

ANNA
BELFRAGE

In the
SHADOW
of the
STORM



Chapter 1

“Will she do?” The voice came from somewhere over Kit’s head.

“Do? She will have to, won’t she?”

With a series of grunts, the men carrying her deposited her in a cart. Kit made as if to protest. A large hand gripped her by the neck, tilted her head, and held something to her mouth. No. No more. She spat like a cornered cat, to no avail. Her mouth was forced open; sweet wine was poured, obliging her to swallow. And then there was nothing but a spinning darkness. Nothing at all.

When next she came to, a wrinkled face was peering down at her.

“Remarkable,” the old woman said. “Absolutely remarkable.”

Kit shrank back. Her heart leapt erratically in her chest, her gaze flitting from one side to the other in this unfamiliar chamber, taking in tapestries and painted walls, streaks of sunlight from the open shutters. Where was she? All she had were vague recollections of days on a cart, being jolted this way and that. Days in which strong fingers pinched her nose closed until she was forced to open her mouth and swallow the unctuously sweet concoction that submerged her in darkness.

“Not so remarkable when one considers that they have the same father,” someone else said drily. A pair of light blue eyes studied Kit dispassionately. The eyes sat in a narrow face, a nose like a knife blade separating the two halves. A wimple in pristine linen and a veil in what Kit supposed to be silk framed a face that would have looked better on a man than on a woman – harsh, aloof and with an expression which reminded her of old John back home when he’d cornered a rat.

“M...m’ lady,” Kit stuttered. She tried to sit up but was pushed down again.

“Oh, no. You will not move until we have reached an agreement.”

“Agreement?” Kit pulled at her hands, noting with a burst of panic that she was tied to the bed – a simple thing, consisting of a rough wooden frame and a straw mattress.

“We are in a quandary,” the lady with the blue eyes said. For an instant, she pressed her lips together. “Stupid, wilful child!”

“Me?” Kit’s head hurt, a constant thudding behind her eyes. What had happened to her?

There was a barking sound which Kit took for laughter.

“You, little one, will be anything but wilful. If you are...” The lady made a swift motion across her throat with her hand. Kit cowered. What did they want with her, these two old crones? The older of the women patted her hand.

“It will be none too bad.” From the homespun material of her clothes and the coarse linen of her veil, Kit concluded that she was not a lady but a servant.

“Where am I?” Kit asked.

“Where you are doesn’t matter. It is what you are that is important.” The lady gave her an icy smile. “You are a soon-to-be bride. At noon, you will wed Adam de Guirande.”

Kit did not know what to say. She didn’t like the look in the lady’s eyes, and for some reason she suspected that should she refuse to comply, she would end up dead in the latrine pit – the lady had that sort of air to her.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Me?” The lady cackled. “Why, I am the bride’s mother, Lady Cecily de Monmouth.”

Kit wanted to protest. Her mother was Alais Coucy – dead since two months back. Grief tore at her, and she turned her face towards the wall, not wanting these strangers to see the tears welling in her eyes.

“I know all about your whore of a mother,” Lady Cecily said. “My husband’s great love, no less.” She sounded bitter. “But at least his bastard will come in handy.”

Kit tugged at her bindings. “I am no bastard!”

“What lies has little Alais told you? That your father is dead? That he abandoned her to pursue a religious vocation?”

Kit flushed. “My father—”

“Is my husband, Thomas de Monmouth. My husband, you hear?”

“But...” Kit slumped back against the thin pillow. For most of her eighteen years, she’d heard her mother’s sad story: how two young lovers fled their irate parents, exchanged their vows before a priest and hoped for an eternity together – except that her father had died of a fever. She didn’t understand. Life as she knew it was caving in on top of her – all at the say-so of this unknown woman. “You lie,” she tried.

“I most certainly do not,” Lady Cecily said.

Kit closed her eyes to avoid that penetrating light blue gaze. She suspected the lady was telling the truth: every question Kit had ever asked about her father had been met with an evasion, or the sad tale of star-crossed lovers as trotted out by her mother. When she’d taken her questions to John or to Mall, they had looked discomfited and referred to her mother.

A hand on her shoulder shook her – hard. “No time for all that now. Those dolts I sent to abduct you took their time getting you here, and we have urgent matters at hand. First and foremost, your impending wedding. Mabel, call for a bath – the child is revoltingly dirty.”

“No.” Kit raised her chin and stared Lady Cecily in the eye, summoning what little courage she had. “I’ll not wed on your say-so.”

“No? Oh, I think yes.” Lady Cecily’s eyes were of a sudden far too close, filled with such menace Kit flinched. “If you don’t, I will have you thrown out of Tresaints and publicly branded a bastard.”

“Tresaints? It’s my home.”

“It was deeded to your mother for life. And she is quite, quite dead, isn’t she?” Lady Cecily smirked. “You have nowhere to go, little...Kit, is it? But here you’ll respond to the full version of the name you share with your sister, Katherine.”

A sister? Kit gaped.

Lady Cecily smiled wickedly. “What? You didn’t know you had a trueborn half-sister? A girl who looks just like you?” She

laughed as she straightened up to her full height. “So, what will it be? Destitution or marriage?”

Kit wanted to say destitution. She wanted to snarl and spit in Lady Cecily’s face – accuse her of abduction, even – but she knew it would be futile. Women like Lady Cecily had power and wealth on their side. Kit had nothing. She swallowed a sob.

“If you say no, I will evict every single one of the tenants as well,” Lady Cecily said, effectively nailing down the lid on what felt very much like a coffin.

“And if I say yes?”

“If you say yes, your father will include Tresaints in your dowry.”

Kit was trapped. She knew it; Lady Cecily knew it. She acquiesced with a single nod.

Lady Cecily patted her cheek. “Good girl.”

“Why?” Kit asked Mabel once they were alone. She rubbed at her wrists, at her ankles, and studied herself with dismay. Lady Cecily was right; she was covered in grime, and from the state of her kirtle, she’d been sleeping in it for days.

“Hmm?” Mabel gave her a vague smile, motioning for her to stand up.

“Why do they need me to marry this Adam?”

“Ah well, my lamb decided not to.” Mabel chuckled, relieving Kit of one garment after the other.

“Your lamb?” Kit bit back on a snort.

“Your namesake, little Katherine.” Mabel sighed. “That one has no sense of self-preservation.”

There was a knock on the door, and Mabel hurriedly wrapped a sheet round Kit. Moments later, the room filled with men carrying a tub and a stream of water boys, bringing bucket after bucket of water. A young woman dressed like a nun entered the room with a basket of dried herbs. Lavender and rosemary were thrown into the steaming water, linen towels were piled on a stool, and just like that the room was empty – well, except for Mabel, who rose, went over to bolt the door, and then beckoned Kit towards the bath.

“Get in,” Mabel said.

Kit remained where she was, gaze fixed on what little she could see of the autumn landscape through one of the two narrow windows. One of the shutters hung awry, she noted, creaking slightly as it moved in the wind.

“What is the matter with you?” the old woman complained. “Has an earwig or two crawled in through your ears and made you deaf?”

“That would have been unfortunate – and unusual,” Kit muttered. Reluctantly, she dropped the sheet and clambered into the tub, her mind whirring as she attempted to find a way out of her predicament. This couldn’t be happening to her! Only days ago, she’d been safe and content at Tresaints, mistress – or so she assumed – of the little manor that had been the only home she’d ever known. Maybe it was a nightmare. Yes, dearest Mother Mary, please make all of this a dream, a terrible, terrible dream, starting back when Mama died. Kit drew in a deep breath and held it, willing back the tears that stung her eyelids.

Mabel began scrubbing her back and Kit sat hunched, taking in her surroundings. Her gaze drifted over to the huge four-poster bed, enclosed by heavy bed-hangings in a dusty green. Other than the pallet to which she’d been tied, there was a chest, a table with a chipped earthenware mug containing a drooping bouquet of Michaelmas daisies, and two silver candlesticks, set on either side of a miniature Madonna.

She made big eyes at the carpet that covered the thick wooden boards – the only carpet she’d ever seen before was a small, precious square of vibrant reds and blues that her mother kept hanging on the wall in her solar. Her mother... Kit’s throat ached with the effort not to cry.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why what? Lean back, so I can wash your hair.” Mabel’s hands busied themselves with undoing Kit’s braids. “Such beautiful hair, m’ lady, as dark red as your sister’s – and just as thick. Well, Sir Thomas can’t deny you, that’s for sure, and—”

Kit’s main concern was not her hair. “Why does Katherine not—” Kit spluttered as Mabel upended a bucket of water over her head. “Is he that terrible, this bridegroom of hers?” She

shivered. She was going to marry a man she didn't know – had never heard of – and every part of her balked at the thought.

“Not really. But Katherine had her sights set higher, foolish girl that she is.” Mabel exhaled. “And now God knows where she is.” She lathered Kit's hair, hands softening into a gentle massage that had Kit groaning. Not since her mother's death had anyone touched her like this. Her throat clogged with tears. Her mother had lied to her. If what Lady Cecily said was the truth, all of Kit's life was built on a lie – and now her future was to be built on a new one. She forced her attention back to the elusive Katherine.

“She's gone?”

“The little minx,” the old woman said, laughing softly. “She took the only way out.”

“What did she do?”

“She refused to agree to the match with Sir Adam, and when Lady Cecily threatened her with the switch, our Katherine ran away. As I hear it, she is well on her way to Spain by now.” Mabel clucked at this sad state of affairs. “Stole most of her mother's baubles.”

“Spain?” A place Kit had only heard of, as exotic as the Holy Land or the wilds of the Barbary kingdoms. “She is travelling on her own?” Kit felt a rush of admiration for this unknown sister.

“Not any longer.” Mabel clamped her mouth shut. “The silly lamb has found another suitor – just to properly shame her father. A titled man, no mere knight.” She gestured for Kit to get out of the tub.

“Oh.” Kit stood, arms over her head as Mabel patted her dry. “But why not tell Adam his bride has fled?”

“Katherine's wedding to Adam de Guirande is a boon from Baron Mortimer. It comes with other boons, such as a place in his household for Lady Cecily's firstborn, Richard, and more power and land for Sir Thomas.”

Baron Mortimer? No one living in the Welsh Marches could have avoided hearing of the magnificent baron, even if Kit had never seen him – but then she'd seen nothing beyond Tresaints, except for the odd visit to Worcester and the annual excursion

to visit Alaïs' uncle. She frowned: Lady Cecily's revelations went a long way towards explaining her mother's self-imposed isolation, but she had never questioned her mother's decisions – not until recently, when Tresaints had become too small, too boring. Why had Mama never told her the truth? How could she have gone to her grave without ensuring Kit knew? A surge of anger rose through her, crested and broke, converting into yet another wave of grief. Alaïs was gone.

“She must be very important for Lord Mortimer to arrange her wedding,” she said.

Mabel's mouth twisted into a little smirk. “Oh yes, very important – to Lord Mortimer.” She sighed. “It does not matter. Katherine is gone, but fortunately we have you to fill her place.” She tilted her head. “No one will ever see the difference, you're that alike. Not alike enough to fool the family, but the others, yes. Well, maybe not Lord Mortimer – not if he gets close enough.”

Kit was afflicted by yet another case of the shivers. “I can't do this.” This had to be a grievous sin, to impersonate someone else and marry a man under false pretences.

“Oh yes, you can. I will not have my dear lord and his lady wife shamed by their daughter on her wedding day.”

“I'm not their daughter! And I'm not about to marry a stranger.”

Two eyes as hard as black pebbles bore into her. “You're his daughter – it suffices with one look at you to see that: same cornflower eyes, same hair. You *will* honour the contracts. If not, Lady Cecily will have you whipped until you bleed, and then she'll throw you out to fend for yourself. How long would you survive out there, do you think? You, a pampered young woman with no skills, nothing but her looks? You'd end up on your back in the stews within a week.”

Kit swallowed. There was no way out. Mabel was right: if she didn't go through with this, she'd be left at the mercy of whoever came along, as would the tenants of Tresaints. “I'll do it,” she whispered.

“Good.” Mabel beamed at her and gestured for her to sit so that she could comb her hair. “How is everyone at Tresaints?”

Kit craned her head back. “You know Tresaints?”

“Bless your little heart, of course I do! I was born there. Besides, Sir Thomas grew up there, and I’ve been with him since he was three weeks old.” She smiled. “Is my brother John holding up?”

Kit smiled. “Old but hale.”

“Old? I’ll have you know he’s younger than I am.”

Kit found it wise not to comment further on this. Instead, she answered Mabel’s questions, and her heart lightened as they spoke of her home, the little manor nestled into an undulating landscape that to the south rose towards the Malvern Hills. She only had to close her eyes and she was there. The hornbeam hedge that bordered the lane was beginning to show patches of autumn brown, the old oak that stood closest to the house had begun to shed leaves, while the vines that clambered over the crumbling gateposts burned a bright, fiery red. From the kitchens came the scent of baking bread, and to the side of the manor house proper was the little chapel, her mother’s favourite place in the world. Kit sighed. Home. When would she see it again?

A sharp rap to her head brought her back to the present. “I asked how old you are.”

“Eighteen,” Kit said.

Mabel looked her up and down. “You don’t look that old. Are you untouched?”

“Mabel!” Kit threw the hag an incensed look.

“Just asking. If Adam de Guirande does not find his bride a virgin, there will be hell to pay.”

“He will.” Her stomach cramped, her eyes filling with tears.

“Shhh.” Mabel gave her an awkward hug. “Don’t cry – it will not help, will it? Besides, do you not see something good coming from all this? You’d never have found a husband on your own, would you?”

Kit threw her a heated look. “Robert—”

“Robert Fitzhugh? Down in Worcester?” Mabel laughed. “He’d never have married a destitute orphan.” She gave Kit a little shake. “This is for the best – and Tresaints remains with you.”

The room filled with people. A sea of light veils, of dresses in rich colours contrasting with white linen chemises and wimples. Lady Cecily sauntered in, followed by two girls carrying armfuls of colourful fabrics. Kit was urged to stand, and women chattered and laughed as they dressed her. Someone stuck a goblet of sweetened wine in her hand.

“Drink,” said Lady Cecily. “It will steady your nerves.” Beady blue eyes ensured Kit swallowed every drop before Lady Cecily turned away to talk to one of the other women. The wine tasted a bit odd, overly sweet.

“Poppy wine,” Mabel said. “Your lady mother wants to ensure you’re at your most docile today, my Katherine.” She grinned, topped up the goblet and had Kit drink it all.

“I’m Kit,” she slurred, but obediently downed yet another goblet of the sweetish wine. It made her agreeably relaxed, blurring the surroundings into dreamy fuzziness.

“You’re Katherine de Monmouth,” Mabel corrected sternly. She lowered her voice. “Over there is your sister Alicia, and you have three brothers called Richard, Thomas and Roger. Richard is Lord Mortimer’s squire and your father is Sir Thomas de Monmouth, loyal vassal to Roger, Baron Mortimer, as is your future husband.”

“I can’t remember all that!” Kit said.

“You’d best try.” Mabel patted Kit on the shoulder. “But today all you have to remember is that we are celebrating. Baron Mortimer has achieved what he set out to do, those dastardly Despensers are forever banished, and so we will make merry. And what better cause for celebration than a wedding – your wedding? Remember, all you have to do is to smile and look content. No one expects more of a bride.”

Chapter 2

Adam de Guirande approached his impending nuptials with as much enthusiasm as a lamb about to be led to slaughter. Had it not been for the dowry, further enlarged by Lord Mortimer's generous gift, he would have refused the honour, all too aware of the fact that most men viewed his intended wife as used goods. He'd only met Katherine briefly, but rumour had her spending a lot of time alone with Lord Roger – especially during the past winter, when their baron had resided for several consecutive weeks at Wigmore – and Adam knew better than most just how carnal a man Lord Roger could be. Not for him the refined love of troubadours and chansons – no, Roger Mortimer preferred his pleasures in the flesh, so to speak.

Adam stood to the side, flanked by his brothers, and watched as the bride came out of the great hall. Surrounded by a flock of women, she made her way carefully down the stairs, supported by her lady mother on one side. A gossamer-thin veil covered her hair, but a sudden gust of wind lifted the material and Adam caught a glimpse of locks the colour of chestnuts. She wore her hair loose, a statement of her virginity. It made Adam swallow back a rush of bile. He was not looking forward to the bedding, had no notion how he would react should he not find her a virgin. He laughed, converting the sound to a cough. He knew she wasn't a virgin – his brother Guy had maliciously told him one sordid tale after the other, starring Mortimer and Katherine de Monmouth.

Walking some paces to the side of the bride was Lady Joan, Lord Roger's wife, and when she saw Adam she smiled, prompting him to bow in return. He had a great fondness for Lady Joan, a most gentle and noble lady who had more than once accompanied her husband on his campaigns, taking mud, bloodied men and dismembered corpses in her stride. This time, though, she had remained in the Marches, bringing

the womenfolk to join them only when Lord Roger had concluded his recent matter with the king – and the rapacious Despensers.

Adam's gaze strayed, beyond the walls that encircled Stratfield Mortimer, to the tents that housed most of the Mortimer men. Disciplined and experienced, Lord Roger's men-at-arms had cut a swathe of destruction through Despenser land, meeting almost no resistance as they marched from Glamorgan through the Earl of Arundel's land. To do such was to invite future retribution, in particular when the Despensers – both father and son – were the king's favourites. Adam sighed. Fortunately, at present the Despensers were no longer in this realm of England, the king having been forced at sword-point to banish them.

The bridal party was halfway across the bailey when Lord Roger appeared, making his way towards it. Adam stiffened; did his liege lord intend to humiliate him on his wedding day by doing something inappropriate, indirectly marking Adam's intended bride as his? Mortimer said something in passing to his wife, his hand grazing hers, before approaching the bride. Katherine gave him a vacant look, as if she'd never seen the man before. To Adam's amusement, Lord Roger looked irritated. He gripped Katherine's hand and lifted it to his mouth in greeting, and she retracted her hand as if scalded. Mortimer's dark eyes bored into Katherine. She stared straight through him, mouth slightly open.

As his bride progressed towards him, it struck Adam she was moving unsteadily. Her eyes were bright and wide, her mouth was somewhat wet, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Milk of the poppy," William whispered beside him. Adam nodded in agreement. His brother was right – the bride appeared drugged. Mayhap this wedding was as unappetising to her as it was to him. The thought made him frown. He was uncomfortable with wedding a woman who might not want him – ever. He surreptitiously studied her waistline. Might she come to his bed already with child? She didn't look as if she was carrying, if anything she looked confused, blue eyes sliding from one person to the other as if she had no idea who they might be.

“I don’t recall her being that tall,” Adam muttered to his brothers. Or as shapely – the cut of her kirtle displayed a generous curve of hips, a trim waist. She lifted her hand to her cheek to brush at a strand of hair, and her fingers trembled. For an instant, her eyes met his, and Adam felt as if she’d sucked all the air out of his lungs.

William laughed. “She’s a pretty girl.”

More than pretty. His bride-to-be was striking, Adam thought, studying her as she continued towards the chapel.

“Oh yes! Pretty enough to catch Mortimer’s eye,” Guy snickered. Adam clouted his youngest brother over the head. But she was undoubtedly comely, if somewhat flat over the chest.

“It doesn’t help much,” he said with some bitterness. “I don’t like used goods – especially not my women.”

“Not much choice,” William said. “Besides, she’ll make you wealthy – her dowry doubles your land.” He eyed his future sister-in-law. “She looks healthy enough. I dare say she’ll give you a nursery full of heirs.”

Adam shrugged. He bowed in the direction of Lord Roger, who inclined his head in greeting before striding off to join the bride’s father. “I don’t like it,” he muttered. “Mortimer is playing with fire, and if he burns, so do we all.”

“He won!” Guy laughed in his ear.

“He did?” Adam shook his head. “For now, maybe.”

“The king pardoned him, did he not?” William said. “The deed is not yet a fortnight old, and already you fear it may not hold.”

“It won’t. The king will have no compunction in declaring his pardon null and void – he will claim coercion, that he had no choice, not with our lord’s men camped outside London.” Adam shifted on his feet. As one of Mortimer’s most trusted captains, Adam had seen more than his fair share of the recent action, and he had been among Lord Roger’s men at the recent meetings with the king. Tall and handsome, Edward II had swept into Westminster Hall, every inch a reigning monarch when in fact there was not a man present who didn’t know it was Hugh Despenser who did the actual ruling.

Edward Plantagenet had developed such a fondness for his favourite that there were whispers of unnatural behaviour, of nights in which the king and Despenser did more than just share a bed. Adam found it hard to believe those rumours – the king had sired several handsome children – but King Edward had been close to tears when he exiled his favourite, and from the look he had thrown the assembled lords, Adam had concluded that the king intended to get his own back – somehow. It made his scalp itch with premonition.

“He had the right of it, I think,” William said, nodding in the direction of Lord Roger. “The king should not have allowed the Despensers to ride roughshod over laws and customs in their never-ending hunger for more riches. If greed ever has a face, it will look mightily like Hugh the younger.” He spat. “And it was downright foolish of the king to give the Despensers Mortimer land.”

Adam smiled cynically. “He’s the king, William. He does as he pleases.”

“Wise kings don’t,” William retorted, scratching at his tonsured head. “Nor are great kings ruled by their favourites.”

“Great kings don’t have any favourites,” Adam said. “They don’t need them.”

William shoved him. “Go on.” He gestured at the bridal party, now come to a standstill by the chapel doors. He slapped his brother on the back. “And don’t look like a man about to witness his own hanging.”

Adam scowled at him, tweaked his scarlet silk tunic into place and made his way towards his waiting bride.

Somewhere halfway through the lavish feast, the effect of the poppy wine started to wane. Kit sat back in her chair and gawked. The hall was thronged with people, the floors were covered with strewn flowers, and dogs slunk from one table to the other. She fingered the heavy fabric of her gown. A deep, rich green, it was adorned by a wide girdle and embroidered flowers, and when she raised a hand to her head she could feel some sort of circlet on her hair.

“Here.” Someone poured wine into her cup and she

downed it in a gulp. Aagh! It was too sweet and full of spices. With an effort she stopped herself spitting it out, not wanting to attract undue attention. The man sitting at her side turned towards her and smiled briefly, a guarded look in his eyes. She had no notion of who he was, but had a vague recollection of standing beside him some hours back at the door of a chapel. At the door of a chapel? Kit hiccupped; this man was her new husband – not that she had any memory of anything beyond walking up to stand beside him.

She dared a quick peek from under her lashes, met his appraising look and ducked her head. Her husband! Kit knotted her fingers into the fabric of her skirts.

From somewhere to her right came loud laughter, and the man – her husband, dear God, she had a husband, a man she'd sworn to honour and obey under false pretences – joined in.

“Look,” he said, and she followed his finger to where a jester was prancing about in motley. There was more laughter, at the further end of the hall a fight broke out, and right in front of her danced a girl, accompanied by two musicians.

She felt as if she was drowning. So many unknown people, so much noise, and beside her a man she was now tied to for life. She felt an urge to run, to flee before it was too late. Kit rose, and the man rose as well, his thick fair hair gleaming when it caught the candlelight.

“I...” She sat back down again, giving him a tremulous smile. He just looked at her. “Wine?” she asked. Her husband – Adam – snapped his fingers, and a child rushed over, a heavy pitcher in his hands.

“Not too much, I prefer my bride conscious on our wedding night.” There was an edge to his voice that made Kit quail. He smiled, yet another smile that came nowhere close to touching his eyes. Kit licked her lips; her husband was clearly as unhappy about having to marry her as Kit had been at the notion of marrying him.

“It’s not my fault,” she muttered.

“How do you mean, my lady?”

“It wasn’t me who forced you to marry me, my lord.”

He sat back, looking surprised – and amused. “There’s not

a man alive who could force me to wed you,” he said after some moments of silence.

“How fortunate – for you.” She emptied her cup, waved it at the wine-boy. “Not everyone has a choice.”

“It is done.” He regarded her intently. “It is up to us to make it work – or not.”

“Yes, my lord.” She drank some more, false courage collecting in a burning heat in her belly.

Adam held out his hand. She placed hers in his, and it was warm and strong, closing over hers. He ran a finger down her wrist and she shivered. When he rose, she accompanied him to the dance floor. A graceful dancer, despite his size, he twirled her through the complex steps of the ronde, now leading her to join the line of other dancers, now swinging her in the air until she was breathless and rosy, laughing despite herself.

The music changed, and the people rose to stamp and clap, and there was her husband again, and he had her firmly by the waist as he led her through the crowd. His hold was strong, his face was set, and not once did he look at her as he hastened her along dim passages. Up some stairs, and she was surrounded by women who chattered and laughed while they undressed her, and Kit wanted them to leave but her tongue had gone numb with too much wine. Minutes later she was led stark naked towards the bed that dominated the small room.

There were candles everywhere, filling the room with the scent of beeswax and golden light. Kit wanted to hide, not to be exposed, but instead more candles were lit, and the fire in the hearth was coaxed into renewed vigour, adding tones of ruddy red to the soft glow of the candles.

The women settled her in the bed, her hair was arranged to lie over the pillows, and the door crashed open. Kit half sat up before recalling that she was naked. The man from the table – her husband – was standing on the threshold, in only his shirt and with an entourage of loud, laughing men. He – Adam, she reminded herself – stood half a head taller than most of them, and succeeded in looking unperturbed despite his state of undress. They led him over to the bed, his shirt

was pulled off him, and the room erupted with catcalls and encouraging remarks.

Dearest Father in heaven! Suddenly Kit realised this was happening for real. He was in the bed, faces smiled down at them and she squeezed her eyes shut, but she could still hear them, all the people in the room. The priest intoned one last blessing, and the spectators cheered and laughed. Finally, the sounds of laughter and song drifted away. They were alone, and Kit had no idea what to do, lying beside this stranger.

His hands. Warm and firm, they skimmed her breasts, her hips. She lay rigid at first, but as he continued his tactile exploration, she softened, turning towards him. No one had ever touched her like this, and she was torn between shame and unfamiliar anticipation, her skin heating under his hands. Was she supposed to touch him as well? He was on his side, regarding her through narrowed eyes, and she felt intimidated by the assessing look in them, so she remained silent and passive, allowing this stranger – her husband, she reminded herself, her lord and master from this day forward – free access to her naked body.

A hand between her thighs, nudging them apart, and she felt mortified at the surge of pleasure she experienced when he combed his fingers through her curls, explored her privates. Her legs widened of their own volition, all of her melting under his expert fondling.

“Best get it over with,” he said, and just like that he was on her. She panicked and tried to heave him off, but it was too late, he held her down, and with a grunt he pushed himself inside.

“Aah!” She couldn’t stifle the gasp. He froze, staring down at her. She heard him mutter something, he pushed again, and Kit could feel something give. She turned her head to the side and bit back on a sob, lying perfectly still as he finished.

There was utter silence – no, not quite. Kit could hear the sound of her heart, of his breathing, but she herself was holding her breath in a determined attempt not to cry – that would be one humiliation too many on this terrible day. He lifted himself off her and rolled out of bed in one fluid

moment, cursing under his breath. Kit curled together: he was displeased.

Adam went to the nearby table, sloshed wine into a goblet and drank deeply before passing it to her.

“I hadn’t expected to find you a virgin,” he said, eyes the colour of pewter raking her body up and down.

“What do you mean, my lord?”

“Don’t give me that.” He reclaimed the cup and leaned against one of the bedposts. “Do you think I don’t know about you and Lord Roger?” Not only was he tall, he was big, a thick, fair fuzz covering his chest, the hair darkening closer to his groin.

“Lord who?” Kit’s head ached.

“Mortimer,” he clarified with an edge to his voice. “Our lord and master.”

“I have no notion what you are referring to, my lord,” Kit said.

He regarded her over the rim of the goblet.

“I don’t!” she insisted – which was, after all, the truth.

His eyes flickered over to the bloody smear on the sheets. “Did it hurt?”

The sudden change in subject made her blink. “Yes. You were rough and uncaring.” She pulled the sheet up, covering herself.

He flushed. “I thought—” He broke off, cleared his throat. “Lord Mortimer has been most generous to you – to us. Three manors as a wedding gift, and I thought these lands were intended to compensate for your lost maidenhead.”

Lord Mortimer? What had that silly Katherine played at? “Well, you were wrong,” Kit replied tartly. Her husband frowned at her and in one swift movement he pulled the bedclothes off her, leaving her feeling very naked under his gaze.

“Enough of Mortimer. It seems I have amends to make to my virgin bride.” He gave her a tight smile, leaning forward to touch one of her breasts. “Small but pretty.” She crossed her arms over her chest. He laughed, gripped her wrists and lifted her arms over her head, one large hand holding both her wrists

while the other yet again brushed at her breasts. “They’ll grow bigger with time,” he said, pinching one of her nipples gently.

“They will?” She looked down her own body.

“A woman grows rounder with each child, everyone knows that.”

Children! Kit struggled, trying to sit up. How could she give this man children, and not tell him the truth? She had to—

“Lie still, woman,” he said, tightening his hold on her wrists. “I am but exploring what is mine to have.” He met her eyes, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. Kit licked her lips. She couldn’t quite find the courage to tell him he had the wrong bride in his bed. Instead, she wondered what had given him the scar that ran like a thin white line from his left temple down to his jaw. Strong fingers touched her belly, moved downwards, and all the while he held her eyes.

She jolted when he rubbed his thumb over her cleft, when he slid a finger into the wetness he had left behind the first time round. She shouldn’t like this, she thought fuzzily – to take too much pleasure in the joining with a man was sinful. But she did like it, and besides, he was her husband, and as such he had the right to her body, whenever he wanted it. Her hips moved in time with his fingers, making him smile.

He bent his head and nibbled her neck. She inhaled loudly. No, she shouldn’t be enjoying his touch – but she did. Holy Mother forgive her, but she did! His mouth on hers, at first a brushing of lips, no more, but it had her heart racing. A forceful tongue demanding entrance, and she yielded gladly, pinned into place by the grip on her hands and his weight on her body.

Her husband: he was her husband and she could not deny him – did not want to deny him, not now, when he was gentle and kind, when his warm breath tickled her skin. Those fingers... she lifted her pelvis towards them, wanting to deepen the contact. A laugh rumbled through his chest, a strong thigh wedged itself between her legs. Obliging, she made way for him.

He stared her in the eyes when he entered her, inch by careful inch. She felt stretched and sore at first, but when his fingers caressed her flank, grazed her breast, she relaxed. He held her gaze as he began to move. Her breath hitched. Heat raced

up her skin, flew through her loins to where they were joined. He took his time, and Kit had never experienced quite so many sensations at the same time, had never imagined her blood could heat like it did. A wave of something akin to red-hot pleasure surged through her, scorching her. Coherent thought escaped her; she just was, her body shattering into a myriad of little pieces. She could swear he smiled before he let himself go.

They lay silent afterwards, him still on top of her. She caressed his back, fingers travelling over ridges and scars. He grunted and shifted to lie beside her instead. In a matter of seconds, he was fast asleep, but Kit lay wide awake. Only when this new husband of hers rolled towards her, draped an arm over her and mumbled, "Sleep, wife" did she drift off. It was close to dawn when she got out of bed.

"Where are you going?" he said, opening an eye.

"I..." Her bladder was about to burst.

"The garderobe is yonder," he said, pointing at one of the walls. "Come back when you're done."

Moments later, Kit was urged down onto her back, her husband's weight and size holding her in place. But this big man was possessed of gentle hands and fingers that knew just how to touch her, of lips that left damp impressions on her neck and breasts. Not a man to hurry through his pleasures – her pleasures – she thought when he kneed her legs apart. Oh, no – Adam de Guirande took his time, those silver eyes of his never leaving hers. Neither was he a man who would ask permission before he bedded his wife – that was made eminently clear, no matter how considerate and accomplished a lover he was. But that was how things were ordained: the man demanded, the wife acquiesced. Kit gave herself up to the moment, to the feeling of skin against skin, to the burning heat he awoke within her. With a shudder he came, then collapsed on top of her.

"With luck you'll be with child within a fortnight," he said as he rolled off.

What? Her hand fluttered down to her belly.

"Good breeding stock, the lot of you," he added with a yawn. "Very good."

Chapter 3

When Kit woke some hours later, she was alone – for an instant, before Mabel bustled into the room, followed by two maids.

“All right then?” she asked, gesturing for one of the girls to hand Kit a steaming earthenware mug.

“Alive, at least,” Kit replied, seeing no reason to tell the old crone she’d actually enjoyed some parts – a few parts – of yesterday’s events. She sipped at the hot cider. One of the maids opened the shutters, and an icy blast of wind flew through the room. A bowl of water was set down, Mabel clucked happily at the sight of the stained sheets, bundled them into the arms of one of the maids and shooed them all out, before having Kit sit down on a stool while she brushed her hair.

“Ow,” Kit protested when Mabel began braiding it – tight. “I never wear it like that.”

“Now you do,” Mabel snorted. “Married women don’t go about with their hair undone – as you well know.”

Kit made an acquiescing sound. Her mother had always kept her head covered, saying that all well-bred women knew better than to display their crowning glory to the world. Kit grimaced: unlike her mother, she had a thick tumble of hair that protested loudly at being so constrained. Her scalp hurt by the time Mabel was done.

“When can I go back home?” she asked, adjusting the sheer veil Mabel handed her.

“Home? Your home is wherever your husband is. For now you stay here.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

“What you want matters not at all. It is what your husband wants that is important.” Mabel rapped her over the head with the brush. “Silly child! Has your mother not taught you anything at all? You belong to your husband – your lands belong to him, your clothes, your servants – they are all his, as

is your body. If you don't please him, or if, God help us, you do not conceive, he may punish you as he sees fit, even put you away."

"Put me away?" Kit's hand fluttered up to her mouth. And what would he do when he discovered he'd been duped into marrying the wrong Katherine?

"He may decide you'd make a better nun than wife – not that it happens often, but it does happen."

Kit fell silent.

Mabel nodded seriously. "Best keep it in mind: a wife does as her husband bids – or bears the consequences." She sighed. "And Adam de Guirande has every reason to be distrustful of his young wife."

"He does? I have not done anything!"

"But Katherine has." Mabel frowned. "Witless girl, always simpering at Lord Mortimer, so convinced she could play the man."

"So it is true? Katherine bedded with Mortimer?"

"I don't know. But it does seem probable, tempting little wench that she could be when she set her heart on something. One of Lady Joan's maids stumbled upon them in a compromising situation." Mabel looked away. "My poor little lamb, where may she be now?" She cleared her throat. "Well, we will never know, will we?"

As Kit dressed, Mabel regaled her with a summary of the latest political events, insisting that Adam de Guirande would expect his wife to be well informed. Not that Kit was entirely unaware of the upheaval that had swept England in this the year of Our Lord 1321, but she gaped all the same.

Lord Roger Mortimer was a recently pardoned rebel, the king – Edward II, according to Mabel a pale and disappointing copy of his illustrious father – preferred his favourites, such as the Despensers, to real men of worth like Mortimer, and Kit's newly acquired husband was bound by oath to side with Mortimer. Bound by much more than oath, she gathered as Mabel told her briefly about Adam's life, from destitute son to a good-for-nothing drunk, to a young man with lands to his name – and all of it as bequests from Mortimer.

“Kings generally win,” Kit said, interrupting Mabel halfway through yet another adoring description of the marvellous baron.

“Let us hope that this time he doesn’t – and that he is wise enough not to invite the Despencers back.” Mabel pulled the blue kirtle over Kit’s head and helped her do up the laces. “Stay away from Lord Mortimer,” Mabel said as she ushered Kit out of the room. “You don’t want to set all those tongues wagging again.”

“It’s your precious Katherine who cavorted with him, not me.”

“Now you’re her, so best start working on repairing your reputation.” Mabel grinned, showing off a set of yellowed teeth. “You can start by winning your husband’s heart – or at least his loins.”

“Why would I want to do that?” But she smiled, recalling the weight of his body, the gentleness of his touch. Given her situation, she might as well follow Mabel’s advice, if nothing else because it would make her life easier to have a happy husband than an unhappy one. The idea of an angry Adam was intimidating.

Kit broke her fast on honeyed wafers and a mug of heated ale. Beside her, Mabel kept up a running commentary as to who was who, and Kit’s head ached with the effort of attempting to remember all the names and faces. No sooner had she finished her ale than Mabel dragged her off to the small chapel, there to attend mass with the household. It was crammed and dark, filled with people who reeked and fidgeted, very different from the services back home in Tresaints, in a chapel that shimmered with light.

Kit staggered out from mass and clutched Mabel’s arm. “It is wrong!” she hissed. “I have to tell him the truth.” Guilt bowed her back; it dried up her mouth.

“You can’t! Not now, not after the bedding. In the eyes of Our Lord, you are his true wife.

“The wrong wife,” Kit moaned. “I must—”

“No.” Mabel cut her off and dragged her back into the

chapel, all the way to the altar. “Swear that you will not. Swear it on the cross, on the Virgin and the saints. You must not tell him – ever.” Her voice shook. “Lord Mortimer would be mightily aggrieved, and my dear lord would pay dearly for the subterfuge enacted by his wife.”

“But what if he finds out?” Kit said. “What then?”

“We will cross that bridge if we must.” Mabel gestured towards the altar. “Swear.” Her hands sank with surprising force into Kit’s arms, forcing her to her knees. Kit did as she was told.

The events of the last few days, combined with the emotional turmoil that inhabited her, left Kit quite exhausted, and even more so when she stepped outside into the huge yard. Stratfield Mortimer was crammed with people, appearing to Kit’s eyes like a cross between a castle and a huge manor. There seemed to be men everywhere, leading horses, carrying armloads of weapons, loading carts. Most of the men wore nondescript tunics in muted brown homespun, but quite a few sported eye-catching creations in green, with the right shoulder and sleeve a contrasting yellow. Mortimer men, Kit concluded, squinting at the heraldic badge that decorated their chests.

A young man came striding towards them, hand raised in a wave. “Brother Richard,” Mabel whispered just before the man enfolded Kit in a hug.

“And how is my favourite sister today?” he asked. There was an edge to his voice and he took a step back to study her.

“Seeing as you only have two, that’s no major distinction, is it?” Mabel said, making Richard laugh. Kit gave him a shy smile, shocked at seeing so many of her features in this male face. The same eyes, the same mouth – even similar ears, somewhat overlarge. Richard’s hair was much brighter than hers, but harshly cropped. His hands were large and calloused, his dark blue surcoat adorned with the pattern of bright blues and yellows that Kit recognised as the Mortimer arms. By his side hung a massive sword.

“My lady mother was right – the resemblance is uncanny.” He gave her a wary look. “This must all be very confusing to you.” He frowned. “Was he kind?”

“Kind enough,” Kit replied, touched that he should care. She had yet to see her husband, and kept on throwing discreet glances this way and that in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. From the stables came a series of loud thumps, a horse shrieking in anger – or fear. Richard turned towards the commotion, frowning.

“That dratted horse,” he muttered. “He’ll be the death of someone one day.” A large bay was led out, eyes rolling, nostrils flaring. It stamped and snorted, hind legs flying whenever anyone got too close. It was a handsome horse, even with bared teeth and ears laid flat against its head. The coat glistened in the September sun, each leg decorated with a white half-sock. A wide chest, a powerful neck, and a rump that bunched with coiled muscles.

“Lord Mortimer’s horse?” Kit asked, mesmerised by the stallion.

“My lord has more sense than that,” Richard said. “No, my dear, that’s Adam’s horse.” As if on cue, Adam appeared, advancing slowly on the horse. Keeping his voice low, he spoke continuously to the horse – not, Kit noted with some surprise, in French, but in English. The stallion shivered, hooves moving restlessly over the cobbles. Its neck relaxed, the ears rose, and by the time Adam placed a hand on its neck, the stallion was no longer fighting the stable boys. He was standing still.

“Beautiful horse.” Kit came over to stand beside Adam. “Spanish stock?”

“Aye, but keep your distance,” Adam warned. “He bites.”

“Not me, he doesn’t.” The horse’s head snaked out, but Kit was too fast. “Oh, no you don’t.” She took a firm grip of the horse’s nose. It snorted and rolled its eyes, but Kit just laughed, crooning softly as she rubbed the horse’s broad forehead. “What’s his name?”

“Goliath.” Adam looked from her to the horse, at present standing quite still under Kit’s hands. “I was told you don’t like horses.”

“You seem to be hearing a lot about me that isn’t true.” She gave him a look from under her lashes. His mouth twitched. “One should never believe hearsay,” she added. “Much better to verify the facts oneself.”

He laughed softly, standing close enough that she could feel the warmth of his body. “Is that so?” he said.

“It is. And some things one should verify repeatedly.” She stepped close enough to whisper in his ear, feeling very daring. “Every night.” It pleased her to see the light in his eyes.

She was called away from her husband by Mabel, who told her to make haste, as her lady mother was leaving and Kit was expected to help with the packing.

“Leaving?” Kit hurried after Mabel. Not that she cared.

“Sir Thomas must stay, of course, but Lady Cecily returns home to the Marches to manage the estate.”

“And you?” Kit gripped Mabel’s arm. “Will you stay?”

Mabel flashed her a grin. “I’m your nurse, and I aim to be raising your children as well, my lady, so aye, I’m staying.”

Kit exhaled with relief – navigating these uncharted waters with no one to help her would be a daunting challenge.

The room was turned upside down. Kit came to a halt, surveying the bevy of maids who were packing everything into various chests. The feather bed, the hangings, the bedclothes and the various smaller items of furniture were all carefully stowed away, as were Lady Cecily’s silver candlesticks and little statue of the Virgin. Lady Cecily sat in the middle of the room, sharp eyes on the girls who were handling her household goods, and at the sight of Kit she gave a satisfied smile – looking verily like a replete wolf – and beckoned her to approach.

“You look well,” Lady Cecily said. “I take it your wedding night left you none the worse, then?”

Kit shrugged, not sure what to say.

Lady Cecily raised her brows. “And was the groom satisfied?”

“I think so.” Kit looked away.

Lady Cecily chuckled. “Keep it that way, my girl.” She gave Kit a considering look. “Make sure you keep Mortimer happy as well.”

Kit couldn’t believe her ears. “What are you saying, my lady?”

“Oh, don’t be so obtuse, child! Baron Mortimer wouldn’t be the first lord to enjoy his underlings’ wives,” Lady Cecily said, adjusting her wimple. “It might bring Adam more lands, more power, to do as our baron wishes.”

Kit gave Lady Cecily a venomous look. Keeping Mortimer sweet would also line the lady’s coffers. “I’m Adam’s wife, not a whore to be pimped out. Besides, I don’t think he wants me to.”

“No?” Lady Cecily fiddled with her veil. “And must he know everything?” She gave Kit a look. “You must remember where your loyalties lie. Family first, Katherine, always family first.” She clapped her hands together, told everyone to make further haste, and with a fleeting smile left the room.

“My own mother,” Kit said to Mabel some while later, watching as the chests were carried out of the room. “Well, not my own mother, but all the same, and she’s telling me to sleep with my husband’s lord?” She set her teeth. “I will not do it.” And as to Lord Mortimer, should he ever try anything, Kit would scream like a flayed cat.

“It’s the way of the world, lass,” Mabel sighed. She gave Kit a look. “But it is to your credit that you are upset.”

Lady Cecily and her youngest children left amidst a lot of loud noise. A litter for the lady herself, two carts and a dozen or so of men-at arms set off just before noon, with an assortment of servants following in their wake. No sooner had the party left than everyone made for the hall and the waiting midday meal, Mabel hurrying Kit along.

The large hall filled with retainers, and Kit quickly gathered that there was an invisible pecking order. The high table was reserved for Lord Mortimer, his immediate adult family and such men as he would choose to place there. Kit noticed with interest that quite a few of the men wore the flowing robes of senior churchmen, and when she asked, Mabel nodded, saying that the man sitting closest to their lord was the Bishop of Hereford, Alan of Orleton, and a good Mortimer man he was. The tables closest were for the Mortimer’s trusted captains, his younger children and their nurses and an assortment of wives.

“You sit with your lord.” Mabel shoved Kit in the direction of Adam before darting off to find a seat in the further end of the hall, where servants and men-at-arms sat cheek to jowl. Voices rose in laughter, people babbled in French and in what Kit recognised as Welsh.

After the long, confusing meal, Kit succeeded in sneaking off to her room – their room, she amended, noting that the small space was cluttered with Adam’s belongings, most of them spilling from a large chest. In contrast, her few garments were hanging neatly from the clothes pole, tucked away in an alcove just beyond the bed and half-hidden behind a length of linen suspended from the roof.

She sank down on the bed and cradled her head in her hands. How was she to cope in this unfamiliar role? How was she to keep up the subterfuge that she was someone she wasn’t? She’d spent most of dinner shoving the food around on her trencher while she watched the others eat. Spicy roasts, bread that was warm from the ovens, cheeses and wines, frumenty studded with raisin and almonds, miniature pies – she’d never seen such a selection of food before, accustomed to the plain fare and quiet peace of meals at Tresaints. Her stomach grumbled, unhappy with her for not having fed it more, but Kit had spent most of the meal struggling with her conscience. What she was doing was wrong, and things were not helped by Adam’s courteous behaviour at dinner, or by the way his eyes had lingered on her. Sweetest Virgin, what was she to do?

Kit rose and wandered over to Adam’s chest. Tunics lay thrown together; she saw the coloured leather of a boot, the heavy buckle of a belt. She picked up a long length of hose, found its pair and rolled them together. The tunics were shaken, inspected and folded, with Kit caressing the fine silks of his two supertunics. There was a deep blue woollen tunic that must fall down to his knees, a number of linen braies and three long linen shirts. She held one to her nose, capturing a faint remnant of his scent. Her husband...despite the unorthodox aspects of their union, she couldn’t quite suppress a little shiver. Just the thought of him had her privates contracting, heat

flaring between her legs. Lust, she chided herself, this is mere lust.

“My squire can do that.”

She whirled, finding her husband by the door.

“I don’t mind,” she said. This was something she felt comfortable doing, with the added benefit of being out of sight of all the people who thronged the castle.

She folded a thick cloak, knelt to tuck it in, and heard him crossing the floor towards her. His boots squeaked, and a leg clad in thick hose appeared in her field of vision. She placed a hand on his leg. He inhaled when she moved her hand upwards.

“What are you doing?”

Her cheeks heated at her daring. Would he find her too forward? “Exploring my husband,” she said, caressing the narrow patch of bare skin she found on his upper thighs. The hose-points were tied to the rougher fabric of the linen braies, and Kit counted two ties as her fingers traced their way round his leg. She suppressed a nervous titter. She had never inspected a man’s undergarments before. His hand clasped hers, arresting it, through the fabric of his tunic.

“My turn today, my lord.” She looked up at him, still kneeling at his feet. His face was flushed, those grey eyes of his inscrutable.

Adam gestured with his head. “The door – it’s unbolted.” He sounded hoarse, breathless even.

Kit lurched to her feet, nearly stumbling until he caught her, holding her close. Stubble gilded his cheeks, straight, fair lashes framed his eyes, and a lock of dishevelled hair fell across his brow. His lips grazed her ear, her jaw. She breathed through her mouth, eyes closed. His lips on hers, a strong hand at her waist manoeuvring her backwards, to the door. The bolt screeched into place. He pressed her against the door and she moaned into his mouth. Adam tore away, gasping for breath. His hands under her skirts, masses of fabric wedged between them, making it impossible to get him really close.

“Bed,” she said, tugging at his belt.

“Here,” he panted, “now!” He lifted her, entered her, and

she clung to him, helpless in his arms, incapable of doing anything but taking what he gave her.

“God’s blood!” he exclaimed afterwards, leaning his forehead against hers. Her pulse was painfully loud in her head, her legs wobbly. Kit released her hold on his tunic, tried to straighten up.

“Indeed.” The bed. She stumbled towards it, needing to lie down, to rest. The bed creaked with his weight when he joined her. Supple fingers loosened her veil and braids, travelled further down to the lacings at the side of her kirtle. Garment by garment he stripped her, before undressing himself and lying down beside her.

“It seems that in this we are well suited, my lady,” he murmured. His eyes were dark and soft, his hand gentle as it caressed her cheek. “A good start,” he added, leaning over to place the lightest of kisses on her mouth. Hesitantly, she raised her hands to cup his face.

“A very good start,” she agreed. He laughed, took her hand and placed it on his chest.

“All yours,” he said. “Explore me to your heart’s content, my lady.”