

## EXCERPT **Their Castilian Orphan**

### **Chapter 1**

He refused to let go of her. Ignoring Elena's muttering, the dark and disapproving looks from the old midwife and the two maids, Robert FitzStephan sat in his bed with his unconscious wife in his arms. In a corner stood the abandoned birthing chair; between Noor's spread legs was blood. So much blood. He swallowed repeatedly, carefully stroking her face. His hand trembled. Nay, it shook, and he had to blink furiously to rid his eyes of thronging tears.

"She will live," he said out loud, not daring to phrase it as a question. Elena turned his way, a softness in her gaze as she looked at him.

"She will." She grasped his forearm. "She will, Robert. But I fear there will be no more children."

More children? What did he care about that? It was Noor he needed, her presence he craved. Without her . . . He swallowed. The faint mewl of the newborn had him casting a look in the direction of Amalia, Noor's old nurse. Normally as cheerful as she was round, today the woman looked her age, a grey pallor about her mouth, dark shadows under her eyes. But she smiled down at the swaddled infant before raising her face to look at Robert.

"A little maid. Healthy and well formed."

He just nodded, finding it hard to feel anything akin to joy.

"She almost died," he said in an undertone to Elena. "My Noor, my hawk, she . . ." His voice broke.

"But she didn't," Elena said just as low before returning to whatever she was doing between Noor's legs. The afterbirth had already been inspected and set aside, and after washing Noor's privates, Elena produced a needle. Robert looked away,

murmuring soft words to his wife as Elena stitched her up. Noor remained slumped, her head cradled against his shoulder.

“There,” Elena said, straightening up. She looked as exhausted as Robert felt, blood spattering the huge apron she wore over her kirtle. A set of quick orders and the maids rushed forward. Without letting go of his Noor, Robert rose from the bed, holding her as the linens were changed. One of the maids approached with a clean shift.

“I can do that,” Robert said, gently laying Noor down. She stirred, eyes opening for an instant before closing again. That little sign of life had something loosening in his chest. He cleared his throat, shooed the maids from the room and relieved her of the sweat-drenched and stained linen she was wearing before dressing her in clean garments that smelled of chamomile and lavender.

“You should change as well,” Elena said, gesturing at his tunic.

He nodded, drew the soiled garment over his head and tossed it aside. In only shirt and braies, he climbed into the bed, settling his wife in his arms.

“What will you call her?” Amalia asked, approaching with the infant.

He had no notion. Truth be, he was consumed with ambivalence towards the poor mite. Only thanks to the grace of God and the Holy Virgin had his Noor survived the ordeal, and while he knew it was not the babe’s fault, at present he was wallowing in fear of losing his wife. “Noor will want to name her,” he therefore said.

Elena and Amalia left, and it was only him and her in a chamber that sank slowly into the darkness of a December night. A single candle fluttered in its holder, the brazier glowed a dull red, and Robert rested his head against the heavy headboard and closed his eyes.

“Robert?” Noor murmured, and he startled out of his doze.

“Here, my hawk,” he answered, sounding as if he’d swallowed gravel.

“The babe,” she whispered.

“Hale,” he assured her. “As yet nameless, but I thought you’d like to name her.”

“Her.” In the faint light, he saw her smile. “A little maid.”

“Aye.” He smiled too. “And let us hope she is of a more placid disposition than Isabel.”

Noor snorted. “We do not make placid children.” She yawned. “My babe,” she said. “I want to . . .” She fell asleep mid-sentence.

Some hours later, Noor had not only named the babe—Avice—but had also nursed her, staring down at the perfection she claimed their babe to be. Their other children were invited inside the solar to greet their new sibling, and while Hugh and Alonso only looked, Isabel held the little babe, crooning softly.

“You don’t want to hold her?” Noor asked Hugh, but he shook his head, the dark eyes he shared with his mother staring at little Avice.

“She won’t break,” Robert said with a little smile. Hugh was not yet seven but big and strong for his age.

Hugh wrinkled his nose. “I know that. But men do not coo over babes.”

Robert swallowed back an amused laugh, sharing a quick look with Noor. Ever since they’d told Hugh he’d be leaving for Chirk Castle, there to serve Roger Mortimer, their lad had concluded he was no longer a child but a man in the making.

“Papa does,” Isabel said.

“That’s because he’s the father,” Hugh retorted.

“Lionel did. With you, when you were a babe,” Isabel said.

“He did?” Hugh edged closer.

“And with Alonso,” Isabel continued. “You remember that, don’t you, Alonso?”

Their youngest son shook his head, thumb plugged firmly in his mouth. Robert drew him close enough to tease out the wet digit and adjust his coif. With eyes as light as his and a dark, unruly mop of hair, Robert suspected Alonso was the one who most resembled him—especially as he, just as Hugh, had been cursed with the de Lamont nose, a giant beak of a thing that gave both his sons a disturbing similarity to a bird of prey. Like him, he reflected, rubbing a finger over the bridge of his nose, no longer as elegant as that of his sons, what with having been broken on several occasions.

“I remember Lionel,” Hugh said.

“Of course you do. He is your brother,” Noor said.

“Foster brother,” Hugh corrected, a blush staining his cheeks at the reproving look from his mother. “Father Alain says that—”

“Aye,” Robert interrupted, “Lionel is your foster brother, but we love him as dearly as if he were our own.”

“I remember him too,” Alonso piped up. “He was here for my birthday.”

“He was.” Robert smiled down at him.

“He was big,” Alonso said.

“Not that big,” Isabel protested. “He’s only ten.”

Almost eleven, and for the last few years they’d scarcely seen him. Since he’d entered the king’s service as a page back in 1291, Lionel had only been back twice. Aye, they’d seen him a couple of times at court, and while Robert knew that serving the king offered Lionel an opportunity he would not otherwise have, he missed the lad, wished it were him, not the king—or the king’s servants—who were shaping him into a man. Not that he’d ever admit it, insisting instead that this was best for Lionel.

Hugh sidled closer to Noor, setting a tentative finger on Avice's head. "Does she have any hair?"

"A dark fuzz, no more," Noor replied. She nodded at Susanna, the lads' nurse. "Time for bed," she said. "You too," she added when Isabel remained planted on the bed.

Their daughter pulled a face but did as told, stopping to pat Goblin.

"You can take her with you," Robert said, and Isabel brightened. Goblin was likely the ugliest dog that had ever graced this earth, built like a footstool—low to the ground and massive—and with one ear half missing. But the brindled bitch was brave and loyal and had saved their children from death, leaving her with a permanent scar down her flank. Since that occasion, Goblin had become as defensive of Isabel as she was of Noor, and as the bitch had never truly warmed to Robert, he preferred having her sleep elsewhere—at least when he was home.

He sighed at that. This year, he'd served the king far more than the required forty days, with repeated forays into Wales, where it seemed no sooner had they doused one spark of insurrection but another took hold. It was only sheer luck that had had him returning just as Noor had gone into labour, and they'd not even had an opportunity to converse or share news.

"Tell me," she said, patting the bed.

He poured them both some mulled wine before joining her. "Something is brewing in Wales," he said. "The Welsh chafe under the English yoke, and the king is not making it easier, trampling their laws and traditions underfoot." He laughed mirthlessly. "Not that he has any attention to spare for Wales, not now with the situation in Gascony."

"That man is a snake," she spat, and he did not need her to clarify. Neither of them had any fond memories of Philippe IV of France, no matter his handsome countenance.

“Just because he treated me wrongly does not mean he is an incompetent king,” he admonished with little heat. As always, just thinking of Philippe had him studying the maimed fingers on his right hand. Philippe’s so-called justice had left him incapable of using a bow, and he would never forgive the French king for that. The intention had likely been to further impair him, but fortunately Philippe had been interrupted by Alfonso of Aragon, and so here was Robert, still fully capable of wielding a sword, no matter the missing bits of his fingers.

“What exactly is Philippe hoping to achieve?” Noor asked. The last year or so had seen increased tensions between Philippe and King Edward, the much younger—and arrogant—French king demanding King Edward do homage for his lands in France. This, of course, was his right, but King Edward was many years his senior and should be treated with respect, not with threats of being dispossessed of lands that had belonged to the Plantagenets since the fair Eleanor of Aquitaine had trod this earth.

“He wants to make a point,” Robert said, reaching for some dried figs on the platter set on the small table beside the bed. He offered her one. “Gascony is French land, and King Edward only holds it as his vassal.” He chewed industriously. “But to send a messenger to court and baldly demand our king drop everything and hasten to Paris to bow his knee . . .” He tapped his nose. “I smell subterfuge.”

“But surely he does not want to goad our king into war?” Noor shivered, settling herself closer.

“Who knows what that damned royal pup wants?” Robert said. War. His innards tightened. He was too old for such—except he knew his king would never accept that as an excuse. After all, he was only two score, while the king was well over two score and ten. “Mayhap a marriage between our king and a French princess will suffice to smooth things over.” He’d heard it from Mortimer—

who was, as always, impressively well-informed—that the king was considering an alliance with France by wedding Philippe’s half-sister.

“Does he want to wed again?” she asked.

“Our king?” Robert pursed his mouth. “Not as such. But he will do his duty—he always does his duty.”

“Poor bride, to always come second to a dead woman in his affections.”

He snorted. “It is a royal marriage. Not a love match.”

“And yet . . .” She sighed. “She must be so much younger.”

“Our king is a vigorous man.”

Noor made a face. “He’s old, Robert!”

“Sometimes old men wed young brides and make them very happy. My sire did.” It still was somewhat incomprehensible that Sir Stephan de Lamont had developed such affection for his second—and much younger—wife. “And look at Gilbert de Clare. He is thirty years older than Joan but evidently besotted.”

Noor chuckled, as did he. At one of their infrequent visits to court, the powerful Earl of Gloucester had been there with his wife, King Edward’s daughter, and the way the man had fawned over Joan—and his precious infant son—had been both amusing and endearing.

Robert settled in the bed. “Our king needs a new wife,” he said softly. “He needs more sons to secure the throne.” He toyed with her hair, a mane of dark curls presently unbound. “Had Alphonso lived, he’d likely not have even considered wedding again. The loss of his queen has left a fist-sized hole in his heart, and I fear it will never heal.” He gazed up at the bed canopy, losing himself in the recurring embroidered pomegranate trees. It had to be devastating to not only lose a beloved wife but be expected to replace her with someone much, much younger and fertile. He

tightened his hold on Noor, and she hummed under her breath, pressing herself closer to him.

“You could have died today,” he said out loud. There had been moments when he’d been certain she would die, the child stuck in the birthing channel and she screeching like a flayed cat until suddenly she just gave up, flopping down on the bed with glazed eyes.

“Aye.” She shivered, her hand clutching at his shirt. “Like you can die every time you ride out to quell yet another rebellion on behalf of the king.”

“That is not the same.”

“No?” She turned her head, pressing a kiss to his collarbone through the thin linen. “Elena would tell you that a woman’s battlefield is the birthing chamber.”

“Never again,” he said.

“No,” she said softly. “Never again.” She hid her face against him. “Elena says there will likely be no more childbeds for me.”

He shifted her to the side. “Does that make you sad?”

She inhaled. “Sad? Nay. But I am ashamed by the relief I feel.”

“You have already given me more sons and daughters than I ever expected to have.” As if in response, a piercing wail rose from the cradle. He was out of bed and holding his latest child in his arms in mere moments, rocking her gently. Avice opened her eyes, pools of darkness that spoke of innate wisdom.

“I think she has your eyes,” he said, helping Noor settle the hungry babe at her breast. His wife hissed when the babe began to suckle. She gave him a weak smile.

“Tired,” she mumbled. She groped for his hand. “Do you think he will allow Lionel to come home for Christmastide?”

“I do not know.” He’d sent to the king, politely requesting Lionel be allowed to come home, stating Noor’s condition as his main reason. He stroked her hair. The babe had come early, nigh



on a fortnight before expected. "I dare say our liege has other far more important matters to handle than the homesickness of one small page."

"Homesick?" She struggled up to sit. "Is he?"

Robert hemmed. He'd not spoken to Lionel since his visit back in the spring, and he only had the word of John and Elias, who had been to Westminster some weeks ago, accompanying Father Alain and Dickon on manor business. That had him smiling: their priest was proving a more than capable negotiator, delighted at stepping into Noor's shoes while she was great-bellied.

"Well?" She frowned. "Is he?"

"I think it is at times difficult to be the only lad without a considerable inheritance serving the king," he said.

"Hmph!" She scowled. "Well, we must do what we can for him, mustn't we?" She chewed her lip. "Maybe . . ."

"No need to sort this now, my hawk," he said, and it was verily like smoothing down the ruffled feathers of an angered goshawk to get her to lie back down. "Now is the time to feed our daughter and rest." He kissed her cheek. "Sleep," he said firmly. It was testament to the gravity of her recent ordeal that she fell asleep almost immediately. He, however, did not, lying like a silent sentinel beside her while listening to her breathing. She had lived. The babe had lived. *Holy Mother, thank you.*

## Chapter 2

His arms ached. Lionel shifted his weight, clenching the heavy pitcher of wine to his chest. In front of him, King Edward was deep in conversation with the Earl of Gloucester, and his uncle, the aging Earl of Pembroke, the latest missive from his brother lying discarded on a nearby table. Earl Edmund was in France, speaking for the king in this infected matter with the French king, but truth be told, Lionel did not fully comprehend the issue—beyond watching his lord and liege explode in colourful tantrums on a daily basis.

Lionel distracted himself from his cramping arms by studying Pembroke's old hound, fast asleep behind his master's chair. It made him think of Mama's huge hound Mist, which in turn made him think of Orton Manor. A wave of longing suffused him. He swallowed. Not his home, he reminded himself. He was no trueborn son of Robert FitzStephan d'Outremer.

He wasn't even a bastard son to the man he thought of as his father.

No, Lionel was an orphan Robert FitzStephan and his wife had come upon during their travels abroad and taken pity on.

He detested being Fadrique Enriquez, son of the unknown Castilian knight Enrique Gonzales de Trava and an equally unknown Castilian mother. Those names meant nothing to him, and he refused to claim them as his. He was Lionel FitzHenry, preferring a name others could pronounce to the Castilian words that marked him as foreign. Besides, he knew nothing of his parents, except for Mama's assurance that Don Enrique had been a brave man who'd died in service of his distant relative Queen Maria de Molina. That was something Lionel had in common with Mama: she too was distantly related to the queen of Castile.

The king snapped his fingers. Lionel shook free of his thoughts about Mama and hurried forward, pitcher aloft.

The hound rose abruptly. Lionel stumbled, his hold on the pitcher slipping. A large hand appeared out of nowhere, salvaging the pitcher before it crashed to the floor.

“Watch your feet, lad,” Pembroke said, handing the pitcher back to him.

“Yes, my lord.” To point out that it was Pembroke’s hound who’d caused the incident was futile. Pages were not expected to speak. They were expected to obey and leap forward when summoned.

Carefully, Lionel replenished the king’s goblet.

“Damn that French whelp!” the king said, directing himself to the earls.

“Aye,” Pembroke said. “Here’s to Philippe of France being struck down by ailment.”

“Uncle,” the king admonished with little heat. Well, not to wonder: everyone knew the French king was as false as they came. And Lionel may have been very young when it happened, but to his dying day he’d carry the memories of the day Philippe had ordered his foster father maimed. He frowned; from what he’d overheard from Amalia and Mama, that had happened in Aragon, where they’d been *before* Castile. Before taking in an unwanted orphan with the unwieldy name of Fadrique Enriquez. And yet he knew he had seen Papa’s bloodied hand, the severed fingertip lying on the dusty ground. Lionel shook his head, attempting to dislodge the thought, but it niggled, as it had done for days—nay, months.

“Stop dreaming, lad!” Pembroke sounded irritated, holding out his goblet demandingly.

Lionel hastily served the earls and retreated to his position by the wall. The king turned and gave him a bleary look while

rubbing at his drooping eye. "Arrange for hot water for my room," he said.

"Yes, my liege."

Lionel scampered off.

It did not take long for the king to excuse himself. Lionel heard his measured tread on the floorboards in the antechamber and busied himself with linen bandages and the heavy stone jar of unguent. King Edward stopped in the doorway, said something in a low voice to Guy, one of his squires, and slowly entered his bedchamber, shedding his cloak and his impervious expression simultaneously.

"God's blood!" he muttered, limping over to serve himself some of the mulled wine Lionel had just prepared. He inhaled deeply, drank just as deeply and collapsed into his elegant armchair, legs sprawled in front of him.

Lionel needed no instruction. This was a task he'd done regularly over the last few weeks. The unguent had been prepared by one of the king's Gascon physicians, a substance that was poisonous if ingested but soothing to aching and inflamed joints.

"The Naked Lady is best avoided, lad," the physician had said. "She may look innocent," here he'd brandished a purple flower in the direction of Lionel, "but she is lethal." The physician had winked. "Some would say that applies to human ladies as well—in particular if they're naked."

"Eh?" Lionel had never seen a naked lady. After all, his foster sister Isabel did not count as a lady, what with her being a mischievous urchin younger than he was.

The physician had patted Lionel's leg. "You'll find out soon enough, lad."

Lionel eased off the king's shoe and hose, revealing an irritated big toe knuckle. Carefully, he washed the foot with hot water. The king held his breath but did not move. Once he'd dried the king's foot, Lionel applied a layer of the unguent and rubbed it in, releasing the pleasant smell of crushed mint.

Lionel sang softly as he worked. He often did. It made him think of old Amalia back home, who'd go all teary-eyed when he sang, exclaiming that God had given him the voice of an angel. The king sank deeper into his chair, and Lionel changed the tune, shifting into a melody Rhys had taught him.

"What language is that?" the king asked.

"I think it is Welsh, my liege." In actual fact, Lionel knew it was Welsh—Rhys of Clun was as Welsh as they came and the best archer Lionel had ever met. He was also a man who had spent many years fighting the English, and Lionel did not need Papa's admonishments to know one should not brag about Welsh friends at court.

"Welsh? You speak the language?"

"No, my liege." Lionel sat back on his heels. "But I like the tune."

The king grunted. "So, no Welsh, hey?"

"Not beyond the words any lad growing up so close to Wales knows, my liege."

"And what words are those?"

Lionel picked up one of the neatly rolled linen bandages. "Words like *good day* and *thank you* and—"

"Rebel," the king filled in sourly.

"No, sire, that is not a word I know in Welsh," Lionel said.

The king chuckled. "Of course you don't. But in my opinion, every Welshman knows that word—in Welsh, Latin, French and any other goddamned language on this earth." He closed his eyes. "Contentious and stubborn, they're all potential rebels," he

muttered. “Every single one of them would gladly betray me, their anointed king, if they thought it would lead to casting off my rule.” He snorted. “As if that will ever happen!”

Lionel held his tongue. Too often, he’d heard Rhys speak of his lost home, his lost lands and companions. He’d heard the sadness in the big Welshman’s voice, seen the darkness in his eyes, and when he’d asked Papa, all he’d received was a deep sigh. “He is entitled to his grief,” Papa had said.

Once the foot had been bandaged, the king called for Ranulph and Guy to help him, dismissing Lionel with a curt nod. “Find your bed,” he said.

A while later, Lionel burrowed under the bedclothes. From the other pallets came the sounds of sleeping lads, all of them sharing the honour of being a royal page. Lionel sighed and turned on his side. He’d have preferred to serve his foster father—or Roger Mortimer, Papa’s good friend. He fell asleep to dreams of home, of sloping meadows dotted with sheep and Mama smiling widely as she opened her arms to embrace him.

The next morning, Lionel and the other pages hurried back and forth in the king’s chambers, packing up furnishing under the eagle eye of one of Langton’s clerks. John Langton himself was closeted with the king, had been so since just after prime. Not unusual, as the lord chancellor always had much to discuss with the king. Lionel had only met Langton’s predecessor a couple of times before he died back in 1292, but even he could see that where the king had trusted Bishop Burnell with everything, he meddled more in Landon’s handling of the realm’s affairs. Or mayhap it was more a matter of the king requiring constant distraction from what Soaking Sally called his broken heart.

Lionel liked Soaking Sally, a laundress who’d been in the king’s household since well before the king stopped using

clouts—or so she said, even if Lionel had a hard time imagining their king as a toddling babe. The old woman was built like a barrel and had hands so strong she could crush an apple in one of them.

“All those years wringing linen,” she’d told Lionel with a little cackle. “Maybe you should try it?”

Lionel had politely refused her offer to teach him how to properly handle wet linen, but something akin to a friendship had sprung up between him and Sally. It was to Sally he went when he’d been hurt or when he felt lonely. It was to Sally he rushed to share the honey wafers he’d pilfered.

But when Sally spoke of broken hearts, Lionel was hard put not to roll his eyes. Men did not suffer from broken hearts. Such nonsense was for women, weak creatures that they were. And yet he listened when Sally went on and on about how much the king missed his dead wife.

“Close to two score years joined at the hip, and then,” she waved a hand in the air, “gone!”

“She’d been ailing for years,” Lionel protested. He’d even seen her laid low by one of those recurring bouts of tertian fever.

“There’s a difference between ailing and dead,” Sally said.

A sharp reprimand called him back to the present and the goblets he was presently packing.

“You crack one of those and I’ll take it out of your backside, lad,” the clerk, Ambrose, growled.

Lionel believed him. Ambrose was not a kindly man, a constant sour expression on his face. He was also of the opinion that every single one of the royal pages was a potential sinner, haranguing them for hours about good and evil, discourses that Lionel mostly spent thinking of other matters—relevant matters, like how to further improve his sword-fighting skills or how to

evade the boring task of repairing the king's gambeson—again. God's truth, but their liege wore holes in his battle gear.

They were finally done. Lionel slunk off to the stables. Halfway there, he ran into Peter de Montfort, a page some months older than him. Several inches taller, Peter was substantially thinner, but those narrow shoulders were stronger than you would think, and Peter had the temperament of a cornered dog to go with it. He'd been fighting since he arrived at court, face going bright red with anger whenever one of the other lads whispered "traitor's get" behind his back.

"Not that it isn't true," he'd once confided to Lionel. "My grandfather died at Evesham, side by side with Earl Simon." He grimaced. "Aye, I share a surname with Simon de Montfort, but he is no family of mine."

Lionel couldn't quite understand why that mattered, seeing as Peter's grandsire *had* been fighting for the earl, thereby obviously dying as a traitorous rebel.

"My foster father was at Evesham," Lionel had said. "Brave, he was. Helped defeat the rebels." Not at all true. Papa's summary of Evesham was grim. "Blood, death and pain," he'd once told Lionel, "and I was a young fool to think battles were honourable things until a mighty strike sent me sprawling half-dead to the ground."

"Your foster father?" One of the other pages within earshot had snorted. "Isn't he the bastard get of a de Lamont? Surely, our king had better companions to support him—men like my grandfather."

Lionel had eyed Will in silence. The larger lad had a tendency to pick on Lionel whenever he could, whether it be with belittling comments or hard shoves. Lionel did not retaliate—he was no fool. Will de Bissoux would bleat in anger, and, no matter how unjust, it would be Lionel who was punished. It was hard being an impoverished orphan when all the other royal pages were the



sons of barons and lords, young lads who would inherit lands and power.

He was comforted by reminding himself of the fact that his foster father had been just as poor when he first entered the king's service. Now, thanks to the king, he was no longer poor. He had manors and he had sons—here something twisted in Lionel's belly—and a daughter. Not that having Isabel could be considered a blessing, he thought, smiling at the memory of last he'd seen Issy, perched high up in one of the oaks that bordered the lane leading to Orton Manor.

A whinny brought him back to the here and now, to the warmth of the stable and the smell of horses. Peter was already busy with his bay, and Lionel ambled over to his gelding, a stout and reliable pony.

He'd almost finished currying his horse when Ambrose appeared in the doorway.

"You!" he snapped, pointing at Lionel. "The king requests your presence."

"Mine?" Lionel swallowed. Had he done something wrong? His innards twisted; had he perchance been remiss in packing the king's precious glass goblets, the ones that had belonged to his dear, departed wife?

"Now!" Ambrose ordered, and Lionel broke into a reluctant trot, following Ambrose as he strode at haste towards the great hall, located in the inner bailey. A raven cawed, another followed suit, and Lionel stopped for an instant to look at the huge black birds that made the Tower their home.

"No dawdling!" Ambrose said. "We do not have all day; we have an entire household to move." He went on to mutter that he did not understand why the king could not remain here at the Tower—or at Westminster—rather than move back and forth. "I

thought we'd stay here over Christmas," Ambrose continued. "But no, no sooner have we celebrated St Lucy but we must pack. Pah!"

Serving the king was to be constantly travelling. At least this year they remained in the south of England. Lionel shivered as he recalled last year, spent mostly in the north.

The king was deep in discussion with Langton and a man Lionel did not recognise. His accent indicated he was not from England, and as the discussion centred on Gascony, Lionel hazarded the man in mud-stained clothing hailed from there. He stood quietly to the side, waiting patiently. At long last, the king noticed his presence.

"Ah, Lionel." He beckoned Lionel closer, and Lionel knelt before him.

"Your foster father has requested your presence," the king said. "It seems your foster mother is with child, and he would want you home for that joyous occasion." A shadow passed over the king's face. "Not that it always is joyous," he added, crossing himself hastily. "Langton here has men travelling west, to Shrewsbury, so you can ride with them."

"Now, my liege?" Lionel asked.

"They leave within the hour," Langton replied.

"Best make haste," the king said, waving his hand in dismissal. "Oh, and I expect you back by Twelfth Night. In Canterbury."

"Yes, my liege." Lionel was already on his feet. He was going home! Home!

Three days later, he politely thanked Langton's men for the company and turned down the lane towards Orton Manor. The winter day was crisp, frost covering the empty fields, the leafless hedges. He set heels to the gelding, urging it into a trot. Already, someone in the gatehouse had seen him. Already, the large gate

was swinging open, and he leaned forward over the horse's neck as it broke into a canter.

No sooner was he in the bailey but the door to the hall banged open, and there was Mama.

"You're back!" she exclaimed, and then she was making her way slowly down the stairs, tread by careful tread, Isabel leaping ahead with a wide grin.

"Are you hurt?" Lionel was already off his horse, rushing towards Mama.

"The babe came sooner than expected," someone said from behind him, and there was Papa, arms wide open. He threw himself into the welcoming embrace. A warm kiss before he was shoved in the direction of Mama, who was smiling and weeping at the same time.

"You're so big!" she said.

"And still incapable of keeping his coif on his head," Amalia grumbled from behind her. "*Ven aquí, Tesoro,*" she added in Castilian, and he was hugged and kissed so noisily he should have protested—but it felt so good to be held. He did, however, grumble loudly when she proceeded to whip off his coif, smooth back his unruly hair and then resettle the linen coif atop his head.

"I can do that myself," he said.

"Aye, we can see that, lad," Papa replied drily.

Mama returned to the solar, steadied by Papa. Lionel chewed his lip, studying her careful progress up the stairs.

"Come on," Isabel said. "If we ask him nicely enough, I am sure Sergio will give us something to eat."

Sergio the cook greeted Lionel effusively, rapped Hugh's fingers when he tried to break off a piece of marchpane and gave them all a slice of warm bread. And then they were outside again, with Isabel skipping beside him as she condensed months and months of news into succinct sentences.

It was easy with Isabel. It took a mere hour for her to be back to her teasing self. It was much harder with Hugh and Alonso. The latter he did not know, having only seen him twice since he learned to walk. The former studied him warily, dark eyes flitting from him to Isabel, who was so evidently glad to see him.

Elias appeared from the stable and waved. John the Gascon emerged from the smithy and called out, "Welcome home," to Lionel. It filled his chest with warmth. Father Alain hurried by, stopping for an instant to set his hand on Lionel's head and greet him. Two of Papa's men-at-arms hailed him as well, and with every greeting Hugh's features darkened.

Isabel danced before them through the postern gate, holding Alonso firmly by the hand.

"You're just the foster son," Hugh told him, shoving by him to exit first. He swept a hand over the meadows, over the walls of the manor that now rose behind them. "This will all be mine someday. Not yours." With that, he scurried ahead. Lionel slowed his pace, and where his foster siblings darted into the woods, he instead took a left turn, making for Tom and Harry's cottage.

The small cottage was dark—but agreeably warm after the cold outside, as were Tom's and Harry's effusive greetings.

"Look at you!" Harry used his only hand to squeeze Lionel's upper arm. "And strong as well. Is the sergeant-of-arms any good?"

"Not as good as you are," Lionel said, which made Harry preen.

"Very few are," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "How are you lad?" he asked. "Truly?"

Truly? He was lonely. He was lonely at court, and today he felt just as lonely here, so evidently the cuckoo in the nest. He sighed softly and studied his hands.

"Hey!" Harry nudged him. "Is it as bad as all that?"

Lionel shrugged. “Nay,” he admitted. But Hugh’s words had hurt. Hesitantly, he shared what Hugh had said.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Harry said. “But you’ve known that for years.”

“Aye.” Lionel used a stick to poke at the glowing embers in the hearth. “I don’t really belong anywhere, do I?”

Tom laughed. “Fool of a lad,” he said. “Surely, you know your Mama and your Papa love you as much as if you were their own?”

Except he didn’t. After all, how could they?

Some days later, Lionel was in the stable. He had already fed Cid a wrinkled apple and was presently currying Jupiter—not that he needed it because Papa’s horse was well taken care of—but both he and Jupiter enjoyed it, the stallion bowing his neck to nuzzle him repeatedly.

“Lionel? Are you there, lad?” Papa’s voice was followed by his footsteps. “Ah, there you are.” Papa hung over the door of the stall. “One could almost think you prefer the horses to us, what with all the time you spend here.”

“I like it here,” he said, giving Jupiter a final pass with the brush.

“But not with us,” Papa said.

“It’s not that.” Lionel considered just how to explain. But he could not quite find the words, so instead he just shrugged.

“Ah.” Papa gave him a perceptive look, arms folded over the partition. “Is it hard, being at court?”

Mostly not. In some ways, Lionel felt lonelier here, but he would never say that, knowing full well it would make Papa sad—and he was already sad, a constant worried expression on his face whenever he looked at Mama. He shook his head.

“No? I imagine it is a bit akin to what I felt when I was sent to Wigmore, a bastard son foisted on the Mortimers in exchange of

an owed debt." He grimaced for an instant. "Aye, it was hard, but it shaped me into who I am today."

"The king's trusted man," Lionel replied with a nod.

"Trusted?" Papa laughed. "He is my liege, and as he orders, I must do." He tilted his head to the side. "Even if it is only a display of strength, like at Berwick."

Lionel shivered. The only good memory he had of all those weeks at Berwick last year was that Papa had been there too. "One of the king's most loyal knights attending him," he said, smiling at his foster father.

"Well, if we are going to be correct, I was not exactly attending him," Papa said with a little smile. "Other than bowing before him when I arrived, I did not see him. I was just one insignificant knight among many other insignificant knights." He gave Lionel a piercing look. "That is how it is for you, isn't it? One insignificant page among so many others."

Lionel scraped at the ground. "I am insignificant," he mumbled. "The others are not—or they will not be once they grow up."

"Hmm," Papa said. "Being insignificant is not necessarily a bad thing, lad." He straightened up. "Your mama and I have a gift for you, though. Something to make you somewhat less insignificant." He winked. "Come on."

Some moments later, Lionel gaped. "For me?" He extended his hand to the beautiful chestnut mare.

"For you. Mama has been training Estrella for a year." Yet again, a shadow crossed his face but was quickly replaced by a smile.

Lionel swallowed. And swallowed. "Thank you," he said hoarsely, hiding his face against his horse's neck.

"You are welcome, lad. Now, will you accompany me to the solar and sit with your mama?"

Lionel nodded. He wiped at his eyes. “Will Mama heal?” he asked. He didn’t like how wan she looked, how carefully she walked—and how rarely she emerged from the solar.

“She will,” Papa said. His mouth set in a grim line. “She must.”

### Chapter 3

All through Christmas, Noor had managed to remain on her feet. Aye, she was weak; aye, there were days when the sheer effort of leaving her bed had her covered in icy sweat, but Noor had gritted her teeth and somehow convinced both herself and everyone else she was slowly getting better, only requiring a short nap or two to revitalise herself. Until the day after St Stephen's, when it was as if all strength drained out of her, leaving her incapable of as much as lifting an arm.

Even then, she found the strength to smile reassuringly at Lionel when he came to bid her farewell a few days later, assuring her precious lad this was nothing to be truly concerned about. He gave her a doubtful look out of eyes as dark as her own, but in difference to her, his skin was very fair, and there was a reddish tone to his dark hair that she had not truly noticed before and that now had her heart fluttering.

When he turned to look out the window, she could scarcely swallow because for an instant he so resembled his true father, and if she could see it, would the king see it too? Would King Edward one day cast a glance at her Lionel and see in him the shadow of Dafydd ap Gruffydd, the Welsh princeling who'd been raised at Henry III's court and then betrayed not only his brother, but the king he'd sworn to serve? She clutched his hand, offering up frantic prayers to the Holy Mother that she keep Lionel safe, that the secrets of who he truly was remained safely buried.

So preoccupied was she by this that for some hours she remained quite animated, even to the point of insisting she leave her bed and slowly make her way to the hall, joining her husband at the high table for dinner. A swallow or two of wine and for a while she felt mellow and warm, but upon attempting to rise, her



legs folded, and only Robert's quick reactions stopped her from falling to the floor.

"It is nothing," she insisted stubbornly once she was back in her bed. "I merely overexerted myself." But she knew she was lying because the weariness spreading through her limbs came accompanied by a burning heat, and there was a growing constriction in her throat, making it hard to swallow.

The following days were blurred. At times, she burned, and Elena and Amalia would take turns cooling her with damp cloths. At others, she was so cold her teeth chattered. And there would be a warm body wrapped around her, a low soothing voice murmuring that he was here, that he would keep her safe, and sometimes she sank into sleep, safe in his arms; at others, it was one vivid dream after the other.

She burned. He was there.

She shivered. He was there.

She cried because everything hurt—even swallowing hurt—and he was there.

She slept, and he held her hand.

She woke. He was there, whether it was day or night.

Eventually, it was as if only Robert was there, only his hands cooling her fevered brow, changing her drenched linen shifts.

And every time she managed to open her eyes, he would smile, his voice soft and dark as he told her it would all be well.

But there were times when she heard him weep, and she knew she should do something to comfort him, but she was too tired, so, so tired.

On occasion, she registered other sounds: the wailing of a babe, the hushed voices of a child.

Someone sang a lullaby, and she croaked out, "Mama."

That babe again, and now she knew it was her babe, but where was it? Why wasn't it here, with her? At one point, a male voice rose in prayer beside her, and she frowned.

Her back ached. Noor blinked awake and licked her cracked lips. So thirsty! The solar was sunk in shadow, but weak daylight spilled through the small glassed window, illuminating the man who was fast asleep on a stool, his head pillowed on the bed. She had never seen him so unkempt, his hair unbrushed, his beard a bristling mass of dark where she could see clear streaks of grey. There were tear tracks on his cheeks, and even in sleep his face looked lined, his mouth a grim dash.

She touched him. Her fingers smoothed at his hair, his cheek.

He startled, nigh on falling off the stool when he reared back. And then his eyes widened; that mouth of his softened into a smile for an instant before he leaned towards her and hid his face against her, his shoulders shaking. She held him. She shushed him. She shifted to the side, and he fell into bed beside her. Somehow, she ended up pressed against him, her ear over his heart, his arms holding her so tight it was close to uncomfortable.

By the time she woke up again, Robert was no longer in bed with her. Instead, Elena was sitting beside her, smiling and weeping simultaneously.

"How long?" Noor asked, managing to sit up.

"Too long," Elena said. "Close to a fortnight."

Noor swallowed tentatively. No pain. Elena handed her a mug, and she smelled honey and limes.

"Robert?"

"I have sent him to sleep." Elena laughed softly. "I may have helped him with that, but he needs his rest." She shook her veiled head. "That man, he has been like a sentinel angel, never leaving your side."

Noor reclined against the pillows and yawned. “Still tired,” she mumbled, wondering if Elena had crumbled some of her sleeping herbs into her drink as well.

“*Duerme, mujer, duerme,*” Elena said, and Noor obediently slipped into sleep.

Two days later, she was out of bed and dressed, shocked to discover just how much she had shrunk during her recent ordeal. She tightened the laces of her everyday kirtle as much as she could, and yet it hung loose, her previously so round bosom decidedly much flatter.

She looked gaunt, and even if she had washed—well, been washed, by a hectoring Amalia who had also washed her hair, rinsing it in nettle water—she still felt as if a residue of her recent illness clung to her, making her skin pasty and grey.

“Compared to what you looked like three days ago, you look radiant,” Amalia said with a huff.

“But look!” Noor gestured at her body. “I resemble a starved hag!”

“Hmph! Some weeks of eating and you will be back to being nice and round.” Amalia pointed at the stool.

“I can comb my hair myself,” Noor protested.

“Well, of course you can—I taught you, didn’t I? But today, I will comb it.”

Once she finished combing and braiding, Amalia secured Noor’s coif before shaking out her veil. “I still think you should stay in bed some more days.”

“And I think not.” She needed fresh air and sun and said as much.

“It is raining,” Amalia pointed out.

“Then I need fresh air and rain,” Noor retorted. Her stomach grumbled. “And food—real food, not that pap you’ve been feeding me!”

The door opened to Robert and her children. Hugh and Alonso hung back—they had spent the little time they had been allowed in to see her staring at her from a safe distance—but Isabel threw herself towards her, strong arms winding round her waist.

“Ouff!” Noor staggered a few steps, was steadied by Amalia.

“Careful,” Robert warned. “What did I say just now, Isabel?”

“It is all right.” Noor was already making for him and the bundle he was holding. “My little one,” she crooned, stroking Avice’s downy cheek. “Give her to me.”

“Is that wise?” Amalia asked. “What if—”

“Here,” Robert said, settling the babe in Noor’s arms. He remained close enough to support her should she need it, his warm strength enveloping her as she rocked their little daughter. Two dark eyes stared up at her, a rosebud mouth pursed as if finding her lacking. This child would never nurse at her breast, and it made Noor’s heart ache when the little one began to cry, a loud demanding wail that had the wet nurse hastening into the room.

“She looks healthy,” she said, her hand lingering on the swaddled infant.

“She is, mistress,” the wet nurse assured her. “And she eats like a horse, that one.”

“She does?” Alonso piped up, coming close enough to lean against Noor. “You feed her oats and hay?”

“Babes eat milk,” Hugh informed his brother haughtily. “They suckle, like piglets do.”

Alonso made big eyes. “She does look a bit like a piglet.”

“No more than you did,” Isabel said. “Or Hugh. Hugh really looked like a piglet—oink, oink!”

Noor was quite relieved when Amalia shooed the children out, ordering Isabel and Hugh to find Father Alain for their daily lessons. Alonso lingered for a while. "Are you still sick?" he asked Noor, those light eyes of his wide.

"No," she assured him. "I am as hale as ever."

"Liar," Robert murmured once they were alone. He drew her into an embrace.

"I will be," she said. And today, she actually believed it.

It was somewhat astounding to emerge outside only to discover they were halfway through January. The fine drizzle and a recent snowfall had left the ground wet and soggy, and in the little garden patches of pristine white snow still remained, rimmed with brittle ice. In one corner, she spied a stand of snowdrops, as yet tightly furled, and the old bench was damp enough that it seeped through her heavy skirts, but she did not care. It was sheer bliss to be outside again, even on a day when clouds all shades of grey scudded across the sky.

"Still winter," John de Gascon said when she leaned back with a smile. He hovered conscientiously around her while Robert conferred with Dickon, their young bailiff.

"But not for long." Soon enough, their precious ewes would be lambing, and they hoped for many twin births. She frowned at Robert. "I trust Dickon isn't asking Robert for advice on the sheep." She made as if to stand.

"Dickon does not need anyone's advice when it comes to sheep," John said. "Even old Walter knows that."

Old Walter was half-deaf and had, according to Elena, had one foot in the grave for several years, but miraculously the old man had survived yet another year, as tenacious as a yew. It was probably due to Amalia's cosseting: she spent almost as much time fussing over Walter as she did over Noor.

John crouched before her and took her hands in his. "It is good to see you up and about," he said. Of an age with Robert, he wore his years well, despite having spent most of his two score years fighting for the king.

"It is good to be up and about."

He gnawed his lip, rubbing at his neat beard—more grizzled now than some years ago. "It would have killed him to lose you," he said, throwing a cautious look at Robert. "All those days, all those nights, not once did he step out of that solar." John sighed. "I feared for you, but by God, I feared as much for him." He gave her hands a little shake. "Had you d—"

She covered his mouth with a finger. "But I didn't."

"No." He rose to stand. "How about we venture to the stables instead of getting wet out here?" He held out a hand to help her up.

"Has Nerys foaled yet?" It was testament to how ill she had been that she had not even asked about her precious mares.

"No. But Elias thinks it will be any day now." Halfway across the bailey, John slipped. He winced, his hand flying to his lower back. Noor did not need to ask; just like Robert's, John's body carried permanent reminders of all those years fighting for the king. Except that the latest additions—the deep scars running up and down his back—were courtesy of that evil miscreant Eustace de Lamont, may he rot in hell.

She steadied him. She did not say anything, waiting until he straightened up. They'd never healed properly. Whoever had wielded the cane on Eustace's behalf had been a cruel bastard, but he, like all of Eustace's men that day, had hanged. Not that she believed John found much comfort in that. Even now, almost—she frowned, counting back in her head—aye, almost five years since . . . Dear God! Five years! She came to an abrupt halt.

"What is it?" Robert appeared at her side. "Are you hurting?"

“Come June it’s five years,” she croaked. “Five years, Robert!” She glanced about the bailey, and there were her children, leaping about in a complicated game involving long sticks, a broken barrel and a juggler’s ball. “He’ll be back,” she went on. “Holy Mother and all the saints, he’ll be back!” And just like last time, he’d try to kill their children as well. Her gaze flew to the walls, to the open gate. “We must close the gates! We must—”

“Hush, my hawk.” Robert had hold of her.

She struggled. “We need more men! Armed men!”

“Noor.” He shook her gently. “Noor, look at me.”

She somehow managed to do as he said.

“Breathe,” he said gently. “Breathe, my hawk.” So she did, gulping air while meeting his eyes. Such beautiful eyes, somewhere between blue and grey. Some deep breaths and her heart stopped racing. She suddenly became aware of how quiet the bailey had gone, and by the overturned barrel her children had been playing with, the three of them stood close together, staring at her. Noor managed a smile before hiding her face against the soft wool of Robert’s tunic.

“The stables,” he said softly. “Come, my lady, let us see to your horses.”

Once they were alone—bar John, who shadowed them like a protective hound—Robert found a stool and sat down, dragging her into his lap.

“What’s the matter?” Elias’ head popped over the partition to Nerys’ stall.

“A fucking ghost is what happened,” John growled.

Except Eustace wasn’t a ghost. No, the king in his wisdom—and she would never, ever forgive him for that—had chosen to exile a man he should have hanged, preferably after having first castrated him and disembowelled him.

“De Lamont,” Elias said with a sigh. “What?” he asked when they all turned to look at him. “Are we not all counting down the weeks until he is allowed back home?”

“No,” Robert said coldly. “I am not. The king has sworn he will ensure Eustace never harms us again.”

“And how will he do that?” another voice said, and even in this moment of bone-freezing despair, Noor smiled.

“Rhys!” She wiggled free of Robert’s arms and hurried over to greet their Welsh friend. “I had thought to see you at Christmas,” she chided. “So had Elena.”

“I am here now,” he said, smiling down at her. He looked different, his hair cut short, a closely cropped beard framing his wide mouth.

“When did you arrive?” Robert asked.

“Last night.” Rhys winked. “No reason to wake you all.”

No, none at all now that Elena had chosen to settle in a small cottage a stone’s throw from Harry and Tom.

Rhys turned to Noor. “Eustace de Lamont is a worm of a man,” he said. “And aye, I find it likely he may try to hurt you—well, mostly Robert—again. But he will fail, Noor. Not because of the king’s worthless promise, but because your man will keep you all safe.”

From Robert came a little chuckle. “Thank you, Rhys. I feel quite flattered.”

“You should be.” Rhys whacked his back. “Not that I wouldn’t do a better job,” he added, winking at Noor.

“Where have you been?” John asked. “You’ve been gone for weeks.”

“Here and there,” Rhys replied vaguely. “Although most recently, I come from Canterbury.” He grinned. “I fell in with Lionel and his companions just outside of Ludlow and chose to accompany them south.”



Robert frowned. "You did? Those were the king's men."

"Langton's actually. And I know a couple of them," Rhys said. "And it was nice to spend time with the lad."

Beside her, Robert tensed. She slipped her hand into his, and he squeezed down. Neither of them liked it when Rhys spent time with Lionel. Neither of them liked it when Rhys looked at Lionel as if he were the single hope left for his people, the Welsh. Because other than them and Amalia, only Rhys knew who Lionel really was, and it was their constant fear that one day Rhys would tell Lionel the truth and seduce him into what would likely be a very, very short life of rebellion against the king.

Rhys frowned, looking from one to the other. "I taught him a new song or two—and how to use his left fist in a fight."

"His left?"

"Aye. Best way to surprise an overbred milksop who thinks he is entitled to bully others because of his name."

Robert sighed. "It's that Will, isn't it?"

"It is." Rhys shrugged. "But next time he tries something, he'll be the one with a bleeding nose." He smirked. "He's strong, our Lionel. Aye, not as tall as some of the others, but strong." He looked at Noor. "And you have given him a beautiful mount. As proud as a peacock, he was, sitting astride that little mare."

"She needs a firm hand," Noor said. "But Lionel is an adept rider." She frowned, still considering this matter with Will, an unknown lad bullying her Lionel.

"He will manage," Robert said, tapping at her brow. "Especially now that Rhys has taught him to use his left fist. That was very remiss of me not to do so." He grinned. "I did, however, teach him to stamp down on dear Will's instep."

"Poor Will," John said with a deep sigh. "I myself taught our lad just how to use his elbows."

“And his knees,” Elias piped up. “One well-placed knee in that Will’s crotch and there may not even be any future little Wills.”

Noor burst out laughing.

Some weeks later, the entire household was in the chapel. It was still dark outside, but inside the golden light of candles illuminated Father Alain as he began to sing. God had given His servant a glorious voice, and the Latin rose pure and beautiful towards the ceiling. Noor closed her eyes; she loved Candlemas, the way it promised a new beginning, an end to the winter.

She opened her eyes to look across the aisle to where the men were standing. Robert was looking at her, his hands on the shoulders of their sons.

Their gazes locked.

“I love you,” she mouthed, and he smiled, releasing Hugh for an instant to blow her a kiss.

After Mass came the blessing of the candles, and Noor tightly gripped the candle Father Alain handed her. Beside her, Elena did the same, closing her eyes as she murmured a prayer. A tear slid down her cheek, and Noor sighed; poor Elena, torn with fear for Rhys, torn in two by her loyalty to the king she had always served and the man she had come to adore. She craned her neck, and there, right at the back, she could make out Rhys, his entire attention directed on Elena, not Father Alain.

Noor frowned. Rhys was adept at remaining mostly invisible to the people of Orton Manor when he visited. This time, she’d wager most of their household would have assumed him already gone—after that one day in the stable and, afterwards, in the hall, he’d not been down to the main manor once. Instead, he’d stayed with Elena, on occasion flitting over to Tom and Harry’s cottage, where Robert and John would join them.

Once again, she glanced at Robert. Her man was concerned about whatever it was that was brewing in Wales, and over the last few weeks his frustration had grown increasingly higher, likely because every attempt he made at convincing Rhys to stay well away from any brewing rebellion was met with a bland smile.

“Of course he is involved,” Robert had told her earlier this morn. “Rhys knows exactly what is afoot, and this time I fear it will be bad.” He’d scrubbed his face. “I’m going to ask him to leave,” he’d added in a low voice. “I cannot put my people at risk.”

“It will crush Elena if you force him to leave.”

“Aye. And yet she will be the first to tell you it must be done.” He gave her a tired look. “He is putting her through hell as well.”

Father Alain’s voice brought her back to the here and now, to Amalia shuffling on one side of her while Elena stood as still as a statue on the other. Noor studied her surreptitiously; since Elena had appeared at their door after the death of Queen Eleanor, she’d become a treasured companion, an older and wiser friend.

Just like Amalia, Elena was Castilian by birth, and the two old women had journeyed from Burgos to England as part of Queen Eleanor’s retinue. Not that Eleanor had been queen at the time, her husband’s father very much alive. And where Elena had served the young infanta, Amalia had been Noor’s mother’s nurse and chaperone. Sancha Alfonsez had not wanted to accompany her aunt to England, but what did a young girl’s opinion matter? For King Alfonso—Eleanor’s brother and Sancha’s father—this had likely been a good way to send his bastard daughter out of sight, out of mind. No, that was unfair. King Alfonso had by all accounts been a conscientious father, ensuring not only that Sancha was well taken care of but also educated by the nuns in Las Huelgas. He had even settled considerable lands on her—lands Queen Eleanor had deviously withheld from Noor.

There had been a time when Noor had despised Queen Eleanor for that. Now, she tried to remember her queen and great-aunt for her good qualities—her erudition, her wit—and had long since forgiven her for the lands. But she would never forgive her for effectively ripping Lionel from them.

Noor sighed. Aye, she knew Robert was right: the queen's dying request that the king give Lionel a place at court was likely an opportunity for Lionel—but she was as certain as the night was dark that the queen had not requested that out of the goodness of her heart. No, Queen Eleanor had her suspicions about Lionel's parentage, and only her fear for her husband's eternal soul had stopped her from sharing them with the king. Had she done so, Robert would likely have been dead and Lionel locked up behind the thick walls of Bristol Castle with Owain ap Dafydd.

Noor lifted her gaze to the statue of the Holy Mother. Poor Owain, now more than ten years locked away from the sun. What had it done to him, to the lad who'd been not much older than Hugh was now when he'd been torn from his weeping mother and carried off to permanent incarceration, escorted by her Robert? She glanced at her man. He never spoke of Owain, but she knew that whenever they were in Bristol, he would always approach the castle constable and ask for news.

The doors to the chapel creaked open, and Father Alain led the procession, lit candle held aloft. She saw the moment he recognised Rhys, a slight stumble to his step before he continued out into the bailey, his acolyte trotting behind him.

When they assembled in the hall for mulled wine, Rhys was not there. A good thing, all in all, especially when the first thing Father Alain did when he entered was to make a beeline for Robert, moving so quickly his dark robes flared around his long legs.

“Has he been here all this time?” he asked in an undertone.

“Who?” Robert asked, frowning at the priest’s tone.

“Rhys,” Father Alain hissed.

“Is he here?” John asked, standing on his toes. “I cannot see him.”

“Do not take me for a fool,” Father Alain growled. “I saw him in the chapel.”

“You thought you saw him,” Robert corrected.

“He is hard to miss,” the priest retorted. He shook his head and lowered his voice even further. “These are dangerous times—especially for anyone succouring a would-be rebel.”

“Rhys is a friend,” Robert bit back. “And as far as I know, he isn’t rebelling.”

“Not right now he isn’t.” Father Alain closed his eyes for an instant. “Saints, give me strength.”

“And right now he isn’t here either,” John put in.

“No, because he is likely hiding in Lady Elena’s cottage, making as much of a sinner of her as he is himself.”

“For shame!” Noor said. “With what right do you judge someone for loving?”

The priest flushed. “It isn’t the loving. It’s the acting upon it. Fornicating is a sin.” His voice softened. “I do not begrudge them that. But if he loves her—and you—he should stay away.”

“He has nowhere else,” Noor said. “His family, his home—it has all been taken from him by a covetous king.”

“Noor,” Robert said with a sigh.

“What?” She gestured at their little group. “We are among friends, are we not? So surely I can voice my true thoughts. King Edward had no right to Wales. None. In truth, he stole, which would make him culpable of several sins, would it not? Sins far worse than bedding your lady love.”

“I cannot have you talk about our king like that,” Robert said, but there was little heat in his tone.

She shrugged. “I don’t do so where I can be overheard.”

Father Alain wagged a finger at her. “You must be more careful. Much more careful. What you just spoke is treason, and we all know how traitors end their days.” He inhaled. “But in principle, you are right. Except that our king would argue he did as he did for the well-being of his people, once and for all putting a stop to Welsh raids and violence.”

She made as if to speak, but he held up his hand. “A king must sometimes put his own soul in peril for the greater good. Which is why his good subjects should pray daily for his deliverance.” He frowned. “And rebels must not be succoured.”

“A man who fights for what is rightfully his is not a rebel,” Noor argued.

“In this England of ours, he is,” Robert said, drawing her close. “No matter how just you find his cause.”

It wasn’t only Rhys who was missing from the hall. Come the afternoon, Noor therefore grabbed her cloak and staff, whistled for Goblin and trudged her way through the postern and up the meadows to Elena’s cottage.

This time of the year, the little garden surrounding it was a collection of withered plants and dark earth, but come summer Elena’s efforts would fill the space with fragrances and colour. Robert had not liked having Elena live on her own, but the older woman had insisted, saying that after living all her life at the beck and call of a queen, she desired to build herself a home of her own—however small.

The forest crept up to encircle most of the cottage, and at the back there was a small shed Rhys used to stable his horse when he stayed. This, Noor suspected, was why Elena had insisted on

this specific cottage, making it relatively easy for Rhys to slip in and out unnoticed.

Noor knocked before entering. The single room was as neat as ever, the hangings pulled back from the bed that stood in one corner. A table, two chairs and a couple of stools, two large chests and a shelf containing three books—not much to show for an entire life.

There was a small earthenware jug on the table holding a collection of snowdrops. From the hearth came the scents of herbs and parsnips, and at the table Elena was sitting, staring down at the fabric in her lap.

“Elena?” Noor knelt before her. “Are you all right?”

“He just left.” Elena gave her a little smile. “And every time he does, it is as if he takes a sliver of my heart with him.” She wiped her eyes. “And leaves a sliver of his own behind.” She uttered a low moan. “It is not fair, is it? An entire life, I hoped that one day—one day!—I would find love. And when I do, it is to a man who can give me nothing but the odd day here and there, a man who will likely never grow old with me because he’ll be dead long before. Dead!”

“He has left before and always come back,” Noor said.

“It is different now.” Elena cleared her throat. “Things in Wales are becoming more fraught by the day, and Rhys is right in the middle of it. Where else would he be, fool of a man that he is?” She sighed, stroking the thick fustian she was presently converting into a new tunic for Rhys. “I understand him, I truly do,” she admitted in a low voice. “But how can he think a ragtag band of Welsh rebels can defeat the mighty Edward?” She looked at Noor. “And if he dies, how will I even find out? Who will come to tell me if he lies wounded? Who will tell me where he lies buried? No one will. No one!”

Elena pressed the fabric to her face and wept while Noor held her as hard as she could.

“They’ll fail, won’t they?” Noor accepted a goblet of wine from Robert and reclined in the window seat. He joined her, stretching out his long legs before her.

“Ordinarily, yes,” he said. “But this time . . . At present, the king is much distracted by his hopes for a new crusade and the strained relationship with France. So if the Welsh time things right . . .” He drank deeply. “Not that it will help in the end,” he said bleakly. “In the end, Edward will emerge victorious, and nothing will have changed except for all the men who lie dead.” He shivered.

Men like him. Like Rhys. Noor leaned her head against his shoulder. *Keep him safe, Holy Mother, keep my man safe.*