her body with his. His hands tangled in her hair and he captured her lips in a deep kiss. When he drew back he saw a flash of fear in the depths of her eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked tenderly stroking her cheek.

"I think we should stop," she panted. Her breast heaved and he could see the pulse beating in her throat.

Hugh stared down at her in amazement, his brain fuddled by desire. He laughed and nuzzled her throat. "Surely you would not be so cruel, my lady."

"What if I conceive a child?"

Understanding came like a dash of cold water. "Ah, yes, that could be a problem."

Joanna's soft mouth tightened. "Perhaps you can make light of the subject, but I cannot take such a risk." She placed her hands on his chest and pushed him away.

Hugh pushed back, pinning her arms between them. He bent and pressed a hard kiss on her unresponsive lips. "Forgive me, my lady. I should have been more prepared, but the moment caught me unawares."

She looked confused. "What?"

He grinned. "'Tis something else French. It will ease your fears. Don't move." He kissed her again, then rolled from the bed. Joanna sat up, a puzzled look on her face as he moved to the door that led to the solar.

"You're naked," she said.

His gaze swept over her. "So are you," he pointed out with a grin. "Now wait right there."

He pushed the curtain aside, shivering in the blast of colder air. He dashed across the frigid floor of the solar, slapping at his goose-bump-ridged flesh to warm himself. All in a good cause, he thought as he rummaged through his pack and found what he

needed. He hefted the small leather pouch in his hand, his mouth quirking in a slight smile as he imagined Joanna's reaction to the contents.

Teeth chattering, he returned to the bedroom, pausing to add more wood to the fire and stoke it into a blaze before he rejoined Joanna on the bed. Other than pulling the blankets up, she'd followed his order to stay put. Hugh heaved a mental sigh of relief. He'd half expected that in the short time he'd been gone she'd have come up with some new objection to their lovemaking.

He opened the small leather wallet, pulled out a wrinkled skin-like object with a thin black string dangling from one end. Hugging the blanket to her, Joanna sat up. Brows drawn together, she studied the odd object. She poked it tentatively with one finger then looked at him. "What is it?"

He smiled. "It's called a French sheath."

She pursed her lips. "And what do the French use it for?"

He indicated his cock, which had shrunk a bit in the cold air. "It's a cover of sorts for my randy bird. It will catch my seed so you will be protected from conceiving."

Joanna's eyes widened. "Truly!"

"Truly."

She took it from him and examined the sheath more closely. "What's it made of?"

"Lamb intestine."

"Ah." Her face lit with understanding. "'Tis the same principle as stuffing sausage. This is the casing and you're the..." She glanced down.

"The meat," he finished for her. A slow flush rose up his neck as he spoke. He was glad for the dim light so that she wouldn't see him blush like some callow, untried youth.

As Joanna stared at the sheath dangling from his fingers in silence for a long moment, Hugh saw his chance of making love to her recede. In another second or two,



she would talk herself out of coupling with him. His hopes and his cock perked up when the corners of her mouth tilted upward.

“Robert always did say that the French were an inventive people.” She handed the small lambskin sheath back to him. “Show me how it works.”

Hugh gathered her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly. “I will, but first I must warm both of us up.”

He gently pushed Joanna back on the bed. He dipped his head and took her mouth, nibbling and tasting her. His kiss became more demanding. He thrust his tongue between her lips plundering the warm, sweet cavern beyond. Joanna allowed the exploration for a few seconds then joined him in a teasing battle that left them panting.

He trailed tiny kisses down the slender column of her throat and nuzzled the delicate hollow at its base. She gave a small sigh of pleasure, her fingertips dancing over his shoulders. The gliding caress sent a frisson of heat deep into his belly.

He lowered his head and drew one nipple into his mouth. He sucked it into a glistening, rosy peak then moved on to the other. Joanna arched upward. Her fingers dug into his back, urging him to continue. Her ready response delighted him. He’d had many women in the past nine years, but none of them did to him what Joanna did.

He rubbed his fingers along the seam of her cleft. They came away glistening with her juices. Joanna inhaled sharply and spread her thighs, giving him an invitation to explore every intimate part of her body. He inserted his middle finger inside her channel and moved it slowly in and out. She moaned and bucked against his hand, demanding more. Hugh complied. He slipped a second and then a third finger inside her damp heat, stretching and preparing her.

His cock ached with the need to plunge inside her hot, sweet moisture. When Joanna’s warm hand wrapped around it, he thought he might lose himself and come right there. Inhaling deeply, he mentally repeated snatches of a bawdy drinking song. A poor choice of distraction since the words about sampling the lady’s hidden charms reminded him all too much of what he wanted to do to Joanna.

He broke free of her embrace. Scrabbling under the pillow, he pulled out the wrinkled sheath. "You wished to see how this works," he managed between gritted teeth, struggling to hang on to the last remnants of his crumbling control. Joanna rolled to her side and watched him slip the lambskin over his swollen cock. His fingers fumbled with the silken string. His eyes widened when her warm fingers brushed his hand away. With graceful dispatch she tied the string into a neat bow. His cock jerked and throbbed with anticipation at each light touch of her warm flesh against his.

As soon as the sheath was in place, Hugh took her shoulders and guided her back onto the pillows. Covering her body with his he took possession of her mouth. Joanna kissed him back with equal heat. His heart pounded in his ears and flames licked along his nerve endings. He eased her knees apart. Positioning the head of his cock at the opening of her cleft, he slowly pushed forward.

"I'm no virgin, my lord. You needn't be so careful," Joanna said in a breathless voice.

With one move he buried his cock in her sweet depths and began to move. Their rhythm built. Joanna bucked against him, her fingernails digging into his back, demanding more. Hugh responded. His balls slapped against her bottom with each hard thrust. Joanna gave a soft cry and her internal muscles clamped around him as she reached her completion. He felt the tip of his cock slam against her womb.

The heat coiling in his belly became a roaring fire. He reached his release, crying out as wave after wave of pure pleasure battered him. When he could breathe again, Hugh collapsed next to Joanna. He raised her hand to his lips. "You are a most amazing woman, my lady." She smiled at the compliment. He kissed her fingertips once more then rolled from the bed. The stone floor was like ice. God's Blood it was a wonder his feet didn't freeze fast.

He hurried to the fireplace and added the last of the wood before stripping off the sheath. In two long strides he reached the earthenware pitcher on a small table, broke through the thin film of ice forming over the water and quickly washed the sheath and

laid it beside the bowl to dry. Such items were costly and not easy to replace, so must be reused. Grabbing a nearby towel, he moistened the edge of the cloth and quickly cleaned his cock. Wetting the cloth again he twisted the excess water from it, returned to the bed and handed it to Joanna. When she finished with it, he tossed it across the room, noting with satisfaction the wet thump it made as it landed atop the pitcher.

By now his skin was ridged with goose bumps and his once fine cock had shriveled with the cold. He scooped up the bed covers, climbed under them and pulled Joanna's head to rest on his shoulder. He turned and pressed a kiss to her soft hair. Holding her like this in the aftermath of lovemaking felt right. He knew in that moment that he wanted her beside him like this for the rest of his life. He prayed Joanna would come to feel the same way.

*Deceiver.* The word hovered at the back of his mind. How could Joanna love him when she discovered the man she shared her bed and her person with so eagerly was not Hugh DeBracy but the hated Earl of Reston? He pushed away the image of her beautiful eyes, ablaze with passion a short time ago, filled with loathing when she discovered the truth.

Once she understood the reason behind his deception she'd forgive him, he told himself. He was a hardened soldier. In his nine years in France, he'd never lost a battle he put his mind to. He wasn't about to lose this one, not when the stakes included his and Joanna's future together. Yet, like a worm hidden inside an apple, doubt sank tiny teeth into his heart.

## **Chapter Seven**

Joanna rolled over and opened her eyes. Streaks of light crept through the cracks in the shutters. She had no idea what time she and Hugh had finally fallen asleep. The memory of the reason for the late hour sent a flash of heat to her cheeks. It was difficult for her to believe that the wanton woman who'd eagerly accepted his caresses and kisses was her. After Robert's death, she'd put all human bodily lusts and desires away. She told herself she was content to live out her days in peaceful solitude with the memories of her husband and child for comfort and companionship. And then Hugh had arrived, swept to her doorstep, and into her bed on the wild winds of a winter storm.

She felt a pang of shame at her behavior, at how easily she'd succumbed to him. But more than shame, she felt confusion. It would be easy to blame their night of passion on evil demons seeking to lead them down the road to damnation, but she knew better. What had happened between them was more than a lust-filled carnal slip from the road to paradise. Hugh's gentleness, kindness and merry humor called to her on a deeper level—a level that her beloved Robert had never reached. Why and how that could be true, she didn't know.

She turned onto her side and studied Hugh's face hoping she'd find answers there when she could find none within her own heart. He lay flat on his back, his brown hair tousled. The lines of pain and care that sometimes etched his mouth were almost invisible. In sleep, he looked vulnerable and much younger than he was. A wave of unexpected tenderness washed over her. She reached out and smoothed it from his brow.

"Good morrow, my lady." He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "Hmm, you taste even better in the morning. Better, I vow, than one of Alys' fine breakfasts."

He nibbled his way across the back of her hand with loud smacking noises as if he meant to dine on her.

Even as she laughed at his silliness, her stomach fluttered beneath the warmth of his mouth. Freeing her hand, she sat up. "I fear, my lord that hunger has driven you quite mad."

His lids lifted and gray eyes, clear as lake water, met hers. Mischief glinted in their depths. Before she realized his intent he grabbed her and pulled her down on top of him. "True, my lady and 'tis all your fault."

"My fault," she gasped, all too aware of his muscled chest pressing into her soft breasts.

He caught a long strand of hair and wrapped it around his finger. "Aye, your fault, for you have driven me mad with desire, my lady of the snow."

Joanna's heart beat in slow beats as she listened to his deep, baritone voice. The words he spoke were like cool balm on a festering wound. As soothing as they were, they were dangerous too. Despite their unexpected connection, what had taken place between them could be naught but a sweet interlude. When the snow stopped falling and the roads cleared enough for travel, they would say farewell and move on to very different lives.

A dull ache settled in her heart. Ignoring it, she spoke lightly. "No doubt, like the storm, the feeling 'twill pass."

Hugh shivered and made a face. "You speak cold words, my lady."

Joanna arched a brow. "You did call me your lady of the snow."

His eyes flicked to the light peeping through the shutters then back to her. "Ah, but the sun will soon shine. You know what that means?"

"Nay, what does it mean?"

He rolled over pinning her beneath him. "Snow melts at the touch of the sun's heat." The corners of his mouth quirked upward in a sly smile. "What say you, my lady? You play the snow and I'll be the sun and we'll test my theory ourselves."

Despite her misgivings, Joanna found herself smiling in return. "I may take some convincing."

Hugh bent and brushed his lips over hers. "Prepare to be convinced."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man was as good as his word Joanna thought, standing on the porch outside the kitchen an hour later, her eyes on the pale winter's sun brightening the sky. A smile hovered at the corners of her mouth at the memory of the method of Hugh's argument.

"You look like you've been sneaking sweets," Alys said from behind her.

Joanna's face flooded with heat. Keeping her eyes on the white landscape, she shrugged. "I'm simply happy that the snow seems to have stopped at last."

Before the older woman could retort, Hugh appeared, dressed for the outdoors. He carried Joanna's mantle over one arm. He greeted Alys with a cheerful smile. "I think our storm has finally blown itself out."

"So it seems, my lord. I confess it's been so long since I've seen the sun I almost didn't recognize it at first."

Hugh's grin grew broader. "I understand the feeling, Lady Alys." He draped the squirrel-lined woolen cloak over Joanna's shoulders. "I'm taking Lady Joanna out for a ride. I think we could both do with a bit of fresh air."

"Aye, after all the long hours you and my lady have spent cooped up inside these past few days, a good ride will do both of you good," the older woman said straight-faced. Joanna narrowed her eyes, but Alys met her stare with an innocent smile before reentering the kitchen.

Joanna jumped when Hugh took her arm. He gestured to the high drifts blocking their way. "I'll go ahead and break some of this down. Keep to my footsteps if you can."

Leading the way, he stomped the snow down with his heavy black riding boots to make a path for her to walk. Still the bottom of Joanna's mantle was wet by the time they reached the stable. Hugh threw open the doors and pulled her inside. The horses nickered and leaned their heads over the stall railings in greeting.

Hugh put his hand inside his cloak and pulled out a withered apple. "Don't tell Alys." His mischievous grin made him look years younger. Joanna's heart did a small flip in response as she imagined him as a little boy. No doubt he'd charmed his mother with that same smile. And many a court lady as well, she reminded herself. She discovered she did not like that idea much.

"You do realize you're not fooling Alys for a moment. She keeps a supply of apples there for just this purpose."

Hugh's gray eyes twinkled. "Aye, but don't let her know I've caught on. 'Twill break her heart." He pressed the apple into Joanna's hand. The feel of his warm fingers covering hers made her stomach tremble with desire. *'Tis your heart that will be breaking if you continue on like this.*

"Your secret is safe with me." She forced a bright smile.

His hand tightened around hers as if he meant to pull her closer. She slipped her fingers from his and hurried over to her mare. "Poor thing," she crooned. "You've been terribly neglected." Joanna offered her the apple, stroking the horse's satiny neck as she ate it.

"Mistress Dove has not suffered much. Sampson has kept her company." There was nothing in Hugh's tone that indicated he found her behavior odd.

In control again, Joanna finally took a good look at the huge chestnut stallion. Barely five feet tall, she had to tip her head a bit to take him all in. She reached up and held her hand out to him. "Walt did not exaggerate. He is a giant of a horse." She smiled as Sampson's big head came down to nuzzle her palm.

"Aye, but gentle as a kitten with children and ladies, as you will soon see for yourself."

She glanced at him in surprise. "I thought to ride Dove."

"Perhaps in a day or two, but today only a horse like Sampson can break through the drifts and not be winded."

Hugh was right of course. Dove would have tired before they'd gone a mile. In a matter of minutes Hugh had Sampson saddled. She kept pace with him as he led the destrier outside.

"Ready?" Hugh asked. She nodded, warmth flowing through her as his large hands spanned her waist. Without thinking she swayed toward him. His eyes darkened with an answering desire. Her cheeks flooded with heat at the knowledge that he'd noted her response. He bent and spoke low in her ear. "Hold onto that thought, my lady." Despite her momentary embarrassment, a smile tugged at her lips at the roguish grin he flashed her. He lifted her onto Sampson's broad back and swung himself up behind her.

They made their way through the stable yard, around the walled garden, and up the sloping hill behind the manor house toward the forest. The snow-covered trees glittered in the sun, reminding Joanna of the sugared sculptures used to decorate the high table on feast days. In some places the wind had scoured patches of ground almost clear of snow. Hugh guided Sampson from one cleared area to another, using them as a path. The stallion used his body to plow a way through the deeper drifts.

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Hugh held her snug against his chest with one arm. Joanna leaned her head back and let her thoughts ramble. Mostly they concerned Hugh. Curious to know more about this man who shared her bed, if only briefly, she twisted a bit in the saddle and asked, "We've spoken much of Ashwood Hall this past week, my lord, but what of your home?"

His eyes met hers in a fleeting glance. "I live in Lincolnshire."

"Then you have been to the city of Lincoln."

"Aye, but not for many years."

"There is a great cathedral there, is there not?"



"Aye, with a tower that stands over two hundred feet tall and a great, circular stained-glass window."

"It must be a wondrous sight," she mused.

"Mayhap you will see it for yourself one day." There was an odd note in his voice. She tipped her head back to look at him. He met her quizzical gaze with a bland smile and she decided she'd been mistaken.

She shook her head. "I think not. 'Tis near ten days from here to Lincoln. Farther still from Thornbury Abbey." A startling sense of sadness filled her as she said this.

"Stranger things have been known to happen, my lady." Once again his voice held that oddly out-of-tune note.

They continued in silence until they gained the summit of the hill. In the shelter of several ancient oaks whose broad limbs were bearded with snow, Hugh reined in Sampson. Drifts piled against the tree trunks, but a few yards away nearer the top of the hill, the ground was swept nearly clean. He dismounted and lifted Joanna down. A chill breeze nipped at her face.

"My nose must be as bright as a cherry," she said with a laugh as she noted Hugh watching her with a slight grin.

"Cherries suit you." Pulling her cloak about her, he took her arm and drew her to his side. Sampson stomped his feet and snorted, his breath white in the cold air. From where they stood they could see the whole of Joanna's land and into the village beyond.

"You are lucky, my lady. I have traveled much in this country and in France, yet I have rarely seen such a beautiful sight."

"You should see it in the spring," Joanna said with a soft sigh. "When the orchards and the gardens are in full bloom, it near takes my breath away."

"And yet, you are content to give it all away?"

Alys and Hugh could sing a duet Joanna thought. They'd sung nearly the same tune so often. They reminded her of Robin who would pester her about some small

issue, his eyes, so much like her own, full of hope that this time he'd win his way. For the first time in months, the memory of her son no longer sent a piercing arrow of grief through her heart.

"Nay, not content," she explained in the same patient voice she would have used on her son. "But I can see no other way. The king is adamant that I marry the Earl of Reston."

An unidentified expression flickered in the depths of Hugh's gray eyes. "Is it marriage you eschew, my lady or just marriage to the earl?" he asked in a colorless voice.

Joanna bit her lip. This was a question of a different sort. One she'd avoided asking herself. When she'd read the king's letter and her eyes had beheld the name of the man he wished her to wed, she'd been so disgusted by the idea of becoming Reston's wife, that all her energies had been aimed at thwarting such a match. If it had been any man but the earl would she have objected so strenuously?

"In truth, my lord, I don't know," she finally answered.

"Edward is a reasonable man. You could offer a compromise."

Joanna shoved back her hood to look up into his face. "What sort of compromise?"

Hugh's gaze moved over her shoulder. "If Lord Reston is not to your liking, name one of the king's nobles who would please you."

"I doubt the king cares over much about my pleasure. Besides," her brow wrinkled, "would he not be insulted that I spurn his choice?"

"Maybe not." Hugh's gray eyes moved back to her. "I think it is less a choice of the man for King Edward as it is a desire not to lose any more good forest land to the control of the Church. As long as the man was of noble birth and Edward's goal was achieved, I think he might approve."

Joanna swung around her gaze moving to the manor house nearly buried beneath the snow at the bottom of the hill. If Hugh was right she could keep her estates. And

perhaps have a second chance at happiness. The tight band of fear squeezing her insides since she'd received the king's letter eased. Her heart beat wildly, making her almost giddy with relief. Plans and possibilities she'd refused to allow herself to think about tumbled through her mind.

Turning to Hugh, she placed both hands on his chest and sent him a dazzling smile. "What I need is a champion," she announced breathlessly. "Someone like you, my lord, who knows both the king and the earl. If you were to present this compromise, perhaps they might agree."

Hugh's gray eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "Me. But-but I..." His stammering words trailed away into silence. His initial expression of dismay became tinged with a mixture of guilt and shame. "You flatter me, Lady Joanna, but I'm not sure I'm the right man for the job."

"I can think of no other who could present my proposal so well." She made a great show of carefully looking around then sent him a teasing smile. "In fact, my lord, Hugh, you are the only man, since I see no others hiding beneath the drifts."

Hugh's expression became resigned. "I fear you speak rightly my lady."

"So, you'll do it? Be my champion to the king?"

"It seems I have little choice. I've been that since the first day I met you. Have you a noble gentleman in mind whose name I shall suggest to Edward?"

She flushed and looked down at her hands. "Perhaps, but I shall not tell you his name until the snow melts. I am not sure he will have me." She raised her head, looking up at him with a sad smile. The wild rush of dizzy madness had passed as cold reality crept back into her mind. "In truth, I'm not sure that even if he did that I could wed with him."

"By God's most sacred beard, what obstacle do you present now?"

"I promised Robert," she began. Her throat filled with tears and she choked.

"Promised Robert what?" Hugh's tone was gentle as he cupped her face between his gloved palms.

"That I would never want anyone else but him."

"Did you swear this before a priest?"

"Nay, to Robert alone, as he lay dying in my arms. He said it was his wish that I remarry and find earthly happiness again, but I told him I wanted no other and that I would never wed again." Tears ran down her cheeks as she told him the secret that she'd not even revealed to Alys.

Hugh removed his gloves and wiped her face with his warm hands. "Of course you said that, my lady. And at that moment, you meant every word. But promises made in grief do not count as a holy vow. If Robert were here, I'm sure he'd tell you the same thing."

"Do you think so?"

His jaw firmed. "I am certain of it."

Joanna swallowed hard. Gazing into Hugh's empathetic gray eyes filled her with unexpected hope. He chose that moment to bend and take her mouth in a slow, deep kiss that made her knees tremble. He slipped his hands inside her cloak around her back and pressed her to him. Despite the layers of clothing between them she felt the proof of his desire.

Breathless, she pulled away. His arms tightened around her. "Put away your sorrow, Joanna." Her legs weakened even more at the sound of her name on his lips. He continued in an oddly bitter tone. "I will champion your cause."

Joanna pressed her gloved hands together. Struggling to get her thoughts in order, she walked over to Sampson. The horse swung his massive head toward her and nuzzled her shoulder. She ran her hand along his thick neck, taking comfort in his strength and the warmth of his brown eyes. She grabbed his bridle and leaned her head against him. How simple it was to be a beast.

Hugh was right though. Once the king got over his displeasure that she'd marry a lord of her own choosing, no doubt he'd see the merits in the match, especially since his bit of forest would be preserved for his hunting pleasure. Abbot Boniface might protest the loss of her property, but as she had not yet signed the papers, there would be little he could do. A pang of grief tugged at her heart as a misty image of Robert and little Robin rose in her mind. Was she ready to leave them behind? In truth she didn't know what she felt.

She jumped at Hugh's approach. He turned her toward him with firm hands. "'Tis time we return, my lady." He gestured toward the frozen landscape. "It will be days before this melts. We will talk more on the matter then."

Hugh lifted her in his arms and set her atop Sampson's broad back. He swung up behind her and spread his cloak around her shoulders. Joanna sighed and snuggled closer to his chest, reveling in his warmth and the strength of his arms. He was her champion...and if God willed, perhaps Hugh would consent to be more. Until then, wicked woman that she was, she intended to keep the outside world at bay a little longer.

\* \* \* \* \*

By God's most sacred tears, what had he gotten himself into? What had possessed him to agree to serve as Joanna's champion to the king? Hugh grimaced at his reflection in the solar window. The whole idea was ridiculous—not to mention impossible, as he had no intention of taking Joanna to Windsor and proposing to the king that she marry someone other than the Earl of Reston. He could just imagine the expression on Edward's face if Hugh actually suggested such an idea. Since he was the said earl, Edward would lock him away as a lunatic. Perhaps the idea wasn't all that ridiculous, he decided with a wry smile. If he were confined in the king's dungeon as a madman, the king would no doubt gladly find Joanna a husband more to her liking.

The storm seemed to have blown itself out at last. As he stared out into the night, he replayed the scene on the snowy hilltop that afternoon over and over in his mind,

trying to figure out exactly how she'd managed to trap him into this foolish vow. It was those damnable blue eyes, he decided. Whenever he allowed himself to look too deeply into them, he lost all sense of reason. She had played him to a draw at chess, he reminded himself. Why hadn't he remembered that sooner?

"You've been staring out those windows for a long time." The woman occupying his thoughts rose from her chair by the fireplace and came to stand beside him. "So what have you been looking at?" she asked.

He drew her to him and gestured toward the moon. It hung in the cold, black winter sky like a silver coin with a huge piece bitten off one side. A soft haze surrounded it like a misty halo. "See that ring?" She nodded. "'Tis a sure sign the weather is going to change. I saw such a ring the night before the storm hit. Then it was waxing full. Now 'tis fast waning. Before we know it, the month will have flown."

Joanna sighed. "If I had my wish, the moon would stop in its courses and we would stay like this forever."

Hugh brushed a stray curl from her forehead. "Eventually, I think, you'd yearn for spring."

"You are right, of course, it's just that..." She broke off.

"You'd like to keep the world from your door a little longer," he finished for her.

"Aye, that's it exactly." The shadows of grief that he'd noted when he first met her still lingered in her eyes. Shadows he meant to extinguish one day, if she'd only let him. But would she, he wondered, once she knew the truth?

He turned her to face him. "All too soon the snow will melt and the world and its troubles will come knocking at your front door." A sharp pang of guilt stabbed him at the realization that his long overdue confession about his true identity would be the first of those troubles. He pushed the thought aside, vowing to put everything right—later. He brushed the back of his hand over her satiny cheek. "Tonight it still lies frozen beyond your door."

Their gazes locked as sexual awareness flared between them. Joanna's eyes darkened. He drew her to him, bent and swiped his tongue across her slightly parted lower lip. She trembled. Her arms twined around his neck. He took possession of her mouth again, their tongues dueling. His cock stiffened. God's Blood, but he wanted her, wanted to spread her milk-white thighs and plunge his cock into her tight, moist channel to the hilt.

He lifted his head and stared down at her. Passion equal to his own was reflected in her countenance. His cock thickened and his balls tightened at the knowledge that her need for him was as great as his for her.

He scooped her up and carried her across the solar and into her bed chamber. He kissed her hard and deep then set her on her feet. As he started to pull his *cote-hardie* over his head, Joanna's small capable hands tangled with his in the folds of fabric. Panting, they helped each other strip off their garments. When they were both naked he lifted her and placed her on the bed.

She stretched her arms above her head. The movement raised and displayed her breasts. Her nipples pebbled in the cool air. His cock swelled and stood at attention. She sent him a sultry smile. "I have just the chamber for that crowing cock of yours to rest within, my lord."

Hugh laughed at her bawdy comment. What man could resist such a blatant invitation? Not he. He climbed onto the bed. "On a cold night like this, my lady, he would greatly appreciate a warm place to shelter." He bent and captured her mouth. Her soft lips parted under his. He plunged his tongue inside to be met by hers. Heat rushed through his veins.

Breaking off, he trailed kisses along the side of her neck ending with the soft hollow in her throat. He cupped her breasts and massaged them before lowering his head and sucking each nipple into a glistening peak. She whimpered and pressed upward.

His fingers skimmed over her belly. He followed the gliding caress with a series of soft kisses following the same path, pausing to swirl his tongue around her navel. Hugh

smiled against her warm skin when she jumped and gave a breathless laugh. He loved hearing her laugh. He pushed himself up her body again. "Have I tickled your fancy, my lady?" he whispered, nibbling at her earlobe.

"You must judge for yourself, my lord."

He lifted himself to look down at her. "Ah, so you plan to be mysterious."

She caressed his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "I'm a woman, 'tis my prerogative."

He brushed his knuckles over her woman's seam. She sighed and arched her hips. "Aye, no question about it, you're all woman." *My woman*. He longed to say those words to her out loud.

He parted her folds and sought the pink pearl hidden beneath. He rubbed it slowly with the pad of his thumb, teasing it into a stiff bud. Joanna moaned and spread her thighs. His cock ached with the need to take her. He sucked in a deep breath and tamped down his own lust. Pleasuring Joanna came first.

He slipped a finger into her channel and moved it in and out, then added a second to stretch and prepare her. Despite having had a child, she was as tight as an untried maiden. Moisture gushed between her legs, wetting his hand. He could smell her excitement. He plunged his fingers deeper, reveling in her soft groans of pleasure.

As he found her mouth again, her hand closed around his rampant cock. She stroked her palm over its thick head before grasping his shaft and moving up and down. It lengthened and hardened under her ministrations. Breaking off their kiss, she scooted down the bed and twisted around until she knelt between his thighs.

Hugh lifted his head to look down at her. "What are you doing?"

She flashed him a mischievous smile. "'Tis something French." His rumble of laughter became a strangled gasp as her warm mouth closed around the swollen purple head of his shaft. His heartbeat accelerated and all his muscles trembled with excitement.



He groaned out loud when she drew him deeper into her throat. At the same time she hefted his balls in her hand, squeezed and massaged them. His fingers tangled in her warm tresses and he held her head as she licked and sucked at him until he thought he would explode. The slight scrape of Joanna's teeth over the sensitive head of his cock while she pumped his shaft with her hand sent him reeling over the edge. He expected her to jerk away and let his seed spill onto the bed, but she kept his cock within her mouth wringing the last convulsions of pleasure out of him.

Drained, he lay against the pillows gasping for breath. Joanna curled up beside him, licking her lips with all the daintiness of a cat after lapping up a saucer of cream. "We're even now."

"Even?" His heartbeat was finally stilling enough for him to think straight again.

She nuzzled his shoulder then sent him a wicked glance from the corner of her eyes.

"Aye. You tasted me, so I thought 'twas only fair that I get to sample you."

He raised a brow. "And, what think you?"

Her naked shoulders raised in a graceful shrug. "A bit salty, but I think I can get used to it." She raised herself on one elbow, her fingers strolling over his chest. "Did I do it right? I had naught but your example to go from."

"Aye, you're a fast learner."

Her face grew solemn. "Does that please you?"

Hugh heard the note of uncertainty in her voice as if now that she'd time to contemplate what she'd done, she feared her boldness might put him off. He sat up and pulled her up to sit beside him. Cradling her face between his palms, he stared deep into her eyes. "Everything you do pleases me, Joanna."

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. She sighed and relaxed in his arms. Ignoring her gasp of surprise he pushed her back on the bed and pinned her beneath him. "Now 'tis my turn to please you."

He kissed her deeply while massaging her breast. He felt it swell and harden beneath his palm. His cock lengthened and grew rigid with anticipation. He pinched and teased her nipples into tight, little buds. His hand strayed lower to the nub between her legs. She moaned and thrashed restlessly as his fingers caressed and stroked it. He ran his fingers across her woman's cleft. They came away moist with her juices. She was as ready as he was.

He reached under the pillow where he'd hidden his supply of French sheaths and drew one out. Once again Joanna's nimble fingers helped him arrange it properly and tie the thin black thread that held it in place. *What an amazing woman. A true partner, in or out of bed.* For some reason he found himself absurdly pleased by the notion.

Kneeling over her, he gently pulled her thighs apart. He ran the tip of his cock over her entrance. She moaned and arched upward. Positioning himself, he thrust into her, taking her gasp of pleasure in his mouth. He withdrew slightly then pushed forward embedding himself to the hilt within her slick, velvety channel.

Joanna bucked her hips against him, her fingers digging into his back. As they began to move together she wrapped her legs around his hips. As he pumped into her, he insinuated one hand between their twined bodies and rubbed the erect little bud. He rolled it around his thumb and forefinger until Joanna writhed. "You are a wicked tease, my lord."

"Shall I cease?" he murmured into her ear before nibbling the delicate tip of her earlobe.

Joanna shuddered, her fingers digging into his back. "Mother Mary, no." Her hips thrust up to meet his. He continued to stroke her swollen nub as the rhythm between them built. With a smothered cry, she clenched her thighs around his back and she came in a series of hard spasms that dragged Hugh's cock deeper. The sensation made him lose the last vestiges of control. His passion peaked as shattering convulsions of pleasure coursed through him.

Afterward they clung to each other. Joanna's soft pants warmed the skin of his bare shoulder. As their breathing returned to normal, she sighed and unwound her legs. Hugh rested on his elbows and smiled down at her. He bent and kissed her hard before rolling onto his back with a gusty exhalation. "God's Blood, my lady, but you can give as good as you get."

"Would you have it differently?" Once again he heard the hesitation in her voice.

He tucked her under his arm. "I wouldn't change a whit."

Warm tears wet his chest. He turned his head and regarded Joanna with concern. "What's wrong? Is it something I said?"

She shook her head, wiping the tears from the corner of her eyes with the edge of the sheet. "Nay, everything you say is perfect." She sat up, drew her knee to her chest and buried her face between her hands. "'Tis just that I fear..." Her words trailed away.

Hugh pushed himself up, alarmed by this sudden change in her. "Fear what?" he asked, gently bushing her hair over her shoulder. *Was it something about Robert and her promise?*

She half raised her head, turning it sideways so he could see one blue eye. "I fear I shall burn in hell. 'Tis wicked to enjoy the worldly pleasures of the flesh so much."

Hugh bit back a snort of relieved laughter. Still he couldn't completely hide his mirth as he lifted her head with his hand and met her troubled gaze. "Then we shall burn together, my lady, for I feel no such guilt."

Her soft mouth tightened. "Do not laugh at me."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead. "With you, never at you, my lady." He looked down at her in all seriousness. "I have seen much hate and ugliness on the battlefield in France and other places. Truly, Joanna, when weighed in God's book, I think you have naught to worry about."

She regarded him in silence for a long moment. "I think you may be right." Her lips curved in a wry smile. "Still, 'tis comforting to know I won't burn alone."

Laughing in spite of himself, Hugh climbed out of the bed and stripped off the used sheath. As he strode across the room he paused to toss it into the fire. Despite their cost and his dwindling supply, he'd learned from experience that using a sheath more than a few times often led to disaster, if the fragile casing broke. Until matters were settled between them, he had no intention of allowing Joanna to suffer even a moment of distress.

Wetting a cloth with the chill water, he carried it back to the bed. After he and Joanna washed themselves, he returned the cloth to the bowl. He stoked the fire into a cheerful blaze, climbed back into bed and pulled the bed curtains closed.

Drawing her into his arms, he gazed through the slight gap he'd left in the curtains at the patterns the flames made on the wall. Time had run out. The storm had blown itself out. And prepared or not, he had to tell her the truth before her brother arrived. He couldn't allow her to pack for a trip to Windsor that would never take place. He had no doubt that when she found out his true identity, there would be a new storm to equal the one they'd just weathered.

Not for the first time, he wondered why he'd ever thought deceiving her had been a smart strategy. Still, he prayed, that with luck, once Joanna realized his love for her was genuine, his revelation would lead to a happy conclusion. Holding that hope close, he cradled her against his heart and fell asleep.

## **Chapter Eight**

As the ring around the moon had predicted, the hard freeze broke. The next morning dawned with bright sunshine in a clear blue sky. For the first time in two weeks, the household gathered in the Great Hall to break their fast. The plastered walls looked bare without the usual tapestries and colorful banners that hung from the small minstrel's gallery, but the fire crackling in the fireplace lent it a cheery air.

"Will you take me to the village this morning?" Joanna asked, handing Hugh a bowl of porridge.

Hugh took the proffered dish then poured himself a mug of cider. "Anything you wish, my lady. Sampson always enjoys stretching his legs. When we return there is something I wish to discuss with you." His gray eyes were uncharacteristically sober and unfamiliar tension lined the corners of his mouth.

Alarmed by his expression, Joanna leaned forward. "Is there something the matter, my lord?"

His expression softened. "Nay, I was simply wondering how long until the roads will be clear enough for travel."

"The snow has barely begun to melt. It will be days yet, I'm sure."

"With any luck," he muttered around a spoonful of porridge.

Joanna frowned at his cryptic remark. Aware that the others were staring at them from the other end of the table, she turned the conversation to other subjects.

An hour after breakfast, with Joanna perched before Hugh on Sampson's broad back, they headed through the front gates and down the hill toward the village. The snow beneath Sampson's feet was soft and the big horse reached the outskirts of the village in no time. As they rode along the main street, villagers appeared in their doorways to wave and call out to them.

"Your people seem to set great store by you, my lady," Hugh observed as they rode past.

"Ashwood Hall is a small estate compared to some of the holdings of the greater lords around us, but we are a prosperous manor. Sir Robert always felt 'twas our duty to share that prosperity with those who work so hard to provide for us."

"'Twould be better for all of us if more of our English landlords thought like you and your departed husband, God rest his soul."

Joanna smiled up at him. "'Tis kind of you to say so, Sir Hugh." She raised a hand and pointed. "That is my destination."

Hugh turned Sampson into the yard of a small, stone church. Dismounting, he lifted her from the saddle. He tucked her arm in his and they walked along a narrow, shoveled path to the front of the church. "I'll explain later," she promised as he held open the stout door, a curious look on his face.

"Ah," was all he said as he followed her inside.

The interior was dimly lit by the sunlight falling through narrow windows lining each side of the length of the building. Two tall candles burned on the altar. Alerted by the sound of their footsteps echoing softly on the stone floor, a monk who'd been kneeling in prayer rose and met them. "How can I help you, my lady?" he asked in hushed tones.

"I've come to see Father Timothy." She turned to Hugh. "Would you mind waiting for me here, my lord? I have some personal business to discuss."

Hugh bowed. "Not at all." He looked around. "It has been far too long since I've been inside a church. 'Twill do me good to stay here and say a prayer or two."

Joanna followed the monk through a doorway behind the altar and up a flight of stairs that led to Father Timothy's private work room. She waited outside while the brother announced her.

Father Timothy rose from behind a table piled high with papers and manuscripts. "'Tis good to see you, my lady." He ushered her to a chair then returned to his own. "What can I do for you?"

Joanna hesitated then plunged forward. "My heart is troubled Father, and I need some advice."

Father Timothy folded his wrinkled hands and leaned across his cluttered table with a smile. "You've come to the right place, my daughter. Tell me what is troubling you?"

Joanna twined her fingers together in her lap. "When Robert lay dying he told me I should marry again. I told him I wanted no husband but him and said that I had no wish to ever remarry."

"But now you have reason to reconsider those words?" Father Timothy said with a shrewd glance.

"Aye. Is it a terrible sin to have changed my mind?"

"Did you swear a holy vow never to remarry at that time or after your husband's death?"

"Nay, I spoke only as I told you."

Father Timothy smiled. "Then you have no reason to fear, my lady. You are free to wed again if that is your wish." His blue eyes twinkled. "And I'm guessing it is since I understand from Brother Stephen that a tall knight waits for you in the church."

Joanna felt the blush flooding her face. "Nothing has been decided yet," she said. "And there is still the issue of Ashwood Hall. As you know I'd planned to give it to the Abbey at Thornbury and move there to live as a life pensioner. If I were to remarry, I would naturally wish to retain my estate."

The priest tapped his fingers together, a thoughtful look creasing his brow. "Abbot Boniface will not be pleased by such a turn of events. He's been bragging about his plans for Ashwood Hall."

"The abbot's disappointment is understandable, but as I have signed no papers, Ashwood Hall is still mine," she pointed out. Hearing the sharp edge to her voice, she softened her tone. "I fear you will think me too outspoken, Father, but in truth I'd rather face the abbot's displeasure than the king's."

"Well, your obedience to the king's command will surely please him. As for the abbot..." Father Timothy's thin shoulders lifted. "He will recover, I have no doubt."

"Indeed," Joanna murmured. She glanced away, ignoring a twinge of guilt at not confessing that marriage to Sir Hugh would not exactly fulfill the king's commands.

Father Timothy rose. "I will pray that all turns out as you wish it, Lady Joanna."

Relieved, she stood up and went to kneel in front of him. He laid his hand on her bowed head and blessed her.

Her heart lighter than it had been in months, Joanna left Father Timothy's small chamber and went in search of Hugh. She traversed the corridor and descended the stairs to the floor below with buoyant steps. As she entered the church, she saw him in the nave on the opposite side reading the stone markers set in the wall. He was standing almost directly over the stones in the floor beneath which her husband and son were buried.

Joanna drew in a deep breath, waiting for the wrenching pain that pierced her breast each time she stood where Hugh was standing. Instead, for the first time in eighteen months, all she felt was a bittersweet ache. Startled, her pent-up breath escaped in a soft gasp.

Hugh turned at the sound. His welcoming smile turned to an expression of concern as his gaze swept over her. He crossed the short distance separating them in a few steps and grasped her around the waist. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You look like you are near to swooning." Trembling and unable to speak, Joanna leaned her head into his shoulder, grateful for the strength of his arm. "My lady...Joanna, what is it?" he asked, his voice rough with worry.



She lifted tear-filled eyes to his. "Forgive me, my lord. I did not mean to cause you any distress."

"Forget about me. Tell me what's wrong."

She linked her fingers through his and led him back to where he'd previously stood. "As you've already discovered, this is where the Leland family members are laid to rest." She gestured down at the floor. "My husband and son lie there."

Hugh drew her close to him again, looking down at the stone at their feet. "I read some of the names on the wall while I waited for you, but did not realize Sir Robert and your child lay buried here as well."

Joanna slipped from his light embrace and knelt. She placed her palm first over Robert's name then over that of her son. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as images of the two of them ran through her mind. Their time together had been all too brief, but they had been a happy family, far happier than many she knew. She had been blessed. Knowing that comforted her.

There was another man and another child who needed her now. And perhaps, one day, if God willed, there would be more children. None would take the place of her sweet Robin, as no man could ever replace Robert. They were part of her and she would never forget them or stop loving them. But Alys and Hugh were right. Life was for the living. Clinging to a dead past did no good for anyone. "Goodbye," she whispered.

Rising, she scrubbed the tears from her cheeks with the edge of her cloak. She squared her shoulders and faced Hugh. "I think 'tis time we went home."

Hugh lifted her chin. His gray eyes were still troubled as he gazed down at her. "Are you all right?"

"All is well," she assured him. His smile twisted slightly as if he doubted her assurances. Before she had time to wonder why, he pulled her hood up and ushered her from the church.

Later that night, curled up in the security of his arms, Joanna allowed herself to dream of a future with Hugh. A smile touched her mouth as she remembered his

expression of shock when she'd asked him to be her champion and go before the king with her compromise. He'd asked her then if she had someone in mind as a replacement for the earl. She could only imagine what he would think when he discovered he was that man.

Her smile faded as a troubling thought intruded on her happy daydream. What if despite all of Hugh's soft words he had no interest in marrying her? Could she have misread his actions, placed a meaning on them that he'd never intended? A memory of his troubled eyes at breakfast that morning rose in her mind. He'd told her then that he had something to discuss with her, but the day had passed without him saying anything more.

No matter the outcome, she resolved, in the morning, she would tell him of her decision. If Hugh was agreeable, they could ride together to Windsor and present her compromise to the king. Perhaps be married there. She closed her eyes and tried to recall the memory of the castle at Winsor. It had been years since her brief visit. Sometime during her reminiscing she must have fallen asleep for when she next opened her eyes, it was morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joanna rolled over with a sleepy smile, but the space next to her was empty. Hugh was already up. She pressed her hand to the pillow where she could still see the slight indentation left by his head. It was still warm. She sat up and raised her arms in a leisurely stretch, thinking how surprised Hugh would be when he learned of her plans.

As she tossed the covers aside, it occurred to her that it was the first of March. Filled with eagerness to see Hugh, she ran across the room and poured water into the basin. Stripping off her shift, she quickly bathed. By the time she was done, her skin was covered in goose bumps and her teeth were chattering. It might be March, but her chamber still held winter's bite.

She found a fresh shift and dragged it over her head then pulled on a pair of her best hose, tying them with a set of purple garters decorated with silk tassels. Eschewing the dark woolen kirtles she'd worn the past months, she chose one made of amber-colored silk with flowers embroidered about the hem in shades of orange and green. She fastened a narrow girdle composed of small gold links around her waist. A thin circlet of gold held her sheer white veil in place atop her carefully arranged hair. She wanted to look her best when she presented Hugh with her proposal. She gave a soft laugh as she considered the double meaning behind the word "proposal".

When she entered the hall, she discovered Hugh had already eaten and was in the stable with Walt checking on the horses. Gilly took in Joanna's finery in open-mouthed silence. Paying no heed to her curious glances, Joanna ate her solitary breakfast of porridge and cider and returned to the solar.

She was in the middle of unpacking the trunk that held the rest of her silver plate when Alys hurried in, her a look of excitement on her face. She stopped and stared at Joanna with the same amazed look as the scullery maid, before announcing, "John is here, or will be shortly. Hal spotted him and his men riding up from the village."

Joanna's heart leaped. Her brother had arrived already? She stifled a groan. God's Blood, where was Hugh? She needed to find him and talk to him before her brother reached the hall. "Have you seen Sir Hugh?"

"Aye, he and Walt are in the kitchen. They just came in from tending the horses." Hands on hips, she surveyed Joanna from head-to-toe. "What —"

Joanna never gave her a chance to finish. Gathering her skirts in both hands, she ran from the solar. She met Hugh in the doorway of the kitchen. Joanna grabbed his arm and dragged him back the way she'd come. "You heard the news?" He nodded, looking nearly as harried as she did. "Hurry, I need to talk to you before John gets here."

Hugh's mouth drew down. "Aye and I have a few things I must say to you before he arrives. But first I must wash and change my shirt." She paced the solar impatiently waiting for him to bathe and change his clothing. He appeared, his hair damp and his

cheeks red with scrubbing. Joanna smiled and went to him, smoothing his hair into place with her hands.

He grabbed her hands and kissed them. His warm lips pressed against her knuckles sent ripples of heat down her spine. He pulled her toward a chair and gently pushed her into it. "I've been trying to find the right words to tell you something that I should have told you days ago. I thought we'd have more time until your brother arrived. I know there is something you wish to tell me, but before you do, I have a confession to make."

Joanna's stomach twisted in fear at his grave expression. Something was wrong. Was he going to retract his promise to champion her to the king? She wet her lips and nodded. "Pray, go first, my lord."

Hugh straightened his shoulders. Regret shone from his gray eyes. His mouth opened, but the words he was about to speak were interrupted by the solar door crashing back on its hinges. John Parr strode in, wet snow falling from his boots in clumps, followed closely by Alys and Walt.

"What's this, Joanna? Hiding in your solar instead of greeting me in the hall as a proper sister should?" John boomed with a grin. He looked her up and down. "At least you dressed for the occasion. 'Tis good to see you in bright colors again after all those dark, dismal gowns these past few years."

Joanna colored, pleased that he'd noted the change in her appearance, even if Hugh had not. She rose and went to embrace him. "How did you get here so quickly? We thought it would be days until you could make it through."

"The weather was so good St. Valentine's Day that I decided to leave early. We were almost here when the storm hit. We holed up comfortably at the inn at Whitby Ford. When the sun finally showed its face, we decided to push on. The road was..."

His explanation halted in mid-word as his gaze settled on Hugh. His blue eyes, so similar to hers, grew round with surprise. A broad smile spread over his face. He strode forward a few steps and bowed. "I had hoped to find you here, my lord earl. May I

conclude from your presence that congratulations are in order and that my sister has at last seen clear to accept you as husband as the king commanded?"

Joanna's welcoming smile froze on her lips. Her heart constricted with such pain that for a moment she couldn't speak. Surely she couldn't have heard correctly. Her gaze moved from her brother to Hugh. "My lord earl?" She forced the words past dry lips. Tilting her head, she studied him intently through narrowed eyes. It had to be a mistake. Yet it had been years and the hallway had been but dimly lit. "Perhaps, Sir Hugh 'tis time you made that confession."

Hugh shifted his feet, his cheeks filled with a ruddy tint. "I meant to tell you..."

"Tell me what?" Joanna interrupted with a wave of her hand. "That you are not Hugh DeBracy, but..." She swallowed hard unable to bring the hated name to her lips.

"Hugh Radcliff, the Earl of Reston," he finished for her.

The shame and guilt evident on his face as he spoke resonated in his voice, but Joanna barely noticed. A wave of nausea flowed over her. She pressed her hands to her stomach to keep from being sick. Hugh had deceived her. All those hot, sweet nights of lovemaking and his tender words had been nothing more than a carefully planned assault to make her bend to his and the king's wishes. The knowledge of his betrayal pierced her to the core. She swayed.

Hugh's arm quickly encircled her waist. Her hands balled into fists and she jerked away. "Pray do not touch me."

"Joanna, please let me explain," he began.

"Save your breath, my lord. There is naught you have to say that I wish to hear."

He captured her fists. "Please, Joanna." His voice was full of pleading.

"Speak your lying, deceiving words to some other woman," she ground out between clenched teeth. Giving him no chance to respond, she yanked her hands from his, drew back one fist, and with a strength fueled by anger and betrayal, punched him in the jaw. He staggered back a step, his gray eyes wide with shock. Ignoring the

stunned looks of her brother and the others in the room, she spun on her heel and ran out of the solar.

Hugh rubbed his stinging chin, his eyes following Joanna as she disappeared through the doorway leading to the hall. "That could have gone better." He shot John a rueful smile. "Your sister has a wicked punch."

John stared at him, a pained expression on his face. "I apologize, my lord. When I saw you together I naturally assumed Joanna knew who you were."

Hugh swept a quick glance over Joanna's brother. Of average height, his brown hair held only a hint of her autumn color, although their eyes were much alike. Seeing them together there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that they were related. To Hugh's knowledge John Parr was also a stranger.

"You have the advantage on me, sir. 'Tis certain you know who I am, but I have no memory of ever meeting you."

"'Tis no great mystery," John explained as he took off his cloak and slung it over his arm. "I was in Winchester on business when you and King Edward returned from France. I noticed you chatting with the king as you rode by. 'Twas obvious from the way the king treated you that you stood high in his favor. I inquired of my friend, Sir Henry Marshall, who you were. I recognized your name immediately when Joanna wrote me about her plans." His brows furrowed as he regarded Hugh. "If you don't mind my asking, why did you keep your identity a secret?"

"'Tis complicated."

"I see." It was clear from the puzzled look in John's eyes that he didn't see at all. "I had hoped that meeting you in person might persuade my sister to reconsider her plan."

"I thought I had made some progress, but now..." Hugh said. His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I fear any feelings your sister might have had for me died when she discovered who I really am. She's made it quite plain again and again what she thinks

of the Earl of Reston. I can think of no argument strong enough to change her mind." His knuckles strayed to his chin again. "In any case, I doubt she is in any mood to listen."

"Not that she can be blamed," Walt pointed out. Arms crossed on his chest, he glared at Hugh with eyes hard as steel. His stance said clearly he was on Lady Joanna's side.

Hugh's shoulders sagged. "Nay, Sir Walter, I cannot argue with you on that score. Joanna has every right to be furious with me."

"Why the charade?" he demanded.

"'Twas not my original plan, I can assure you. I had every intention of telling you all who I was, but after hearing how much she detested...me...the earl..." He dragged a hand through his hair. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"And you're the king's famous strategist?" Walt gave a snort.

Hugh winced. "I used to think so. Your lady was an unexpected opponent."

"Do ye love her?" Walt asked his blue eyes boring into Hugh's.

Hugh nodded. "With all my heart. Although, I confess that too was unexpected."

Walt's expression softened. "Perhaps there's hope for you yet, my lord."

Alys pursed her lips. "Aye, the battle may be lost, but the war can yet be won. I've heard the Earl of Reston was a mighty warrior. Would ye leave the field in defeat, my lord?"

"God's Blood, Lady Alys, what would you have me do?"

"Go to her, Lord Hugh. Tell her what is in your heart. Before you came, my lady was like one dead to the world. But I've seen her awaken back into life. She would not be so hurt and angry if that were not so. Wait here one moment." Alys disappeared into Joanna's chamber. She returned with two cloaks. "I have faith that that silver tongue of yours can yet persuade her to your cause," she said as she pushed them into his arms.

Hugh hesitated only a moment. Alys was right. Keeping his identity a secret from Joanna had been a foolish blunder. He wouldn't compound it with a bigger mistake. And not trying to win Joanna's heart would be just that. She was the best thing that had happened to him in nine years. He meant to have her.



## Chapter Nine

Joanna walked blindly only half-aware of the hem of her silk gown dragging through the slush. The temperature had risen and the frozen snow had begun to thaw. Only the icy hand gripping her heart was unaffected. Her footsteps faltered. As the initial rush of anger and betrayal that had sent her from the manor eased, her mind grew clearer and she slowly became aware of her surroundings. She found herself standing ankle-deep in snow beneath the large pear tree at the far end of the garden.

In the spring the tree was a wonder, clothed in a cloud of white blossoms whose scent was nearly as intoxicating as wine. During the summer its thick leaves provided a shady sanctuary from the heat. Its bare branches offered little in the way of shelter. Despite the bright sunshine, she began to feel the bite of the air.

Joanna wrapped her arms around herself, cupping her elbows with her hands for warmth. Snow filled her shoes and her feet ached with cold, but she remained where she was. She cast a disgusted look at her wet gown. *Look at yourself, decked in silk and adorned in your best jewels, and for what? That all it took to melt your resolve as quickly as the sun melts the snow was a few nights of passion in the arms of a deceiving stranger?*

Shame filled her as she thought of her behavior the past ten days. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She brushed them away with the icy tips of her fingers. She would not cry for the likes of Hugh DeBracy...Radcliff. Her mouth tightened. Whatever name he chose, it all amounted to the same. He was the man she most hated in the world.

It was said that King Edward had no better battle strategist than the Earl of Reston. She could attest to the fact that they were right. Since his arrival at Ashwood Hall, he'd toyed with her as skillfully as one of his chess pieces. And she'd made it all too easy for him. What hurt the most, even more than his deception, was that he'd awoken her to possibilities of a future that she'd believed was forever closed to her. The tread of heavy

boots squishing through the soft snow behind her jerked her from her dark reverie. She stiffened but didn't turn as the weight of her cloak settled about her shoulders.

"You'll catch your death," Hugh said from behind her. For the first time since she'd known him, he sounded unsure of himself.

"Your concern is touching, my lord," she said her tone as frigid as the frozen ground beneath their feet. "Now that you've seen to my welfare, pray leave me." She adjusted the cloak, pulling it closer about her, continuing to give him only her back to look at.

She waited for the sound of receding footsteps. Instead, he plowed through the snow, moving around her until they stood face-to-face. His sculpted mouth, which could bring her such ecstasy, was pulled into a tight line. His gray eyes were filled with mute appeal. "Tell me what I can do or say to make this right."

"Nothing you do or say can make this right," Joanna informed him, determined not to budge one inch from her decision to be done with him.

They regarded each other for a long moment, the melting snow dripping from trees and shrubs the only sound in the garden. He lowered his eyes and shifted his feet. Joanna thought she had won and that he was about to leave. Her fleeting second of triumph, mingled with disappointment that he would give up—give her up—without a fight, segued into surprise when he stood firm. He raised his head and met her gaze again.

"I cannot blame you for being angry with me, my lady. 'Twas a grievous error on my part not to tell you straight off who I was and why I'd come to Ashwood Hall. You have my heartfelt apology on that account." The earnest expression on his face matched his words. There was no doubt his apology was genuine, but it would take more than mere words to appease her.

"If 'tis true you have a heart, my lord, then 'tis made of stone for without the slightest care to my condition, you thought to win me to yours and the king's will through deception."

Hugh's hand went to his jaw. To her surprise, she saw a bruise darkening it. "Your words wound me more than that punch you gave me earlier. But in all honesty, I deserved them both. Still, I would have you know that the king's command had naught to do with my deceiving you."

"If 'twas not fear of displeasing the king, why bother to lie at all?"

He hesitated then his mouth curved in a rueful smile. "'Twas your displeasure I sought to avoid."

"My displeasure!" Joanna gave a sharp laugh of disbelief. "You amaze me, my lord. I hardly think I can inspire that much fear in so seasoned a knight."

A slow flush crept up his neck at the scorn in her tone. "Perhaps if we had met in ordinary circumstances, I could have announced myself and my intentions. But Edward told me of your antipathy to the earl...to me. And then that morning when I awoke in your bed, I called you by another woman's name. I thought, foolishly I realize now, that if you knew me first as Hugh DeBracy, when I finally told you who I really was, you would feel differently about marrying me. It seemed a good strategy at the time," he added with a rueful smile.

"So you thought to win me as if I were some castle like the ones you attacked in France?" she demanded.

His shoulders lifted. "Something like that. I've always liked a challenge."

"And that's what I was to you, a challenge?"

"Perhaps, in the beginning. Although it was Edward's idea, marrying you fit into my plans. As you pointed out, I need an heir. And I wanted a loving stepmother for Meg. But it was more than that. I was curious to meet the woman who had the courage to defy Edward, and who hated me so much, despite the fact that we were strangers." He paused then added in a low voice, "Then I met you and I wanted to prove that I wasn't the man you thought I was."

Joanna's lips twisted in a humorless smile. "And to that end, you played at being the man you are not?"

"I am that man," he insisted. "The man you remember, the one who acted without honor nine years ago in that dark hallway at Windsor, is no more."

"Isn't he?" Joanna's dark brows rose and her gaze swept over him. "Then which of these two men was it who lied to me these past few days?"

Hugh winced. His hand half lifted to his chin as if she'd struck him a second blow. Joanna could see him struggling to find the words to defend his actions. Emotions chased across his face—shock, guilt, shame, finally resignation. "Although it pains me, I must concede there is more truth than I'd like to admit in what you say, my lady. I put my own interests before yours and for that I am truly sorry. All I can ask of you is to forgive me."

The raw pain in his voice sent fracture lines through the ice encasing Joanna's heart. That he was truly repentant for all the wrong he'd done her was clearly evident. But was that enough? Memories of their nights together crept into her mind. They had been filled with a physical splendor she'd never thought to experience again. But it was their days together, learning about each other's lives, that she treasured the most. But, by his own admission, while she'd been opening her heart, and other things, she reminded herself grimly, he'd been acting out a series of carefully planned moves to reach his goal. Perhaps it was better to live a lonely life at the abbey than wed a man who saw her only as a means to an end.

Pulling her pain around her like a shield, she raised her chin. "You have a long trip ahead of you, my lord earl. I think it best for you to go. March is such an unpredictable month. Who knows when you might be caught by another storm?"

"And leave you to do...what?" Hugh swung his arms, gesturing to the snow shrouded garden. "Leave all this behind while you retreat to the abbey and hide from the world?" he demanded.

"Aye," she shot back. Her cheeks burned with more than the cold air. She pulled herself up to her full height and looked him straight in the eye. "You need not concern yourself with me. You have a daughter to make peace with. Pray leave me to find my

peace in mine own way.” Giving him no chance to respond, she gathered up her sodden skirts, and with all the dignity she could muster, turned her back on him and quickly walked away.

The unfamiliar taste of defeat burned at the back of Hugh’s throat as he watched Joanna’s retreating back. With each step she took, any chance of a future with her at his side slipped farther away. A painful hand squeezed his chest at the thought of losing her. What words could he say that would soften her heart? He didn’t know, but he knew he’d better find some fast. The words that usually rose so glibly to his tongue stubbornly refused to come.

*Forget words. Carry her to your horse. Take her to Father Timothy and force her to say the words. The king gave her to you. She’s yours.* Hugh considered that strategy. He knew the king would approve of such direct action, especially if it preserved Ashwood Hall’s woods for his hunting pleasure. After a few objections, Joanna’s brother would most likely agree. It was clear Sir John approved the match and thought his sister a fool for resisting it.

The solution was tempting, but he knew he couldn’t do it. To take Joanna by force would be a colossal mistake. It would utterly destroy what little was left of the fragile bond that had formed between them. He’d had a marriage forced on him when he was young. It had turned out well enough, but he wanted more than just a mother for Meg. He wanted a wife who loved him, someone to laugh with him and to share his thoughts with during the long winter nights. Someone to walk with through the gardens in the summer and to watch the sun go down each evening. He saw the answer to all those desires in Joanna. She needed to come to him willingly. Or not at all.

With absolutely no idea what he intended to do, he strode after her, trampling a new path through the slushy snow in his haste. He caught up with her near the kitchen door. Joanna had paused to look up at the icicles on the porch roof. They glittered like crystals in the afternoon sun. Melting water cascaded down their sides in silver

waterfalls. The warmth of the sun had melted the mound of snow near the back door, revealing a cluster of white bell-shaped blossoms surrounded by dark green leaves. Snowdrops! The small flowers heralded the promise of spring. And perhaps the promise of something else, Hugh realized.

Unmindful of the slush, he knelt and broke off a few stems. Joanna turned at the sound of his soft grunt as he pushed himself upright. He held them out to her. "Look, my lady, a sure sign that winter is ending." He handed her the bouquet of waxy blossoms. "You know their meaning?"

After a moment's hesitation, she took the stems of the flowers, answering in a nearly inaudible voice. "Aye, my lord, they stand for hope."

Hugh dropped to one knee again and took her chilled hand between his. "Exactly, my lady—hope. And that is what I ask of you. Forgive my transgression and tell me that I may hope."

"Pray rise, my lord," she said. Her voice was cool, but a rosy flush tinged her cheeks and her gaze softened as she looked down at him.

Hope rose into his heart. His heart beat faster. He might yet succeed. He wrapped her fingers closer in his. "I will not rise until you've heard me out. Tell me I may speak." There was a moment's hesitation during which he thought he'd forgotten how to breathe. She gave a slight nod and air rushed back into his lungs. He touched the snowdrops she held with his free hand. "These small flowers offer us the promise of spring, my lady. After all this snow, I am sure you'll agree 'twill be welcomed. But I see another spring, Lady Joanna, one that could bloom between us, if you will give me a second chance. If you do, I vow you will not regret taking the risk."

"Luck was with me in my first marriage, my lord. Such luck does not come twice in a lifetime."

The corners of his mouth quirked upward. "I assure you, my lady, as a man with some experience at gambling that luck can indeed strike more than once. If you wed me, I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to you."

Uncertainty flitted across her face. She touched a waxy blossom with her fingertips. "You lied to me – betrayed me. How can I trust you?"

"I know it will take time and that I'll have to work hard at regaining your trust. But if you believe but one thing of me, believe this – Lady Joanna Leland, I love you with all my heart."

"We barely know each other." Despite her protest he saw the snowdrops tremble in her hand.

He drew her fingers to his lips and kissed them then smiled up at her. "Zwounds, my lady, in the past few days I'd say we've gotten to know each other very well. In truth, I think we know each better than many married couples. You suit me well. And if you give me a chance I think you'll find I suit you too."

He rose, freed the flowers from her grasp and gently tucked them in her hair. They shimmered like pearls among the autumn-kissed strands. "Marry me, Joanna, and let our winter blossom into spring."

Hugh saw the indecision in her eyes diminish. The shadows of grief and betrayal were not completely gone, but in the warm sunshine beating down on them, he saw them withdraw. In time, he hoped to see them disappear all together. Lips half-parted, she gave a small nod. "Very well, my lord."

Hope exploded into joy. Hugh gathered her into his arms and claimed her mouth in a tender kiss that promised much more to come. He straightened, but kept her close. "Thank you, my lady. You have made me a happy man."

A rueful smile slanted her lips. "Aye, and the king as well, I have no doubt."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Aye, 'tis true. Edward will be most pleased."

Joanna smiled. "Just think, my lord. Had the storm waited another day, I might have been on my way to the abbey."

"Fortunately fate had other plans for us."

"Indeed." She reached up, broke off a stem of the snowdrops in her hair and tucked it behind his ear. "'Twould be a great folly to gainsay fate."

Hugh bent and kissed her with all the love he possessed. Breathless, they parted and stood smiling up into each other's eyes. A drop of icy water splashed onto the back of Hugh's neck. Lost in their kiss, he'd moved them beneath the melting icicles. "Spring comes apace," he said with a laugh. "Before we get washed away, I think it best we go tell your brother our news."

Joanna took his arm and they ducked beneath the porch roof. Hugh looked down into her laughing face and knew that winter had indeed ended, to be replaced with all the warmth and promise of spring. He planned to make it last all their lives.



## About the Author

Kathleen Coddington wrote her first romance in sixth grade. While it was vastly entertaining to her classmates, her teacher was less than amused. It was over thirty years before she began writing again. When she did pick up her pen, she looked to the things she loved most for inspiration. Her stories reflect her passion for history, magic, fascinating future worlds and a firm belief that love conquers all.

She is a member of Romance Writers of America, the Pocono Lehigh Romance Writers, and the Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group. She has received awards from the New Jersey Romance Writers' Put Your Heart in a Book contest and the Golden Rose contest. She has three books published through Cerridwen Press.

A retired school librarian, Kathleen enjoys reading and travel. A member of two Civil War reenacting units, she is a frequent lecturer at historical societies and women's groups. She has also published several articles about the fashions of the mid-19th century. She and her husband and three cats live near their son in a tiny town in eastern Pennsylvania, where she teaches a novel-writing course at the local community college.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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