

ELLORA'S CAVE

Blush

Rosemary
Laurey

The
Wooing of

Lady Elisa

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Kisses

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Blush sensuality level: This is a sensual romance (may have explicit love scenes, but not erotic in frequency or type).

Elisa expected changes when her brother returned to Thorncroft after years in the Kings' Crusade. That he returned with her future husband was unexpected. But Elisa fast learns to love the intriguing and attractive *Signor* Marco. All seems well, until the sudden arrival of visitors on the eve of her wedding...visitors who seem certain to destroy Elisa's chance at happiness.

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The Wooing of Lady Elisa

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THE WOOING OF LADY ELISA

Rosemary Laurey

Chapter One

It was a perfect morning for a homecoming.

Lady Elisa of Thorncroft thanked heaven for her brother's survival after fighting in the Kings' Crusade, but Sir John's return, marked the end of the life she'd enjoyed the past six years.

The aromas of roasting and baking followed her as she rode out to meet her brother. For three days, servants had been preparing the celebration feast. The entire house had been wild with activity since the first news of his return. Sir John was coming home to a hero's welcome and an estate that now fared well under her direction. Wheat stood strong and ready for the scythe, fruit trees bowed under the weight of an abundant crop and livestock had increased since the day John rode out to join the Christian cause.

They had not been easy years. She'd grown to a woman, learning along the way to direct servants and haggle with traders. The flood last summer and the drought the summer before she'd faced but with the authority to give orders. With John's return, she would descend from lady of the demesne to unmarried and now, perchance, unmanageable sister.

Still, that was preferable to marriage to Edwin Doune. Elisa would not feel anything as sinful as gladness that her betrothed was dead. Each night she prayed for his soul and thanked the Creator for sparing her from marrying him. She'd liked Edwin, and the alliance was blessed by all concerned, except the bride-to-be, who had no say in the matter. Edwin had been kind, she granted his departed soul that, but the one time he embraced her had been like kissing a dead carp.

She'd seen and heard enough between the servants and the villagers to know there was pleasure between men and women, but mayhap such a boon was just the

Almighty's gift to peasants to compensate for their heavy lot in life. Perhaps such pleasures were not for those of her class and standing.

No time for pondering! The familiar blue banner of Thorncroft approached. It was faded and worn from long years of fighting, but the standard bearer carried it with pride. There were far, far fewer in the company than had set out that crystal-clear spring morning so many years gone past, but she could sense the joy in every heart at the sight of home.

At the head of the company rode her brother John, looking older than she remembered and weary and grime-streaked from travel. Beside John rode an unknown, broad-shouldered man on a white mount. The horse chomped, but the stranger held the reins with one hand, confident his horse would respond to a touch from his knees or thighs.

"Elisa!" John said as they met. "Let me present my rescuer from a heathen ambush, *Signor* Marco de Bella Vista. My sister, the Lady Elisa of Thorncroft."

"Lady Elisa," *Signor* Marco bowed, the tanned skin by his eyes crinkling as he smiled. "I am honored." His speech marked him as a foreigner, and his dark, searching eyes were unlike any she'd ever encountered.

"'Tis my privilege, *Signor* Marco. Thorncroft is open to all loyal and brave knights, and my brother's savior gains a tenfold welcome."

"Gracious and beautiful, indeed," *Signor* Marco replied, taking her hand and kissing it. If good sense did not tell her otherwise, she'd swear she felt the touch of his lips through the leather of her glove. Or maybe it was his smile that stirred the warmth across her skin.

"Come, Elisa," John said, his brows furrowing. "I have a thirst and a hunger to slake."

As she turned her mount to fall beside her brother, the wind ruffled her kerchief. Thank heaven the knots held! When John saw her hair, he'd have good reason to scowl.

Hopefully by then, he'd have food and beer in his belly and thus be in a mellow mood before he glimpsed her shorn head.

After a short while, John rode ahead, leaving her to ride alongside their guest.

"Thorncroft is a fine property, Lady Elisa," *Signor* Marco said.

"I believe so, but it's my home and I love it, so perhaps my opinion is biased," she paused, glancing sideways. *Signor* Marco rode high in the saddle, head and shoulders above her. He was slender, as were almost all the men returning from long years of war and hard travel, but from the way *Signor* Marco held himself, she guessed he was strong and muscular. She stopped herself. Thinking of a man's body was most unseemly. "Tell me about your home, *signor*." He seemed surprised at her question. "Forgive me if I intrude, but I am curious."

"No forgiveness needed, lady. I hesitated for fear of boring you."

"You would not bore me, *Signor*. How will I learn about the world beyond Thorncroft if not from those who have traveled?"

"Would you travel to lands afar, lady?"

No one in her family had ever asked her that. Elisa looked up at the stranger riding knee to knee with her. "I have not permitted myself to want it. My world is Thorncroft."

"But one day you will marry, lady, and leave your brother's demesne."

"I was to have been married but my betrothed died on the march from Acre to Jerusalem." She didn't want to talk about Edwin. Not now when happiness and lightheartedness seemed the order of the day. "Your mount, *Signor* Marco. Is she from your country?" The mare was light-boned, but fine muscle rippled under her sleek, white coat.

"No, lady. Diane was captured from the Mohammedans. I took my bounty in four-legged wealth. I had two yearlings, six brood mares and a fine stallion sent to my home."

"You will breed them?" Why else bring horses all that way? If the others were half as fine as this one, he'd have the start of a magnificent blood stock.

"Breed my horses and tend my vineyard." His dark eyes glimmered as he spoke.

"You miss your home?"

"Doesn't every man, lady?"

"But you journey this far out of your way." Mayhap that was too presumptuous, but why had he come? And where was his home?

"Your lord brother insisted."

How like John, to demand *Signor* Marco travel many, many hundreds, maybe thousands of leagues out of his way. Thank the saints they'd not arrived in the spring, with the countryside recovering from flood and famine. "If you would, tell me..."

A shout from the company interrupted her. Thorncroft was in sight. John had reined in his horse as he surveyed the fields. "Tithes will be rich this year," he said.

"It will be a good harvest," Elisa replied, "after two lean years. Drought and then floods ruined the last two crops."

"But all is well now, sister, I am home." Head high, John led his company the last few miles.

* * * * *

All was as well as she could make it. Smells of roast meats and fresh pies filled every corner of the castle. Huge cauldrons of water had heated in the courtyard all morning, and now servants carried tubs of hot water for guests to bathe before the feast. Minstrels gathered to entertain, and a troupe of players had been summoned from the town. Elisa prayed it was sufficient to please her brother.

Certain that everything was in readiness. She retired to her room. She bathed quickly and sat in her shift as her serving woman dried her hair.

"'Tis growing back, my lady," Marjorie, her cousin, said as she brushed the damp out. "One day it will be as long and beautiful as ever."

So Elisa hoped! Selling her hair had been a necessary sacrifice she still regretted. "And meanwhile, a fresh kerchief. The blue one to match my new dress." She ran her hands over the soft blue linen, the color of bluebells in summer, spread out on her bed. It wasn't silk or velvet but was the best she could afford, living on the sparse finances John had allowed.

She brushed down her skirts, smoothing out creases as Marjorie checked the knot on Elisa's kerchief and gave her a gentle slap on her cheeks to restore their color. Elisa knew she was pale from anxiety. There was so much that might not be to John's satisfaction and he had never been one to hold back from criticism or complaint.

She could delay no longer. The company and the feast awaited. She left her chamber and descended the stairway down to the solar, crossed the long, narrow gallery and down another narrow flight and opened a door.

"Sister," John called as she entered the small parlor where he and *Signor* Marco waited. He stepped forward, his ever vigilant gaze taking in her new dress, her reddened hands and her kerchief. As his eyes lighted on that, he frowned. "Why wear that kerchief?" he asked. "A maid should show her hair. Off with it!" Moving faster than she could, John pulled off her kerchief. "Saint's bones! What have we here?" He stared. "Have you been ill, sister? Why is your hair cropped like a postulant's or," he paused, "a whore!"

"I had it cut, brother. It was necessary." Elisa stood as tall as she dared, her face burning as she fought back the tears of humiliation that stung her eyelids. He might shame her this way in front of his guest, she felt the heat of *Signor* Marco's gaze as well as the weight of her brother's scowl, but she would not be ashamed.

"Were you sick of the fever?" he demanded.

"No, I was not sick. We were in dire need. This past spring we had no seed corn. Last season's was lost in store during the floods. So I sold my hair to a wigmaker to buy us seed."

He looked ready to blame her for the rains that left them close to starvation. "But your hair! Ye gods! Sister!" He ran his fingers through his own dark locks as if to emphasize her shorn state. "What think you, *signor*?" Blood heated her face as John grabbed her shoulders and she turned to meet *Signor* Marco's dark eyes. "Do you still want her? Shorn like a Magdalene?"

Elisa gasped, her brother's words echoing in her skull. She was to marry the foreigner! How could John tell her like this!

Signor Marco was silent for several wild thumps of her heart. He looked from her to John and back to her as the blood pounded in her ears. Then he smiled, directly at her. "Why not, my friend?" he said. "A maid who would sell her hair to buy seed corn for her brother's harvest has a heart great enough to surely find space for a husband."

Elisa blinked back her tears, knowing weeping would only bring on more of John's wrath. He said nothing. *Signor* Marco's gaze said far too much.

"Your hair is the color of aged honey, Lady Elisa," *Signor* Marco went on, his voice warm and gentle in the strained silence. "For my part, I would look on your golden hair shorn or long, but as you wish to keep it covered..." His fingers deftly and surely smoothed her ruffled hair before taking the now crumpled linen from John's fist. "This blue matches your eyes, lady," he said as he knotted the square of fabric back in place.

Signor Marco stepped back, but she still felt the warmth of his breath on the back of her neck and the lingering touch of his hands. She wanted time alone to fathom her brother's ill-timed news, but it could not be. The feast and the company awaited them.

Seated between her brother and her would-be husband, Elisa barely tasted the fowl and beef John sliced and placed on her trencher, but the stripped carcasses and empty serving trays showed others were not so distracted. But no one else faced marrying a stranger.

"Lady?" *Signor* Marco spoke gently as he raised a pewter flagon to refill her goblet. "My regrets that you heard this news in such a fashion."

"Mine too." The blood rose to her face at the memory.

"Is it unwelcome?" Elisa stared. *Signor* Marco went on. "I fear that I sense your displeasure."

"Not displeasure, sir." It was the truth. "But surprise."

He nodded. "Surprise that your brother found you a husband or surprise it was me?"

"Both, sir. The news took me so unawares. On reflection, I know I should have expected with Edwin dead that..." She did not want to talk about Edwin, not with Marco who, by his eyes and smile alone, thrust her into disequilibrium.

"Is it too soon to think of another as your betrothed?"

It would be so easy to act the bereft lover, but she balked at the deception. "Edwin was my childhood playmate, *signor*. It was hard to think of him as my husband, a boy I'd pushed out of a tree and made cry with teasing. I was three years older and not a very kind child, I fear. I once put a mouse down his tunic."

Her now intended had a deep, warm laugh, rich and heady as mulled cider. "Would you put a mouse down my tunic, lady?"

Her face burned as blood flooded her cheeks. This man was no eight-year-old boy. "No, *Signor* Marco." She shook her head. "I have grown up and learned better manners since then."

"And how to manage an estate, tend your bother's lands and provide a feast fit for the pope. Lady, is it too much for me to hope that you look favorably on my suit?"

Most gently and tactfully put, but... "*Signor* Marco, is my consent of any import?"

That was not tactful. He raised his eyebrows. "Indeed, it is, lady. When your brother offered me your hand, I told him I would only accept if you agreed."

"Knowing that for me to refuse is impossible, if my brother wills it." That was shrewish but why pretend her feelings were of any importance?

His slow smile did strange things to her heartbeat. And other parts of her body. "You will come to me willingly, lady, or we will not marry."

Signor Marco's words sent shivers chasing down her spine. Shivers that burst into an ice storm when her brother stood and silenced the company to announce three days of feasting, at the end of which, his sister and *Signor* Marco would wed.

How like John! Three days of feasting meant endless work for the kitchens and even more inroads to their still not abundant stores. Maybe she could convince him to organize a hunt tomorrow for entertainment.

But these concerns, she had to put aside as the company drank to her health and that of her future husband before the players assembled to perform *The History of the Trojan Horse*.

As the players frolicked and the company laughed and shouted their amusement, Elisa's mind was on matters other than Greek ingenuity or even worries of how the kitchens would cope for the next three days. Her intended spouse occupied her thoughts. To the eye, he was more than pleasing, but a man was surely more than muscular shoulders or a strong, clean-shaven chin. Much as she admired the dark hair that fell over his forehead and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners as he laughed at the antics of two Trojan guards, she knew what she saw was just the shell of Marco de Bella Vista.

He was brave and strong, saving John's life proved that. Honorable and courteous, that she'd observed herself. Determined too, insisting on her wholehearted agreement to their marriage. She would ask him later why that mattered so.

"Such entertainment at short notice speaks of great hospitality," *Signor* Marco said. "I thank you, Lady Elisa."

John clunked his goblet on the table. "I warn you, good *signor*, watch my sister when the players come to Belle Vista. She's wont to leave her home and follow them."

How could John mention that! She'd been seven years old at the time.

"Indeed, Sir John?" Marco sounded almost bored, until he turned his dark gaze her way. "You ran away and followed the players, my lady?"

"I was a child, enthralled by the Christmas players. I wanted to travel from town to village and castle to house and see the world and play dress-up games. I hid in their wagon when they left, but they found me and brought me back before we'd even reached the next town."

He gave her a slow, wide smile that sent little thrills skittering across her skin and whispered, "Lady, I too ran away. I was nine and wanted to join the traveling acrobats."

"But they brought you back?"

"Not right away. When my father received the news they'd found me, he told them to take me with them a month." *Signor* Marco shook his head, and she tried to imagine him as a nine-year-old boy. "I found out how hard life could be. They never ill-treated me and fed me when they ate, which was not as often as I was accustomed to. But as I was no use as an acrobat, I had the rough work to do—help the men load and unload the carts, find fodder and water for the two donkeys, hideous animals who kicked and bit me at every chance." He took her hand, very lightly, but her skin warmed at his touch and her heart raced at what those hands would do, one day. No! In three days' time. "When I was finally returned to my family, I was most appreciative of my home."

John banged his fist on the table. "No more talk! Where are the minstrels, sister? Summon them!"

The side tables were cleared for dancing. John led her out first then *Signor* Marco claimed her. This was not like dancing with a brother. As they parted and met through the measures of the dance, she found herself waiting for his hand in hers, and the touch of his arm on her waist as they twirled their turn down the line of dancers. It was only, she insisted in her heart, because this man danced with a grace she'd seldom encountered.

As the evening wore on, Elisa danced with other partners. Many of her brother's knights begged her favors, but it was to *Signor* Marco her eyes kept turning. Wanting to meet his eyes and see his smile and missing the warmth of his hand in hers. How could she miss him? They'd only just met. But in mere days they would be wed and he would

have rights of her body and take her away. What was his home Bella Vista like? By name it sounded so alien from Thorncroft. What awaited her there?

The night was long and she was tired and confused and needed time alone, something rare in a castle filled with company.

Chapter Two

Early the next morning, Elisa left the castle by a side gate, taking the path to the lavender meadows. Not fifty paces gone, she turned at a call from behind. *Signor* Marco approached. No point in running to hide. Lavender bushes would barely hide a rabbit. She'd wanted quiet moments to consider him and now she truly did have to consider him. Consider him keeping her company.

If looks were all, striding across the sheep-clipped grass, he was as fine a manly figure as any she had seen, and she was to marry him. She shivered in the morning sun.

He stopped ten paces away then advanced slowly, a half-smile on his wide mouth. "Lady Elisa," his voice came strong and clear in the morning air, "I would intrude upon your walk, if you permit."

If she reached out, she could touch the soft wool of his surcoat. His head inclined as he spoke, and as he raised upright, his eyes met hers. His wide, hopeful smile would be hard to refuse. If she dared. "And if I do not permit, *Signor* Marco?"

"Then, my lady, I would offer my humble apologies for intruding and entreat you to appoint an occasion when we may talk." He paused. "For talk we must, Lady Elisa."

"Why must we? My brother has decreed we will marry in two days, so marry you I will."

His eyes seemed to deepen. "Lady, did I not tell you last night. We marry only if you will it."

"You believe that, sir? Can you imagine my brother's humor if I spurned you?" She shivered at the thought of John's ire. She'd as well take to the forest with the beggars and wanderers as to refuse.

A frown shadowed *Signor* Marco's thoughtful face. "Lady, rest assured. I will convince your brother I am the one refusing." He held up a long-fingered hand at her

gasp of dismay. "I will tell him, I believe your health is not strong enough to endure our southern climate." He smiled. "Sir John swore himself to hell and back over the heat of the desert, he will believe me. Although, trust me, even the hottest days of our summers are nowhere near as harsh as the blistering heat of the deserts." *Signor* Marco paused again. "Your refusal will not compromise you in any way, I give you my word."

Not quite understanding why, she accepted his assurance. "Why does it matter what I wish?"

"Walk with me, Lady Elisa, and I will tell you." He offered his hand.

His skin was warm, his palm callused. Under the skin, she felt the strength of a hand that had wielded a sword, killed and fought, and saved her brother's life. Her fingers closed over his. "You have beautiful hands, lady, and your nails are pale and smooth as pearls."

"You flatter me, *signor*." As he flattered her old nurse's salve of lanolin and rose petals. "Do you mind gathering lavender? We have need of it for the still room."

"We can gather the entire hillside, if you wish. If you will talk while we do so." He took the basket. "Allow me, lady."

She was happy to. As unlike the men she'd grown up with as sweet mead from rough ale, *Signor* Marco fascinated her, and his insistence that she marry him willingly intrigued her. Why did he just not take her and her dowry as Edwin had been more than content to? She handed the *signor* a handful of lavender stalks, and as his fingers brushed hers, she looked up at him. His eyes were dark as sable fur, and yet in their depth she saw honor and trust—and a wariness at odds with his confidence.

"There is something about me you must know first, lady." Elisa nodded, her mind charging through wild possibilities. "I am baseborn, a bastard."

Was that all? By his tone, she'd half-expected him to admit to being a leper or having a lizard's tail. "Why should that be held to your shame?"

He eyed her as if still unsure. "Many consider it so."

"They do," she agreed, "but to hold you in scorn for that, would mean I scorned my father and brother."

His eyes widened. "Why, lady? They are not baseborn."

"No, but both have put a few bastards on this earth."

"Lady, the world oft scorns a bastard but not the man who makes one."

"Does that mean the world is right? To be born is not a sin but adultery and fornication are." *Signor* Marco seemed shocked at her words. True, it was not seemly to talk of sin and even less seemly for a maid to mention sins of the flesh, but... Still uncertain of the meaning of the stare he gave her, she bent to pick more lavender. "You thought I would scorn you as a husband because of your bastardy? My brother considers you honorable. You proved your valor in saving his life. How could I consider you less?" She handed him a bundle of fresh stalks.

"You mean this from your heart, lady?"

"I do not speak unless I mean it, sir." His fingers closed over hers, and her throat tightened as she looked up at him. "I will never scorn you, *signor*, and if any in my brother's house so insults you, you will have recompense and satisfaction."

"You would fight for me, lady?" he asked, a tight smile curving one side of his mouth.

"I would fight in the ways a woman can for the honor of my house and my family and for yours," she paused, "if you so choose."

"No, lady, when you so choose."

"I see it's 'when', not 'if', *signor*." She eased her hand from his and placed the stalks in the basket. "I meet your approval, at least in some measure."

"Lady, my approval is assured." His voice sent a warm thrill through her. "Now I strive to meet your approval."

"Why does it matter so much?"

"I have no desire to spend my life with a woman who dislikes me."

"I do not dislike you, *signor*."

His look suggested he only half believed her. "Then call me Marco as my family does."

"If you wish, Marco." Without his title, his name rolled strange on her tongue, but it fitted him. He was unlike any man she'd ever known standing among the scented bushes. "Marco," she repeated, her heart skittering inside her ribs as he raised her hand to his lips and trailed his warm, wet tongue across her knuckles before kissing the bend of her wrist. Her heartbeat raced as she met his questioning eyes. The way his mouth curled in response sent a wild thrill down her spine.

She should pull her hand away. This was most improper, she felt certain, but she could no more remove her hand, or hold back her smile, than fly. He half released her fingers, but her disappointment soon warmed into expectation as he gently kissed her upturned palm. "Lady," he said, his voice tight and hoarse.

"Should I not be Elisa?"

"E...lis...a," he pulled her name out, giving the syllables a softness she'd never heard from anyone else's lips. "My Elisa." Her throat tightened as if choking on the sweetest honey and her body bathed in the heat from his eyes. He closed her fingers over her palm as if to hold his kiss from the world. "We had better walk some more," he said. "Lady, you are the sweetest temptation."

The lavender stalks seemed tougher and harder to cut, but she found the strength. "Tell me about your home, Marco?" Elisa asked, knowing she should put distance between them but wanting to stay close.

"Bella Vista?" His pride showed in his eyes. "It merits the name, or will. It is close to a ruin now. The estate was a gift from my father's wife." At Elisa's intake of breath, he squeezed her hand. "She believed, as you do, that bastards are not responsible for their illegitimacy and gave me the land and sufficient estate to support a wife."

“And you would have me as that wife?” Elisa stepped closer without realizing. Through the wash-softened linen of her robe, his leg brushed hers. She should draw back but would not. “Do I please you?”

She heard rather than saw the basket drop with a soft thud. A strong, gentle hand eased up her neck to cup the back of her head. Instinctively, she lifted her face and watched his eyes darken. Her lips parted but not to speak. Her breath caught as he lowered his face, and as his lips brushed hers, a wild rushing in her ears drowned out all thought. All she wanted was to feel. She took a half step closer, his warmth covering her from breast to knees as his mouth claimed hers. She tasted excitement and heat and male ardor. Somewhere deep inside her mind, she heard an excited whimper, but all she really knew was his mouth on her lips and the touch of his hands on her hips. The heat and the strength of him spurred her need as she pressed closer.

Finally, they parted, both panting, the sweat beading on his brow and his eyes dark as an undiscovered cavern. Elisa felt her chest rise and fall as if from running or hard riding. “Marco!” she managed between gasps.

“My dearest, my Elisa.” His words were as forced and breathless as hers. “Oh my love.” His arms closed around her, but as she relaxed into him, the sound of children calling halted her.

They turned together, his hand still round her shoulders, and watched. Seemed every unoccupied child in the castle was advancing on the lavender meadows, armed with baskets.

“God’s teeth,” Marco muttered.

“No doubt someone decided we have dallied here alone far too long,” Elisa replied, striving her utmost to conceal her annoyance.

“Mayhap we have dallied too long. I am awash with temptation.”

Was that what it was? This strange and heated need she felt in her bones, under her skin, inside her mind, whirling her very soul. “We must go.”

He nodded and retrieved the basket, gathering up the spilled stalks before walking beside her up the hill.

“You never did tell me about Bella Vista,” she said.

“I will, my lady, and soon,” he promised. The gate stood open, waiting for them. “Will you grant me a favor?”

“If I can. What do you wish?”

“At the feasting tonight, wear the gift I will send to your room.”

“If my brother so permits.”

“He will permit.”

She didn’t doubt it. “I will wear your gift, Marco. With pride.”

Chapter Three

"It is indeed lovely, my lady," Marjorie and the handmaid Anne exclaimed as Elisa untied the velvet package to reveal Marco's gift. The pendant of pearls hung on a fine golden chain. The deep luster contrasted with the dark green of her robe and the creamy pearls warmed at her touch as she rolled them between her fingers. It was a rich gift and pleased her, but not as much as that kiss on the hillside. Pearls were truly a gift of love. She had the pearls her father gave her mother as a wedding gift. They were fine, and wearing them brought her parents' memory alive, but looking at Marco's, it was no contest which Elisa preferred. Elisa stood. Time to meet John and Marco in the parlor.

John's dogs were there, sleeping among the rushes, in the narrow pool of sunshine on the scrubbed floor, but her brother was not. Elisa's throat tightened as Marco rose from a seat by the window.

"Lady Elisa," he said, crossing the room. "You wear my pearls."

Elisa was suddenly aware of the weight nestling against her breasts. "How could I not? It is a gift a queen would be proud to wear. They are truly beautiful."

"But were not one tenth as beautiful until you wore them, my lady. The Arabs say that pearls take on the beauty of the wearer."

"Maybe they carry the honor of the giver too."

He smiled. "That I have not heard, but if you so declare, how can I not believe?"

"Are we flirting, Marco?"

"Yes, lady, we are." His chuckle was warm as the sunshine by her feet. "Will you run to your brother and object?"

"Since he has no doubt seen to it that we are alone, why would I? Besides, you never finished telling me about Belle Vista or why you so demand my agreement."

He led her to the seat by the window, the cushions were still warm. He was close enough to touch. She clasped her hands in her lap.

"Belle Vista is halfway to a ruin, but with my spoils from war, I will rebuild. There are three vineyards, neglected but only needing work, orchards and acres of fine meadows to raise my Arabs and breed them with the local stock. The dark soil will grow most things with a little care and careful husbandry."

"Will it grow lavender?" she asked, remembering their walk and their embrace that morning.

"Hillsides of it, if you wish, Elisa, and we can stroll among the scented bushes together and undisturbed."

"Marco, you are well on the way to convincing me."

"I have two more days, Elisa. And I would see into your heart."

"I have no secrets in my heart." The setting sun through the embrasure made a golden aura 'round his head and shoulders. Her breath caught. This man would be her husband. The prospect no longer disturbed her. "Tell me why my agreement is so important?"

"My father's legitimate daughter was married as he willed. Annette is unhappy beyond words. My once laughing sister seldom as much as smiles, and her life is one long sadness. Her husband had already taken a mistress and produced a bastard before I left for the wars, and they'd only been married three years.

"At Lady Jeanne's insistence, my two fellow bastard half sisters were allowed to choose their own mates. One married the youngest son of a lesser knight, the other a merchant in the town, but both seem happy with their husbands, for it was their choice.

"My father and Lady Jeanne married as part of an alliance to join two great estates. Lady Jeanne spends her life in prayer and doing good works, my father, hunting, drinking and wenching. Their lives were separate and they are both very alone and lonely. I want more."

"How much more?"

"A wife who welcomes my touch and comes to me gladly. Who bears my children out of joy, not obligation or duty."

And she could be that wife. Elisa stood, turning so she faced him, offering her hand. "I have welcomed your touch and your lips, Marco."

He took her hand and pulled her so she stood between his legs. "There is more to marriage than kisses, Elisa."

"I do know that!" She had to smile.

His hands rested on her hips, easing her closer to him. "I would have all of you, my sweetest lady. To love and hold."

"And I would love you with my heart and body, Marco."

His arms snagged around her waist, lifting her so she sat across his thighs. He smelled of man and fresh air, the smile on his lips sent her mind back to the kiss on the hillside and then his mouth met hers and she didn't think anymore. She felt.

His lips eased hers apart until their breaths mingled, his tongue met hers and sensation flared like the white light of a comet in the sky. She pressed into him, curving her body against his, wanting to feel more, needing him to consume her. She returned his invasion, touch for touch, thrust for thrust. Her mind spiraled in a wild vortex and her heart raced under the warm palm that pressed upon her breast.

It was as if she'd never felt before, never sensed, never been aware. Now her whole being flooded with feeling. As his fingers closed around her breast, a wild streak of joy rushed deep between her legs. She cried out in surprise, but the sound was swallowed by his kiss and the wild pounding in her ears.

Slowly, her body calmed, but her mind still reeled with the aftermath of his touch. "*Signor!*"

"Marco," he corrected, stroking her swollen lips with his finger. "Did that please you?"

"Please me?" She all but gasped. "Music pleases me, a beautiful sunset pleases me, a new dress pleases me. I have no word for what I just felt."

"Would you feel more, my love?"

"Indeed, I would, if there is more to feel."

"Much more," he replied, and lowered his head again. But as their lips met, one of the dogs lifted his head with a welcoming bark as the door opened.

Elisa moved to spring up, but Marco held on. Short of tugging, she could not separate herself from him. Why would she? She wanted the touch of his hand on hers. For always. Did she still need to convince him?

"Ho, ho!" John said, scowling as he walked toward the window. "What is this I see? Not dipping your wick before the ceremonies are you, good *signor*?"

Elisa's face burned. Her cheeks had to be scarlet.

Marco tightened his hold her waist, pulling her closer. Much closer, so she gasped at the pressure of his erection though her skirt. "No impropriety, my friend. I have been persuading the Lady Elisa to come to Bella Vista with me."

"She'll go with you, I have spoken it."

"And so, my friend, has she," Marco replied, standing and setting her on her feet.

"You are too scrupulous, Marco," John replied, "but let's not discourse it further, the meal awaits."

And a fine meal too, not that John understood one fraction of the labor involved or how close their larders were to depletion. But, as she'd asked, he announced a great hunt on the morrow to prepare for the wedding feast, and he was pleased with the players' choice of *The Tragic History of Pyramus and Thisbe*. Elisa's heart ached for the tragedy of the lovers, and a shadow darkened her mind at a sudden pang of fear that she would be parted thus from Marco. Impossible! They had agreed, and John had decreed two nights from now she would share Marco's bed.

She turned to look at him, He was handsome beyond measure, courtly, generous—she fingered the pearl pendant at her breast—and loving. Her lips and arms ached for more of his touch. As if sensing her thoughts, he turned her way and gave her a smile and a look that promised years of happiness, to watch their children grow in Bella Vista.

* * * * *

The hunting parties left shortly after dawn and the castle set to work. Elisa commandeered the baker's oven in the village to supplement the castle's kitchen, promising food would be distributed in the village to commemorate her wedding. The castle was astir with activity, sides of beef turned on the spit, pies baked in the ovens and the courtyard was white with the feathers of chickens being plucked. Around her were the sounds of wood chopping to maintain the cooking and heating fires and the shouts of agitated cooks and the flustered blacksmith. And amidst it all, the shouts of children and the squawking of hens as they were chased down to be killed and plucked.

Seeing all was under way, Elisa repaired to her chamber where Anne and Marjorie were occupied sewing Elisa's wedding gown. There had been no time to send for the draper and his samples, so they were busy sewing a spare length of silk and some lace unearthed in a trunk to Elisa's best gown.

In the laundry, two women from the village had been busy since yesterday washing and ironing Elisa's petticoats and shifts in preparation for packing. All her belongings would be clean and mended but simple. Once, she'd dreamed of a marriage chest of silk and lace and velvets, but the past years of shortage put paid to that hope. She would be leaving with very few marriage goods.

Her throat tightened at the thought of moving forever from her home, but she was leaving to be a wife to Marco, to know his caress and to be surrounded by his courtesy and love for the rest of their lives. A fair exchange. It had been agreed that her serving woman Anne was to travel with her. The blacksmith who had harbored hopes of Anne was in a surly mood but did not refuse to shoe the horses. He knew better.

There was much to oversee, but she must take time to pack her few jewels and treasures in the leather-covered box Marco had sent up that morning. She had little enough. She still had not told John how many of her mother's jewels she'd parted with before she was reduced to selling her hair. A few remained, aside from her mother's pearls. They were mostly trinkets that had been rejected by the jeweler in the town. What she had, Elisa wrapped in linen pouches and placed in the box, along with her treasured prayer book, given to her by her mother's uncle the Abbot of Whaley.

Looking though her work chest, she found, knotted in a handkerchief, the silver bangle Edwin had given her on their betrothal.

She'd worn it for him, until she got word of his death. Then had packed it away. Now it seemed as if his ghost entered her chamber, reminding her of her promise to him. If his ghost did not rest easy, she would pray for him, but now another man was claiming her. It was one of the twists of life and death.

What to do with this now? It was fine-worked silver with a pattern of grape leaves. Pretty in its own way, but she could never, as Marco's wife, wear a gift from another lover. To give it to Anne or Marjorie was not right. It was too fine for a servant, and if word spread to Edwin's family, they would be offended. Perhaps she would do best to return it to them.

That seemed harsh. Another reminder of their lost son. She put it aside to worry about later. Mayhap would be easiest to leave it here and let John decide the best course.

She had work to do.

She left her chamber and was halfway down the stairs when she met Edith, the head of the linen room, and two the linen maids, laden with boxes and packages.

"What is it?" Elisa asked.

"For you, lady, sent by your lord's man." Elisa could hardly believe her eyes. They had not said her "lord brother". They meant Marco.

“Come.” She picked up her skirts and led them back up to the chamber, and there they unwrapped packages and opened boxes, exclaiming at the riches before their eyes. Silks in pure white and bright jewel colors, some as fine as gossamer, others heavy as winter woolens. Laces, some made with gold and silver, lengths of fine linens, buttons of gold and fine-cut glass, buckles for her shoes and even a bundle of furs so pale as to seem white.

It was riches to furnish a wardrobe for a queen, and it as all hers.

“Lady,” Anne said, holding up a length of blue silk in one hand and silver lace in another. “If we work all day, we can make you a new dress for your marriage. And look at this.” She lifted a length of darker blue silk. “This is so light and fine, we will make you a flowing veil to cover your head.”

Elisa could not stem their excitement, did not wish to. It matched her own. She now had the marriage chest of her dreams, not from her labors or John’s beneficence, but as a gift of love from Marco.

“Yes,” she told them, “I must go to the kitchen but will return as soon as I can.”

She all but skipped down the stairs, thinking of the morrow when she would go to Marco, dressed as richly as any princess. Perhaps it was worldly to care so much for beautiful things, but she so wished to look her finest on her wedding day.

She needed new travel clothes too. Would there be time to fashion a cloak from the furs? She almost turned back to her room but made herself descend and cross the courtyard to the kitchen. Before long, they would have a hungry hunting party to feed.

She worried about having enough food for tomorrow’s feast, but very soon seeing to provisions at Thorncroft would no longer be her burden.

Until she arrived at Bella Vista, and there, if Marco spoke truly – and could she ever doubt him? – there would be work and labor aplenty.

Leaving Anne and Marjorie to their needles, Elisa spent most of the day supervising the kitchens, bullying the lads to replace the used rushes on the hall floor and encouraging the younger children who maintained the fires to heat cauldrons of water in the yard.

By late afternoon, when the hunting party returned, there was fresh bread and cheese with ale to slake their immediate hungers and an abundance of hot water for washing. A party of her brother's men-at-arms and several of Marco's company set to skinning and butchering. There were some fine skins, but it was no longer her responsibility to see they were tanned for the winter.

She hoped all would be well once she was gone.

"Sister!" She turned at her brother's voice. "Why stand you here?"

"To see all is in readiness for the feast tonight."

He gave a grunt. "Don't let the food be late, and is there entertainment for us?"

"Jugglers and acrobats I sent for when I heard they were in the town, and minstrels from the cathedral."

"I want no churchy music tonight, sister."

"It is agreed. They will play dance music and some of the number will sing ballads."

He could find no fault with that so she took her leave and hastened back to her chamber, hoping Anne would have hot water ready for her.

They had indeed. Marjorie had found a vial of perfume among Marco's gifts, and they had decorated her old green gown with some of the silver lace.

"It will show him how much you value his gifts," Marjorie said, and Elisa couldn't disagree.

Not two hours of the clock later, wearing her green dress embellished with silver lace, Elisa fastened her mother's pearls around her neck. It was fitting, she decided, to

wear them tonight, her last night as a maid of Thorncroft. After tightening her kerchief, Elisa left her chamber and headed for the parlor, hoping that Marco would come in early before her brother.

As she opened the door, she glimpsed a shadow on the floor and turned toward it, smiling. "Marco!" She ran across the room and into his arms. He picked her up by the waist, twirling her around as they kissed, keeping her in the air. As he set her back on her feet, it took her several moments to catch her breath. "I have missed you," she said, feeling shy, elated and joyous at one and the same time.

"I too," he replied. "Coursing after hares and shooting birds is poor sport compared to holding you, sweet Elisa."

"I thank you for your gifts," she said, fingering the lace at her collar. "They are all so fine."

"You make them fine."

"You've given me so much. I don't know how to thank you."

He chuckled, deep and earthy. "I do, my sweet, and tomorrow night I will show you."

"Yes." The blush burned her face as a sweet warmth grew between her legs. "I truly wish to be your wife."

"Dearest love." He pulled her close and kissed her again, his hand stroking her bottom as he pulled her against him. Her gasp was swallowed by the kiss, but there was no mistaking Marco desired her. She might be a virgin but learned by her eyes and ears what went on between male and female.

Sweeping her up in his arms, Marco crossed the room to the seat in the window. He sat down, holding her close on his lap as her legs stretched out beside him. His hands were on her breasts then inside the neck of her dress. As he touched a warm finger to her breast, wild pleasure shot through her. Something deep between her legs throbbed with excitement. Scared she might cry out and draw attention to them, she lifted her

head and kissed him again. Sheer and utter joy flooded her mind and body as she clung to him and he caressed her other breast.

So this was the pleasure the maids and women had spoken of. They had told half-truths.

She lay in his arms, at once limp and pliant and agog with excitement and anticipation. A whimper of disappointment broke from her as he lifted his mouth off hers and moved his hand from her breast to straighten her dress.

"Marco," she said, her breath still coming fast. "That was so wonderful."

"Yes," he agreed, "and if I had my way, we would never stop, but we can both wait one night, and tomorrow I will make you mine, in all ways."

"I do not want to wait."

"But we must, my love, and the prize will be worth it, trust me."

How could she not? "It will be hard to wait."

"Yes," he agreed, "but I have crossed oceans, deserts and mountains to find you, sweetest Elisa. What hardship could one more day bring us?"

None, as long as the wine and ale lasted and food was to her brother's pleasing.

At the sound of footsteps outside and the quiet woof of one of her brother's dogs, Marco eased her off his lap so she sat beside him. Very close beside him as he held her hand. She smiled up at Marco and bit her lip. Was she as flushed as he was, and would John notice?

Seemed not. "Come," he said, smiling. "Let us to feast. The hall is set, is it not, sister?"

"Indeed it is." And had been for some time. The hungry company waiting while John tarried and she and Marco embraced. "The hall is set."

And well set at that. Knowing the hunt had brought in so much, she'd given orders to serve all the meats prepared that day. Tomorrow they could start again cooking.

Chapter Four

Dishes were brought around, fresh bread trenchers provided between courses and good ale and sweet cider flowed. She'd kept back most of the wine for tomorrow; her wedding, their wedding, merited that surely.

The minstrels were to John's satisfaction, playing merry tunes between sad ballads, and in the dancing interlude before the jugglers and acrobats, John danced with her three times.

"I will miss you, Elisa," he said, surprising her with his candor as they held hands and danced the round. "We may never see each other again, but I know Marco will be good to you. Your groom is a good, honorable man."

"And a brave and noble one."

He nodded. "Indeed he is. I truly do own him my life." He went quiet for a moment. "So many died out there in the desert. Too many."

One of whom she'd pray for to the end of her days but whom she could not truly mourn. "You found me a fine husband, brother, and I will write to you. I promise."

"Send word when you give him an heir and I will have a celebration here at Thorncroft."

"I will, John." And she so hoped that was soon, very soon. She looked up at the high table where Marco sat, watching her. As their eyes met, he smiled.

"I see," John said, "your betrothed gets impatient. I must release you back to him. I will miss you, sister."

And she would miss him and Thorncroft, but to be mistress of her own hall, not just the caretaker of her brother's, was an honor she looked forward to.

John led her back to the table and Marco met them as they approached the dais.

"Now I will dance with my bride-to-be."

Yes.

With her hand in his and his arm on her waist, he spun her into the dance and the world stopped. It was as if they were alone in the hall, the minstrels, the cooks and the company receding into the distance so Marco and she were locked in a bubble of their own contentment.

How her life prospects had changed in just three days. Looking at Marco and catching his eye as they danced, she wished this were their wedding feast and in a short while they'd be sung and drummed to their marriage chamber and she would know the completeness of his body.

But one day was not long to wait.

The music came to an end and Elisa was surprised to see Eoward, the steward, approach the high table and whisper something in John's ear. Perhaps the tumblers and acrobats were ready. But why would he tell John? Eoward always left house matters to her.

She was even more astounded when John left his place on the dais and came toward her. "One minute," she said to Marco. "It seems John needs me."

"You may have twenty or a hundred minutes, lady," he replied, "as long as you return to me."

"As if I could not."

"Elisa!"

She turned to face John. "Brother?" What had Eoward told him to put that scowl on his face?

"We have guests—Sir Mark and Lady Margaret Doune."

Edwin's parents? They had been invited to the wedding tomorrow, but why arrive so early? "I must talk to Eoward and see about a room for them." They would expect a chamber of their own, and who could they turf out at such short notice?

"You must come with me." John took her elbow. "They await us."

"Why did Eoward not summon them into the hall?"

That John didn't answer, just strode to the door, taking her with him. "They wait in the chapel," was all he said as they crossed the courtyard in the chill of the evening. She wished she'd had the chance to send Anne or Marjorie for a cloak.

But she went along with her brother, wondering what had caused them to arrive early. She would make them welcome of course, but she had more on her mind than accommodating her deceased betrothed's parents.

The chapel was dark and cold. In the wavering light of the lantern John had taken from Eoward, stood Edwin's parents.

"Welcome, neighbors. Would you not come into my hall?" John asked.

A very good question. They could all be warm in the hall, watching the jugglers set up instead of shivering here in the dark and cold.

"Sir Mark, Lady Margaret," Elisa said, bobbing a curtsy. "Welcome. We'll prepare a chamber for you."

"First we must speak, Elisa," Sir Mark said.

It was then she spied the third figure with them, standing back a little. She grabbed the lantern from John and, ignoring his protest, held it high. "Edwin!" she gasped as the thin light caught her one-time betrothed. "You live!"

John took the lantern back as it shook in her hand.

"Indeed I do, Elisa. You sound shocked to see me."

"Small wonder, son," his father said. "We were astounded at your arrival this morning, your mother collapsing with shock as you walked into our hall."

"We all mourned your death, son," Lady Margaret said. "Elisa mourned with us."

"This," said Sir Mark, "is why we insisted we meet you out here. I did not want to cause a disturbance in your hall."

Only a disturbance to her heart, mind and soul. "I am glad to see you well and alive, Edwin," Elisa said. That was true, knowing how much his parents had mourned his death, but oh, if only he could have returned a day later!

"Are you, Elisa? I hear it took little time for you to betroth yourself to another."

Unfair and he surely knew it. "I agreed to marry the husband of my brother's choosing."

"No matter. Now you will marry me. It has been long agreed."

"That is why we came at once," Sit John said. "This must be settled between us. Assuming there is no dishonor."

She flushed at that, not that anyone would notice in the dark. What counted as dishonor? Welcoming another man's embrace?

"I see," John replied, his voice laden with worry and concern. "Let us proceed to the parlor, and I will send for food and wine, and we will consider this." He turned to her. "Elisa, return to the hall by the main door. I will take them by the side gate into the parlor, have food and wine brought to us and send a servant to see the fire is well lit."

"Yes, brother." As they started moving, she caught Edwin's sleeve. "Edwin, a word if I may."

"We will have all the words you wish once we are married. Did you accept gifts from this foreigner?"

What a question! "He gave me bride gifts, yes."

"You will return them at once."

"Patience, my friend. Patience. This will all be decided," John replied before she could object, refuse or agree.

"We have the prior agreement," Sir Mark reminded him.

"Of that I am aware, come."

Elisa was so numb in her heart she scarcely noticed the cold as she walked back. How could this have happened? For Edwin to return from the dead on the eve of her wedding was the cruelest twist of fortune. She was happy for Sir Mark and Lady Margaret, who now had their only son restored to them, but for her sake, why could he not have stayed dead and missing one more day? If she were married to Marco already, nothing could put that aside. As it was, the fear that she would now be forced to marry Edwin chilled her soul.

How could she, after knowing the heat of Marco's embrace?

How could she not to uphold her family's honor? A betrothal was a solemn and binding agreement. Negated only by death.

Elisa made herself ignore her anguish and concentrate on her duties in the hall. She gave orders to Eoward that the acrobats and jugglers were to begin as soon as possible. If the company was occupied with the entertainment, John's absence was less likely to be noticed.

For herself, she wanted to run, to flee, to beg Marco to abscond with her into the night. But that was unthinkable, Edwin would then be within his rights to pursue them and slay Marco, and that would be a thousand times worse agony than seeing him ride away.

"Elisa," Marco said as she took her place beside John's empty chair. "What is the matter?"

"Unexpected visitors," she replied, struggling for words through a throat tight with misery. "Sir Mark and Lady Margaret of Polsden. Edwin's parents," she added.

He must have caught her distress. "They were discourteous? Hasty with you?"

She shook her head. "No, not that." How could she say this? But she had to. "Edwin is with them. Seems he was not killed after all."

The full implication hit him at one. His brow creased until his eyebrows all but met and he reached over to take her hand, ignoring any who might see. "You are promised to me!"

"And I want to be your wife," she whispered back, "but what can we do? It was a solemn betrothal before the bishop."

He muttered a curse that she'd heard often from John's lips but never with such vehemence. "Where are they?"

"In the parlor. John is with them. Oh! Marco, I fear there is nothing we can do."

"I must talk to them." He stood but kept hold of her hand, enclosing it between both of his. "Whatever occurs, never forget that Marco de Bella Vista loves you and always will."

At that her heart sank even lower as she fought back the tears stinging her eyelids. There was nothing to be done. "And remember," she replied, "Elisa of Thorncroft has given you her heart and I will never take it back."

He raised her hand to his lips, turned and was gone.

She wanted to scream, to cry, bang her fists on the table and revile the heavens for this hideous injustice, but instead she nodded to Edward and gave the signal for the entertainment to commence.

She sat in her place and presided for two of the turns—and wondered how she'd managed to restrain her tears that long.

Once the entertainment seemed to be progressing without delay or mishap, unable to contain herself any longer, Elisa left the table. Once beyond the hall, she paused. She had to know what was being said but knew if she as much as cracked the parlor door open, John would order her away. Instead, she went down to the pantries beneath. There was a spot in one of them where, if one climbed onto the top shelf, it was possible to hear all that was said in the parlor above. John had shown her when they were children, and no doubt her father and his brothers had listened to their parents. She pulled over a butter tub and used that to hoist herself up until was she curled up on the high shelf between crocks of pickles and preserved apples and listened.

And let the tears fall.

As she'd feared and dreaded. Edwin was pressing his claim. He had the law, custom and the church on his side. All Marco and she had was their love. She wanted to rail against the cruelty of life and the twisted fates who'd brought her Marco only to snatch him away.

Still, there was little point in dallying here, crying into her new lace collar. Marco's lace collar, she reflected, and so she climbed back down and was halfway up the stairs when Eoward met her. "Lady, I knew you'd be down here. Sir John has commanded you attend him in the parlor."

"I'm coming," she replied, tightening her kerchief. Would Edwin be as accepting of her shorn locks as Marco had been? A wild glimmer of hope flickered at the thought he would cast her aside on that account. No, her dowry was too large and the agreement too advantageous to let a few missing tresses negate it.

She smoothed her skirts, straightened her bodice and ascended to the parlor and her sorrow.

* * * * *

The air in the room was cold with anger and discord, even though the fire burned brightly. As she entered, everyone glanced her way. John barely met her eyes as he said, "Ah, Elisa, we have reached a resolution."

Lady Margaret stepped toward her. "This must be distressing to you, child."

Edwin spoke sharply. "You will marry me as was agreed before I left for the Holy Land."

Elisa acknowledged them all with a nod then walked over to Marco. "Good *signor*, I am so regretful of what has happened."

"I too, Elisa," he replied, "but an agreement before the bishop is binding."

Edwin grabbed her arm. "Enough! We are betrothed. Seems you forgot that."

"Give her peace, son!" Sir Mark said, stepping behind him. "She thought you dead, as did we all. She broke no word, betrayed no one."

"So I trust. I take no foreigner's leavings to be my wife."

Elisa gasped in horror at the snarl Edwin threw in Marco's direction. She blushed in shame that he could say that aloud.

"Sir," Marco spoke quietly, but even a deaf man could have caught his fury. "Lady Elisa is a maid of unquestionable honor and unimpeachable reputation as you, having known her since childhood, must surely be aware."

Edwin schooled himself, looked from her to Marco and grunted. "So be it," he said, "so be it."

"Enough, son," Sir Mark said. "*Signor* Marco has been gracious beyond belief, considering you have snatched his bride from him." He bowed to Marco. "*Signor*, my thanks for your consideration and understanding."

He didn't thank her for hers! But of course her duty was to go where she was told and marry where she was ordered. What cruel fate had offered her Marco and snatched happiness away, and why had Edwin returned today of all days?

Foolish to speculate and wish.

Marco bowed in return. "Sir Mark, it is with a heavy heart that I retire from my courting." He turned to Edwin. "Sir, I ask a boon. May have a moment to speak to Lady Elisa ere I leave in the morning?"

"No! I forbid it! She is mine, promised and agreed. She speaks to no one."

How dare he! But he had the right. Edwin raged on, turning his creased brow in her direction. "Did you accept gifts from this man?"

"For our betrothal, yes. He gave me several gifts. They will be returned, Edwin." Parting with them was a trifle compared with losing Marco.

"Indeed you will!" He stepped so close she could see the dark hairs in his nose and a sprout of bristle he'd missed when shaving. He reached and grabbed her pearls. "These for a start!" He yanked so hard, the cord broke and pearls fell and skittered over the floor.

Elisa grabbed for the cord, trying to save at least some of them, but he snatched her hand away, holding it in his fist. "Let them fall, Elisa. You will not wear them now."

Something froze deep inside her. She looked him straight in his eyes, refusing to let the anger in them intimidate her. "Those pearls, Edwin, were my mother's. Given to her by my father on their marriage. John gave them to me to celebrate the day you and I were betrothed, but seems you do not remember that."

He had the grace to look away but seemed it was not from shame but doubt. He looked at John instead. "Is this true?"

"Every word as she speaks."

"You acted harshly, son," Sir Mark said.

Elisa chose to ignore them all and stooped to pick up what fallen beads she could. She still wore Marco's golden bracelets. She would have to part with them and soon, but for now she wanted to feel the weight of them against her wrists.

John bent to help her. "Here, sister," he said, "give me the others. I will have them restrung for you. I know how you valued them." The last he said clearly and loudly. Seemed she was not alone in her distress at Edwin's behavior.

"Son, you have not behaved as befits a Doune," Sir Mark said.

"Father! What else can I do if my promised wife wears another man's jewels!"

"Yes, her dead father's," Lady Margaret added.

At last Edwin did have the grace to look shamed, but he still glared at her as she rose.

"Sir Mark and Lady Margaret, may we give you hospitality for the night?" John asked. To ease the atmosphere no doubt.

"Gracious of you John, as always," Sir Mark replied. "Thus we will be all ready in the morning."

"But Edwin does not have his wedding suit," Lady Margaret said.

Elisa bit back the gasp. "Tomorrow," she began.

"We will be wed," Edwin replied. "It is agreed, and since all is set and ready, why delay?"

She had many reasons but none that would count. "Then if you will all excuse me, I will speak to Eoward and make sure rooms are prepared."

Head high, eyes stinging from unshed tears, Elisa left the room. She could not even bear to glance in Marco's direction.

Outside, she fled to the small alcove above the great hall and, to the sounds of merriment and the laughter at the tumblers, she wept bitter, salt tears.

But she could not so indulge for long. She had responsibilities and the germ of a plan grew in her troubled mind.

She dried her tears, found Eoward and gave orders for her parents' old rooms to be prepared for the Dounes then stopped by the still room for a vial of sleeping potion and the pantry for a jug of cider. Asking for warm water to be sent up, Elisa repaired to her chamber.

The feasting might well go on into the night, Eoward was more than able to supervise the servants and she had a mission in mind.

She washed carefully. She'd bathed yesterday but wished to be clean and sweet in her body. She made sure her cloak was folded on top of the chest, so she could find it without making noise and placed her soft slippers by the bed. Then, wearing a clean shift, she poured herself a glass of cider and tipped the contents of the vial into the jug.

When Marjorie and Anne arrived, Elisa begged them to share a mug of cider with her and let them chatter on. To their questions about Edwin's ill-timed return from the dead, she replied that John was closeted with them and they were staying overnight.

All that was no lie. But Elisa spoke little, claiming weariness, and as the potion took effect and the others began yawning, they all went to bed. Elisa lay awake, heart pounding, asking herself if she truly dared what she planned. She did. Did she not deserve one night of bliss with Marco before she was bound to Edwin for life?

Once she heard the others' snores, Elisa slipped out of bed, Marjorie stirred by her side. "Sleep," Elisa said, wishing she'd added two vials to the jug. "I must visit the privy. I ate overmuch tonight."

That was a lie, but she'd confess it later, when she'd have a much bigger sin on her soul.

Gathering up her cloak and slippers, she went out, closing the door carefully. John and the Dounes slept on the floor below. Far enough away not to hear her footsteps as she climbed upward. Once at the top of the tower, she wrapped her cloak around her against the night chill and crossed the narrow stretch of deserted battlement to the top of the tower where Marco slept.

Walking carefully in the dark—would do her no good to fall and twist or break a limb—she counted the floors to Marco's. She'd feared some of his men-at-arms might sleep outside his door but luck was with her. She took the iron latch in her hand, opened the door a little way and slipped inside, closing it quietly behind her. The room was less dark than expected. In the light of a tallow candle sat Marco, a flagon of ale in his hand, and across from him sat John.

Both men stood, almost as if joined together. Both gasped, "Elisa!" But so differently.

She stood and stared, her courage faltering, but just a little. "John, I did not expect to see you here."

"Nor I you, sister!" He frowned at Marco. "You gave me your word."

"Marco is not forsworn." She tried with all her might to keep her voice steady. "He was not expecting me."

"Indeed, you surprise me, Lady Elisa," Marco said. "Is something amiss?"

Almost everything in creation, but he knew that already. "I come to you now, Marco. Knowing I will never see you again."

"Aye," he said, "but, Elisa, if your brother were not here."

"If John were not here, I would only have to explain myself to you." She had to go on before courage wilted and John's frown silenced her. She stepped across the room to where they both stood. "I come to you, Marco."

John gasped. As well he might. "What if you are missed, sister? Are not Marjorie and Anne with you?"

"I mixed a soporific in a jug for cider and gave it to them. They sleep, brother, and will not note my absence."

"Ye God!" he muttered.

She turned to Marco as John stood there, shaking his head in shock. "I wanted one night with you before I must live without you forever."

Marco took her hand. "Sweet Elisa, do you have any idea what you are saying?"

"Yes. I know. Edwin as good as accused me of immodesty and indiscretion. I was not guilty, except by thought. He thinks the worst of me. May I not have the best from you? Please do not deny me."

"Dear saints, Elisa!" John said.

She looked at her brother. "You wanted me to marry Marco, did you not? I know I cannot, but please let me have this as it is all I will ever have of him." What if Marco refused? What if he'd been coerced into taking her? No, that could not be true. "I beg of you, John. For pity's sake."

Her brother swore. "If that damn Edwin Doune had only remained dead one day longer!" He looked at Marco. "And you, my friend, to whom I own my life. What a twist of fate we are caught in."

"Elisa," Marco said. "You truly mean this?"

"Marco, would I be climbing over the battlements and creeping down from the roof if it was just to bid you a fair journey in the morning?"

John let out an odd sound. "What am I to do with you, sister?"

“Go to your own bed?” Where she found the courage, only the saints knew, but seemed wild need drove her to words and acts undreamed of.

“Aye,” he said and took her hand. “Be good to her, Marco. I will see you at dawn.”

And he was gone.

Chapter Five

Elisa could scarce believe they were alone together but had no doubt when Marco took her in his arms. "My love, this is dishonor you seek."

"No, this is what we were both promised. John will never tell, nor will I, but if you honor me thus, I shall bear your memory to the end of my days."

"You say I honor you, lady, when you offer me the gift that should go to another."

"He will have me for years. As was agreed but, Marco, if you meant one half of what you have said to me these past days, give me this little part of you."

"I meant every word a thousand times over," he replied, sweeping her up in his arms as carried her over to the bed. "You are certain about this?" he asked, sitting beside her.

"Utterly, Marco."

He bent and kissed her, his lips hot and gentle on hers, opening her mouth to stroke her tongue with his and easing his hands down to open her cloak and cup her breasts through the fine cotton of her shift. "So sweet, so loving," he murmured as she reached up to rest her hands on his strong shoulders.

He ran his hands down her chest, resting the flat of his hand on her belly a minute before drawing wide circles with his fingertips. His touch was gentle and soft as it sent wild thrills through her. Her legs fell open and she let out a little whimper.

"What is it I feel?" she asked.

"Your need and mine," he replied. "Sweet Elisa, you honor me with this. I too will cherish this night until the end of my days. Cruel circumstance has snatched you from me, but we are clutching this moment back from the hands of fate."

"Yes," she replied, and kissed him.

As his hands stroked her body, a wildness possessed her. A crying, aching need that had her arching her back and letting out strange, little noises that seemed to come from beyond her mind and consciousness. She was floating in the sensation of his touch, flying in his arms as he kissed her again and again, stretching out beside her so she felt his thigh against her. "Dear love," he whispered. "I must disrobe."

It was immodest to watch, she felt certain, but knowing never again would she have this chance, she sat up and found she couldn't keep her eyes off him. He moved with grace and speed until all he wore was his undertunic and he was back beside her, his arm around her and his lips brushing the line of her jaw. "You are so beautiful," he whispered in her ear, his breath warm against her skin. "I will miss you forever, my sweetest, but this will be a night for both of us to remember."

"Yes," she agreed as she turned to wrap her arms around him. "Dearest Marco."

He kissed her forehead. "Sweet, you must understand one thing. You are virgin, I will do what I can to make this easy but there may be pain."

"From you, Marco, it will not be pain."

"I hope not, my sweet."

He kissed her again, but this time his hands stroked her legs and glided up over her belly to caress her breasts and then back down until she could not keep still. Her back arched, her legs flexed and a wild and ardent longing seized her. "I would we could lie here all night like this," she said, and gave little gasp as he opened the neck of her shift and his hand eased inside to cup her breast and his fingers played her nipple.

The priests called this sin, but why? If they were married it would be sanctioned. How could a few words and promises make such a difference? That thought faded away as Marco touched her other nipple and, pulling her shift lower, kissed her breast. She cried out with utter joy and gasped as he pressed close and she felt what could only be his cock against her hip.

Dear heaven! "You are hard," she said, "and large."

"Don't let it trouble you," he replied. "It is so, when a man loves a woman. You did that to me, Elisa."

"I? What did I do?"

"You offered me yourself. A gift from the God indeed. And now I will give you myself, dear heart, but first..."

He raised the hem of her shift and stroked her legs, flesh on flesh. She could not think of this as immodesty or sin. She could think of nothing but Marco, her lover. Whatever awaited tomorrow had no matter here in this small room, this bed. All in the entire world was here between Marco and her. For this moment, nothing else, no one else mattered.

His hand was between her legs, parting them and stroking the inside of her thighs. With a shock, she felt dampness between her legs and wondered what was happening until he touched her there and thinking became too much. All she wanted was to feel as he stroked and opened her.

"Sweetest Elisa," he said, "you are nearly ready." Then all must be well. She relaxed at his words then tensed and arched her hips as his finger stroked her harder. "Marco!"

"Elisa, my love. I am making things easier for you. Preparing the way for my cock. Lie still."

Hard to do while her mind whirled with the wondrous sensations of his touch. Harder still as his fingers probed and pressed inside her. There was a stab of pain and she cried out. Excitement took her. Little, wild whimpers escaped her lips as he stroked her. Her hips rocked of their own volition.

"Easy, my love," Marco whispered, "almost done. He eased out a little then came back, pressing in deep. She was tender but the pain faded as he leaned up and kissed her. Then he was back, his hand down between her legs again as he stroked and rubbed her, and a wildness engulfed her reason. A wild flood of pleasure washed over her, rippling across her skin and surging deep inside her to the depths of her soul. His arms wrapped around her as she shook and gasped, and the wild rush of sensation eased.

"Marco, what happened?" Whatever it was, it was wondrous indeed.

"I am making you mine," he replied, "and now, Elisa, it is time for us to have all of each other." He settled between her legs. Spreading her thighs wide, he clasped her hips in his hands, lifting her slightly. "Easy, my love," he said, "this may hurt a little but there will be pleasure, I promise you."

He was right. His vastness filled and stretched her but the lingering ripples of ecstasy eased his entry.

As he pressed into her, she felt little tremors of sharpness, but her lassitude and utter contentment absorbed them all. He moved in and out, sending wild ripples of joy deep into her body as he gasped and panted until he called out her name and collapsed on her, supporting his weight on his arms as he went limp inside her before rolling off her as he slipped out.

She sighed with satisfaction. "Thank you, Marco."

"My dear, Elisa, should be I thanking you for your greatness of heart."

"I think you were the one who was great indeed. At least in girth."

He chuckled. "Sweetness, after what we have just shared, my heart is yours, never forget that."

"As if I could."

He stood then leaned over and kissed her. "Stay, my love." Crossing the room to the table, he returned with a napkin and a towel. Sitting on the side of the bed, he proceeded to wash between her legs. "We must remove all traces of blood and of my presence," he said. "Nothing must remain that could arouse suspicion."

He was right, but it hurt deep in her heart to know he was removing every trace of himself.

He dried her with a soft towel then, lying down beside her under the covers, said, "Stay with me a little while, Elisa. Before we must part forever."

She turned into his embrace and rested her face on his chest, hoping he would not see her tears.

She must have dozed. Marco was shaking her shoulder. "Elisa, wake up."

She opened her eyes. He was dressed for riding and had his belongings packed and strapped into bags. "You must go," he said, handing her her slippers and helping to fasten her cloak around her shoulders. "It is still very early and I pray you will not be seen."

"If I am, I am returning from the privy."

"I will give you time to get back then I will awaken my men. We leave as soon as it is light."

Taking her heart with him. "I will never forget this night, Marco. Nor you." She kissed him one last time, holding him close as he enveloped her in his arms. She wanted to stay in his embrace forever but it was impossible. Harsh reality intruded in their love.

"Farewell, my dearest," she said as he opened the door and looked out.

"All is clear," he told her, and she slipped out, glancing back for a final sight of him until the curve of the staircase hid him from view. Reaching the top of the tower, she ran noiselessly across the battlements. A pale streak of light showed in the far east. In a short while the cocks would crow and the castle waken.

On her wedding day.

Bracing against her future, Elisa descended to her room and a terrible commotion—screams and shouts and what sounded like heartrending sobs.

* * * * *

She rounded the last twist cautiously. The door of her chamber was flung open, Anne was shouting, Marjorie sobbing, one of John's men-at-arms blocked the doorway as Edwin insisted he let him pass.

Edwin stood in the middle of her chamber in his shift. As Elisa opened her mouth to ask what was happening, John approached, calling to Sir Mark and Lady Margaret to hurry from the floor below.

"God's teeth, what has happened?" John demanded.

"Him! Him!" Anne cried, pointing at Edwin, standing there in his shift. "He came into my lady's chamber, hit me and violated Marjorie!"

"What!" Elisa ran forward, brushing past everyone to see Marjorie cringing on the bed, curled up like a sick kitten and sobbing, her shift torn and bloody.

Elisa wrapped her arms around her cousin and glared at Edwin. "How could you!" she shouted. "Why would you use her thus?"

"I came for you!" he snapped. "In the dark, I mistook her. She was in your bed. How was I to know it was your attendant?"

"God's teeth, Edwin!" Sir Mark asked. "Did you accost this maid, son?"

He could not deny the evidence before them but blustered on that he thought it was his bride in the bed.

"You thought to take my sister by force before the benefit of the church?" John asked, sounding irate and grievously offended.

"My son, you have shamed me," Sir Mark said.

"How could you do thus?" Lady Margaret asked.

"Where were you?" Edwin demanded of Elisa, sounding anything but contrite.

"I stepped out to the privy." May God forgive the lie.

"This is a bad business," Sir Mark said, shaking his head. "Sir John," he went on, "let us talk, but not here. Come, Edwin."

"Can you care for her, Elisa?" John asked.

"Yes." Of course she would. "Have someone bring up warm water and a little sweet wine."

She would clean and comfort Marjorie. It was the least she could do. Elisa's heart wrenched, if she had not given her the sleeping draft, maybe Marjorie or Anne could have roused help sooner. But she also shuddered at the thought. It was intended to be her huddled and bleeding in her bed. The contrast with Marco's loving brought tears to her eyes.

But this was no time for weeping.

With Anne's help, Elisa bathed Marjorie as Marco had bathed her, washing away the blood and stickiness, dressing Marjorie in a clean shift and wrapping her in a blanket to sit in a chair while she and Anne stripped the bed and remade it with clean sheets.

"I can't go back in there," Marjorie whimpered as they helped her back to bed.

"Yes, you can," Elisa said. "You must rest. He will not return. Anne will bolt the door.

It was only unbolted to admit a servant with bread and meat, and an hour or more later when John summoned Elisa to the parlor.

She had washed and dressed as they watched over Marjorie, so now she smoothed her skirt, tied a clean kerchief on her head, reflecting that in the commotion no one had noticed her shorn locks and, with dread in her heart, descended to the parlor and her fate.

John was alone.

"How does Marjorie, sister?"

"Hurt, injured, misused and defiled," she replied, wishing that Edwin was present to hear, but perhaps it was best he wasn't.

"So I told the Dounes," he replied. "It is a tragedy for poor Marjorie but a blessedly happy chance for you."

"How?"

"Edwin is gone."

"Gone but to prepare for our wedding?" She spoke sharply as her heart surged with anger.

John shook his head. "Gone for good. This base act of his has provided your release. I told him, and indeed so did his father, that to plan to attack you on the eve of your wedding was the act of an honorless churl and to rape a young maid under the protection of Thorncroft was a shameful abuse of hospitality.

"Then I crowned it all by letting drop that I had an informal agreement with her father that when she came of marriageable age, I had intended to take Marjorie as my bride."

That was indeed news. "Had you?"

He shrugged. "Her father had mentioned the possibility when she first came to us. I considered the idea. I should take another wife but hesitated at marrying a giddy girl. However, that, my dear sister, scotched all argument." As indeed it would. Raping a betrothed was merely anticipating the marriage bed. Raping another man's promised bride was destruction of his valued property and a grave offense against manly honor. Elisa held her tongue as John went on. "In compensation, Sir Mark conceded I should keep half the land he agreed to settle on Edwin and made no argument when I said his son's heinous act negated the betrothal arrangement."

It took her several heartbeats to grasp the full meaning of John's words.

"You mean..."

"I mean, you now marry the man I wish, and I have every reason to believe from your actions earlier," he smiled, "the man you wish."

Indeed she did, as he knew well, but... "Marco has departed. He was leaving at dawn."

"He did," John said, "but I sent a swift rider after him. He will return and, I have every hope, be back in time for your wedding. You had best talk to Eoward to ensure all is underway then prepare yourself, sister, for your wedding day."

"I will." Her heart all but burst with joy and sorrow. "But poor Marjorie? Will you marry her now?" Would anyone marry her once news of this spread?

"Not if I am to retain the land promised me as compensation. I think for her sake, it would be best if she travel with you and Marco to a place where no one knows her past. Let her go with you. Anne can stay instead."

Seemed unjust that poor Marjorie would have to flee her "shame" whilst Edwin was free to remain and no doubt marry some other bride found for him. But Elisa was free and it would be kinder to Marjorie to take her away. "Let Anne come too, please, John. If she stays, she will be expected to marry the blacksmith and she wants to see the world."

"Aye, she may then, but you have much to prepare. I think this wedding had better happen with all speed, lest another delay arise. Be happy, sister."

"I will."

How could she not be? She was marrying her love – *Signor* Marco of Bella Vista.

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author Rosemary Laurey is a graduate of London University and the University of Virginia. She taught for many years and on three continents before embarking on a writing career. Her work has received numerous nominations and awards, including the PRISM Best of the Best, the Scarlet Letter, The Laurel Wreath and the Dorothy Parker Award. Married, with three grown sons, Ms. Laurey now lives in Ohio.

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