

ANNA
BELFRAGE

DAYS
of SUN &
GLORY



England in the early fourteenth century was not a happy realm...

In 1321, the barons of England decided they'd had enough and rose in rebellion against their king, Edward II. They were sick of the king's rapacious favourites – the Lords Despenser, father and son – and this time they prevailed on the king to exile them, forever. For a short while it seemed the barons, led by Lord Roger Mortimer and Earl Thomas of Lancaster, had won. But fate is fickle and Edward II was not about to take this recent humiliation lying down. By late autumn of 1321, the king had assembled an army and rode west to punish his rebellious barons. Thomas of Lancaster retired north, leaving Lord Mortimer to face the king alone.

Against the full might of the king, Mortimer was helpless, and in January 1322 he submitted to his king, was struck in irons and transported to the Tower. Edward then turned his attention north, and by March Lancaster was dead. Everyone supposed it was but a matter of time before Mortimer was hanged, drawn and quartered, but for some reason, Edward stayed his hand.

In August of 1323, Roger Mortimer escaped the Tower and fled to France.

In England, an enraged and fearful Edward regretted not having killed his greatest enemy while he still had the chance...

Chapter 1

God forgive her, but Kit de Guirande had every intention of disliking Queen Isabella on sight. After months of listening to her husband's voice growing warm with adoration whenever he spoke of the queen, Kit felt entitled to hate this woman, who, apparently, was the equivalent of a heavenly angel come to earth.

She hurried after her limping husband as best as she could, too tired and confused to do more than glance at the magnificence of the royal Palace of Westminster – not that much of its splendour was visible in the flaring light of the few torches still burning in the sconces. If anything, this hasty trot in the early hours of the morning increased her resentment towards the unknown queen. Why send for them at this Godforsaken hour, why did the queen require that Sir Adam and his wife attend on her before dawn had properly broken? Kit said as much to Adam, but all she got for her trouble was a reproving look and an exasperated shake of his head.

“Better she sees us now, before anyone else is up and about,” he said.

Kit rolled her eyes – discreetly. Of course; the queen had summoned Adam this early to discuss their favourite subject, that of Lord Roger Mortimer, at present in exile in France. If Kit was tired of listening to descriptions of Queen Isabella, that was nothing compared to the mental exhaustion she experienced whenever Adam spoke of his beloved Lord Mortimer.

Four months and counting since Lord Mortimer's spectacular escape from the Tower, four months in which Adam had been hounded by Lord Despenser, the only thing keeping Kit's husband safe from Mortimer's mortal enemy being the fact that Adam had pledged himself to Prince Edward of Windsor, heir to the throne. Kit glanced at her

man, sending a fervent prayer to God that He would continue protecting him, keeping him far away from Despenser's grasping hands. She repeated this prayer on a daily basis, and had done so ever since Lord Mortimer fled for France.

As per Lord Despenser, royal chancellor and de facto ruler of England – what with King Edward giving his favourite anything his favourite desired – Adam was a traitor. Despenser insisted that Adam had helped Lord Mortimer escape, which was true, but fortunately there was no proof, and Despenser's attempts to have Adam arrested and turned over into his own tender care for further interrogation had been foiled, twice by the Earl of Pembroke and once by the queen herself. And thank the Lord for that: Kit had no illusions as to how her husband would fare in Despenser's hands.

Ever since Roger Mortimer's escape, the kingdom of England had sunk into a state of terror. The king – and Lord Despenser – lashed out viciously against anyone potentially involved in Mortimer's escape, and over the last few months countless men had been dragged before assizes, attainted and gruesomely executed, based on the fact that they had once served Roger Mortimer. Rotting corpses adorned gibbets all over the southwest of the country, and destitute widows and orphans were evicted from their homes, left to starve and die during the approaching winter.

The king's rage spilled over onto others as well: London merchants known to be Mortimer supporters had been severely punished, and recently the Bishops of Hereford and Lincoln had been accused and found guilty of helping Mortimer. Kit shook her head: so many men whose lives were permanently impaired on behalf of Roger Mortimer. And Hugh Despenser was not done – he intended to use Mortimer's escape to rid himself of every enemy he had in England.

Kit suppressed a little shiver and threw a hasty look over her shoulder. Lord Despenser was here, in residence with the king, and even if she had so far not encountered him, she knew it was but a matter of time before she'd be confronted by his dark eyes, his wet mouth and his wandering hands. Kit clasped her hands together, remembering all too well

just how violent Lord Despenser could become should he be sufficiently riled.

“Watch out!”

Kit stumbled; Adam’s hand flew out, gripping her by the elbow and thereby stopping her from overbalancing down the short flight of stairs.

“Use your eyes, sweeting,” he said with a little smile, sliding his hold down from her elbow to clasp her hand instead. She pressed herself against him, an affectionate gesture that had him tightening his hold on her hand, his lips brushing briefly at her brow.

They hastened on. Kit had a stitch up her side, and at one point she had to stop, clutching at her rounded belly. Her hand smoothed the cloth that covered their growing child – an inactive babe that gave her very little trouble beyond the odd pang of pain in her lower back. Adam gave her a concerned look.

“You should not have come,” he said. “A woman great with child does best staying at home.”

She gave him a level look. “I wanted to.” Kit straightened up and hurried on.

Twice this autumn, Adam had been called to court at the behest of his lord, the young Edward of Windsor. Twice, Kit had spent her days in constant anxiety, fearing the summons was only intended to lure Adam into Despenser’s waiting hands. So when the royal messenger had come riding down their lane some weeks back, demanding that Adam de Guirande attend his lord over Christmastide, Kit had insisted on coming along, no matter how great with child she might be. After all, she’d told him, he had promised her that he would never leave her behind again – a futile promise, she knew, as Adam had little say in how his life was ordered, but he had promised.

At present, she harboured certain regrets: she would have preferred spending the middle of winter at Tresaints, in the comfort of their own manor and surrounded by their loyal household. But Adam had no choice, so here they were.

“Here.” The pageboy leading the way came to a halt, gesturing at a small door set discreetly into the wall.

“Very much subterfuge,” Kit murmured.

“It is best that way,” Adam replied, just as low, before stepping aside to allow her to enter first.

After the dark of the passage, the room Kit entered was surprisingly bright. The windows that gave to the east were unshuttered and set with precious glass, allowing the soft light of the impending dawn to spill into the room. There were lit candles everywhere, the fire in the hearth had recently been rekindled into crackling life, and standing in the centre of the room was the queen herself.

She was just as beautiful as people said she was. A spurt of dark green jealousy surged through Kit as she took in the elegant figure of the queen, dressed in silk that shimmered somewhere in between lavender and pink. In the privacy of her chambers, the queen’s hair had been left to float loose around her head, soft, dark curls caressing the white skin of her neck. A veil so sheer it was ludicrous was held in place by a circlet of sweet water pearls, and beneath elegant brows eyes as green as emeralds regarded Kit with mild curiosity, a smile tugging at her perfect mouth.

The queen moved towards them, all elegant, willowy grace – a far cry from Kit’s rounded state. Kit placed a hand on her belly and dipped into a reverence, dropping her gaze to the floor.

“Rise,” the queen said. Even her voice was perfect, melodious and low. With Adam’s support, Kit straightened up. “Here.” The queen gestured at the window seat. “Please sit, Lady de Guirande. That child of yours seems heavy.” She smiled at Adam. “Big men make big children, do they not?”

To Kit’s annoyance, Adam gave the queen a brilliant smile, for all the world looking like a lovesick whelp, before raising her hand to his mouth and placing a reverential kiss on it. Kit frowned and concentrated her attention on her girdle. The queen laughed.

“Contrary to what people may say, I am not in the habit of consuming handsome men for breakfast.”

Kit’s cheeks heated.

“In fact,” the queen continued, “I stay clear of all men, so your husband’s virtue is safe with me, Lady de Guirande.”

“My lady,” Adam said, shaking his head. “My wife would never—”

“Wouldn’t she?” the queen interrupted.

Adam turned to look at Kit, who did her best to avoid his eyes.

“Kit,” he groaned, “how can you think—”

“Think what? That you hold our queen in much affection?” Kit almost bit her tongue off. Now why would she be so foolish as to say that out loud? Adam gave her a reproving look.

The queen laughed again. “You are quite the dim-witted creature, aren’t you?”

Queen or not, that remark had Kit considering raking her nails over Queen Isabella’s complacent face.

“I am not...my lady,” Kit replied.

“No? And yet you don’t see what I see? It has been made abundantly clear to me, Lady Katherine, that as far as your husband is concerned there is only one sun in his sky, and that sun is his beloved wife.”

Kit looked at her husband, who had gone an interesting hue of bright pink. “He said that?”

“More or less,” the queen said. “Maybe not quite as poetically, but I am right, am I not, Sir Adam?”

In reply, Adam set his hand to Kit’s face, his thumb stroking gently over the ugly scar that marred her left cheek, courtesy of a far-too-close encounter with Lord Despenser some eighteen months ago. “Yes, my lady queen. This is my sun, my moon – my everything.”

Kit’s vision blurred. She leaned into his touch, covering his hand with her own. He had never said anything like that in front of other people before. Her Adam preferred his declarations of love to be in private – and in bed. Kit drew in a shaky breath and decided that Queen Isabella deserved a second chance.

“And now to the matters at hand,” the queen said, her voice brisk. She clapped her hands, and a page brought in

spiced wine, lacing the air with the distinctive scents of nutmeg and cloves. More clapped hands, and another page appeared with miniature wafers, bread and cheese, before scurrying off to leave them alone.

Kit settled back in the window seat, a goblet of wine in her hand, and took in her surroundings. The room not only bathed in light, it was also ablaze with brilliant colour, from the royal blue walls with miniature fleur-de-lis strewn over them, to the bedstead painted white and red, with gold inlays. The floorboards were covered by Turkish carpets, little squares of crimson and blue that Kit would never dream setting a foot upon, so beautiful were they. Adam came to sit beside her, while the queen paced like a caged leopard as she spoke.

“I’m under constant surveillance,” she said. “Despenser weaves his web of whispered half-truths tighter round my husband’s head and heart, and with every day, my lord king distances himself from me, regarding me as a roe deer would a wolf.” She laughed harshly. “Despenser insists I was involved in Lord Mortimer’s escape, and I dare say my husband is inclined to believe him.”

Given that the queen *had* been involved – albeit indirectly – Kit could not dredge up much indignation on her behalf. But as Queen Isabella went on with her descriptions of how her life was being curtailed, Kit felt a twinge of pity – and fear – on behalf of this magnificent woman who was more or less held a prisoner in her own court.

“And this situation in Gascony doesn’t help,” the queen finished. “I dare say the king holds me personally responsible for every reprehensible act a Frenchman may commit, starting with the actions of my dear, royal brother.” She grimaced. “Charles will never back down regarding Gascony, and Edward is as stubborn as my brother, so God alone knows how this will end.” She broke off, muttered a prayer, and crossed herself.

“But my lady, this may work in your favour.” Adam leapt to his feet to replenish the queen’s empty goblet. Kit gave her husband an annoyed look. Did he need to be quite so attentive?

“How?” Queen Isabella sank down on the window seat beside Kit.

“Who is better placed than you to negotiate a truce?” Adam asked.

The queen sipped at her wine. “Maybe you’re right,” she said after some moments of silence. “I could write to Charles and—”

The door banged open and the room was filled with ladies in wimples and veils, surcoats of embroidered silk and velvet, and girdles that glittered with jewels and gold thread. Kit retreated into her corner and fiddled with the sheer length of silk that covered her head, fully aware of just how inconspicuous she was in comparison.

“What is the meaning of this?” The tallest of the ladies addressed the queen sharply. A sequence of unicorns embroidered in gold and silver pranced along the hem of her light-blue surcoat, her kirtle a darker shade of blue.

“The meaning of what?” Queen Isabella rose, her chin lifted demandingly as she stared down the ladies, standing as immobile as a statue until they all sank down into deep reverences.

“My queen,” the first lady mumbled.

“And good morning to you too, Lady Eleanor,” the queen replied.

Kit studied the lady with increased curiosity. So this was the famous Eleanor de Clare, niece to the king and Hugh Despenser’s wife. Eleanor straightened up and glanced at Kit. Sharp blue eyes assessed and discarded her as uninteresting before darting over to Adam, where they lingered for substantially longer.

Adam bowed, and Lady Eleanor inclined her head and rounded on the queen.

“This is not seemly, my lady,” she scolded. “A man in your chambers!” From under Lady Eleanor’s loosely draped veil peeked a strand of red-gold hair, and for all that she had given that serpent Despenser numerous children, she retained a slim figure, adequately curved over her hips and bosom. All in all, Eleanor de Clare was an attractive woman – maybe not as beautiful as the queen, but still.

“With his wife,” the queen retorted. “And what is it to you, Lady Eleanor? Are you perchance my gaoler, put in place to restrict access to my person?”

The lady flushed. “Your gaoler? Of course not, my lady. But I am—”

“My chief lady-in-waiting,” the queen interrupted. “Chosen for me by my husband, not by me.” Yet again, she gave Eleanor a mild smile, while her eyes shot darts. “And as my lady-in-waiting, you should do precisely that: wait on me. Not interrupt my discussions with my visitors, nor eavesdrop outside my door, or attempt to coerce my pages and maids to spy on me.”

Lady Eleanor looked as if she wanted the floor to swallow her whole.

“So,” the queen continued, “as I do not require your services at present, I suggest that you retire to my solar and wait for me. I am sure there is some sewing you can do to keep yourself occupied.”

She raised her brows, crossed her arms over her chest and waited until the women had left the room before sweeping her arm over the table, sending the pitcher and the goblets to fly through the air, landing with loud clatters on the floor. “She used to be my friend and now she is my guard dog. I hate that woman!”

“As I hate her husband,” Adam muttered.

Amen to that, Kit thought, suppressing yet another shiver.

As luck would have it, they ran into Lord Despenser on their way back to their allotted chamber. Kit didn’t see him at first; she simply felt the muscles in Adam’s arm tense.

“If it isn’t my favourite traitor,” Despenser said with a smirk, stepping out to block their path. Adam bowed, as did Kit – protocol required that they do so, even if Kit would have preferred to spit Despenser in the face. This was the man who had threatened her and abused her, who had tortured her Adam, leaving him permanently crippled.

“No traitor, my lord,” Adam replied in a calm voice.

“Despite your repeated attempts to smear me as such, I remain a loyal servant of my master, Edward of Windsor.”

Dispenser’s mouth curled into a sneer. “You may fool all others, de Guirande, but you do not fool me. You are Mortimer’s man through and through, have been since he picked you out of the dirty squalor you grew up in.” He moved closer, close enough that his heavy robes brushed Kit’s skirts. “One day, Adam de Guirande, I will have the pleasure of housing you in my dungeons. All it takes is one false step, and then you will be at my mercy until you die.”

Adam took a step back, dragging Kit with him. His hand was clenched round the hilt of his dagger, and under Kit’s hand his muscles quivered. With rage? Fear? Both, Kit assumed, her knees weakening at the thought of her Adam in Dispenser’s custody.

Dispenser came after, eyes bright. “You fettered and in chains – I rather like that image, dear Adam. Imagine yourself so helpless, incapable of stopping me from doing whatever it pleases me to do to you.” He chuckled. “Pleases *me*, de Guirande.” With that he was off, hurrying down the passage with his men at his heels.

Kit leaned back against the nearby wall, trying to calm her racing heart. Beside her, Adam slumped, sliding down to crouch with his face hid in his hands. Carefully, Kit lowered herself to his level.

“It won’t happen,” she said.

“No,” he agreed in a shaky voice. “I’ll leap off a cliff rather than end up in his hands.”

Kit got down on her knees before him and prised his fingers off his face, cupping it and lifting it so that she could see his eyes. “It won’t,” she repeated. “I won’t let it happen.”

That made him smile. “My protective wife.” Adam stroked her cheek.

Kit had risked her life to save him from Dispenser once, and she’d do so again if she had to. She crossed herself, feeling vulnerable and defenceless. In this the year of Our Lord 1323, Dispenser made a dangerous enemy, and Kit fervently wished she had skills with sharpened metal implements other than her embroidery needle.

Adam got to his feet and helped her to rise. “We are not over yet, Despenser and I,” he said in a low voice.

“You can’t touch him.” Kit brushed at her dusty skirts.

“Not yet. But one day...”

“You will have to form a queue,” Kit said. “There are many people who want to make Despenser pay, and first in line are your beloved queen and your equally beloved baron.”

“My beloved queen?” He slid an arm round her waist and drew her as close as was possible with a rounded belly between them. “I only have one beloved, my lady.” Adam took hold of her hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing each finger in turn. It made Kit’s heart somersault, even more when he leaned towards her, his mouth pressing gently against hers. Warm lips, an insistent tongue, and Kit opened to him, her arms wound round his neck as he kissed her until she was breathless and flushed. She tightened her hold on him and heard the rumble of his responding laughter.

“Later, sweeting,” he promised as he released her. He gave her cheek a little tweak. “In the privacy of our bed.”

Chapter 2

The Christmas festivities at court were not turning out to be the glamorous event Kit had imagined, firstly because the king had chosen to celebrate the holiday season in Kenilworth, a not-so-subtle reminder that his cousin, Thomas of Lancaster, was now dead, and his favourite castle in the king's possession.

It had been a harrowing trip from Westminster to Kenilworth. Kit had insisted on riding, refusing the litter that held her elderly maid, Mabel, and young master de Guirande, Tom, but by the time Kenilworth's russet ramparts rose out of the misty December day, she'd been tired to the bone, the long days of travelling having left her with a chill and an irritating soreness all the way from her left hip to her foot. Not something she said much about, as Mabel and Adam would have insisted she travel in the litter.

The royal castle was an impressive sight. Set atop a knoll, it dominated the surrounding landscape, protected not only by its curtain wall but also by the large expanse of water that lay before it – a manmade mere, traversed by a causeway.

In some ways, Kenilworth reminded Kit of Wigmore. An enclosed castle, it consisted of a large outer bailey, a sizeable inner bailey and a number of buildings containing everything from a forge to an infirmary, as well as a buttery, pantries, chapels, stables, mews and kennels. But where Wigmore under Lady Joan had been efficiently run, with lavish meals appearing with a minimum of fuss no matter the constant chaos that characterised a large castle, Kenilworth was like a dog with fleas, always itching, always restless.

Instead of joyful spirits, the court of Edward II was filled with broody rumours, all of them centred round the evil intentions of Lord Mortimer. Not that Kit agreed with this description of Roger Mortimer. He was no saint, but from her limited interaction with him, she perceived him to be

a fair if somewhat harsh man, and at present that would be a substantial improvement on affairs, as Despenser could be called many things, but none of those was 'fair'.

Surrounded by the king's barons and earls, and by men and women who wore fortunes in jewels round their necks and on their hands, Kit felt dowdy and bleached of colour, intimidated by people who spoke of landholdings in France, of new hawks and hunting steeds. Rarely did any of these high-bred creatures as much as bestow a look on her, but if they did, the men would often look twice, which caused Adam to glower and their lady wives to cast withering looks Kit's way.

"It's not my fault if they look," Kit said in an undertone when her husband's face set in yet another scowl. "Besides, it's probably my scar that catches their interest." Self-consciously, she patted at her cheek.

Adam's features softened. "That scar is your own badge of honour, sweeting – but we both know it's your other attributes that draw their attention."

"Hmm," Kit replied, more than pleased by how her pregnancy had rounded her breasts and left her with a permanent soft flush. "Who's that?" she asked to direct her husband's attention elsewhere. She nodded discreetly at a man in splendid attire who was presently fawning on the king. Slim and erect, with pleasing proportions and reddish-gold hair, the man was laughing at something the king had said.

"That is the king's half-brother, Edmund of Woodstock, the Earl of Kent," Adam said. "Lord of Gloucester Castle, recently invested with sizeable quantities of Mortimer land – well, what was left once Despenser claimed his rewards for his loyal service to his royal liege." He sounded bitter.

Kit regarded the young man with heightened interest. Edmund had to be some years younger than Adam, close to two decades younger than the king, and was brimming with energy. The king's half-brother was lithe and as bright as sunbeam – and devastatingly handsome, attracting almost every female eye in the hall. Something the young man well

knew, Kit concluded, watching just how casually he twirled, his blue and silver robes lifting to allow a glimpse of long legs clad in black hose.

“As I hear it, he’s quite capable,” she said. Kent had distinguished himself in the recent strife that had torn – was tearing – the kingdom apart.

Adam snorted. “Good enough,” he muttered, “but there was not much opposition to squash, was there?” He leaned closer. “The man is all surface, no depth, they say. And his royal half-brother keeps him on a very short leash.” He chuckled. “One day, our Edmund will tire of scraps.” He nodded at the dark-haired young man who was standing to the side, watching Edmund and the king with an inscrutable expression on his face. “And that is Edmund’s brother.” Adam lowered his voice. “Not a happy man, is Thomas – not when the king did not stop the Despensers from appropriating some of the earl’s properties.”

“Always the Despensers,” Kit murmured, studying the silent statue that was Thomas of Brotherton, Earl of Norfolk. Yet another handsome man, although his features were of a sterner mould, sharp eyes studying his surroundings with keen interest. His gaze met Kit’s, went on to study Adam before returning to her. He inclined his head in the slightest of greetings before returning his attention to the king.

“Where is Pembroke?” Kit liked Aymer de Valence, a man much marked by years of loyal service to the crown.

In response, Adam inclined his head to where the aging earl was sitting, quite isolated, at one end of the table. “New times, new men,” he sighed. “And rumour has it that de Valence is deeply in debt.”

Kit studied Lord Aymer, sitting slumped and alone with only his wife by his side. She didn’t like the countess, but the lady was being a most dutiful wife, keeping up a one-sided conversation with her husband, who stared straight ahead and ate whatever she placed on his trencher.

“He’s ailing.” Kit wanted to approach Earl Aymer and say something, but to do so in front of the king might be doing him a disfavour – he did not need to be tarred with the

suspicion of consorting further with men like her Adam. As it was, Kit suspected the earl was paying a heavy price for having saved Adam from Despenser on several occasions.

“He’s old,” Adam said brutally. “Well past it and wallowing in regrets. His heart was with the Mortimers, but his oath and arm belonged to the king. Such conflicts can tear even the strongest man to shreds.”

On Twelfth Night, Kit was sitting beside her husband at one of the lower tables in the hall, watching the king and Despenser interact at the high table. While there were a lot of rumours about Edward and his favourite, Kit could not understand how their king could prefer Despenser to his wife. On the other hand, she knew for a fact that the king never visited his queen at night anymore, while it was common knowledge that Despenser and the king spent entire nights closeted together in the royal chambers.

Kit pursed her mouth, uncomfortable with the images these thoughts evoked. Two men in bed, taking pleasure from each other... No, it was wrong, a grievous sin, and surely no king would lower himself to such base pleasures. Except that when she shared her thoughts with Adam, he laughed and called her a right innocent – men enjoying the bodies of other men was not as uncommon as she might think.

The hall was ablaze with candles. If Kit craned her head back she could just make out the colours of the painted ceiling, here and there decorated with the royal arms. An occasional draught made the tapestries hung on the far wall lift and billow, causing the depicted wildlife to suddenly spring into life before it returned to immobility. The hall reverberated with noise; laughter, impromptu song that ended in a loud burp, and at the high table, the king threw his head back and guffawed.

To the far right of the king sat his eldest son, a boy of eleven or so. Prince Edward looked a lot like his father, with the same fair hair, the same eyes. The boy showed promise of becoming as tall as his father, and already there was an

impressive width to his shoulders for one so young, the result, according to Adam, of many hours spent perfecting his fighting skills.

Beside the prince sat his mother, and often the queen's veiled head and that of Prince Edward leaned close together as they talked. Gallantly, the boy acted his mother's page, ensuring her goblet was always kept filled and her trencher laden with the choicest of morsels.

"He seems very close to his mother." Kit had met Prince Edward once, and had found him an engaging lad, possessed of the most mesmerising deep blue eyes she had ever encountered.

"Prince Edward is very fond of her." Adam wiped his hands on the cloth provided and sat back, goblet in hand. "Too fond, some would say." He cast a dark look at Despenser, who was presently entertaining the king, at least to judge from the king's grin.

Kit studied the two men, sitting side by side. Where the king was tall, fair and big-boned, Despenser was dark and slender, a few inches shorter. On the other side of the king sat Despenser's wife, and the king seemed as attentive to his niece as to his royal chancellor. Lady Eleanor basked in her uncle's admiring looks, her cheeks flushed a most becoming pink as she leaned towards their liege to whisper something. The king nodded, then turned the other way to say something to Lord Despenser.

"They truly care for each other, don't they?" Kit said, studying Despenser's hand, which was resting on the king's sleeve.

In reply, Adam muttered something very rude.

"Adam!" Kit threw their neighbours a nervous glance.

"Aye?" He leaned towards her and speared a slice of honey-glazed ham on the trencher. Kit was about to respond when there was a loud clatter behind her.

Three men hurried in, trailing gravel and ice behind them. Heavily bearded, wrapped in wet cloaks splattered with mud, they marched towards the dais. Despenser rose. The king rose. Everyone rose, thereby making it impossible for Kit to see

anything beyond the madder rose tunic of the man in front of her.

“What?” The king’s voice carried like a whiplash. “What are you? Incompetents? I want his head, damn you, not contradicting information about his whereabouts!” Something was slammed down on a table – the king’s goblet, Kit guessed. Irritated at not seeing anything, she took hold of Adam’s arm and stood on the bench.

On the dais, the king was walking back and forth, hands clenched into fists by his sides. The three men were kneeling before him, one of them saying something in a hushed voice.

“Well, unless he’s sprouted wings, it can’t be, can it? No mortal man can be in Flanders on the morrow and in Rouen by noon! Not even that accursed Mortimer!” The king’s voice rose to a yell. He swivelled, glaring at Despenser. “Why haven’t you rid me of him yet? You promised you would!”

“My liege, calm down.” Despenser spoke softly but clearly. “It is but a matter of time, sire. Mortimer cannot cower forever behind the skirts of the French king.”

This statement had the king turning to glower at his wife, who calmly looked back at him.

“We will catch him soon,” Despenser continued, “and then...” He made a slicing movement across his throat. Out of the corner of her eye, Kit saw Adam smile.

The king was not appeased. He cursed, kicked at one of the unfortunate messengers and stood on his toes, glaring at the people in the hall. Kit saw his eyes narrow as they locked on Adam.

“You!” The king snarled. “Adam de Guirande, no less. How dare you show your traitorous face in my hall? I will not have it, you hear?” He snapped his fingers and two men-at-arms started towards Adam. Behind the king, Despenser grinned.

Adam had nowhere to go. The men-at-arms were only yards away, and even if he could have made it out of the hall, what then? He heard Kit exclaim, her hands on his arm. One of the men-at-arms caught hold of his other arm and yanked. Adam wrenched himself free.

“I walk on my own.” Very slowly, he approached the king, exaggerating his limp. Beside him walked Kit, gripping his sleeve with both her hands. “Let me go, sweeting,” he murmured as they approached. She shook her head, her blue eyes wide. “Kit,” he said, covering her hands with his. “Stand aside. I’ll not have you humiliated with me.” Or killed. Adam didn’t like the look on the king’s face, nor on Despenser’s.

“I can’t,” she whispered back. “If I let go of you, I’ll fall.”

And then they were standing before the king. Adam was forced to his knees, and as Kit still refused to let go, she kneeled beside him. She was trembling, her fingers clawed into the green wool of his tunic.

“Take the woman away,” the king commanded. Two men moved forward and took hold of Kit, but she wouldn’t let go, screaming like a wounded horse when they tried to separate her from Adam.

“Sweeting,” Adam tried, “it will be all right.”

“All right?” she groaned, the sound converting to a gasp when one of the men wrenched her hand off him. Moments later, she was dragged away and Adam struggled against the hands holding him when his wife was roughly manhandled to the side.

“She’s with child,” he growled.

“A traitor’s whelp!” the king spat, but ordered his men to step away from Kit. She straightened up, eyes blue fire. Despite being with child, Adam’s wife retained her willowy grace, and now, standing close enough that he could hear her every breath, she resembled a protective lioness, ready to spring.

“No traitor, my lord. I am your son’s liegeman.”

“Now you are! But you used to serve Roger Mortimer.” Wild eyes glared at him, the normally so handsome royal features contorted into a scowl.

Adam raised his chin. “I did. I served him loyally for many years. I bled for him, I fought for him, I would have laid down my life for him. I follow my lord, sire – to Hell and beyond if required. But my lord is no longer Lord Mortimer. It is your son.” It woke a hollow ache in him to repudiate his lord.

Lord Roger was the closest thing Adam had to a father, and not a day went by without Adam praying for his former lord's continued health.

"So you admit it, do you?" The king was barely coherent. Spittle flew from his mouth as he spoke, those large hands of his clenched into formidable fists. "You admit being a traitor? You rode with Mortimer against me, against your king!" He crashed his fist down on the table, causing everyone to jump.

"I followed my lord. I could do no other." Adam closed his eyes against the memories of the rebellion. Months of freezing in the winter cold, day after day of skirmishes, and all the while the king's army had slowly closed the noose around Mortimer's troops, forcing the capitulation which resulted in Mortimer's incarceration in the Tower, while most of Adam's companions were hanged in Shrewsbury. But not Adam: no, Adam had lain helpless as Despenser tortured him.

"You could do no other?" The king kicked Adam – hard. "I'll not tolerate a traitor at my court. Take him away and hang him! Now!"

"No!" Kit threw herself forward, covering Adam with her bulk. "He already paid."

"Get out of the way, woman!" The king bent as if to take hold of Kit and throw her to the side. She hung on, emitting one wordless scream after the other. The king roared; guards came rushing from all over, their booted feet and loud commands adding to the clamour.

"My lord! This is unseemly." The queen's voice rose above the din. "Besides, you have signed his pardon, my lord husband." Queen Isabella glided towards them. "Do you truly think your son would have accepted his pledge otherwise?"

"My son does as you ask him, my lady," the king replied in a voice so cold the queen recoiled.

"I do as you tell me too, Father." Prince Edward helped Kit to stand, placing himself between Adam and the king. "You've told me to surround myself with men I trust, have you not?"

The king nodded.

"I trust Adam de Guirande. He saved my life once." The

prince shared a quick look with Adam, his mouth quivering with a suppressed smile. Adam smiled back, briefly. The lad had been most irate at having been saved by Adam, insisting he was fully capable of swimming on his own.

“Son.” The king cleared his throat. “I cannot have a man suspected of traitorous activities in your household.” He gestured at the men-at-arms “Take de Guirande away.”

“No, Father, please don’t do this to me,” Edward said, kneeling down beside Adam.

“To you?” The king ruffled his son’s hair. “I’m doing this to protect you.”

“You’re shaming me,” Prince Edward said.

“Shaming you?” The king looked at Adam, then at his son.

“Sir Adam is my liegeman. He has pledged himself to me, and I, in return, have pledged to protect him – isn’t that what liege lords do?” The prince turned wide eyes on his father.

“My lord, don’t listen to him. Our young prince is a gallant lad, but he is yet a child, incapable of fully comprehending the world of men,” Despenser said.

“And which world is that, Lord Despenser?” the prince asked, getting to his feet. “Is that the world where some men ram a red-hot stake through the foot of a helpless man – just for sport?”

To Adam’s grim amusement, Despenser blanched.

The king frowned. “That was badly done. To maim a belted knight...”

Despenser licked his lips. “I did it to incapacitate him, my dearest lord.” He scowled at Adam. “But it would be best for all if he was hanged.”

“No,” Prince Edward said. “I will not allow it.” He placed his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“You will not allow it?” The king laughed. “Quite the fiery pup, aren’t you?” He regarded his son in silence for some moments. “Very well, this time I will not harm your man. But if I pick up as much as a whiff of deceit, I’ll have him hanged, drawn and disembowelled – and that is a promise, lad.”

“If he betrays me, I will condemn him myself,” the prince

replied, and Adam shivered at the steely edge to his voice. Prince Edward might as yet be a lad, but the lion cub was well on the way to becoming a lion, and woe betide the man who riled him.

“My liege,” Despenser protested. “Surely you will not heed the voice of a child in this matter?”

“Your prince,” Prince Edward bit off. “And one day I will be your king. Best keep that in mind, Lord Despenser.”

Despenser spluttered, and the king laughed and whacked him hard. “You hear that, Hugh? Your future king demands your obedience.” He laughed some more, his previously dark mood evaporating, and returned to the table, one arm affectionately draped round Despenser’s shoulders.

Adam sagged in relief, placing his hands on the floor to support himself. His neck itched, his innards cramped. This had been uncomfortably close.

Prince Edward crouched down beside him. “Are you all right?”

“All right? I owe you my life, my lord.”

“Yes, you do, don’t you?” The lad regarded him with some amusement. “It seems we are even, Sir Adam.”

Adam shook his head. “No, my lord. You could have saved yourself that day by the Tower. I would not have survived tonight without your help.” He got to his feet, looking for Kit. “My wife?”

“Here. I’m here.”

Adam turned in time to catch her as she fell into his arms. “Shhh,” he crooned, running his hands up and down her back. He rested his cheek against her head and held her close, drawing in the scent of her, his woman.

“Your wife is upset,” the queen said. “It would be best if you escort her to your rooms.”

Adam bowed, relieved at being dismissed. With one more bow in the direction of the prince, he left, leading Kit by the hand.

Mabel couldn’t stop fussing. When Kit and Adam appeared in the doorway, she had taken one look at them and sent

Adam's new squire, a lanky fourteen-year-old named Gavin, to fetch mulled wine and honey. Ignoring both Kit's and Adam's protests, she proceeded to help Kit out of her clothes, replacing the deep green surcoat lined with squirrel fur and the matching woollen kirtle with a long-sleeved robe in dove blue. Adam was instructed to take off his boots and sit down by the fire, a sleeping Tom placed in his arms.

Kit smiled weakly; to hand a man reprieved from imminent death his sleeping child had to count as one of Mabel's more inspired notions, at least to judge by how Adam buried his nose in Tom's hair, eyes closed as he inhaled their son's scent.

"And Lord Mortimer remains safe and sound?" Mabel asked once she'd handed Kit and Adam a posset each.

"To judge from the king's reaction I'd say Roger Mortimer is in the best of health," Kit replied.

"As I hear it, he remains in France." Adam sounded casual.

"As you hear it?" Kit pounced. "Are you in contact with him?"

Adam sighed. "No, I am not. But others are."

Like the queen, Kit thought snidely.

"William, not the queen." Adam said, and she felt caught out.

"Is William here?" she asked instead, smiling at the thought of Adam's priest-turned-spy brother.

"Here?" Adam shook his head. "No, sweeting, that would be too dangerous. But he's in London, so once we're back in Westminster we can meet with him – he's staying with a vintner up by Aldgate Street."

Kit shrugged. She did not know London well enough to be able to place the street. Twice, she'd accompanied Adam to the city, finding the entire experience more than daunting. It was an assault on the senses – and especially that of smell – to visit the city. Dark, narrow streets, large, looming buildings, too many people, too many unwashed urchins, too many beggars, too much filth, too much abject misery – no, all in all, Kit preferred to stay clear of London.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked instead.

"I got his message moments before we were due at the

hall. I was going to tell you, but other things happened.” Adam kissed his son’s head.

“When can we see him?” Kit had not laid eyes on William for over a year.

“Well, not tonight, sweeting. It is a long ride from here to London.”

“M’lady is not going anywhere until she is somewhat recovered,” Mabel interrupted.

“I wasn’t planning on a midnight departure,” Adam replied with a smile. His features tightened. “The king would probably take it as an attempted flight, an admission of my guilt, and kill me on the spot.”

“The king is a fool,” Mabel stated. “So yes, he might do just that.”

Kit clasped her hands together to stop them from trembling.

“But as you’ll not be traipsing off in the dark, he’ll have no reason to, will he?” Mabel continued. In passing, she patted Kit on the back. “Nothing happened, m’lady.”

“Nothing.” Kit stretched her mouth into a smile, while tears ran down her cheeks.

Once Kit had stopped crying and Mabel had decided they had recovered, she took Tom with her, shooed Gavin before her and left them alone in the small chamber. The only source of light was the fire, by now reduced to a heap of glowing embers. Adam moved close enough to take Kit’s hand, and sat toying with her fingers.

“Bed?” he asked, breaking the silence. He kissed her wrist, and at her nod, helped her to stand. He undressed them both before the fire, smoothing his fingers over her skin. Kit shivered under his touch and rested her head against his chest. The golden fuzz that decorated most of his body tickled her nose, and she rubbed her cheek against him, relishing the sensation of his skin against hers. Had the prince not spoken up... Kit shoved the thoughts away from her. Adam was here, he was warm and alive.

“We should not be doing this,” Adam murmured, but his hands contradicted his words, gliding over her rounded belly, her heavy breasts. “It is a sin.”

“How can it be a sin?” She fondled him. “Why would God frown when we, his creatures, take pleasure from each other?”

Adam groaned, tensing his buttocks when she closed her hand around him. “Man should only lie with woman for procreation,” he said breathlessly.

“Not my man.” She tightened her hold.

“No, not your man.” Adam cupped her bottom and gathered her as close as possible. “Your man is in your thrall, my lady, willing to risk his immortal soul for you.”

“What? Your immortal soul for a slice of Heaven? Not a bad trade, my lord.”

Adam laughed, his breath tickling her neck. “I’m not complaining, sweeting.”

He guided her backwards towards the bed, and helped her down before lighting the candle on the nearby table. The comforting scent of beeswax filled the room, a circle of light in the gloom. Sufficient light to see each other by, enough that she could see how his pupils dilated when he lay down beside her, a heavy hand moving up her thigh, over the slope of her hip, up to caress her breasts, before tracing leisurely circles over the taut skin of her belly in the direction of her pubic mound. A finger, two fingers sliding through her folds, teasing, touching. His mouth whispering her name, kissing her neck, her ear.

Kit closed her eyes, submerged in a sea of tactile sensations. She almost smiled when his fingers stopped moving, and she knew what he was going to say before his nose brushed against hers.

“Open your eyes,” he whispered, nipping her earlobe. “My wife loves me with her eyes open. You know that by now, sweeting.”

So she did, staring up at him as he entered her carefully with most of his weight on his braced arms.

“I love you,” she told him, trying to envelop as much of him as she could with her legs and her arms.

“I know.” Adam smiled down at her, flexing his hips in slow, measured movements that stoked the heat inside of her,

a concentrated point of pleasure that craved his proximity, his strength and virility. Kit heard her breathing, loud and ragged in the quiet of their room. She hooked a leg round his hips, using her heel to spur him deeper, faster, harder. Adam increased his pace, the muscles of his arms quivered under her hands and Kit could no longer form any coherent thoughts beyond his name, one long, extended ‘Adam’ ringing in her head.

With a soft exclamation, Adam reached his release. His head dipped, his breathing slowed and he pulled out to lie beside her. “I love you too,” he murmured, clasping her hand and placing it atop his beating heart.

Chapter 3

“I will not ride in a litter.” Kit gave Adam an exasperated look. They had gone by boat from Westminster to Byling’s Gate, and Kit had not regained her composure after the choppy ride, very much aggravated by the rising wind and churning tides. She glanced at the bridge, now to her left, and suppressed a shiver. Shooting under those dank, dark arches was an experience she could gladly have done without. To ride a litter after her recent encounter with the river would only increase her queasiness – besides, she’d spent too much time in litters recently and wanted to see something of the crowded and dirty streets that surrounded her, curious despite the stench and the squalor.

“If you’re walking, then so am I.” She stretched. She might be carrying, but she wasn’t weak, and the occasional discomfort that flowered up her back was nothing but a consequence of her being tired.

They’d been back in Westminster no more than three days, this after trailing the king and his retinue as he first rode west, then turned back east. This time, Kit had acquiesced to travelling part of the way in one of the litters, mostly because the queen had insisted, saying a woman so swollen with child should not expose herself to the strains of riding. It had been on the tip of Kit’s tongue to remind her of the old king’s second wife, by all accounts a most dignified and cultured lady, who all the same was out hunting when afflicted by labour pains.

Adam adopted a stern look, but she could see he wasn’t about to insist, so she slipped her arm into his, lifted her skirts as high as she could do with decency, and followed him up through Watergate to Thames Street where they turned left before turning right again, this time up a crooked street Adam told her was Harp Lane.

It was like walking through a crowded, unkempt farmyard. Hens, the odd pig, far too many dogs, soiled straw and offal in the gutters – Kit’s nostril’s widened, incapable of closing out the disagreeable odour of very many people living in far too much proximity. She clutched at Adam’s arm as she slipped on the wet cobbles, and for an instant she regretted having insisted on walking. No matter her care, the dark blue wool of her kirtle was already splattered with mud, and had it not been for her pattens, her shoes would have been covered with filth.

As they proceeded up the street, Kit was afflicted by the sensation of being trapped. The streets were dark and narrow; the houses stood cheek to jowl, the upper storeys straining towards each other at the expense of the light, casting the ground below into a constant dusk. Add to this a multitude of people, most of them hastening by with a determined look on their faces that spoke of important matters to handle, and Kit almost regretted having insisted on accompanying Adam.

She shuddered at the state of some of the people they passed. Crippled children sat in the filth, hands extended mutely. Bare-headed women far younger than her leaned provocatively against walls, necklines gaping open over breasts that pimples in the cold. Old hags teetered along, bent double under loads of kindling or rags, and here and there they came across men, already so drunk at this hour of the day to be incapable of anything more than bleary looks and staggers.

“London’s underbelly. Not a pretty sight, is it?” Adam twitched his shoulders, keeping his free hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“Terrible.” A band of children in rags rushed by, yelling loudly. “But some are trying to help.” She inclined her head in the direction of several black-clad men, their habits swishing round their legs as they made their way down the wet street. Behind them came other men, carrying baskets of bread.

“The friars do a good job, bless them all.” Adam came to a halt. “William?”

In response, one of the friars straightened up and pulled back his cowl. “Brother!”

Adam released Kit, took three strides and crashed into his brother.

They were very much alike, Adam and his younger brother. Both of them over six feet tall, both of them fair, but where Adam had grey eyes that shifted from darkest pewter to brightest silver depending on the light and his mood, William's eyes were a light blue, fringed with fair lashes as thick and straight as those of his brother.

"William!" Kit hugged her brother-in-law, ignoring the disapproving look that flitted over Adam's features. Her man didn't like it when she was too familiar with other men, even his own brother.

"Kit." William disengaged himself and winked at her. "It is not seemly for a woman to embrace a friar."

"So you're a friar now?" she asked. "No more the queen's man?"

William grinned. "Most definitely the queen's man – but as of last night I am also a friar, travelling extensively through France and England as per my abbot's orders." He glanced furtively over his shoulder. "I couldn't stay with Robert – in the present climate it would place him and his family at risk," he continued, his voice lowered to a rumble. "I have news," he added with a smile.

Kit didn't need to ask what his news related to. She could see it in William's bright expression, mirrored in Adam's.

"Lord Roger sends his regards," William said, and Adam shone like a beacon. Kit retreated a couple of steps. Always Lord Roger Mortimer, who took up far too much space in Adam's life – and heart. She threw a concerned look down the street, fearing that at any moment they'd be surrounded by the king's men-at arms loudly proclaiming them to be plotting against the king.

Adam was too intent on his hushed conversation with William to notice when she took yet more steps away from him. She heard him mutter, "Lord Roger" a couple of times, and William nodded and said something that made Adam grin. It riled her that one moment he would refuse even considering allowing her to walk without his support, while

the next he had forgotten her presence, so focused was he on hearing news of Lord Mortimer, the king's greatest traitor. So Kit turned on her heel, disregarded the little voice inside of her that was telling her she was being foolish, and walked up towards Cheapside and the beckoning market stalls.

In a matter of moments, she was accosted by urchins, children who gripped at her skirts and begged for pennies, for bread. She walked on, ignoring their entreating eyes. They grew insistent, latching on to her and shoving her with them.

"Let me go," she demanded of one of the boys, cuffing him over the head. The child ducked, let go, and was immediately replaced by another, pushing her with determination towards a nearby alley. Kit dug in her heels and yelled for help. A quick glance over her shoulder indicated she'd left Adam further behind than intended, but when she attempted to call his name a shove sent her further into the gloom of the narrow passage. Kit slipped in the mud underfoot, righted herself, and swung madly, sending at least one of the children flying. More hands, many, many hands, and out of the shadows the lanky shape of a man appeared, knife in hand.

If anything, the appearance of the man had her increasing her efforts to fight free. The man laughed, saying something she couldn't quite interpret. There was an odd, stinging sensation down her arm. She was pushed back, her head hitting a nearby wall. The man's acrid breath was far too close, his hands on her cloak. There was the sound of something tearing. Her brooch. Kit tried to wrest herself free, but there were too many hands on her. The man pinched her breast and grinned, making yet another unintelligible comment, even if Kit recognised the word 'whore'.

When he pawed her again, Kit succeeded in pulling a hand free and punched him straight in the mouth. The man snarled. Kit shoved at him, almost collapsing under what seemed like a thousand small bodies. There was a roar, children were flung this way and that, there were squeals and screams of pain. The man landed face first on the ground and emitted a howl when a booted foot came down on his hand clutching the knife. Just like that it was over, Adam heaving

the man to stand while William reclaimed Kit's brooch and helped her adjust her clothes.

William stayed with her while Adam dragged the man off, calling for the constables.

"He didn't hurt you?" William led her over to a nearby stall, digging into his pouch to produce the goat required to buy her a mug of hot cider.

Kit shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. When yet another band of children passed by, she backed into William in her haste to maintain her distance from these potential miniature abductors.

"What..." She coughed. "They only meant to rob me, I assume."

William didn't reply. Instead he steered the subject over to his nephew and the people of Tresaints.

After several minutes discussing old John and Mabel, Kit's pulse had returned to normal. When Adam reappeared, minus the man, she gave him a tremulous smile. He spoke over her head to his brother, deciding to meet up again in a week's time. With one last hug, the brothers parted. William gave Kit a little smile before melting back into the crowd, his black habit visible only for some instants.

Adam didn't speak to her at all on their way back to the wharf. His hand was a clamp on her wrist, and he walked with such haste that she had to trot, one hand clutching at her belly. Only when they were on the docks did he turn to face her, eyes narrowed into slits.

"You could have been harmed! Killed, even."

"I—"

"I've told you, have I not? London is not safe for a woman on her own – and especially not for a woman like you."

"A woman like me?"

Adam blew out his cheeks. "Look at you! You're well-dressed and healthy, you have rings on your fingers and baubles in your ears." He took hold of an escaped tendril of her hair and yanked – a tad too hard. "And you're lovely," he added, sounding as if this was an unfortunate fact. "Women like you disappear all the time."

“Disappear? Don’t be silly. Besides, look at me – I’m huge.”

“A temporary condition,” Adam reminded her. “And there are many men who’d find you tempting anyway.”

“You think?” She hoped for a compliment or a smile. All she got was a glower.

“Why did you walk off like that?”

“Why didn’t you notice I did?” she snapped back. “One moment you’re like a protective wolfhound, the next you forget I’m there at all.”

“He’s my brother,” Adam protested. “I haven’t seen him that much lately.”

“We both know it wasn’t William who distracted you.” She turned her back on him. Behind her, she heard him sigh.

“Are you all right?” he asked instead. She just nodded. The cut to her arm was shallow, and other than that she was more frightened than hurt. “Kit,” he murmured, wrapping his arms round her and pulling her close enough that he could rest his hands on her belly. “I’m sorry,” he said simply. “I should not have left you unguarded like that. I got carried away.”

“And I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have walked off.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” His teeth nipped gently at her ear. “A woman as enticing as you must never walk without her husband.”

“Enticing?” She softened against him.

His soft chuckle tickled her skin. “Enticing, tempting, enthralling...all of them suit.” The bristles on his jaw scrubbed against her cheek, sending all sorts of sensations rushing through her.

“I like them all.” She turned in his arms and lifted herself on her toes to give him a kiss.

“Please don’t punish me by risking yourself,” he said once they broke apart. “I couldn’t bear it if—”

A quick brush of her lips on his silenced him. “I know.” Which was why it was such a good way to punish him, but she didn’t say that. “So what news of Lord Mortimer?”

“Do you care?”

“Of course I care – if nothing else because you do.” She gnawed at her lip. “I like him too, you know.”

“Do you now?” there was a slight edge to his voice that made Kit laugh.

“Not like that – which you well know, Adam de Guirande.”

“He’s a handsome man. And rich.”

“He isn’t you.” She cupped his cheek, smiling at the pleased look on Adam’s face. “And he is married – something the queen should keep in mind.” She sighed at the thought of Lady Joan, Lord Mortimer’s wife, who would soon enter her third year of captivity.

“Kit!”

“Oh, come! Every time Queen Isabella speaks of Roger Mortimer, her features soften.”

“Lord Roger is a man of honour,” Adam reproved. “And the queen is a faithful wife – and devout.”

“I didn’t say they’d acted on it,” Kit told him. “I’m just saying that she would very much want to.”

“Wanting and acting are two very different things.” Adam sounded very serious.

“A narrow precipice that separates the thought of sin from actual sin,” Kit said. “So, is he faring well?”

Adam nodded, going on to regale her with a detailed description of Mortimer’s recent months of freedom. After almost two years in the Tower, Kit supposed the man needed to savour life at its fullest, which was probably why he seemed to invest most of his time in pleasurable pastimes. On the other hand, what could he do? It wasn’t as if he could return home and pick up the pieces of his previous life. But she felt a sting of ire at the fact that Roger Mortimer was feasting with the French nobility while his wife and most of his children languished in captivity here in England – a captivity that had grown that much harsher after Mortimer escaped back in August.

“Any news of Lady Joan?” she interrupted Adam. He grimaced and dragged a hand through his thick thatch of hair. She needed to cut it, she noted, smiling at how it stood every which way.

“The lady suffers under the king’s new measures.” Briefly, he told her how Lady Joan lived under constant supervision, prohibited from communicating with her children. The Mortimer daughters were sequestered in nunneries, the sons were locked up – with the exception of Geoffrey, who was with his father in France. “In difference to her husband, she fares badly,” he finished. “I hope Lord Roger’s letter will bring her some hope.”

“A letter?”

“William has been entrusted with it. He will make sure she gets it. I am tasked with getting Mortimer’s other letter to the queen.” He patted himself at heart level. “Will you accompany me to see her later?”

Kit had no intention of letting him talk to the beautiful queen alone. Besides, she might be able to help. Smuggling a letter to the queen under the watchful eyes of Eleanor de Clare was the equivalent of entering the lion’s den – with a hungry and wide-awake lion in it.

Later that day, Adam and Kit exited the queen’s chambers after an uncomfortable hour in the presence of the queen and her ladies. Adam frowned; the queen lived in a gilded cage, her every step monitored by Despenser’s wife. Only through Kit’s clumsy spilling of wine on Lady Eleanor’s skirts, causing all eyes to fly to her, had Adam succeeded in slipping the queen the missive. A fleeting smile was his reward, those luminous green eyes glittering in his direction.

When they left, the queen’s hand had, as per chance, brushed at Adam’s wrist, long fingers caressing his skin. The imprint of her touch still tingled. The queen was an attractive woman, and it would take a man of rock – or a eunuch – to be impervious to her. Beside him, Kit walked in stony silence, and a glance in her direction confirmed that she had seen the queen touching him – and did not like it.

“Shall we walk outside?” he asked, gesturing at the surprising brightness of the January day. His lord and master was supposedly still at his Latin lessons, so Adam had some time on his hands prior to the hard riding he had promised

Prince Edward later on. In silence, she followed him outside, keeping her hands very much to herself.

With the king in residence, Westminster became a hub of activity, men-at-arms jostling with clerks and accountants, with priests and tradesmen. From the smithy came the incessant sound of hammering, through the gate rolled cart after cart piled high with victuals of all kinds, from wine to be stored in the darker cellars to salted fish and waddling ducks. Courtiers bedecked in velvet and silk hastened across the muddy yard, from chapel to hall, from hall to private chambers, flocking round their handsome king like starlings round a bushel. Not that the king was anywhere in sight at present – their liege preferred to take counsel with his closest circle, and would at this moment be closeted in the Painted Chamber with Despenser and Stapleton, no doubt with flagons of good wine at hand.

Yet another look in Kit's direction, and Adam had to quell the urge to grin. He enjoyed seeing her jealous, chin up, bosom pushed forward and those blue eyes glittering with anger.

"If she touches you like that again, I'll be tempted to claw her face, queen or no queen," Kit said.

"She brushed my hand by mistake." Not true – Queen Isabella rarely did anything by mistake, and these last few months living under constant supervision had, if anything, reinforced that trait in her.

In response, Kit snorted. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy what precisely? That a beautiful woman touched my hand in gratitude?" He drew her to a halt. "You've said it yourself: if the queen has a fondness for anyone but her husband, it is for Lord Roger." Adam frowned. "And let us hope the poor woman has little fondness for her lord husband. Otherwise, his present behaviour would break her heart."

"Hmm," Kit replied, but her mouth softened somewhat. "Does the king visit her at all?" She pressed back against him as a group of men hurried past.

"Not recently. Despenser and his wife are driving a wedge between them. It suits Despenser's purposes to isolate the king, so their communication is restricted to the words

they exchange when they preside over the festivities in the great hall – or when they discuss their children.” Recently, the king was rarely seen without either Lord Despenser or Lady Eleanor by his side. The king was inordinately – at times inappropriately – fond of his niece, and there were some that whispered it was Lady Eleanor, not Lord Despenser, who kept the king company at night. Or both.

“Poor children,” Kit said, slipping her hand into Adam’s.

“Aye. Prince Edward in particular. The poor lad is being torn apart by his parents. It is fortunate, I think, that he has his own household to grant him some stability.” Prince Edward was rarely at court, but when he was, he stayed with his mother as did all the royal children, a handsome brood consisting of Edward, his younger brother John, the pretty little Eleanor and the baby Joan, a plump toddler who had the most contagious laugh. “The prince has made it clear that I am required to stay with him for some time. I presume that includes you as well.” Adam hoped it would.

Kit did not look happy. “Live with him? I want to go back to Tresaints.”

Adam lifted her hand to his mouth and gave it a brief kiss. “So do I, sweeting. But my life is not mine to order – you know that.” He braided his fingers with hers. “But if you want to return to Tresaints, I’d understand. I wouldn’t like it, but I’d understand.”

“You wouldn’t like it?” She sounded pleased.

“No. I want you here, with me.” Adam quietly congratulated himself. His wife’s cheeks had gone a pleasing pink, and her grip on his hand tightened. She was about to say something, when a distant shout had them both focusing on the gatehouse – or more specifically on the person dangling from a rope affixed to the roof.

“What...” Kit never got to finish. With all the speed he could muster, Adam made for the building. Long before he’d reached the base of the tower, he heard the mewling sounds coming from the young person tangled in the ropes – and he had already recognised that head of bright hair, the tunic in cornflower blue wool hemmed with green and red.

“Hang still!” he called up. The rope was attached to grappling hooks, and too much movement could easily dislodge the hooks and send the prince down to land on the stones below. Adam swallowed. The lad was hanging upside down, and well over fifteen feet from the ground.

There was a gargle from Edward.

“The rope!” Kit’s voice came in gasps. “It’s round his neck!” Fortunately, the prince’s arm was also caught in the makeshift noose.

“A rope!” Adam yelled, making a quick assessment of the situation. Reaching the lad from the battlements would take too much time, and to pull him up with the rope round his neck...no, that would not work. One of the hooks screeched over the stone and gave way. The prince whimpered as he dropped yet another foot.

A guard came running with rope and grapples. Adam steadied himself, drew in a deep breath and threw the rope. There was a satisfying clunk as the hooks caught on something.

“Talk to him,” Adam said to Kit. “Keep him as still as possible.”

“What are you doing?” She took hold of his cloak. “You can’t climb!” She gestured at his foot.

“Aye, I can – I have to.” He leaned towards her. “And I’ve done it before.” With that, he was off, using his arms to heave himself upwards towards his young lord. From below came Kit’s voice, low and reassuring as she spoke to the lad, telling him to look at her, only at her, and concentrate on his breathing.

Yet another of the hooks gave. The prince fell downwards a foot or so before being brought to a jarring halt by the rope. He was choking, his hand pressed against his windpipe. Eyes wide with fright, he stared at Adam.

“I’ll be right there.” Adam grunted, trying to find purchase for his good foot to push himself upwards. A crack in the mortar offered a foothold, and suddenly the prince was within reach, hanging like a helpless chrysalis.

“The hook!” Kit yelled from below. Adam threw out his free arm and caught hold of the lad just as the last grapple gave. The prince fell, brought up short by Adam’s hold.

“Sweet Lord!” The tendons in Adam’s shoulder shrieked in protest, but somehow he managed to hold on to the boy. With an effort, he succeeded in lifting Edward sufficiently to hold him clumsily against his chest while lowering himself to the ground.

By the time Adam’s booted foot touched the stone flags, a large audience had collected. Standing in silence, they watched as he set Prince Edward down.

“Can you stand, my lordling?” he asked in an undertone. Edward nodded, holding on to Adam as he straightened up. A cheer went up from the crowd and the prince gave them a sheepish wave.

“What were you doing, my lord?” Kit chided, inspecting the lad for damage. “No more than a bad rope-burn, I think.” A thick red abrasion decorated the prince’s neck.

“I was learning how to climb walls,” Prince Edward replied in a pinched voice.

“Climb walls?” Adam echoed.

The prince flashed him a look. “How else to enter a besieged castle?”

Adam could think of various other methods, but held his tongue.

“Well, don’t do that again. You could have died!” Kit tweaked Edward’s tunic into place before smoothing his hair, retracting her hand as if scalded when the king burst through the spectators, with Despenser at his heels.

“You saved my son.” The king looked from Adam to Edward and back again.

“My liege.” Adam bowed deeply, pulling Kit into a reverence with him.

“Thank you,” the king said in a gravelly voice, hugging his son to him.

“My pleasure, my lord.” When Adam raised his head, he met the jet-black gaze of Despenser, hovering behind the king. Adam couldn’t help it; he grinned, causing Despenser’s scowl to deepen into an expression resembling that of a disgruntled gargoyle.