

ANNA
BELFRAGE

HIS
CASTILIAN
HAWK

EXCERPT, HIS CASTILIAN HAWK

Chapter 1

“Ha!” King Edward, first of that name, dragged off his helmet and turned to grin at his companions. “See? They run like flea-bitten curs.”

“My liege,” Robert FitzStephan said, moving closer. “The danger is as yet not passed.” He scanned the wooded slopes, the narrow valley which hemmed them in. A determined ambush and... God help them! He crossed himself. Accursed Wales, accursed Welsh—why his lord and master was so intent on subjugating this worthless corner of the world was beyond him, but it was not Robert’s place to question his king’s decisions. It was to obey.

King Edward shrugged and hung the helmet off his pommel. “For now, it is.” He gestured at the dead, the broken. “Help our men.”

The group dismounted. Robert and some of his men stayed close to the king while others went from fallen man to fallen man. If Welsh, he was dispatched. If English, he was either helped over to the baggage carts or offered the services of a priest. Blood, gore, shattered bones—Robert had seen it all before. Likely, very few of those wounded would survive, and it would have been more merciful to slit their throats than subject them to the tender care of the field surgeons. He sighed and muttered a prayer, thanking the good Lord for yet

again sparing him anything but the odd shallow cut and aching bruise.

A movement to his right had Robert straightening up. Out of the woods burst a company of mounted men, racing towards them.

“My liege!” Robert yelled, pulling his sword. “Simon, shoot!” he added. “Aim for the horses.” His best archer did just that, and the lead horse tumbled to the ground, spilling his rider.

“Agh!” Robert swung at the horseman closest. A keening sound when his sword connected with soft, unprotected flesh. Blood spurted from the thigh. Robert struck again, and then the horse was gone, carrying the bleeding man with it.

“Father!” The unhorsed rider shrieked and came charging towards Robert. No helmet, no shield, just a young man hefting a sword with death in his eyes. Robert ducked the swipe and struck from behind. He’d missed the neck, but his sword dug into the unprotected back of the youth’s head. Bone cracked. Blood and gore splattered Robert’s face. His attacker staggered a couple of paces and then fell, first to his knees, then to hit the ground face-first. Good. One dead. Robert yelled in triumph.

“Robert! Stop!”

The king. Was he hurt? Robert wheeled, near on crashing into his liege. “Damn it, man, stop!” The king shoved him, and Robert went sprawling. King Edward gripped him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “They’re friends, not foe, you fool!

That's Sir Ralph d'Outremer, one of de Geneville's men." He pointed at the man hanging lifeless from his horse, his life blood gushing down his leg.

"What?" Robert blinked through the blood. What sort of fools would ride like that against men who'd just survived an ambush? He pulled his sword free from the corpse at his feet. Blood had stained the hair a darker brown, rivulets decorating the beardless cheek. A lad. He'd killed a boy, not a man. "They charged us," he said. "They did not hail us; they flew no colours. How was I to know they came in peace?"

The king peered down at the body. "Aye, it is strange that they didn't hail us." His drooping eyelid twitched. "We shall have to question the squire, but in the meantime, you must make haste to Orton Manor."

Robert looked at the king. "Why me?"

"Because as I recall, Sir Ralph had but one son and one daughter. The son lies at your feet"—he pointed, but Robert chose not to look—"and so the daughter is converted into an heiress." He frowned. "Not much of a castle is Orton Manor, but I want it in the hands of a man I trust." He nodded at Robert. "You will return the bodies to the little lady, and then you'll wed her."

"Me?" Robert gaped.

"You." King Edward clapped him on his shoulder. "About time I reward you properly for all those years of service, eh?" His hold tightened. "The battle for Wales is far from won, Robert. I'll need it ringed by castles loyal to me. And then..."

He smiled, making Robert shiver inside. "Then I'll break it, once and for all."

"A wife?" Edith looked up from the gruel she was presently stirring. "You?"

"You heard the man," John the Gascon said. "Our Robbie will soon have both wife and manors." He slipped an arm round Edith's waist and drew her close enough to place a loud and wet kiss on her cheek. "No need to fret, poppet. You still have the rest of us to take care of."

Edith rapped him hard over the head with her wooden spoon. "Let me go, you oaf." She scowled at Robert. "Is it true? Are you to wed?"

"The king wishes it so." Robert shrugged off the tabard emblazoned with the royal arms and began unfastening his gauntlets. He slid Edith a look. "Does it displease you?"

"Me?" Edith laughed. "Why would it displease me? Nothing will change between us, will it?"

Robert hesitated.

"Will it?" she demanded.

"Some things might," Simon the Archer said. "He'll not be swiving you as often. But don't worry, dove, we're still here." He made a sweeping gesture, encompassing Harry, Tom, David, John and himself.

"As if I'd have you," Edith snorted, but she smiled all the same. Her skirts rustled as she moved closer to Robert, her long legs pressing against his. He draped his arm round her

shoulders and grinned at his friends. “Our Edith has taste,” he said.

“Not your Edith for much longer. You’ll have other furrows to plough,” Harry replied.

“She’ll always be my Edith,” Robert retorted. The girl who’d saved his life well over fifteen years ago and who had since then been as much of a fixture in his life as John, Harry, Tom and Simon. David was a later addition, Edith’s brother being a decade or so younger than the rest of them. In response, Edith smiled, wrapping her arms around his neck before she kissed him.

Much later, she came to his pallet, slipping under his covers to lie beside him. Her skin was soft and cool to the touch, her fair hair unbound. He grazed his fingers over her arm, remembering so many nights they’d lain like this. Not always as lovers—Edith was a beautiful woman who enjoyed the attention of many men, returning more than often just before dawn after a night of passion elsewhere—always as friends.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

“I know.”

She kissed his chest. “I’ll be doing my best to remind you why you will always need me in your life.” Her nails raked his belly.

He smiled into the dark.

“Behold your reward,” John the Gascon said a week later, holding in his horse. They were several miles east of Wigmore,

about as far away from Ludlow to the west. A shallow dale, wooded on the further side, sheep grazing on the nearest meadows. Closer to the buildings themselves were neat fields and fenced pastures, one of them with several horses. Robert narrowed his eyes: good horseflesh, well above what he would have expected to find in a castle so small it was more of a fortified manor. He sat back in his saddle. He'd never had anything of his own before, and he couldn't quite hold back the pleased smile at the thought that soon this would be his, all the way from the large hall and the sturdy walls that surrounded the bailey to the barns and the stables.

The rest of their companions caught up, forming a loose half-circle around Robert and John.

"The king was right. It's not much of a castle," Edith said.

John scowled at her. "She shouldn't be here. It's not right." Of late, John had been as prickly as a hedgehog when it came to Edith—likely because she'd refused his offer to share his bed instead of Robert's now that Robert was about to wed. Robert glanced at Edith. These last few nights had been intense, neither of them falling asleep until just before dawn. But John was right: he couldn't ride into Orton Manor to claim his bride with a woman he regularly bedded in tow.

"Best you return to Ludlow." He dug into the pouch that hung from his belt and produced some coins. "Treat yourself to a room and a bath, love."

"Are you ashamed of me?" she asked, taking the coins all the same.

“I am to meet my wife,” he said. “It will be difficult enough what with the gifts I bring her.” He grimaced, gesturing at the cart and the two elongated bundles on it.

Edith’s green eyes studied him thoughtfully. “But nothing will change between us.”

“Nothing,” he promised, ignoring John’s scowl.

Edith nodded once before turning her horse. With her went David, and Robert’s shoulders relaxed somewhat.

John looked him up and down. “You could have worn something else.” Robert shrugged. He rarely went anywhere without his leather surcoat, a garment he’d had for close to a decade. He found a length of leather to tie back his hair and urged his horse forward. “Best get this done, then.”

The cart trundled along the lane, Robert and John riding in front. Well past Lammas, the wheat fields had mostly been harvested, but the barley still stood tall, the peas were drying in their pods and the apple trees in the orchard stood heavy with fruit. A good harvest, Robert thought before breaking off to shake his head. He knew nothing of harvests, of apples or peas. But soon he would. His fields, his orchards—his apples. To the king, Orton Manor was likely not much, but to Robert it was akin to a kingdom.

The villeins labouring in the fields halted their work at their approach, straightening up to take in the visitors—and the cart. By the time they’d reached the rustic drawbridge over

the ditch, they'd acquired quite a following, the people of the manor walking silently behind the cart and the two corpses.

Over the bridge, through the gate—a strong, sturdy gatehouse, Robert concluded, the heavy doors set on huge hinges affixed to the stonework—and they were in the bailey. At the top of the stairs leading to the hall stood a group of women, all but one in veil and wimple. The youngest was standing a few feet in front of the others, one hand resting on the head of a magnificent hound. A huge beast, it looked like a cross between one of King Edward's precious greyhounds and a wolf, its brindled coat shifting from the lightest of greys to a sooty black. No wimple, but her hair was not to be seen, a veil covering all but the tip of a heavy braid and a few tendrils that had come undone. Dark hair.

She walked slowly down the stairs, the hound at her side. From the hall erupted a sturdy tonsured man, his robes flapping round his legs as he hurried after her.

"My lady," Robert said once she'd come to a halt before him.

"My lord." She bowed her head in greeting. No one had called him a lord before. It almost made him grin. Lord Robert of Orton, master of all he presently surveyed, including the young woman in front of him. What would his dear sire have to say about that, he wondered, teeth grinding together for an instant.

Robert shook himself free of dark thoughts and dismounted. "I come—"

“I know why you come,” she interrupted. “Our liege has sent me a messenger.” Her voice shook. “He has ordered me to wed you at the soonest—for my own safety.” She looked at the cart, and for an instant her eyes glittered. Her lashes swept down, and he heard her mutter, “*Unus, duo, tres,*” counting all the way to ten before she opened her eyes again. “Is that...” She cleared her throat. “Are they...”

“Yes, my lady.” John bowed. “We are sorry to bring you such gruesome tidings.”

She nodded, no more. “No mother, now no father, no brother.” She gave a little laugh, a sad sound that caused Robert’s innards to twist. “The king is right: I am without protection, without family.”

“Come, come,” the priest said. “The king has seen to that, my lady.” He gave Robert an ingratiating smile. “Behold your new protector, your husband.”

“Not yet,” she said, her eyes on her embroidered girdle.

“Easily remedied,” the priest said. He straightened up. “And the king expressly ordered that I wed you as soon as possible.”

He had? Robert was in two minds about that. Surely, a young maid deserved some time to get used to the notion of wedding a man she’d never seen before? But then he recalled just how determined his liege was to keep this part of the borderland between Wales and England under his control—he’d never risk having someone abduct this little heiress and force her to wed. He looked away, made uncomfortable by the

thought that, from her perspective, this was just as forced a marriage. That was probably why she'd not adorned herself, her kirtle an unembroidered russet.

The priest prattled on and on, repeating it was best to get things done. And so Robert found himself face-to-face with his bride on the threshold of the little chapel that leaned somewhat erratically against the encircling wall.

She was soft and round and so short she had to crane her head back to look at him. Someone had adorned her head with a coronet of herbs, threaded through with pink roses. Big dark eyes in a face that still retained the softness of childhood, a plump lower lip that bore the indents of her teeth—she must have been biting it just seconds before. A child, he reflected, trying to recall just how old this bride of his was. Fifteen? She didn't look fifteen, but when his gaze dipped lower, it encountered a promising swell over her chest, so maybe she wasn't quite as immature as he had first thought. He smiled. She blushed, a dusky red spreading over her olive skin, but she did not avert her eyes, studying him as intently as he was studying her.

Idly, he wondered what she might think of him. Of somewhat more than average height, with hair as dark as hers, he was hard where she was soft, all the way from the beak of a nose his father had bequeathed him to his broad chest and lean legs. She stared at him. He shifted on his feet, the soft soles of his boots sliding over the well-worn stone steps. Aye, he knew he was no Lancelot, what with his scars and weather-

beaten skin, but neither was she a Guinevere, all short and plump. Fat, almost. Well, maybe not fat, but all the same, who was she to look at him as if she were disappointed? He frowned. She blushed again, but this time she ducked her head, her eyes disappearing behind thick, dark lashes.

Robert held out his hand. Hesitantly, she placed hers in his, a tightly knotted little fist he easily enclosed. He could feel her trembling, slid a finger over her wrist and found her pulse, a rapid beat that had him thinking of a captured bird. An unfortunate comparison, seeing as his little bride was just that: a prize, given to him in recognition of his loyal service to his king. With her came lands and several manors—far more land than he had ever hoped for. He squeezed her hand. She exhaled softly, and her fingers uncurled enough that he could grip them instead.

He liked her voice. Such a small, round thing, and her voice was rich and melodious, even if she stumbled over her vows. The priest did his bit, and already the assembled people were converging on them—she standing very still as she was surrounded by his friends, her retainers. No family for either of them. Sir Stephan de Lamont may have fathered him, even contributed to his upbringing, but Robert had seen him too rarely to have formed any emotional ties to the man, and he'd never known his mother. Her family—he couldn't quite stop himself from glancing at the cart, now moved to stand in the shade of the stables. He'd killed them both, her father and her brother, but that was not something he intended to tell her,

not today. He felt a twinge of pity. Here she stood, Eleanor d'Outremer, all alone in the world.

Well, not entirely alone: she was his now, and soon enough there'd be babes to distract her from the grief she must be experiencing. He tightened his hold on her hand, sweeping his thumb in a soft caress. She looked up at him, and they shared a little smile.

There was food aplenty in the hall. Sitting side by side with his new wife, Robert ate as if he'd not seen food in a month. Well, he hadn't seen food like this, one meat dish after the other eliciting cheers from his companions. Wine and ale flowed freely, and soon enough people were singing, one bawdy song after the other that had Robert laughing while beside him Eleanor stiffened with tension. He noticed but chose not to comment, replenishing her goblet instead. Her hand shook as she lifted it to her mouth.

John waved Robert over. He murmured an excuse to his wife and went to join his friends.

"Not too bad," Simon Archer offered, eyeing Eleanor as if he considered bedding her himself. Robert clapped the lout over his head. Simon and he went back a long way, but he'd not have him ogling his lady. *His lady*. He tasted the words and grinned. He had a lady and was now a lord. Not much of a lord, but still, for a man whose mother had earned her living as a laundrymaid and whose grandfather had been a fletcher, he'd risen very high.

“She looks fearful,” John commented in a low voice. “Best be gentle with her.”

“It always hurts the first time,” Tom said.

Robert scowled at his cousin. “What would you know? Swived many virgins, have you?”

“Everyone knows that,” Tom retorted, helping himself to more ale. “She’s pretty enough, I reckon.”

“She’s like a little brown hen,” Simon said. “Let’s just hope she’ll be a good layer.” He’d not kept his voice down, and Eleanor’s head snapped up. Yet again, her eyes filled with tears. Yet again, she lowered her lashes. Some moments passed and then she looked up, her features arranged in a bland smile. He lifted his goblet to her. He’d married a brave little maid.

Her courage deserted her in the bedchamber. By the time he was led in to join her, she was already in bed, the sheet pulled up high, her dark hair spilling over the pillow. He joined her, lying silent as the priest blessed their bed and marriage. Some more ribald jests and then they were alone, candles lighting up the solar. His solar. His bed. His wife.

He stroked her cheek. She shivered. She smelled nice, and her hair was so soft. He moved closer, nuzzling her neck.

“Please,” she whispered. She turned away from him.

“I’ll be gentle,” he murmured, a hand on her arm. In response, he heard a muffled sob. He rose on his elbow. “Are you weeping?”

She shook her head, but he could hear that she was.

“It’s been an overwhelming day,” he said, stroking her hair, her back. She curled up in a little ball. “I won’t force you. We can wait if you’d prefer that.”

“Yes,” she whispered. She turned to look at him over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I’ll leave you to sleep.”

“What?” She sat up. “But...”

He was already out of bed. He heard her gasp, her eyes on his half-engorged member. He shrugged. “I can wait, wife. But the bed is narrow, and you’re naked and soft, so if I stay...” He waited, thinking she might invite him back in. She didn’t. Instead, she nodded and lay back down. For some reason, that made him disappointed. Very disappointed.

He threw on his shirt and descended the stairs to the hall. The large space was filled with snoring men, from a corner came the unmistakable sound of a man and woman swiving, and just by the hearth someone was sitting, as if waiting for him. Edith. He’d know the shape of her anywhere. Her fair hair spilled down her back, and he knew she would never deny him in bed, would allow him to mount her and take her as roughly as he wanted. He scrubbed a hand over his face. He was not being fair to Eleanor. It was his decision to leave her to sleep. And yet it rankled that she’d looked so relieved.

He sloshed some ale into a mug. Edith turned at the sound.

“What? The groom arises from the bridal bed?” She grinned. “Maybe you don’t like little hens.”

“Be quiet,” he said. “She’s just young and vulnerable.”

“Well, I am neither,” she told him, making as if to touch him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, stepping out of reach.

“David’s horse went lame, and I hoped you might need me.” She laughed, a soft, dark sound that had him smiling in return. “It seems you do.”

She took his hand and tugged.

“No,” he said, “it would not be right.”

“Right? How can it be wrong between the two of us?” She kissed him. “Besides, she’ll never know.” She led him to a pallet set somewhat to the side. “We’ll be quiet. Very, very quiet.”

Robert woke to the sound of a cock crowing. He had a crick in his neck, and his arm was numb. He peered down at Edith, fast asleep within the crook of his arm. His head hurt, and his mouth tasted of ashes. He needed a drink. He sat up, and the bedclothes spilled to the floor.

“Mmm,” Edith said, wrapping her arms around him. “Don’t go. Not yet.”

From somewhere came an odd, strangled sound. He squinted in its direction, only to see Eleanor on the stairs

leading from the solar. Her eyes widened. He shoved Edith to the side.

“Eleanor,” he began, falling silent as he realised he was surrounded by spectators, tousled heads lifting from pillows to register the new lord of the manor had not slept with his wife. Colour drained from Eleanor’s cheeks. Without a word, she whirled and fled.

“Eleanor!” he repeated, rushing for the door before recalling he was as naked as the day he was born. “Damnation!” Robert scrubbed a hand over his bristling cheeks, his gaze on his wife. Her dark braid was visible beneath her veil, and she was running, no, flying towards the postern gate, with that large dog of hers padding alongside.

“What have you done, you fool?” John asked, appearing beside him. “Tell me you did not spend your wedding night with her.” He pointed at Edith. “Why is she even here?”

“I can assure you I did not invite her. You heard me telling her to stay away.” He could still see Eleanor, still make out the blue of her skirts as she ran and ran up the sloping meadows, placing as much distance as she could between them.

“Is that what you told her last night?” John asked.

“No.” Robert sighed. “I came down for a drink. She—Eleanor—asked me not to bed her, and so...” He shrugged.

“You decided she deserved to have you bed another.”

“No! It wasn’t like that! And you know I care for Edith.”

“She’s not your wife,” John said. “If you care so much about her, why didn’t you wed her?”

“With what?” Robert asked. “Until this”—he gestured at the bailey, the surrounding buildings—“what did I have to offer a wife?” And why would he wed Edith? She was not the kind of woman a man left behind to care for his home and his children while he left for other places. She was far too restless and needy for that. Edith lived off admiration, of the loud whistles that had her swaying seductively as she made her way down an encampment full of brawny men-at-arms.

John made a disgusted sound. “And how have you treated the wife who brought you all this?” He scowled at Edith, even more when she joined them and made as if to embrace Robert.

“Not now,” Robert said, moving out of the way.

“Best tell your trollop to leave,” John said.

“Watch your mouth. She’s not a trollop.” But he stepped out of reach when Edith yet again tried to slip her arms round him, far too aware of all the disapproving eyes on them.

“She is now. You’re married elsewhere, and surely you cannot expect your wife to tolerate her presence in her home?”

“My home is with Robert,” Edith said. “The little hen will have to come to terms with that.”

“Truly?” John took a step backwards. “Is that how you imagine your future life?” He spat to the side. “A wife in the solar and Edith in the pigsty?”

Edith swung at him. John caught her fist and squeezed, hard enough for Edith to whimper.

“Let her go,” Robert warned.

“Gladly.” John shoved, and Edith ended up sprawled on the floor of the hall.

“Where are you going?” Robert asked when John stalked off.

“Me? I hope to offer some comfort to your humiliated wife.”

“That’s not for you to do.” Robert had hold of him. “I—” He broke off. “What’s this?” He gestured at a group of men presently being pushed through the gate. Welsh, to judge from their appearance. He found his shirt and pulled it on before stepping outside.

“Hang them?” he said some minutes later. “Me? Here?”

“At the crossroads,” the guard explained. “Our liege wishes their rotting carcasses to send a lesson to anyone who dares to breach his peace.”

“His peace?” one of the Welshmen said, spitting to the side. “We follow our own prince.”

The Welsh prisoners were anything but cooperative. Not to wonder at, given that they had nothing left to lose. Condemned to hang for the single sin of being Welsh—it sat badly with Robert, but it offered distraction from his marital mess, albeit he couldn’t stop himself from looking for her, his wife, whenever a moment arose. Now and then he saw her, mostly with that big hound by her side. At some point during the day, he stopped what he was doing at the sound of laughter. His wife, playing with some of the younger children,

and her face was lit from within as she swung a little one in wide, wide arcs. She sparkled with life, but the moment she caught him watching, it was as if someone had quenched a fire, leaving nothing but wet and sooty ashes. He sighed. This was not how he'd intended things between them to be.

At dinner, she did not appear in the hall. Come evening, he went up the stairs to the solar and tried the door. It was barred from within, and a spark of anger flared in him. She was making a fool out of him!

"I should break that door down," he muttered as he sat down beside John. His friend said nothing. "Did you talk to her?" Robert asked.

"To Noor? Yes."

"Noor?" Robert asked.

"She prefers Noor to Eleanor," John said airily. "Strange that her husband doesn't know that. Ah yes. Her husband has not taken the time to speak to her, has he? He's been busy bedding others."

"I've been busy with the king's business," Robert snapped. "What did she say?" he asked after a while.

"I'm not your spy," John replied. "And why is Edith still here?"

"I don't know." Robert felt drained to the bone. He'd told Edith to leave, and she'd flown into a rage, reminding him they'd always gone everywhere together, Edith as much a part

of their group of companions as Robert was. "She wants me to kick your arse."

"You can try." John was both taller and wider than Robert.

"I'm no fool," Robert said. In response, John just raised his brows, looking first at Robert, then at Edith, who was sitting with her brother and Simon.

"I'll tell her again tomorrow," Robert said. "Right now, all I want is to sleep. Alone."

Chapter 2

Noor slipped out of the solar well before dawn, tiptoed through the hall full of sleeping men, and made for the stables. Gawain padded with her, now and then shoving at her hand.

“Yes, I know you love me,” she said to the dog, pulling at his silken ears. He pressed against her legs, a heavy weight that almost had her overbalancing. She took the long way round the shed that held the Welsh prisoners, muttering a hasty prayer for their souls. Poor men, they were destined to die today, and all for being loyal to their prince.

She didn't rightly understand the situation with Wales. Her father, half-Welsh himself, had not liked it, how King Edward had refused to hand over Prince Llywelyn's bride, using Eleanor de Montfort as a pawn to bring the proud prince to his knees. And now ...Noor sighed. The poor lady was dead, the prince was distraught, and that fiendish brother of his was proving as manipulative as ever—or so her father had said. *Father*. Her chest tightened. She'd never see him again, or her brother.

From one of the sheds came the sound of hammers. She peeked in and just as quickly darted back outside. The manor's carpenter, Nicholas, and his son were making coffins, and come compline both her father and her brother would be buried, side by side with her mother.

It had been two days since that disastrous morning when she'd emerged from the solar to see her husband naked in bed with another woman. Two days of staying well away, of hating him while wishing he'd come after her and talk to her like his friend John had done. She liked John. His brown eyes were soft and warm, and when she'd cried, he'd been polite enough to turn away, allowing her the moment she needed to regain her composure.

Robert FitzStephan she watched from a distance. Always in that worn leather surcoat of his, always with his sword at his side. A man of war, scars decorating his face and arms, dark hair falling to well below his jawline unless he tied it back, equally dark bristles shading his cheeks. He moved with grace and speed, and when he laughed, he threw back his head, baring a thin line of untanned skin at the neckline of his linen shirt.

She'd heard him at the door to the solar, but he hadn't asked for her to let him in, he'd just tested the door and, finding it barred, he'd left. All yesterday, he'd not spoken once to her, strutting about as he ordered all these unfamiliar men to find rope and planking for a good stout gallows. Her eyes flitted to the shed that held the prisoners. What was it like to know that rope would soon be wrapped round their necks?

She stepped inside the stables and was greeted by several soft whinnies. Noor went from horse to horse, crooning softly as she patted them. The large roan stallion, Cid, was her favourite, long swishing tail and mane so black they almost

looked blue in sunlight. Temperamental and young, he required careful handling, a firm but gentle hand on his reins. He'd been intended for her brother, but now ...Once again she felt a stab of grief.

Next to Cid stood Lucia, the oldest of the mares and Cid's dam. She'd been her father's special love, him bragging endlessly about the mare's speed, gentle temperament and beauty, and all on account of her Castilian blood.

"Like you," he'd tease Noor at times before tilting his head and sighing softly. "You look so like her, like my Sancha," he'd say.

"Short, plump and dark is what he means," her brother Ralph would fill in, insisting he did not look like his Spanish mother. And he didn't: Ralph looked—had looked—like their father.

"Are they broken to the saddle?" someone asked from behind her. Noor jumped, retreating when one of Robert's men came towards her.

"Not all of them," she replied, liking how the man recoiled when Cid's head shot out, teeth bared. She recalled his name was David, and she suspected he was related to the trollop with whom she'd found her husband. Same long limbs, same fair hair, same startling green eyes.

"Maybe Robert will let me pick one for myself," David said.

"They're mine," Noor retorted, offering Mars a piece of apple. The dark stallion snorted in her palm.

"Not anymore," David replied. "Now they're his."

“If he as much as touches one I’ll...”

“What?” David asked, grinning at her. “Kill him?” He strolled towards her. “What could you possibly do to him, a drab little hen like you?”

Gawain rose from where he’d been lying on the floor. David came to a halt, eyeing the dog. Gawain growled, lifting his lip.

“I’ll set my dog on him,” Noor told him, grabbing Gawain’s collar.

“You will?” Robert’s voice echoed down the stable. “And why would you do that, wife?”

“Why not?” she snapped. Serve him right to have his nether parts mauled by Gawain! The dog seemed to agree, straining against her hold. She took a deep breath. “David says he wants one of my horses. I told him no, and he said they’re now yours. But if...” She hiccupped. “They’re mine! They’re all I have left after Father!”

He looked at her for a long time, those light eyes of his narrowed. “No one will take your horses,” Robert said in a gruff tone before turning on his heel. “But if you set that dog on me, I’ll gut him.”

“You would do that? To the only friend left to me?”

He came to a halt and turned to face her. “Only if you set him on me. What sort of a wife would threaten to do so?”

“A humiliated and scorned wife?” she retorted. “One deeply hurt by her husband’s behaviour with his whore?” It gladdened her that he looked away, likely incapable of meeting her gaze.

“Watch your mouth.” David loomed over her. “I’ll not—”

“Shut your gob,” Robert said. “And best remember who you are addressing—the lady of the manor, no less.”

Noor blushed. Was he mocking her? To judge from David’s smirk he was, but the smirk turned into a scowl when Robert ordered him to leave.

“I will not tolerate such outbursts, especially not in front of my men,” he said. “And while I understand you are confused and struggling with grief, it is best you remember all of Orton, including the horses, now belongs to me.”

“Confused?” She shook her head. “No, my lord, I am not confused. You want all of Orton—all but me!”

“That’s not—”

“True?” she interrupted. “Oh, I think it is. But by all means, bed your whore and leave me alone. Maybe I am as disappointed in you as you are in me.” She quailed at the expression on his face but refused to back away when he closed the distance between them.

“We will speak of this later,” he said. “For now, I have other matters to attend to.”

“More important matters.”

“Aye. The king’s orders cannot be disobeyed.” He gave her a curt bow and left. Noor knelt and hid her face against Gawain’s brindled coat.

Some hours later, Orton Manor was blissfully silent. Robert and his men had herded the desperate Welshmen to the

crossroads just outside of Ludlow, and Noor was sitting in her mother's garden, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Ah, there you are." Amalia bustled towards her, as neat as a pin. To judge from her subsequent enthusiastic greeting, Amalia had been gone for months rather than the five days it took to accompany Walter down to Aconbury for Amalia's annual visit to the priory. Once she was done kissing and hugging, she studied Noor with a frown. "No, no, that will not do! You look like a hoyden, not the lady of the manor."

"I'm not," Noor said, even if she was already brushing her skirts into some sort of order. At Amalia's raised brows, she adjusted her veil, knowing full well her old nurse would have expected her to wear a wimple as well now that she was properly wed. Except she wasn't properly wed.

"Not what?"

"The lady of the manor." She gave Amalia a cautious look. "Everyone knows, don't they? That he spent the wedding night elsewhere."

"Si." Amalia sat down beside her. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Noor straightened up. "I didn't do anything." But then she remembered that she had, asking him to delay the consummation.

"Silly girl," Amalia clucked. "Some things have to be borne, *hija*."

"Like finding your husband with a... a... woman?" Noor asked. "And he did not insist, Amalia. He didn't try to seduce me or reassure me, he just rolled out of bed and went to her

instead.” She hung her head. “I know I am not pretty, but am I that ugly?”

“Ugly?” Amalia embraced her. “You? Whoever says that has no eyes in their head.”

Noor rubbed her face against Amalia’s ample bosom. “No one has ever told me I am pretty.”

“Vanity is a sin,” Amalia reminded her. She released her. “Truly, *Leonorcita*, you are a pretty girl. In Castile, men would fall at your feet.”

“But we are not in Castile, and my husband seems to prefer willowy, fair-haired women.” She dragged a hand under her nose, causing Amalia to slap it. “Is she still here?”

Amalia shrugged. “I do not know.” But she did not meet Noor’s eyes.

“Is he spending his nights with her?”

Amalia sighed. “How would I know? I’ve been away, *hija*.”

He prefers her to me, Noor thought. Of course he did. What man would not? Edith was everything Noor was not, elegant, graceful and strikingly beautiful. No wonder he had not returned to Noor’s bed—why should he, when he had such a wondrous creature to keep him warm through the night? And after their discussion in the stables, he’d have even less inclination to return to the solar. She kicked at a stone and bit her lip. Down went her lashes as she counted slowly to ten in Latin. It did not matter, it did not matter, it did not matter. But it did, and she felt as insignificant as a flea, invisible in comparison with her lord husband’s whore.

Amalia patted her arm. “You are the lady of the manor. If he wants this”—she swept out with her arm—“then he must take you as well. A wedding without a bedding will not stand.”

Noor gave her a dark look. That did not make her feel any better.

After some further minutes of useless advice, along the lines that maybe Noor should bite her lips to redden them and pinch her cheeks to bring out roses and thereby look pretty for her lord and husband, Amalia bustled off. Noor leaned against the stone wall behind her and turned her face up to the sun.

“And here she sits, my Robert’s little brown hen.”

Noor opened her eyes to see Edith standing in front of her, hands on her narrow hips.

“Go,” she said. “I have no desire to talk to you or even see you.” She stood up. “Leave! You are not welcome here.”

Edith did not budge. “Why should I? Maybe Robert wants me to stay.”

“He’s my husband, not yours!”

Edith laughed. God is unfair, Noor thought bitterly. Edith laughed like an angel, a soft sound that had little to do with the icy look in her eyes. “He’s my lover. Mine. He’ll never be yours.” She leaned closer. “And would you really want the man who killed your father between your thighs?”

What? “My father?” she whispered.

“And your brother.” Edith smiled, reminding Noor of a viper. She sauntered off, leaving Noor pressing her fisted hands to her chest. What sort of monster was she wed to? And

what on earth had caused Robert, a loyal servant of the king, to end up on the opposite side of her father?

It was well into the afternoon when the last man had been hanged. Ten men, ten bodies to lock into gibbets and hoist to hang in various trees. Hard work, damned unpleasant work, and by the time the walls of Orton Manor rose before him, Robert desired a bath and food.

He looked about as he entered the bailey, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife, but she was nowhere in sight. It irritated him; she should be here to welcome him back, to arrange for a bath and see to his comfort. But when Edith offered to do so instead, he rebuffed her, asking her curtly why she hadn't left yet.

He scowled at her. "You're not making this easy for me, Edith."

"Do you think this is easy for me?" she hissed back. "To see how you look at these buildings, these lands? One could think you loved them more than me!"

"Not the same thing," he replied. But he just had to cast a look round the bailey. His. All of it, his. A bastard who'd clawed his way up the ranks of men-at-arms, who'd deserved the knighthood ten times over but never received it as he did not have the means to field the men required of a knight, and now here he stood, on the brink of becoming a man of note, someone who could serve his king as more than just a fighting man. And all because of a generous king and an orphaned

maid. He frowned, wondering yet again where Eleanor—Noor—might be.

Despite him sending a servant to find her, his wife did not join them for dinner.

“She’s probably sulking somewhere,” Edith said.

“Eleanor doesn’t sulk,” John said. “She has just buried her father and her brother.”

“She has?” Robert asked. “How would you know?” He dragged a hand through his hair. He should have been here for that, but to stand to the side and watch as two men he’d dispatched to the hereafter were lowered into their graves had sat badly with him.

“Her nurse told me.” John sipped at his ale. “And as to where she is, maybe she feels disinclined to join us as long as her husband’s whore is in her hall.”

“Whore?” Edith leapt to her feet, her eating knife aloft. “Whore, is it? Not what you said when you wheedled and begged some nights ago.”

What was visible of John’s cheeks above his beard turned a vivid red. “I haven’t!”

“Aye, you have,” Simon said. “Of late, we all do, seeing as our Edith seems to have forgotten anyone but Robert exists.”

“Aye, what with him being rich and all, I reckon Edith prefers him to us,” Harry put in with a grin. Robert did not find it amusing, even less as Harry was right: ever since Edith had

heard of Robert's impending wedding, she'd been like a flea on a rat—determined to hang on.

"I've always preferred him to *you*," Edith flashed back.

Harry just laughed.

"Why are you still here?" John asked. "I heard Robert ordering you to leave several hours ago."

"Because Robert needs me." She straightened up. "He may not realise it, but he does."

Simon snickered. "Really? He hasn't as much as touched you these last few nights."

Edith's nostrils flared. "And how would you know?"

"Because he's been sleeping in the barn with me and Tom, not in the hall with you," Simon said.

"You have?" John asked.

"Aye." Robert stood up.

"Where are you going, my love?" Edith asked, trying to grab his arm. He shook her off.

"I have a wife to make amends to." This marriage had gone bad from the moment he'd deserted his new wife on their wedding night. Aye, he'd done it for the right reasons, but since then... With a curt nod at his friends, he made for the stairs to the solar, ignoring the venomous look on Edith's face.

Unsurprisingly, her door was barred. But this time, he knocked until she opened, threatening to take an axe to the door if needed. The heavy bolt slid back, the door flew open, and he nearly fell into the room.

“I don’t like it when my wife bars our solar to me,” he said once he’d shut the door. It was a nice room, two carved chests along the outer wall, a large new hearth in the opposite wall and an embroidered tapestry on the further wall. A deep window seat ran under the shuttered window, the dark floor planks contrasting with the plastered walls.

“You haven’t treated me as your wife,” she retorted. “Instead, you’ve done me the dishonour of bringing your trollop to our—my—home and choosing to spend our wedding night with her.” She’d prepared for bed, looking vulnerable in only her linen chemise. She was holding an ivory comb, her dark hair spilling like a waterfall down her back.

“It wasn’t like that.” Except, of course, it was. “I left your bed out of consideration.”

“And was it consideration that had you sleeping with another woman in my hall?”

“That was not supposed to happen,” he muttered. “It was a mistake, and I regret it deeply. Look, Noor—”

“Only my friends and my family call me Noor.” She sat down on the bed.

“I am your family. I’m your husband.”

She looked away.

“Why is she still here?” she asked, and he could hear the tears in her voice. “Could you not have done me the courtesy of pretending you found me adequate? Instead, you allow her to stay, and compared to her I am nothing, a little brown hen, as your friends so kindly put it.”

Robert winced. "She'll be gone tomorrow." He joined her on the bed, but when he touched her arm, she recoiled.

"No! I'll not suffer the touch of the man who killed my father and brother."

Damnation! "Who told you?" he asked, knowing who it was. He'd strangle Edith! Of all the cruel things to do.

"Does it matter?" She gave him a bleak look. "Is it true?"

"It is." He took a deep breath. "They came out of nowhere, riding straight for the king. They didn't hail, they just came charging across the ground, and I ...Christ and all his saints! I just lashed out, desperate to protect our king."

"They rode against the king?" she asked in a broken voice. "My father?" A shadow crossed her face, and for some reason Robert was left with the impression his little bride was not entirely surprised.

"It looked that way," he said. "But it's not always easy to tell foe from friend, especially not in those accursed Welsh hills."

"Is that why..." She cleared her throat. "Did the king choose you as my husband because he feared treason?"

The thought had struck him as well. He gave her a crooked smile. Here she was, the true innocent in all this, and she'd been given to a man she'd never even heard of before, a man who'd never dared dream of a home like this. Not to wonder if she was disappointed, even if her words from earlier in the day still rankled.

“The king rarely chooses to share his motivations.” He set a careful hand to her cheek, relieved when she did not pull away. “I was going to tell you, but I’d not found the right moment to do so.”

“Not surprising as you’ve not talked to me,” she said. “Not once.” She moved to the side, increasing the distance between them.

He studied her in silence. She slipped her hands under her thighs, a veil of hair concealing her face. His wife, the mother of his future children. The woman he was tied to for life, and at present, she must detest him.

“I’ve wronged you,” he said, leaning forward to brush her hair off her face. He waited until she met his eyes. “I am sorry for that, my lady. Can we start again?”

She was silent for a long time. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “How am I ever to trust a man who shows me so little respect?”

“I’ll make amends.” He took her hand and pressed a light kiss on the inside of her palm. And another. She shivered. He released her hand, leaned forward and touched his lips to her mouth. “I’ll woo you, my lady,” he murmured. He increased the pressure, her lips parted and he kissed her thoroughly but gently. When he released her, she licked her lips, a dazed look in her eyes. “Enough for tonight,” he said, standing up. His wife was truly an innocent, scarcely responding to his kiss.

“What are you doing?” she stuttered when he began to undress.

“I’ll be sleeping by your side tonight,” he said, motioning for her to get into the bed. The best way to heal the rift between them was proximity, thereby giving her an opportunity to become accustomed to his presence. “Only sleeping,” he hastened to add when her eyes widened. “Or talking,” he said as he slid beneath the covers. He drew her close and planted a light kiss on her temple. “A bed is a good place to share secrets.”

He fell asleep first. His breathing deepened; the arm over her waist grew heavy. Carefully, she turned in his hold. He slept naked, but in the faint light she could make out little beyond the general shape of him. She slipped her hands under her cheek and studied him. She’d never been this close to a nude man before. Her man. Or maybe not, she thought before recalling that he *had* come to find her tonight, and he’d kissed her. She touched her lips. Did he kiss Edith as well?

He sighed in his sleep and rolled over on his back. She rose to her knees. Strong arms, broad shoulders and hands that were calloused and rough. The hands of a fighting man, accustomed to wielding a heavy sword, a shield. She ran a finger over his palm, and his fingers twitched. This close, she could see the scars that covered his chest, the long gash that snaked up his forearm. A sword? No, more likely a dagger. She leaned forward to see better, and her hair tumbled forward, drifting over his chest. One moment he was asleep, the next

he was wide awake, sitting up so abruptly she overbalanced and fell backwards.

“What?” he demanded. He blinked, his gaze locked on her.

“Noor?”

“I... I...”

His expression softened. “Come here,” he said, patting the bed beside him. She lay down, and he drew her close. “We’ll do fine with each other,” he murmured, stroking her hair. She fell asleep like that, his hand caressing her, his voice repeating that they’d do well with each other. Very well.