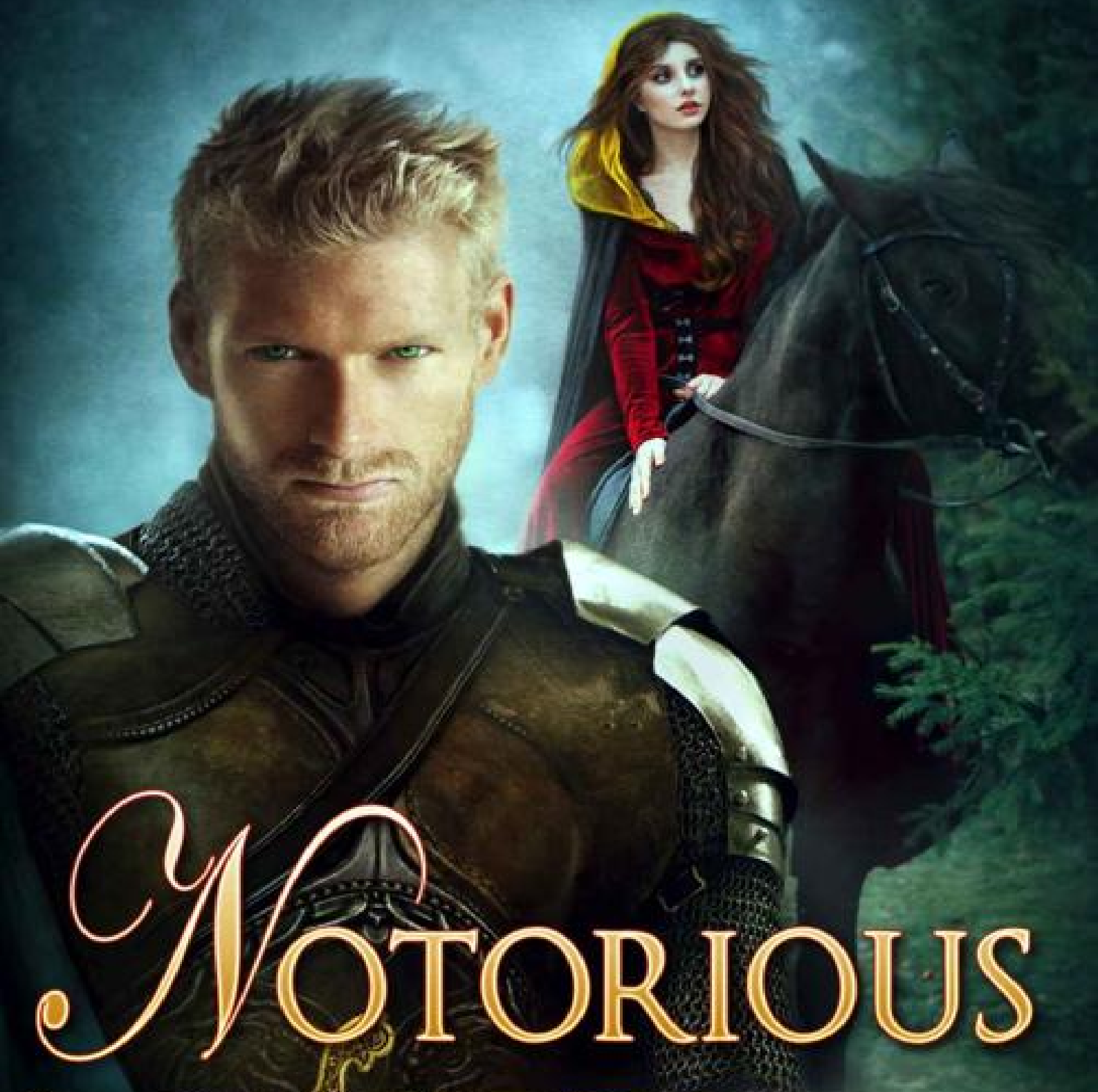


THE WULFRITHS. FIRST. IN BETWEEN. IN THE END.



Notorious

AGE OF HONOR: BOOK FIVE

TAMARA LEIGH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NOTORIOUS

BOOK FIVE: AGE OF HONOR

TAMARA LEIGH

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THE WULFRITHS. FIRST. IN BETWEEN. IN THE END.

The late middle ages. England's king seeks to recover the French lands of his ancestor William the Conqueror and claim the continental throne. France's king aspires to seize the remainder of his royal vassal's lands and retain his throne. So begins the Hundred Years' War, the backdrop against which the formidable Wulfriths of the AGE OF CONQUEST and AGE OF FAITH series continue their tale.

THE KING'S SPY

For years, Lady Vianne Wardieu has navigated the intrigues of the French court, supplying the English king with intelligence and preserving her cover at the ruin of her reputation. Entangled with the King of France's advisor, danger and sacrifice shadow her every step. When her bid to return to England is thwarted and ensnares an innocent in her schemes, she vows to escape again. But her plans falter when a man from her past appears seeking revenge. Or so she believes. Discovering he was sent by their king to extract vital information, she forces an alliance, offering secrets for aid in securing her freedom. As their paths merge and they become bound by more than necessity, Vianne strives to shield her heart from her reluctant savior, certain just as her notorious past cannot be rewritten, neither can it be forgiven.

THE KING'S MAN

Commanded by King Edward to retrieve intelligence from his spy at the French court, Sir Warin Wulfrith's disdain for the lady's notoriety and anger over her endangerment of his sister tests his honor—and further when she sets terms for her cooperation. As they navigate treacherous terrain to outmaneuver her pursuers, his perception of her alters when he discovers great depth and vulnerability beneath her wild beauty. With the line between duty and the need to safeguard her blurring, he questions whether his fiercely-guarded emotions are at risk of falling under her spell. And if true salvation lies not only in escaping external threats but finding solace and redemption in each other.

From USA Today Bestselling author Tamara Leigh, the fifth book in a new medieval romance series set in the 14th century during The Hundred Years' War. Watch for PERILOUS, the tale of Lady Fira Wulfrith and Chevalier Amaury de Chanson in Winter 2023/2024.

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Cover Design: Ravven

Ebook ISBN-13: 978-1-942326-64-9

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1-942326-65-6

*To our son, Skyler, and daughter-in-law, Mariola,
on your wedding this 21st day of October, 2023.
May you love as you have been loved, nurture as you
have been nurtured, and bless as you have been blessed.*

“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her... When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.” ~ John 8:7-11 KJV

PROLOGUE

Palais de la Cité

Paris, France, 1351

Could one's heart fall from the breast, surely that the fate of hers.

He was not supposed to be here. From her chamber window she had watched him ride away, assuring her hours in which to exploit his absence. But that was his voice in the corridor—and louder than usual for anger toward one whose query was sweetened with deference.

Amid the paused war between France and England, Lady Vianne of the English house of Wardieu was trapped, the only way out of the apartment of King Jean's advisor being the door through which he would enter once his heavy stride resumed.

Hide! she commanded, hand to her chest as she swept her gaze around a room familiar for past trespasses. It was well lit, sunlight entering through the window at her back, slanting across the desk where Rollon de Talliere conducted many of his king's affairs, and touching all else within.

Unless a miracle turned away the man none could persuade her was not responsible for the murder of her betrothed five years past, she would be had. But then her eye was drawn to the half-open door of the bedchamber she had trespassed on only the first day she dared gather intelligence beyond what was overheard unintentionally or otherwise.

When more angry words sounded from the corridor, she moved so quickly from behind the desk she struck an ankle

against one of its legs. It hurt, but her muffled cry was more for the rustle of paper caught in the crush—one of two pieces hidden in pockets sewn around her skirt's hem.

Moments later, she slipped into the bedchamber she prayed would save her from detection. Though the curtains were partially drawn, enough light entered through the window to make sense of luxurious furnishings, foremost the postered bed whose upper rails were hung with red- and gold-striped fabric that could be opened in summer to cool the occupants and closed in winter to warm them. There was sufficient cover should De Talliere glance inside en route to his desk, but of no worth if his return to the palace was not a matter of business.

“The garderobe,” she rasped, but as she started toward the corner where a door stood against the scent of human waste, the outer door opened.

“I will not say it again, Gustave!” De Talliere barked at his squire, then did repeat himself. “Find the imp and thrash him!”

“Oui, my lord,” the younger man said with the weariness of one agreeing to a task likely beyond him, then the door slammed so hard Vianne felt its vibrations beneath her feet.

“It *was* intentional,” growled De Talliere whose boots she prayed would move him to the desk she could only hope appeared undisturbed for having no moment to verify it.

Now weighty footsteps. Did they advance diagonally toward the bedchamber? If so, it was too late to reach the garderobe, and even were it not, that could be his destination.

Do something! commanded her inner voice. *Regardless of being discovered at his desk or here, he will know this English lady for a spy, and further proof when a search uncovers your pockets. Then what was done the clerk who took English coin to report the state of the King of France's finances will be done you—whipped naked through the streets, disemboweled, and hung for all to witness the punishment of those who stand with the King of England. Think, Vianne!*

Considering where she found herself and De Talliere's obsession with her since she arrived at the French court to wed

her betrothed in 1346 before the war with England began in earnest, she need not think far.

Just as she believed the king's advisor had killed Chevalier Balian to gain her for himself, he had believed his influence with the royal house of Valois would aid in overcoming her resistance. It had not, even when King Philip died last year and was succeeded by his son over whom De Talliere exercised greater influence. Blessedly, neither had King Jean made it hard for her to refuse a man she privately loathed and sidelong scorned. But then, she had cultivated value to survive in a country hostile to the English while she served King Edward as asked of the nearly sixteen-year-old who was cruelly widowed before even wed.

Now, certain the bedchamber was his destination, Vianne had to accept her life was about to change in ways that would have her belly warring with her gorge, mind with her heart, and sin with her faith. But if it kept her from a torturous death and allowed her to continue saving her countrymen's lives, so be it.

God help me! she sent heavenward.

When the broad-shouldered, going-to-fat Rollon de Talliere entered with a scowl that further evidenced he had well over twice as many years as she, he was removing his cotehardie with such violence the seams might tear. However, upon seeing her where she leaned against an end post—hands behind, elbows out, a slippered foot peeking from beneath a hem that concealed stolen secrets—he halted so abruptly it appeared he walked into a wall.

Play the part or die! she told herself. Though that part was barely written and done with the ink of desperation, it was all she had.

Fingers cramping on the post she gripped behind, she tilted her head and cast a perfected smile never before gifted him. Though that flirtation did not outright invite intimacy, it told she might be receptive at another time, and that made men confide as they should not.

De Talliere blinked, then as if her smile and stance lacked the power to override suspicion, he demanded, “What do you in my apartment, Lady Vianne?”

Heart pounding as she imagined a fox’s did when cornered by a slavering hound, she gave a little laugh. “As you are no stripling, my lord, you know what I do.” Here was the place to moisten her lips as did ladies of the court who slipped away with men to venture beyond flirtation, but she was nearly bereft of saliva.

His nostrils flared. “After all these years and hundreds of snubbings?”

Thousands, she silently corrected and said, “I did not expect you to give up so easily.”

“Easily!”

No greater exaggeration, she thought, then shrugged. “One day you are trying and trying to get me alone, the next you are gone from court—and stay gone for months, leaving me to turn my attention upon men with less appreciation for the sport.”

“Sport?”

In other circumstances, his single-word responses would rouse scornful laughter for how many he often used to express what needed far less. “And then to learn the reason for your absence—that another woman has permanently claimed your affections...” She trailed off, mewled sorrowfully. “It is right I congratulate you on wedding Lady Baldwina, but I must admit to envy.”

“Envy?” He took a step toward her that would have set her to flight were it possible to get past him. Of course, were she able to escape those meaty hands, a barked command would see her intercepted by the palace guard. “You speak as if I never offered you my name, Lady Vianne—as though you did not reject me once, twice, three times!”

“That I did,” she said, then quickly wrote more of her part. “A pity it is not enough to be desired, that I wish to be loved as well.” She frowned. “As you are French the same as

Eleanor of Aquitaine who fashioned the rules of courtly love, I expected you to observe those dictates. Instead, you discontinued your pursuit and wed one younger than I.”

Were it possible to keep distaste from her words, she would have remarked on that lady being the one whose betrothal his son had sought. Vianne did not like Pierre who was a compact version of his father, but she empathized with betrayal he must feel for Rollon gaining Lady Baldwina for himself. And the woman’s generous dowry.

Silently she named him *vile*, then knowing he would see her subjected to the same as the traitorous clerk if she failed to play her part well, she straightened from the post. Shake in her legs, hoping her raised chin and calculated steps rendered it unseen, she crossed the rug and halted nearly within reach. She had little hope of leaving here with her virtue intact, but as men liked their games, it was worth a try.

“Though your impatience denied me being titled your wife and sharing your bed with the Church’s approval, Rollon”—she purposely used his Christian name—“providing your conscience does not suffer over marriage vows given in the sight of God, I see no reason we cannot continue the chase now I have permitted you to study my playing pieces.” She dipped her head. “I shall see you at supper.”

One step past him was all she gained before he snatched her arm and whipped her against his chest.

Fearing she would heave over what could prove violation of the nuptial bed, she swallowed, tipped up her face, and playfully rebuked, “Have you not learned the wages of impatience? I—”

His other hand slammed over her jaw. “Prove you are here because you desire me.”

Could he hear the banging of her heart? Braving eyes gone nearly black, she tried to sweep her tongue over her lips, but it dragged. “Surely the words I spoke suffice.”

“I want proof!”

What she wanted was to spit in his face and slam a knee up between his legs, but she said, “You must not be acquainted with the pursuit of English ladies, but give me time and—”

“*You* do not know how Frenchmen pursue their women! But you shall learn this day—*if* what you tell is true.”

He was a fool, but not so great as to allow her to slip away from him and the treasonous clerk’s fate.

Lest her stomach spill, she swallowed again, then donning a smile that pained all the way to her feet, said, “For how much the chase thrills, I shall miss it, but I yield.”

His head came down, and as she commanded her body to respond opposite revulsion, his rough kiss put the taste of iron on her tongue. “Kiss me back,” he growled.

She did and, eyes closed, it was not as terrible as expected. Beyond his mouth belonging to one who had slain her betrothed and beyond another woman having a claim to it though likely neither did Lady Baldwin want it, this was but a mouth upon another mouth.

I can do this, she told herself. No matter what I feel and what others say, to preserve my life and aid my countrymen, this lady no longer a girl is capable.

He released her, but as she started to praise the Lord he pulled back from sin, he began fumbling with her buttons.

She thought she would cry—and might have had his impatience not shown itself again in abandoning the buttons and reaching to her skirts. With their pockets.

“Non!” She slapped his hands away, and when his lids narrowed, said, “Slowly, and let us begin with you.”

Now confusion, but when she began drawing off his cottehardie, he murmured, “Oui, my love.”

She loathed being named that, but it gave her breathing space and—were it possible—time to prepare for what was ahead.

As she set the garment atop the bench at the foot of the bed, she saw a streak of mud across its back.

Knowing he was particular about his finery and seeking to delay the inevitable, she said, “Considering the state of your cotehardie, it appears you met with mishap.” And there was more evidence of it. “Your tunic and hose suffered as well.”

He peered down his front. “Accursed imp!”

Then likely for his loss of the saddle, his squire was to thrash the boy responsible. She nearly asked which Parisian street it happened on, but that would reveal she had known he departed the palace, giving him more reason to suspect her presence here.

“Was it a palace servant’s child?” she asked.

“Non, a street urchin. He ran in front of me, causing my mount to rear. For the loss of my seat, I returned to change my clothes.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I would say I am sorry, but had such not befallen you, my wait would have been longer.” No sooner said than a thought struck. If he acted on it, her reprieve might be temporary, but something in her favor could happen between now and being forced to make good on her profession of desire.

She gave a gasp of surprise. “Were you on King Jean’s business? As I would not be responsible for keeping you from it, perhaps—”

“It can wait.” He began tugging at her clothes.

Panic rising, it took some moments to find the words to remind him to go slow, but this time he ignored her—until, no falsity about her fear, she revealed she was virtuous.

For flirtations that served well in gaining intelligence, clearly he did not believe her, but he humored her and, in the end, was so captivated by what proved truth that if any suspicion remained, it was neither seen nor heard.

Days later, at a banquet for a delegation sent by the Pope to discuss France’s war with England that was expected to resume once both countries recovered from the pestilence’s decimation of their populations, Lady Vianne Wardieu entered

the immense hall on the arm of one of the king's most esteemed advisors.

With much practice in front of a mirror to ensure her smile reflected contentment rather than revulsion that had several times made her retch in private, she progressed among the nobles and stayed his side when he paused to speak with one or another to create opportunities to mark her as his property. Blessedly, his touch was restrained here, but it was familiar enough that any who looked their way knew his pursuit was finally rewarded—and in the eyes of some, better rewarded for it being unnecessary to wed an Englishwoman.

After the feasting of which she could eat little for being on display seated beside him...after recitation of one of her compositions to entertain the Pope's delegation...after King Jean commanded his advisor to his side...after enduring the company of noblewomen who now looked upon her with something more than dislike of the English, Vianne sought solitude.

Though she ached to withdraw to her chamber, this morn it was given to another and her possessions moved to Rollon's apartment. Despite her prayers he would make an effort to save his wife the humiliation of him keeping a mistress at court—all the more degrading for how recently they wed—he made it blatantly clear Vianne was his.

Pressing her lips to keep from weeping over becoming a *leman* as the English were inclined to name an illicit lover, she pushed her back into the corner of a dim alcove and stared at the people between her and the great doors beyond which lay only a slight hope of escape. If not for impending resumption of the war and England's need for intelligence that was now nearer her skirt's hem, she would try to squeeze through the eye of that needle.

“If not for that,” she whispered. And startled when she heard a laugh mostly familiar for how poorly it fit a future king. Unlike his sire who was tall and powerfully built, the thirteen-year-old Charles the Dauphin was of such slight physique and ill proportion there was little chance he would boast a warrior's build and stature upon attaining adulthood.

When he and his companions halted a dozen feet ahead with their backs to her, he revealed the recipient of his laughter. “For the stink of the English of that *lady*, never would I admit to my sire she does our beautiful language proud.”

“That is the French of her,” one of his companions said.

“A pity it is not enough to absolve her of an English sire,” said the other.

Charles harrumphed. “It matters not to De Talliere. Like a parched dog presented a bowl of water, he laps up his success after years of panting after her.” He snorted. “When next the whore presents one of her rare compositions, mayhap it will recount the fumbings of one nearly old enough to be her grandfather.”

Better than the fumbings of one young enough to be my wee brother, Vianne silently scorned King Jean’s son who had been like a pup with its nose to the ground this past year, scenting her footsteps and trying to get his twitching nose beneath her skirts.

She breathed deep, but still anger slammed against self-loathing. However, some good came of that bitterness, it keeping her from reacting in a way that offended the Dauphin or saying something that proved as dangerous as if she had failed to allay Rollon’s suspicions.

What think you of this composition, pup? she silently demanded. *How does an English noblewoman become the leman of the King of France’s advisor? How does she withstand the notoriety of being paraded for all to envy the murderer’s prowess? You wish the answer? Look upon this two-faced coin, one side self-serving to save her life, the other sacrificial to save her countrymen. The choice of life over death is costly, but it will be at the expense of you and your people for your grandfather refusing to allow a sixteen-year-old lady to return to England. That is how. That is this. That is now.*

Vianne pushed off the wall and stepped from the alcove. As she passed nearer the young men than necessary, she

smiled from one wide-eyed youth to the other—and more brightly than done in days.

CHAPTER I

King Jean's 35th Birthday

April 26, 1354

Three years since yielding to Rollon to preserve her life and more easily gain intelligence.

Three years of being displayed as the mistress of the King of France's favored advisor.

Three years of near silence from her family for her heartbreaking fall from grace.

Three years of occasional respite from Rollon during his wife's visits to court.

Three years in which the Dauphin grew only a bit taller and broader, but considerably sharper of wit.

Three years of maintaining her cover to keep harm from those of much consequence to her—providing she excluded two tragedies that sought to break her, the first a little life lost a year ago, the second several lives lost four months past though she lacked confirmation her actions proved devastating. And now, if Rollon did not believe her truth, there could be a third tragedy.

Perched on the foot of the bed, head in her hands, Vianne started to fold over. She did not make it far before discomfort and the reminder she would have greater freedom at the palace than she had these past months at Rollon's manor house made her straighten. She would be watched here, but not suffocatingly since it would reflect poorly on her jailer who

wished all to believe an ailment had caused her prolonged absence from court. And if God answered her prayers, more believable that in less than five months.

“Will You answer them?” she whispered. “Or will this prove another tragedy for what I set in motion when I fled France believing I had only myself to lose?”

Cessation of sound in the room beyond—the scratching quill done with its work—returned her to her feet ahead of the creak of the chair and Rollon’s call, “Is it a poor fit? I told the seamstress it looked the bodice would have to be taken in.” When she did not answer, he demanded, “Let me see.”

She could not, the gown remaining untouched where its voluminous crimson was spread atop the bed like an offering of...

She did not know what. Nor care. What mattered was relief that though upon her return to the palace Rollon had immediately ushered her to the bedchamber, it was only to exhibit his generosity despite his son nearly convincing him of her betrayal.

Pierre was right. She had not been taken against her will to England. However, when he had returned her to his sire, she had played her part well enough that she lived, though not well enough to restore her relative freedom—nor Rollon’s high regard and trust since he harbored doubt of a strength that stripped her of power in their relationship and saw her rebuked for slight offenses.

Then there was the item she had been required to don when she left the manor house, even if only to walk the garden. Would he be angered when he learned she had not brought that which rendered her more visible, subtly humiliating her though he told he did not believe her capable of betraying him?

Seeing his shadow cross the threshold ahead of him, she stood taller and drew in her abdominal muscles.

Rollon entered. And halted as abruptly and scowled as deeply as the day he first found her here. “Why have you not

donned it?”

Her weary smile was genuine. “The travel being long, I need to sit a while and—”

“There is no time! We have few hours before the celebration of King Jean’s birthday.” He strode past her, snatched the carefully arranged gown off the bed, and thrust it at her. “Now!”

Hands trembling, she took it.

“Five minutes.” He raised as many fingers and pivoted.

Silently, she thanked the Lord he did not stand over her while she bared a body he had not seen in over a month for his king ordering him to return to Paris. It was changing, which would be more evident had she a better appetite. Still, Rollon had only to look near upon it to see what she dreaded unveiling.

Though the seamstress had erred as rarely done, still the bodice of the gown of low neckline and vivid red was snug. It could be easily corrected by moving the buttons, but she feared that as Rollon believed the garment too large he would guess the reason for its alteration. For his distrust, surely it was better to reveal her pregnancy here where he would not lose control as he might at the manor with only servants to bear witness, but she was not ready. Were it possible to be ready...

A knock sounding, she swung around and watched through the doorway as the king’s advisor strode the outer room, exited, and closed the door to converse with whoever had come. As their muffled voices tempted her forward to press an ear to the door, she was struck by a means of easing the gown’s fit until she could secretly move the buttons. She but needed Rollon’s exchange to carry on a few minutes.

It did, and after slamming the door, he returned.

Appreciation flickered in his eyes as he stared at the tops of her breasts, but when he moved his gaze lower, a frown displaced the light and he said with what could be accusation, “It fits.”

Grateful she had been given time to remove her chemise, an undergarment of fairly thick cloth, she clenched her stomach muscles further, gripped the skirt, and curtsied. “It does fit, and beautifully.”

He stepped nearer. “I thought it a bit large.”

“So you said, but you engaged my usual seamstress, did you not?”

“Oui. Still...”

“None know my measurements better,” *Just as you know not how much I detest you*, she thought, then put her feet between his and slid her arms around him. “I thank you for the gift.”

She hoped he would not tip up her chin. He did. She hoped he would not kiss her. He did. But unlike other kisses since she returned to him, this one was not rough nor long. And now he smiled and tapped her nose. “Did you bring your yellow-hooded mantle?”

For becoming more adept at quickly writing her part these years, with little effort she kept her face composed and transitioned it to believable surprise. “Pray, forgive me! I treasure that gift as well, but your summons was unexpected.”

His thick eyebrows nearly touched.

“And since your missive told the king expected a new composition as a birthday present, I had little time to prepare for travel.”

That excuse far more acceptable than owning to having stuffed the mantle in a corner of the wardrobe, Rollon grunted. “When I returned to Paris, I should not have assured King Jean of your recovery. When days past he commanded I send for you, I sought to dissuade him, but he misses you.” He tapped her nose again. “Should he inquire about the illness with which you were struck, much exaggeration, oui?”

So he and others remain ignorant of her time in England lest they question the truth of her abduction and loyalty to one who dealt in the king’s secrets. And Rollon’s ability to hold close those secrets.

“Much exaggeration,” she said and stepped back. “I am glad the seamstress was able to complete the gown as quickly as I did my composition.”

“Not quickly,” he said petulantly. “Since I meant to gift it to you when given leave to return to Chevreuse, she has been working on it over a sennight—and had to be prodded to finish it in time for your arrival.” He raised his eyebrows. “You like it?”

Needing to know if what she believed of it was true to better gauge the state of her stay at the palace, she said, “It is breathtaking, though...”

His chin jerked back, the weight added to his bones these years making it disappear amid the thick of his neck. “Though?”

Looking from that gullet to the eyes of one she professed to love, she angled her thoughts heavenward. *It is hard to believe You grant me strength to continue this sinful ruse, but surely the greatest portion is from You, Lord.* Then she smoothed her hands down the lustrous material and said, “Do you not think the color intense?”

He considered the gown she imagined the same hue as the cord the Biblical prostitute hung from a window in Jericho to alert the conquering Hebrews whose lives Rahab saved that those in her home were to be spared. Then Rollon chuckled, and when he tapped her nose again, it was a struggle not to bite his finger. “The red makes it easier for me and those tasked with protecting my love to keep you in sight.”

Meaning if not by way of the bright yellow hood worn by London prostitutes to designate their profession, then by way of the blood-red gown.

As vomit stirred, the spillage of which would make him further question the seamstress’ measurements, she pecked a kiss on his lips. “I cherish my privacy, but I accept what is required to ensure I am not parted from you again.” She dropped to her heels, then hopeful there truly were too few hours before they must appear in the feasting hall, said, “Since the gown requires no alteration, I will lie down a while.”

He glanced at the bed. “Would I could join you, but for certain this eve.” He turned, but came back around. “What of your composition?”

It was natural to clasp her hands upon her abdomen, but lest his eyes were drawn there, she lowered them to her sides. “As told, completed.”

“That does not mean you are done. It must be delivered well, especially on the occasion of our king’s birthday. Hence, practice is needed.”

Not a suggestion as it would have been before she conspired to return to her country. Embracing his newly acquired power bred of distrust, it was a command.

“Then I shall practice, Rollon.”

“Good. Now as I have matters that need tending, I will be gone an hour, perhaps two. Remain here, and if you require anything, my man shall accommodate you if possible.”

A guard outside the door as there had not been before, it being enough to rely on one or two at the foot of the stairs to ensure only those with apartments above accessed them.

Rollon was determined his pretty bird did not depart her cage, whether death was dealt any who thought to pluck her from it or her wings must be more closely clipped.

At her acquiescent smile, he stepped out and closed the door. Had he not told she should direct requests to the guard, she would have held her breath in anticipation of being locked in the bedchamber.

For minutes she stood in sunlight come through the window and listened as he set his desk aright—and waited for the clatter of keys that earlier unlocked drawers never before locked. There it was, ensuring if Pierre knew her better than his sire, the secret matters of France were no longer hers to cull and pass to her contact who had seen her intelligence carried to England since shortly after her betrothed was murdered.

More clatters and scrapes, his heavy tread, the outer door opening and closing.

She let her chin drop, and after a brief bout of self-pity, reminded herself that after all that had transpired during her return to England, which included her family refusing to allow her to return home, she could be patient and adapt to these circumstances. It might take years, but she would regain Rollon's trust and, even were she unable to continue aiding her country, escape.

"But first we must survive," she said and was not surprised her hand was on her belly where it did not belong lest it become habit ahead of finding the least dangerous moment to tell Rollon that Pierre would no longer be an only child. But how to make him believe he was the father so he not question its paternity as done the one other time she was with child?

"Aid me, Lord," she whispered, then crossed to the wardrobe that held an assortment of gowns alongside his garments. In a small box she found what was needed to provide the breathing room necessary to wear a thin chemise that would prevent the gown's embellishments from pricking her skin.

As she gripped the scissors to nip away thread, light ran down the keen edges, and she was struck by the oddity of once more possessing something that could cut—and gut.

Not since the sailors hauled her over the side of the ship to return her to France had she been allowed even a meat knife. It had begun with Pierre who did not trust her at all. When he delivered her to his sire and she requested the means by which she did not have to be fed like a child, that precaution was upheld by Rollon under the pretense of devotedly performing the service for one he had not realized how much she meant to him until she was lost. And yet during his month-long absence from the manor, ever her meat was delivered in bite-sized pieces.

Given the chance, could she put a blade in Rollon? Before fleeing last December, she would have thought it impossible. However, as she had killed his former squire, Gustave who, in accompanying Pierre to England to retrieve her had sought to ravish her, surely she could do so again were her body and life threatened—and her babe.

Determined not to lose another child, when she returned the sewing box to the wardrobe after resetting the buttons, an item was missing. It was not an ideal weapon, but far better than words cast against closed ears, desperate emotion, and a slap that would serve no better were she to make a fist of her hand.

I WILL CLING to You even do You not cling to me. I will watch for the door You open even do You never open it. I will treasure the strength You grant even do You not grant enough so I not suffocate.

Escorted on Rollon's arm, thrice between the apartment and great hall Vianne silently recited words first prayed on her return voyage, and which were now habit when it felt her feet curled over the edge of darkness and she was tempted to lean into it.

It was bad enough returning to the palace she had not wished to enter again. Bad enough once more being among those who tolerated her for years of her moving among them yet still regarded her as the hated English. Bad enough that after the feasting she must honor King Jean with a recitation, making her more an object of interest.

Bad, but to feel again the hand Rollon landed on her abdomen this eve after she exited the bedchamber in her finery and to hear again his growled words, *I shall rejoice—providing it does not arrive before the passing of five and a half months...*

For her isolation at the manor since the second week of January and his incessant presence until near the end of March, he would not question the child's paternity were it fewer than three and a half months in her womb. Unfortunately, it was not. When she fled him in December, she was unaware of her pregnancy, meaning if she could keep this babe alive long enough to be born healthy, it would arrive in four and a half months.

Thus, not merely bad. Terrifyingly bad. Rather than Rollon accept she had conceived ahead of her professed abduction, he would think the child sired by an Englishman, and likely Sir Rhys de Arell from whom she had withheld intelligence, giving him no choice but to return her to England so she could deliver it to King Edward herself.

Now seated beside Rollon near the high table, smiling and occasionally laughing as required of her these two hours, she struggled with the temptation to dull fear, revulsion, and despair with excess drink more than she had upon resuming her role as harlot. She did not want heavily watered wine. She wanted the dark red she waved away each time it came around. But the child...

Rollon's hand beneath the table closing over her thigh, breath across her cheek wafting the strong scent whose taste she wished on her tongue, he said, "You are a beacon, my dear."

For a gown so red it renders me almost vulgar, she thought, then feeling the stiff of her smile, softened it into something suggestive. "As ever, I am yours, my lord."

"I could not be happier." As if to impart some sweet thing and be heard over the musicians in the gallery, he nuzzled her ear. "If the child is mine," he rasped. As the food she had eaten was tossed by watered wine, he moved his hand to her abdomen where moments earlier a flutter was felt. This time his touch was gentle, and yet it seemed just as threatening.

I will cling to You even do You not cling to me, she sent to the Lord and turned her face to Rollon. "You break the heart of one who wanted only to be in your arms again." Her tears were genuine, the kiss touched to his mouth false. "I should not have to give my word you are the only lover I have had, but I do. This son or daughter is yours." Then silently she added, *And I will do whatever I can to ensure you never lay eyes nor hands on my child.*

Seeing struggle all about him, she thought he leaned away from what Pierre believed of her, but then he returned to her ear. "And yet you sought to hide this joyous news, making me

question..." His fingers on her abdomen dug into what he suspected another man's doing.

Anger casting off its chains, she slapped her hand over his and sank nails into it. "You may forget the last time I had such joyous news," she hissed, "but I never shall."

He blinked, and the tight about his face eased, causing lengthening jowls to disrupt the straight of what remained of his jawline. "You know I did not mean that to happen. Had you not—"

"But it did happen, and I had every right and reason to protest my innocence. Now get your hand off me, and I will try to make you proud of *my* gift to King Jean—and forgive you."

Now threat about *her*, which could see her pay a considerable price once they were alone again. However, having played the submissive since her return, it had been impossible to stuff herself back into the bottle she had occupied to save herself—and the child when she became aware of its existence.

I shall regret losing control, she thought, but as it was too late to draw rein and the bit of power gained in unsettling him was more intoxicating than undiluted wine, she continued gripping his hand upon her.

And was more intoxicated when his eyes moistened. "I do not want to question your love, Vianne, but I need time and further proof." He turned his hand up into hers, and with a smile meant for all who looked their way, raised her knuckles to his mouth and kissed them.

Play the part, she told herself, but unable to summon a smile, dipped her head as if too touched for words.

When he released her and retrieved his drink, she put her own goblet to her lips and did not resent the watered wine as much as before. Sipping, she moved her gaze over the celebrants and suppressed the impulse to glare at those openly watching her—among them Rollon's son she hoped would not attend.

He was the hardest to ignore. For what appeared an affectionate display between the king's advisor and her, he would put more poison in his sire's ear. And would be satisfied only when she suffered a traitor's death, as told her when she was forced to watch him cast overboard the English brigands who aided in taking her from Sir Warin Wulfrith—a baron in whose care she was left when the French made hostages of a Wulfrith sister and Sir Rhys.

If not for Aubert Marionne, a chevalier ever at Pierre's side just as he was this eve, she would have been dropped in the sea as well. Loyal to Rollon, the older man had reason about him that tempered Pierre's behavior though he was of an age it was shameful he required a keeper.

As she considered Marionne, the man raised his eyebrows, then tilted his goblet her direction as if congratulating her on a fine performance. Always he saw better than his lord and charge, but hopefully not enough that his insight would make possible what Pierre wished done to her.

Vianne continued scrutinizing the guests and lingered over those seated at a table that appeared exclusive to Norman nobles—powerful lords given to slyly partnering with the English king in the war providing it served their interests better than supporting their liege, the King of France.

As she paused on a chevalier nearing middle age whose name escaped her, though it should not for past conversations yielding information she forwarded to King Edward, she was struck by the feeling she was watched by one not merely curious nor resentful of the English lady who was afforded great honor at court.

Malevolence like that of Pierre? she wondered and, taking another sip, picked her gaze over the table's other occupants. Of note was one who held her gaze and smiled, and another with his back to her as he conversed with someone at the table behind. The latter's build was excellent and blond hair longer than short, though shorter than fashionably shoulder-length—as if he needed a cut or grew it out. Had not the king's herald proclaimed an end to the feasting and announced

entertainment would commence in a quarter hour, she might have waited for him to turn back.

The hand Rollon set on her arm gentle, he said, “You practiced well, oui?”

“As all is fixed in my mind, I have no need of the written word.”

“Good.” He raised her with him and escorted her to the antechamber where she and others—jokesters, troubadours, jugglers, masters of exotic animals—would ensure they were perfectly presentable when called upon.

His kiss also gentle, she realized though he exploited his power of suspicion over her as if taking in hand a good dog gone bad, he missed the self-assurance with which she expressed opinions sometimes so cutting he teased she sharpened them with a whetstone. No whetstone. Rather, restrained distaste when offense was dealt her and the English disparaged.

Resisting a flicker of goodwill toward him, she was glad of it when he tapped her nose and said, “Impress the king, and once we are alone, the night will seem without end.”

What he believed a treat for this well-heeled dog... She bowed her lips, inclined her head.

When he departed, she set her teeth and entered the sizable room in which this night’s performers were gathering. Fortunately, none paid her notice, being occupied with preparing to excite France’s ruler.

Vianne crossed to a small table on which a mirror sat and lowered to the stool, then stared at the pale reflection of one who, garbed in red, had long ago sacrificed the *lady* of her to the harlot—as all at court knew. And her family.

As she drew breath, raising shoulders that felt weighted, she realized she could not deliver well her pretty composition. She would have to present another. Though as yet unwritten, she had only to recall the deck of the ship that stole her from England, gather up the ugly water-logged pieces, and form a

rhythmical pattern that satisfied she who yet mourned the loss of the virtuous and happily outspoken Vianne Wardieu.

As for satisfying Rollon by impressing his king... Well...

CHAPTER 2

There was advantage in being among the last to perform, it allowing more time in which to perfect and practice the delivery of words entirely composed in her mind. But there were disadvantages. The first was fatigue to which she was more vulnerable for advancing pregnancy entangled with fear and worry. The second was nervous anticipation that, dashed each time another performer was summoned ahead of her, heightened further.

When finally Vianne departed the chamber, she was so tense she questioned everything as her red skirt skimmed the floor and the tail of the black girdle set with silver, articulating scales lightly slapped her thigh.

How did she appear to the hundreds thronging the hall, some eager for another performance, others grudgingly pausing amid conversations to show polite interest as required?

Were her chin and shoulders level, footsteps gracefully unhurried, abdominal muscles sufficiently engaged so none suspected she was with child? Was her composition well enough fixed in memory its only fault would be the dark subject on an occasion that called for light? When she ascended the dais and took her place before the king whose chair was set back from it, could she present this work, or would she fold and recite something more pleasing to him—and Rollon?

The impatient one at the back of my tongue, she silently commanded as she neared the steps of what had been

transformed into a stage and pinched up her skirt so her feet would not catch on the hem. Still, she nearly stumbled when Rollon appeared and took her elbow.

As he stabilized her ascent, he said low, “Do me proud, my love.”

In that moment accepting she must to sooner regain trust and freedom that could keep this child safe, she graced him with what was to appear a loving smile.

When she set foot on the dais, he released her. Center of the stage, she turned to face King Jean and his boot-licking subjects. Once the murmuring ceased and most eyes were on her, she smiled as if no greater happiness could be had, flared her skirts like crimson wings, and curtsied so deeply to those unworthy of bended knee it was hard not to scowl. To ensure she did not, she remained bent longer than necessary to compose her face, then whipped up her head as she straightened. And felt the pins fixing her hair at her nape fail.

As if the uncoiling of the braid down her back was part of an act, the faces of many lit, and she heard scattered applause. None from the women, of course, nor King Jean, though appreciation was in his eyes. It was the same with his sixteen-year-old son, Charles, who sat beside him. Though the young man now four years wed to his cousin continued to look down upon Rollon’s mistress, it was obvious he still wished a taste of what the royal advisor enjoyed.

“Entertain us, Lady Vianne Wardieu!” the king commanded.

She dipped her chin, and when she raised her eyes, saw Rollon move behind and to the left of Jean, and just beyond him were Aubert Marianne and Pierre.

Though she had decided to behave, the bore of the latter’s eyes flashed her with memories of the English brigands whose reward for betraying their country was that of being cast into the sea. She saw again their flailing as they were sent over the rails...heard their screams...

“We wait!” King Jean snapped as if she delayed minutes rather than moments.

Vianne opened her mouth, but it was her newest composition advancing across her tongue. She pressed her lips and, not daring to look to Rollon lest his expression make it more difficult to recall what she had written two days past, searched backward.

“Mayhap the *lady* overly imbibed this eve, my lord king,” Charles said loud, causing those too imprudent to wait on Jean’s reaction to chuckle. Then with the sickly smile he thought charming, the Dauphin leaned forward as if to search out further evidence of her inebriation. “As all know, it would not be the first time.”

Feeling her face aspire to the color of her gown, Vianne looked to the tight-lipped king, and certain greater humiliation would be had did she not begin, expelled her breath on the words, “For your birthday, King Jean, what I call *The Chasm Between Us*.”

His eyes narrowed. Though the title was no auspicious beginning to something expected to honor him, it *was* honest.

Though Vianne was not known for dramatic flair during a recitation, this eve was different. Finding courage in the sweep of an arm, she sent across the great hall, “What terrible sea is this? No warm embrace, no gentle kiss.” She touched her lips, leaned forward to peer at the floor before the dais. “Down... down...”

She straightened, and seeing she yet held the attention of those more given to conversation, continued, “Whence does it rise, whence does it fall? No soft passage, foul siren’s call.” She turned her ear out as if to attend to the call and leaned forward again. “Down...down...”

Continuing to peer into her memories and seeing the men swallowed by the sea, her next words were pitched high. “Why does it churn, its waves break?” She raised her eyes to the glowering Pierre whose hiked lip revealed crowded teeth. “No compassion, no pity’s sake. Down...down...”

As his lip hiked further, she straightened. “Where does it flow, north or south?” She looked up, down. “No tide goes in, no tide goes out.” She glanced side to side and once more at Pierre. “Down...down...”

If not for movement from the king who followed her gaze by peering around, she would have remained fixed on the miscreant. To return Jean’s attention to her, she clapped her hands and demanded, “Who braves its winds, who trims these sails?” Putting back her head as if to look upon the flapping, fraying sheets, she recalled Pierre retching over the side in response to the ship’s lurching though his gut weathered well the casting of men into the sea. “No weak-kneed lord, none at the rails. Down...down...”

She moved her gaze over her audience. “When will it ease, when will it still? No land in sight, no more to kill.” She closed her eyes, shook her head. “Down...down...” Now she raised hands as if beseeching God and looked to random men and women at the rear of the gathering as she prepared to deliver the final lines. “How does one—?”

The remainder of the words jammed in her throat as one recipient of her gaze stared at her out of a face that should be hardly familiar for how brief their acquaintance, a light beard gone thick, blond hair grown long, and warrior garments exchanged for the lavish dress of a French courtier.

Vianne had thought never to see him again—had prayed the English knight she foiled with what she believed good cause would not risk entering the lion’s den of France to wreak vengeance on her. But Warin Wulfrith was here and, doubtless, was the one at the Norman table whose gaze she had felt and back she had seen before he was prepared to reveal himself.

“Forgive me,” she mouthed, not to him but Lady Dangereuse and Sir Rhys—the most recent tragedy for which she was responsible, both surely lost to the sea after she swam her horse to reach Pierre’s boat so she could be traded for Sir Warin’s sister. As she had drawn near, that lady had wrenched free of a brigand and jumped into the chill water.

Vianne had been unable to aid her, so cold herself she was only half conscious when dragged off the horse. However, she had met the floundering lady's gaze and beseeched forgiveness before being dropped into the boat. As Lady Dangereuse had been distant from Sir Rhys who desperately swam to her and more distant from the shore where her brother and his men had slain most of the brigands, the two must have succumbed to the cold. And now Sir Warin was here to—

“If this painful silence is for show, Lady Vianne,” King Jean's tone exaggerated boredom, “we have no patience for it.”

Having scant time to pen her part, she lowered her arms and smiled apologetically. “Forgive me. The illness it was feared would claim me continues to addle my thoughts. Do you give me a few moments—”

His hand slashed the air. “You work words well, but on the occasion of our birthday, I expected something better—uplifting, not dreary. You are done!”

She bowed her head and, turning toward the steps, looked sidelong at Rollon so she might know the depth of his anger. But hardly had she caught his eye than the king's crooked finger had him bending near.

Though tempted to retreat abovestairs to avoid those to whom she provided more fodder to look down upon her and fairly certain the long night Rollon promised would be longer yet, she crossed to a side table.

As brothers who juggled all manner of items, including eggs, were ushered to the dais, she poured a cup of weak wine. And resisted trying to catch sight of Warin Wulfrith who, unless willing to risk death, could be of no danger to her in the midst of hundreds of enemies.

He but wished to strike fear in one he could not know was already fearful, surely believing she desired to return to Rollon as professed on that shore—a lie not for his benefit but Pierre and Aubert Marianne into whose hands she had meant to give herself despite Sir Warin's attempt to thwart her.

“Exceptional, Lady Vianne!” called one who approached. Though she recognized his accented voice, she startled as if it belonged to Sir Warin whose own Norman-French accent was heavily diluted by the English of him as hers had been before she was sent to marry into French nobility.

She swung around, and there the man nearing middle age who had been seated at the Norman table—and unwittingly supplied her information over the years. Relieved he came alone, she wished she could recall his name. Unfortunately, some edges of a mind she believed sharp had become dull these months, likely due to stress as much as pregnancy.

When he halted, she returned his smile. “It is good to see you again.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I glimpse recognition, and though I recall your name, I believe you have forgotten mine.”

She nodded at the stage where the jugglers raked in expressions of awe and admiration not shown her. “Since my name was announced and spoken by the king, you have the advantage.”

“Had I forgotten it, but I did not. You are memorable, not only for beauty but compositions of which, alas, *The Chasm Between Us* is only the second I have heard.” He set a hand on his midriff and bowed. “Chevalier Joffrey Masse.”

“Pardon me for forgetting. As told the king, I am not thinking straight due to my recent illness.”

“And yet your gift to him, even incomplete, was exceptional.”

“And dreary,” she reminded.

He shrugged. “Only those of narrow mind find beauty in the joyous alone.”

Doubtless, that an intentional jab to the flank of the royal House of Valois. Just as the Duke of Normandy who took England’s crown three hundred years past had chafed beneath the rule of a king of France, still William the Conqueror’s people aspired to autonomy that was rarer with each passing century. Tight rule did not sit well with them, and less so now

the eldest sons of French kings were titled *Duke of Normandy*, meaning grown men and seasoned warriors currently answered to the arrogant sixteen-year-old Charles.

“I appreciate your encouragement,” she said and, finding some solace in his company, took another sip. “Blessedly, the jugglers are talented, clearing the sight and sound of me from King Jean’s eyes and ears.”

The chevalier drew nearer. “Oui, Jean being less likely to perseverate on not being praised as if a God, and Charles soon to fall asleep with his blanket hugged close and a smile on his lips.”

She looked sidelong at him. “Careful, you sound almost as English as I.”

His mouth convulsed. “And here I feared I sounded *more* English than the special friend of the king’s advisor.”

She was no stranger to allusions about this English lady’s relationship with Rollon, and once before this man had acknowledged that notoriety, but as there was no useful information to cull from him in her current circumstances, she saw no reason to continue the conversation.

However, before she could politely disengage, he changed the subject as if realizing he overstepped. “The Dauphin’s wife, Joanna, admires your compositions.”

That she had not known, the duchess rarely looking her way while at court. Was what Masse spoke true? Or this an attempt to hold her here? No sooner questioned than she was struck by something she should have considered sooner. Warin Wulfrith had been seated at the end of the Norman table opposite this man, but that did not mean there was no connection between them. What if—?

“The Duchess tells an inquiry into your French ancestry yielded something interesting. Your mother, being among the ladies who accompanied Princess Isabella of France to England to wed the second King Edward, was of the family De Morville.”

Vianne knew where this was heading, as it had with many who discovered the French of her—that her ability to make verse of words was passed to her by the twelfth-century Elias de Morville whose works were treasured in both France and England.

“I would not argue my best writings are a result of my ancestor,” she said, then dipped her head. “Now as King Jean requires of his birthday gifts, I must move among the guests.”

Giving him no moment to catch her back, she set her cup on the table and worked her way toward young ladies who did not like her for being told they ought not but were more tolerable than those who warned them away. But when she saw they were also Prince Charles’ destination, she veered. Obviously having tired of sitting his sire’s side, he sought to use his royal position to gain the attention and admiration of women who would spurn him were he not France’s future king.

“My lady.” A hand touched her arm, and she turned so quickly her skirts swept tall boots belonging not to Warin Wulfrith but Ingerger le Grand, lord of Amboise as well as Chevreuse upon which Rollon’s manor house was situated.

“My lord!”

The man with whom she had become fairly acquainted over the years for his appearance at court and more recently her extended stay at the manor, was attractive of face, but less of figure. Despite his surname, his height and build were unimpressive. And he seemed drawn to her as Rollon scorned each time he was obligated to entertain the lord who permitted him to take game from Chevreuse’s wood.

“You look vibrant this eve, Lady Vianne.”

“I thank you, Lord Le Grande.”

“And your composition...” He kissed the air between them. “Though the king deemed it dreary, I thought it hauntingly beautiful.”

He sounded genuine, but this was also flirtation of which she could make good use were she prying for intelligence.

Since now was not the time, she said, "You are kind, my lord. How fares your wife?"

The flash of annoyance in his eyes was soon displaced by sorrow. "Her lingering illness tests my faith and that of our children."

"I am sorry. I know you love her well." Not so, though from the little she did know of his marriage, he was at least fond of the woman.

Regardless, her words served. He smiled, caught up her hand, and kissed her fingers. "As told, hauntingly beautiful. Good eve, my lady."

When he disappeared among the many, further alteration of her course proved a blessing. She had not expected the doors of the inner courtyard to be open since April nights were cold, but the press of bodies in the overheated hall had seen them set wide.

She looked around to be certain none followed, including Warin Wulfrith who would be conspicuous among the gathering for his stature and blond hair. Since he was nowhere to be seen, she guessed he had departed, as was wise with Pierre and Marianne now moving among the guests. Though the former was unlikely to recognize the warrior who had led the attack against brigands in the pay of the French, despite Pierre and his keeper being offshore in the boat carrying Lady Dangereuse toward the waiting ship, the sharp-eyed Marianne might recognize him.

Believing herself unobserved, Vianne stepped through the nearest doorway onto stone that formed a walkway around a rectangular, lantern-lit garden.

There were couples holding hands and walking among vegetation that would be lush before long and one couple who appeared almost of one body for how close their embrace against a tree, but whereas they sought privacy in which to enjoy each other's company, she sought it to pretend at freedom ahead of facing Rollon's displeasure that she must suffer as calmly as possible to protect one other than herself.

Flinching over remembrance of his hand on her belly, she strode left and set her forearms atop a short wall cornering this section of the walkway. For the lanterns and being near the hall's light escaping into the dark, she was visible, but as this had become a retreat for couples, likely she would be left to herself.

Fixing her gaze far right of the couple against the tree to afford them privacy for however much time they could steal from whoever would deny them, she whispered her own longing, "Freedom and safety." And thought it almost tragic that eight years in France—only a third of her life—could wear her so thin she would hesitate to dispute any who said she was nearer an old woman than a young one. She ate, dressed, and lived well, but she might as well labor in the fields for how worn she was.

Almost immediately, she snorted with disgust over the presumption her life was as hard as those of common women, many of whom suffered as much or more for being controlled by a man they did not want—and having no soft landing upon the comforts nobility imparted.

If they can persevere despite sorrows that make them feel far older than their years, so can I, she told herself. And I will.

Footsteps. As they moved toward her, it felt as if her heart snagged on a peg passed by. Not because her solitude was interrupted. Because something she could not see, smell, nor touch revealed the identity of he who, the last time they were alone, had shocked her with his sudden appearance.

Dragging her tongue off her palate, she turned her face toward him.

Had Warin Wulfrith not allowed his beard to thicken, concealing burn scars on one side of his lower face, still he would be as handsome as he presented now—even with eyes harder than hard and darker than dark.

Halting a stride from her, he said in English, "An interesting performance."

“Well come to Paris, Sir Warin,” she managed past the lump in her throat. “Rather, *Chevalier* Warin do you wish to continue passing as one who belongs inside the walls of Palais de la Cité.”

He looked to those wandering the courtyard, then in French and an accent far thicker than he possessed, said, “This day, it is Chevalier Warin d’Argent, *Lady*.”

On the surface titled with respect, but barely scratch the surface and there scorn with which she was accustomed when acknowledged by many of the French court. Refusing to respond to it, she left a forearm on the wall and angled her body toward him. “D’Argent, you say?”

“From whom the Wulfriths descended following Duke William’s conquering of England. Still they hold the Barony of Valeur in Normandy.”

She scrutinized his garments. “I see, and you make yourself one of them so...” She returned her gaze to his and, hoping he would not seek vengeance in the presence of witnesses, continued, “...you may exact payment for what you have lost despite what King Edward gained.” At least, what she hoped he gained from the intelligence she left in England. Unfortunately, because of her isolation at the manor, Rollon’s month-long absence, and having engaged in no meaningful conversations since returning to the palace, she had no way of knowing if the English had thwarted French trickery a fortnight past.

Braving his narrowing eyes, she pressed fingers into the hand tempted to her belly and prepared to ask for confirmation she had served her country well. Instead, she said what she should have thought through. “I never intended your sister harm, nor Sir Rhys and the people of Lillia. Truly, I am sorry —” She broke off.

He had not moved, but a distant look in his eyes told his attention was no longer on her. And when she looked past him, there the reason—an enemy at his back armed with weapons as not allowed King Jean’s guests.

Vianne rebuked herself. Despite skills honed to keep her alive and being aware the guard posted outside the apartment was also set to watch over her in the hall, just as she had caught no sight of Sir Warin before entering here, neither this man. Now he would report to Rollon what appeared a tryst.

Write the part! she demanded as he advanced, then scribbled it out behind her eyes and spoke it into words, beginning with hissed ones of regret. “Apologies, Sir Warin.”

The hand missing a sword hilt becoming a fist at his side, he said low and threatening, “For what, *Lady?*”

Her answer was a lunge and a slap, which he did not try to prevent though a well-trained warrior—even one garbed as a nobleman of leisure—could evade or retaliate against.

And you thought those eyes could not be harder nor darker, she rued as they stared into hers despite the slight turn dealt his head.

There being more to her act that must be played out to protect her unborn child, she spat, “Foul Norman!” then swept around him. Hearing the couples’ voices rise in response to their trampled bliss, Vianne hastened forward, causing the guard to falter.

“A lady alone does not a conquest make!” she called back, then said to Rollon’s man whose uncertainty was almost laughable for how great a brute he was, “Insult only, though I am certain your lord would think punishment due him—providing it does not disrupt our king’s celebration.”

Then heart thumping, she was past him. Upon entering the hall, she caught the sound of a struggle, curses, and flesh-covered bone on bone. She nearly turned back, but determinedly made for the corridor that accessed the wing where the apartment lay—all the while praying the guard heeded her only so far as her desire for retribution against Sir Warin convinced Rollon her venture into the courtyard was innocent.

Having seen the second eldest Wulfrith brother fight the brigands on the shore, she assured herself the ferocity of his

swinging blade would also be felt in his fist. Then, though he would hate her more, he would abandon vengeance and depart France.

That is as likely as Rollon embracing this child when it delivers in four and a half months or sooner, she rebuked. You fool!

CHAPTER 3

Just out of her gown and ahead of going under the covers wearing her chemise, Rollon banged into the apartment.

Shooting her gaze to the door she had not locked but now considered rushing to bolt, Vianne silently counseled it would be seen as proof of guilt and told herself to make ready.

When he tossed open the door, she stood on her side of the bed, arms folded over her chest. “Tell!” she demanded. “Did that hulking guard of yours serve your lady well?”

The words humping his tongue left unspoken, he halted over the threshold.

She gave a huff of disgust and dropped her arms to her sides. “Well, did he? Or is he merely for show, Rollon?”

Eyebrows pinching, he said, “He did his duty to me. Therefore, you.”

What did that mean? she longed to ask, but dare not. Were she to learn of the encounter between Sir Warin and the guard, the answer would have to come to her. “Though the Norman laid no hand on me, clearly he thought me something I am not—at least, not to others,” she added.

He crossed to her with a lumbering gait that had been fairly quick when first Vianne met he who would become so consumed by her he eliminated her betrothed. Eyeing her down a nose more bulbous than eight years past, he demanded, “What say you?”

It is believable you remain outraged by an uninvited advance, just as you would have before fleeing this aged boar, she assured herself, then said, “As already told, since I risked all to return to you, I have been made to feel more a harlot than an esteemed lover.” She gestured at the gown tossed over a chair. “Never have I worn a gown so red as to look dragged across the floor of a slaughterhouse, and certainly not one cut so low that were I to tip sideways, my breasts would spill. Though the Norman deserved your man’s fist, he can hardly be blamed for thinking my favors easily granted.”

He was so long peering across his shoulder at the gown that she thought her imaginary arrows landed well, but looking back, he said, “I paid dearly for that and find no fault in it. If there is any, it is the way in which the woman wears it. *You* will have to wear it better, Vianne—proudly, not lustily.”

“Lustily!”

“I saw you speak privately with that Norman Joffrey Masse, next the Lord of Chevreuse who, I assure you, will gain more than a bruised eye do either trespass against me.”

She started to defend the men who had approached her in view of all and maintained a respectable distance, but within his threat was what sounded insight into what she had brought down on Sir Warin. Truly, only a bruised eye?

Rollon’s grunt had her scrabbling for her place in their exchange. She had just found it when he said, “Do I do Chevalier Joffrey a small injustice in believing him self-serving? Perhaps he but arranged a tryst with that young Norman in the courtyard. And rejection of your suitor was an act.”

That last frightened, and so here another act. “As you persist in allowing the jealousy of others to poison you against me, I fear for our future, Rollon. When I returned to you, it was with the expectation of resuming what we had in the best of times.” She resisted pointing out the worst was when suspicion of less strength caused the first tragic loss she feared would be repeated. “Instead, you make it clear to those who name me foul things that you agree with them by punishing

me for the possibility I betrayed as Pierre tells. And do not see more harm is done you than me.”

“I protect myself!”

She shook her head and, ignoring the voice of caution beseeching her to hold her tongue, said, “By dressing and parading me like a whore paid for her favors, you make yourself look pitiful.”

Vianne did not see his hand coming, but she felt its weight far more than Sir Warin had felt hers. As she landed against the bedside table and protectively turned an arm around her child, she thanked the Lord this time her lower back took the hit rather than her belly. *This time*, she thought as a hand gripped her arm to steady her. Cheek burning, she looked up and hated this man anew though the remorse grooving his face appeared genuine.

“You know I did not mean to do that, Vianne.”

Dragging fortitude from her depths, she said dully, “Of course I know.”

“You pushed me to it.”

When she did not respond, he touched her inflamed cheek then looked to her belly. “Is it truly mine?”

For the babe’s sake, remain calm, she told herself. “As God is my witness, no other could have fathered my child,” she said, then closed her mouth lest she reveal his former squire, Gustave, would have been a contender had she not violently thwarted his ravishment.

Rollon released her. “As the king is displeased with your birthday present and believes you require more time to recover, he has ordered you back to Chevreuse and granted me permission to remain with you a sennight.”

Hoping that meant when he returned to court it would be without her, more hopeful she would have at least another month free of him thereafter, she said, “I think it for the best, too.”

He jerked his chin. “Unfortunately, I must return to the celebration.”

Barely keeping relief from her expression, she said, “Then as I am tired and require more rest for the morrow’s journey, I will sleep.”

He paused in turning away. “You did not ask what was done the Norman who followed you into the courtyard. What was his name?”

More relief, this for his ignorance of he who must have absented himself following the clash. “The knave did not say, and I did not care to ask one who regarded me as other than a lady. Thus, I am content knowing the guard did his duty in punishing him.”

“My man tells he landed a blow to his eye.” His nostrils flared. “Disappointingly, the filthy Norman got the better of him, breaking his sword arm and front teeth.”

As Vianne began delving the advantage of having no guard outside the apartment, Rollon said, “Sleep well,” strode from the bedchamber, and called back, “Fear not. I have set another man outside to ensure your protection.”

A quarter hour later, the sleep for which she desperately longed eluded her—and was as much Sir Warin’s fault as Rollon’s.

For this night seeing again the Baron of Woodhearst, more vivid her memories of their first encounter on Christmas Day when she sat astride with Lady Dangereuse to watch Lillia’s castle folk sled and ice skate. En route from London to his own lands, he had paused to spend the day with his sister and her son. Upon learning the name of the lady who recovered with Sir Rhys following an attack by Pierre and his men, his distaste was evident. Since he had come from the English court, she had been certain he learned Sir Rhys had been sent by the king to collect intelligence from his lady spy and, until that moment, was as ignorant as Edward of her insistence on delivering it herself. More than an Englishwoman who aided her country, he had seen a woman who used her body to gain

secrets—one worthy of being named a lady only were that title wrapped in scorn.

Then had come the attack on those at play around the ice pond, which saw many injured by Pierre's attempt to retrieve her with the aid of English brigands. Had Sir Warin not pulled her onto his horse, she might have been taken. Instead, Pierre settled for capturing Lady Dangereuse and Sir Rhys, the former to be traded for Vianne whose disclosure of intelligence could compromise the standing of King Jean's advisor, the latter to be delivered to Rollon and flayed alive.

When later Sir Warin came to her chamber at Lillia, she had been so mired in guilt over being the cause of those injured and taken hostage she had not heard him enter. He had disliked her before, but it was more apparent when he told she would accompany him and his men to make the trade.

A pretense, he had assured her, confident he could save his sister without sacrificing the intelligence King Edward awaited and Vianne held close—though only a while longer since she had been determined to force the trade were it necessary to save Lady Dangereuse.

If she must return to Rollon, the paper she had slipped into the saddlebag of Sir Warin's uncle would find its way to England's king. And she to France for being exceptionally skilled in commanding horses, even ones to whom she was a stranger.

With skill of his own and aided by those under his command, Warin Wulfrith had overwhelmed the brigands on the shore, but not before Pierre and Marianne got Sir Rhys and Lady Dangereuse in boats and started for the ship awaiting them.

Thus, Vianne had spurred her mount from those tasked with showing her to the enemy while keeping her out of their hands. Upon reaching the shore, to ensure Pierre heard her across the water, loudly she had told she wished to return to Rollon. After looking around at Sir Warin and braving his disgust and judgment, she had gone into the sea toward the boats that dare not return to shore, then further shocked all

with her ability to swim a horse. It had been painfully cold, but worse for Lady Dangereuse who, not trusting her captors to make the trade, had broken free and gone into the water. And likely drowned after Vianne was dragged onto the boat.

Hours after Pierre killed the handful of English brigands who made it to the ship with him, she had worried Warin Wulfrith would seek vengeance for what she had brought down on his sister and her people. However, as her worry hardly compared to the fear, revulsion, and shame of returning to Rollon, she had determined that as long as the narrow sea lay between them, Sir Warin was of no danger to her. She had been wrong.

“No sea between us now,” she whispered. “That chasm crossed.”

HE HATED schemes that did not go to plan. But then, who did not?

“My guess is you did not gain the information sought from De Talliere’s paramour,” spoke the one King Edward had assured Warin could get him into the palace for his support of the French king when other Norman nobles wavered over their loyalty.

No wavering on Joffrey Masse’s part, though his cousin who held lands in Normandy often roused King Jean’s enmity. Doubtless, it was easier for landless Joffrey to appear a staunch supporter of the Valois king with few the wiser he was Edward’s side. For his ability to gather riches to him, some surely a result of the value Jean placed on his *loyalty*, he lived very well near the palace. And more evidence of that for the thick slice of raw meat a kitchen servant was commanded to collect from a cellar so packed with winter ice it came to Warin nearly frozen.

Continuing to press it to his eye where he sat in the kitchen, he said, “You guess right, Masse, though you must

admit that for how little time I had with her, greater the chance of failure than success.”

Leaning back against a table whose heavily scarred surface evidenced it was used for preparing food, the Norman chuckled. “Still you had a good time of it, hmm?” Now an exaggerated grimace. “I speak not of those spare minutes with the beautiful Lady Vianne, rather De Talliere’s man. With you more resembling a peacock than a warrior in my court attire, he must have believed he could deliver a blow at close quarters.”

The thawing meat’s juices running down Warin’s wrist into the cuff of the saffron-colored tunic that would require a skilled laundress to clean, he regretted he had not removed it as done the fine doublet. Though he had considered baring his chest, the one who delivered the meat was a skittish young woman of ten and five who had returned to sweeping the floor before Masse sent her away.

“He whose appearance deprived me of questioning the lady shall hurt for a time,” Warin said.

“Sadly, as it would be madness to show your face again at the palace, I dare not use my influence to provide further access, Sir Warin. I am loyal to whom I am loyal, but can remain thus only do I rouse no suspicion.”

“I am grateful you risked aiding me, Chevalier. Now it is for me to find a way to get her alone again.” Flashed with memories of the lady and wishing they did not first manifest in watching her deliver the ill-received composition, he commanded himself to move beyond her beautiful face, lush brown hair, and sensual figure encased in violent red. Better to remember her as last seen in England—face desperately defiant, hair a mess for sea air whipping it free of its moorings, and figure mostly concealed by a mantle.

Though shockingly skilled at swimming a horse, she had barely made it to the nearest boat. After his uncle and he swam their own horses to pull his sister and Sir Rhys from the sea, the latter having reached and sustained Dangereuse long enough to ensure survival of the two who were now wed,

Warin had watched Lady Vianne board the ship that would return her to her lover—if being put around with rope and hauled up the side could be considered boarding.

She had suffered the chill water but survived. Once more at De Talliere's side, she enjoyed being lavished with gifts and attention, the greatest price she paid being the notoriety of an English lady openly consorting with a married Frenchman.

“Likely it will be impossible to get her alone again,” Masse said with what sounded an echo, meaning this plodding about the past had forced the man to repeat himself.

Unfortunately, Warin had no choice but to gain the piece missing from the intelligence forwarded to King Edward. Not that he believed what she left behind was of enough consequence that the one deemed responsible for her returning to France should be commanded to leave his child, demesne, and country to retrieve it. Had that intelligence been of value, likely it was no longer for not being acted on quickly.

Warin returned the meat to the platter. “And yet I must make it more than possible,” he said and raised a towel to wipe moisture from his face and hand as his host strode forward.

Chevalier Joffrey halted. “I do not know how you can,” he said, then drew a sharp breath. “Ah, a way forward!”

Though he was of short acquaintance, certain he teased, Warin dropped the towel and griped, “Only now you see a way forward?”

“Non, before departing the palace and after exercising my penchant for being in a good place at a very good time.”

“What did you hear?”

“De Talliere's son complained to Marionne that the king is so displeased with Lady Vianne he returns her to Chevreuse on the morrow.”

“Chevreuse?”

“Half a day's ride south of Paris where De Talliere has a manor. From discreet inquiries, I learned she has resided there these past months during her absence from court.”

An absence that alarmed when, upon arriving at Masse's home three days past, Warin was informed she had not been seen since December. Had not the man told that were she to show again soon, it would be at King Jean's celebration, he would not have remained in Paris.

"Supposedly recovering from the illness for which she beseeched King Jean's forbearance," Masse added.

Had she truly been ill? If so, was it from her voyage across the channel? Telling himself it mattered not, Warin said, "A manor house is easier to infiltrate than the king's residence."

"Ah, but she does not go alone, my friend. For that, Pierre's displeasure. His sire accompanies her and has commanded his son to join him and invite friends for a hunt—and at a time Pierre gains favor with the Dauphin whom he hopes to one day serve as Rollon serves Jean. Of course, I do not think that arrow will fly. Though Charles coolly embraces those who bow and scrape, he grows out of the fool which youth and lack of a warrior's mind and build rendered him. Once he has need of a close advisor, he will not settle for a man who but bears the name of his sire's advisor."

Masse heaved a sigh. "As I must gain my rest and am certain you will make good use of *my* intelligence, I expect you will be gone before I rise on the morrow. Thus, I pray you much success in satisfying the one we esteem and encourage you to use that coin wisely should you require assistance."

He spoke of that which King Edward had given Warin, along with the names of his most trusted French supporters to whom presentation of the coin accompanied by unremarkable words would assure the recipient Warin was their side. "I thank you, Chevalier."

The man clapped him on the shoulder. "I may trust you to depart my home as discreetly as you entered it?"

"Of course."

As Masse strode from the kitchen, no gratitude was begrudged him though he had been slow to impart what should sooner see Warin returned to English soil.

And my daughter, he thought. Having recently moved Charliese to the Barony of Woodhearst he had been awarded, his determination to become the father his daughter deserved had been deferred when King Edward commanded him into the heart of enemy country. Unfortunately, not only must he gain the missing piece of intelligence destroyed by salt water but make every effort to bring back something considerably larger.

Shifting his jaw, he returned his thoughts to his little girl. Blessedly, she had his grandmother's former maid, Lady Héloïse having released Esta from service so her great granddaughter could continue in the care of the woman who loved her and was loved in return.

As Warin's uncle had agreed to administer Woodhearst in his nephew's absence, there would be tension in the household as ever there was when Owen and Esta came into contact, some history between them of which neither spoke though it was felt in their silence and occasionally seen on their faces. Were they unable to resolve it, hopefully they could forge a navigable path around each other so Charliese and the castle folk were comfortable with both.

"But a few more weeks you must tolerate each other's company," Warin muttered, then glanced heavenward. "Pray, Lord, *weeks*, not months."

CHAPTER 4

Chevreuse, France

Not intolerable. The more she assured herself of it, the more believable she could bear resuming relations with one whose eyes often strayed to her belly. But not believable enough.

Since her return to Chevreuse four days past, each night she was nearly sick with anticipation Rollon would wish to do more than sleep when he joined her. As he had left her undisturbed thus far, she was grateful Pierre's peers, which included the Dauphin, had accepted the invitation to feast and hunt in the fertile Vallée de Chevreuse whose landscape was dominated by the castle of Château de la Madeleine just visible from the manor house.

It was burdensome to accommodate guests numbering two dozen with Charles' sizable retinue, but worth the effort and every forced smile, laugh, and sparkling quip for their habit of drinking, gambling, and making conquests of women servants long after Vianne withdrew from the hall.

Rollon having refused to abandon his guests, though on the day past Pierre loudly encouraged him not to sacrifice his *play between the sheets* since his son could see to their needs, once more he had fallen into bed late and set to snoring.

Pray, Lord, let it be so again this night so I must not test the veracity of being able to tolerate his attentions, Vianne silently beseeched where she sat beside him on one of many blankets spread across the newly mown grass before the

manor, alongside each a basket filled with beautifully arranged food and drink.

“I begin to see a glow about you,” Rollon said, and when she looked sidelong at where he leaned back on his elbows, raised his eyebrows. “Most becoming, my dear.”

Resisting the impulse to touch a cheek whose warm color had been the result of his slap until two days past and was now due to sunlight rather than impending motherhood for how pale she felt, Vianne turned her face to him. Wondering when last she did not have to think a smile onto her lips, she said, “I thought I missed being at court, but I believe Chevreuse a better fit for me. And our child.”

He maintained an indulgent expression, but there was a flicker in his eyes. Still he questioned his siring of the babe. Though this time more he doubted it for how long she was in the hands of Englishmen, last time doubt was born of information gathering that he interpreted as something beyond flirtation, and surely further it was strengthened for his first wife birthing only one child and his second wife none. Not that he would admit he could be at fault for Pierre being the only proof of his virility.

“I believe you are right, Vianne. Though my pretty Baldwina is fond of Chevreuse, I am certain she would happily forego visits were I to permanently settle you and the child here.”

As ever, she rued her sin more when reminded of his wife with whom he spent little time. If Vianne could extricate herself from Rollon before the advanced state of her pregnancy was obvious, the neglected Baldwina with whom Pierre remained entranced would not long be deprived of Chevreuse’s delights.

“Rather, mostly settled here,” Rollon said. “Still I would have you at court when King Jean’s needs outweigh my own, denying me leave to visit you.”

“Of course,” she said softly.

He leaned in and kissed her gently enough it required little effort to feign enjoyment, then he looked around at those who partook of the meal ahead of the hunt. “I am the envy of many who can only imagine having you. You know I like that, and as long as imagination is all they indulge in, whatever you ask of me will be given—within reason.”

Dare she? She did. “And providing you accept my word this is your babe.”

He glanced at her abdomen. “Time will tell, hmm?”

Coursed by both anger and fear moving too fast to keep it off her face, she looked down.

As if that an admission of guilt, he caught up her chin. “Hmm, Vianne?”

“De Talliere!”

Rollon snapped his head toward the Dauphin who had risen from the blanket shared with Pierre and Marianne, and in that moment alone Vianne liked King Jean’s son.

Releasing her chin, Rollon hefted upright. “I shall call for the horses and dogs, my prince,” he assumed the young man was so eager for the hunt he could not wait for others to finish eating.

“Non, Lord de Talliere. Before we enjoy our sport, I would speak to you on a matter of import.” He snapped his fingers at Pierre. “You may join us.”

Rollon’s son hastened to his feet while Marianne rose with his usual elegance.

“You as well, I suppose,” Charles said and gave a laugh.

“The library,” Rollon called and started to turn from Vianne, but then he eyed her. “As I believe exercise will do you good, return with us to the manor so you may change into a gown more fitting for the ride.”

She caught her breath. He knew she did not care for hunting, though not because of its vigor which did thrill. She disliked the cruelty of setting small animals to flight who had little chance of escaping barking dogs and men on thundering

horses. But on this occasion, more she hated the thought that caused her skin to prickle—that the feverish ride to which she would subject her child only were it more dangerous to keep her feet on the ground appealed to Rollon who would not like what time would tell of this babe.

He skitters away from me losing another child by his hand, she thought, but if it could be blamed on the ride...

“Come, Vianne!” He reached to her.

“It would not be good for the babe, Rollon,” she said low.

His eyebrows rose. “Were you farther along, but two... three months? No cause for concern.”

The hand she placed in his trembled, the legs with which she kept pace as he guided her forward quaked, and her hatred of him doubled when, after sending the others on to the library, he halted her at the stairs and said, “A woolen gown to protect you from the scratch of branches, your yellow-hooded mantle to ensure those wielding bows do not mistake you for game.” He tapped her nose. “We should depart within the hour. Do not keep us waiting.” Then he turned toward the corridor down which Charles, Pierre, and Marianne had gone.

Slamming her eyes closed, Vianne moved her thoughts to how she might resist joining the hunt without rousing him to anger possibly more dangerous than the ride.

“So when the attack on Calais, De Talliere?” the Dauphin’s voice spilled down the corridor as Rollon entered the library. “It should have been—”

The door slammed on his next words.

“Calais,” she breathed. As revealed by her missive Owen Wulfrith was to have delivered to the King of England, the attack on the port city held by the English since 1347 should have taken place a fortnight past. It had not, rendering her intelligence useless—and possibly believed a lie. Either way, perhaps Sir Warin had come to Paris to avenge the ill done those dear to him as well as what must have cost King Edward time, money, and humiliation in preparing to defend against an attack that never came.

Focusing on the corridor at whose end the library lay, she wondered why King Jean had drawn back from retaking Calais whose strategic location allowed English troops and supplies to easily enter France. And as the Dauphin had questioned, on what date would the postponed attack take place?

Go don the accursed mantle, she counseled. As you are distant from Paris and have no means of getting word to King Edward, there is no reason to risk gathering intelligence. Climb the stairs!

She meant to. And she would have had it not occurred good might come of Rollon forcing her to join the hunt. When last had she so much freedom? England. When last had she a swift horse beneath her? England.

THE VALLÉE DE Chevreuse provided good vantage points and cover for the one who kept watch on the large manor house and observed the daily hunts of those who had several times drawn near him.

The sixteen-year-old Charles had come the closest on the day past, and as he bent over his horse in an attempt to keep pace with his skilled counterparts, Warin had glimpsed in that grim face a youth determined to one day fiercely rule France with his mind as his body could not. Though King Jean aspired to make a warrior of his heir, little chance of that as Warin knew from his knighthood training and training others to become worthy of sword and spurs.

Having grown restless awaiting an opportunity to gain the most important thing required of Lady Vianne, once more Warin bided his time mounted in a thick copse that provided a good view of the manor.

All evidence of the outdoor meal Lady Vianne closely supervised and herself enjoyed on a blanket beside De Talliere had been cleared away a half hour after she withdrew with the others. Over the next half hour, saddled horses were moved from the paddocks to the right of the manor while hunting

dogs strained their leashes to the left and participants gathered near their mounts to await the four who had departed the meal accompanied by Lady Vianne.

Was whatever the Dauphin wished to discuss with his host still being discussed, and for that would the hunt be delayed? If so, it had to be of import. Might King Edward's supposed spy be included in those talks? Or was fatigue that became obvious when De Talliere escorted her to the manor behind her accompaniment?

Useless pondering, but it was something with which to pass the dragging minutes while he waited to see if this was the day he got Lady Vianne alone. Ever she saw the riders away, and once afterward had gone around the side of the manor to the herb garden. Unfortunately, as if she or her lover feared her being on her own, men-at-arms had been present who kept their distance but not so much they would fail to prevent others from keeping theirs.

Minutes later, those who earlier entered the manor returned. Surprisingly, Lady Vianne no longer wore the pale purple gown but one of dark green wool. Then there was the black mantle draping her back, its yellow hood more vivid than the red gown worn at the birthday celebration.

Even before De Talliere assisted her into the saddle of an ash-black mare, it was obvious she was to join the hunt. Recalling her ability to command and swim a horse, he had no doubt she was skilled and relished the adventure for the smile she shone on the one Joffrey Masse called her *paramour*—a vile Frenchman whose hand on her thigh moved to her knee above a boot visible for the rise of skirts that allowed her to straddle her mount.

Warin was not the only one who noted the intimacy the harlot allowed, many of De Talliere's fellow hunters watching the two. But though there seemed nearly as much amusement as desirous interest about them, Pierre regarded his sire and Lady Vianne with what appeared distaste. And more evidence of that when she leaned down, set a hand on her lover's jaw, and spoke something.

Warin wondered at that, then told himself it mattered not what sweet thing she said to the man to whom she sold her body. What mattered was turning this event to his advantage.

This day he would get her alone, and by this eve be making his way west across France. Then home to Woodhearst and his daughter.

CHAPTER 5

Come now, Vianne, we all know you for an accomplished rider.” Rollon’s fingers rubbed the back of her knee in what he believed a caress, and she needed no intimacy beyond theirs to know it was not frigidity that made her feel nothing but revulsion. Just as he remained ignorant of what she truly felt when he touched her, he would never know she hoped each time would be the last.

“You will keep pace so none sacrifice their enjoyment,” he said, then pulled her entreating hand from his jaw and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

Vianne pushed down emotion that threatened to leap onto her face, and as she watched him cross to the horse that would bear his bulk, thanked the Lord his hand at her knee had not moved down her calf to the scissors in her boot, nor had he discovered the sizable purse attached to the back of her belt under her mantle.

I detest you, she thought as he heaved into the saddle. Though she intended to use the hunt to escape, and to increase her chance of success had employed well what time remained to her after listening in on the library discussion, her request he warn the others to be cautious around her and slow when necessary had been genuine in consideration of the babe.

For his refusal, it was more imperative she not return to the manor. Though to remain in his power could further endanger her, this unborn child was in mortal danger, whether across the valley or at the manor. Then there were the English holding Calais whose loss of lives and that port city would devastate

their families and cripple England's foothold on the continent—should King Jean's forces succeed this time.

In 1350, three years after King Edward's victorious siege of Calais, through trickery the French had tried to take it back and were humiliatingly defeated. Though they had thought to try again this year, according to what she overheard this day, the attack of which her missive had warned had not taken place because another treaty between the countries was signed the first week of this month, King Edward agreeing to abandon his claim to France's throne in exchange for French territory.

On the advice of Rollon and others, Jean had postponed the assault. Though the city would be easier to take if a contented Edward let down his guard, Vianne was certain Rollon also wished postponement lest she had passed intelligence to the English as Pierre suspected, the revelation of which could gravely impact his standing at court. Hence, in three weeks the French would disregard the treaty in attempting to recover Calais.

Once Vianne and her child were safe, she would alert an English authority. Whether or not she was believed and her information acted on, King Edward would have proof of her loyalty. Of course, that was possible only if this day did not end badly for her.

I will watch for the door You open even do You never open it, she sent heavenward as Rollon motioned her to his left side and the Dauphin urged his spirited horse to the right. Pray, forgive me my sins, and if still You will not cling to me as I cling to You, cling to this child whose safety is all I ask for eight years of serving king and country and bearing the dishonor of offending You, my family, and myself. Please, Lord.

FOR ALL APPEARANCES, Rollon would make this easy for her. Whether he was truly caught up in the chase, intent on impressing the Dauphin with his daring, wished to be distant

in the event she lost the saddle, or laid a trap for her, she was given opportunities to slip away.

Though she likened the temptation to the promise of water for a parched throat, she would not yield. Were this a game, he must weary first. Just as it was expected King Edward would let down his guard in protecting Calais against an attack, hopefully Rollon would succumb as well. Thus, only after she had time and again reappeared after going from his sight would she be confident of a good chance of success. But how to carry on with the hunt when the prospect of letting her aching body drop out of the saddle was almost as appealing as escape?

Holding to the promise she made the Lord, each time her body or mind began to fail, she sent heavenward, *I will treasure the strength You grant even if it is not enough to keep me from suffocating.*

Over two hours into the vigorous chase, the fox desperate to evade its bloodthirsty pursuers was cornered, as told by frantically barking dogs and the feverish sounding of horns.

“Now,” Vianne rasped, having been left behind and in sight of only two who were so eager to demonstrate the superiority of their species by witnessing the mauling of a small animal that they forgot to remain near her as commanded.

When they spurred farther ahead, she looked left and right. Both ways were open, but though the south would be easier riding, as the north was her destination and she would have to turn that way soon, better she brave it now.

Leaning over her mount, she pressed a hand to its neck. “You know me, Gudrun. You trust me as I trust you. Now fly as if to save your child as I would save mine.”

Muscles in that great neck twitching, the mare whinnied.

“God be with me,” Vianne beseeched and veered toward what she hoped a new beginning for her and a good beginning for her unborn child.

However, shortly that hope was crushed when she caught the sound of mounted pursuit.

Certain the yellow-hooded mantle she should have cast off pointed the way to her, she cried, "Lord!" and resisted looking around lest that moment prove the difference between escape and capture. What mattered was that only one rider had sighted her. Hopefully, no more were coming behind.

"Fly!" she cried. Though she knew she should not push Gudrun harder than the horse believed safe to distance them from the one closing in across uneven ground, Vianne was so desperate it felt as if they barely cantered.

Not so, she told herself, but still she jabbed her heels into Gudrun's heaving sides, causing the horse to give a scream of protest before obeying.

"Vianne!"

Whoever was sent after her drawing nearer, she entreated, "Make a way for us, Lord!"

Her name was called again, and she thought there something strange about his voice, but she resisted looking around. He was nearer and the trees ahead thicker, lower branches reaching out to each other as if to form a cruel net with which to catch her. And they might did she not alter her course.

She urged the horse right, but when its hooves skittered, it pulled left to avoid traversing steep, rock-strewn ground.

"Trust me, you can do this!" she called.

Gudrun did not trust her, and though Vianne distantly acknowledged her desperation gave the animal cause, she continued pulling the reins right and urging, "You can, you can!"

"Vianne!"

Still Gudrun resisted the rider who had never failed her, its instincts surely warning that despite great bestowal of trust there could be a first time it was not due.

Acknowledging that, Vianne accepted she must yield, but then heard—and believed she felt—the panting of her pursuer’s mount. “You can!” she called and wrenched the reins again.

The one coming behind bellowed something of which she could make no sense, but she heard his command, “Do not!”

Because he will not, she thought and determined she would deny him an easy victory sure to earn Rollon’s gratitude. But Gudrun was having none of it, continuing to strive against the reins. Then more skittering, and as the beast went sideways and Vianne cried out and whipped a protective arm around her middle, a hand brushed her side.

A moment later, the saddle gave up its rider, and as Vianne had encouraged Gudrun to do, she flew. *Lord, let this not give Rollon what he wants, she entreated. And do You allow it, take me as well since there is no little thing left for me. And I am tired.*

Then she hit the ground.

SHE LIVED, though whether she was broken must be determined. Having gone to his knees beside the lady who landed with arms and legs spread and the yellow hood that allowed him to keep her in sight flared around her head, Warin moved from probing her arms to her legs.

Continuing to listen for pursuers, he pushed up her woolen gown, noted the lower edge was thick as if double-hemmed to accommodate one of lesser height than its original owner, then moved his hands up her booted ankles in search of a break. He did not get far before encountering something hard on the inside of her left calf. He thought it a dagger until the upper reaches flared and broadened.

Strange she conceals scissors rather than a dagger, he reflected as he continued searching upward.

She moaned when he reached her knees, but as her lids remained down, he ventured higher over hosed thighs. Now she whimpered, and silently he cursed that he had not been near enough to snatch her onto his saddle as done at Lillia's ice pond when Pierre de Talliere's hired brigands put an arrow into her mount. This day, no sooner had he made contact with her than her horse's hooves failed, and it was all Warin could do to keep his mount clear of the beast as it went down.

Without thought of what he needed from the lady, he had cried out to God to preserve her life and, blessedly, she was thrown clear of the thrashing mare who encountered shrubbery, rocks, and saplings en route to the bottom of the ravine. Now the animal lay with its head at an unnatural angle amid vegetation of such height that only if one looked closely might they make sense of the disturbance below—and less likely from the ridge above.

“Hapless beast,” he growled and, glancing at his own horse that a smack to the rump had sent twenty feet distant, yanked down the lady's skirts and returned to her side to check her torso.

Her collarbone was intact, but as he felt her ribs, she groaned and opened her eyes. They appeared unfocused, but as the black yielded to gold, recognition sprang to them. “You!” she hissed.

“Me,” he said, and though he longed to demand of her that which was foremost his mission, he continued moving his hands toward her waist and hips. “Tell me where you hurt.”

She blinked. “My b—” A gasp slicing through the word, she shoved his hands aside.

Warin drew back, but she sat up so quickly she nearly clipped his chin. If not for what he heard—and perhaps she did not—he would have provided more space she clearly needed.

He clapped a hand over her mouth, thrust her onto her back, stretched atop her, then flipped up his dark hood to cover their heads and her yellow hood.

As she struggled despite what must be a mass of aches, he peered through the shadow between them and rasped, "Lady! Even if 'tis but a game you play in fleeing De Talliere, you will be still until the riders are well past."

A choking sound landed against his palm and she ceased struggling as if to listen. Then she jerked her chin. It looked agreement, but not trusting her, especially for what had resulted in slight swelling and discoloration about his eye, he left his hand over her mouth.

When the riders passed on the ridge off which the lady had veered, she tried to speak into his palm. Still he waited, and as he gave the patrol time to further distance themselves, his body became more aware of hers. It was not to be borne. De Talliere's leman was beautiful, but he wanted nothing to do with her beyond what the king required of him. Thus, the sooner his mission was completed, the better.

When in one fluid motion he removed his hand, turned, and went to his haunches beside her, she shot her gaze to him, and he saw the moment she noticed the fading bruise about the eye assaulted by De Talliere's man. Raw meat could do only so much to speed healing.

Wincing, she sat up, then searching her gaze over the steep ground, ran her hands down her back and sides as if checking for fractured ribs. She paused on Warin's horse who snuffled the ground amid close-set trees, then momentarily closed her eyes as if realizing the reason her own mount had opposed her command.

He thought she would ask after the mare, but she jutted her chin toward the ridge. "How many of the hunting party were there?"

"Four, though they were of a patrol, not the hunt."

Her head came around and hands stilled. "What say you?"

"Those who caught sight of the huntress in the yellow hood as I followed are of Château de la Madeleine."

"How do you know this?"

“Having been in the valley since your arrival at the manor, I acquainted myself with the comings and goings of those at the fortress flying the colors of the Lord of Chevreuse.”

Across a small breath, she said, “Ingerger le Grand.”

As known from an inquiry made of a servant during Jean’s birthday celebration when Warin saw the man intercept Lady Vianne before she went to the courtyard.

“He is not in residence,” she murmured.

Just as it had occurred to him that despite it appearing she fled De Talliere it could be a game the two played, upon sighting Le Grand’s patrol, he had pondered if during her meeting with the man at court the two had arranged for her to be delivered to her next lover. Thus, he said, “You are certain he is not at the château?”

As if she feared revealing something that could harm her, she did not immediately answer, but finally said, “Were the Lord of Chevreuse in residence, he would have been invited to join the hunt for his generosity in allowing Lord de Talliere to take game on his land.”

Possibly, Warin silently acceded, then suppressing the need to gain the information needed from her, said, “Just as I found nothing broken, neither you?”

“I but ache, and mostly my back. Did I land on it or...did you turn me over?”

“You hit on your side and dropped onto your back.” No sooner spoken than he heard riders approaching from a direction different from the patrol. Standing, he reached to her. “We have delayed too long.”

She shrank from his hand. “What makes you think I would go with one who wishes me ill?”

He did not wish her ill, though neither would he enthusiastically wish her well. She was a means to an end—one that must wait until he had her safely away.

Glad she remained unaware of the impending danger lest the riders were only a threat to him, he said, “I am your only

way out of the valley, Lady Vianne—that is, do you wish to leave Chevreuse as it appeared.”

“My wishes being none of your concern, I do not require your aid.” She peered both sides of her. “I but need my horse.”

Hearing a hopeful note in that, it was apparent she did not entirely delude herself in believing the animal had come out of the fall better than she. “Most unfortunate, that fine mare paid the highest price for its rider’s recklessness, *Lady*.”

“Non!” she gasped.

Noting her pursuers were nearer, though not perilously so as if they rode well back from the ridge, he jutted his chin at the bottom of the ravine. “She is there.”

The lady struggled to rise, and when he offered a hand again, ignored it. Once upright, mantle askew and yellow hood falling half over a shoulder, she looked below and bemoaned, “Gudrun!”

“The longer we delay, the likelier the scent of you will be had—and mine, *Lady*. We must go.”

She swept her gaze to his. “You did this! Had you not—”

“Having no wish to chase you to ground, I but followed to get you alone and have the conversation denied me at the celebration. When the patrol set after you, I yielded to the chase only to keep them from reaching you first.”

A sob escaped. “You should have warned it was you.”

He breathed deep. “Despite our last meeting when you set De Talliere’s man on me, and that I did not expect my name to slow you, I did shout it.” As her flitting eyes told she searched backward, he took her arm. “Come!”

When she tried to break free, he pulled her near. “There is something I need from you. Like it or nay, you go with me.”

She tensed as if to continue resisting, but then her shoulders descended and she whispered, “The lesser of evils.”

Was that how she regarded him? Though it could not be more opposite a compliment, if being the lesser of evils sooner

saw them away, so be it.

As he drew her toward his horse, she moved slowly, testing his patience and tempting him to swing her into his arms. However, being fairly certain her lack of speed was due to an aching body, he resisted until she dug in her heels as they neared his mount.

He turned on her. "Lady!"

"I..." As she stared at the big gelding who snorted and tossed its head, he understood the one who had boldly swum a horse into the sea now had reason to fear four-legged beasts over which she had demonstrated mastery unlike any woman he knew.

Though Warin did not want to be moved by compassion for the terribly improper lady who had caused the Wulfriths and their people much trouble and suffering, the imaginary armor donned to defend against her loveliness softened. "I will not let you fall. I give you my word."

As if fearing his horse would attack the moment she looked away, she dragged her eyes to Warin and said, "I should not be afeared to go astride, but I am."

"I know." He released her, straightened her mantle, and gathered the hood and pushed it down the neck of the garment to hide the yellow. "We will dispense with that later," he said and led her to his mount. "Foot in the stirrup."

With quaking hand, she raised her skirt, with the other took hold of the saddle, then fit her boot. She startled when he gripped her waist to boost her, stiffly swung a leg over the saddle, and lowered, causing her skirt to rise and reveal a booted leg his side.

As he removed her foot from the stirrup to fit his, he saw her hand slide down that boot. Doubtless, she verified scissors could be brought to hand should he prove as depraved as Pierre de Talliere's man who had cornered her in England and, according to Warin's uncle, was slain for trying to ravish her.

Though Warin was no violator of women, lest she misinterpret his actions, it would be best to get the shears

away from her.

Once he was behind her, he took the reins in one hand and set his other around her waist to draw her back.

“Non!” She grabbed his arm and removed it.

Knowing it would not be long before she welcomed what would make the ride more comfortable, he said, “Tightly hold to the pommel, for we go the way any pursuers will not expect you to venture.”

She did as told, leaning forward to put more space between them, but as he turned his mount, looked up to search the ridge. Now she heard those coming for them.

Warin placed his mouth near her ear. “Here your only warning. If I must knock you senseless to still your tongue, I shall. Now lean into me.”

He expected defiance over compliance, but she dropped back, and he felt a bulge against his abdomen he was certain was her purse.

Shears down a boot rather than a dagger girded at the waist. Purse fixed to the rear of her belt rather than the front.

As he acknowledged there was more to this lady than expected, she tucked her chin. And made no sound as he urged his horse to traverse steep ground that would deter pursuers providing this quarry remained out of sight.

A quarter hour later, Warin rebuked himself for believing those come after her would not expect a woman who swam a horse into the sea to go the perilous way.

CHAPTER 6

Lord, let this child not have been harmed, Vianne silently prayed and, inwardly shuddering over nearly expressing concern for her babe when Warin Wulfrith searched her for injuries, eased a hand across her belly in the hope of some small movement. *Let this stillness be the same contentment my little one has enjoyed these past days.*

Feeling more pressure on her bladder, she opened her eyes and guessed it an hour since they took cover between a rock wall and curtaining vines with bits of green between the grey and the brittle. An hour since repetition of Sir Warin's threat of what would happen if she did not stay silent. And now a half hour since those sent after her where Rollon dare not go had abandoned the search here—or so it appeared.

Leaning back against the knight, she whispered, “How much longer?”

He shifted in the saddle, causing the arm across her abdomen to shift as well. “We give them another half hour to search farther out. You need to relieve yourself?”

How did he know? Though she had been discreet in searching out evidence of her babe, perhaps he had felt her slight movements and interpreted them as discomfort. “I do, but I can wait a half hour.”

He nodded. “Sooner the time will pass do we use it wisely.”

Turning her face toward his, she was disturbed by the brush of his beard. Further bothered at better seeing his

shadowed face and thickly lashed green eyes that attracted light filtering through their tangled cover, she cleared her throat. “Then make good use of it.”

“King Edward sent me to you for the missive you left in my uncle’s saddlebag.”

Doubtless for intelligence of no use and great hindrance to the one she had previously served without fail. “And?”

“Due to the serious injury my uncle sustained while aiding in retrieving my sister, it was not discovered until weeks after you returned to your lover, and then—”

Though her caught breath silenced Sir Warin, it had naught to do with him acknowledging the harlot of her. “Pray, tell me Sir Owen recovered,” she said.

“He did, and sufficiently to administer the Barony of Woodhearst in my absence. Even does he not recover in full, he expects to resume training warriors.”

“Praise the Lord,” she breathed, then though she believed no good would come of asking, said warily, “What of Lady Dangereuse and Sir Rhys?”

“They survived the sea’s great maw.” It was said with the grudging of one who yields information not believed another’s due. “And now are wed.”

Relieved there was little light on her face when it crumpled over answered prayers, Vianne choked, “I am happy for them.” Then ventured further. “What of Lady Dangereuse’s people attacked at the ice pond and the warriors you brought to the shore to retrieve her?”

Anger and frustration in his grunt. “Though ever some shall bear the marks and suffer the disabilities of their injuries, all survived.”

Her heart and conscience eased, as did fear of him since whatever made him seek her out had nothing to do with revenge—at least not his own. “Would I could say how relieved I am, Sir Warin.”

“If not that thus far we fail to make good use of this time, I would insist you try, *Lady*.” As she pondered why his scornful titling hurt one accustomed to such, he said, “Now tell the date of the attack on Calais and whether it was incorrect, has passed for there being a change of plan, or yet stands.”

His question was so unexpected, she could only stare as she waded through memories of setting that intelligence to paper. She had written in her own hand rather than affect another as done when information forwarded by her contact must travel the breadth of France, the risk of interception ever present. Not only had she provided the name of the port city held by the English king, but the date, that the attack would occur amid the dark of early morn, and twenty knights would scale the walls and open the gates to a force of six hundred who were to have first slain the English patrol.

Though she had hoped to deliver the missive herself, at the bottom she had inked the letters adopted to identify the source when, at ten and six, she was enlisted as an informant—*AVS* for *à votre service*. Then she had folded the paper and wrapped it in twine. When later she accepted another must deliver it, on a small piece of parchment she had written *For the eyes of King Edward alone* and, for the first time, inked her own initials. This she had tucked beneath the twine, then ahead of Sir Warin leading the attack against Pierre and his brigands on the shore, slipped it in his uncle’s saddlebag.

Returning the knight to focus, she said, “I provided the date.”

“So it appeared, but when my uncle and I swam our horses to draw my sister and Sir Rhys from the sea, that portion of the paper sustained water damage. Thus, for months the king has had Calais’ garrison on high alert—for naught.”

Then though precious resources were wasted on an attack Edward could not know was postponed, Sir Warin was not sent to work revenge on her for failing her king nor being deemed duplicitous.

Relief suffusing her, and further over the possibility she could make good use of this, she dropped her chin.

“Lady?”

“Give me a moment.”

He gave her little more than that. As she whispered with wonder, “Lord, here the door,” he raised her chin.

“The door, Lady Vianne?”

The opening of which she had assured the Lord she would watch for. Though she would not have believed Warin Wulfrith would become that to her, it seemed so. He would not like the plan that was forming, but as she could think of no other way to preserve her child and its mother, if she could open that door wide enough, she would go through it.

“When is Calais to be attacked?” he demanded.

Lest he leave her to her fate for the burden of staying ahead of her pursuers, she could not reveal it. Despite having gems and small pieces of valuable jewelry in the hem pockets of a gown that was one of several used to conceal physical intelligence, such currency would not ensure her freedom. But in the theater of war-strewn politics, the altered date might.

In consideration of England’s need to retain Calais and protect the garrison and people settled there, she would do all she could to ensure she did not slow Sir Warin who must reach the city which had been her destination upon departing the manor. Providing her information aided the English in keeping hold of it, Calais was her best chance to gain shelter for her and her child this side of the sea.

She sat taller. “The date I cited in the missive was nearly three weeks past. Though obviously I could not send word of its postponement, the new date draws near.”

Silence in which he waited for her to reveal it. When it was not forthcoming, he snarled, “When?”

“I will tell, but this time it shall cost Edward more than gratitude.”

He drew a guttural breath. “The cost, *Lady?*”

Hating duplicity was necessary to the survival of the two sharing the saddle with him, she said, “I am done living among

the French. Get me to Calais and settled in a modest home, and you will have the date.”

He gave a humorless chuckle.

“Sir Warin?”

“There is something I meant to reveal the night of Jean’s celebration and have yet to tell for it being of less importance than the date you hold hostage—if your claim of postponement is to be believed.”

A chill rippled through her. “What have you not told?”

“In addition to being tasked with learning of the attack upon Calais, I am to return you to England if you wish.”

Were she not seated, her legs would buckle. If he spoke true, she had just given him cause to think far worse of her.

He lies, she told herself. The French court is where Edward wants me, and my family made it clear they will not have me back.

“I do not believe you, Warin Wulfrith. You play with me.”

“You are certain?”

Still he played. Shifting in preparation to dismount, she said, “As surely we near the half hour’s end, I would relieve myself before we make our way to Calais.”

His silence dark, he dismounted and lifted her stiff figure down. “Do not go far, Lady Vianne. The sun is on the wane.”

Forest of Rambouillet

Eight Leagues Southwest of Paris

HARLOTS. He had some experience with women whose livelihood was that of allowing their bodies to be used by men who yielded to base instincts. As once he had yielded.

Nay, not once, but with only one such woman while struggling to rise above mourning the loss of his wife and gain

control of anger toward his eldest brother for his role in Blythe's passing.

Looking to Lady Vianne who hugged a blanket to her where she sat before a low-burning fire that warded off the cool of night, his thoughts shifted to another woman who debased her body—the reformed Esta. For years she had faithfully served his grandmother. Now, ironically, she cared for the child born of Warin's dalliance with a French harlot.

Regardless of Esta's past, she is a good woman, he told himself, and as he questioned how she and his uncle fared at Romary Castle, Lady Vianne corrected the drop of her chin by snapping it up.

She fought sleep, the ride north physically exhausting her—and mentally him since it was necessary to intently listen for sounds and watch for signs of other riders. Though there had been no way of knowing whether hoofbeats and occasional shouts belonged to those of De Talliere, most travelers they might encounter would be dangerous to these two of England.

One of England, Warin silently corrected in remembrance of the lady's terms for revealing the date—that he see her settled at Calais rather than the land of her birth she fled months past.

Recalling his sister's belief that on that bloodied shore Lady Vianne professed the wish to return to De Talliere only to force the trade she hoped would save Dangereuse, he frowned. Did the king believe that as well, and for that ordered Warin to deliver her to England if she chose?

Despite her intelligence about the attack on Calais appearing useless, he had longed to ask Edward why he would remove a valuable agent from the French court, but the king had been in no mood to be questioned.

“Sir Warin,” the lady said, turning her face to him where he sat three feet distant. “Would you pass the drink? I am dry.”

As she was quite often, he reflected and extended the wineskin. The same as done each time he yielded it, she avoided contact with his hand—though soon she would have

to give her hand into his keeping. Then as done throughout the day, she took a single swallow and recapped the skin.

“You would not be so dry if you drank deeply rather than sipped, *Lady*.”

“I prefer watered wine.”

As once he had, though that preference was born of the determination to break the habit of drinking himself numb to which he yielded during his mourning. Though it was years since he had brought himself back from that edge, on the rare occasion he approached it, he returned to diluted wine and ale, milk, even water boiled to render its impurities harmless.

Accepting the skin she reached to him, he nearly smiled when the brush of his fingers made her snatch her hand back. “For as long as you have been at the French court, *Lady Vianne*, I would have thought you accustomed to robust wine.”

When she swept her eyes to the fire, the suspicion she overly imbibed—supported by the Dauphin’s taunt at his sire’s celebration—increased, though it seemed she sought to overcome the destructive habit.

Silence followed, during which the clouds parted, allowing moonlight—and his eyes—to explore the undulations of her hair whose braids had unraveled during their journey.

The moment Warin realized how much he liked that which framed her face being a lighter brown than the rest, he dragged his thoughts elsewhere, then seeing no harm in voicing them, said, “If Calais is soon to be attacked as you tell, the French did not intend to honor the treaty signed at the start of this month.”

“I believe that to be true,” she said, keeping her profile to him.

“They expect King Edward, confident of peace for a time at least, to let down his guard.”

She looked around. “That he does not do, does he?”

After considering how best to answer the woman he did not halfway trust, he said, “As he is shrewd, likely he takes the

treaty no more seriously than Jean, especially since he has been expecting Calais to be attacked.” What he did not say was the resources the King of England gathered for another invasion to reclaim his ancestral lands had continued during treaty negotiations and accelerated following the signing.

Before she could ask more questions whose answers he would not impart, he stood. “Since we resume our journey ere dawn, let us sleep.”

She released her legs clasped beneath her mantle and blanket and slid them to the side to stretch out.

“Hold!” He strode to his mount and collected the rolled blanket fastened to the saddle. “This one is warmer,” he said, returning to her. “I will take the lighter one.”

She stood. “Much gratitude, Sir Warin. Even so near the fire I cannot shake the cold.” As he spread the wool blanket on the ground, she drew off the other.

When he took it and she started to lower, he glimpsed yellow at her neck. “Remove your mantle.”

“Why?”

“I told we would dispense with the hood later.” He flipped the light blanket over a shoulder and drew his Wulfrith dagger. “Later is now.”

As she considered the blade, he guessed her mind ventured to the weapon in her boot, then she drew off the garment, and he saw the purse fastened to the back of her belt. Things there, though not much—and did it hold a weapon, it was not of sharpened steel as known from the feel of the purse between them during the ride.

After cutting away the yellow silk, he passed the cloth to her and resettled the mantle on her shoulders. Coming back around, he noted how still she had gone and that she stared at the ragged-edged hood.

“It must seem desecration of a fine garment,” he said, “but as the yellow made you dangerously visible, it was necessary.”

She remained unmoving.

Telling himself her distress was of no consequence, especially compared to what could be the consequence of too little sleep, he nearly ignored it. But having three sisters and the middle one enamored with beautiful fabrics that had been a balm to her pain in the years before she wove something more beautiful—love for the man she wed over a year past—he submitted, “As the material is exceptional, perhaps it can be fashioned into something else.”

Her eyes landed on his. “Surely you know London prostitutes are required to wear yellow hoods to identify their profession.”

He did, though they were not sewn into the necks of mantles. Garments unto themselves, they consisted of a hood flaring into a short cape that covered the wearer’s arms down to the elbows. Having believed her unaware of what went in the dark streets of London, he had thought it ironic what she wore called to mind those women who could be bought for a coin or two.

“You are aware?” she prompted.

“I am.”

She stepped to the fire and cast the hood atop it.

Had he guessed what she intended, he would not have allowed it—and been more opposed had he known it would smell like burning hair with which he had experience for his chain mail being stuck through with a flaming arrow. Not only had one side of his face and neck been burnt before he could pull the shaft free, but also hair.

“Lady!” He caught her arm.

She allowed him to draw her away from the foul vapors, but though she pulled free when he halted, she remained at his side to watch the slow-burning silk. “I will not miss it,” she said when it was reduced to ash, then crossed to the wool blanket, lowered, and pulled it over her.

Drawing the lighter blanket around his shoulders, Warin followed, and with a thought for the scissors in her boot, lay down beside her.

“What do you, Sir Warin?”

“The same as you, seek sleep.”

“It is unseemly for you to be so near.”

“And yet I was nearer during the ride.” He shifted to settle his back and hips atop firm ground.

“But this is different!”

“So it is.”

When she sat up as if to move away, he closed a hand around her elbow. “It does not become you to act a maiden. Lie down.”

Slowly, she eased onto her back—while keeping her left leg bent.

“*Lady*, if you think to wield against me the shears down your boot, think again.”

She nearly choked on her breath.

“Discovered during my examination following your fall,” he said. “Though I considered taking them from you, I did not to prove *I* can be trusted not to violate you as attempted by one of those who pursued you from France to England.”

“How know you of that?”

“My uncle revealed what he learned happened when Sir Rhys and you were separated en route to London while being pursued by De Talliere’s men. He told you put the man through with a dagger.”

She swallowed. “Gustave was Rollon’s squire before he became the means of hurting and eliminating those who threatened or opposed his lord. Disturbingly, the more valuable he became to Rollon, the less he sought to hide his desire for me.”

“And for that is dead.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I suppose you think ravishment less an offense committed against a har—” She drew back

from naming herself that. “A mistress,” she corrected, but added, “to a married man,” as if she also found it distasteful.

Warin released her, but when she started to turn her back to him, he said, “Give me your hand.”

Her golden eyes landed on his. “For what?”

“So I may sleep fairly well.”

“You think I will slip away in the night?”

“If you do not give me your hand, I will put a leg over you.”

She made a sound of outrage but complied.

Closing his fingers atop hers, Warin said, “Now sleep.”

She went silent, though not still enough to indicate exhaustion outweighed discomfort. Nor was his fatigue greater than awareness of her shifting about, then the twitch of her fingers and rub of her thumb over the base of his.

“Be still, Lady.”

She slid her thumb inward, and he thought that the end of it, but it began moving across his palm. She had discovered the worst of the scars paralleling it, but that was not what disturbed him. What disturbed was that it felt a caress.

“What is this?” she whispered.

“One of several scars there.”

“How did it happen?”

He nearly groaned. “The same way my neck and face sustained burns, which you must have noticed when my beard was shorter.”

“I did.”

“During a siege on the barony I now hold, a flaming arrow embedded in my chain mail near my shoulder. Had I not used that hand to quickly remove the shaft, I would have suffered greater disfigurement.”

“It must have been painful,” she said and started to pull free, but more tightly he gripped her fingers.

She quieted, but again, not for long. “Before the attack at the ice pond, I heard you speak to Lady Dangereuse about your daughter. You said you were moving her to your demesne but did not mention her mother. Has she passed?”

Hoping she would sleep if he satisfied some of her curiosity, he said, “Charliese’s mother has not passed.”

“Then you are wed. For some reason, I thought—”

“I am not married to her mother. Blythe, the woman to whom I *was* wed, was lost to the Great Mortality.”

“I am sorry.”

“Sorrow due, for I loved her,” he said tautly. “As for the girl’s mother, she is a French woman I met well after my wife’s death while serving King Edward in Calais. Being loose with her favors, I cannot know for certain Charliese is mine, but as the timing is right, I took responsibility for my indiscretion.”

“Honorable,” she said. “What of her mother?”

“I offered to provide for her as well, but she preferred to be relieved of the child who stood between her and what she thought a better opportunity.”

The lady shook her head. “It is hard to believe she would give up her daughter.”

“Yet she did.” Before he could think better of it, he added with scorn, “And happily.”

“I could not give away my child. That is, if ever I am blessed with one.”

Something about the way she said that troubled him, but he let it go and said, “Though I do not dispute the fairer sex is more nurturing than men, some women are not meant to be mothers.”

“I suppose not,” she said, then, “I am glad your eye heals, Sir Warin.” She turned her face away. “Good eve.”

It was not good for either, but finally she slept. For recall of her exploration of his scar that made him more aware of her

desirability despite what she was to De Talliere, he was tempted to release her hand. But he held to it, and that cost him sleep. And made him more determined not to share his saddle with her longer than necessary.

CHAPTER 7

Eastern Border of Normandy

Northwest of Paris

The horse Sir Warin obtained was so fine he thought it likely stolen by the village blacksmith who revealed its existence only after an offer was made for another mount. However, the man had known its value and was paid accordingly.

Though Vianne was relieved she must no longer share a saddle with the knight, flashed with memories of Gudrun's resistance to her commands that proved devastatingly warranted, it was hours before she felt comfortable astride.

Still, their progress was poor in the two days since first Warin Wulfrith and she slept side by side, his hand holding hers even in the depths of sleep when she tried to pull free. Not only were they slowed for veering west to avoid other riders, some of whom he identified as mercenaries who were dangerous even were they English, but it had rained heavily on the day past, forcing them to shelter for hours at a time.

According to Sir Warin, there was some good in their northward journey taking a detour along the boundary between the Duchy of Normandy and the royal domain at whose heart lay Paris. As the former was the ancestral lands of the Kings of England for belonging to William the Conqueror, many lords there cautiously supported King Edward though one hundred and fifty years ago the French had taken the duchy from King John who most agreed was England's worst ruler. Were Warin

and Vianne set after, their best chance of escape would be to seek refuge from a Norman lord. Of course, that required he be one who currently leaned toward England's claim on France.

Musings interrupted by movement low in her belly and eager for more evidence of her placid child, Vianne loosed a hand from the reins and set it on the slight swell. More movement. But was it a flutter or...a cramp? Though some discomfort there, she determined the little one pressed against a tender place and held her breath in anticipation of further movement.

“Lady!”

Jerking upright in the saddle, she dropped her hand from her belly as Sir Warin brought his mount around amid trees bordering the open ground they avoided. Seeing how far she had fallen back, she increased the mare's pace.

“Are you well?” he asked as she came alongside.

Feeling as if caught doing something wrong, she told herself to play the part and was struck she had not done so since fleeing Rollon. There were things to conceal from Sir Warin, but little pretense about her since he brought her out of Chevreuse.

“I am well, though as it is hours since we relieved and refreshed ourselves, I would like to stop.”

As cool toward her as ever, he inclined his head. “We near a branch of the Seine that snakes toward Rouen—perhaps half a league inside Normandy.” He glanced at the sun. “Since two hours remain of daylight, it will be best to make camp there.”

Certain they had time aplenty to alert Calais of the attack so measures could be taken to prevent it, weariness would not allow her to suggest otherwise. She nodded and followed him west through thickening trees and denser undergrowth.

It being lovelier here—and louder for birdsong and the humming and buzzing of insects who made a playground of what was last a wintry wood—Vianne was lulled, though not so much she fell behind again. Eyes on Sir Warin's back, she

turned her thoughts to what he had unexpectedly revealed their first night.

Not only was he a widower but, unlike many men—and fewer warriors—he had not thought it weakness to profess love for his wife. Though there had been reluctance in speaking of his daughter, acknowledgement of his sin and acceptance of the child as his own touched Vianne in a way she was touched only once since arriving in France. Her betrothed had made her feel so wanted that her yearning for family and England became more than tolerable. Had she time to know him better, she could have given her heart to him.

At the realization she favorably compared this knight to Balian, she caught back such thoughts just before he reined in and thrust out a staying hand.

Vianne halted her mare and looked around. Riders were heard coming behind and to the left, the stamp of hooves distinct from those of booted feet. And as told by French-accented voices, they did not pursue human game. Not yet.

Moments later, she glimpsed movement and color not of the wood. Four hundred feet out, they came this way.

“Sir Warin?” she whispered.

“Friend or foe, I know not,” he said and gestured in the direction they had been moving, then eased his mount forward.

Though it would be difficult to catch sight of them for how much cover they had, if she moved too quickly as fear tempted her to do, they would be seen.

Follow his lead, trusting him to get you and your child safely away, she told herself, then set a hand on the mare’s neck and whispered, “I trust you as well, my friend.”

It snorted softly and plodded after Sir Warin’s mount, but before long, the others here altered course until they were directly behind and moving somewhat faster. Though still they seemed unaware of the English, they gained on them.

Sir Warin paused again and waved her to his side. “As there is not enough cover to conceal us and we must advance more quickly, we are certain to be seen.”

“Then?”

“Proceed at a good pace. The moment they are roused by the sight of us, ride wild.”

She had never heard that expression, but it told all.

“You are to stay as tight to me as possible, Lady.”

Now was not the time to be struck by the difference in his titling of her, but she felt a thrill for a tone of respect rather than scorn.

“You can do it, *Lady?*” This was said impatiently and once more with scorn.

“I can.”

“Now!” He urged his horse forward.

It seemed a miracle no alarm sounded the first minute, but as she began to think they would escape unseen, shouts sounded and pounding hooves became a good match for those forced to ride wild.

Beset with memories of her flight on Gudrun, Vianne reminded herself she knew how to be one with a horse and stayed near Sir Warin despite denser trees and hedges turning them one direction after another. Blessedly, it was less kind to the pursuers she saw numbered six when she glanced around. Though they fell behind, they were not giving up the chase.

“Go right!” Sir Warin shouted, and she was grateful for the warning since she would not have seen the three-foot-drop in time to prevent the death of another fine horse. And perhaps her own death.

Their pursuers were also spared that tragedy, but avoidance of it caused them to drop back until no longer seen and barely heard.

Still the lady and knight rode wild. Though for Vianne’s aches she longed to pause, since the din created by their horses could mask their enemies’ continued pursuit, they dare not. And when something that felt a cramp moved from one side of her abdomen to the other, all she could do was send heavenward, *I will cling to You even do You not cling to me.*

Pray, protect this babe, throwing high a wall between us and them.

Shockingly, the wall materialized, though it stood between them and safety and was not fashioned of stone. Here the Seine River, swollen from yesterday's rainfall and moving rapidly toward the narrow sea.

She thought Warin would go east, but as if believing their pursuers expected that, he went west. Swiftly, they rode along the tumultuous river and its flooded bank, slowing only after its course was altered by a sharp bend that took them from sight of any who might follow.

They rode minutes longer, then Sir Warin reined in. "We cross there!"

Vianne looked to where he pointed and, voice quaking, said, "But the river nearly rages."

He jutted his chin. "For greater width, less so there."

"There are rocks beyond it!"

His light eyebrows were very different from Rollon's, but their gathering almost as ominous. "Aye, *Lady*, and beyond them the river does rage for how greatly it narrows."

"Non, I think we should stay this side."

"As our pursuers may if they persist in the chase."

She glanced at the bend in the Seine. "If they followed us to the river, likely they went the other direction."

"Or divided their party, some going that way, others this."

"But—"

"Lady Vianne, I know you are capable of swimming a horse far better than most."

She swallowed hard. "That was a fairly calm sea and salt water, not a turbulent, far less buoyant river."

"For Calais, you must do it."

She realized she had set a hand on her belly and it might be visible past her mantle's part, but leaving it there, abandoned

pride and beseeched, “I am afeared.”

She thought sympathy lightened his regard, but he said, “Fear you will have to overcome. Now we go!”

She stared after him, then ignoring the inner scream that demanded she ride into the bordering trees, followed.

Five feet he advanced along the river...ten...fifteen... At twenty, he called, “Here!”

She knew he had chosen the best place to ford it, but remained wary though it would not be the first time she braved rapidly moving water—and done once in opposition to Rollon who refused to cross a river. That being when she had power over him for his pride in having her on his arm and lacking reason to question her trustworthiness, he had merely pouted. The next day, she had sent intelligence gained from the young noblemen who also crossed the river and, for a time, meandered through the meadow with her, regaling her with tales of their importance at court.

Now as Sir Warin urged his horse forward, he said, “You can do this, Vianne.”

More than needing to be assured she could safely cross the swollen river, strangely she needed to hear him speak her name absent formality and scorn.

My babe and I cling to You, Lord, she sent heavenward, then followed to the water’s edge. And met slight resistance from the mare who, the same as its rider, knew what was fairly easy going in the shallows would become arduous and life-threatening.

Vianne did not need to be told to keep distance between their mounts lest currents draw them dangerously near, but when Sir Warin commanded her to enter to his right, she saw wisdom in that. If she lost the saddle, he would have a chance to scoop her up before she was carried past him.

As both ventured farther into the river, the sweeping water rose up their horses’ legs, then over the riders’ feet toward their knees. It was not as cold as the sea Vianne had gone into months past, but that was the only good of it, she thought as

the flooded bank began falling away and water dragged at those seeking to thwart nature who wished them to join its perilous journey.

When the horses began swimming, another and not unexpected comparison was made between the river and the sea. She had thought the latter powerful when she and her mount negotiated it from shore to boat, but it felt a wolf pup alongside a mature, hungry wolf.

Between beseechings to the Lord to safely deliver them to the opposite side, she leaned over the mare's neck and assured it she had faith in it reaching the ground beyond the other flooded bank—that just as Sir Warin believed this lady could make the crossing, so could the animal churning its legs.

Shockingly, it was the knight who was nearly swept away. As they neared their destination, the swirling water before the rocks around which branches and other debris were tangled caused his horse to struggle as if against ropes wound about its legs.

Seeing Sir Warin start to go sideways, Vianne called his Christian name. When the two came right moments later, she thanked the Lord, and again when the gelding's legs firmed and it began emerging.

So great was Vianne's relief, her mind mistook it for joy. Thus, when her soaked mount delivered its halfway-soaked rider to the knight's side, the smile bestowed on him was so rarely on her mouth this past year it felt her lips would crack. That set her aright, as did Sir Warin's expression of surprise that quickly darkened.

Before confirming he once more looked upon her with aversion, she shifted her attention to the wet mantle heavy upon her shoulders.

As she lifted one side to wring it out, he warned, "If they come this way, they come soon—and may prove as capable of swimming horses."

He was right. The sooner they gained the wood, the less likely they would be overtaken for none considering a woman

capable of swimming a horse.

If only he were right sooner, she thought as they spurred away and shouts and a glance toward the bend in the river revealed three riders that side. As Sir Warin suspected, their pursuers had divided.

HE HAD LOOKED BACK ONLY ONCE before going to the trees to conceal the direction they would take should their pursuers risk fording the river.

Though Warin had seen the three well enough to be certain none were those at De Talliere's manor house, they could be as dangerous, whether by their independent actions or were they to reveal to others they had seen a lady riding across Normandy accompanied by a knight. Warin's identity could not be known were it suspected she had gained the aid of a warrior, but the first step in rendering descriptions void was to alter his and her appearance as much as possible.

Nay, he corrected where he stood alongside his mount. The first step was securing sanctuary best not entrusted to the wood since he had an alternative.

Use that coin wisely, Joffrey Masse had said, though the chevalier could not have known its use would be of much personal interest to him. And more wise that use for the fatigue Warin believed the lady sought to conceal, which became more evident as they watered their mounts during the sun's final descent.

Hair reworked into a braid, body draped in the hoodless mantle dried by the whip of their ride, she continued to sit back on her heels just as when he passed to her the wineskin, bread, and dried meat. As usual, she had only a sip before returning the skin. As less usual, she left most of the food untouched.

Might she be ailing? Had she taken a chill as surely done the day she braved the sea and had to be put around with rope to get her over the ship's side? If so, wiser yet to take her to

the demesne of Joffrey Masse's cousin, though the lands of Warin's distant relations were not much farther.

Unfortunately, the Barony of Valeur held by the D'Argents since before Duke William conquered England was under the wardship of a staunch supporter of King Jean. And even were the D'Argents not beneath that man's thumb, since the Wulfriths' connection with them began unraveling when Normandy was taken by the French king one hundred and fifty years ago, it could not be known if this English kin would be welcome.

Warin patted the horse of whom he had asked much in crossing the river and battling the current that carried them perilously near the rock. Stepping between it and the lady's mare, he said low, "I must ask more of you both this day, then a good meal of hay and a fine bed of straw, hmm?"

Both nickered, and Warin strode to the lady whose chin had lowered. He thought she napped, but when he halted, she tipped up her face and asked, "It is safe to make camp here, is it not?"

Too much hope in her voice. "Fairly safe, but as we will be more secure elsewhere, we have what I believe an hour and a half ride ahead."

Her jaw tensed, but she did not protest. "Where do we go?"

"A Norman stronghold."

Though he had told such could prove necessary, now that he believed it imperative, she protested, "Though many Normans take the side of King Edward, you must know they are changeable."

"Aye, sometimes for greed that overrides their wish for autonomy when the King of France is of a generous mood for being desperate to assure their allegiance, other times out of necessity when he is of a punitive mood for being confident of gaining their compliance in threatening the lives of their families."

She shook her head. "I believe we are safer here."

“I do not. Thus, we ride for Blanchefleur.”

“Blanchefleur?” She ignored the hand he reached to her. “The demesne of Baron Landon Masse?”

“Aye.”

“His cousin, Joffrey, is firmly King Jean’s side.”

Clearly, there were things Warin knew that this spy did not, but it was not for him to dissuade her of the chevalier’s support of the Valois king, only to assure her the landed Masse’s mostly secret loyalty lay with the King of England. “I am aware Chevalier Joffrey’s best interests are served in holding to the hem of King Jean’s robe, but ’tis not so of his cousin.”

As told by flitting eyes, she searched for further argument, then asked, “Is not Blanchefleur south of here though we go north?”

“It is mostly south, but I believe sheltering there is worth the time of making up for lost ground.”

After some moments, she said, “We stay there but one night?”

“Aye, departing for Calais at dawn.” He reached nearer. “As it grows darker, come.”

She set a hand in his, and when he raised her, he noted warmth about her fingers and heard her suppress a sound of discomfort. And further regretted she must ride again so soon.

She pulled free, turned toward their mounts, then hunched and groaned.

He set a hand on her shoulder. “Lady?”

“’Tis only a riding cramp,” she said, slowly straightening.

As Warin had sisters, he understood—and was more resolved to reach Blanchefleur to ensure she had what was needed to attend to her monthly flux during the remainder of their journey to Calais.

She allowed him to assist her into the saddle, and so gingerly lowered he searched her face. Previously, he had

worried about the pale of it. Now he questioned flush beyond that of her cheeks.

“I am as ready as I can be, Sir Warin.”

He made no comment but crossed to his mount and shortly led the way south.

CHAPTER 8

Barony of Blanchefleur

Normandy, France

They could have made better time, but in consideration of the lady's discomfort, Warin had proceeded at a relatively sedate pace, enabling him to more closely watch for danger. And that allowed him to verify two riders wore the colors of Baron Masse before Lady Vianne and he were sighted.

After relinquishing his arms as required by the patrol, they were escorted to the castle of varying stone that evidenced expansion over hundreds of years. The Lord of Blanchefleur kept them waiting a quarter hour before appearing atop the gatehouse. Looking down at their torchlit figures, he demanded the names of those wishing an audience.

Though upon their arrival, the patrol had passed to the captain of the guard the name Warin gave, once more he thickened his French accent and in that language called, "Chevalier Godfroi le Blonde." He gestured at Lady Vianne whom he had told of the role she must play before he had allowed the patrol to intercept them. "Here my wife, Lady Anne."

After some consideration, the nobleman descended. Accompanied by a dozen men-at-arms, he ducked beneath the rising portcullis and halted ten feet in front of his visitors. "What business have you with me, Le Blonde who comes in the night when better the day?"

“No business, my lord. Rather, a request.” Warin drew a silver groat from his purse and held it up. “Pray, shelter.”

As told by arched eyebrows, more greatly he had the attention of the baron of two score years, but then the man snorted. “Does my castle look a flee-infested inn?”

That was not part of the script off which it was acceptable to veer according to the circumstances when presented the coin, especially if it was possible an audience included those not to be trusted.

“It does not, Baron Masse, though I am so travel weary I would consider a night’s rest worth the itch that follows a stay at an inn of low repute. Of course, my wife would not.” He jerked his head at she whose taut lips were so chapped they might crack. Though no more pleased to play his wife than he her husband, she understood it was safest.

“For that, my lord, we seek a chamber in your donjon at best, a pallet in your hall at worst, and as I would not impose without offering compensation, *this*.” He looked to the groat and, seeing it was face up, turned King Edward’s head down. On the back was a cross, and around the edges the Latin words *I have made God my helper*. It being not only required to present the back of the coin but with thumb and forefinger pinching the cross’s lower right quadrant, he shifted his hold on it and repeated, “Pray, shelter.”

The nobleman strode forward. With apparent disinterest, he glanced at the torch-lit coin, then said, “Generous, but no payment required.”

They were back on script, Warin’s words and presentation of the coin revealing he had King Edward’s blessing, Baron Masse’s response showing acceptance of him and confirming his own support of the English claim to the French throne.

As Lady Vianne watched Warin drop the coin back in his purse, their host commanded the patrol to return his guest’s weapons and said, “Well come to Blanchefleur, Sir Godfroi and Lady Anne.” Then he motioned them to follow.

Rather than leave their horses at the stable in the outer bailey, they were permitted to guide them to the donjon, Masse likely noting the lady's fatigue. After Warin put his pack over a shoulder, he aided in her dismount, then braced her arm and led her up the steps.

In the hall, amid activity in preparation for the evening meal, they were greeted by the baron's wife, a short woman of no more than thirty years who would be plump even were her pregnancy not advanced.

Baron Masse said something in her ear, and Lady Clémence entreated their guests to follow her abovestairs where they would be provided a chamber.

A single chamber, Warin reflected, but if that concerned Lady Vianne, it was not apparent. But then, since they had been sleeping side by side in the wood each night, him holding her hand and there none to prevent him doing more than that, she must trust him enough to know it would be no different here.

Again, he aided her up the steps, over the course of which she gave him more of her weight. Then they were on the landing and traversing a corridor of many doors.

When Lady Clémence opened one halfway down, she surprised in announcing, "Here your chamber, Lady Anne. Two doors down Sir Godfroi's."

Baron Masse was astute, knowing it highly unlikely one on King Edward's business would be accompanied by a wife.

As Warin handed Lady Vianne into the room, she looked around and said, "Much gratitude, Lady Clémence."

The woman inclined her head. "I shall send a servant to provide whatever you require. As supper is an hour hence, that should be enough time to refresh yourself."

She was thanked again, then Lady Vianne closed the door.

As Warin entered the chamber the baron's wife opened to him, she said, "You are aware the lady is ill?"

He turned. "Certes, she is not well."

“Know you the nature of her illness?”

“She took a fall from her horse early on, but besides soreness appeared to recover. However, the ride since has been strenuous, the weather at times unfriendly, and our nights spent on cold, hard ground.”

She nodded. “Regardless of what has hold of her, if her body chooses to sleep through supper, we shall leave her undisturbed.”

Which should restore her so there would be no impediment to resuming their journey at dawn, he thought. “I agree and appreciate your concern and hospitality.”

“We are glad to assist, Sir Godfroi.” When she set a hand on her belly and the movement drew his eye, she said, “My sixth child, all but one surviving though my husband was warned not to wed one of such small hips. Though it seems I will die with each birthing, the Lord blesses us.”

“He does, indeed.”

She turned, but halted and looked across her shoulder. “The Christian name, Godfroi, is one with which we are familiar since our neighbors, the D’Argents, carry it down through their line.”

Seeing a sparkle in her eyes and knowing there was more to her words than observation, he allowed, “A name also long in my family.” *Beginning with Godfroi D’Argent whose eldest son, Guarin, founded the Wulfrith line of England,* he thought.

“I shall send a servant to you as well,” she said, then traversed the corridor with the gait exclusive to women who bore the weight of more than one life.

A beautiful thing, he thought and wondered when he would be ready to take another wife and know the joy of children made with her.

A few more years, he told himself and swept his regard to the door of Lady Vianne, next the chamber before him. *Then I shall be ready to pursue what I thought to have with the lady lost to me.*

LADY VIANNE HAD SLEPT through supper on the night past. Though Warin had believed it a good thing, the maid tending her reported to Lady Clémence that despite her guest drinking several cups of honey milk, she had eaten little before donning the clean chemise provided her and going abed.

Now with dawn an hour out and the sounds of an awakening castle rising all about the donjon, Warin put his pack and mantle over a shoulder and departed the chamber that had provided the best sleep had since he enjoyed Chevalier Joffrey's hospitality.

If not that the lady might need to be roused to resume their journey, he would have gone directly to the kitchen to gain food and drink to supply them for days, then broken his fast in the hall while waiting for her to join him.

Halting at her door, he tapped lightly to avoid disturbing others along the corridor who need not rise early. When he heard footsteps, he rasped, "It is Sir Godfroi."

She opened the door slightly and, its frame casting a shadow across her, peered at him where he was lit by lanterns along the corridor. When she startled back a step, he saw her hair was worked into plaits draping her shoulders and she wore a clean gown surely provided by Lady Clémence. "You..." She trailed off.

He pulled a hand down his lightly bearded jaw. "Closely trimmed last eve after Lord Masse's squire cut my hair."

"You look more as you did..." Again, she did not finish what she spoke.

"...when first we met, Lady."

"When first we met," she said, her dragging words making it sound as if she came up out of sleep though she was dressed and had arranged her hair.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

“Much improved.” She nodded as if to convince herself of it.

“You are ready to depart?”

“Oui, I have only to don the mantle Lady... Is it Clémence?”

He did not like this. “That is her name.”

“She sent a hooded mantle with the gown.” Taking another step back into lantern light, she ran a hand down a bodice of brown that was as unlikely to catch the eye of other riders as the soiled and travel-weary green.

“That was kind of her,” he said.

When she looked up, what had not been seen in shadow was evident now. More than on the night past, she was flushed and her golden eyes partially hooded as if she struggled to remain awake.

Nay, as if she weakens, he silently corrected and pushed the door wider and entered. “You are not much improved. Whatever ails you worsens.”

Though she stood taller, the effort made her sway nearly enough to require steadying.

Knowing this changed all, he bit back a curse, then realized good could come of this. He would reach Calais more quickly if she did not accompany him, though that depended on her providing the date.

He crossed to the chair and set his mantle and pack there, then returned and placed a hand on her shoulder. “We must talk.”

Her frown all suspicion, she said, “Of what, Sir Warin?”

“Until we are among the English, I am Godfroi,” he reminded.

“Talk of what, Sir *Godfroi*?”

He urged her toward the chair before the brazier. “Sit and we—”

“Non!” She slipped free. “Tell of what you wish to speak and be plain.”

For the rise of her voice, Warin returned to the door and closed it. “I was expecting sleep to restore you, but you appear more ill than last eve.” Once more, he placed himself before her. “Hence, for the sake of your health and to ensure you do not slow me in reaching Calais, I shall ask Baron Masse to allow you to remain.”

“Non, I go with you.”

“Regrettably not.”

“Regrettably?” She stepped forward and clenched a handful of his tunic. “I vow I will not slow you.”

Seeing her face was pricked with perspiration, he was more certain he must leave her. “Assuredly, that vow would prove misplaced within hours. Now serve the king you profess as your own and tell the date of the attack.”

“You are not leaving me behind!”

He set a hand over hers on his tunic. “I vow I will come back and deliver you to Calais.”

She wrenched her hand free. “*Assuredly*, that vow misplaced ere the week is done,” she altered words spoken of her own pledge, then crossed to the bedside table on which sat a pitcher and cup beside her purse. She poured honey milk, drank, then began fastening the purse’s belt around her waist.

A moment later, Warin was before her. “For the rest and care you need, you shall return to bed.”

Chin down as she struggled with the buckle, she said, “What I shall do is accompany you to Calais.”

“You will not.”

She looked up. “Oui, if you wish the date.”

Anger made fists of his hands, not to be used against her but to control his emotions. Still, for her obstinacy that could endanger the port city and its inhabitants, it was not enough. “I know the king’s beautiful spy bends men to her will with

flirtations that promise favors like those enjoyed by her lover,” he bit, “but even do you turn your every effort on me, I will not bend, *Lady*. You shall tell me—”

“Lady!” she hissed as her purse thumped to the floor. “I tire of being scornfully titled, especially as none need remind me of what I became to survive—least of all you who judges my sin though, as evidenced by your misbegotten daughter, much aid you gave in ensuring at least one harlot a good supply of clients.”

Her words stung more than the palm she had landed against his cheek in the palace courtyard—as they would not were there no truth to them.

“If my title offends,” she continued, “cease using it or—” Her own anger hitting an invisible wall, her eyes widened and she whimpered.

“What is wrong, Lady Vianne?”

The shake of her head was slight, and when he reached to her, she jumped back against the bedside table. Then she looked down and breathed, “Non.”

He followed her gaze and, seeing a rivulet of blood appear from beneath her skirt, was flashed with remembrance of her fall from the horse, then the thought she had been bleeding internally all these days.

“Almighty!” He caught her up, turned, and lowered her to the mattress.

As her head sank into the pillow, she pressed hands to her abdomen and, eyes overflowing, whispered, “Pray, Lord, do not take this babe.”

CHAPTER 9

Had you told what you suffer, Lady Anne, sooner I could have sent for aid.”

Striving to rise above delirium that had seized her at the sight of blood, Vianne narrowly opened her eyes and was struck that just as the voice was no match for Sir Warin, neither the face.

“I am Lady Clémence,” the woman reminded where she leaned near.

Feeling moisture on her brow, Vianne raised her lids higher and realized a wet cloth was pressed to her brow.

“Alas, much bleeding,” the lady said.

“Bleeding,” she whispered, then assured her heart, *It is not much. Just because a woman bleeds a little does not mean her babe cannot be born healthy.*

“You must be still and hold to God.”

Ignoring the sympathetic smile accompanying those words, Vianne touched her abdomen beneath the blanket. “I shall—for my babe. We but need rest.”

The cloth was removed and passed to a servant who handed the lady another. As a colder one touched her brow, seeking assurance, Vianne said, “We need rest. That is all, oui?”

Lady Clémence’s lips curved with falsity more difficult to ignore than that smile of sympathy. “Rest is good, Lady Anne.

Sleep, and when next you awaken, you should be in the hands of one well versed in such things.”

Such things—words as needful of being set aside as, *Alas, much bleeding*.

Once more, Vianne tried to move beyond what sounded an ominous pronouncement. And might have succeeded had she not become aware of much moisture beneath her that foretold the fate of the child she had tried hard to keep from losing the same as its sister or brother.

She choked back a sob. “My babe is lost?”

Lady Clémence nearly averted her gaze, and though that was answer enough, she said, “I am sorry, but though there is little hope for the child, there is much for you, and a good chance one day you—”

“Your words do not comfort!” Vianne cried, her heart feeling as if only moments from hitting the ground to break into a thousand pieces.

With the firmness of a mother trying to calm a destructive child, the woman said, “Lady Anne, listen to me.”

“Leave!” Vianne raised her other hand from beneath the blanket and pushed aside the one holding the soothing cloth in place.

“Hear me, Lady—”

“I said *leave!*” She started to turn away.

“And I said you must be still.” Quickly rising, the kindly Lady Clémence leaned over the babe thriving in her own womb and set hands on Vianne’s shoulders to return her to her back.

Not wanting to unleash more anger on her, Vianne strained to the side to close in on herself and be left to misery with which she had become so accustomed it was almost a balm.

“Lady!” the baron’s wife snapped. “I am not here to harm but give aid as Sir Godfroi asked of me.”

That name made her cease resisting, and she saw again the Wulfrith who had taken the name of Warin d'Argent in Paris, then Godfroi le Blonde in Normandy.

In this chamber, he had sought to use the excuse of what he named illness to leave her behind, and in exchange for the date had told he would fulfill the promise of delivering her to Calais.

She had wanted to believe him and might have had she only herself to consider, but the need to keep her babe from Rollon had been great, and the only means of halfway assuring that was for mother and child to gain sanctuary among the English. Thus, even had he done all in his power to keep his word to one he disdained, it would have been of no use if circumstances—deadly or otherwise—prevented him from returning to Blanchefleur.

And we would not escape Rollon, she thought, then more closely pressed a hand to the womb Lady Clémence believed had failed and amended it to, *I would not escape*. Then she wept.

Releasing Vianne's shoulders, the woman said, "While we await the lady, sleep."

She wanted to, but between sobs whispered, "What lady?"

After the baron's wife instructed the servant to go for more iced water, she said, "I speak of one versed in the joy—and sorrow—of delivering children into the world."

"Sorrow..." Vianne breathed.

A hand caressed her jaw. "Fear not, soon Lady Eugénie d'Argent arrives."

Though struck by the surname, Vianne could not raise her lids, but she heard the servant departing the chamber call, "If Fitz Géré allows her to come, my lady."

"He will," was the answer, and when the door closed, Lady Clémence murmured, "Whatever it takes to get inside our walls and pry at tongues we have loosened for just such occasions."

... *WHAT I BECAME TO SURVIVE.*

Warin did not want the lady's words in his head, but it was those or ones of anger and frustration both had spoken when she withheld the date to force him to take her to Calais. Worse, there was her desperate pleading with the Lord to save the babe he had not known journeyed with them.

Sitting on the mattress, elbows dug into his thighs, clasped hands gone white, he repeated those words, "What I became to survive."

However, his attempt to return his thoughts to how she was made a spy failed. Instead, he questioned her pregnancy—how far advanced, which would impact the babe's ability to survive as well its mother...if it was the cause of her recent illness reported to the French king...whether the fall from her horse, of which he was at least partially responsible, caused the bleeding...if De Talliere had known...

The sound of horses moving from outer to inner bailey and accompanying voices more effective in closing down such pondering than deciphering how one of the Wardieu family became a woman of loose virtue, Warin stood and strode to the window whose set back shutters let in spring air beginning to warm.

He knew who came. Having sent a servant for Baron Masse's wife after settling Lady Vianne on the bed, Lady Clémence had instructed him to find her husband and, under cover of the lie she herself labored ahead of her time, have him send for one skilled with childbirth—Lady Eugénie d'Argent of the Barony of Valeur.

And there she is, he thought as, standing to the side of the window to prevent being seen, he peered down at the four who reined in before the donjon. Center of an escort doubtless loyal to her family's hated guardian, one possibly Louis fitz Géré himself, the woman sat erect despite loosely braided hair of so much silver she must be the heir's grandmother.

Though three hundred years had rendered Warin a very distant relation, he longed to meet the woman and learn more of the D'Argents. Of course, whatever he discovered would be passed to his grandmother and youngest sister who were the keepers of the family's chronicle, *The Book of Wulfrith*.

Unfortunately, it was doubtful he would have an opportunity to speak with Lady Eugénie who nearly made him smile when the first of her escort to dismount set a hand on her waist to assist her and she knocked it aside.

Whatever her hissed words, they were too distant to ascend the donjon fully formed, but there was no mistaking the anger on the face of a man of perhaps thirty and of less than impressive height whose parted mantle showed he was dressed nobly. Even were he not Fitz Géré as seemed likely, Warin agreed with Baron Masse he should stay out of sight.

The lady dismounted smoothly and, taller than the one whose aid she rejected, straightened her mantle and skirts, then unfastened a pack from her saddle. With this she did seek aid, though after thrusting it against the nobleman's chest, she had to keep hold of it until he accepted it with little grace. Then she advanced past others who had dismounted, snatched up her skirt's hem, and quickly ascended the steps with her pack bearer coming behind.

Sprightly old woman, Warin thought and remembered the same could be said of his grandmother until five years past when advancing age began winning more battles against her resolve than were lost.

Baron Masse appeared. Meeting the D'Argent matriarch halfway, he said something and, when she nodded, took her arm and guided her up the last steps to the hall with her resentful escort following.

"Pray, Eugénie d'Argent," Warin rasped, "if you cannot save both, save the lady."

FOR THE SILVER halo about the woman patting Vianne's cheek with one hand and sweeping a pungent cloth beneath her nose with the other, this seemed a dream. But as that one's visage lost its blur, Vianne deemed it a hallucination.

The patting and sweeping ceasing, in a lilting French accent the woman said, "There you are."

Vianne squeezed her eyes closed, expecting the vision would be gone when she opened them, but it was more clear—as were the woman's next words, "Very good, Lady Anne. Now we begin."

"Begin?"

"Oui, you must deliver the babe."

Hope flew through Vianne. "Then my child—" She broke off as realization thrust through her thoughts. Even were her pregnancy two months further along, it would not be enough.

"Your babe is lost," the woman verified it was impossible to deliver a live child barely halfway developed. "I am sorry."

Vianne swept her hand off her belly, dug her fingers into the mattress.

"Mourning is due you, Lady, but it must wait. Now we try to save you, hmm?"

"Why?" she demanded as tears once more spilled, then turned her face away and squeezed her eyes closed.

"Ah, non!" The woman pulled her chin around, patted her cheek, then lightly slapped it. "I did not ride so hard and far for you to prove how weak a mother you would have been."

Cruel words, but they dragged her out the place into which she burrowed, flashing her with memories of all she had endured these eight years, ending with the merciless ride from Chevreuse to Blanchefleur. "Not weak! Not what I—"

The door opened, and the one who harassed her looked around and asked, "Everything is arranged?"

Vianne expected Sir Warin to answer and, despite him being responsible for some of this jagged anger, longed to hear

his voice. But it was Lady Clémence who said after closing the door, “I am assured our *guests* will soon be greatly honored with music.”

“Fitz Géré will like that,” this woman said with enough bitterness it did not escape Vianne who had every reason to ignore the feelings of others.

Appearing on the opposite side of the bed, the Lady of Blanchfleur said, “You have brought her around.”

Throat tightening over the sight of that prominent belly, Vianne thought, *A blessing twice denied me. And so never again.*

Nearly yielding to further weeping, she returned her attention to the woman whose silver halo was no halo. However, when Lady Clémence closed a hand over the one gripping the mattress, Vianne slammed her eyes to her. Though she longed to cast angry words, the lady’s expression was so compassionate, more she wanted to go into her arms.

“We know there is much suffering about your heart, Lady Anne,” she said, “and though there will be great suffering about your body, you must strive against voicing it loudly since there are men in our hall who are not to know what goes here. As they were made to believe Lady Eugénie was summoned to aid with my pregnancy, it must remain thus, and easier that for my husband providing entertainment to mask what you cannot hold inside when you deliver your wee lost one.”

“With which we must proceed immediately,” said the woman of silvered hair who now had a name.

Once more longing to burrow, Vianne lowered her lids.

“Non!” Lady Eugénie denied her, though this time absent cruel words. “You told you are not weak.”

She had and spoken true, but what did it matter now?

“I am convinced of it,” the woman continued, “and that the mother of you would have been stronger for love of her child—and one day shall be.”

Were she to allow other babes to be made on her, Vianne might agree. However, if death did not come for her this day the same as her child, she would not suffer Rollon de Talliere again. Were he to recover her, she would do to him what she had done to his man, Gustave, who sought to ravish her.

“There!” Lady Eugénie said. “I see more strength about you. Now climb it hand over hand so we may preserve your life.”

When Vianne jerked her chin, the woman retrieved from the bedside table something padded in cloth. She handed it to Lady Clémence. “Sit beside her. Once it begins, put this between her teeth.”

At Vianne’s gasp, she said, “It will prevent you biting your tongue and cracking your teeth, as well as muffle sounds of what will be worse pain than what came with the bleeding.”

“I am afeared.”

Lady Eugénie surprised in lightly kissing Vianne’s brow. “As is every woman no matter how strong. As would be every man had God created them to be the life-giving vessels we are.” She straightened, removed a tunic of plain cloth from a pack on the bedside table, pulled it on over her gown, then carried the pack to the foot of the bed and said, “Let us pray—briefly.”

CHAPTER 10

Pacing—to which he was not given. Pacing—to which his brother, Rémy, had been given months past when his wife labored to birth a child who narrowly survived unlike its mother.

Now another cry aspiring to a scream, but heard only because he listened for what escaped those in the hall due to entertainment provided the unwelcome guests. Abovestairs, repeatedly the sounds of misery that could be the prelude to death traveled down the corridor and through his door.

Almighty, how much longer must she endure?

Though it was Warin's nature to empathize with others and many times these days he had been moved to feel for Lady Vianne, because of what she was and the suffering she caused in England, he had suppressed kindred emotions. Then there was his growing attraction to her though it threatened to tempt him to a relationship like that which resulted in the birth of his daughter.

Yet another cry from another woman laboring with a misbegotten child.

Halting center of the chamber, he rasped, "Lord, I know the babe cannot be saved, but—"

He strode to the door, reached to it.

Naught you can do, nor would she welcome you, warned the voice within. Indeed, your presence would make it worse.

Still, it was so hard to turn back into his chamber that he could only brace a forearm against the doorframe, bend his head, and pray for the lady. At the end of his beseeching, he remained unmoving until restlessness moved him to his pack from which he took a whetstone.

A quarter hour later, he heard a door open on the corridor. Was it over? he wondered as light footsteps moved his direction.

He stood from the bed, resheathed the Wulfrith dagger he had sharpened, and when slipped feet slowed, opened the door to Lady Masse whose knuckles were poised to rap.

Sorrow all about her eyes, she said, "It is done. Though Lady Eugénie has delivered the miscarried babe with no damage to the mother, to increase the chance of recovery, Lady Anne must remain abed. Hence, it will be at least a sennight before she can resume her journey with you."

Though that could prove too late to alert those of Calais of the attack that might see many slaughtered and the city lost, he said, "I thank you for informing me," then asked, "With time and proper care, will she recover fully?"

"I believe she has a good chance, but as it is best Lady Eugénie answer that, I will send her to you before she departs."

Then he would meet the aged woman after all. "And the tale she will give those who accompanied her, one of whom I believe is Fitz Géré?"

Her mouth moved toward a sneer. "You believe right. As for the tale, she will say she stopped my early labor but must return every two days to check on me."

Meaning to check on Lady Vianne. "I regret your husband and you must further suffer Fitz Géré's company."

Lady Clémence snorted. "Blessedly, King Jean's bootlicker does not always accompany her, so it may not be so terrible. Regardless, it is best the two of you remain out of sight of her escort." She paused in turning away. "As I assume

you shall extend your own stay whilst the lady recovers, know you are most welcome.”

Having determined whatever the outcome of the miscarriage, even lacking the date he must continue to Calais, he said, “I thank you for your hospitality, but as there are things that need doing, I leave at dusk to decrease the chance of being seen departing your demesne.”

“But you will return for the lady, oui?”

“I gave my word I would deliver her to a place of her choosing, and so I shall.”

She smiled. “If she does not awaken before you depart, I will assure her of your return.”

“Much gratitude, my lady.”

She swung her pregnant bulk away and soon entered the chamber from which no further sounds issued.

Warin closed the door, bent his head, and this time praised the Lord for Lady Vianne’s life and asked He fully heal her.

An hour later, footsteps approached again. As before, he opened the door before the rap. He expected the one without to be Lady Eugénie. What he did not expect was her age.

Here the reason what he assumed a very mature woman was so sprightly. And he could be forgiven that since the premature silvering of young Wulfriths that had begun with the D’Argents was reversed with this lady whose lovely face suggested she was of a similar age to his recently widowed brother, Rémy. Though there were black and dark grey strands amid silvery-white, they were so sparse he had not noticed them when he peered down at her in the inner bailey.

She set her head to the side. “You stare, Chevalier who shares my brother’s name.”

After quickly taking in the rest of one of good height whose mantle was folded over an arm and her pack hooked over the other, he said, “Forgive me, though...”

Eyebrows rose above pewter-colored eyes. “Though?”

“You must be accustomed to such.”

Her smile was slight but very pretty. “Just as I am accustomed to being presumed an old woman when seen from the back. But whereas once it offended, now it amuses—mostly.” She glanced past him. “I know it unseemly to enter your chamber, but as Lady Clémence tells you are honorable, of greater concern is discretion.”

She was right. Should one of her escort venture abovestairs, it would not do for them to be found speaking. He opened the door wider and, when she entered, closed it and kept his distance to offer assurance beyond that provided by Blanche fleur’s lady.

As she set her hands at her waist, he asked, “Lady Anne?”

“She sleeps deep, less from the draught I gave than fatigue over what was required of her. Though she remains feverish, she cools.”

“Will she recover fully?”

“That is the hope and prayer, and more likely answered well if my instructions are followed.” Her eyebrows pinched. “Would I be mistaken in offering condolences due the father of a lost child?”

“Oui. I did not sire it and, until this day, did not know she was with child.”

Lady Eugénie nodded slowly. “As she wears no ring, I would guess her babe misbegotten though she left me in no doubt she wanted it.”

Deciding no comment was needed, he asked, “Were you able to determine the reason it did not survive?”

“Non. Rarely can such be known early in pregnancy, even one halfway to nine months.”

Warin jerked. “Halfway?”

“The babe was well enough formed I would say between four and five months.”

Were that so, she would have conceived just before fleeing to England, and it followed discovery of her pregnancy could have been the reason—or among the reasons—she returned to De Talliere. *If* this lady was correct.

“You are thinking were she that far long, her pregnancy would have been more obvious,” Lady Eugénie guessed what was behind his silence.

“I am.”

“Not all women quickly add weight, nor do their babes eagerly press forward. For some mothers in waiting, it is merely the way of their body. For others it is due to insufficient sustenance, whether from lack or prolonged nausea. For yet others, anxiety or fear suppress the appetite.”

Warin considered the months since her return to De Talliere. Absent from court until King Jean’s birthday celebration, how had she passed her time at the manor? Had she desired the isolation? Or had her lover forced it—a repercussion of her absence that proved so unpleasant she determined to escape? And might it have been worse than unpleasant? Of danger to her unborn child?

“Regardless, a terrible loss for the lady, Sir Godfroi. Now, ere my *keeper* comes looking for me I must leave.”

Feeling for her, he wished he could learn more of her family’s circumstances so were it possible for the Wulfriths to give aid they would have an idea of how best to do so. “I thank you for coming to me, Lady Eugénie.”

She moved to the door where she looked across a shoulder coursed by a silvery-white braid. “I cannot be certain, nor that it is of much consequence, but from my observations I think Lady Anne’s babe passed before this day.”

He stiffened, his first thought her miscarriage a result of the fall from her horse when he gave chase. “How much earlier?” he said gruffly.

“Days, perhaps a sennight. But I could be very wrong.”

Were it a sennight, he would wish her very right for relieving him of guilt.

He strode to her and, when she turned, caught up her hand and kissed it. “I am glad to have made your acquaintance and grateful for what you have done and will do for the lady.”

“As I am glad to have made the acquaintance of one of much-diluted Norman accent,” she said, withdrawing her hand.

He had let his pretense of being one of the continental French slip, and yet it did not alarm—not with this one descended from Godfroi and Robine D’Argent the same as he. In that moment deciding a greater token of gratitude was due, he said, “Nearly two years past, my eldest brother wed a lady who once served as the companion of a D’Argent lady of the Barony of Valeur.”

She frowned. “If that was within the past three years, you speak of me.”

“As thought, and just as now you know that woman is safe and loved, so is her young cousin who was kin to you and is being raised into a warrior by other blood relations.”

In her eyes understanding that he was a Wulfrith, and to that she gave what seemed a nod of approval. Then something not quite a laugh escaped her. “And just when once more I think God does not care—perhaps not even exist—prayers answered for dear Séverine and Mace.” She sighed. “Be assured I shall hold close the beauty found in the sorrow of this day and look forward to finding more when next we meet.”

He nearly told her that was unlikely since he departed at sunset, but as that referenced the near future alone, he said, “I look forward to it as well, Lady of the D’Argents.”

Shortly, she rode from Blanchefleur. As he would hours from now.

UPON AWAKENING, she did not have to flounder her way to reality. Her aching body told this was no imagining. And

certainly no dream. The child she had believed had a chance of being cradled in her arms was lost—the same as her first babe.

Many at fault, beginning with me, she thought as, feeling mostly numb, she stared at the brazier that warmed and lit a chamber gone dim whether for the night or but the closing of shutters.

Then there is Rollon for not believing the babe was his and surely wishing the hunt to resolve the matter. And Pierre for turning his sire against me though I did betray the secrets of that murderer and his liege. And my family who, had they not rejected me and things come different, I could be with now. True, my pregnancy would further dishonor them, but in less than five months—

Realizing her hand rose to seek movement it would not find, she made a fist of it and pressed it into the mattress, then resumed listing those responsible. Of course, these next only if what Lady Eugénie whispered to Lady Clémence was wrong—that it appeared the babe was lost well before Vianne arrived at Blanchefleur. Considering movement felt days before the hunt seemed more slight cramping than fluttering, she could be right.

Still, if Vianne discounted Warin Wulfrith gave chase only to prevent her being overtaken by Le Grande's patrol, for the fall from Gudrun he could bear blame as well. And then there were the six who forced them to ride hard and cross the turbulent river. It could have been then her babe released the cord of life.

Many at fault, she affirmed. *And might I fault You as well, Lord? Or would You absolve Your silence by claiming my loss a result of the free will Your creation cherishes?*

Immediately, her clinging faith rebuked, *You think blasphemy, and as He is all you have to hold to now—*

“A drink, Lady Anne?”

She turned her head so fast it dizzied. When her focus returned, she saw the one sitting by the bed was the servant

who had settled her in this chamber on the day past. Or *was* it the day past? How long since she arrived?

She was about to ask when the young woman rose and turned to the bedside table. For how great Vianne's thirst, of first interest was the pitcher she raised, next how deeply red the drink she poured.

The girl offered the cup.

Feeling the dry of her mouth and sting of chapped lips, Vianne raised her head and, noting hair that had been wild about her during her travails was fashioned into braids, set a hand over the girl's to steady the cup that wafted the scent of strong wine.

One sip. A gulp. Another.

"Poor lady, you were thirsty," the servant said as she withdrew the emptied cup.

And for more than moisture, Vianne's inner voice warned. *Stop now*. Instead, she said, "Still I thirst. Would you pour another?"

"Of wine? I also have boiled water that has cooled nicely and my lady told you should drink as much as you can. Of course, not so much the need to relieve yourself has you moving about more than you ought."

Vianne managed a smile of gratitude, said, "Another cup of wine."

More was poured, more passed over her tongue, and more the promise of dulling the pain of her heart that seemed greater than that of her body.

When the young woman started to return the cup to the table, Vianne said, "Pray, more."

She nibbled her lower lip. "Best first I aid in relieving your bladder."

Vianne could not argue that, even if it did not result in another pour of the finest wine that had crossed her tongue since she realized she alone would not be dulled by overly imbibing but also her babe.

After Vianne had painfully answered her body's basic need, the servant poured a third cup of wine, but when it was drained, likely lied in saying, "That is the last of it. Now water?"

Vianne shook her head and, beginning to feel the drink, sighed over the feeling she sank into the deepest mattress. *A good place to linger*, she thought. But then her belly roiled, likely for her having ceased excessively indulging months ago.

"Are you going to be sick, my lady?"

"Non." Vianne lowered her lids and bid her stomach tolerate the slosh as it had the tumultuous sea during her return journey to France that was prolonged when the ship was blown toward English-held Calais where it dare not dock.

Calais. Her thoughts sweeping that name back onto the shore of her, she opened her eyes and saw the servant resume her bedside watch. "Sir W—" She covered her near mistake with a cough. "Chevalier Godfroi is still here?"

"I believe so, though I have not seen him since this morn when you...took ill."

Vianne nearly became ensnared by the word that was no fit for what her body had suffered. Determinedly freeing herself of it, she acknowledged she had not lost a day or more—that this was the first of her grieving. Then despite Sir Warin possibly numbering among those responsible, she said, "Would you go for him?"

Consternation nearly stitched the girl's eyebrows together. "My lady was most clear I should not leave you."

Feeling a bit more of the wine and her belly's continued protest, she longed to forego meeting with him, but said, "His chamber is just down from this. Pray, go."

Reluctantly, the girl nodded, then departed, leaving the door ajar. Moments later, Vianne heard her knock.

Silence. Another knock. When still no answer, Vianne assured herself, *He would not leave me at Blanchefleur with nary a word*.

Or would he? When he deemed her too ill to continue to Calais, she had refused to provide the date. Might he have decided confirmation of the attack was enough? Without knowing whether she would survive, had he departed? Was he leagues nearer the port city where she had hoped to make a life for her and...?

“My child nevermore,” she whispered, then rolled to her side. The movement pained a body that felt beaten, but far greater that pain when her belly betrayed her.

Chattering words of apology, the servant returned and had only enough time to get a basin under Vianne’s face before she messed the bed.

“I feared it too much wine,” she said after cleaning the lady’s mouth, then eased her back on the pillow. “Best you rest now, and when Lady Clémence returns I shall tell her you wish to speak with the chevalier.”

Certain the knight had gone, Vianne nearly discouraged her, but it was not worth the effort for how much she longed to sleep. *Afterward, I shall begin thinking on what to do with the life God spared for some reason I cannot know,* she told herself.

As she drifted, memories of Rollon jumped to mind as if bouncing on the flea-bitten mattress made of her. Not a single good one, every smile, laugh, and flirtation of Lady Vianne Wardieu false between each suffering of his hands upon her. Blessedly, as she moved toward sleep, the memories ebbed, and when she came free of the last, she curled her mind in on the question—*If vengeance is Yours, Lord God, might You use this one left behind to see it done?*

CHAPTER II

In *this do you prove a dreamer again?* Warin questioned the hope she summoned him to reveal the date. Were it so, was it due to too much drink which, as reported to Lady Clémence, was not kept down?

Standing inside the doorway through which the servant had slipped past him, Warin considered Lady Vianne whose head was turned to the side, eyes closed, hands gripping the blanket drawn above her breasts.

He would have come sooner had Lady Clémence known where to find him, but it was an hour before he and her husband returned from a ride that acquainted Warin with the horse offered him for it being exceedingly powerful and swift. Though the mount provided on his arrival in France was worthy, Baron Masse's would sooner deliver him to Calais.

Upon their return to the castle, it was a half hour longer before all was arranged for his departure, then he had come directly here, hopeful the lady would tell what she had refused before she bled.

He stepped fully inside and seated the door. With the shutters closing out the last of day, the chamber was dim but for the brazier's glow and the light of a lantern set in a wall niche.

Without softening his footsteps, he strode to a bedside table and confirmed one of two pitchers held water and the other diluted wine as he had directed Lady Clémence to provide regardless of what was requested—or demanded.

The woman had eyed him and, suspecting the same as he, said, “That is good to know. Be assured, she will not sicken from drink again, nor suffer other ill from wine of a strength that could be the ruin of her. When you return, the worst should be past, then with your aid, perhaps whatever path she fell hard upon can be diverted to a better one as I suspect long overdue.”

Warin thought it unlikely she knew the identity of the woman to whom she provided care, but she sensed it was imperative the lady escape what had come before the loss of her babe.

Now as he started to lower to the chair the servant had occupied, he glimpsed on the opposite table the purse this woman had kept out of sight the same as the cloth-wrapped scissors now beside it. Though what he considered would violate her privacy, if the date he sought could be found there, his trespass would be justified for lives saved and Calais remaining English.

He strode around the bed to the table that provided a better view of the woman. Poor health and emotions were obvious on her pale face, but though she looked almost fragile enough to be formed of glass, it barely detracted from loveliness with which Rollon de Talliere was surely obsessed.

And you will not become yourself, warned the nearer side of reason. Though he was far from blind to her beauty, that acknowledgement had been balanced by her being something of which he did not approve. And which she made clear he had no right to judge her for, especially considering Charliese.

Just as he did not know the full tale of his daughter’s mother nor his grandmother’s maid, he did not know Lady Vianne’s. However, there was something he need not be told—rare the woman who would make currency of her body had she a better choice. And another thing he knew—rare the protection and privilege with which his sisters were blessed.

“I am sorry, Lady,” he said, then raised her purse.

As evidenced by the weight, there were few items inside. The first come to hand was a small pouch he did not have to

delve for the shape of coins. He set it on the table, then drew out something wrapped in silk. It was a ring of gold likely made for her slender finger, and threaded through it a white ribbon as if last worn around the neck.

Knowing greatly he trespassed with this, he returned it to its cloth and set it aside. There were more wrapped items, but as he started to draw out another, he saw a rolled parchment at the bottom.

Lord, let it be the intelligence denied me, he silently beseeched. He removed it, returned the purse to the table, and untied and unrolled the missive.

Hope veered when he saw the dated parchment opened with a greeting to Lady Vianne, and when a glance at the bottom showed the sender of few words was of the family Wardieu, hope went straight off the sheet.

Returning to the greeting, he recalled last Christmas when Pierre de Talliere and his brigands attacked the gathering at the ice pond. They had sought to retrieve Lady Vianne, but when Warin came between them and her, had settled for taking his sister. Ahead of him and his uncle assembling men to bring them to ground, a missive was received at Lillia and delivered to Lady Vianne. From the date, this had to be that. Hence, not the means of discovering when Calais would be attacked.

He started to return it to the purse, but the temptation to learn more about this Englishwoman who became the leman of one placed high at the French court gave him pause. However, though he excused further trespass for the possibility of learning something that would aid in preserving Calais, his conscience told him *nay*.

And Lady Vianne concurred. “Non!” She thrust up on an elbow, and gasping as if pained, threw out a hand to snatch the missive from him. Her reach short and momentum great, she would have gone over the mattress had he not caught her with his other hand.

“Apologies,” he said and, as she strained against being moved to her back, dropped the missive on the table.

Golden eyes slashing at him, she said, “You had no right!”

“I know that now, just as you must know what I was looking for when I went into your purse.”

“No right,” she repeated, then jerked her shoulder to cast off his hand.

Continuing to hold to it, he said, “My word I give I did not read beyond the names of recipient and sender since they revealed what is written there has naught to do with Calais.”

Gradually, a frown cleared her glare, then she murmured, “Calais.”

Warin released her and straightened. “I hoped it was for the sake of that city and its English you wished to speak with me.”

She glanced at her purse and the items removed from it. “How far did you trespass?”

“Beyond the missive, the pouch of coin and a gold ring on a ribbon.”

She sucked breath. “Return all to my purse and give it to me!”

Accepting the command was her due, he did so, half expecting her to direct him to place the scissors inside as well. When she did not, he fastened the flap and looked to her.

She lifted the bedclothes, indicating he should place the purse against her side. As he did so, the sight of her clean chemise struck him with imaginings of the fate of the last she wore. And gratitude she was so well tended.

When she had covered the purse, he said, “I am sorry for your loss. Had I any part in it, I pray one day you can forgive me.”

Though she turned her head opposite, not before he glimpsed tears. Had acknowledgement of her heartache and acceptance of responsibility lost him an opportunity to gain what English-held Calais might need to survive? If so, much regret, but it was impossible to behave as if he were unaffected by the death of her child.

At her continued silence, he said, “Lady—”

“I almost miss your scorn in naming me that.” She looked around, causing a spilled tear to angle across her cheek. “Offend though it did, it was genuine—did not hide the truth in the hope of gain.”

“And was wrong of me,” he said. “Thus, greater my apology.”

Vianne stared at the green-eyed man whose words sounded as genuine as had his scorn. Despite the trampling of her privacy, she would no longer refuse him what he needed, having withheld the information to ensure he kept his word to deliver her to Calais, thereby protecting her child.

Suppressing a sob, she diverted her thoughts from the nevermore to the evermore—Vianne Wardieu alone. Were she to continue walking this cruel world, the port city was the best place for her, but since it was no longer imperative she reach it quickly, if this man failed to escort her there, so be it. And it might even be best did he not. After all, should God make her an instrument of revenge, perhaps sooner what was due Rollon would be done.

I but need You to reveal when, where, and how, Lord, she sent heavenward as movement at Sir Warin’s side drew her regard to fingers he opened as if impatience made a fist of them he did not wish her to see.

She looked up. “When do you depart Blanchefleur?”

“An hour hence.”

“And you would carry with you the date and details of King Jean’s attempt to recover Calais.”

His brow lined. “You have details as well?”

“The day Rollon insisted I join the hunt, I gained more than the altered date, and since the little one I sought to keep safe...” She drew more breath. “As no longer do I require assurance you will keep your word to deliver me to Calais, I shall give you what King Edward needs.”

Regret in his eyes—acceptable. Pity in his eyes—hated, but this day also acceptable. “How did you gain this intelligence?” he asked.

“During my eight years of service to the Crown, I became exceedingly proficient at listening at doors and through walls. Had I not, I would have been drawn and quartered long ago.”

He nodded. “Though confirmation of an attack is useful, of greater consequence is knowing when and how it will take place.”

She tried to moisten her lips, failing that, asked, “Would you give me drink?”

He moved to the opposite side of the bed and poured water. It was what she wanted, she told herself, but though the wine had tossed her belly and burned her throat, her mouth moistened in remembrance of that deep, dark taste.

She frowned. Did he know how much she had quickly downed and the result?

As if to confirm it, he turned with the cup and said, “In the second pitcher, heavily watered wine for later.” He did know—and other things as seen in his eyes. Though he had apologized lest he was in any way responsible for her loss, did he know it might be days or longer since last her babe’s heart beat?

Could it be known her child was lost before the hunt, she would assure him—

She tensed at the realization that, despite anger of which some was his due, she was moved to exonerate him.

“Lady Vianne?” The cup was near and, at her nod, he set the rim against her lips.

Since it would not do to steady his hand with hers, she but fixed her eyes on the contents and sipped nearly tasteless liquid that so soothed she nearly gulped. However, unlike when the pain of body and heart was more felt and the cup held wine, she exercised control and drew back her head.

“Take as much as you need, Lady.”

Shifting her regard to the eyes of one who continued to eschew scorn, she felt a stab to the heart over sympathy amid the green she now saw was finely slashed with grey.

“Drink,” he said.

Feeling the precious moisture seep away, she leaned in, and this time did drink—and held her gaze to the one who granted her permission to discard self-consciousness.

After the last slid down her throat, he said, “Since I depart soon, we will stop with the one fill.”

Not only for time better spent telling what she knew but to ensure none was wasted on summoning the servant to aid with relieving her.

He returned the cup to the table and lowered to the mattress edge as was far from appropriate. But then, neither did he forget they had been nearer in the wood.

“Begin with the date, Lady Vianne.”

“Wednesday, the twenty-first of May.”

His eyes went distant. “Two and a half weeks.” There was relief in his voice, surely for sufficient time in which to reach Calais, prepare the garrison, and call in reinforcements from other French lands held by their countrymen, perhaps even troops from England. “You are certain?”

“That is what I heard Rollon, his son, and the Dauphin tell. For my isolation at the manor since I returned to France, which causes Rollon to believe I am unaware of the altered date I might try to pass to King Edward if I am the traitor his son believes, it is not likely to change again—at least, not on my account.”

She thought now he would press for details to sooner leave, but he said, “Soft confinement.”

She frowned. “What say you?”

“It is what our king names imprisonment amid soft walls bounded by those of stone. Comfortable, but no more freedom than that given a caged—albeit pampered—bird.”

Envisioning herself behind gilded bars with wings clipped, next seeing her little chick born into that—and quite possibly removed despite her stabbing beak and thrashing, mutilated feathers—Vianne’s throat tightened so much that when her lungs demanded breath, she gasped as if surviving a near drowning.

“Vianne?”

Had he ever spoken her name without title—scorned or otherwise? He had and beyond when twice she demanded Gudrun do what the horse feared it could not. And yet this was different. This was...

Whatever it was, it was wrong—and dangerous for feeling like comforting arms. And now his hand was on her shoulder where she should not want it.

“You have been his prisoner, even at King Jean’s celebration,” he said.

She did not have to look up to know the shadow moving over her was of his face...to know his eyes awaited hers...to fear them delving hers for how much more broken she felt at this moment. Gaze on the peaks of her toes beneath the cover, she sought to seam enough of her cracks so when she looked up to tell the rest of what he needed, he would have no cause to believe her a soul in need of his compassion.

“Vianne.”

“*Lady* Vianne, Sir Warin!” she said. “With scorn, if you please.”

“Look at me.”

Not with so much seaming to be done.

“My sister believes the reason you broke from your escort and told you wished to return to De Talliere was to force the trade and free her.”

Traitorous eyes landed on ones that were too close, then words betrayed her as well for their desperation. “*Lady Dangereuse* stands my side?”

Warin hurt as he ought not for any woman other than those of his family. But he did, and surely that an ill thing where Vianne Wardieu was concerned, especially for the hurt being felt as much about the heart as the mind.

“Truly she does?” Just barely, the breath of her words reached his mouth, and yet it felt—

Not a kiss, never a kiss, he told himself and drew back. “Truly, *Lady Vianne*,” he titled her as demanded. And wanted it to feel more right than wrong.

What one wants is not always better than what one gets, he heard his departed sire’s words to his eighteen-year-old son. *Though sometimes you will not know it unless you—or someone else—pry open your eyes.*

I do not want to be more familiar with her, he silently countered. *I have wronged her with cold judgment of what she made of herself, but all I wish is her belief in my remorse. Naught else.*

As if to test him on that, her lips curved. The smile was so slight it could hardly be named one, but it made his mouth very aware of hers.

“I shall hold your sister’s kindness close,” she said, then made him feel a dastard by adding, “Still you are nearer this woman of loose virtue than you ought to be.”

He rose, considered the chair, then decided it best to remain standing. “Time is short. Pray, tell King Jean’s plans for Calais.”

“The same as the first attack that was to happen weeks past, it shall commence in the dark of early morn. However, rather than a score of French knights scaling the walls and opening the gates to six hundred, a group of French who conduct business there and secretly call themselves *Les Fléaux de l’Anglais* will let in thousands.”

Though what she told alarmed, it was surmountable, especially since her intelligence would better prepare Calais’ defenders. But as evidenced by her next words, she misread emotions he let onto his face. “You think those who are to

open the gates cannot be uprooted? That the garrison will be unable to fend off so many French?”

He shook his head. “It can be done, though likely much bloodshed our side as well.”

“Then?”

“I am acquainted with the name Le Fléau de l’Anglais.”

Her eyes widened. “You have encountered them?”

“Nay, I first heard the name from the lady who wed my eldest brother two years past after journeying from France to England to gain knighthood training for a cousin distantly related to our family—an orphan whose sire, of the same silvered dark hair as my eldest brother and sister, is thought to have died during the siege of Calais. Ahead of that Frenchman becoming one of the city’s leading citizens, he gained renown for pirating English ships, much to King Edward’s fury. Le Fléau de l’Anglais—the scourge of the English—is what he was called before abandoning that life to take a wife and build a legitimate business in Calais.”

“You think it possible he did not die? That he leads these men?”

“Certes, something to consider. What else do you know of the attack?”

“That is all.” She drew breath. “Now you can leave me.”

Not only dismissive but finality about her words as if he would not see her again. And he did not think it because she believed her child’s death would result in her own. “Lady Vianne, once you are well enough to make the journey to Calais, I will deliver you there.”

Her laugh was bitter. “I vow that is all I have to tell. Thus, as you have what you need, no further effort must be expended.”

“Lady—”

“Go!”

He needed to, but he also wanted her to believe he would keep his word so she had hope throughout her healing. Once more doing as he should not, he lowered to the mattress. Before she could protest, he said, “I think many have failed you, Vianne.”

“*Lady Vianne!*”

“Vianne,” he repeated, though he could not say exactly why. “Unless the Lord makes it impossible for me to safely distance you from De Talliere, I will not fail you.”

“So you say, and for the honor of a Wulfrith are fortunate I no longer need a protector. Since henceforth I shall make my own way wherever that may be, best after Calais you return to England for your reward—and your daughter.”

Her voice cracking on that last and followed by a cough, Warin poured more water.

“Leave me,” she said.

He extended the cup. “Drink.”

Was what she spoke barely above her breath a curse? No matter. Even were she to name him things more foul, she would wet her mouth and throat. “Ah, you need me to raise you,” he said and started to lean in, but the threat sufficed.

Glaring, she raised her head, parted her lips, and drank all he pressed on her.

When he withdrew the cup, thoughtlessly he brought up his other hand to prevent a dribble from running onto her chin.

The sweep of his thumb across her chapped lower lip was an innocent thing, so why did it feel deliberate? For the glide of his skin over hers calling to mind the vision of her during her recital at the palace, next her face raised to his in the courtyard before she set De Talliere’s man on him? Nay. Then for *her* thinking it deliberate, the offense of which made her cease breathing? That must be it.

It does make it easier to accept her assertion she does not require your aid, which ensures whatever you feel for her has no chance to more deeply hook you, his conscience scorned.

But can you do it—go to Calais, have another collect and settle her in that city, and return home?

“You have done your good deed, Sir Warin. Now save Calais, knowing you need not look back.”

Further permission granted. And refused. He stood and set the cup aside. “Does God will it, I will come back for you.” When she laughed low, he demanded, “What besides my word do you require?”

“As told, your protection is no longer—”

“*What* do you require?”

Fire leapt so high in her golden eyes, he thought it a good thing. As his father had told, anger—within reason and properly directed—was a healing force all its own. Hopefully, with Lady Clémence’s guidance she would recover more quickly and be stronger of mind and purpose.

Her gaze that had moved down him returning to his, she said, “Very well, for proof of your return, I would have something dear to you.”

What is she about? he wondered a moment ahead of realization. He knew what she asked of him, for what else on his person was as dear?

“Your Wulfrith dagger, Sir Warin. *That* you will come back for—hence, me as well.”

He nearly argued his prized weapon was integral to the armoring of a knight, but since he could acquire a dagger from Baron Masse, it would sound the hollow excuse it was.

Your dagger will come back to you, he told himself. *And does it not, it will be because you no longer have need of it for a heart forever quieted.*

He reached to his belt, and hearing her sharp breath that confirmed she did not expect him to yield, unbuckled that to which he would return his sword once retrieved from the guard to whom Masse had all visitors surrender their weapons upon entering his hall. Usually daggers as well, but one look at Warin’s and the baron said an exception would be made. He

had not asked, and Warin had not told it was a Wulfrith dagger whose similarity to those of the D'Argents was striking.

Continuing to feel Lady Vianne's disbelief, he drew off the scabbarded weapon, paused to consider the fine hilt and ruby set in its crossguard, then peeled back the covers and set it beside her arm.

"Better protection than scissors," he said. "I am fair certain you will not need to avail yourself of its keen blade between now and my return, but keep it close—and as hidden as your true identity, Lady *Anne*." He strode to the door and looked around. "I am guessing three weeks ere I return—time to thwart the attack and make my way back. Between now and then, think on going home to England which is safer than Calais with men like those of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais having access to its streets."

"Calais," she said firmly.

"Heal," he said more firmly, and departed.

Vianne stared at the door and, feeling fingers on her lips, realized she touched where he had touched. He had meant only to brush away drops of water but it had felt...

"Like my first kiss," she whispered, recalling the handsome Balian peering into her eyes, then angling his head to cover her mouth with his.

He had been patient with her, making her feel treasured and certain of a beautiful life with him as he gently introduced her to what she expected would grow into flowery passion.

Then he was dead, and all she had of him was the ring about her neck that he had been very near to placing on her hand.

She drew her fingers from her lips.

Then Rollon's pursuit began openly and in earnest.

She jerked her hand down.

Then finally the man she loathed wed another, making her feel more secure in delving secrets he kept for his king—and horrified when she was caught.

She crammed her fingers into her palm. “Then...” she whispered.

No gentleness but grasping. No loving patience but obsessive impatience. No flowery passion but thorny weeds. No treasure made of her but a possession. No beautiful life with children about her skirts but an ugly, sinful life. And two lost babes.

“Nevermore,” she rasped. “Never. Ever. More.”

As for choosing England over Calais...

Had Sir Warin read her missive as he assured her he had not, he would know she was less likely to find welcome in her country than in Calais. Too, once she settled in the port city, she would have time and better opportunities to discover how best God could use her as an instrument of revenge.

There was danger in remaining on the continent, but were the attack not delayed again or entirely aborted, measures would be taken to keep out French like those calling themselves *Les Fléaux de l’Anglais*. She would be as whole as possible there and could live fairly well for all that was hidden in her hem pockets.

Vianne looked to where that gown was folded on the chair near the brazier. Only after sending word to Sir Warin she must speak with him had she seen it had been removed from the chamber. Though panic nearly rendered her speechless, she had communicated the urgency of it being returned when the servant told it had been taken for laundering.

Though the girl must have thought her mad, she had sent another servant for it. A quarter hour later, it was returned with the laundress’ apology for having yet to clean it. Had Vianne’s tears not been exhausted, she might have wept with relief. Her means of survival was safe. And now she had an additional means.

She closed a hand over the dagger. She had not truly wanted Sir Warin to give it as surety, only to prove him a liar. That she had not done, and yet she made it her hostage as was made of his sister. Thus, as Lady Dangereuse was to have been

traded for Vianne, the dagger would be traded for an escort to Calais.

Though she claimed she did not want his protection, she would be a fool not to take advantage of what was gained in relieving him of this, just as she would be a fool not to keep it close. Might she have to use it between now and his return? She did not believe so, but since her beliefs had betrayed her before, she would be prepared.

CHAPTER 12

Barony of Blanchefleur

May 15, 1354

Her heart was not in this day. But then, neither had it been present in all the days before.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since her great loss, since she began healing in body, and since assuring herself she could heal in mind. Meaning in five days—or was it six?—King Jean would seek to return Calais to his sovereignty.

And fail again, she silently appealed as she stared at the unfolding rose she cautiously cupped to avoid thorns seeking to bleed one already bereft of much blood.

Raising her gaze to sunlight spearing thin clouds, she whispered, “Allow me to have aided in that failure, Lord. Let Sir Warin have reached Calais safely and prepared the garrison to preserve English lives.”

It was not the first time she pushed past what felt the Lord’s betrayal to beseech Him to make good come of the information passed to the knight, but this time her appeal was more genuine—and desperate.

Did that mean a bit of her heart *was* in this day? That she had but needed to descend from the chamber where she had lost all and take in the sights, sounds, and scents of the garden to revive some corner of a heart secretly continuing to beat?

Vianne returned to the rose whose white petals were no longer tight, though not quite ready to open. “Beautiful,” she

said, then breathed in a fragrance she had thought unequaled until the scent of potent wine supplanted it in her affections.

Non, not merely the scent—the taste, warm slide down her throat, coursing of her blood and, best of all, acceptance and blurring of the loathsome.

She released the rose and touched lips that only watered wine had crossed for a fortnight, then closed her eyes and set a hand on a belly so hollow she no longer needed to pull in those muscles to accommodate her gown. Far from it, meaning she must eat more as Lady Clémence encouraged.

Though she made an effort, more was needed so when Sir Warin returned for his Wulfrith dagger she would be hale enough to complete her journey without providing an excuse for him to once more leave her behind.

“Calais,” she breathed, then dropped her hand to her side and opened her eyes on the rose that had settled back amongst its companions. “Alone,” she added, and though she would never think that for the best, the question of whether she would have been worthy of the blessing of motherhood slipped in—and was cast out. Not only was it no longer of consequence, but she feared an answer that had all to do with the harlot of her.

Vianne drew in the garden’s other scents that were a balm to her aches. But then came voices from the direction of the gate that accessed the inner bailey. Doubtless it was by way of that portal men entered here, the hinges so well-oiled their turning had not alerted her to the loss of her sanctuary.

As she hesitated over returning to the donjon before those moving this way saw her, she recognized one voice as belonging to Baron Masse. She had neither spoken with nor seen him since her arrival at Blanchefleur, but she knew the sound of it fairly well from words exchanged with his wife when the two passed by her chamber.

Having no wish to trespass on his conversation nor become part of his, she started toward the donjon’s side entrance.

“Regrettably, it may be best to deliver the lady to him,” he said.

She halted and, eyes on the door beyond a hedge one side of the path and trees the other, turned over his words and guessed she was the *lady* and Sir Warin the *him* of whom he spoke. Having believed she had another sennight before once more facing that Wulfrith, she waited.

Though the other man’s softly spoken response was lost to her, his accent was French. Might there be something familiar about it?

“But is it best for her?” the baron questioned as they neared. “Though my lady wife tells she is mostly recovered, it may be too soon for her to ride.”

It is of me they speak, Vianne thought as her heart crowded her breastbone.

“Even so,” the other man said, “were she found here, it could prove dangerous for you and your people, Cousin.”

Twice she caught her breath, first for near certainty that voice belonged to King Jean’s staunch supporter, then for Joffrey Masse confirming it by acknowledging kinship with the baron.

She turned to face the two whose garments were visible beyond vegetation that side. Though she had stiffened over the possibility of being delivered to Sir Warin before she was prepared to face him again, now she shuddered at the possibility the *him* of whom Baron Masse spoke was Rollon. But despite how much she would resent being relinquished to the cousin who had discovered she was here, it would be hard to fault the baron were he to yield her as surely he must to protect his family and people.

Of course, could I not be found—and no proof I was here—the same end, is it not? she posited. Then though she had no idea how to depart Blanchefleur unseen, she swung toward the door. And went still when a branch cracked beneath a slipper.

Now the silence of interrupted speech, and when she glanced around, she saw the two quickly traversed the path.

Unable to reach the door ahead of interception, she yanked up her skirt and snatched the Wulfrith dagger from the scabbard tied to her hosed calf.

It was before her, sunlight balanced on its point, when the two came fully into sight and halted at the threat she presented.

“Lady Anne,” Baron Masse afforded her the alias that identified her as the wife of Chevalier Godfroi as both men knew she was not.

“Lady,” Joffrey Masse said with a nod.

Movement of the dagger between them making the ruby glint, Vianne said, “I will not return to that pig—certes, not alive!”

Baron Masse held up a hand, and this time correctly addressed her. “Lady Vianne, you have my word you are in no danger from me.”

“Nor me,” Chevalier Joffrey said with such sincerity it could have fooled her had she not years of court experience with falsity, guile, and intrigue.

She shook her head. “You are not taking me to him.”

“Indeed not,” the younger man said. “It is to Sir...Godfroi we go.” His hesitation over the name given by the one who delivered her to Blanchefleur evidencing he was aware it was as assumed as *Lady Anne*, she feared he might also know that one was Warin Wulfrith.

“My cousin speaks true,” the baron said, “just as it is true a contingent of King Jean moving toward Calais comes this way expressly to discover if the lady seen riding with a blond warrior near my lands is the same abducted from Chevreuse.”

She gasped at the realization likely it was the six who forced Sir Warin and her to cross the Seine who reported to Rollon she could be found in Normandy, and that Rollon who told her absence from court was due to illness now adopted her tale of abduction to excuse her disappearance.

“You will have to take my word for it,” Baron Masse prompted.

“I must do no such thing!”

Chevalier Joffrey took a step toward her, and when she swung the dagger nearer, glanced at his cousin. Receiving a nod, he said, “As you are not all you appear to be to De Talliere, Lady Vianne, neither am I what King Jean thinks me.”

Did he own to being a spy the same as she? “Non, you deceive me.”

“During Baron Wulfrith’s recent visit to Paris,” he said, “not only did I gain him entrance to the palace but provided lodging—as directed by King Edward.”

Vianne struggled for words, finally managed, “I know you are loyal to Jean.”

“The same as you are loyal to De Talliere.” When she continued to brandish the dagger, Joffrey said, “You require more? Very well. The messages you send to the King of England go through me.”

She nearly choked.

He settled into his heels. “The cloth merchant to whom you give your intelligence passes it to me. With a few ins, outs, and roundabouts, I ensure it arrives in the hands of the one to whom it is intended.”

She nearly lost hold of the dagger. Since he knew of the one who carried her messages from the palace, surely that evidence he was no more the side of the French king than she. Or was it? Perhaps her long-time accomplice had been compromised and, by way of torture, revealed her duplicity. If so, what Chevalier Joffrey told was meant to quietly extricate her from his cousin’s protection and deliver her to King Jean who would make her suffer abominably for a heart that had never truly resided in France.

Baron Masse cleared his throat. “I understand your suspicion and fear. For that, I vouch for my cousin and his loyalty. As for my own, as proof of my goodwill toward you

and your king, know I am aware of what you conceal in your gown.”

The flash of the ruby alerting her to the drop of her hand, she brought it back up. “How know you of that?”

“When it was taken for cleaning, the laundress noted the weighted hem and alerted my wife who consulted me. I knew not Baron Wulfrith’s mission, only that you are an important piece of the service he performs for King Edward. When I discovered the hidden pockets of a lady whose French accent nearly disguises the English of her, I considered you could be the mistress of King Jean’s advisor who keeps that—what did you call him?—*pig* content outside the marriage bed.”

As she flushed over his acknowledgment of her sin, he continued, “And it was not the first time I considered that since villagers alerted my patrol they had been questioned by soldiers passing over my lands who sought to overtake brigands said to have abducted a lady dear to King Jean’s advisor. As for the secret places in your garment, though such is not uncommon for concealing valuables during a journey, yours were not hastily stitched. Much thought was in their construction as if regularly used to smuggle secrets. And who better to provide secrets worthy of an enemy king than Rollon de Talliere?”

Though nearly convinced he was genuine, she looked to his cousin. “I would be a fool to trust you.”

“Then I must prove worthy of your trust, Lady Vianne. Unfortunately, now is not the time.”

She frowned. “Then?”

“That is a vicious dagger, but you must know it can easily be taken from one whose skill at reaping King Jean’s secrets does not extend to proficiently wielding a blade.”

She knew that, but said, “Perhaps.”

He sighed. “Whether or not you believe it my intent to deliver you to the protector who left you that weapon, I shall take you from here.”

She believed him. Even were she accomplished with the slice and thrust of a blade, if these warriors moved against her, her attempts to fend them off would be laughable.

Moistening her lips, she lowered the dagger. “It appears I have no choice.”

“Soon enough you will see I play the side of Jean better than you,” the chevalier said, then gestured at the door beyond her. “Don that clever gown and gather your belongings.”

She startled. “Now?”

“Better it was the day past, but providing we depart in a half hour, we shall have five good hours of riding before night falls. God willing, that will be enough to keep us ahead of De Talliere.”

Vianne did not realize she had set a hand on her midriff until his eyes went there. When she snatched it away, he said, “I am sorry we must travel before you are better healed—and for what you lost.”

Then he had been told. And surely knew who sired her babe. “I am well enough,” she said, then raised the dagger—and stilled when light running the blade skipped over an engraving beneath the crossguard. Though certain it was the maker’s mark, something made her look nearer. Heart beating faster as if before her stood the man who allowed the dagger to be taken hostage, she moved a finger over the initials *WW*.

“Lady?”

She looked to Chevalier Joffrey. “As this was entrusted to me for my protection, I shall keep possession of it.”

There was question in his eyes, but he said, “I do not object.”

She returned the blade to the scabbard beneath her skirt and, as she straightened, said, “Before I depart, I would like to thank your wife for her kindness, Baron Masse.”

“When last we talked, she was bound for the kitchen to discuss the menu with Cook.”

“Then I go there first.”

A half hour later, Vianne's eyes stinging over Lady Clémence's embrace, the dagger bearing the initials of Warin Wulfrith tucked down one boot and her purse the other, she and Joffrey Masse departed Blanchefleur. And only just avoided being seen by French soldiers approaching the fortress from the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 13

Calais, France

May 16, 1354

They had the date of the attack, had uprooted and detained a dozen members of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais with the aid of an informant, English forces and foreign mercenaries were discreetly converging on the city to defend what appeared vulnerable, and now confirmation by scouts that French forces approached from the east and the south.

All good if the upper hand remained the upper. If not, there was something much needed that was lacking—three of the five ships that were to provide further reinforcements from England and return to its shores with women and children who would remain there until the danger was past.

For the storm that had whipped into a frenzy yesterday, only two of those sent from Dover dropped anchor this morn, the missing ships, troops, and their crews either lost to the sea or carried so far off course it could be days before they reached Calais. And too late.

“I do not like the solution any better than you, Baron Wulfrith,” said the Captain of Calais.

Warin raised his gaze to the man who spoke across his shoulder where he stood before a window peering at the placid sea whose flashes of foul temper ensured aggressive crossings to either country were no reliable thing. And often deadly.

He knew the captain did not speak lightly, being also troubled by the possibility a good number of English women

must remain inside Calais during the French assault or begin the trek north to sanctuary offered by England's allies. Either way, if all went wrong and the city was lost, women who should be bound for England could become spoils of war—ravishment the least they would suffer.

Thus, if the missing ships did not soon appear, there was only the captain's solution to ensuring fewer ransoms and concessions could be demanded of King Edward. Children and the wives of high and lesser nobility would be the first to board the two ships, and from the count taken these past days, likely there would be few—if any—places for women of lesser birth.

The captain turned. "Though my decision is final, out of respect for your family who trained my son and you who alerted us, I ask that you stand with me in this."

There appearing no other place to stand, Warin nodded, and as his thoughts ran to what must be done to prepare those denied passage on the ship to make the journey north should they fear remaining at Calais, the captain said, "There can be no exceptions."

"No exceptions," Warin begrudged.

Taut smile showing the strain of responsibility borne by one weary beyond his years, the captain strode to the younger man. "We will save Calais. We must."

Warin inclined his head. "If we are done here, arrangements must be made for the women who have no place on the ships at anchor," he said. "Too, I would question the member of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais who was taken yestereve."

"Hopefully, that the last of those who are as wily as fleas on a mastiff," the captain said and juted his chin. "Go and report back anything of consequence."

As Warin descended the tower's steps, he allowed his thoughts to shift to the one he wished to question not only to better prepare for the assault, but for the sake of his sister-in-law's young cousin who began training at Wulfen two years past.

Though it was believed the boy's sire died during the siege of Calais that gained King Edward the port city nearly seven years ago, it was distantly possible Amaury de Chanson—also kin to the D'Argents—lived. As that nobleman had been known as *Le Fléau de l'Anglais* in his younger years for pirating English merchant ships on the narrow sea, there could be a connection with the French infiltrators that would finally put to rest the fate of Mace's sire.

Could be, though likely just as Hector's inquiries yielded nothing to satisfy his French wife who hoped Mace's sire's disappearance was only that, neither would Warin's yield anything of use. Still, it was an opportunity to be exploited.

A DOZEN HOURS after arrangements were finalized for those who must journey north accompanied by a sizable contingent for protection, Warin dropped onto his bed and stared at beams crisscrossing the ceiling.

He needed sleep for the day ahead that would be more rigorous for coordinating those who would defend Calais from outside the walls. With the addition of two hundred warriors who arrived this afternoon, the forces now numbered fifteen hundred. A good number, though possibly half as much as the French were bringing to Calais.

Providing all went to plan, much of which depended on their assailants believing only the walls and garrison of Calais stood against French victory and could be overcome with the aid of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais infiltrators, few English lives would be lost.

Know and embrace the power of being gravely underestimated, his uncle had said when, as a squire, Warin was moved to give warning of his skill ahead of engaging a knight who beat a one-legged beggar. *To the opponent unprepared for the strength of your single blade, it will feel you wield many.*

For that wisdom, those come to the aid of King Edward's Calais must remain out of sight as long as possible. The English were well disciplined, but since the same could not be said of the mercenaries joining them, the latter's numbers had been divided between four English commanders of fearsome reputation. Thus, they were less likely to chart their own course.

Warin closed his eyes and would not have opened them again if not that a vision of Vianne Wardieu appeared against the backs of his lids. Returning his gaze to the ceiling, he shifted his thoughts from the lady he had vowed to deliver to Calais to his interview with the most recently imprisoned member of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais.

Maintaining arrogance despite chains pinning him to the wall of his cell and bruises and swellings dealt by whoever first questioned him, Hugh of no surname had smiled and shrugged at each question put to him.

No matter what was asked or how it was asked—though never with violence for that not being Warin's way with defenseless men—the man did not waver. Then, as if accepting he would yield nothing of use, Warin had sighed heavily, crossed to the guard, and said the same as done each time he withdrew from questioning an infiltrator, “Has De Chanson recovered sufficiently to be questioned again?”

A sharp breath had sounded behind—the first of its kind.

“He has, and we have his name in full, my lord,” Warin's accomplice answered. “*Amaury de Chanson.*”

“It cannot be,” exclaimed the man behind.

Warin looked around. “Whether he speaks true or not, it is the name given—doubtless with much inducement.”

“What does he look like?” the man demanded.

“Tell of what consequence that is, and mayhap I will answer.”

After a long moment, the prisoner said, “If you truly hold Amaury de Chanson, I will know it by your description of one who is...unusual.”

Warin's heart beat faster. This hardly proved Mace's sire lived, but it was a step closer to learning his fate.

Returning his attention to the guard, Warin said. "Unusual—surely confirmation the name he yielded is true." He sighed. "Of course, of what consequence the name when what we need is for him to talk?" He started past the guard.

With what sounded as much desperation as fear, the prisoner called, "Is he a fairly young man of dark hair silvered before its time?"

Warin turned. "That sounds him." He raised his eyebrows. "Would you have me pass along the kind regards of Hugh of no surname?"

Though the man ceased rising to the bait, there was nothing rebellious about his silence. It was somber. And telling. He knew the name and the man, and though he protested Amaury de Chanson being held, he had not claimed it was because he was dead.

Something more than we had, Warin had told himself as he departed. And possibly more can be gained later.

Lowering his gaze from the ceiling, he put Mace's sire behind him to sooner gain sleep.

Still it eluded him. Regrettably, he was as much at fault as Vianne Wardieu. He told himself only her well being concerned him—that she heal in body and mind so she prosper when he settled her at Calais. However, since riding away from her, memories of her sought to defy mere attraction, causing movement about his heart that he wanted no more than would she.

For her being terribly fallen like Charliese's mother and possessing none of the soft, sweet innocence of his departed wife, he assured himself what he felt beyond attraction was only pity for her plight and terrible loss. Aye, pity was the movement about his heart, and it was that which slipped him the thought that were Calais lost and he survived the battle, he could offer her a home at Romary Castle had she no other place to go.

“Fatigue makes mince of reason,” he growled. “Pity due her, not sacrifice of the possibility one day you will find another to love as well as Blythe.”

He nodded. If they failed to hold Calais and he was capable, it would be enough to escort Lady Vianne to London and pass responsibility for her to King Edward. Far and away enough.

CHAPTER 14

Northwestern France

May 17, 1354

Progress toward the English port city was excruciatingly slow. Though they rode hard for hours at a time to stay ahead of French forces, often they were forced to halt for as many hours to avoid scouts sent ahead and contingents deployed to clear the way of any who might alert those of Calais of King Jean's approaching army.

Blessedly, Joffrey Masse left Vianne in little doubt he was Edward's ally. How many times had he prevented them from being overtaken? Once the first day of their journey. Three times this day, the second occasion of which had them taking cover behind a waterfall—and gaining a glimpse of Rollon and his son riding in the Dauphin's entourage amid forces that had to number more than a thousand.

Joffrey had remained as silent and still as she, and when it was safe to exit, altered their course. It added leagues to their journey, but in going farther west toward the coast, the chances of crossing paths with the French army greatly decreased.

Now, curled on the ground to sleep away the aches of the ride, Vianne did so with the expectation when she awakened they would be less than ten hours from Calais. But it was yet dark and the moon's travel barely changed when the screech of an owl and something on the air warned her to be very still.

Sweeping her gaze to where Joffrey slept fifteen feet distant, by the light of the moon she saw his bedding was empty. And heard the cautious advance of boots all sides of her that aspired to go unheard until it was too late for the prey to run.

Where are you, Joffrey? she silently questioned as she quelled the longing to retrieve the Wulfrith dagger from her boot for it being of no use against so many. *I do not believe you betrayed me. But have you abandoned me to save yourself, concluding why should two suffer when one will do? And, unlike me, still you can serve King Edward?*

That last consolation enough to remain unmoving despite the instinct to escape the inescapable, she was prepared to feign being jolted awake when the predators rushed at her.

She cried out, scrambled upright, and as she shed the blanket and her mantle went askew, saw six warriors. And was that flash of movement far left another? Certes, he moved as fast, but not her direction. Rather, toward the two horses overlooked by those whose priority was to capture her.

It *was* Joffrey, she saw as hands snatched her and French-accented voices sounded all around.

When one of her captors started to follow her gaze, she screamed and flailed to distract him. Since she could not blame the chevalier for abandoning one he could not save and knowing he had done all he could to deliver her to Calais, she must provide time for him to escape as she could not.

As her upper arms were pinned behind and she was dropped to her knees, she hung her head and peered sidelong at Joffrey who was now astride—and frozen as if he hesitated to leave her. But when she turned her head just enough to meet his gaze, he nodded, raised a hand, and sharply reined around.

Shouts went up as he put heels to his mount, and two of her captors ran as though it was possible to overtake horse and rider.

“Fools!” barked the one who stood before her. “An extra purse of coin did we also bring back the knight!”

“*If* this is she,” said the man behind, then wrenching her braid to force her chin up, ran his filthy eyes over her moonlit face. “Oui, I think you are the aged peacock’s English lover.” He grinned. “Weary of his molting, eh?”

Fairly certain these were the men who weeks past chased Sir Warin and her to the banks of the Seine, she remained silent.

“It is she,” said the man of stubby build to her right. “But I do not think the one who forsakes her this night the same we first saw who was pale of hair. Too, were he her lover, no evidence this one as well.”

Sidelong, Vianne saw him gesture at the distant bedding, and the one holding her braid said, “A man of different appetites, then—else paid well to render a service. What say you, Lady Vianne?”

She sucked breath through her teeth. “Release me.”

He chuckled. “As soon as the peacock pays what is owed for returning his errant bedmate. A pity you must be untouched for us to earn our coin in full.”

The stubby one laughed. “As if the grizzled hound would know whether her fair knight trespassed or us!”

Vianne’s stomach lurched.

“Screech the hue and cry all she likes, for being a Daughter of Eve who betrayed her master and there being no witnesses, we can do with her what we like before we take payment.”

“But she is with child,” said another who sounded young enough to have recently come into his man’s voice.

Not only was Vianne pierced over being reminded of her empty womb, but angered that her pregnancy was revealed by Rollon who not only questioned his siring of another babe lost to her but had plotted its miscarriage.

“*Untouched*,” snarled the man before her. “That we agreed to, that it shall be.”

“But—”

“My word is law, Michelle. Break it, and I break you. Now retrieve her horse.”

There was muttering, but the law remained intact—blessedly, so too the dagger and purse down her boots and those things hidden in her hem. After the meat dagger given her by Lady Clémence was taken from her belt, she was marched through the wood to where her pursuers had left their mounts distant.

Though she knew they would not allow her to ride alone lest she escape as done in crossing the Seine, she demanded it as being the right of a lady. There was laughter, then she was dropped on the saddle of the mercenary who claimed his word was law.

Settling in behind her, he said, “Best you sleep, Lady. Dawn will be upon us before we reach the Dauphin’s camp.”

May 18, 1354

SHE HAD NOT SLEPT as advised, at first for it feeling the coward’s way, then for satisfaction over an opportunity for revenge sooner than expected.

It was what she wanted and, it seemed, God did as well. After all, she had asked to be made an instrument of revenge wielded against one who, more than any, was responsible for her lost babes. Could it be clearer God agreed? *If* more clarity was needed, surely it was provided by the Wulfrith dagger yet upon her person.

God’s will, she assured herself.

Else your excuse for doing what you know He would look dark upon, Vianne Wardieu, her conscience countered as the light of dawn stirred those in the encampment not roused by her arrival, and the man she detested exited his tent in a loosely belted robe ahead of the mercenary leader who had entered minutes ago.

Rollon's hair was not only sleep-mussed but in dire need of washing, face so flushed the spots of age appeared poised to jump off, and when he resumed his advance after halting at the sight of her, a slight limp rocked his steps.

He was no warrior. A man of numbers, letters, and sly devices, his body mostly accustomed to hours of sitting, spurts of strolling, and short rides, he was unsuited to accompanying the Dauphin on this journey. Why had he? To supervise the search for her along the way? Or had the king's son given him no choice? Likely the latter, though why Charles wished him at his side was incomprehensible.

When he halted before her where she stood alongside the horse, there was so much twitching about his face she thought he would strike her. And his growl when he said, "Vianne," seemed to confirm it. But then his gaze lowered to her belly and she thought *she* might strike *him*.

Seeing his lids narrow as if he noted she was thinner when her girth should have increased, she said coldly, "Your wish granted. Another you refused to believe yours lost."

He returned blazing eyes to her and was quiet so long she wondered if it was possible to bring the dagger to hand before she must defend herself. "Where have you been these weeks?" he demanded. "And who aided you?"

Resigned to what was to come—hopefully on her side of it a powerful dose of revenge since she had nothing to lose—Vianne raised her eyebrows. "Who aided me? Why, I—"

"Pardon, Lord De Talliere." The mercenary came alongside. "We will be taking our reward and getting on with our next great enterprise."

Rollon cranked his head around. "Marionne!"

The man exited the tent followed by Pierre. Like the father, the son was disarrayed, but not Marionne. Though he wore a robe evidencing he had also recently roused, he appeared his usual well-seamed self, and not for the first time she wondered how he bore serving the De Tallieres.

As she looked to the fat purse he held, Pierre pushed past him and, drawn lips exposing exceedingly crowded teeth, jabbed a finger near her face. “Deceitful whore!”

Refusing to blink amid the spray of saliva, with mock confusion as Rollon snatched the purse from Marionne and thrust it at the mercenary, she said, “Am I?” The challenge came easy, but not so what should follow—a tale of woe to support her long enough to avenge her dead babes and repeatedly fouled body.

During the ride to the camp set apart for those of high nobility and office, she should have written her next part, but had only glancingly considered constructing something believable.

“Oui, that you are!” Pierre snarled. “Sinful desire wrapped in deceit.”

Desire. She wanted to laugh over what—on her side of it—played no part in her relationship with his sire. As for deceit, surely that her due for the loss of her virtue and use of her body.

“Say no more, Pierre,” Rollon growled, aware others were exiting their tents to salve curiosity over those who delivered his lover en route to Calais.

“And sown in the mire of whores,” his son defied him as the mercenary leader swung into the saddle.

When Rollon cursed and started to pull Pierre away, the latter spat in her face, causing her to startle back. And the horse behind to bump her as it was reined around.

Though Vianne kept her feet under her, the thrust forward perfectly aligned with Pierre’s backhand that otherwise would have struck air. She staggered, Rollon shoved his son toward Marionne with the command to return him to the tent, and Pierre called, “Mire of whores! Ever taking from good women!”

Vianne needed no reminder of the pain caused Rollon’s wife whom Pierre seemed to love as far as he was capable. However, the spit on her jaw and pain of his slap sped

retaliatory words to her tongue. “Better the mire of whores than that of murderers!” she called, and barely suppressing the longing to tell he was no better than his sire who had slain her betrothed, made sorrowful music of the words, “Down... down...”

Gripping her arm so hard there would be bruises, Rollon wrenched her into his tent whose flap his squire quickly dropped to provide as much privacy as could be had.

When Rollon halted, she had but a moment to note the confines were lit by a lantern on a table alongside which Marianne and the glowering Pierre stood, then she was whipped in front of him.

“Where have you been and with whom?”

Though she preferred to divulge all he had ever been to her and that even the sight of him reviled, she possessed enough reason to accept rashness that felt wonderful in the moment would feel terrible in the next, especially if it lost her an advantage better spent on revenge.

Non, *justice*, she renamed it before her conscience jabbed again. Though she no longer possessed self-control that, fueled by the need to aid her countrymen and protect her unborn children, had enabled her to mask anger and revulsion, she *could* temper this roiling.

“Vianne!” His shake popped her chin back.

Having only to be concerned with how what she did affected Vianne Wardieu and fairly content with the part written these few moments, she let ire light her eyes. “Where have I been since you commanded me to join the hunt as you knew I ought not in my state?”

As he blinked, she heard a strident breath surely of Marianne for Pierre requiring more to understand what she referenced.

“Where have I been since struggling to keep pace as you knew I could not without endangering our unborn child?”

This sharp breath was Pierre’s.

She set her chin higher. “Where have I been since Gudrun’s attempt to obey as her rider commanded caused me to lose the saddle and that poor creature to break her neck?”

“Vianne!” he warned.

“You found her, did you not?” she pressed, then answered it herself, “You did, and so now the question of what became of me. Certain you sought the same end for that babe as our first, I determined to ensure its survival.”

“Sire?” Pierre nearly choked. “Is it true—?”

“It is,” she snapped and looked around. “Had he not violently questioned the paternity of our *first* babe, you would have a sibling now. Had he not threateningly questioned the paternity of our *second* babe, you would have one before much longer.” She returned her gaze to Rollon. “Where did I go when over and again I put one foot in front of the other in the hope of saving our babe?” She shrugged. “For injuries sustained by my fall, most is a blur. Fortunately, I had coin to hire an escort to take me north.”

“Who?” he demanded.

She left that unanswered. “And when I lost our second child, my journey ended so I might recover in a Normandy village.”

His fingers dug into her flesh. “What village?”

She nearly brought a knee up between his legs. “By the time I healed, my escort had taken other work, but I hired another.” She sighed. “And last eve those mercenaries found us—and the one I paid well took his coin and ran rather than defend me. But then, he was French.”

Rollon’s nostrils flared. She should have been afeared, and she was some since having naught to lose did not preclude great suffering, but it was tolerable enough he would not see it on her face.

Lord, she sent heavenward, just as now I understand why some sin greatly to shed this world ahead of what You intend for them, I understand why some hardly hesitate to take risks that could easily put them in the ground.

“For what should I believe anything you tell?” Rollon asked.

“You should not, Sire,” Pierre said. “She has deceit all about her and is a harlot. An *English* harlot.”

She looked around and paused on Aubert Marianne just long enough to note his unreadable expression. “I am as guilty of that as your sire is of being an adulterer. But no longer.”

“No longer?” Rollon said sharply.

It was almost laughable her rejection of him was of greater consequence than what she named him. But then, disregarding his wife’s feelings, he had flaunted their relationship.

Vianne inclined her head, then tempered the truth with, “I no longer care to be with you.”

A tic at one corner of his mouth, he stared.

“I want to go home,” she said, then silently amended, *Which is what I would make of Calais should it remain English.*

Rollon released one of her arms and set a hand on her jaw—not quite gently. “Since ever you shall be mine, wherever I am, you are home.”

“Father!” Pierre protested.

“Non,” Vianne agreed, “all possibility of that was lost with the babes of whom you deprived me for accusations I was as unfaithful to you as you are to your wife.”

“You are young enough to have more!”

It was a strain to keep from sinking teeth into his hand on her jaw. “More babes? So you can accuse me of making them with other men, then rip them from my womb?” She jerked her head back, freeing it of his hand.

But it was back a moment later, fingers digging into her jaw. “For shamelessly flirting with others, you give me cause to question your faithfulness.”

She gasped. “As God is my witness, they were your children and could not be otherwise since I have been with no

other man.”

“So you say, but much I question. Thus, the manor house shall be your permanent residence.”

“Sire!” Pierre cried above the raging between her ears, then she caught the sound of his advance and Marianne calling him back. “You told you would set this whore aside and show your wife the good regard—”

Vianne was so suddenly thrust away she could not keep her feet under her. Looking up from where she landed on her knees, she saw Rollon gripped his son’s neck.

“You will not question my decisions!” he shouted in that blanched face.

“Enough, my lord!” Marianne rebuked as never before heard and came alongside, risking his own neck to save his charge’s. “Pierre is your heir. Your only heir!”

“I can make more!”

“Can you?” Marianne jutted his chin at Vianne as she straightened. “Two babes in her, and neither yours you tell. But not so Pierre. *He* is of your loins.”

As that one gurgled and began prying at his sire’s hand, Rollon said, “Perhaps he is.”

“My lord, you know your first wife gifted you what all men want. Now, pray, release your son.”

Rollon held him a moment longer, then shoved him back.

As Pierre wheezed and pressed a hand to a neck that would likely purple the same as her face and arm, his sire pointed at him. “While I live, I decide what I want. When I am dead, you can have what is left of my hard work to which you contribute nothing!” He swung to Vianne who longed to bring the Wulfrith dagger to hand. “You shall accompany me on my journey with the Dauphin, and upon our return to the manor settle in so never again must I question what babe swells your belly.”

Ache in her face where surely a bruise rose, she folded her hands on her abdomen. “I will not risk losing more than

already I have by continuing as your..." She shifted her regard to his son. "Such an ugly word, but he is right—*whore*. No longer will I be party to dishonoring your wife."

His face brightened further, but then he chuckled and stepped in front of her. "You will come around, my love." He tapped her nose. "You always do."

Abandoning what remained of her calm, she swept up a hand and knocked his aside. "I am done coming around," she loosed words that would be of no aid in seeing justice dealt him.

He did not tap her nose again, but repeated, "You will come around." Then he started to draw—then drag—her to a corner of the tent where he pushed her atop the mussed blankets of his pallet. "As it had to be a tiring ride to get back to me and we break camp in the next two hours, rest."

She started to rise, but when he lifted a bare foot toward her chest, she dropped back.

He lowered his foot, and though his smile once more tempted her to gain what was in her boot, she beseeched the Lord that, whether or not she became His instrument of revenge, never again must she suffer those hands upon her.

"Further lessons to learn," he said, "but as I know what is best for you, I have no doubt you will thank me when the son you desire of me is at your breast."

It was good he turned and shouted for his squire. Otherwise, she might have lost the dagger to impulse.

When the squire reached his lord, Rollon said, "As Lady Vianne is in need of a protector while I prepare for the day, she is your responsibility—and downfall do you not keep her safe for me."

Soon to earn his spurs providing his family had the means to outfit him as a knight, the squire said, "I will not fail you, my lord," then set his legs apart and placed a hand atop his sword's hilt.

Limp more pronounced, Rollon crossed to the small chest surely transported in the baggage train bringing up the rear of

Charles' army. He lifted the lid, and as he picked through the clothes, she turned her back to him and felt the purse shift against her ankle.

There was relief in retaining it the same as the dagger and items in her hem for the mercenaries having barely searched her. Though it could be insulting to be underestimated, not in this. All hidden upon her was of import, and if she escaped, some would make her way easier, though certainly not easy.

You will escape, she told herself as she stared at the tent's canvas. *You must believe it, keep watch, be patient, and think before acting, for there is only you to spread these iron bars to slip away.*

She assured herself she would, and that before she freed herself, Rollon would pay for her losses.

How? her inner voice questioned wearily.

"Every one of my losses," she whispered.

How, Vianne? The dagger is for protection alone.

So it was, its deadly use justified only were she seriously aggressed upon as Gustave had done in England. Recalling the defense of her person that unintentionally resulted in death, she longed to hug her arms about her.

Could she do it again when Rollon tried to take what she would no longer yield? Though the anger of her wanted to believe she could to ensure he paid for the evil done her and others, the godly of her flashed her with crimson memories.

Suppressing a whimper, Vianne accepted that with any degree of calculation she could not slay that murderer—even were justice denied her.

Fighting tears, she sent heavenward, *If You would have me be an instrument of revenge, Lord, You must make the way. I cannot.* Then as done many times before, she told Him she would cling to Him even if He did not cling to her.

CHAPTER 15

Regrettably, here we part ways,” said the man who had ridden hard to reach Calais before dawn to alert Warin his efforts to deliver Lady Vianne to the port city were thwarted by mercenaries seeking the reward of retrieving the royal advisor’s leman.

Though Warin had longed to beat him for leaving her, reason prevailed as he started to draw back an arm. Had not Joffrey been awakened by the sense something was amiss and risen to patrol the area, he would have faced six warriors he could not have stood against regardless of his skill. Were he not slain, he would have been taken with the lady and there would be no possibility of recovering her soon—if at all.

“Here we part ways,” Warin agreed and looked from formidable forces led by the less than formidable Dauphin to the chevalier who could yet aid King Edward—and protect his Normandy family all believed him estranged from. “You shall return to Paris?”

He who continued to exercise caution to ensure his face was not seen by Warin’s men, inclined his head. “Paris where it is believed I am in conversation with wine merchants whose concessions will put more coin in King Jean’s coffers.” He grunted. “Which could be in the best interest of the King of England does he soon enforce his claim to the French throne.”

Warin did not speak to that, both men aware the Great Mortality following the capture of Calais had snatched the reins of military dominance from England’s fist. Though King Edward believed they could be wrenched back, for now it was

more hope than possibility—and could prove but a dream if England lost its gateway into France.

“I am fair certain King Edward remains set on wearing a second crown,” Warin said, then briefly gripped Masse’s arm. “You did all you could for Lady Vianne. God willing, I will keep the word given her as could have been impossible had you not made the difficult decision to leave her.”

The man sighed. “For all she has sacrificed for England, I pray she finds peace and happiness.”

“I will do all in my power to see she gains the first,” Warin said, “though I fear that possible only if she is persuaded to abandon the idea of making Calais her home. As for her happiness, that is out of my hands.”

After some moments, during which Warin felt so scrutinized he almost wished he was beneath a hood, Masse said, “It starts with peace.” Then he reined around and, keeping to the trees atop the ridge that provided a distant vantage to follow the enemy’s progress, left Warin to plot how he and the men provided by the Captain of Calais would retrieve the lady likely riding among those most useful to the royal brat.

Moving his regard over the long column that looked a winding snake in the midst of digesting a mouse, Warin paused on the bulge behind the fanged head. There the Dauphin rode, heavily flanked by warriors whose lives would be forfeit if they failed to ensure his protection.

“Be there, Vianne,” he murmured. “Be ready. I come for you.”

TWICE THE DAUPHIN paused his army en route to Calais to refresh the horses and his men. Twice Rollon refused to allow Vianne to dismount. But now that they were to make camp two leagues from the port city, he had no good excuse to keep her in the saddle. And much incentive not to delay her dismount when she turned to him a face whose one side

remained swollen and said coldly, “Do you not wish your senses fouled, you will have to gain me tunic and chausses.”

He frowned. “What say you?”

That you are as thick as a water-logged book, she silently scorned. “I needed to relieve myself hours ago and you refused—as has my body to hold what it could not.” Lest still he did not understand, she added, “Hopefully your squire can clean the saddle and it will be dry by morn.”

His eyes widened and the arms reaching to her dropped. “You should have said,” he hissed and looked around as if to ensure the Dauphin was too distant to hear her claim. A false claim—though barely.

“I did say and twice you told me *non*, so...” She sniffed, grimaced. “Lest matters worsen, I must gain cover soon.”

When he ignored her beckoning arms, looked around, and called for his squire, she smiled at the likelihood that regardless of whether he gained clean garments for her, he would not seek intimacy until she bathed thoroughly. No chance of that here, the nearby stream too shallow and the eyes of other men grasping.

The young man conversing with Pierre whose boots caught the eye for being fit with polished steel tips, hastened forward. “My lord?”

“While the tent is erected, aid Lady Vianne in dismounting, then find her privacy in which to relieve herself.”

A chance for escape?

“As I trust you to avert your eyes,” Rollon continued, “you will remain close and keep her in sight at all times.”

“Oui, my lord.”

Rollon sent her a warning look, then stalked toward the Dauphin who had ignored her since acknowledging her with the words, *Beware, men, the English are among us*.

He was right, though he knew not the true depth of that. For information passed to her king, where this one English lady was, many her countrymen.

“Come, Lady Vianne.” Unaware of her claim she had fouled herself, the squire extended his arms.

Though of Rollon’s two squires she liked this one least for him striving to ingratiate himself with his lord at the cost of the other squire’s standing, she was glad there was no truth to what she told Rollon. And that had she an opportunity to run, better this young man bear the blame than the other.

He set her down, and as she adjusted her mantle said, “Privacy for you past the Dauphin’s tent.” He nodded beyond the clearing to dusk-rimmed pine and oak trees skirted by thick vegetation.

Privacy from others but not him. However, whereas once that would have mortified, it merely plucked at her modesty.

This shell hardens, she thought as she preceded he who had set a hand on his sword hilt. Given time it will thicken until there is no more soft about me. And I will be glad of it.

Still, when she had advanced as deep into the trees as he would allow, leaving behind much of the din inherent in providing accommodations for men eager to eat, drink, and commiserate over the aches of their long journey ahead of sleep, she felt enough discomfort in her purpose here that she had to turn her back to the squire.

When she straightened to set herself aright, he said, “Be quick. My lord—”

Hearing what sounded a crack of wood on wood, she swung around. Past the figure swiftly moving toward her, she saw Rollon’s squire was face down and to the left of him a large branch rolling to a stop.

Vianne swept her gaze to the one nearly upon her and would have cried out had he not launched himself the last step and slammed a hand over her mouth as he took her to ground.

This she would expect from Pierre but not Aubert Marianne. Staring into his face above hers, she anticipated the burn of a blade that would end her the same as the branch may have done the squire—were she unable to draw the Wulfrith dagger from her boot.

Arm at her side, she scraped up her skirt to expose the hilt and startled when he said, “Be quiet and still!” Though she maintained that appearance, causing him to ease some weight off her, her skirt continued to rise. “Now hear me.”

Pulling air through her nostrils, she nodded.

“I do not seek your death. That is not who I am nor willing to become even to aid my...charge. I but ensure you do not reveal me.”

And yet might he have killed Rollon’s squire?

As if she had spoken that, he said, “I put him down hard so he will not soon rise, but he will come around—and answer for your escape.”

She frowned.

“Oui. Since clearly Pierre disappoints, I cannot risk him being displaced by a child of your body that, if it is true you have known no other man, appears receptive to Rollon.”

Fingers finding the dagger’s pommel and easing the blade from its scabbard, not for the first time she was struck by the depth of this man’s loyalty to one undeserving of it. And questioned why he so tightly knit himself to one like Pierre.

“If ever you truly wanted Rollon, I do not doubt that is well in the past, Lady Vianne, but not for him. Regardless of whether you betray, he will do what it takes to keep you, even if you must be caged—as well you know. That of which I do not believe you are aware is he who holds as tight to his coin as a nun does her virtue prepares to dig into his coffers to gain an annulment.”

As she nearly lost hold of the dagger, he nodded. “After we brought you back from England, I learned he seeks to cast off his wife—something he surely does not wish Pierre to know, nor that he intends to wed you.”

Heart gripped over imaginings of what Pierre would seek to do to her and, failing that, spending the remainder of her life shut away at the manor with Rollon her jailer, she swallowed hard.

Though Marianne's face was partly shadowed, she saw his eyes close as if he was pained. Then he said, "I cannot allow that. Thus, you shall run as instructed and, aided by one I have paid to clear a way for you, leave France and never return."

Eyes still her only means of communicating, she widened them.

"Agreed, Lady Vianne?"

Was this God's answer to her wish to be His instrument of revenge? A resounding *Non*, followed by a benevolent, *But an instrument I shall make of another to deliver you from Rollon?*

"Soon the squire will rouse." It was said with impatience. "Now tell you agree, and I will see you away."

Though she no longer believed he intended her harm since death would have been dealt by now, even as she nodded, she closed her fingers around the hilt.

"When I remove my hand, you shall be silent for truly wishing never to see him again."

Another nod, then he lifted his hand and the body pinning hers eased as he dropped his knees both sides of her. Before she could push the dagger beneath her thigh, one of his knees landed atop that hand and she gasped.

"What is this?" he demanded, though from his tone and knee pressing harder into her hand as he reached to the dagger, no answer was required.

"Protection," she said and, trying to free her hand as she sat up, nearly had the air knocked from her for how hard he thrust a palm to her chest to return her to her back.

His other hand prying at her fingers, with something between accusation and disbelief, he said, "You meant to use this on me?"

"Non, protection only. I did not know you sought to aid me. Do you let me up, I will do as you tell and—"

Where her words ended, a cry began for him being knocked sideways. Muffling it, Vianne stared at the squire who held the branch that momentum had swung to his

opposite shoulder. Just as he had been felled, he had felled the one who aggressed on him.

Chest rising and falling rapidly, outrage shining from a face nearly as bright as blood trickling from his ear, he dropped his makeshift weapon.

As Vianne thrust to sitting with the dagger in hand, he looked to it. “I heard enough to know my lord’s man is as traitorous as his whore. Now I shall be rewarded for uncovering the truth and preventing your escape that would have seen *me* punished.”

He drew the sword likely eschewed in favor of the branch lest the blade exiting its scabbard alert Marianne. Angling it at her, he said, “Toss the dagger aside.”

Thinking he delayed raising the hue and cry until all was under control lest others attempt to take credit for what could sooner see him knighted, she firmed her grip and drew her legs in and feet under her.

“Do as I tell,” he rumbled, and when she rose, took a step nearer so the point of his sword was a short thrust from her abdomen.

Sliding her upper finger over the cross guard to the blade, emboldened by the engraved initials beneath that finger, she set her dagger-wielding hand before her. “I have nothing to lose, and we both know you dare not spill my blood.”

His eyes flicked to Marianne as if to confirm he remained senseless. It appeared so, and yet she sensed Pierre’s keeper had broken through the dark into the grey.

Vianne stepped backward. Though she would not get far—

A thought blossomed. Would it work? She did not know the direction Marianne meant to send her to gain the aid of one paid to take her from France, but even if she went the wrong way, it was a chance she would not have if she yielded to the squire.

“You are going to let me go,” she said.

He bared his teeth. “You err.”

“Non, for I will scream, and when this lady’s cry is answered, I will tell Marianne was put to ground for confronting you over seeking favors I would not grant. And you know his tale will be much the same.”

“Whore!” He set his sword nearer.

There was some good in repeatedly being told how bad one was—what at first was a blow that could double one over rendering it but a glancing blow.

More hardening of this shell, she thought as she watched for him to move against her, whether by way of the sword or sounding a warning to summon others who would wade through his version of the events and hers supported by—

“It is me they will heed, Lady.” Of a sudden, he stepped toward Marianne and drew back his arm to plunge it into the man’s chest where he lay on his side. However, his attempt to deprive her of one who would corroborate her story was thwarted.

As Vianne jumped forward, foolishly thinking to prevent the murder, the arm draping Marianne’s hip swung up and the hand holding silver let fly that which caused the squire to lurch and clap a hand above his collarbone.

She might have screamed if not for the shock of how swiftly Marianne gained his feet.

Though the gurgling squire swung his sword wildly, he was dropped by the kick his opponent landed.

As Vianne stood unmoving, Marianne bent to the young man who lay on his back as if to watch the stars come out. When he freed his dagger, the squire spasmed, then went lax.

“Never liked him,” Rollon’s man said as he moved toward her with the bloodied weapon. “You must—”

Whatever he meant to say was interrupted by the sound of great movement behind her. They were had. Rather, she was, since likely Marianne would make use of the tale with which she threatened the squire. Fortunately, it would also serve her if what had happened was laid at the feet of the wily young man who could refute nothing. And yet Marianne, looking

oddly alarmed for one about to answer to his countrymen, brandished his dagger.

Knowing the least of her worries was to have the Wulfrith dagger taken from her, the greatest that it could identify Sir Warin as the one who aided her flight from Rollon, she turned. And was certain she hallucinated when she saw the man with drawn sword closing in on her and flanked by four men.

He came for you! her inner voice cried. *He kept his word as though you are worthy.*

But then she saw Warin's eyes on Marianne were as grim as his bared his teeth, and knew the man who sought to aid her to ensure Rollon gained no alternate heir would be slain.

Acting with only enough thought to make no noise lest it reach those raising the camp, Vianne swung her dagger-wielding arm to the side to bar Warin's way, then thrust her other hand forward, entreating him and his fellow warriors to cease their advance.

They slowed, then fanned out to encircle her, Marianne, and the dead squire. When Warin halted three feet in front of her, there was question in the eyes that swept her face amid hair loosed from its braid, and from their darkening she knew he saw the result of Pierre's backhand.

"Pray, do not harm him," she said, careful not to speak Warin's name. "He meant to aid in my escape, and the squire is dead for trying to thwart him."

Warin's eyes returned to Marianne who might recognize him as the warrior who sought to retrieve his sister from England's coast. Fortunately, as there had been much distance between that boat and the shore and it grew dark here, it was possible Marianne was unaware he was in the presence of a Wulfrith.

"It is true what the lady tells," he said. "Self serving, but true."

When she eased her arms to her sides and looked around, she saw though Marianne no longer brandished the dagger, it was at the ready. Were he set upon, he would not survive so

many opponents, but he would inflict harm—all the while raising the hue and cry.

He jutted his chin at Vianne. “I could have caught hold of the lady and used her as a shield. I did not. Thus, take her from here as I arranged for another to do, and when men come looking for her and the squire, I will be recovering from having prevented the violation of my lord’s woman.” He glanced at her. “A better tale I could not have constructed, Lady Vianne,” he said, then returned to Warin. “All you must do is make good use of the time you have before the alarm is sounded to search for the lady who ran during my struggle with the squire. Most unfortunate, I know not the direction.”

Vianne looked to Warin, and guessing he was tempted to ensure Marianne had no opportunity to prove false, she entreated, “They will come soon. Pray, let us leave.”

His shoulders rose with breath, then he motioned his men forward and reached to her.

Still no words passed his lips nor his men’s, she realized as she slid her hand into his. Though day gone to night provided cover that would make it difficult to identify Warin as the knight on that shore, his voice could be recognized. Too, it was best those come for Vianne not reveal English accents should Marianne be made to tell the truth of what happened here.

As Warin drew her to his side, Vianne looked to his men who fell in behind. But as they started back, Marianne rasped, “Chevalier!” When all halted and looked around, he said, “King Jean’s birthday was quite the celebration, hmm?”

Vianne felt Warin stiffen the same as she, both aware of what was between those words. He might not know this Wulfrith’s identity, but he had noticed him that night and might have seen him slip into the courtyard after her.

“We must go,” Vianne hissed.

She felt Warin’s struggle a long moment, then blessedly he resumed his stride.

“Sir Knight!” This time Marianne properly acknowledged that Warin’s elevation to warrior in full had not been earned in France but England. “I commend your ability to swim a horse with the same skill as my lord’s mistress.”

When Warin released Vianne and turned back, raising his sword despite her entreaty to leave it be, the observant, clever, and wise Aubert Marianne shot up a staying hand. “Do you take her from France, none but I will know she is gone from my country and that you made it so...Wulfrith.”

Warin strode forward.

“My lord, the lady is right,” one of his men said, stepping in front of him. “We must go.”

Vianne did not know if the man saw or sensed something beyond the passage of precious minutes, but Warin heeded him. He thrust his sword in its scabbard, took the dagger from her and slid it beneath his belt and, with no warning, lifted and dropped her over his shoulder.

As he and his men ran, Vianne gripped his waist, raised her head, and craned her neck to see her ally staring after them. A moment later, Marianne lowered to the ground near the corpse. As his head injury would support his tale, all he must do was play the part she had quickly written for them, never expecting it to become a one-man spectacle.

Lord, this day You shine Your face upon me, and I thank You for opening this door! she sent heavenward, then let her head hang.

When Warin and his men halted minutes later, she saw over a dozen warriors here. Half were astride, and those not held bows fit with arrows. Their leader had been well prepared to retrieve her. In the event the four taken with him were not enough due to the arrival of other French, arrows shot from the shadows would have increased their chance of escape.

“Mount up,” he commanded as he began drawing her off his shoulder.

Vianne’s ribs traveled over that muscled ridge, then she was sliding down his chest. When her feet touched ground, she

told herself to step back, but her body would not heed her, maintaining contact with the man who had come for her as if she were—

Feeling his dagger's hilt against her lower ribs, she corrected herself. He *had* kept his word, but surely more for his precious weapon.

“We must get astride, Vianne.” Though his familiar address, deep voice, and breath warming her scalp made her long to keep her forehead pressed to his collarbone, she stepped back. “I am ready.”

“You shall ride with me,” he said and led her to the horse one of his men had drawn near.

She tried not to marvel over the ease with which he lifted her onto his mount—and succeeded when he said, “You have lost much weight.”

She knew that from the fit of her gown and how dizzying it was to rise quickly, but his observation tempted her to offense. However, when he swung up behind her and drew her back, all possibility of taking offense fled. And it had nothing to do with numbness. Indeed, she did not know when last she was so conscious of all within and without her skin.

Beware, Vianne. This is for the moment, the hour, the night and day only, she warned against hope so great she might have believed it possible to eventually rise above all she had lost. Then she turned into his arms and, making a pillow of his shoulder, whispered, “I thank you, Warin Wulfrith.”

He tightened his hold on her. “Sleep, Lady,” he said. “Soon Calais.” Then he put heels to his horse.

CHAPTER 16

May 19, 1354

The lady had slept longer than expected—like an exhausted child certain of safety in the arms of one whose mind and heart were devoted to her well being.

“Mind only,” Warin murmured as he watched her where she yet knelt streamside though minutes had passed since she fashioned a braid and splashed water over her face.

She had said nothing when he roused her as he and his men reined in at the dawning of day, nor when he lifted her down and told where she should relieve herself ahead of completing the journey to Calais.

As she turned away, he had tried to empty what had filled him upon recovering her—and filled further with her softly spoken gratitude. But though he did not want any part of his heart involved with the lady, neither did he wish to return to the dark between them following the loss of her babe. He wanted them to breathe well in each other’s presence and for her to yield to leaving the continent as Aubert Marianne told was necessary. That was what he wanted. That and no more.

And that was a lie.

With a growl, Warin cast off the vision of her face turned up to his and remembrance of her in his arms, then told himself all he must concern himself with at this time was ensuring she was ready to ride a quarter hour hence.

Closing his hand around the cloth-covered remains of his meal, he straightened from the tree he leaned against to

observe the men who served him well for the Captain of Calais providing his best warriors. Having paid them little regard, here further proof women were versed in turning a man from his purpose.

Even when little of it is of their doing, his conscience pricked.

Accepting responsibility for the drift of thoughts that had carried him to the isle of Lady Vianne, Warin strode down the incline, returning the nods of men who respectfully acknowledged him.

Halting alongside the woman whose gaze was on the water flowing to the narrow sea, he said, “Since we depart soon, and it will be mid-morn ere we reach Calais, you should drink and eat.”

Without looking up, she said, “I am not—”

“And yet you will refresh yourself.” He lowered to his haunches and extended his wineskin.

Hesitantly, she accepted it and put the spout to her lips. She drank more than expected and did not recoil when their hands touched in passing the skin back. However, he nearly recoiled when she turned her face to him.

With her hair drawn back, the light of day revealed what he had glimpsed on the night past was far from the reality of the blow dealt her—and made him wonder as he had not allowed himself what was done the rest of her body when she was returned to De Talliere.

She frowned. “How have I angered you?”

Though inclined to assure her he was not angry with her and shift the conversation, he thought it might soothe her to know this darkness was aimed elsewhere. “My anger is for Rollon de Talliere,” he said and looked to the swelling that, fortunately, had barely bruised.

She touched it. “This was not done by Rollon but his son after he named me a whore and spat in my face.”

More anger that neither could he keep from his face. “Much reckoning due that knave for this, the near death of my sister, and injuries and wrongs done the people of Lillia,” he said.

“There *is* something evil about him, whereas Rollon...” She shook her head. “I hate him, but perhaps more his son.”

Though Warin told himself he need hear no more, he asked, “What did he do to you when the mercenaries delivered you?”

“Naught.”

“Vianne—”

“Naught but reveal his plans for my future, which was for the manor to become my permanent residence and that I...” A hand rose toward her belly, dropped. “...would be glad of it once I had his child at my breast.” She swept bright eyes back to the stream. “According to Marianne, he planned to seek an annulment to wed me, binding me to him with more than locked doors and guards ever at my heels.” She swallowed. “I do not know I could have survived that.”

Warin longed to draw her in and tell her the worst was past, but the longing was too near his heart where she who could not be more different from his departed wife should not be.

She sniffed, glanced at the small bundle he held. “I am a little hungry.”

He handed it to her and watched as she ate what remained of the crumbling biscuit and dried meat. Upon returning the cloth to him and catching sight of the dagger tucked beneath his belt, she exclaimed, “The scabbard!” then raised her skirt and withdrew it.

As he fastened it on his belt, he asked, “What of your purse?”

“Down my other boot.”

Pleased foul men continued to underestimate her, Warin sheathed the dagger.

“Not until this morn did I question how you found me,” she said when he looked up. “Chevalier Joffrey told you I was taken, oui?”

“Aye, without cease he rode to Calais and accompanied me and my men much of the way back before turning toward Paris. I was angered he left you to the mercenaries—”

“It was his only chance to aid me.”

“And himself.”

“That is so, but I believe I was the first consideration and am grateful—and more now I know he has been my side throughout my ordeal and supports our king the same as his cousin.”

Her ordeal... “Much is owed him,” Warin acceded. “Hopefully, one day his faithfulness to Edward will be well rewarded. And I have no doubt yours shall be.”

It bothered the way she smiled—as if she believed no reward would be forthcoming. Or was it that no matter how grandiose the reward, never would it compensate? Though in the beginning he had not wanted to know the hidden of her tale, he did now. But were it to be told, it must wait.

Standing, he reached to her. “It is time.”

When she accepted his aid, there seemed good in that, but as if to remind him delivering her to Calais was not fulfillment of his vow in its entirety, she said, “Time for me to be introduced to my new home.”

Unfortunately, argument—supported by what Aubert Marianne had sought to stipulate—must also wait. He did not know how he would get her to England if none of the lost ships appeared during his absence, but it was imperative. Were Calais lost, likely more than any Englishwoman she would pay a high price, and if she lived, it could prove impossible to extract her again. Were that her fate, he was certain he would not know true peace again.

Peace of mind, not of the heart, he told himself and assisted her astride.

Calais, France

May 19, 1354

TWO DAYS until the attack that could become a siege if all done to prepare for it proved only halfway successful. One day until the second ship bound for England carrying high-ransom-value women and children set sail.

God willing, those precautions would prove unnecessary—that either the French would withdraw when Les Fléaux de l’Anglais failed to facilitate their entrance into the city or they determined to proceed with the attack and were felled by English within and without.

Regardless, the greatest risk to those who had boarded the first ship this morn and those who would board the second on the morrow was if the sea behaved a temperamental child. Though late spring was not overly given to fits that disappeared vessels, it did happen as evidenced by those recently gone missing.

Still, Warin wanted Vianne on the one that departed with the sun’s next rising, but what he wanted was of no consequence to the Captain of Calais who stood firm on what was agreed and Warin had not expected to have a personal stake in seeing amended.

“I am sorry,” the older man said, pressing the knuckles at the ends of his fists into the desk. “Though I understand the need to make an exception for this lady, just as the list has been posted of those whose places are guaranteed on the morrow’s ship for being wives of high-ranking noblemen, so too the list of those awaiting a place should any on the first be unable or unwilling to leave.” He opened his hands, pressed his palms to the table. “All I can do for her is the same as you and those who remain inside these walls—pray we send the French back to their mothers’ skirts.”

“Should she be taken, Captain—”

“As she is not wed to an English nobleman, no exception can be made without furthering the unrest of those who will deem it unfair and demand to become exceptions themselves. Hence, either Lady Vianne joins one of the processions traveling overland or she remains.”

Warin knew he was right, that to stray from the course could unbalance what was barely balanced, but it was hard to accept his inability to protect her from what could be.

Just as well she does not cooperate, reason recalled her determination to remain in Calais. Were he able to secure a place for her on the second ship, he would have to betray her trust, and likely that would require binding and gagging her.

“You are right, Captain. It is just...” He shook his head, then inclined it ahead of taking his leave.

“Just what, Baron?” the captain’s wife reminded the two that Warin’s arrival had interrupted a discussion with her husband.

Warin turned to the older woman who stood before the window at which her husband liked to look out at that portion of the sea entrusted to him to ensure English ships moved safely between the continent and island kingdom. “Forgive me for the interruption, my lady,” he said and started for the door.

“You did not answer, Baron Wulfrith,” her words halted him. “Now tell—it is just *what?*” She who clasped her hands before her could never have been a beauty, but for her poise, directness of gaze, and refusal to be among the stampeding ladies who departed on the first ship, was quite attractive.

“My lady, I but thought to further my argument a moment before accepting it was without firm footing.”

“Just what?” she repeated.

He nearly groaned. “I cannot recall exactly what I meant to say.”

“I do not require exactness.”

“It is of no consequence what the baron decided against speaking, my lady wife,” the captain rebuked mildly,

“especially since you should be packing for the morrow.”

“Husband—”

“Joan!” he barked, then softened his tone. “Pray, go and pack, my love.”

She sent breath up her face, causing tendrils to dance on her brow, then exited with a whisper of skirts.

“Truly, I am sorry,” the captain said and motioned Warin to depart.

No sooner did he step off the stairs than the man’s wife appeared. “Lady Joan.” He bowed.

“Baron, there is a way Lady Vianne can board the ship on the morrow.” She leaned in and spoke the unexpected near his ear. “If you are willing,” she said, drawing back.

He was not. What she proposed so preposterous it warranted no response, he wished her a good day and left.

Though already he had been gone longer than what he told Vianne during their meal prepared by the woman who kept the home where visiting nobles were often housed, likely she would never know for having withdrawn to her chamber to rest.

Thus, he decided to go to the market where little business would be conducted after this day since most merchants—many being French—did not care to be inside these walls when Calais’ fate was decided lest they and their families suffer.

There being several things Warin needed, and one in particular, he would delay his return to the house a half hour longer. Too, it would give him time to shake off what Lady Joan suggested.

“Never,” he muttered and lengthened his stride.

SHE LIKED what she had seen of Calais upon her arrival and experienced during her exploration this past hour.

But should it fall to King Jean, you will like it not, reason warned.

Ignoring it, Vianne entered a market teeming with customers whose air of urgency was more intense for there being few places open to obtain goods, whether those who sold them had begun the trek north or settled in to witness what would become of the prosperous, strategically-situated city.

Having not considered what might be needed to sustain her, she felt a flutter of alarm, but it settled with the reminder she was not alone. Not yet.

The woman who kept Warin's home had assured his guest she had only to ask for whatever was needed. It would not always be so, Vianne's place there secure only as long as Warin remained in Calais. But once the conflict was over and before his return home, she believed he would keep his word to settle her here. Of course, that was possible only if her information led to English victory.

Despite the heat of the day, she had meant to stay under her hood lest her swollen cheek draw attention, but when a lad eager to regain his mother's side jostled her and the hood dropped, she left it atop her shoulders. Let those who looked her way wonder at her misfortune. She needed to breathe and

“Harlot!”

Vianne halted and looked whence the voice of condemnation sounded. However, the attention of the well-dressed man was on a middle-aged woman who stood behind a table on which sat bottles and pots likely containing herbal remedies.

“Ever cheating the English!” As the voices of others lowered and eyes turned their direction, he pointed at her. “Exploiting those to whom you should bow and scrape.”

A deep breath gained the woman more height and breadth, but were it patience she sought, it eluded, and she slapped him so hard he stumbled. As others ceased buying and selling to witness the spectacle, she bared teeth that showed she had half as many upper as lower and spat in French-accented English, “You are in *my* country, wee islander!”

With a curse, he overturned the table, scattering goods that sustained her and whoever depended on her persuading customers to buy her concoctions.

“You think you are Christ overturning the tables of moneychangers?” she shrieked.

A moment before he set himself at her, Vianne sensed she was watched—and darkly. Had not the French woman fallen beneath her assailant, causing alarm and excitement to ripple through the crowd, she would have searched out her detractor. However, when her countryman drew back a fist and none sought to aid the woman, she cried, “Cease!” and ran forward.

She arrived too late to prevent the first blow that would do worse to the woman’s face than what was done her own, but she caught the man’s arm as he made to strike again. That unbalanced him, and when she released him, he fell to the side.

A glance at the woman confirming a bloodied mouth, Vianne cried, “Foul being! You have no right—”

A thrust to her shoulder dropped her to one knee near the man and, as if in league with whoever pushed her, he landed a kick to her ankle that pained so much she barely made it upright.

“Here an English harlot,” trumpeted a woman at her back. “And more vile for selling her body to the French—among them the advisor of King Jean, is it not, *Lady?*”

Head gone light, Vianne slowly turned to one of perhaps thirty and five who wore a gown of fairly fine cloth.

As the man whose abuse Vianne had protested regained his feet and demanded, “Tell!” the woman glanced at her

audience, then considered Vianne whose legs did not heed the command to retreat.

After lingering over the swollen cheek, once more she cast her voice wide. “Three years ago, at the behest of King Edward, my lord journeyed to the French court to attend talks between our countries, and I accompanied him and his lady wife.” She pointed at Vianne. “Adorned in jewels and extravagant gowns, this Englishwoman gone the side of the French was the talk of the court for being the leman of King Jean’s advisor—Vianne Wardieu, a whore and spy in our midst.”

Ill upon the air surging, Vianne spun away. Seeing her path narrow as the English moved toward her, she snatched up her skirt to make her way through before what was done the French woman could be done her. She managed a single step, then her accuser yanked her braid, pulling her booted feet out from under her and landing her so hard she struck the back of her head on the ground.

As her vision wavered around the edges, she saw she was surrounded by her countrymen whose expressions were accusatory. And yet they kept their distance, the reason eluding her until she started to rise and something struck the side of her head.

Her ears rang, but she heard well enough to know it was not her name shouted but *harlot* and *whore*. Then more missiles flew, and as she turned onto hands and knees and crossed her arms over her head, she saw some of what was flung at her were the Frenchwoman’s bottles and pots.

As those here continued judging her for having no idea her loathsome reputation was gained to aid them, her ear took a hit. She cried out, and again when something struck her hip and knocked her onto her side.

As she tucked into a ball to protect her soft places, the voices grew in number and she heard pounding feet. Hugging herself tighter, she entreated, “Lord, save me!” then added, “If You will not, let it be over quick so never again do I know such hurt of body and mind.”

He did not heed her, hands upon her surely intent on tearing her apart.

Having no blade with which to defend herself, she threw out an arm and hooked her fingers to rake whatever flesh they could find. And made contact. Guessing she drew blood, she sought more.

“Vianne!” the recipient of her bloodletting called, though barely heard for someone near pleading for God’s aid between sobs. “Vianne!” he repeated, then iron closed around her wrists, and all she could do was try to roll away when more iron crossed her back and curved about her hip.

As she was lifted, for her imagination delivering her to a noose, she screamed, “Non!” and yet apathy began draining the fight from one so very tired.

You will not go easy! commanded the voice within. Still you have much to lose. Though your family does not want the fallen of you, you remain a Wardieu. Fight for that name and the blood of the women and men that courses your veins.

She bucked and, rousing a curse from whoever held her, realized not only were her wrists free but eyes squeezed closed as if it would hurt less not to look upon what awaited her.

Determinedly raising her lids and seeing an indistinct face and, beyond it, the sky, she demanded, “Let me down, you son of a sow!”

He halted, lowered his face near hers. “I tell you again, it is I—Warin Wulfrith.”

Though still she could not look clearly at him, for the cessation of pleading and sobbing, she heard him. “Warin,” she choked, then the din of someone near resumed, and she realized it came from her. She should be stronger, but at this moment longed for this man to be strong for her.

“I have you, Vianne. Soon we will be home.”

That last making her sob harder for having no roots to keep the wind from tumbling her distant, she turned her face into his chest and held to his tunic lest someone seek to tear her from his arms.

CHAPTER 17

The woman who kept Warin's lodgings was visibly surprised upon opening the door, but quick to swing it wider to ensure his armful cleared the frame.

Since Vianne remained awake as told by soft, intermittent weeping, he instructed the woman to go for drink and strode into the sitting room. "You are safe," he said as he eased the lady into a chair. However, her hands remained fastened on his tunic. "Look at me, Vianne."

Shuddering, she dropped back her head and peered at him.

Self-control continuing to test its bindings, he moved his gaze from hair matted with blood to tear-swollen eyes, next her bleeding ear and bared shoulder on which a bruise rose.

Rage—there was no better word for what ran through him on razor-sharp feet.

When the report of an altercation in the market ended his exchange with the captain of a contingent arrived from the North, he had altered his plan to return to the house with the items he had acquired and aid soldiers sent to stamp out unrest likely resulting from fear over what would be at their gates in less than two days.

Huddled on the ground, the woman who could not protect herself from the insults of an angry crowd sought to protect herself from items cast at her, including small stones.

Warin had thought her a prostitute foolishly plying her trade at a time few men would be receptive, but as soldiers wielded weapons to disperse the crowd and he punched and

thrust aside her persecutors, someone shouted the name of the lady who should be far from the market, then called her De Talliere's whore.

The next throw of his fist had broken teeth, to which his cut knuckles would attest, allowing him to get her away from those intent on making her pay a debt she did not owe—though certainly they owed her one.

“I am looking at you, Warin Wulfrith,” she whispered.

Returning to the present, he said, “Do you release me, I will go for bandages and salve.”

“Am I hurt badly?”

As she would know were she not in shock. “Not badly, but your injuries must be tended, my lady.”

She opened her hands and, when he straightened, said, “I am sorry for causing you trouble. I could not sleep and thought to explore the city that I...”

...thought to make her home, he silently finished. “You caused me no trouble,” he lied. “Now stay, and refreshments will be brought while I gather what is needed.”

She settled back, but when he reached the doorway called, “It is not far enough.”

He turned. “Of what do you speak?”

“Calais. I was recognized and hated for what is true of me and what is not.” Her throat bobbed. “I must go elsewhere. Perhaps Flanders.”

Still not safe enough, he thought, then said, “England.”

She shook her head. “Neither am I welcome there, but since your vow is fulfilled, I will not ask you to settle me elsewhere.”

“England,” he repeated harshly for what he must do to get her on the morrow's ship. Then he went in search of bandages and salve.

IT WAS NOT Warin who tenderly ministered to her, as was best for injuries scattered over a body struck dozens of times, but the housekeeper who told unexpected business had called him away.

Now well into the afternoon, wearing a clean chemise and loosed hair covering her swollen ear and cheek, Vianne limped about her chamber in the hope of stilling her mind and delaying rest so she might sleep through night until morn when...

“When what?” she rasped and let her thoughts go to England.

The French scorned it for being an island, but it was immense. Thus, though the last time she put the sea between her and Rollon his son brought her back, she *would* be safer there than on the continent—and greater that likelihood if King Edward ensured she was protected from her enemies as reward for her years of service.

“England,” she said aloud, then prayed, “Heavenly Father, if that is where You would have me go, open a way for me.”

A quarter hour later, Warin’s voice belowstairs causing her heart to thrum, she struggled between the longing to go to him and crawling beneath the covers to feign sleep should he come to her.

Leaning toward seeking him out so whatever must be spoken would be over, she looked to the gown provided by the housekeeper who had been confused by Vianne’s resistance to laundering her own of many pockets.

Before she could decide, boots sounded in the passageway and halted on the other side of her door. Rather than knock lightly lest she slept, knuckles landed. “I must speak with you, Lady. Now.”

Setting her teeth against discomfort, she eased into her borrowed robe and belted it.

The man to whom she opened the door was disheveled, and though the state of his clothes was due to extracting her from the market, his hair had been in better order when he returned her to the house. Had he been raking fingers through it? Then there were scratches running jaw to collarbone—something for which she was responsible, as confirmed by the housekeeper having cleaned blood from under her nails.

As he continued scrutinizing her in return, she prompted, “Sir Warin?” and winced over a voice that grated across a throat gone raw.

He shifted a bundle beneath his arm. “May I enter?”

Were he any other man, she would refuse, but no matter how unseemly it would appear to others, she was safe with him on two fronts—first his honor as proven since the first time they were alone following his sister’s abduction in England, second his distaste for what she was as all in the market learned this day.

She opened the door wider, and he strode inside and set the bundle on the bed. “For you.”

Struggling to keep her face and body from reflecting discomfort, she crossed the room and looked at the linen bound with twine. Deciding her curiosity could wait, she turned to him. “Doubtless you wish to speak of what happened —”

“I know what happened.”

She blinked. “You do?”

“Aye, and it is the Frenchwoman you sought to defend whose version of the events was deemed truthful. Thus, the man who set upon her is first responsible for what followed, next the woman who assaulted you and riled others. Both shall be punished.”

She had no kind regard for either, but neither did she wish them to suffer beyond what was just. “Their punishment?”

Annoyance tightened his brow. “Be assured, the Captain of Calais is not cruel, though I do not know I could be half as lenient as he who did not witness what I did. Since neither

victim appears to have suffered lasting damage, the perpetrators shall be incarcerated a fortnight.”

She breathed easier. “The Frenchwoman is well?”

“Compared to what was done her savior, quite. Now we must speak.” He took her arm to draw her away.

Had she been prepared for his grip, he might never know the extent of her pain, but when she gasped and snatched free, there could be no question of it.

“God Almighty,” he growled, but quickly said, “Forgive me. I do not know where all you are hurt.”

She nearly told him everywhere, but some exaggeration to that. And self-pity. “Let us speak,” she said and stepped to the nearest chair.

Warin drew the other close, and as he seated himself, took something from his purse. The same as the bundle placed on the bed, the item was wrapped, but it was smaller, long, and wide at the top. “When I departed the house earlier, I had matters to tend to, one being to gain this.” When she accepted it, he added, “Which could have proved too late.”

Its weight and shape revealing it, she said, “Why a dagger?”

“I would say so you may cut your own meat, but as it is far more than that—and in consideration of our encounters thus far and that you have returned mine—better said for your protection.”

Emotions stirred over recall of Rollon denying her even a table knife, she lowered his gift to her lap and unbound it. “Oh, it is wonderfully made!”

“I sought a simple one, but since the smithy was closing his shop to begin making his way north and feared Calais would soon be lost, he was eager to sell it at a good price.”

She glanced up. “Still much coin.”

His shrug was slight. “He told it was commissioned years ago for a lady whose betrothed paid half and no more when

the young woman persuaded her father to allow her to become a Bride of Christ.”

Wondering if the man had been heartbroken, Vianne drew the blade from its leather sheath and raised it, causing the sleeves of robe and chemise to fall back.

“Lord, grant me calm,” Warin muttered. Past the intricately worked crossguard and hilt, she saw his eyes were on her mottled wrist.

His anger for what was done her making her heart convulse, she said, “I thank you for your concern, but when I trouble you no more weeks hence, what aches and is ugly will be healed and what happened this day mere remembrance.”

His nostrils flared. “Mere?”

“Not weeks,” she conceded, “but you should be able to put me from your mind knowing what you did for me was enough.” Hearing his teeth grind, she lowered the dagger. “What is it?”

“It will not be enough, Vianne.”

Fearing she would not like what lay behind that, she nearly begged fatigue to send him away so whatever he meant to tell would resolve and sow no further discord. “I am grateful for your thoughtfulness, Sir Warin. God willing, it will not be necessary to use this to protect myself, but I will feel safer.”

“I am pleased it is well received. Now I will explain the situation at Calais so you are in no doubt of what needs to be done regardless of our feelings.”

“Not necessary,” she said and set his gift on the table beside her and started to rise.

He reached his full height first and stepped so near she found herself caged. “Time is wasting, Vianne. Sit.”

She started to protest, but assuring herself she could refuse to cooperate with whatever he told, resettled. “Very well, why is it not enough, Sir Warin, and what are we to do about it?”

CHAPTER 18

Not enough because military reinforcements and provisions made for English women and children were partially sabotaged by the sea, forcing the Captain of Calais to reserve the two ships that reached port for children regardless of rank and noblewomen of high ransom value.

It was very possible Calais would not fall to French forces encamped two leagues distant—half to the south, half to the east—especially for a good number of English contingents answering the call that went out when Warin delivered her intelligence. However, just as the French did not know the extent of English intelligence, neither did the English know what adjustments were being made to the enemy's plans to compensate for the silence of agents inside the walls and the presence of English contingents outside them of which they could not be entirely ignorant.

Warin having resumed his seat to explain some of what she had distantly sensed during her exploration of Calais and more closely sensed in the marketplace when emotions surged toward madness, Vianne was grudgingly glad she had no choice but to listen—grudgingly because though he reeled it out quickly, he had yet to tell what must be done that neither would like.

Sitting forward, he clasped his hands between his knees. “If you have not guessed the dilemma where you are concerned, it is this—more than any woman boarding the ship on the morrow, it is imperative you are on it since ransom will not be enough to free you should King Jean prevail.”

She inclined her head. “After what happened this day, I accept it is best I return to England. Thus, I shall pray the missing ships appear so I may make the crossing. Do they not —”

“You will be on the second ship, Vianne.”

She frowned. “You told it shall be so burdened as to be nearly dangerous to those with places.”

“You will be on it.”

She sat straighter. “I will not displace another.”

“Hear me, Vianne—”

“Non!” Gaining her feet before he, she might have evaded him had she turned on her opposite leg. Pain shooting through her ankle, she crumpled.

Immediately, he was beside her and whipping up the hem of her robe and chemise. Before she could voice outrage, the culprit was in his hand. No greater bruise had she than what radiated from that ankle, livid purple spreading atop her foot and down the heel.

Anger once more turning his face frightening, he met her gaze but did not speak as if he did not trust himself. At last, he said, “It should be bandaged even if only for support.”

“It was, but so tightly that I lost feeling. I meant to rewrap it, but once it was freed, it seemed fine.”

“It is not fine.” He released her foot, scooped her up, and resettled her in the chair.

When he turned away, she knew what he searched for, but before she could direct him, he was at the bedside table. Returning with the bandage, he knelt and wrapped her foot. “You have feeling?”

She nodded, it being all she could do for his fingers resting against her arch that she had not known was so sensitive.

Though the dark about him had eased, it returned when his regard shifted to the ear she had exposed in tucking hair behind it. After briefly closing his eyes, he said, “Dear Lord,

Vianne, will you always be more broken than whole?” Amid her startle, he released her foot and rose. “Excepting King Jean’s celebration, every time we meet, you are marked by violence in one way or another.”

She could not argue that. Since losing her first babe, a body that had previously suffered only accidentally inflicted scrapes and bruises had been injured time and again—that is, if she disregarded Rollon’s hands upon her. For salve and bandages being unable to reach unseen injuries that resided more in her head, they were harder to heal. Were it even possible...

“That ends this day, Vianne.”

She frowned. “What say you?”

He set his hands on the chair arms and leaned so near his breath swept the whole of her face. “All is arranged. Once you are in England and whatever mess made of Calais is swept up, we will grapple with what comes of our arrangement.”

“I do not understand, Warin.”

His gaze lowered to her mouth. “And yet you have become as loose with my given name as I yours,” he murmured.

Feeling as if she were falling into him, she said, “What do you?”

“This.” He slid a hand around her neck and tilted her face higher as if...

“You should not,” she whispered. “You will regret it and hate me for—”

His mouth closed over hers, and though she expected abandon as of one losing control he would later rue, his kiss was as gentle as the first given her by Balian. Gentle and yet warmer...deeper...longer...lovelier...

Vianne told her hands to remain where they were so she could not be faulted for what he would wish undone, and she thought they obeyed until she felt the firm of his chest beneath the left and flaxen hair in the fingers of the right.

“Vianne.”

She expected reproach, but he angled his head and the kiss she thought warm and deep hardly compared to the warmth and depth of what it became.

“Warin.” That was her voice, but it was so thick with yearning previously only hinted at with the patient Balian and never felt with the impatient Rollon that it sounded another’s—worse, that of a woman who took coin for intimacy.

Had he not ended it then, she would have. And ought to have far sooner for what it told of one who should have pushed him away the instant his breath was on her lips.

Should have, she silently bemoaned and opened her eyes.

Though she feared what was in his, she peered into the green that remained very near and, realizing her hand was yet in his hair, let it fall to her lap. Now to find words to absolve her of playing the harlot. However the only ones with which her tongue would cooperate were, “What was that?”

That Warin also wanted to know, having not expected such a response to a mouth that tentatively gave back as if barely experienced. Despite having acknowledged how desirable Vianne was, he had thought the longing of his body could be tempered by the fact she was far from virtuous—worse, publicly fallen as further supported by what happened in the market, but...

“I need to know what that was,” she entreated.

Resenting her moist eyes made his chest constrict, and not wanting her to know he had been more moved by their kiss than she, he straightened. Then forgetting how he had thought to explain what was to come, he said, “That was practice.”

One moment confusion about her eyes, then wariness, sorrow, and anger. “I will not be that to you, Warin Wulfrith—nor any man ever again.”

Silently, he rebuked himself for allowing her to so affect him he offended one he persisted in judging without knowing even half her tale. “You misunderstand, though the blame is mine,” he said.

Her lids narrowed.

“When I named what went between us *practice*, I meant it would prepare you for what shall come after the next ringing of bells.”

Now wariness amid suspicion.

“I do not seek to persuade you to become my leman, Vianne, but to be my wife.”

VIANNE WAS MORTIFIED by a cry that so quickly carried her up out of the chair she had to catch hold of Warin to keep her balance—possibly appearing as if gratitude drove her into his arms.

As he reached to steady her, she jumped to the side and, conscious of her injured ankle, distanced herself. But when she turned at the door, there was little distance between them. Blaming her lack of awareness of him following on the blood pounding in her ears, she crossed her arms over her chest. “There is all manner of wrong in what you propose.”

For more dark in his eyes than green, he surely agreed.

“Your *wife*, Sir Warin? What is this about?”

Though he exuded impatience, he settled into his heels. “It is about getting you on that ship,” he said.

And need say no more. “Children first,” she breathed, “after them *married* noblewomen of high ransom value.”

“For which you will qualify once you bear my name. Thus, after you don the gown I brought, you will meet me belowstairs and accompany me to the church where a priest awaits us.”

“Non.”

Even less green about his eyes. “It is the only way to ensure you do not fall into De Talliere’s hands again. Hence, I will not be dissuaded—”

“As you need not be since I have only to decline to accompany you or, should you put me over your shoulder again, refuse to speak vows. And I will so what you do not want is not required of your honor and, with clear conscience, you can leave my fate to the outcome of the struggle for Calais.”

“As told, all is arranged, the course set,” he growled.

“Not by me. This common whore will not be the altar on which you sacrifice your future.” Catching back what would have followed for having misspoken slightly, she corrected, “Not common, but no less a whore and worse for—”

Hands gripped her shoulders. “No more! Just as none shall disrespect the Baron of Woodhearst’s wife by naming her that, neither shall you.”

“It need not be spoken to be true! And for that truth, I wish you a good life with a woman worthy of your name.”

She hated his hesitation felt a blade to the breast, but then the thoughts moving across his eyes became words. “My family is in good standing with the Church. Thus, with King Edward’s influence for the debt owed you and lack of consummation, an annulment could be granted.” As the solution and logic of that slipped past what had no right to be pain, he said, “A quarter hour hence, you will join me belowstairs.”

She thought she had no further argument, but when he released her, it came to her. “As told, I will not take the place of another promised one.”

“Indeed you will not since one has become available.”

Did he speak false so she might be saved while another risked great loss?

Surely realizing what he told was not enough, he said, “You have a place on the ship that affects none come before you who wishes to go to England. My word I give.”

She looked down, and he allowed her to stumble through her thoughts before raising her chin. “We can delay no longer.”

“What if an annulment is not granted? What if ever you must call me wife and I...”

“...must call me husband?” he finished, then with what appeared great resolve, said, “With God’s aid, we will make the best of it—and sooner my daughter shall have a mother.”

She jerked, having not considered what he proposed would greatly affect any other than them, nor that motherhood twice torn from her could be granted by way of the child relinquished by a woman who had not wanted the complication of her. An instant later, a laugh escaped over the irony Charliese could gain another harlot for a mother.

“What is it, Vianne?”

“I am thinking of your daughter who, despite bearing your name, may ever be known as hedgeborn. Even can you conceal she was conceived on a harlot, it will be known she is raised by one.”

His brow grooved. “Should you remain my wife, you will not aid others in keeping your past alive. We may have to weather it a time, but then no more.”

Fear it would not be only for a time and he and his daughter would suffer nearly made her dig in her heels and let the fate of Calais decide hers. But she recalled what she had prayed earlier—that if God would have her go to England, He would open a way for her. It seemed He had, and Warin was the way.

Struck by the sense he had been that since first they laid eyes on each other and his distaste was felt, Vianne questioned how it was possible he was the way, then how she was to aid in extricating him from her.

Lack of consummation, said the voice within. No matter what he makes you feel, you cannot succumb and must discourage whatever you make him feel.

“We are agreed, Vianne?”

She nodded. “Should I remain your wife, I will aspire to put France behind me.”

From the draw of his eyebrows, that did not satisfy, but he said, "I shall see you belowstairs." Then he left her and, shortly, she heard the door of another chamber open and close.

She stared at where he had been, then crossed to the bed. That which would be her wedding gown was quite fine, making her wonder whence it came. "It matters not," she said as she laced herself into the embroidered bodice fashioned of samite cloth the blue of a sea lit by a summer sun.

What mattered was she would soon be Vianne Wulfrith. Likely a temporary state.

What mattered was she would be bound for England. Likely a permanent state.

What mattered was she would start anew and out of reach of Rollon. Likely a lonely state.

But better, she told herself as she donned boots that did the gown no justice. *It cannot be worse.*

CHAPTER 19

As was proper, the bride was given her own mount to traverse streets that evidenced a greater number of inhabitants had departed than remained. And come the morrow, more would leave, whether by ship or the road north, the latter putting but a full day and night between them and the French assault if it went forward as planned.

When the church came within sight, a solitary priest standing beneath its portico, Vianne glanced at the man riding beside her. Upon descending from her chamber, her heart leapt at how striking he looked in a dark blue doublet and black chausses, and again over how bright his eyes as he considered her transformation. But that had been as short-lived as the betrayal of *her* eyes, and he had been stony since.

“Is she the one what caused all the trouble, Ma?”

The question spoken in the pitch of a boy of six or seven brought Warin’s chin around a moment before Vianne peered past the edge of the veil covering her head as expected of an unchaste bride who was not to wear her hair loose.

Mother and son had paused in an alley between shuttered shops, the first with a basket over an arm, the second holding a cat missing an ear. As told by the shushing of the boy, whatever the woman’s answer, it must wait until the one under discussion was past. Not that Vianne needed to hear it for recognizing the lad who had hastened to catch up with his mother in the market.

A breeze fluttering her veil, she looked forward again and sidelong saw Warin return his attention to the church where the priest had been joined by a man and woman.

“Our witnesses, the Captain of Calais and his wife, Joan,” he said, “that lady the one who provided the gown you are to keep since she tells she is several seasons beyond the figure required to wear it well.”

Doubting that, the woman appearing as slender as she, Vianne said, “I shall thank her.”

When they reined in, the priest of dour expression remained unmoving while the captain and his wife descended the steps and Vianne was gently assisted out of the saddle.

Following introductions, during which the eyes of husband and wife lingered over her swollen cheek that, blessedly, no longer ached unlike injuries sustained in the marketplace, the captain told he must speak privately with the groom and drew him away.

“Worry not,” said Lady Joan whose observation of Vianne had made her feel rather picked apart. “I believe all will proceed as planned since *what may be* can as easily become *what is not*.”

Vianne frowned. “Something has happened?”

The woman who seemed as confident as Vianne had been whilst she wielded power over Rollon, waved a dismissing hand and smiled. “I am pleased the gown fits.”

Shame distracting Vianne from the men standing out of hearing, she said, “Forgive me for being late to express gratitude, Lady Joan.” She glanced down the garment and felt a thrill, albeit more for the dagger fixed to her girdle. “It is lovely.”

“And yours to keep if Baron Wulfrith did not tell,” the woman said.

Liking the gust fluttering her veil and cooling her nape against which she had pinned her rolled braid, Vianne inclined her head. “I thank you for your generosity.”

The lady smiled wider, then gasped. “Ah, they return, and does not your groom look broody?” She clicked her tongue. “Though my lord husband governs Calais exceptionally well, often ’tis at the cost of much worry for him picking at things that need not be picked at.”

Vianne nearly laughed for having recently felt as if this woman picked *her* apart. Were husband and wife well suited? Or exceedingly tolerant for rubbing the grain of the other that felt the wrong direction though quite possibly it was the same?

“Ladies,” Warin said as he and the captain halted.

Since he did appear *broody* beyond the grim of the ride, Vianne asked, “What is amiss?”

“Naught of consequence,” he said, though perhaps the captain disagreed for clearing his throat in the way of men trying to send a message without alerting the opposite sex.

Vianne would have pressed for what Warin held close had he not taken her arm and, supporting her in consideration of her ankle, said, “Not only do we keep the priest waiting, but the captain has much to do ere day’s end, my lady.”

Further quieted by what he named her that this day would gain a whole new meaning, she thought, *I shall truly be his lady.*

For a time, the voice within reminded her of what should not happen between her and Warin.

Before they and their witnesses reached the portico standing sentry over the church door, confirmation of the man of God’s discontent was had by way of a downturned mouth, arms remaining crossed over his chest, and that he exuded what reminded her of Warin’s response to her when first they met.

Non, darker, she amended.

After frowning over her cheek, he looked to the groom and said in heavily accented French, “You know I am opposed to this marriage, and with good cause for how many women of recent seek to wed noblemen given much incentive to participate in the ploy to get aboard one of the ships.”

As Vianne tensed further, Warin said, “Let us be done with it, Father.”

The man of later years lowered his arms, revealing a psalter suspended from a cord about his neck. “It is right I oppose the exchange of vows, and all the more for what I have learned of this *lady*.”

“Father!” Warin said with warning.

“Since all are God’s people, I suffer no stab of conscience in ministering to the English alongside the French. However, that you more than others make mockery of the sanctity of marriage...” He shook his head.

Though it felt almost as if stones flew again, Vianne could only stare openmouthed.

But then he looked to her and said, “You, a harlot—”

Warin lunged, causing the man to yelp and jump back. Fortunately for he who believed himself a representative of God, the captain caught Warin back and snarled something that ended his struggle to break free.

A hand on Vianne’s arm bringing her head around, through tears she saw the lady’s apologetic smile. “Though you have lovely teeth, savior of Calais, close your mouth and put your chin up where it belongs. And you”—she pointed at the priest—“conduct the ceremony quickly and in the spirit of our Lord Christ, who loved all regardless of that to which circumstances reduced them.”

“My lady—”

“It is not for you to argue! You are to be godly, and more imperative that for your recent disagreement with your housekeeper following too many fills of wine, hmm?”

Whatever she knew was enough to bring him around like a disobedient boy given the chance to repent ahead of more knuckle rapping. Straightening his priest’s garments, he griped, “Against my *godly* judgment, I will join these two in wedlock, and they shall answer for the keeping of vows, not I.”

“As it should be,” the lady said.

The priest gestured for the four to draw near, and once the bride stood to the left of the seething groom, said, “Your age, Warin Wulfrith?”

“Twenty and eight,” he bit.

The man flicked his gaze to her. “Yours, Vianne Wardieu?”

“Twenty and three.”

He raised his eyebrows at Warin. “Are there blood ties between you and this woman to the degree prohibited by the Church?”

“There are not.”

Once more, Vianne fell beneath his regard. “Does your father agree to the marriage?”

Throat tightening further over remembrance of one she had not seen in years, she said, “He is lost to me,” certain he would interpret that as meaning he had died, which was possible.

“Does your guardian agree to the marriage?”

Were that guardian King Philip who had not allowed her to return home following Balian’s murder, for certain he was dead. Were that his successor, King Jean, who would not wish her to return, whether to see her punished as a traitor or for his advisor’s sake, he would not agree. Were that Rollon... She shuddered.

“I require an answer!”

She set her chin high as Lady Joan advised. “As I have no guardian until I wed, I speak for myself.”

The priest stabbed the groom with his regard. “Have the bans been read?”

With a threatening rumble, Warin said, “As well you know, there was no time.”

The man’s lip started to hike, but a clearing of Lady Joan’s throat corrected it and he asked, “Do you consent freely to enter into marriage, Warin Wulfrith?”

“I do.”

“And you, Vianne Wardieu?”

“I...do.”

He thrust a hand forward. “The dowry agreement.”

“Almighty!” the Captain of Calais barked. “You know there is none! Continue.”

The priest breathed deep. “I am certain not to like the answer, but does the groom have a purse of coin for the bride?”

The gifting of which was tradition and, following the ceremony, thirteen coins symbolizing the authority of a wife to make financial decisions for her husband were to be distributed to the poor.

“Regrettably, I am unprepared.”

Muttering something, the priest opened the psalter. “Now to plight your troth, Warin Wulfrith.” He read the first vow to be recited, and Vianne held Warin’s gaze through each repetition, and when he ended with, “...to death us depart,” she would have believed his sincerity had he not assured her an annulment could be sought.

The priest closed the psalter, evidencing he embraced the practice of vows spoken by the groom alone. Then he recited a short homily about the sanctity of marriage and extended a hand. “The wedding ring.”

Though Vianne guessed Warin was also unprepared for this, he extracted one from his purse and passed it. The gold band simple compared to what she had only ever worn as a necklace, she felt the latter’s presence in the purse down her boot. And wished she had even half the hope and joy of the day Balian presented the ring, making her impatient for their wedding day.

Because of Rollon, that was denied her. Because of Rollon, now she was to be bound to a man whose taking her to wife was an act of sacrifice.

After the priest blessed the ring and returned it, Warin raised her trembling left hand. “Vianne,” he said so softly it seemed for her ears alone.

When she looked up, he smiled. Despite strain about that curve, he said, “All is well and will be well.”

Wishing that were so, she nodded.

“Proceed, Warin Wulfrith.”

He raised his other hand and slid the ring over the tip of her thumb. “In the name of the Father.” Now her forefinger. “In the name of the Son.” Next her middle finger. “In the name of the Holy Ghost.” Lastly, her ring finger, sliding it to the base. “Amen.”

Thus, lacking only consummation that would be an unbreakable seal on their marriage—though exceptions were made for those with enough coin and influence—they were husband and wife.

As Vianne closed her ringed hand, the priest said, “In light of all, foremost that others are in need of my care and counsel to strengthen them for God’s judgment soon to descend upon Calais, we shall dispense with the wedding mass.”

Lady Joan’s breath caught, but just as Warin did not gainsay him, neither did she, whether it was not worth an argument or in consideration of her husband who should be seeing to the protection of all remaining inside these walls.

“After the kiss of peace, it is finished.” The priest motioned the groom forward.

Despite the stiff about Warin who must wish this dispensed with as well, he accepted the man’s peck and returned to his bride upon whom he was to bestow it. As he tilted up her face, the air gusted again, this time so vigorously flapping her veil the pins securing it to her hair loosened and allowed it to fly.

For how much attention her eyes and thrumming heart paid the mouth moving toward hers, Vianne hardly noticed the loss, but the priest did. “Cease! She is not appropriately covered to receive the kiss of peace.”

“Dear Lord,” Lady Joan muttered.

Warin snapped his chin around. “I see nothing amiss.”

“Being far from a maiden, her hair must be covered!”

Sensing Warin moved toward an edge distant from her and frighteningly near the disagreeable man, Vianne gripped his arm and repeated his words, “All is well and will be well.”

He dragged a harsh breath, then drew her against him. “It is well, Wife,” he said and, moving a hand to the back of her neck, freed the braid from her nape and drew fingers through its crossings.

“This is a greater offense,” she hissed.

Then the priest was beside them, face bright. “Such a bride confines and keeps her hair covered!”

“*Such* a bride?” Warin demanded.

“Oui, one distant from being unknown to men.”

“She is unknown to *me*,” Warin enunciated, then pushed a hand through her loosened hair and bestowed the kiss of peace as it was not meant to be for its length and depth and her response that put her on her toes.

Warin’s defiance of the priest was what moved him to do what he ought not, but it persisted for the sweet of her mouth and softening of her body.

“Pray, calm thyself, Father!”

Lady Joan’s entreaty caused Warin to lift his head, and when Vianne opened her eyes, he said, “For *this* the practice of which I spoke, my lady.”

She blinked, then cheeks warming further, lost height in dropping to her heels.

“It is done,” Warin said and turned her toward the priest who once more stood before the doors and likely would have slammed inside had not Lady Joan taken hold of his arm. As for her husband, he was at her side, and whatever he spoke caused the man to cease tugging to free himself.

When he was allowed to enter the Church and the door closed behind him, the captain set his wife's hand on his arm and drew her to the wedded couple. "Now that Lady Vianne Wulfrith's place on the ship is secure, Baron, she is to present at the dock an hour ere dawn."

Warin inclined his head. "Much gratitude to you and Lady Joan."

"More my wife," the man said and fleetingly smiled.

"You are too modest, Husband," said the lady and patted Vianne's arm. "Godspeed your journey and healing, wife of Baron Wulfrith, and may we meet again one sweet day."

"I will not forget your kindness," Vianne said.

The lady dipped her head, then her husband told Warin to report to him following the ship's departure and the two descended the steps.

By the time Warin had Vianne in the saddle, anger toward the priest had gone from a boil to a simmer for there being matters of greater import, especially since he had no cause to encounter the priest again other than in passing. However, following their return to the house and Vianne's retreat to her chamber, a messenger brought word so unwelcome that what simmered once more moved toward a boil.

You will maintain control, he told himself. For the Wulfrith name and Vianne, you will come out the other end of this with no taint on you nor your family.

Then he strode to the kitchen and instructed the housekeeper to prepare a modest feast for the wedded couple.

CHAPTER 20

Vianne was eager for her wedding night, though not as once anticipated with Balian. What she felt was motivated by dread that had nothing to do with the man whose ring she wore—all to do with being done with the blessing of the nuptial bed.

Glad Warin had interrupted her solitude following receipt of the message so she had time to present a face that concealed resentment over a trespass most would find acceptable, she rose from the table the same as Warin when the housekeeper ushered the priest into the dining room.

In response to the interloper's nod that was punctuated by an air of satisfaction, she inclined her head, causing hair draping her shoulders to shift over her breasts. Remaining standing as he and Warin settled in their chairs, she said, "With the housekeeper's assistance, I will receive my husband and the blessing of the nuptial bed in a quarter hour, Father."

That gave him pause, and she guessed he expected a leisurely meal whilst discomfiting bride and groom, whether obvious about it or done sideways for none being present to temper Warin's response.

As Vianne minded the ache in her ankle and started toward the housekeeper, the priest looked over viands that were hardly modest despite the speed with which they were prepared, then halted her with, "My dear, you underestimate the time required for a *lady* to bathe and clothe herself in a way pleasing to her noble husband who expects—"

“Forgive me, Father.” Warin leaned back and pushed his legs out before him. “Ever it has been my understanding men of God know not the expectations of their worldly counterparts.” He raised his eyebrows. “Has that changed and, if so, when did the Church sanction something so historic?”

One moment their uninvited guest looked flustered, the next offended. “Though this man of God honors the strictures, until he goes gladly to God he remains clothed in an earthly body whose appetites cannot be entirely stripped away, only suppressed.”

Warin raised his goblet, drank slowly, said, “*This* man of earthly body, impatient to begin his wedding night for appetites entirely intact, differs in his expectations of what awaits him.”

Though Vianne knew he poked at the disagreeable priest, heat suffused her.

“Thus, as there is no foul about my bride, time need not be spent bathing.”

More heat—and a jolt to the heart for him claiming there was nothing foul about her. Of course, he referred to a body washed with soap and water, not its begrimed past.

“And being so lovely of figure,” he continued, “no time wasted on replacing one set of clothing with another since a sheet over what God lovingly formed will more than suffice during the blessing of the bed.”

“Baron!” The man came up out of his chair.

Ignoring him, Warin looked to Vianne. “A quarter hour, my lady wife,” he said and nodded her abovestairs to his chamber the housekeeper had hastily prepared for them.

As she and the woman departed, he said, “Father, for the days to come as you minister to God’s people, be they English or French, settle in and indulge in the food and drink of our celebration while I exercise patience.”

Vianne did not hear the response, but since it was a half hour before the priest and Warin set the stairs to creaking, he must have settled enough to eat and drink well.

The housekeeper who had assisted in undressing the bride down to her chemise, putting her to bed with a sheet drawn up her chest, and lighting candles as night went black but for moonlight come through the window, rose from her chair. “A blessing upon your marriage, Lady of the Wulfriths.”

It was said with a smile so genuine Vianne wished she could borrow it. Too, there was the momentary thrill of being counted a member of a family—and no less the honorable Wulfriths. “I thank you.”

Abruptly, the woman’s smile dissolved, and she muttered, “Now for that foul priest to be done and leave you and the baron in peace.” She glanced at the door beyond which feet were heard coming off the stairs. “He hates the English, and be assured few have liking for him. When our warriors send *Les Signaleurs Blancs* scampering, God willing the one who joined your lives in matrimony will be replaced with a good English priest.”

Though the French one would soon be inside, Vianne managed a smile though none remained when the woman opened the door.

As the priest entered and paused to consider the bride, the nervous about her doubled and once again when Warin strode around him and said, “As told, this groom is impatient.”

He halted on his side of the bed whose sheet had been turned back and, his muscular build blocking the priest from view, captured Vianne’s gaze. “Your husband is here. With your permission, I shall join you.”

Before she could find her voice, the priest hastened forward. “Permission was granted by the speaking of vows, Baron.”

Holding Warin’s gaze, Vianne said, “Pray, join me.”

He removed his doublet, and when he let it lie where it fell, her mouth went dry. Next his boots hit the floor. Drier. Then hose and chausses that bared his legs up to mid-thigh dropped. So very dry. Now his tunic, leaving only the undertunic between her eyes and his bared chest.

Tongue cleaving to her palate for what she would see next, she started to avert her gaze but, blessedly, he did not remove that garment. He lowered to the mattress, and as his thigh settled against hers, drew the sheet up to his waist. And therein more cause for her tongue to stick and body to perspire.

One such as she should be so unmoved none could mistake her for an innocent, and yet she felt nearly unversed in the things of men and women—uncertain and fearful of the unknown but with an appetite of her own that so unsettled she had to avert her gaze when the man sharing the bed looked around.

Warin felt for this woman who did not wish to be here any more than he wished the priest present. Thus, he returned his regard to the man he would not have chosen to wed them had he been willing to impose on one of the English whose hands were full tending their anxious flock.

“Do your duty and bless the nuptial bed,” he coldly commanded for how much he resented the power this priest wielded without godly intent unlike the priest of Warin’s first marriage. That man’s blessing had been a balm to his innocent but willing bride. This man was a scourge to his experienced but unwilling bride.

“Your tone of disrespect offends,” the man said. “I was right to contest the marriage, but since it is done, I must strengthen its validity by blessing the bed and bearing witness to consummation alongside your housekeeper.”

Hearing Vianne’s gasp, Warin knew she feared the man would not soon depart, but she was wrong. Though those present for the bedding could vouch for conditions being highly conducive to consummation, the act was between husband and wife alone—though not always with royal marriages. Once the bed was blessed, the priest would go belowstairs and gain the housekeeper’s mark on the documentation to strengthen his attestation so any attempt to annul the marriage was more easily thwarted.

What he did not know, and perhaps neither did Warin until entering here and seeing Vianne propped on his pillows, was

further validation of the marriage would be of no threat to him.

“Eagerly, bride and groom await the blessing,” he prompted, then the priest began. The couple were to consult the Lord daily in all matters pertaining to their lifelong commitment, be faithful to each other, know peace and fulfillment in the company of the other, and be fruitful so blood of their blood honored God down through the ages.

Despite the man’s antagonism, in this he served the Lord so well Warin did not resent him taking the long way around to the conclusion of, “Amen.”

However, a glance at Vianne revealed she who had opposed him wedding her out of a sense of duty and honor did resent it. *I wish you a good life with a woman worthy of your name*, she had said in trying to dissuade him. Yet now she had his name. And was in his bed.

“Your blessing is appreciated,” Warin said. “We bid you good eve.”

The dismissed man looked to Vianne. “Lest your husband not survive the coming clash, think on making an heir this night so just as your marriage has secured a place for you on the morrow’s ship, your future with the Wulfriths is secure.”

Warin held, making fists of his hands as the priest ordered the housekeeper to accompany him downstairs.

The moment the door closed, Vianne tossed back the sheet, revealing pretty calves and feet above her risen chemise.

Before she could swing her legs over the side, Warin caught her arm and, when she swept wary eyes to him, said, “Until he departs, he will be listening for one of us to leave the chamber.”

“Until? Surely he has only to gain her mark then be gone.”

“Were he of that mind. However, as I do not expect it and have exhausted most of my control where he is concerned, we stay put.”

She looked ready to argue, then sighed. “I am sorry that for the blessing of the bed it will be more difficult to gain an

annulment. I am right, oui?”

“You are.”

“And it will be harder since consummation cannot be disproven by examination of my body. As the priest told and many of those of Calais now know, I am a—”

“Vianne!” Her name spoken like the snap of a whip causing her to flinch, he released her. “Forgive me, but berating your past cannot change it anymore than I was able to change mine when I did the same. For that, surely just as we are to forgive others who repent of their sins and trespasses, we ought to forgive ourselves.”

She stared.

He sighed. “Having unfairly judged you when first we met for being prejudiced against women who differ greatly from my mother, sister, and the wife I lost, I believe if you share your tale with me, we can put it away and proceed from there.”

Her chin ducked back. “Even if an annulment is not granted, I see no good in providing details of what I became to survive—and of which I have no wish to speak since mere reflection turns my stomach.”

Raising a warning hand lest her rising voice was heard below, once more he turned over her words—*what I became to survive*—and felt a pang for her years of benefitting their country though likely never herself. Worse, while serving King Edward she had lost a babe she clearly wanted in spite of the circumstances of its conception.

Warin was so distracted by his ponderings he was unable to catch her back when she dropped her feet to the floor and stood with a stumble that evidenced her weakened ankle.

As he came off the bed his side to intercept her before movement toward the door was heard by the priest, she surprised in skirting the bed on light feet and very little limp. And looked even more desirable with the candle behind penetrating the thin of her chemise and outlining her curves.

“I thirst,” she said, avoiding his gaze, for which he was grateful for what she might see in his eyes that ought not be reflected for how things stood between them at this time. Letting her past him, he turned as she halted before the bedside table on which sat a tray of drink and viands provided couples expected to sleep little their first night together.

He watched her pour, and seeing how dark the wine, guessed it full strength though upon their arrival in Calais he had instructed it be heavily watered. Whether an oversight or intentional for the belief an exception should be made for what followed the bedding, he did not know—only that he did not like the shake in Vianne’s hands as she raised the goblet.

Not until it was half drained did he interfere with the slaking of her thirst, then he closed a hand over hers and, meeting some resistance, lowered the vessel to the tray.

“I am dry,” she protested.

“And as tight as thread on a spindle, neither of which can be resolved by an abundance of wine.”

She hesitated, said, “It helps.”

“In the moment, but the whole of one’s life and all they are meant to reflect, influence, and accomplish can be destroyed by seemingly mere moments—as well you know.”

“Do I?”

He paused over an answer that would bring to the fore that which lurked, but there being no better justification for denying her the numbness she seemed to crave, he said, “Certes, you knew it while still you had hope of the babe you carried, denying yourself excess drink to protect it as you do not your own body.”

She snatched her hand from the goblet so violently it would have toppled were his not also upon it.

“We are not done playing our parts, Vianne,” he said, causing her eyes to widen further. “Return to bed, and while we await the priest’s departure, I will entrust to you the rest of my tale of woe so one day you may entrust yours to me.”

Hair a pretty mess about her face, she frowned as if to refuse him, but then said, “That sounds a man resigned to being denied an annulment.”

Resignation? It should be. Fortunately, it was not under discussion at this time. “Return to bed,” he repeated.

She looked to the tray. “Truly, my mouth is so dry it hurts.”

“I will see to that.”

With reluctance, she put knees to the mattress and crawled to her side. When she pulled the sheet over her and caught him staring, she said, “Beware desire. As evidenced by your misbegotten daughter, it can lead to life-changing things you may come to accept but would not have chosen had your body not usurped your mind’s domain.”

Accept... She was right though she did not take into account God’s willingness to aid in making something very good of something unwelcome. He was not yet there with Chariese, burgeoning responsibilities leaving him little time to father her, but he wanted to be. And would be.

Hopeful of refined water in the smaller pitcher, he was not disappointed. After pouring half of Vianne’s wine in the second goblet and water in both to just below the rim, he passed one to her. “Better that will satisfy your thirst,” he said, “and guard against usurpation of your mind’s domain.”

Amid flickering candlelight, she carried the goblet to her lips.

Leaving his own on the table, Warin returned to the bed. Though he had no need of the sheet, he drew it up over his legs in consideration of her, then adjusted the pillow at his back.

“As you know, I was wed before,” he said and, when her eyes ventured to his, continued, “Though when my betrothed and I met, I had little liking for her, by the time we spoke vows, I may have been more in love with Blythe than she with me—something we argued several times.”

Remembrance of their light sparring that often ended with lovemaking made him tense at being abed with another

woman. But it was momentary as it should be for the passage of five years since he lost his wife. “I was happy, then the pestilence that swept the continent following our king’s victorious siege of Calais arrived in England.”

Seeing moisture in her eyes, he guessed she recalled what she had witnessed of that same gutting of the people of Paris.

“As it moved toward Wulfenshire, most took whatever precautions they believed would keep the evil from them lest God did not answer their prayers. Knowing it was not enough—and could never be—I sought to prepare mind and heart to lose members of my family, our people, and the youths we trained into warriors. But it is no easy thing, as surely you know. When it struck, it was harder for my eldest brother being the one who brought the pestilence into our home.” He swallowed. “Though I and others of our family discouraged Hector from accepting King Edward’s invitation to his great tournament for how many were stricken in that part of England, he attended. When he returned, unbeknownst to him, his squire carried the sickness.”

“And you lost your wife.”

He hesitated, but deciding Vianne should hear from him rather than others the full tale of his estrangement from the Wulfrith heir, said, “For Hector putting the king before his family and people in expectation of being among those admitted to the prestigious Order of the Garter, my wife succumbed with his wife, our sire, a good number of castle folk, and nearly our sister.”

“Heavenly Father.”

He nodded. “I was training squires at Wulfen Castle when word came Blythe had been moved from Stern Castle to the hunting lodge where Hector isolated the sick to prevent the spread. I rode there immediately, but he had set a patrol around the perimeter, and no matter how much I raged, would not let me near the lodge.”

As candlelight caught a tear angling toward Vianne’s swollen ear, Warin felt his hands form fists as done that day when his brother was nowhere near to be pummeled. He

opened them, stared as color returned to them, and said, “After her death and others’ and the scarring of my beautiful sister, I felt near hatred for Hector despite the sincerity of his repentance and endangerment of his life in tending the stricken.”

Momentarily, he closed his eyes. “Though not given to excessive drinking, for its ability to numb pain and anger, I succumbed. Still, it was not enough, and so I left England to serve King Edward in holding Calais. For distance and great distraction, it was better there—until I discovered the false comfort of sharing my misery with others as they shared theirs. That led to more drinking, greater resentment of God for not sparing my wife, and succumbing to a pretty woman of loose virtue and sweet words.”

“Charliese’s mother,” Vianne said.

Though Warin knew he had revealed some of his daughter’s origin, he was slow to respond for trying to recall exactly what he had told. Deciding it did not matter were he to repeat himself, he said, “Aye, proof of how I dishonored Blythe’s memory.”

“Being far from family during your grieving, you had to be lonely,” Vianne offered a valid excuse, though it did not absolve him of ungodly behavior well outside the honor of a Wulfrith.

Deciding against responding to her attempt to sympathize away his sin, he said, “When I realized I was coming to hate myself as much as Hector, I determined to restore the warrior of me I had not realized had fallen so far down around my knees. It was hard, but I freed myself of the woman I did not love who openly took others to her bed, and gradually reduced the amount of alcohol I imbibed.” He raised his goblet. “Though no longer do I drink only watered wine, I prefer it for keeping my head clear, as well as the taste. In time, so will you.”

Vianne bit her lip. “Already I do, but those moments of escape...”

When he set a hand over hers on the sheet, she allowed it. “Once you are returned to England, it will be better, Vianne. No life is perfect nor easy, but I believe what you have endured will be left far enough behind that the need to escape will rarely be so pressing you feel you must numb it with drink.”

She peered into her cup. “I want that and...” She shook her head, drew her hand from beneath his. “Tell me the rest.”

There *was* more, but because of greater awareness of her, it was some moments before he placed himself. He took a drink from his goblet and returned it to the table. “Months after I began setting myself aright so I might reconcile with my brother and take my place as a trainer of warriors, I crossed paths with the woman whose bed I had frequented. The timing was right for the infant she held to be mine, but though she conceded I may have fathered it, she said it could as easily be another’s and would accept nothing from me.”

He replenished his breath. “I let her go, but increasingly weighted by the possibility it was my child, began searching for her while off duty, but to no avail. When I returned home, I tried to put it behind me, telling myself another lover had sown the child for how available its mother was to men with a smile and a coin, but I could not. Thus, after reconciling with my brother, I had to return to France and find the woman and child.”

He recalled giving Hector his word that upon his return he would assume his place at Wulfen Castle...taking ship to Calais after making it difficult for his brother to deny himself the love of a woman he believed he was unworthy of alongside happiness...arriving in Calais and beginning his search anew...

“You found them,” Vianne said.

“I did, and easier that for having no responsibilities to work around.”

“Where was she?”

Seeing that place again, he nearly kept it to himself, but as the disrepute of it was not much worse than what was already told, he said, “A brothel some leagues distant from Calais.”

Had he not been watching Vianne closely, she might have been able to dilute her dismay, but it was present enough to reflect his own feelings about where the woman resided with the child he was determined to claim.

He nearly reached for his goblet, but his real thirst was for comfort over discomfort and calm over anger. “She worked there and was content for how well it paid and—more—the brothel owner’s son being so enamored with her she believed marriage would be forthcoming and she would manage the establishment. However, as there was one obstacle in her way, she was pleased to receive me.”

“The child.”

“Aye, her lover did not care to raise another man’s. Hence, though I offered to take mother and daughter to England and provide for them, she agreed only where the little girl was concerned. I was shocked she would relinquish her, and further at her giving her to one who might not be the father. It was as if Charliese were a troublesome dog.”

A humorless laugh returned his regard to Vianne, but before he could question it, she said, “Those not seeking a harlot’s favors, whether they would never consider it or merely not at the moment, are repelled by one who feeds, shelters, clothes, and protects herself by way of her body, rarely considering desperation and hopelessness are what drives women to do so—though not all. Hence, for what Charliese’s mother did, better I understand why you gave me no breathing room for the intelligence I acquired by way of my body. Because of my privileged life, you saw no desperation nor hopelessness that would cause me to sin over and again.”

Having already accepted he had been wrong about her, he nodded. “I believed you cast a similar shadow, and I regret that as I regret being unkind to my grandmother’s maid, Esta, when I brought Charliese to England and announced she would have our name. Though I admitted I could not know

with certainty she was mine, my family accepted her and my womenfolk were willing to aid in raising her. But Esta seemed most eager. I rejected her, not because she was incapable, but for fear of the influence of one who was a prostitute before she served my grandmother—and despite so many years having passed that as a boy I benefitted from her kind but firm guidance.”

Seeing Vianne’s distress, he said, “I made it right with her, and she has blessed Charliese and me in being attentive and loving my little girl—as near a mother as I could provide.” He nearly added *until now*, but that was not yet certain.

“She sounds a lovely woman.”

“As you shall see,” he reminded her she was bound for England as well as Romary Castle. And glimpsed panic in her eyes before she averted them.

She considered her goblet, then returned her regard to him. “It is best I live elsewhere, delaying introductions that could distress your daughter if, in the end, they need never have been made for the award of an annulment.”

Having thought on that, he agreed, but only to a point. “You shall reside at Romary, and though my family will be told of the circumstances of our marriage, Charliese will remain unaware of having acquired a stepmother unless it becomes permanent.”

“You would expose her to me?” she exclaimed.

Though she made herself sound a disease, he forced down anger. “As she is four, she is young enough to accept you are but her father’s guest and adjust to you becoming her mother should our vows remain intact.”

“But—”

“I also consider your safety—that it is better defended at Romary. I believe it unlikely Rollon’s son or another will attempt to tear you from England again, but lest I err, precautions must be taken.”

She went silent, finally said, “After my miscarriage...” As if feeling him tense over her reaching behind to her loss, she

trailed off.

“I listen, Vianne,” he said gently a moment before catching the sound of the priest’s voice below.

A shift of Vianne’s gaze to the door evidencing she also heard the man who surely frustrated the housekeeper with his lingering, she made a sound of disgust, then continued, “Though I ached for vengeance, thinking it would make as right as possible the loss of my babe, methinks once I accept God’s determination, I can be content knowing I shall never again suffer Rollon.”

He narrowed his lids. “God’s determination?”

“That I am not fit to be a mother.”

Heart convulsing, Warin said, “Just because you lost a child does not mean—”

“Not *a* child—two!” The words rushed from her, then the horror of speaking them was in her eyes and a hand so forcefully clapped over her mouth that drink nearly sloshed over the rim of the goblet in her other hand.

For her pain, ache in his heart. For his anger over her losses, heat in his head. Or was it fire?

She moaned low, dropped her hand, and pressed her lips.

Warin welcomed her silence, using the time to form a response, but before he spoke, he knew his words were inadequate. “In God’s time, you *will* make a good mother.”

Nostrils flaring, she handed him her goblet, and as he set it on the table, she said, “Dawn comes soon.”

Hearing the slide of her body, he looked around at where she lay with her back to him as if accepting the muffled voice of the priest would be heard throughout the night.

It was hard not to draw her to him and offer comfort, but he kept his hands to himself and waited for sleep to claim her so he could also yield and forget this woman—his wife—was in his bed. However, for how carefully she breathed, like an animal stuck in its hiding place while a predator passed near, she remained far from sleep.

Settling into his pillow, Warin said, “When you are ready, I will give ear to your tale of woe and not judge you for it as you have not judged me for mine.”

When slight movement traveled across the mattress, he hoped it was not of a suppressed sob. When more movement followed, knowing he would regret ignoring her misery, he rolled to his side. Before he touched her, she ceased breathing, and when he settled his front against her back, she tensed though he put no arm around her as would be natural and comfortable. For him.

“I want nothing from you, Vianne. My word I give.”

Staring at the wall opposite on which her shadow was now taller and longer for the man at her back, Vianne told herself she was relieved he wanted nothing from her for how soiled she was and further relieved she wanted nothing from him that would call to mind Rollon though the two men could not be more different. But much of that was a lie both sides.

Despite there being no good reason for them to be intimate—especially since he could not cherish her as he had his first wife—desire had other ideas. It had grown between them, and were they not careful, would knot itself around them. And render an annulment impossible.

Neither wanted that. Did they?

“Sleep, Vianne.” His breath stirred her hair.

Despite feeling every place their bodies touched, she thought she could find her rest for how tucked and cradled she was—and no threat nor distaste about Warin—but could *he*? Though he fit himself to her, he was so taut he had to be uncomfortable.

Giving little thought to what she did, she reached behind. He tensed further when she set a hand on his arm and slid it to his wrist, rumbled as she drew his arm around her, eased his rigid fingers and curved them into her waist that had been...

...thicker weeks past, she thought, and though she did not want her mind to venture that direction, heard again his words before he left her to deliver her intelligence—*I am sorry for*

your loss. Had I any part in it, I pray one day you can forgive me.

She had been so bereft she had wanted to cast at least some blame on him, but no more. Sliding her hand atop his cupping her waist, she whispered, “You bear no responsibility for my lost babe. Truly you do not.” Then she closed her eyes and, hoping he would as well, began to drift.

And heard herself speak into what must be a dream, “I did not know it felt so good to be held. Just...held.”

CHAPTER 21

May 20, 1354

Just held. That he had done, though not easily. As expected, it was a mistake to draw so near, but he had not corrected it, even after she spoke that and slept.

Unfortunately, with much to accomplish ahead of the morrow's attack should it proceed now the French were aware Calais was at least somewhat prepared, he was sleep deficient for gaining only snatches after hearing the housekeeper close the door behind the priest.

Since fatigue and distraction could see a warrior put to ground, it was best women not be present before and during battles, Warin reflected as the one in his arms stirred. And of greater concern was keeping them out of enemy hands. However, whereas he would have some peace once Vianne was aboard ship, it would elude the Captain of Calais if what was greatly hoped for on the day past did not materialize. Dawn would tell—as would Lady Joan's response had she no valid excuse to remain with her husband.

Murmuring something against Warin's chest, Vianne curled a hand into his undertunic and the other over his shoulder.

It being nearly time to rise, he decided to ease off the bed so she remain oblivious to having turned into him hours past, but then she put her head back as if to peer into his face.

The candles long expired and moonlight having moved beyond the open window, only the dim of street torches

permitted the unseen to be seen here, but it was of little benefit to the two who were so near that the shadow between them was more black than grey.

“Warin?”

Her questioning was not fearful, so she did not mistake who held her. Nor was it angry, so she must know he was not the one who turned in the night. But then, what did she ask of him?

“Vianne?”

She released his undertunic and shoulder, asked, “Did you sleep?”

“Enough.”

She went silent as if it were possible to see the truth on his face, then said, “Not enough. For what is to come, you need more.”

“It can wait until this night,” he said, though he would sleep less than he had with her—if at all.

Exuding fear she had not upon finding they were chest to chest, she said, “You will not be long in following me to England, will you?”

Touched by what sounded concern for his well-being, he said, “That is in the hands of the English forces both known and unknown to the French. And their hands—including mine—are in God’s, but I shall do my utmost to return home.”

“That shall be my prayer, Warin. Though I would not be your wife, more I would not be your widow.”

Knowing resistance to life with him had more to do with her than him, he said, “Should I not return, you *will* be my widow, and my last breath will be easier knowing I provided my daughter a mother.” He ignored her startle. “With you one side of her, Esta the other, and the Wulfriths’ canopy of protection over all, Charliese will have what she needs for a God-honoring life.”

A sound of distress escaped her, and he was certain she was thinking that his daughter, born of a harlot and in the care

of a former harlot, was to be mothered by a woman who counted herself a harlot. However, rather than openly dispute her role in raising the girl, she said, “Charliese needs her father. You must come back to her.”

Considering how much it bothered she did not include herself in that need, here further evidence things had changed between them. And well before they ascended the church steps. “That I aspire to. Now we must—” He broke off when, in shifting to bring her face level with his, her knee moved from his lower thigh to mid-thigh.

“I thank you,” she said.

Further aware of her, the only response with which he trusted himself was a grunt.

“I know there are good men, but I was certain did one willingly come my way, he would not linger. As for aiding and protecting me...” Her laugh was mostly air.

Swallowing against discomfort, he said, “Were he able to assist and did not, he would not truly be a good man, would he, Vianne?”

She seemed to think on that, then continued, “As for wedding me, no matter how good a man, not that. And yet you did, knowing it might not be undone. For that and more, you have my gratitude.”

For that and more, he wanted to kiss her—and go further so it would not be possible to nullify their vows. Had she not done what she did next, perhaps he could have set himself aright, but she drew forth the hand curved around her and kissed his knuckles.

Body reacting as if her lips were on his, he groaned, “Vianne.” Then he had her on her back and their lips *were* touching, now sipping, hands seeking though this was not what she wanted and he should not at this time. But when she made a sound he wanted to interpret as being of surrender, he forced himself to confirm it. Moving his mouth off hers, he said, “Tell me to stop. Tell me to forget we spoke vows. Tell me you do not want this.”

He was warmed by the sparkle in her eyes, but then she sighed heavily, and the carnal of him rebuked the good of him before she said, "We cannot." Then she waited for him to do what was right.

He did, as much not wanting to disappoint her as the Lord. "Forgive me, Vianne." He dropped onto his back.

Turning to face him, she said, "I did not mean that to happen, and yet it was as much me as you."

She left it there, but as if they had been married for years, he sensed she silently corrected herself, accepting more of the blame.

I understand this is desire, he sent heavenward. What I cannot comprehend is how it has become more and so soon. Feelings of the heart—very well—but they cannot be moving toward love.

Whether it was the Lord who gave answer or he drew it from within, he did not know, but the voice was clear. *Nor was it possible you could come to love the young lady to whom you were grudgingly betrothed. You did, feeling deeply for her as you have not any woman since, no matter how strong the attraction, how satisfying the flirtation, how lovely the kisses and great the temptation to sin as done with Charliese's mother.*

"It cannot happen again," Vianne said.

She was right, though only with regard to this day. If they remained wed, it would happen again—and more beyond what was done here in Calais.

He pushed onto his elbows and, seeing the pale of her face, knew the sun's rays would soon pierce the sky. "We have much to discuss, Vianne Wulfrith." The whistle of breath through her nostrils told she was unsettled by him pairing her name with his. "Unfortunately, it must wait until I am reunited with you and my daughter at Romary Castle."

"But—"

"It must wait," he repeated and stood from the bed. "Return to your chamber, attend to your ablutions, and pack

what you would take to England, being of a mind France shall be in your past evermore.”

She rose, her feet moving over the floorboards making them sigh rather than creak, and paused at the door. “Do not mistake desire for anything other than the carnal,” she said as though he had spoken aloud his one-sided conversation with the Lord. “As Rollon de Talliere has learned—and may receive further lessons if it is discovered I alerted Calais of the attack—it is a traitorous thing.”

Then she was gone, leaving him staring at the door. And wishing he need concern himself only with carnal feelings for Vianne.

“Vianne Wulfrith,” he said, then began preparing to deliver his wife to the dock and the single ship that, God willing, had multiplied.

CHAPTER 22

For a sky just beginning to blush, there were more people on the streets than Vianne expected, and nearly all moving toward the gate that accessed the road to the dock. Most of the women departing Calais were accompanied by a man who carried a pack of their belongings that would be more essential should the stay in England become permanent.

Grateful for the arm guiding her and taking weight from her injured ankle, Vianne felt its absence when, after passing with others through the gate and starting down the road toward the sea, the Captain of Calais appeared and called to Warin.

Having drawn Vianne off the road and kept over his shoulder the pack that held little since she wore the pocketed gown and had put her purse down a boot, Warin conversed with the captain who dismounted twenty feet distant. He appeared agitated, and she heard him speak his wife's name, but all changed when three English knights rode out of the east—rather, two, the one at the center no fit for the others.

Altered stances transforming Warin and the captain into warriors facing a threat, they exchanged more words, then the latter swung into the saddle and Warin positioned himself to the side with a hand on his sword.

As the riders slowed, instinctively Vianne drew her mantle's hood over her head, and was glad of it when she recognized the one who was not English. The middle-aged Chevalier Siegfried was of questionable lineage, many believing he began life on the lowest rung of society. If so, it mattered not to King Jean who kept him close when his man

was not traveling the length and breadth of France serving as his emissary.

Had Vianne to guess, he was here to deliver terms of surrender whose acceptance would assure the garrison and its remaining inhabitants were not slaughtered on the morrow. But even did that assurance prove true, there were worse things than slaughter, including cruel imprisonment regardless of whether or not the captive was held for ransom, and which could last for months or years—even a much-shortened lifetime.

As the chevalier drew rein five feet from the captain, he shifted his regard from those moving along the city's southern wall toward its western-facing dock and paused on she who awaited the warrior bearing a pack. There being sufficient light with the sun appearing to the right of him, she would have been recognized had she not donned the hood.

Fear rippled through her, but it resolved at the realization he could have done nothing but carry word she was here the side of her countrymen. When on the heels of that came the realization Rollon would have had to answer for the possibility she had learned of the plan to retake Calais and revealed it, she was tempted to lower her hood. However, lest it complicate matters or endanger Warin and others, she gripped it closed to ensure the breeze flitting about her skirts did not turn its efforts upon it.

Whatever message Siegfried delivered, it did not carry over the voices of those continuing to depart the city. It was the same when the captain responded, except for his words *Les Fléaux de l'Anglais* that scorn pitched higher than the rest.

Though the chevalier's anger might have escaped him and Warin for how quickly it slipped behind a superior smile, being fairly acquainted with one who sometimes succumbed to light flirtation that allowed her to confirm intelligence before sending it on, she saw it.

More words were exchanged amid nods, shrugs, and the captain's clipped laughter as if he found something ridiculous. When the chevalier inclined his head, it appeared respectful,

but it was mockery over which King Jean and he would laugh should Calais be taken. Then Siegfried reined aside, and the knights followed to ensure he did not fall prey to French-haters before reaching whatever line he had crossed.

As Warin looked around, she released the hood, allowing it to drop to her shoulders.

But the danger was not past, and he knew it first, returning his attention to the chevalier who brought his mount around as if something forgotten was remembered.

“Captain!” Siegfried called. “Les Fléaux de l’Anglais—” The rest of his words hit a wall, and eyes that bounced off her returned, causing the hands she raised to her hood to go still.

He stared, then a smile of satisfaction stretched his mouth. And perhaps approval since Rollon and he were rivals for the king’s high regard. Having been handed a wondrous weapon, she would not be surprised if he trembled in anticipation of finding the right time and place to bring it down upon Jean’s advisor.

Though Vianne was certain Warin and the captain knew what captured his attention, both continued facing forward, and she was grateful Warin did not possess darkly silvered hair that could identify him as a Wulfrith.

The chevalier returned his regard to them, feigned confusion, then punctuated it with, “Ah, it was Les Fléaux de l’Anglais of whom I spoke before that loveliest woman put me in mind of my bed rather than yours, Captain. What I meant to say is you would do well to sleep light since the enemy inside Calais’ walls are more numerous than you can know.”

Then he snapped his reins, and as he and the knights spurred away, more words passed between the two who stared after them.

When Warin returned to her, she said, “I am sorry I uncovered myself.”

“You could not know he was not done with us, Vianne, and since soon De Talliere will learn you fled here, all that matters is getting you on the ship.”

As he turned her back to the dirt road, she was struck by the feeling that what had happened had God's hands all over it, and it made her stumble.

He steadied her, and as if aware her ankle was not responsible, said, "Fear not. I will not let him touch you ever again."

She peered up at him, and in that moment acknowledged what had been knocking at the door of her heart. It was not the same thing the young and innocent Vianne had begun to feel for Balian. It was more. It was not incapacitating as some lovers claimed. It was wondrous. She did not want to love this man, but God help her, she did.

And woe is me since higher the price I shall pay if he can be saved from this notorious lady, she thought.

"I need you to believe this," he said.

"I do, but you should know I do not think it an ill thing Chevalier Siegfried recognized me."

His brow grooved. "As we must get you to the dock, tell me as we walk," he said and drew her forward to bring up the rear of the last of those come out of the gate.

"Before I do, did King Jean's man deliver terms of surrender?"

"Aye, and they are fairly generous."

"But rejected." At his nod, she said, "What came of Les Fléaux de l'Anglais I told were to open the gates?"

"Though most uprooted remain tight-lipped since the captain is of the same mind as I that torture should be avoided for the inhumanity of it and unreliability of information gained from a man desperate to end pain, we are certain enough were taken that the French will not easily enter Calais. For that, generous terms."

As they approached the corner of the wall around which she would see the ship, he said, "Tell me of Siegfried."

She did, ending with the likelihood his revelation she was in Calais and departing for England would be wielded against

Rollon. “Hence, I believe it good I was seen, that God exercised His right to vengeance. For it, likely Rollon’s power will be lost.” She moved her gaze to the dock and the sea before it. “That is, at best. At worst, his punishment could be severe enough to be the death of him, meaning I must worry only over Pierre who—”

Leaving that unfinished for what she looked upon—ships taking on English women rowed out in long boats—she halted. Then tears causing the vessels to blur, she exclaimed, “There are three ships, Warin!”

“Only one gone down into the sea,” he said, and when she looked back at him, “Word came late yesterday the storm carried two far north. As the damage they sustained was easily repaired, they were expected to arrive in Calais this morn to deliver their reinforcements and convey the remaining women to England though they will be tightly packed for there being one less ship.”

Shaken by joy over God’s kindness in ensuring any who feared staying behind had a place the same as she, something nearly slipped past Vianne. Snatching it back, she said, “You told word came late yesterday, meaning you knew then?”

His smile eased. “When the captain pulled me aside at the church, he told me.”

She took a step back. “If you knew, why wed me?”

“I did not know. Though it seemed likely we would triple our capacity, it was no given. What *was* a given was my word to protect you and, aided by Lady Joan, I determined to see it done, regardless had we one or three ships.”

Her joy over recovering two ships becoming ache over a sacrifice he need not have made—and one it sounded the captain’s wife had made—she whispered, “What did Lady Joan do?”

“Since being wed to me qualified you for the crossing should space become available—and that was highly unlikely for your name being far down the list—you needed someone to yield their place.”

“Lord!”

“Vianne, I did not and would not ask it of Lady Joan. It was she who, ahead of learning the two ships made their way to Calais and wishing to remain with her husband, offered her place to you.”

Recalling the self-assured woman, Vianne breathed somewhat easier, though not where the captain was concerned. “Much to her husband’s distress—likely even anger,” she said.

“He was not pleased, but his wife being strong-willed and, as if trained up in the law, making a good argument, he agreed when she told King Edward would look favorably on them for ensuring his lady spy escaped France.”

“Look favorably on them how?”

“As both weary of Calais, the captain wishes to be released from his position and return to England.”

“Still, she could suffer much if Calais is lost,” Vianne said. “Blessedly, now there is room for all—”

“Nay. Much to the captain’s frustration, this morn she told that as her heart is set on staying his side, it will not be moved.”

“Then he will not force her?”

“Were he less secure about holding Calais, I believe he would sling her over his shoulder and carry her to the dock, but she stays.”

Vianne turned that over and was deluged with feelings of loss for having herself been strong-willed before Rollon’s desperation to hold to her superseded his desire to please.

But before she could make order of what teemed within, Warin said, “I *will* put you over my shoulder, Vianne, so if you think to argue against the crossing, you are warned.”

She wanted to resent he read her so her well but could not, and so she settled for resenting it was no mere threat and her only hope of defying him would be to wield well the dagger gifted her. But even were she capable, she would not.

Meeting his marvelous green eyes, she said, “And so I go to England.”

The stiff about his jaw easing, he lowered his gaze to her mouth. Though her heart beat faster in anticipation of a kiss, only his breath touched her lips. “Aye, you return home, Vianne. Let that occupy your thoughts these next days, not what goes in Calais.”

She had to smile. “Try though you may, you cannot put my thoughts over your shoulder and drop them in a boat of your choosing.”

Now he smiled and, as they resumed their walk, said, “As I should not aspire to do.”

No more was spoken and, shortly, they halted behind those awaiting a boat that would distance the women from their menfolk. God willing, they would be parted only a short time. Were God not willing, the kisses and embraces shared here could be their last.

The rowboats being of good number, it was not long before one that would deliver the last of the women to a ship started back across sunlit water toward the dock.

“I have two missives for you,” Warin said and, as others exchanged desperate farewells, Vianne watched him remove two packets of folded and twined paper from his purse.

The first and thickest he passed to her bore no wax seal whose breakage would attest to someone trespassing on those words. What it did bear was the name *Sir Achard Roche*. “A distant cousin who serves King Edward,” he said. “As the weather looks good for a crossing, it is possible you will arrive in London this day.”

“London?” she said with dread. “Then I am to meet with the king?”

“Likely only if you wish to, and I am assuming you would not at this time.”

“I would not.”

He nodded. “You have but to give that packet that contains two letters to the master of the port who will be present for the ships arriving from Calais. He will ensure it is taken posthaste to Sir Achard whose letter informs him of our marriage and instructs him to see you escorted to the Barony of Woodhearst. The second letter is for King Edward and tells the same. Providing he is in residence, my cousin will deliver it to him.”

Looking past hair the breeze danced before her face, she said, “What if the king wishes to speak with me?”

“I am hopeful he will honor my request you be given time to recover distant from court.”

“My hope as well,” she said.

“If Sir Achard is unable to escort you, he will assemble good men to do so,” he continued, then passed the other packet to her that also lacked a seal. “That is for my uncle with whom you are acquainted and who administers Woodhearst in my absence. He shall know the circumstances under which we are wed and share it with my family and those he trusts. Until I return, all others will believe the same as Charliese that you are my guest.”

The fewer who knew, the easier to undo the marriage, she reflected.

Warin took one more item for his purse, and from the sound of coins she knew he meant to give her funds. Ignoring the pouch, she said, “As you know, I am not without resources.”

“Aye, but whilst you bear my name—even in secret—it is for me to provide for you.”

“Warin—”

“Shall I raise your skirt and put it down your boot? Or will you fasten it to your girdle?”

She accepted it and fixed it to her belt beneath her mantle. No sooner done than the boat emptied of English women minutes earlier smoothly docked to take on the last of those departing by ship.

Vianne told herself she should not be as emotional as the others leaving their men, but her heart did not agree. Lest it betray her to Warin, she fixed her gaze on the rowers, some of whom stood from their benches to assist the women in boarding.

As the boat began filling, there were sniffles and cries, declarations of love, beseechings to the Lord to reunite those the struggle for Calais sought to tear asunder, and lingering though one of the ships was under sail, another hoisted its canvas sheets, and the last was surely impatient to follow.

When it was only Vianne and another woman on the dock with their men, Warin stepped before her and raised her face. “Much to discuss, Wife,” he said, then closed his mouth over hers.

She tried to remain unmoving, as should be easy with an audience, but his kiss felt a parting gift, and it seemed wrong to give nothing in return. And so she gave until he groaned and lifted his head.

“I will come to you as soon as I can,” he said, then handed her into the boat. After a gap-toothed rower seated her beside a young woman, he returned to Warin who passed Vianne’s pack to him.

When an oar thrust the boat back from the dock, Warin was still there. If not for a man-at-arms speeding his horse across the shore and calling, “Baron Wulfrith!” perhaps he would have remained longer. But after giving Vianne a nod and raising a hand, he answered the call that saw him gone from sight sooner than she would have been gone from his.

“Lord, protect him,” she whispered, peering over her shoulder at where he had turned a corner of the wall mounted behind the man-at-arms.

“Have faith, lady of the...Wulfriths,” said a man with a hitch to his words, voice of a depth that rivaled Warin’s, and English accent imbued with the lilt of one long in France—similar to her own.

She shifted around and looked to the rower who surely knew of her recently acquired surname for the man-at-arms calling to Warin.

About thirty years of age, he who offered solace was built large, though not from excessive eating. Indeed, there was a look of hungry years about his attractive, albeit scarred, face. For whiskers being without benefit of a razor for some time, a grey stripe was seen running from beneath his lower lip down to his jaw, and more visible than for black whiskers both sides. So perhaps older than thirty and bald or balding under the dirty cap drawn down over his ears.

“Have faith,” he repeated.

Embarrassed at scrutinizing him, she turned toward the ship whose deck would soon be under her feet.

“It is not for you to converse with ladies, vermin!” shouted the helmsman who commanded the rowers. “You told you could row, now row!”

Vianne heard the man behind chuckle, but it was not the sound of light, private humor. It was of dark humor held close. Though she told herself she would not see him again once she ascended the ship’s ladder, fear raised bumps across her arms when it occurred he could be in Rollon’s employ.

Immediately, she rejected that. The man she loathed might now be aware she was in Calais and soon bound for England, but he had no time to set someone after her, and this boat and others had been going between shore and ships well before Chevalier Siegfried recognized her.

Nothing to fear that direction, she told herself. And unexpectedly affirmed it a quarter hour later when she stood on deck gripping the ship’s railing and watching with others as the helmsman and the one who had spoken to her exchanged words ahead of the boat’s return to shore. Whatever foul thing the man who encouraged her to have faith was named, it caused him to lunge and knock other rowers off their benches to reach the offender.

As Vianne and other women gasped and leaned over the rail to more closely witness what went beside the rope ladder yet to be drawn up, the helmsman thrust to his feet and whipped a blade from its sheath. A sweeping slash made the bigger man duck, and as he straightened, he slammed a fist into his opponent's jaw.

The helmsman dropped against the boat's rail and, before another blow was dealt him, slashed again. From what Vianne was able to see from on high, narrowly he missed his opponent, but she was wrong. With a bellow, the rower clapped a hand to his neck, lost his balance, and went over the side.

There were cries from the women and shouts from sailors who paused in the midst of preparing to set sail, then various responses to the rower whose head and shoulders broke a small wave ten feet out—concern, wonder, fear, then horror as he who had told the helmsman he could ply oars proved swimming was beyond him.

Over and again, he whose cap clung to his head went under, and each time he surfaced, he slapped at the water as if seeking purchase to heave himself out of it. Despite some on the rowboat and Vianne and the other women at the ship's rail urging the helmsman to aid him, the victor stabbed his blade back in its scabbard and ordered his rowers to go wide around the drowning man.

Well before the boat reached the dock, he went under one last time, and the ripples of where he last surfaced were erased by a gentle swell.

“Lord, receive him,” Vianne whispered as the others drifted away from the railing. Holding so tightly to it her hands ached, the air buffeting her face quickly drying her tears, she stared at where last she saw the man she had thought could be Rollon's agent.

Minutes must have passed, but despite the din of chains and rope, shouts and curses, creaks and groans, and canvas sharply coming to attention, she did not come back to herself until the ship rocked hard ahead of beginning its journey.

Vianne swept her gaze from the wet grave to the vessel's hull. The rope ladder coursing that curved belly made her frown, and it occurred she should notify a sailor it had not been drawn up. But when out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of the immense, walled city in which she had passed the night in Warin's arms, her thoughts emptied of all but those left behind.

"Be with them, Lord," she added to her beseechings. "Warin...Lady Joan and the captain...the garrison...the innocents...the English forces defending it." She closed her eyes. "And bring Warin home soon."

CHAPTER 23

London, England

May 21, 1354

Prayer. And prayer again. That was what knit her together, though every stitch was loosely turned and far from pretty. Would the stitches hold if what might soon be happening across the sea—or even now—went bad for those holding Calais for King Edward?

Having roused in the inn where she and many of the women were lodged after the ship docked late afternoon, Vianne turned over the same worries and fears as done each time she awakened. Though she could not know what hour it was, she was certain the day of the crossing had given unto the day of the French attack upon Calais.

Drawing breath through the narrow channel made beneath the pillow clamped over her head to muffle the snoring woman who shared her room, Vianne told herself to return to sleep. The sooner done, the sooner Sir Achard of startlingly mismatched eyes—one brown, one blue—would appear as promised and her journey to the Barony of Woodhearst would commence.

“Sleep,” she whispered.

“We prefer you remain awake so we may return to our own bed,” drawled a man who neither belonged here nor so near it sounded he stretched out beside her.

Though shock defied Vianne’s command to throw off the pillow and demand he leave, she returned to her senses when

with what sounded amusement he added, “Vianne Wardieu—now *Wulfrith*.”

Closing her hand on the weapon taken to bed with her, she sat up swiftly, shedding the pillow and sweeping from its sheath the dagger Warin had gifted her.

Surprisingly, there was some light here, the pillow having not only muffled the snoring but kept her in the dark. Thus, though it took a moment to focus on the man lit by a lantern hung near the bed, it was immediately obvious he did not trespass as far as the mattress.

Of waving shoulder length hair, trim beard, and middling years, he sat back in a chair drawn near, legs crossed at the knees and an elbow on the chair arm to prop up his chin resting atop a fist. And now a smile. “At last we meet, Lady Vianne.” He glanced around the small, sparsely furnished room. “Much anticipated, though never did we expect we would be coming to you, nor in such a place.”

Neither had she, which was why it was difficult to believe that, despite a cultivated voice, referring to himself in the plural, and exceedingly fine mantle, she was in the presence of one whose power over her was second only to God.

Continuing to hold the blade before her though there appeared no tension about him to indicate he might spring, Vianne said, “You are...”

A nod. “We are, my lady.”

Her gasp not for his confirmation but recall they were not alone, she looked around at the woman with whom she shared the room. That bed was empty.

“We had her gently moved elsewhere,” he said.

And Vianne had slept through it for the pillow over her head. Knowing this man would not have moved her himself, she looked to the door, expecting to see one or more of his guards amid the shadows.

“We are quite alone, Lady Vianne.”

Returning her gaze to him, she saw he appeared as before, lacking urgency despite the desire to gain his own bed.

With a bit more smile, he said, “Though we are no lecher, rest easy knowing Sir Achard is on the other side of that door.”

He spoke of Warin’s formidable cousin who had appeared at the dock shortly after the port master sent the thickest packet to Westminster. Despite stiff formality, he had been considerate in the short time between introducing himself and escorting her to the inn where he assured her once the king granted him leave to deliver her to Woodhearst, he would do so—and in parting, offered hesitant congratulations over her marriage to his kin.

“Lest any become curious about this lady’s pre-dawn visitor,” said the one who watched her, “Sir Achard ensures our privacy.”

“Pre-dawn,” she breathed.

“That it is. Does Jean who calls himself King of France proceed with the revised plan you uncovered, much blood will soon be shed over Calais.” Concern etched his brow. “Or perhaps already is.”

Her fear for Warin and the English inside and outside its walls was evidenced by her body’s quake.

“Lady”—he flicked his gaze to the dagger’s blade across which candlelight glided—“do you know how grave the penalty for drawing a weapon on your king?”

She did, and should have lowered it the moment she knew who had watched her sleep. Still, she could not for being alone with him, abed, and her only covering a thin chemise and light blanket fallen down around her waist. Were it true Sir Achard was on the other side of the door, since he was the king’s man, what hope had she of gaining his aid should she require it?

As if in answer, England’s warrior king moved like a striking snake, and the dagger that had been in her hand was in his.

Instinctively, she drew back, but before she could scramble off the opposite side of the bed, the dagger’s blade flashed.

However, it was no act of aggression. He but turned the hilt up and offered it. “See it back to bed, Lady. You are as beautiful as told and this king is no saint, but we love our wife well. Thus, so we may begin thinking toward your future, we would become acquainted with one who has served us well—*briefly* acquainted to sooner gain a pittance of sleep ere the rest of the world’s troubles come pounding at our door.”

She accepted the dagger with a brush of hands that made her heart beat a bit faster.

He was handsome of face, and from what could be seen beyond his parted mantle, his body as well. Though he did not deeply affect her, there was something about the nearly all-powerful man that made her unduly aware of him. And she knew what it was the moment she resheathed the dagger—his peculiar means of assuring her he was no predator, something Warin might have done, and his profession of love for his wife, something Warin had done regarding the lady lost to him.

But would not do for me—never me, she thought and met the king’s gaze. “Forgive me for threatening you. My only excuse is that of long being hunted.”

Settling back, he clasped his hands over a belly lacking a paunch. “We are aware the time and place of our meeting are inappropriate and uncomfortable, but considering what you have been, what you have become, and what you have yet to be, I deemed it best we speak far from the eyes and ears of the court.”

Hardly hearing that last, she said, “What I am yet to be?”

“First you were De Talliere’s leman, now Warin Wulfrith’s wife, after this...” He shrugged.

“An annulment,” she said.

His eyebrows rose. “The baron’s letter told he wed you to ensure your passage to England but made no mention of breaking that holy covenant.”

She frowned. “Then—”

“Lady, we have no wish to linger here, but as your discomfort discomfits us, put a pillow behind you and be at ease as much as possible.”

She did as told and, feeling the snug of the wedding ring she should have removed upon reaching England, pulled the cover up her chest. “If the baron did not address the annulment we both desire, Your Majesty, it is because he was occupied with defending Calais. Since there was no consummation—and that being intentional—it is hoped what was done to ensure I not fall into French hands can be undone with your aid.”

“Hmm.” Were that a word, it was the only one he spoke for some moments, then he began tapping his fingertips before his mouth. Finally, he said, “Does your husband not leave you a widow, we shall discuss this with him.”

Though Vianne knew Warin could die in Calais, him speaking that was a stab to the heart that made her jerk. And his eyes narrow.

“If Baron Wulfrith is of the same mind and we can free him to wed again,” he said, “where would you go? What would you do?”

“For my long service to the Crown, I would ask for some small place or position where I may safely—and quietly—begin anew.”

“What of your family? The Wardieus—”

“Non!” She did not mean to interrupt, but having already earned a dark frown, continued, “It is best what was parted remain parted for the shame and slighting my family have suffered since it became known I made myself a...” She swallowed. “I do not know if the kinder word is *harlot* or *whore*, but either fits regardless of the reason I was that to the enemy. Thus, I would not make it worse for my family.” Then as he need not know of their rejection when first she fled Rollon, silently she added, *Even were they willing to suffer more for my sake, especially since, if I am anyone’s responsibility, it is this king who benefitted from my sin. Not the Wardieus. And certainly not Warin who saved me.*

Edward continued to regard her, and she was grateful his eyes were all for her face rather than her figure garbed in bedclothes. Then he nodded as if in agreement. “Know that whatever we decide is best for you, we take seriously the consideration due you for lives saved and disasters averted since a very young woman answered the call to aid king and country. Regardless of the fate of Calais, we will do right by you.”

Emotion nearly made her teeth chatter. “I thank you, Your Majesty.”

Smiling, he rose from the chair and more fully into lantern light that further evidenced he was beyond his young years though no less handsome. Might he be one of those men who became more attractive with age?

The jaunt of his eyebrows alerting her she stared, she lowered her chin. To her surprise, he leaned in and crooked a finger beneath it, returning her gaze to him.

“Your Majesty?”

His gaze traveled her face, narrowed over her cheek as if only then noticing what remained of the blow Pierre dealt her, then he said, “Neither harlot nor whore in our estimation, Lady Vianne.” There was so much soft about his eyes that whereas earlier she was aware of him as a man who affected the woman of her, now it felt she was in the presence of a man like her father.

“Truly?” she whispered.

“We do not lie, Vianne,” he eschewed her title as if she *were* a daughter. “What we see is a valuable agent of the Crown, and so that is what you are—rather, *were* now this lady is returned to England and wed to a Wulfrith.”

Her heart hurt, not with love as it did for Warin but gratitude for acceptance, esteem, and concern for her well-being. Still, compelled to remind him of the temporary state of her marriage, she said, “I am moved by your kindness, but it is best Sir Warin is free to join with a woman who does not have

notoriety trailing after her and can bear children untainted by such a past.”

He released her chin, caught up her left hand and considered the ring on it, then loosed her. “As told, we will do right by you, and the matter shall be discussed with Baron Wulfrith have we the opportunity.” He dipped his head. “Good day to you, Lady Vianne.”

“And you, Your Majesty.”

Three strides delivered him to the door, and when he opened it, in the dimly lit corridor stood a man whose build confirmed it was Sir Achard. There the king looked back. “Do not abandon hope of your family. We shall see to the Wardieus as well.”

“My king! As told—”

“Rest, Lady! Soon you go home to Woodhearst.”

Sir Achard closed the door, and as the two men exchanged words, she worried over him naming Warin’s home her own since, if the Church granted annulment, it would be but a stopping place on her way to a life unlikely to ever again cross Warin’s.

With her head on the pillow rather than under it, eventually she slept more. And dreamed of imagined happenings that disturbed and—worse—events she wished imagined.

A knock on the door and Sir Achard calling for her to prepare for departure came in time to prevent her entirely reliving the drowning she counted a murder for the helmsman refusing to pull the rower from the sea.

Hoping the man not shriven ahead of death would somehow reach the feet of the Lord and be forgiven his sins, Vianne lowered to her knees beside the bed. She prayed for him, Warin, Lady Joan, the captain, Calais’ defenders, and the French, the last being nearly impossible to do. Then she removed Warin’s ring, wrapped it, and put it in her purse with Balian’s.

An hour later, mounted beside the king’s man and accompanied by four knights, Vianne of temporary surname

began her journey north to the Barony of Woodhearst. A
stopping place. Only that.

CHAPTER 24

Calais, France

May 21, 1354

He bled, though not badly. But then, being only four hours into the clash that began at dawn with a siege that quickly retreated from Calais' walls for all that was cast back at the French as English forces came out of the wood, there was time to bleed more.

And bleed out. Not something Warin could afford to dwell on for having joined the defenders outside the city in numbers that shocked the enemy. The French scouts had only halfway failed their king, but if the winds of war continued to favor the English, the end would be nearly the same had Jean remained ignorant of all who came to the aid of Calais.

Warin yet in command of two of the three score warriors assigned him and hopeful many of those fallen would survive their injuries, he raised a staying hand to remind his swordsmen and archers to await his signal. He also longed to rush the rearguard whose advance the Dauphin slowed when he retreated from the vanguard upon encountering a massive English contingent, but the timing was not right—though a good fit for the De Tallieres.

Riding tight with Aubert Marionne, father and son would be fairly easy to take down, and great the temptation to risk all for the sake of Vianne as well as Warin's sister whom Pierre had months past told he would break should conditions for trading Dangereuse not be met.

Recalling the missive delivered him at Castle Lillia upon Wulfenshire and his vow to do worse than break Pierre, Warin struggled to keep his hand up until those made vulnerable for falling behind were in greater peril, increasing the likelihood more of his men survived than fell. Too, better the chance of bringing King Jean's battle-shy heir to the English side of the playing board.

"Nearly there," Warin rasped, trying not to feel his hastily bound forearm and calf whose injuries would have made him forget the cut across his brow if not for blood continuing to meander to the corner of his eye.

Blinking away another trickle, he almost smiled when what was hoped for materialized. Though the De Tallieres might escape were they to rein around immediately and point themselves toward Paris, the Dauphin further exposed himself by dropping back farther to rebuke a bodyguard, gesticulating then beginning to wrench at the man's wineskin on his belt.

It was time to attack, and the timing proved even better when he who expected to succeed as king met with resistance. As if the guard could no longer tolerate the brat who wielded his royal position better than any weapon, the man struck him across the face, nearly knocking Charles from the saddle.

If that warrior survives Calais, he will die cruelly, was Warin's last thought before he gave the signal.

The attention of the French within sight of the altercation being on the prince and his man, they were unprepared for riders surging out of the wood and archers shedding cover to gain a straight path for arrows to rain down on all but the Dauphin and those in the wide berth around him.

Unfortunately, that berth included a dozen bodyguards, many of whom had not masked disappointment when denied the bloodying of their blades for being withdrawn from the vanguard to ensure the Dauphin's survival. But now that an arm of those English forces came to them, they could prove their value to the French Crown. Or not...

It was the latter to which Warin and his men aspired as shouts and curses sounded from those they set upon. And now

cries and screams as arrows knocked Frenchmen off their feet and from atop their horses.

Sword in hand, Warin gave another command, and his riders fanned out to encircle this portion of the rearguard lagging so far behind that those who had continued forward were unlikely to hear the attack above the sounds of the great battle ahead.

However, before the circle was completed, the De Tallieres and Marianne made it through, followed by the Dauphin and his bodyguards who wielded their weapons to force wide the opening that had required only seconds more to close. Failing that, one of Warin's men was put through with a sword and another felled by a mace.

Fire lit his veins. Had he time to be ashamed, he would have been for anger fueled more by the loss of the Dauphin and De Tallieres than injuries dealt those under his command.

As he and others slashed through the French who sought to give their prince time to escape, the bodyguard whose life was forfeit for striking Charles returned and rode at Warin.

It was no easy thing to turn aside the blade of one whose visor was recklessly raised, likely for accepting his only choices were death on the battlefield and a torturous death as commanded by his king, but Warin's training prevailed. As the man barely deflected a counterblow, Warin glimpsed in his eyes such sorrow, regret, and apathy that he could not kill him. Thus, the cut he landed but rendered the warrior's sword arm useless and tipped him out of the saddle.

He should have stayed down, but as Warin incapacitated another enemy, he saw the man rise. Though Warin's next move was to go after those who fled, he looked fully around and saw the bodyguard whose right arm poured blood had removed his helmet, brought his dagger to hand, and drawn it back.

Warin did not believe the blade would have flown well enough to find a killing place that reduced the Wulfrith siblings by one, but that could not be known for certain for an

archer's arrow penetrating the chevalier's back before the blade left his hand.

“Lord!” Warin rasped as the man collapsed, then reminding himself this battle would be over sooner were the Dauphin captured, shouted for the archers to finish off what remained of the French here and commanded his mounted men to follow.

It was hard riding—and dangerous since a trap might be sprung to reduce their greater numbers. “Vigilance!” Warin shouted as they negotiated trees and ground trampled by the army that had earlier passed this way confident the English would be at their mercy before nightfall. Though it was not yet certain the French would be the ones at the mercy of their enemy—or in shameful retreat—that end was nearer.

“There!” shouted the first of his men to glimpse their prey who slowed upon reaching a meadow more trampled than the path forged through the wood.

Fool, Warin named the Dauphin, certain the men tasked with protecting him would not slow unless ordered by one with power over them they dare not disobey. Had he to guess, Charles who did not possess the strength and stamina of his warrior father had found the feverish ride tiring and uncomfortable. Thus, believing the men left behind would fight his battle, he and his party trotted their mounts. Advantage in that, though it was but a matter of moments before one looked around to confirm they were not followed or the distant sound of hooves were heard.

Now that moment, next a shout that set the pursued to galloping.

Still, Warin believed all would be settled within a half hour and the King of France's son bound over the back of a spirited mount who deserved a rider worthy of the golden spurs jabbing it forward.

As he only half expected the French to take cover in the wood opposite, he was not surprised when they declined to negotiate that which would be more strenuous for the need to maintain speed while avoiding obstacles, especially unseen

ones. But there were also unseen dangers in a meadow—even a trampled one whose grass bent low to the earth. And Warin saw the moment the Dauphin learned this.

Whether it was his fine destrier that stumbled or Rollon de Talliere's for riding too near his prince, it could not be known at this distance, only that both horses and riders went down, causing their escort to swiftly come around.

As Warin and his men demanded more of their mounts to reach the Dauphin, Charles staggered upright near his thrashing destrier. He shrieked and cursed at De Talliere who heaved to his feet and snatched the reins of his horse who had arisen unlike the destrier, then remounted when his prince swung toward the bodyguard who extended a hand to pull him onto his saddle.

Ahead of fleeing that would prove futile now their lead was far from sufficient, Charles shouted orders and gestured at the enemy. There was hesitation, then seven chevaliers rode at Warin and his men. Not so Pierre who shook his head in response to orders given him as his sire and Marianne appeared to protest whatever the Dauphin demanded.

Face livid and voice cracking so loudly all were surely reminded Charles was more boy than man, he shouted something and again gestured toward the English.

As Warin readied his sword to meet men who wished to part his head from his shoulders, with reluctance Pierre turned his mount and, steel-tipped boots catching sunlight, followed those who were to keep the English from their charge.

“Come to me,” Warin growled to the one who had slammed the toes of those boots into his sister's belly, then seeing who spurred after the knave, said, “So be it, Marianne.” He had not forgotten the man's aid in getting Vianne away from De Talliere, but even had Pierre's keeper not admitted it was self-serving, were he to wield a blade against the English, blades would be wielded against him.

Though Warin considered dividing his contingent to continue his pursuit of the Dauphin, as the chevaliers were highly trained and would set upon Warin's less experienced

warriors like ravening wolves, he kept all intact. And of further benefit was the possibility of felling one of those who now numbered nine—even if King Jean’s son went so far down a hole he was never found.

“Make ready!” Warin commanded.

Thundering hooves out of the west. Pounding hooves out of the east.

Sunlight casting the shadows of blades on those bearing down on the French. Sunlight casting the shadows of blades on ground across which their bearers sped toward the English.

Battle cries of, “England and Saint George!” Battle cries of, “Montjoie, Saint Denis!”

Then slamming steel, shouts of anger and pain, snorting and whinnying horses, one bloodied man losing the saddle, then another. And both English.

As it was mostly for this Warin had stayed, the late arrival of Pierre and Marionne was of consideration only for their ability to cut down his men. Before another fell to a chevalier who wielded his sword as if it weighed barely a dagger, Warin was on the enemy’s flank, his thrust finding the gap between helmet and chest armor.

Crimson sprayed and the chevalier hit the ground. That left eight, but as Warin shouted for the seasoned knights to aid the unseasoned and looked around to determine whom next to challenge, he saw two more chevaliers were down. Now six remained, their sacrificial efforts allowing the Dauphin and Rollon de Talliere to gain further distance.

Despite how often Warin swung and thrust, ducked and punched, and clamped his thighs hard to remain in the saddle, his strength and speed did not lag. Indeed, it accelerated, and he was aware enough to know he approached the threshold between fighting to defend one’s self and others and fighting to satisfy bloodlust—the latter a place that was hard to come back from for atrocities committed absent conscience and reason.

You are a Wulfrith! his inner voice demanded to be heard when he failed to reach a young man-at-arms whose struggle with a chevalier was ended by a second chevalier putting a sword through the back of his leather jerkin. *You are Wulfen-trained!*

He was, but that acknowledgment was barely enough to keep him from doing worse than severing the perpetrator's sword hand and landing a kick that knocked the screaming man out of the saddle. Though the chevalier's injury was so severe his end was near, it was a struggle not to make him suffer further.

Blessedly, beseechings to the Lord contained the animal tearing at his insides—and the distraction of another chevalier setting himself at one of his younger men. Of further distraction was Pierre exchanging blows with an aged knight whose skill and the Wulfrith dagger on his belt attested to his training. And it was needed for De Talliere's son proving quite skilled.

Not formidable, but challenge enough there will be satisfaction in ensuring he never again threatens a woman, Warin thought as he drew back his sword to prevent the Dauphin's bodyguard from slaying the young warrior. His swing was true, dropping the chevalier over his saddle's pommel and causing his horse to run.

A glance around revealed only four of the nine French fought on—and were doomed for how greatly they remained outnumbered though five of Warin's men were unhorsed.

Even before Marianne joined his charge in seeking the aged knight's death, Pierre was marked as Warin's next opponent. And adequate warning was provided when he shouted, "De Talliere's pup!"

That brought his head around. And ensured the aged knight landed a blow to Marianne who, keeping hold of his sword, clapped his other hand over his thigh and urged his mount backward. "Pierre!" he warned, preventing his charge from taking a blow to his helmeted head that would have seen it rung senseless.

Moments later, the sounds of battle diminishing as it neared its end, Warin fought alongside the aged knight to remove these two from the clash.

Despite Marionne's injury, he was so proficient at arms that Warin guessed he had trained Pierre. Still, their combined skill fell short of victory, and the end for De Talliere's heir came when he thrust his sword at the aged knight's exposed neck.

In the midst of deflecting Marionne's blade, Warin's only means of aiding his man was to slam his elbow back, driving his sword's pommel against Pierre's helmet. Now the ringing of the head earlier avoided, causing the knave's sword to pierce air over the knight's shoulder.

As Marionne came again, Warin tried to finish off Pierre ahead of defending himself, but the aged knight was Pierre's undoing. With a lusty shout, he stabbed from on high, and his blade slid beneath Pierre's gorget into his chest.

Marionne howled as if stuck himself, and when Pierre hit the ground, screamed like a grieving mother. Fearing his horse would trample his charge, he reined aside, dropped his sword, and sprang to the ground without regard for his injury. After gathering Pierre in his arms, he removed the younger man's helmet to reveal rolling eyes and crowded teeth in a mouth that dribbled blood.

"Non!" he cried and pushed the gorget hard against the wound as if that would prevent Pierre from breathing his last.

It was no easy thing for Warin to drag his attention from that scene, but he did so for his men. And need not. All the enemy were down, and if any survived the sacrifice King Jean's heir required of them, it would be Marionne.

Warin considered resuming his pursuit of the Dauphin. However, the price of English victory was much blood, and his unhorsed men and some of those astride required aid to save limbs if not lives.

He started to turn his mount aside, but though the space between his ears echoed hours of clanging weapons,

triumphant shouts, and bellowed pain, he heard words spoken low and desperate. “My son. Dear Lord, my son!”

Returning his regard to Marianne who rocked Pierre, Warin wondered if he had made a cuckold of De Talliere with the man’s first wife. Even were it only possible the overgrown whelp were his son, doubtless that had been enough for one of more heart than his charge and lord to devote his life to keeping him safe. But this day his fatherly duty would be done.

Of a sudden, Marianne snapped up his head and demanded of the heavens, “Why?”

Pierre’s face visible again, Warin saw his eyes had gone wide, but they seemed to reflect horror now rather than shock. Over his impending death or—?

“Not my sire,” he croaked, spraying pink spittle. “Can... not be.”

Marianne looked down. “As near a son as I could have,” he rasped.

A lie? Warin was inclined to believe it, but it settled Pierre some, causing the steel-tipped boots whose heels he dug into the earth to go lax while his upper body continued to rattle with breaths drawn across bloodied lungs.

Warin thought to leave them to the heinous business of dying, but then Pierre cried, “You!”

Accusation in that single word and eyes now upon this English warrior told Warin he was recognized. There had been distance between him on the shore and Pierre and his men in a boat bound for their waiting ship. However, the knave had looked well enough upon Warin who sought to prevent the exchange for Dangereuse whose fate he believed doomed regardless of meeting conditions for the recovery of De Talliere’s leman. Had not his sister put herself over the side of the boat and Sir Rhys saved her from drowning, Warin might have succumbed to bloodlust long before now.

“Wul...frith!” Pierre tried to shout his name, but it was more cough than voice and further flecked his face and neck

with bloody saliva.

“Be still, Pierre!” Marianne entreated.

“Quiet, old man!” spat the son who did not want to believe he was the result of cuckoldry, then called again, “Wulfrith!”

“Our dealings are done, Pierre de Talliere,” Warin said, though vengeance tempted him to eschew the surname.

“My sire would have...enjoyed taming your sister,” the dying man taunted, causing Marianne to sorrowfully shake his head. “Alas, drowned.” His smile revealed red gutters between his teeth.

“Not drowned, and neither Sir Rhys,” Warin said, then reined around to aid the men tending the injured. And soon found himself among those whose wounds required cauterizing.

He did not scream as did some when a blade heated red was applied to his sliced calf, but he nearly cracked a tooth for the effort required to keep from voicing his agony. Though the pain made him long to drown it in drink, he came through it and was soon tending his men who must return to the battle once they could ride and the two who died in fighting the Dauphin’s warriors were put over their mounts. The latter would not be going home to England, but they were due a proper burial.

Not so Charles’ bodyguard nor Pierre de Talliere whose death had been marked by the Frenchman’s keening—that is, unless Marianne dug out the earth or got the corpse of one he believed his son over a horse and took him away, the latter dependent on him being allowed to go free. And that was questionable for several of Warin’s men expressing the desire for the eight enemy slain to number nine.

When the injured were ready to ride, Warin limped to the silent man who raised red and swollen eyes as he continued to hold the one whose lids were down and mouth lax.

“I would like you to depart here alive,” Warin said. “If you give me—”

“He *was* my son. There were times he looked at me as if he knew, but if he did, no more did he wish to acknowledge it than I.” More tears fell. “Much to gain for being the only heir. Thus, great the threat Lady Vianne presented for being able to bear another son of whom my lord might be more proud than Pierre.”

“For that, you helped me retrieve her.”

“Oui, she had to go and stay gone since though I had considered adding to my sin to ensure my son’s place, I could not do it.”

“You speak of murdering her!”

The man gave what sounded nearly a whimper. “The older Pierre grew, the less I liked him and yet...I could not help but love him. Strange, hmm? And now...gone.”

Not caring to hear more, Warin said, “Give me your word you will do naught to endanger the lady, and I will let you go from here.”

No answer.

“Marionne!”

The man blinked. “Do I not endanger whom?”

“Lady Vianne Wulfrith.”

“Wulfrith?”

“My wife.”

“Yours? How?”

“Mine,” was Warin’s only answer. “Now your word.” Once it was given, he said, “I will aid in getting your son over his horse.”

Marionne was slow to accept, and once he did, Warin retrieved their mounts. When the corpse was secured and the grieving sire astride, Marionne said, “An English slew him, but the cowardly Dauphin sent him to his death.” He nodded. “As told, your wife has nothing to fear from Aubert Marionne, and likely never again Rollon de Talliere.” Then he urged the

horses across the meadow in the direction of his prince's retreat.

Warin turned and, calf aching and arm throbbing, led the way back to the battle beyond the walls of Calais. And hours more of spilling blood to keep hold of England's key to France.

CHAPTER 25

Romary Castle

Wulfenshire, England

May 23, 1354

She liked Sir Achard of mismatched eyes. He was not given to talk, and when he spoke, usually it was with purpose or kind consideration—to the extent that, as if feeling her distress over what transpired at Calais, several times he sought to distract her. And though he was a distant relation of the Wulfriths, not once since departing London had he sought to learn more about Warin’s marriage to King Edward’s spy.

Thus, she was unprepared the second day of travel when he said, “Do you think you can be happy here, Lady Vianne?”

Having ridden over the drawbridge and through the outer bailey in silence, filling her eyes with Romary’s buildings and castle folk, it took some moments to decide how best to answer. And by then Sir Achard and she were entering the inner bailey absent the remainder of her escort who had taken their mounts to the stable.

Looking to the king’s man riding alongside her, noting he was particularly attractive with dark blond hair fallen across his brow and sweeping the lashes of the blue eye, she said, “Were I to stay, it is possible I could be content.”

He frowned, and she was glad he could question her no further for those awaiting them before the donjon, a result of

him sending a knight ahead to inform Sir Owen of their arrival.

As he had not consulted Vianne, she could not know exactly what his missive told, but she believed Warin's uncle knew the lady who approached was no mere guest—that he had been informed she was now Vianne Wulfrith and that should be held close. But surely ahead of her yielding Warin's missive to the older knight, that was all he could know since, from surprise over her caveat *were I to stay*, neither Warin nor the king had revealed to Sir Achard the uncertain state of her marriage.

Inwardly sighing, she settled her gaze on Sir Owen in whose pack she had left intelligence regarding Calais before attempting to trade herself for his niece—intelligence that would have been of no more use had the date of the attack been legible. Unlike when Warin's uncle aided her during her first return to England, now she questioned if his black, silvered hair was gifted young the same as Lady Dangereuse or attained for being two score years.

When he inclined his head at her, warmth flushed her for what he must think of his nephew being bound to the notorious mistress of De Talliere. Should their marriage become common knowledge, it would be a stain upon his family, making it difficult for Warin to gain a suitable wife in future.

“You see the imp peeking from behind Esta's skirts?” Sir Achard asked.

His words delivered near making her startle, she shifted her gaze and caught movement to the left of the pretty, simply-dressed woman of middling years Warin had told was a prostitute before entering his grandmother's service.

Evidence of the Wulfriths' acceptance of others whose sins are greater than their own, she reflected.

Or perhaps others' sins are more easily known than theirs, the thought squeezed through the door she tried to close for wanting to believe the Wulfriths were as God-fearing and honorable as their reputation. However, there was some truth to that with which her shameful past sought to defend itself.

The Wulfriths were born into this world the same as she and Esta...Charliese's mother...Rollon and Pierre. All innocent, but from their first breath prey to excuses and temptations ready to twist them into sinners. Thus, the need for repentance was not unique to one such as she.

Nor Warin, she reminded herself of his regret for excessive drinking and fathering a child out of wedlock.

"Charliese," Sir Achard spoke the name as if to provide what was unknown to her or had escaped. "If you stay, your daughter."

And a mother made of her. There was light in that, but quickly snuffed for the pending annulment which, if not awarded, would cast her dirt on Charliese, excluding her from the good graces of those of rank should her illegitimacy not be enough.

Reining in five feet before the gathering, smiling with as much sincerity as she could summon, Vianne returned her regard to the knight striding forward, the maid whispering something over her shoulder, the child allowing another glimpse of rippling blond tresses and... Did Charliese have Warin's green eyes?

"Well come to Romary, Lady Vianne," Sir Owen said, coming alongside. "And well come home to England." No darkness about his eyes, he raised his arms to her as if she had not caused him nor his family ill when last she was in England.

"I thank you, Sir Owen, and for more than your welcome."

Question in his risen eyebrows, he reached nearer, and when she placed her hands on his shoulders, accepted how much she longed for the acceptance of him and his family even if the world shut her out. But since she was not the only one who could be walled in, it was selfish.

When he settled her feet to the ground, silently she thanked the Lord her ankle was mostly healed, though its bruising remained unsightly. As for her cheek, when the knight's consideration of her face was done without alteration of

expression, there further confirmation the swelling and bruise had resolved as would others hidden by clothing.

Before Sir Owen turned her toward the others, she said, “I am very sorry for the wounds Sir Warin told you sustained in seeking to retrieve Lady Dangereuse.”

“As I get no younger, it took some time to heal, but ’tis to be expected, my lady.”

“But you are fully recovered?”

“Near enough, and upon my nephew’s return to England shall resume training warriors.”

The life of a younger Wulfrith brother, she thought and guessed it would have been the same for Warin had he not been awarded this barony.

Sir Owen placed her hand on his arm. “Since you look in need of rest, introductions shall be brief,” he said and led her to those standing to the left of Esta. With deferential nods and kind words, the Captain of the Guard, cook, and porter greeted the one introduced as Lady Vianne *Wardieu*.

When he drew her before the maid, the ease about him altered, and the woman tensed. “Here my mother’s former maid, Esta, now my great niece’s devoted attendant.”

“Nay, Esta be my mama!” chirped a voice with a streak of challenge running through it.

“Well come, my lady,” Esta said with a curtsy, then looked over her shoulder. “Lady Charliese, I have told you not to name me your mother. Now come and greet your sire’s guest.”

“I not like her!”

As Vianne acknowledged it was good the child was unaware the Church deemed Romary Castle this *guest’s* home the same as it was hers, the woman said, “Forgive me, Lady Vianne. Charliese Wulfrith is a fine child and mostly well behaved. Unfortunately, her nooning rest came to naught for learning Romary was to receive a guest, and so she is of a mood.”

Charliese's head popped out from behind her, and eyes a darker green than Warin's blinked at Vianne. "You should go home, Lady... What be your name?"

Though she was hardly welcoming, it was difficult not to sweep her up and continue their exchange eye to eye. "Lady Vianne."

Her brow rippled. "Not want you here."

Esta sighed, then lifted Charliese and hooked her on a hip as Vianne had wanted to do. "As such behavior is unacceptable for a Wulfrith, we go to your chamber so you may think on your manners while it is decided whether you take supper abovestairs or belowstairs."

"I be not bad!" the girl said as she was carried up the steps.

"You are not," Esta agreed, "but neither do you behave in a way pleasing to God and your sire."

"Want papa!" Charliese put her chin over the woman's shoulder and glared at Vianne. "Not her. She too pretty."

"Certes, the imp has good sight," Sir Achard said, drawing alongside Vianne and surprising her with what sounded teasing—and a compliment.

"She does," Sir Owen agreed as the porter hastened after the maid to open the door that would see them into the hall. "But that is no substitute for an apology."

"I require none," Vianne said when he moved her toward others of the household.

"You do," he said. "I am no father, but none need tell me one of four years and possessing a sharp wit can accept responsibility for wrongs done even if only in small measure." He looked sidelong at her. "You shall see, my lady."

They were only words, but there was more to them—confirmation he knew of his nephew's unseemly marriage, and near confirmation he expected Vianne to remain wed and become Charliese's mother.

Doubtless, Warin's missive to his uncle would make clear the reason Vianne was to be addressed by her family's

surname as he had not made clear to the king. Though an annulment was not guaranteed, aided by Edward, the possibility was great enough it was best none regard her as the girl's mother until all attempts to undo the marriage were exhausted.

God willing, they would be far from exhausted, and Chariese would gain a mother whose virtues would aid in overcoming prejudice against the circumstances of her birth. But that was possible only if Warin survived the battle at Calais.

“Please, Lord,” she breathed.

“My lady?” Sir Owen said.

Finding she stared through the man to whom she was next introduced, she said, “Forgive me for being so travel weary. You are?” When the steward, a fairly young man with a lovely smile and slight hump of one shoulder, gave his name—likely for the second time—she said, “I am glad to meet you.”

Next the housekeeper was introduced, a plump woman whose smile seemed as genuine as deferential. Perhaps overly so, as if she suspected her lord's guest was the answer to his widowhood.

Sir Owen patted Vianne's hand on his arm. “Let us see you to your chamber so you may rest ere supper.”

She did not require his support in ascending the steps but appreciated the assistance. Upon entering the donjon's sizable hall, she could not help imagining this her home and consider changes that would make it brighter and more comfortable for its lord, his family, and retainers. Unsurprisingly, it was nearly as weary abovestairs, evidencing its former baron had used little of the demesne's income to maintain and update the structure and its furnishings.

“Your chamber,” Sir Owen said as a door was opened by the housekeeper who carried Vianne's pack Sir Achard passed to her after telling he would await Warin's uncle in the hall.

A glance inside confirming the room was a fit for all else here—aged and worn but clean and neat—Vianne smiled at

the housekeeper and said to Sir Owen, “It is lovely and much appreciated, especially as you and the household were inconvenienced in having little warning of my arrival.”

“No inconvenience,” he said.

“None, milady,” the housekeeper concurred. “Now let me see you abed.”

Though tempted to give over, Vianne said, “You are kind, but since I require so little I shall soon go under the covers, I will not impose.” Before either could protest, she took her pack, stepped inside, and eased the door closed. Upon hearing retreating footsteps, she exhaled so deeply her chin nearly touched her chest.

Ablutions first, then sleep—perhaps until the morrow, she considered. However, after setting her mantle and pack on the bed and crossing to the sideboard on which was all she needed to refresh herself, she realized she had forgotten something of import.

She wanted to believe it could wait, but knowing delivery of the missive would be seriously delinquent if she slept through until the morrow, she retrieved it—only to hesitate and finger twine that would be easy to breach and restore.

She gave a huff of disgust, told herself she was no longer a spy, and left her chamber.

“I will say sorry—promise,” Charliese’s high-pitched voice leaked from behind a door two removed from the stairs.

“But can you say it in truth?” Esta asked as Vianne slowed.

“A little, Mama.”

“I am not your mama.”

“Mama!”

“Lady Charliese!”

Silence, then a giggle, next a squeal of delight Vianne imagined roused by tickling fingers.

It made her smile, then came sorrow for a womb twice emptied of the blessing of a child—and knowing it best

Charliese not become a substitute for her lost babes.

No substitute, but perhaps an addition to other children made with Warin, the thought crept in. And not entirely unbidden for how much the selfish of her wished it.

When the little girl squealed again, Vianne raised her skirt and descended the stairs to the hall. But there was no sight of Sirs Owen and Achard, only a handful of servants who spared her curious glances before resuming their tasks.

It being a woman oiling the high table who provided their whereabouts, Vianne was halfway down a short corridor when she heard voices spoken behind the door of the steward's study. Out of habit, she eased her step, then halted abruptly.

Though at the French court she excelled at trespassing on private conversations, here she felt no thrill, satisfaction, nor fluttering fear. Catching the exchange between Charliese and Esta had been an innocent thing half-consciously prolonged. Now she was fully conscious and wanted to retreat to await a better time to—

“...Calais.” At this distance, that word alone she understood for its greater volume and stress placed on it.

“Leave,” she whispered but could not move for the possibility they knew the fate of that city—perhaps even of Warin—whether Sir Achard had received tidings at the inn where they passed last eve or Sir Owen was delivered them here.

Lest they think to keep such tidings from her, the spy of her was moving again with thought and caution as required to keep intelligence flowing between Paris and London.

As she neared the chamber, one of those within sighed heavily, then Sir Owen said, “An amusing observation, Achard, though not one I would share with Warin, perhaps not even once we know the whole tale.”

Setting a shoulder to the far side of the door to watch for any who might venture down the corridor after her, Vianne eased out her breath. Though they might have learned the outcome of Calais, they possessed no ill tidings about Warin.

With none the wiser as to her deception, she should return to her chamber, but since Warin's fate was entwined with Calais', she remained in the hope of learning what was known of those events.

However, Sir Achard's next words had nothing to do with them. "Do you think in time Warin can come to feel for Lady Vianne?"

Go, she silently commanded.

"Perhaps already he does," Sir Owen said.

A grunt. "She could not be more different from his first wife to whom he was so devoted it was almost to distraction."

Feet firm to the floor, ears straining, Vianne reflected, *She who, of unsullied reputation, was worthy of bearing and raising Warin's children.*

"Aye, Lady Vianne is different," Sir Owen agreed, and she imagined his face reflecting the unsavory contrast. "But Warin is different as well for all the years between the very young man who lost his wife and the more mature man he has become. True, he was not pleased to do Edward's bidding, and even less should it require retrieving the woman for whom he had no liking, but he went well beyond what our king would have asked of him. And quite possibly in part for what they endured drawing them near."

"I think Lady Vianne quite fine, and some privy to the service she performed for the Crown consider her remarkable," Sir Achard said, "but unless Warin is better than tolerant of being wed to her—and you know I speak of feelings beyond desire—it could prove a poor match."

Was her noncommittal comment over being happy at Romary reflected in his assessment?

"Too, as her husband is a Wulfrith, greater interest and harsher judgment will be roused by those given to wagging tongues that ought first berate the ones in whose mouths they reside."

Vianne could hardly be offended. His fears were her own, and though he had not mentioned how Charliese would be

affected by having a mother such as she, it had to be a consideration.

“You think there little hope, then,” Sir Owen said.

There *was* hope, she assured herself, then deciding to share it, opened the door.

The figure of one man of good height and breadth became two when Sir Achard turned to the side to peer at her, and Sir Owen before whom he had stood landed his gaze on Vianne.

Stepping inside, she raised the packet bound with twine. “Though I came to deliver this, I own to listening in on your conversation when I heard I was at its center, Sir Owen.”

His frown was weighty.

“Unfortunately, it is no easy thing to correct behavior that long ensured my survival whilst serving the Crown. For that, I apologize and shall aspire to conduct myself with integrity henceforth.” She extended the packet. “As for this, it should assure your family you need not long suffer any failures in that endeavor.”

Sir Owen glanced at Sir Achard who appeared as discomfited as offended by her witness to their exchange, then strode forward and accepted it. “A missive from my nephew, I presume.”

“Oui, hopefully with regard to our marriage,” she said and started to turn away.

“Nay, remain.” He gestured at an armchair as he moved to the left where a high window admitted sunlight. “You stay as well, Achard.”

“As it cannot take long and I am in need of rest,” Vianne said, “I shall stand.”

He glanced up from the packet whose twine he had removed, then unfolded the paper. Without smoothing its creases, he read words she prayed would not be the last Warin wrote.

There were not many, as evidenced by sunlight rendering their dark shadows visible through the back of the paper, and

surely succinct since Sir Owen did not linger over them.

He lowered the missive. “This is mostly as Achard informed me, Lady Vianne—that my nephew wed you to ensure a place on the ship and your marriage is not to be revealed to any beyond my trust.”

“And?” she prompted.

“Naught else.”

She blinked. It had surprised Warin did not inform the king of plans to seek an annulment, but more that he withheld it from his family.

“What did he not tell that you expected, my lady?”

Vianne clasped her hands. “He neglected to mention that which, hopefully, will allow your family to get out from under the weight of my ill repute—an annulment.”

Had she not been watching closely, she might have missed the depth of his disbelief, a lesser version of which he cast at Sir Achard who said, “In the missive delivered me, he did not mention such, and if he included it in the one I passed to Edward, it was not made known to me.”

Vianne cleared her throat. “The king knows.”

She would have left it at that had he not sought clarification for being aware Edward came to her late the night she arrived in England. “By way of Warin’s missive to him or you, my lady?”

“As Sir Warin was occupied with preparing for the attack, just as he neglected to mention to his kin we are of an understanding our marriage should be dissolved for our vows being a matter of expediency, neither did he think to tell the king.” How she hated sounding defensive! “Thus, I informed Edward and asked him to use his influence to see it quickly done so Sir Warin may resume his life and I may begin anew.”

Twice she caught glances between the men and ignored what seemed mutual disbelief. The third time, she said, “Though I know an annulment may be denied us despite lack

of consummation, greater my belief Sir Warin will be freed to wed someone he can more than tolerate—more than desire.”

Annoyance flashed in Sir Owen’s eyes, doubtless for further evidence she had listened in on his conversation. “Then for this he wished tidings of your marriage kept from those outside our family? Not so he be present for its revelation?”

“Certes.”

“I am not as certain as you, Lady Vianne.”

“Why?”

“Like other Wulfriths, he takes his oaths and commitments seriously.”

“But this is different, Sir Owen, both of us entering into the union only to deliver me free of France and serve King Edward well. This God knows.”

He raised an eyebrow. “But does God approve?”

“As already told, our marriage progressed no further than exchanging vows.” Not entirely true, but near enough.

He exhaled. “Lord willing, my nephew returns soon.”

The air being thick with things the two would not discuss in her presence, Vianne asked, “What word have you of Calais?”

“Regrettably, none,” Sir Achard said, and when she sought confirmation from the older knight, he gave a shake of the head.

Though she knew to watch for slight signs of discomfort, avoidance, and anger that could foretell lies or evidence hidden things awaiting further investigation, she also knew that regardless of how adept she was at catching such, many could suppress them. Thus, though she sensed both men were truthful, she said, “Forgive me, but before I entered here, I heard one of you mention Calais. For the importance of keeping it in English hands and Sir Warin remaining to aid in its defense, I am anxious to know the outcome.”

“As are all the English, and more so those with family yet that side of the sea,” Sir Owen said. “Unfortunately, though tidings may have reached London, not yet northern Wulfenshire.”

Before Vianne could respond, Sir Achard said with a glint in his mismatched eyes, “I believe I know what you *overheard*, Lady Vianne—merely a comment I made that had naught to do with the siege of Calais, and of which Sir Owen believed—and rightly so—his nephew would not appreciate.”

“And that was?” she asked.

“I noted that, of recent, each time my relation goes to Calais, a new member is added to the family—first a daughter, now a wife.”

She believed him, and more for that glint in his eyes. Looking to Sir Owen, she said, “As soon as you learn of Calais and Sir Warin, you will tell me?”

“When I believe the time is best,” he said and not unkindly.

Appreciating his honesty, though not his answer, she said, “Again, I apologize for...spying.”

“A habit methinks you shall eventually discover is unnecessary at Romary, Lady Vianne.”

As though she was going nowhere. As though no matter how long it took, intrigue and deception would meet its demise here.

Without comment, she nodded and departed. A half hour later, she settled in to pray herself to sleep.

CHAPTER 26

May 30, 1354

Still no word of Calais. Still no word of Warin. And now a sennight since she arrived at Romary.

Though before Sir Achard departed the day after delivering Vianne he assured her and Sir Owen word would be sent once it reached the king, silence reigned. The only possible good of it was the likelihood five days of rain was vented first upon the narrow sea. Thus, temperamental spring weather had to be what kept ships from crossing with tale of Calais and its defenders.

“Please, Lord,” Vianne breathed where she stood on the donjon roof overlooking the garden that on the day past appeared to be drowning, the stems of their occupants bent beneath rain-weighted blossoms and leaves. It was better this day, but though what had slashed now drizzled, it was no guarantee the sea had sufficiently calmed to allow ships to sail for England.

Peering up from beneath the hood of her damp mantle at clouds now whiter than grey, she gasped over the blue visible to the east that allowed sunlight to slide through the ragged hole to warm the earth.

“Pray, fair weather to deliver blessed tidings of Calais,” she entreated, “and Warin soon home and whole.”

How much longer she stood there she did not know, but by the time the blue reached Romary it had enlarged. Though sunlight missed her, its southernmost edge passed over the

outer walls. Had she not taken a chill that compelled her to descend from the roof, eventually she might have felt warmth on her face for more blue appearing in the distance.

Her chamber was her destination, but as she removed her mantle whose damp seeped into her gown, she was drawn to the chapel this end of the corridor by the longing to kneel at the altar so her prayers were better heard. Though privately she questioned that which priests told, for being reproved as a girl when she asked it aloud, she yielded in dire circumstances.

But had it ever helped? doubt slipped in as she reached to the door.

“Come back here!” If not for the high-pitched command and a thump, Vianne would not have known the privacy of her chamber was breached. Looking around, she saw the door was no longer sealed, a line of light running top to bottom.

Charliese was within, but was she alone when she ought to be napping this time of day, or had she an accomplice? And for what purpose?

Once more engaging the spy as often resisted since listening in on Sirs Owen and Achard, she lightened her footsteps and avoided floorboards with which she had become familiar for their creaks and groans.

As she traversed the last few feet, Charliese exclaimed, “Found you!”

No one responded, and though Vianne was fairly certain the child was alone and indulging in mischief while Esta saw to other duties, she eased to a halt before the door.

Though her finger would barely fit in the gap between it and the frame, it was wide enough to see her chamber was not as she left it. Having discovered Vianne’s purse, Charliese had furthered her explorations by laying out its contents on the rug beside the bed like a merchant displaying wares.

The coin pouch sat squatly, drawstring loosened to reveal silver disks. A square of linen was splayed, small emeralds at its center. There the missive that upended her hope of returning to her family, and beside it a gold fleur-de-lis

medallion King Jean's sire gifted her as consolation following the murder of her betrothed and his refusal to permit her return to England. Lastly, another square in which should nestle Warin's ring whose removal continued to disturb as if she had worn it for years beyond counting. And neither was Balian's to be seen.

Though it was reasonable to assume both rings were here, anger sought to infect what she would speak upon exposing the girl.

Calm, she means you no harm, she counseled. She was but bored with being confined indoors. And forget not the somewhat sincere apology for her unkindness upon your arrival. Too, as if a prelude to acceptance, she now flirts, watching you and flashing smiles.

Charliese gave a click of the tongue as sometimes Esta did ahead of correcting her. "I polish you good, and too pretty lady not know you run away."

Now hearing what sounded something dragged across the floor, Vianne opened the door just enough to see the girl's head emerge from under the bed, followed by one hand flat to the floor pulling her from that tight space, then the other less effective for being closed.

Did she hold in that small fist what needed polishing for its roll under the bed? Strange that more than wanting it to be Balian's ring worn around her neck months ahead of a ceremony that never was, she wanted it to be Warin's worn on her finger for little more than a day.

Emotion tightening her throat, she swallowed it with what remained of her anger, and having no wish to frighten Warin's daughter, quietly distanced herself from the door and approached it by firmly stepping on the telltale boards. Thus, when she opened the door wide, the child had enough warning to hide her hands behind her back where she had come up on her knees beside the bed.

"Why, Lady Charliese!" Vianne halted just over the threshold to play the part needed for this to end well, though nearly failing when she saw the ribboned ring around the girl's

neck. “What do you—?” She moved her gaze to the items taken from her purse. “Goodness, what is this?”

“I...” A shrug. “I be a little bad. Not keep, just look.”

“I see that.” Pointedly, Vianne considered the ring around her neck. “And you tried on one of my pretty things.”

Charliese blinked those green eyes, then drew one hand from behind and touched the ring on her chest. “It be too big. Too big for you, too? That why you make it necklace?”

Further Vianne’s throat tightened. “Non, it fits well.”

The child sank back on her heels. “Why you not wear it on finger? It be prettier than this one.” Other hand appearing, she opened it to reveal the ring given by her sire.

Though the band of gold was plain—and with good reason for being quickly acquired and not intended to remain long on Vianne’s hand—she missed that small embrace of her person.

After chastising herself for that, she said, “You are right, the ribboned one is prettier.” Then she hooked her mantle on a peg beside the door, strode forward, and sank to sitting before the girl.

As Charliese regarded her warily, Vianne touched the ring on its ribbon. “Since I keep that for memory only, I do not wear it.”

“Memory?”

“Recall of when I was happy.”

Though honest, it was the wrong thing to say to one so young and mostly a stranger, but though Charliese’s mouth turned down, she said with what seemed genuine sympathy, “Why you not happy at Rom-y? ’Cause I play with your things?” She glanced at those on the rug. “I be sorry.”

A tremor in her jaw, Vianne said, “You should have asked me, but that is not why I am a little sad.”

Leaning forward, Charliese whispered conspiratorially, “Good. I not want you tell Esta. I s’posed be sleeping, but not

tired.” She extended the hand in which Warin’s ring sat. “This only memory, too?”

Vianne nearly denied it, but were the marriage annulled and she kept what had briefly adorned her finger, memory as well. She took it. “Non, I wore it quite recently.”

“You not wear it now ’cause you not be wife?”

Face warming, Vianne shrugged.

The girl shrugged in return and touched the ring she wore. “Now Seb’s mama be married, she has pretty one like this.”

She spoke of Lady Dangereuse who Warin told had wed Sir Rhys.

“Seb has papa now, but still I not have mama, and Esta say she cannot be mine, that papa need young and pretty wife.” Her brow furrowed. “But she also say she not like Sir Owen, and I think she do.” She wagged a finger. “Even when he look bad at her.”

Vianne nearly startled over the child’s perceptiveness of what she herself had noticed. There was strain between the knight and Esta of the sort that squeezed itself between Warin and her—unwelcome concern, attraction, and longing bound up in resentment over things one did not wish to feel.

The irony did not escape her that, were she right about the two, the only real difference between her and Warin Wulfrith and the maid and Owen Wulfrith was Vianne of long-trampled virtue was highborn. And that gave her an advantage over Esta, though not one she would force on the man who leant her his name to keep ill from befalling her.

The girl’s hand on Vianne’s arm returned her to the present. “I should have papa *and* mama like Seb, aye?”

“Oui, you should.”

Charliese’s lips so sweetly bowed she looked more a doll of exaggerated beauty than a girl of flesh, but her frown returned. “Not *oui*, Lady Vane. You say *aye*.”

Vianne nearly laughed at the pronunciation of her name, her little brother having spoken it the same when she was on

the cusp of becoming a young woman whose sire had begun the search to secure her betrothal. And looked as far as France whence his wife had come...

“And not *non*. You say *nay*,” Charliese added, and Vianne guessed this child of France had been tutored in the same for King Edward determining his nobles of mostly Norman-French descent should abandon their version of the continental tongue and adopt the language of the Anglo-Saxons conquered by the Duke of Normandy three hundred years past.

“I thank you for your counsel, Lady Charliese. Though English-born, I sometimes mix the languages for having spent many years in France.”

“And your voice be different.”

Doubtless, she referred to an accent nearly as French as English. “So it is. Or perhaps I ought say—*So ’tis*.”

Once more flirtatious, the little one fluttered her lashes. “I teach you!”

And were I your mother, I would be happy for those lessons, Vianne thought and, though it hurt, said, “I am certain you would teach me well.”

Now laughter so pretty it seemed the world was less dark for this child conceived out of wedlock having pushed her way into it—and for the wonder she had been claimed by a man who, though his reputation surely suffered, was more honorable for giving her his name.

The same as he gave me, she thought, then corrected herself. Not the same, Warin bearing no responsibility for her nor her circumstances. And yet—

Cease! Your heart cannot afford to love him more, she told herself. But it was too late, though not a bad thing for Warin since it made her more determined to see him freed from her.

At the sound of footsteps in the corridor that should have been heard before they came off the stairs, Vianne caught her breath. Her roiling and the child’s laughter had muffled them, and now the one whose slippers padded over the floorboards called reproachfully, “Charliese!”

The girl went silent and eyes nearly bulged.

Vianne's own consternation was for being less prepared than a former spy should be, and it swelled when Charliese shot her gaze to the purse's contents and breathed, "That not be good."

Though Vianne did not believe Esta harsh in setting aright her charge's behavior—and the trespass *was* worthy of correction—she felt protective of Charliese. Despite an inner voice warning that to make light of what the girl had done would do her a disservice, Vianne looked around when Esta hastened inside and said, "Lady Charliese and I have been sorting through my purse that was much in need of weeding. Join us."

The woman who had thus far been reserved but respectfully kind to Vianne, halted and shifted her gaze from the girl to what was spread on the rug. Then more closely she considered her lord's guest whose dampness evidenced she had been out-of-doors. "Happily sorting through your purse," she said primly. "Is that so?"

Abashed at trying to sabotage efforts to raise Charliese into a worthy Wulfrith, Vianne said with apology, "Not entirely."

Clasping her hands, Esta addressed her charge, "Tell me true, daughter of Baron Wulfrith, did you enter Lady Vianne's chamber without permission and avail yourself of her purse?"

"Umm...I not ask to come in, but what you mean *avail*?"

"Did you take those things from her purse—and the ring around your neck?"

"Oh!" Charliese clapped a hand to her chest as if it were not too late to hide the ring, then dropped her hand and blew breath up her face. "I could not sleep, so I peeked into Lady Vane's room. When she not be here, I played a little."

The woman's lips twitched. "As you knew you should not, aye?"

The girl groaned. "I be bad."

“Nay, but you did do wrong. Now apologize to Lady Vianne, return her ring, and come.”

Charliese of downcast face pushed to her feet and drew off the ring, causing fair hair to fly all directions. “I sorry again, Lady Vane.”

Keeping one hand closed around Warin’s ring, Vianne raised the other.

The girl set Balian’s in it. “If I be good, I wear it again since you not?”

“Charliese!” Esta warned.

“Only do I be good.” It was said with whine, then she hiked her eyebrows at Vianne.

As the ring that was her most treasured possession before Rollon de Talliere stole her future was no longer of first consideration, Vianne said, “Esta and I shall speak on it. If she agrees, you may borrow it on occasion.”

Charliese sped her gaze to the maid. “You agree?”

“As the lady told, we shall speak on it.”

With a heartfelt sigh, the girl trudged forward and put her hand in that of the woman who smiled at Vianne before turning with her charge.

At the door, Charliese looked back. “You be pretty and not old. Mayhap you be my mama, Lady Vane.”

Vianne was grateful the maid hushed the girl and lifted her onto a hip, but Charliese was not done. Peering over Esta’s shoulder as she was carried away, she called, “If you make babies, I have sister and brother.”

“Charliese!” Esta hissed as the two went from sight.

The child’s innocently spoken words feeling a punch to Vianne’s middle, she acknowledged how raw she remained over her loss. But then, it was not many months since her second miscarriage. Nor years since her first.

Drawing breath, she moved onto her knees and refilled her purse, then put it under her pillow and went to the chapel.

Had the kneeler not been well padded, her drop to it would have hurt. Digging elbows into the upper shelf and pressing her palms together, she began praying. But soon her hands formed fists she wanted to press to her mouth lest sobs displace prayers.

Silently she prayed for Calais, its people and defenders... for Warin to return whole and be free to wed one for whom he could feel much and would be the mother Charliese needed... for Vianne *Wardieu* to find peace and acceptance in whatever measure the Lord deemed right for one whose past sins would not further themselves in England.

“Lord, be my side...my hope...my strength. Help this sinner who wants what is best only for her. Pray, have mercy.”

A crack in that last word, she dropped back on her heels and put a hand over her mouth, though not soon enough to keep her heart’s cry from resounding around the chapel. However, those come after were muffled lest any traversing the corridor hear.

Vianne was hunched, arms crossed over her middle, and softly hiccoughing when she sensed another’s presence.

How eager you are to let down your guard merely for trading France for England, she bemoaned. Your life may no longer be in danger, but what of your dignity?

She lowered her arms, then there being little she could do about the mess of her face, looked around expecting to see the priest who divided his time between the castle and nearby villages.

It was Esta perched on the bench against one wall. Though fairly dim here with only two lanterns lit and a flickering candle on the altar, there was no mistaking the woman’s concern. “I am sorry you despair, Lady Vianne. Had I to guess, Charliese made your heart ache, likely more for what she said than did.”

“Some,” Vianne acceded, “but she cannot be blamed for wanting something she has not and thinking I could be that to her.”

“Might you not?” Ignoring widening eyes, Esta continued, “I know not the entirety of the circumstances that once more returned you to England, but ere I accompanied Charliese from Stern Castle to Romary, I was well enough regarded by Sir Owen’s womenfolk that I was not excluded from learning what befell Sir Rhys months ago after he returned from France accompanied by our king’s spy.”

Then she knew the nature of Vianne’s notoriety that allowed her to supply King Edward with intelligence. Though it would not surprise English nobles intent on the politics and strife between the two countries knew, few commoners would be acquainted with the harlot of Vianne Wardieu—providing she did not raise her head too high as would be unavoidable were her marriage exposed.

Deciding to address the woman’s suggestion Vianne could become what Charliese longed for, she wiped her face on her skirt and moved to the bench. “May I sit beside you?”

“You need not ask, Lady.”

Vianne lowered and, turning a tear-stained face to her, said, “As you are well regarded by the Wulfrith ladies, briefly I shall relate my latest circumstances, of which they shall be apprised if they are not already.”

“You may trust me to hold it close.”

For all the holes Vianne left in her tale, not the least of which were her miscarriages, it took little time to traverse the jagged ice between Pierre returning her to his sire who had been her greatest source of intelligence and what Warin did to secure a place for her on the ship.

After showing some surprise that he risked being forever bound to a harlot, Esta said, “Having had a hand in raising him, it does this former prostitute’s heart good to gain further proof he is as honorable as his eldest brother. And to know his little girl has the mother she—”

“She does not, Esta. As told, we shall seek an annulment, and for that Charliese cannot know I bear the Wulfrith name.”

The woman set a hand over hers. “That more you are concerned over the well-being of those I love than yourself makes me like you, especially since you feel deeply for Warin.” She raised a hand against protest. “I recognize it for being what I have long—and painfully—felt for his uncle. You and I are women of lost virtue, but there is a great difference between us in that I know not how many lovers I had for my sins greatly benefitting me. And Sir Owen knew not what I was when he let me near enough we both regret it for different reasons—I for being unable to stop loving him, and him for yielding to what proved more unseemly than he thought possible.”

She sighed. “Now that you know I speak with some authority on such matters, mayhap you will not dismiss what I say regarding your husband who has ever been of good and sympathetic heart. True, he struggles to forgive great offenses, but who does not—and how many truly can?”

Wishing to learn more about the man she had wed, Vianne nodded.

“Young Warin accepted his betrothal, though not pleased with it even when he met the lady and found her quite lovely. It did not help she was less accepting of the betrothal, and yet he set aside pride and made peace with her. That they gained, and far more. Though she loved him well, I believe it was because Warin loved better than she.” Her smile eased. “It may seem inappropriate to speak of such things to his second wife, but you should know Warin is capable of growing into great emotion. Thus, even if he feels only obligation toward you now, it may be better for all were you to remain wed.”

“Better?” Vianne exclaimed.

“Aye, since only a fool would not expect painful obstacles between this beginning and a good end.”

“Painful obstacles to which I will not subject the Wulfriths!”

“Certes, a price to be paid, my lady, but likely worth it for Warin gaining another wife as he might not otherwise, his

daughter a mother and siblings, and the Barony of Woodhearst an intelligent, resourceful lady.”

“Of much ill repute!”

Esta’s mouth curved again. “If any can pack away your past, ’tis the Wulfriths, and more doable if the king comes alongside a family to whom he owes much, though perhaps not what he shall owe you if Calais remains English.”

She was persuasive, and more so for Vianne longing to be persuaded.

“And of further consideration is this, my lady—regardless of the extent of the reason Warin pledged his life to you, like most Wulfriths, the word he gives is the word he keeps, before God or otherwise.”

It was much what Sir Owen told, meaning despite the enormity of Warin’s sacrifice, his honor and integrity could prove as great a barrier to ending the marriage as the Church.

“You are kind, Esta, but I shall pursue annulment since my past will cast darker shadows across the Wulfriths than would your own were you to wed Sir Owen.”

The woman’s shoulders sank. “I do not concur, and this I know—never can I be proven wrong.”

Because she believed Sir Owen would not stoop to love her in return. And likely much evidence of that for how long she had served the Wulfriths.

Struck by a thought, Vianne decided to trespass. “I imagine it has been especially difficult of recent for being at Romary and answering to the man who bruises your heart.”

Esta averted her eyes. “Rarely was he at Stern Castle and, when present, avoided me as much as I him. Though more often we succeeded than not, here we are more unsuccessful. Thus, another reason I am anxious for Warin’s return—that his uncle resume training warriors at Wulfen Castle so I can mostly forget him until next we are forced to breathe the same air.”

Vianne did not know what to say, and realizing there was little for being barely acquainted with them, settled for, “You both seem fine people. I shall hold you in my prayers.”

“As you and Warin are in mine, my lady.” Standing with Vianne, Esta added, “Since sleep tends to settle emotions—and soften evidence of them—I encourage you to gain your rest.”

Vianne nearly probed for swelling about her eyes, but it was felt. “I shall lie down awhile,” she said, then caught up one of Esta’s hands and squeezed. “Were I to stay, I know we could be good friends.”

The woman’s eyes moistened. “I would like that.”

A quarter hour later, Vianne settled her head on the pillow. Discomforted by the purse beneath, she pulled it out, hesitated over the longing to wear evidence of her marriage to Warin, then set the purse on the bedside table.

Were the ring to fit her finger again, it would be for failing to set him free. Only that.

CHAPTER 27

June 2, 1354

“Here, Lady Vane!” Squeezed into the embrasure beside Vianne whose arm was around her, Charliese pointed between the stable and carpenter’s shop. “That where Papa be shot with fire arrow.” She looked across her shoulder at Esta. “Aye?”

“That is right, child.”

Turning back to the outer bailey before the inner wall atop which they stood, she said, “He burned on face and hand, but God wipe away most.”

So He had, Vianne thought, recalling the scarring on Warin’s jaw that was slight compared to that on his neck and barely visible for light beard sprung from unscarred flesh. “A blessing,” she said and tried not to think too much on tidings yet to be delivered these three days of beautiful weather. But they would come soon. They must.

“Still, he not as pretty as you.” Charliese glanced at Vianne. “But he be boy, so you not mind, aye?”

“Not at all. I think your papa quite handsome.”

“I like word *pretty* better, but Esta and Aunt Danger and Ondine say *handsome* what you call boy.”

“As does your Aunt Fira,” Esta said as if to win the argument in naming Warin’s youngest sister who, being an adventurer, was ever testing the leash allowed her—and

adding to its length until she began presenting symptoms of The Falling Sickness fatally suffered by her mother.

Vianne appreciated Esta sharing that though it reflected the woman's belief she would remain Warin's wife and, therefore, should know of private family matters.

"Fira, too," Charliese begrudged.

"I love her name," Vianne said.

"It be like her hair!"

"I am guessing it is red."

"Like fire, and in sun more orange. It so pretty!" She blinked. "But better I like mama's hair color."

Vianne started to ask if it was blond like the girl's, which likely she would know only for being told since she was much younger when Warin brought her to England, but Charliese caught up Vianne's braid and tugged. "This brown be most pretty color."

It was the first time since her great trespass she had revisited the wish Vianne become her mother—at least in words, often seeking the attention of her father's *guest*. It bothered, and Vianne was glad Esta, who had dropped back when her charge asked to peer at the castle folk in the bailey, said, "It was kind of Lady Vianne to ask us to join her walk of the inner wall. Now we must return to the donjon."

"I be not tired!"

"Still, you shall rest."

When Vianne turned with the girl, Esta took her onto a hip.

It was a good look for the woman, and once more it occurred she of thirty and eight might still have some childbearing years. Though Vianne dare not more than glancingly imagine a happy future for herself, she indulged with Esta and Sir Owen. Thus, having watched the two walk wide around each other and sparingly exchange words, she imagined them drawing near and speaking of matters beyond those of necessity. Since they but approached middle age, there was still much time to enjoy a life together.

Charliese grumbled as she was carried to the steps, and when the two began their descent, called, “We play later, Lady Vane!”

Vianne smiled and turned back into the embrasure to watch stable lads lead horses to the paddock for light exercise ahead of greater exercise before the castle. She ached to go astride and *ride wild* as Warin had named the beautiful recklessness with which they fled their pursuers in Normandy. And to swim a horse again, this time for pleasure.

“With you,” she whispered the longing she ought not fulfill for the sake of Warin and his daughter. “Come home.” Knowing neither should she let that past her lips for it feeling she laid claim to Romary, she groaned.

Then, though she had thought to remain here a while, lest her thoughts continue wandering such paths, she decided to return to the hall and aid the servants in mending the tapestry removed from behind the high table.

She was beginning her descent of the inner wall when she noticed Sir Owen and Esta on the donjon’s landing. And turning back into the hall was a servant into whose care Charliese had been passed.

Hope as much as curiosity transfixed Vianne, but once the child was gone, it was dashed by the intensity with which the couple exchanged words—Sir Owen of flushed face setting himself over the relatively slight Esta, her responding to what he said and jerking as if his words offended, then thrusting a hand to his chest to push him back.

The knight hesitated, glanced at those here not quick enough to look elsewhere, then taking Esta’s arm, drew her toward the door.

She allowed it, surely deciding it best to appear she went willingly so they not provide more fodder for tattling tongues.

Though Vianne told herself this was not her concern, she indulged in the possibility good would come of their discord, opening a door long closed on the future they might have had. However, upon entering the hall and seeing the young women

she meant to aid with the tapestry hurried toward the kitchen with so little stealth it would have seen Vianne hung at the French court, she knew where Sir Owen and Esta had gone.

Lest she was the cause of anger directed at the servants, she did not call after those who sought to be versed in the couple's dispute. Raising her skirts, she hastened into the corridor, and hearing angry voices, brushed past the two women and turned in front of them to halt their advance.

Their surprise and dismay obvious, Vianne raised her chin. "I believe you agree it is best you return to your sewing."

"Aye, milady," they said and ran back the way they had come.

Before Vianne could follow, the voices behind the kitchen door became angrier. She started to withdraw, but then the crack of flesh on flesh was heard, next the cessation of voices. Fearing retaliation against Esta whose hand was likely responsible for the slap, she held her breath and heard a gasp that could as easily be of anger as fear. Now more silence.

Though Sir Owen did not seem capable of physically harming a woman, fearing she was wrong—that he was far less a Wulfrith than Warin—Vianne ran and thrust open the kitchen door.

As the sizable room appeared devoid of people, she faltered, then saw movement to the right as the knight of silvered dark hair snapped up his head and took a step back. Had it been a half second later, she would not have known how intimately near he and Esta were.

Of course, that was her first assessment. Her second was that no matter the distance he put between the two, what happened in that sudden silence that had naught to do with harming a woman would have been just as evident for Esta's disarrayed braid and mouth being as bright as the mark on Sir Owen's cheek.

"Lady Vianne," he said huskily, "have you need of me?"

Though embarrassed at what she had witnessed, more she regretted being the cause of its end. Struck by the impulse to

make light of it to alleviate the tension, she said, “Alas, not I,” and smiled from him to the wide-eyed Esta.

But neither appeared to appreciate her attempt to back out of this so they might resume crossing the bridge their disagreement had erected between them, and when she started to withdraw, Warin’s uncle strode forward.

“As my duties are abundant this day, and I have little time for distraction and matters of minor consequence,” he said, “I leave you.”

“Minor?” Esta found her voice, doubtless for words directed at her. “Quite the overstatement! And regarding that for which you took me to task, I do not regret it, Sir Owen.”

He paused just past Vianne but resumed his departure.

Vianne guessed Esta held her breath—and proof of that when his footsteps faded and her body bowed on an exhale.

“Forgive me for appearing at the worst moment,” Vianne said. “Had I not heard the slap and silence that made me fear for you, I would have returned to the hall.”

“He would not hurt me,” Esta said, then laughed. “That is, do I not count stabs to the heart.” She touched her flushed lips. “I was still a young woman when last he kissed me. Though I ought to feel less now—” She clapped a hand over her mouth.

Vianne closed the door, and when she put her arms around Esta, the woman mewled and began crying into her shoulder.

Likely for years in which to mourn lost love, she reached the bottom of her well of tears sooner than Vianne had when Esta came to her in the chapel. Then pulling away, she swept up her skirt and wiped her face. “Forgive me.”

“Naught to forgive, Esta.”

“Mayhap not for my tears, but Sir Owen would say an apology is due for what Charliese told when we encountered him upon our return to the donjon.”

Vianne tensed. “You quarreled over me?”

“Nay, for what Charliese said regarding you. My role in the telling was but the wrapping for what is years in our past and all the more felt since he arrived to administer the barony.” She nodded at the opposite door. “As fresh air would be a balm, may we continue this in the garden?”

Vianne led the way.

After leaving behind that portion of the garden whose herbs and vegetables served the needs of the kitchen, they walked in silence, the only sounds those of nature in this place of trees, flowers, and bushes gone a bit wild for lacking a gardener or lady given to planting, pruning, and nurturing.

As perhaps I would be had it not been necessary to become one who cultivated relationships that produced information fit for the King of England, she thought.

And startled when Esta resumed their conversation as if mere moments had passed. “Though Sir Warin had suggested sending Charliese and me to Stern Castle during his absence, pride made me decline.”

“Pride?”

Esta nodded. “I could not bear looking a fearful mouse—scampering away just because one who could not love me for being so impure was to walk the same floors. To prove I was just as unmoved, I stayed.”

As if feeling the weight of that decision, she slowed, and Vianne urged her to a bench passed twice now as they walked the stone-laid path and joined her there.

“As my tale is one you need not know in detail, I will keep it simple,” Esta said. “Though I believe Sir Owen felt much for this commoner ere the sin of me was known, when I arrived at Stern to serve his mother after gaining God’s forgiveness, what remained of his feelings could hold no wine—not even water—though Lady Héloïse refused to judge me for what I did to provide for myself despite options that would have made survival possible but more difficult.”

“From what I witnessed this day, you may be wrong about what Sir Owen feels for you, Esta.”

She shook her head. “It surprised he yet finds me desirable since my touch offends, but ’tis only desire, and that is no good future—especially for a former harlot.”

To which Vianne could attest with regard to what thickened and thickened again between Warin and she whose notoriety would be of more detriment than were Esta and Sir Owen to make a life together.

“Lord, now he shall dislike me more for tempting him, though I vow ’twas not my intent,” the woman said. “I was but angry that he was so angry with me.”

And now they were back to the part Vianne played in what led to the kiss. Thinking it best to move the conversation away from their relationship, she said, “What did Charliese tell Sir Owen?”

The woman leaned back. “That she liked you very much and you would make a good mama. Before I could quiet her, she said I agreed and told you were going to be that to her.” At Vianne’s gasp, she shook her head. “’Tis true I agreed you would make a good mother, but I told it was for her papa and you to decide. I know—still too much since the marriage may be annulled. After correcting Sir Owen as to what I actually told the child, I owned to overstepping, but he was...”

She turned up her hands. “It was as if there is as much corked inside him as there is me, and once that cork loosened, it leaked out. Not only was he angry with me over what Charliese said, but that I remained at Romary with my charge when we could have stayed at Stern until Sir Warin returned, that whilst I was at Stern my presence was so vexing he dared not come home often, that I took work with his mother years ago...”

“Hence, you slapped him.”

“Aye, and should not have. But he was very near and made me feel so small.” Briefly, she closed her eyes. “When he turned his face back, there was such shock in his eyes it was as if he came up out of a dream he did not know a dream, then he set a hand on my face.” She swallowed. “I had only enough

time to draw breath before his mouth was on mine as he did not wish it to be.”

Vianne gave a small laugh. “Certes, he wished it. Though I do not know him well, I do not believe him a man who can be pushed to do something he finds unpalatable.”

Esta considered that. “You are right, though surely it was but base desire that made him do what he named *minor*. And now he regrets it.”

“Or possibly regrets not doing it sooner since you would not have so many lost years—”

“Do not speak such!” Esta jumped up. “If you give me hope where there is none, more I will hurt.”

She was right, as Vianne knew well. Also standing, she said, “What a pair we make, so fearful of hope we may miss out on its blessings for believing better than the possibility of more wounds.”

The woman’s anger eased. “Do you go, I shall miss the good friends we could have been.”

“As shall I, Esta.”

They were silent a time, then started back to the donjon. And had taken few steps before the sound of an approaching horse carried over the wall.

“Warin!” Vianne cried and spun toward the gate that opened onto the inner bailey. As the rider had not left his horse at the stable—doubtless anxious to reunite with his daughter—it had to be him.

“Praise the Lord!” Esta said as they hastened forward.

Though it occurred to Vianne she should return to the great hall and await his entrance there, she did not, and soon they were running around the side of the donjon to where a rider dismounted before the steps.

Descending them, Sir Owen called, “Well come to Romary, Squire Gunulf!”

Vianne did not trip on her skirt's hem, though it had to appear that way when she dropped to a knee and slapped hands to the dirt.

"Lady Vianne!" Esta cried.

Vianne raised her head and saw Sir Owen and the squire turn toward them. It *was* the Wardieu heir come into the inner bailey astride, though he was far from the twelve-year-old boy who embraced her before she departed England eight years gone. He had yet to attain his spurs, but he was the man his body had promised to grow into, and now greater his resemblance to their sire.

His surprise over the sight of her was apparent, though surely not as great as hers, and so quickly resolved she barely had time to push back on her heels before he was in front of her and raising her.

"Vianne!" Despite choke about his voice, its depth matched his physique. Despite condemnation that ought to darken his eyes, they were joyful. Then he enfolded her. "We thought you lost to us all over again." Though the crack in his voice was so fine others might not hear it, she did.

Feeling more of her hard places begin to crumble, she could only be held without holding, legs so weak she might have dropped were he not supporting her. "Gunulf," she whispered, and twice more before he drew back and peered into her face. "I do not understand."

"Of course you do not. You had to think the worst of us for the missive sent months past in response to Sir Owen's query on your behalf."

Remembrance of that rejection made her heart constrict. "It was deemed best I not return home lest further I shame our family."

He hesitated, then said, "'Tis true what is told of you has been difficult for the Wardieus, but it was Sir Norbert who wrote the missive without consulting us."

Her sire had naught to do with it? Truly, it was of the household knight who, having a facility with numbers,

occasionally aided their aging steward? She knew the man, and more for him showing interest in her upon her attainment of fourteen years, though unwarranted for her sire overlooking him in the quest to secure a good betrothal for her. Thus, many times she had rebuffed him, even after the betrothal was contracted with Balian.

“It was he who rejected you, Vianne, not us.”

Then a grudge held all these years? But how was it possible he wielded power enough to send correspondence and affix their sire’s signature without the baron’s knowledge? “I do not understand. How—?”

“Lady Vianne, Squire Gunulf.” Sir Owen came alongside. “This is best discussed indoors—*after* King Edward’s missive is delivered, for which I granted you immediate admittance, Squire.”

As Vianne’s heart sped over long-awaited tidings of Warin and Calais, Gunulf set her back. “Forgive me, Sir Owen. ’Tis just—”

“You need not explain.” The knight motioned them to follow.

On her brother’s arm, hope all about her for what was learned and would be learned this day, Vianne entered the hall. When Warin’s uncle told they would speak in the solar and she asked Esta to join them, the man who had broken the woman’s heart stiffened. Had he expected Esta to decline, he was disappointed when all settled around a table in the chamber dominated by a poster bed where Warin would spend his nights upon his return.

And I will not, she reminded herself as warmth moved through her.

“The king having summoned me to London to discuss the matter of my sister,” Gunulf said as he passed a missive to Sir Owen, “I was present when ships arrived with word of what went at Calais during the French assault. Thus, as Edward was sending me on to Romary, I was tasked with carrying these tidings.”

Sir Owen broke the seal and raised the parchment. As his face remained behind it, the good or bad of what was written there could not be known, but when he set it down, she had to believe lightness about his face was as much for a report about his nephew as for Calais.

He looked to Vianne. “For intelligence that provided time to strengthen Calais’ defenses and assemble forces that overwhelmed the French as done when first they tried to take it years gone, the king tells you are as responsible for the city remaining English as the ferocity with which our countrymen defended it.”

Her mouth quivered. “What of Warin?”

“He sustained injuries but is expected to recover and return to England in a sennight or less.”

When she dropped her chin, Esta squeezed her hand beneath the table while Gunulf on her other side said low, “Mayhap you feel enough for the warrior who brought you out of France that an annulment need not be sought.”

The king had told him more than expected.

“In gratitude for your long and sacrificial service to the Crown,” Sir Owen continued, “King Edward sends your brother to sooner reconcile you with your family and tells should you proceed with the annulment, he shall do all in his power to give aid. Too, regardless of whether you and my nephew remain wed, he and the queen shall see you restored to society.”

She wished she could be grateful for that last, but it would require facing her detractors. Worse, it would cast more ill on her family who were vulnerable enough beneath the steward’s thumb. Reminded of what her brother had revealed in the inner bailey, she looked up. “What has happened to Papa that he has no control over his correspondence?”

“Apoplexy three years past.” He allowed that to settle, then continued, “He recovered some of what was lost, but not enough to resume overseeing the barony. Thus, for speech being difficult and comprehension clipped, and with me yet in

training and our sisters having no betrothals in sight, he came to depend on Sir Norbert who replaced our steward when the old man passed.” He snorted. “Had not the Baron of Thornemedede with whom I foster intervened, Rhoswen might now be wed to Sir Norbert.”

As Vianne took it all in, Sir Owen said, “You speak of Baron Liam Fawke who trained with my eldest nephew?”

Gunulf inclined his head. “A fine lord and capable of cunning when he has good cause.” He smiled. “My lord borrowed the name of an abbess with whom he is on good terms and sent a missive to our sire to remind him of his commitment to dedicate Rhoswen to the Church once she attains ten and eight years. Though that ended Sir Norbert’s pursuit, he began eyeing our youngest sister. Fortunately, we need not worry when she is of marrying age he will snap her up since he no longer serves as steward.”

“How?” Vianne exclaimed.

“Dear underestimated Rhoswen.” He winked. “Had I to guess, she is more akin to her older sister than our departed mother.”

It sounded almost a compliment. “Tell,” Vianne said.

“She began going through Sir Norbert’s journals and correspondence when he was out about the demesne. Thus, she found Sir Owen’s missive telling of your wish to return to our family and the response Sir Norbert had composed that day and to which he signed our sire’s name. After failing several times to send word to me for fear her missive would be intercepted, it was delivered, and I gained my lord’s permission to go to London and appeal to the king.” He sighed. “Too late. For believing we were no longer your home, you had returned to France—and as I learned later, with little choice. To save Lady Dangereuse, aye?”

She inclined her head. “That was my intent, but she saved herself with Rhys de Arell’s aid.”

“So I heard. Blessedly, Edward not only sent Sir Warin to gain further intelligence about the King of France’s plans for

Calais but retrieve you if you truly wished to return.”

Feeling more hopeful than she had in a long time, she said, “And here I am.” Then she frowned. “How were you able to oust Sir Norbert?”

“King Edward sent his most valued clerk, Sir Yates, with a dozen knights to investigate the steward. His wrongdoings that included theft was enough to remove him from his position. Fortunately, the amount stolen from our coffers is not so great the barony shall be long in recovering. With good stewardship, all accounts should come right in a few years. Less fortunately, he slipped away ere he could be arrested.”

She sighed. “What matters is that he is gone and our sire and sisters safe.”

“They are, and until a steward of good repute can be found, Sir Yates administers the barony, though it occurs...” He trailed off.

“What?”

“When the king sent tidings you had returned to England wed to a Wulfrith, the missive had to be rerouted since I was home for a visit. Whilst there, I oft noted Rhoswen rearranged her activities and household duties to assist Sir Yates with administrative tasks—not that he wished assistance.”

Vianne blinked. “She is attracted to him?”

“I believe so.”

“But she is only—”

“Now nearly ten and eight, Vianne.”

It was true, meaning she would be as changed as Gunulf. “Oh,” she breathed.

He smiled. “And just as she is not truly bound for the Church, I can attest her heart and mind do not lie that direction.”

“And Sir Yates? Might he return her feelings? And is he a good man?”

“For a reserve I suspect has much to do with his appearance, he is hard to read, but when Rhoswen is near, I sense a struggle—the kind where one does not dare venture where they wish. As for being a good man, I have no reason to question his character.”

“What of his appearance?”

“Squire, allow me to answer that since I know the knight and his circumstances,” Sir Owen said and clasped his hands atop the table. “I aided with his knighthood training, for which he was less suited than most who enter Wulfen, one of his disposition better fit for working numbers and letters as evidenced by the duties he performs for our king. Though he has good facility with weapons that earned him spurs, at the battle of Crécy whose victory opened the way for England to gain Calais, his cheekbone was shattered and he lost part of an ear. Though still fairly attractive, he is self-conscious. As for his character, though the warrior of him is not as worthy as most who complete their training at Wulfen, the man of him is, having integrity and a strong faith.”

Vianne felt for the king’s man, and more so for the service rendered her family. “Doubtless for that, his appearance is of no consequence to my sister.”

“That is Rhoswen,” Gunulf said, “clever, insightful, and with an eye for things to which others are blind.”

“I wish to...”

At her hesitation, he said, “You wish to see her and our little sister. And Father, of course.”

“Oui, once I am restored to society as much as possible and they are comfortable with me visiting.”

He laughed. “Be assured, ere this day you would be welcome at Chesne.”

Lest she cry, Vianne averted her gaze. “I am grateful King Edward sent you to me.”

“’Twas also of Sir Warin’s doing.”

Questioningly, she looked back at him.

“King Edward told your husband’s missive to him included a request for aid in reuniting you with your family,” he explained.

Though such consideration must be a reflection of their pending annulment, it made her love him more. “I am grateful to him as well,” she said, “and for far more than that.”

“I assume you will await his return ere making the journey to Chesne,” Gunulf said and, at her nod, looked to Sir Owen. “If you are well with it, I would remain at Romary a few days to become reacquainted with my sister before returning home to prepare our family to receive her.”

“You are well come to stay, Squire.”

The remainder of the day was blessed for a foundation of glad tidings and the promise of what lay ahead—the strengthening of Calais’ defenses that would permit wives and children to return to their menfolk, Vianne’s reunion with her family she had to believe would welcome her as Gunulf told, King Jean forced to accept the hopelessness of regaining the port city for twice being shamed by failure and, God willing, Rollon accepting she was lost to him.

But of greater event to her heart was Warin’s return to his family and people and freeing him of their marriage. As the annulment would be difficult to obtain even with the king’s aid, she would wait it out at Chesne. Not only would distance allow her to more easily put Warin behind her, but desire would be snuffed—and the risk of consummation that would undo all.

CHAPTER 28

June 5, 1354

Pride sought to render this warrior a liar. He ought to have healed well enough to barely feel the morning ride, but the truth he struggled to admit to himself was the only thing he wanted beyond being reunited with his daughter and Vianne was his bed—and greater that need for his arm troubling him this past hour.

Though the physician who tended him at Calais had agreed Warin was well enough to make the crossing, he had done so with some reluctance and Lady Joan had expressed concern he brushed aside.

Lord, let me not have been a fool, he sent heavenward as he urged his mount onward at a pace he did not resent for consideration due his sister, but wished of greater speed that would have seen him reining in before the donjon a half hour ago. Dangereuse was accomplished at riding, but were she with child as was possible for missing two menses, caution must be exercised.

Glancing over his shoulder at where she rode alongside her husband, he was pleased her color was good and the smile she gifted him genuine.

As the prevailing winds had carried his ship well north of London and docked before sunset east of Stern Castle, he had passed the night at his family's home, arriving after supper to find his eldest sister and her husband visiting.

As Warin's missive instructed, his uncle had informed the family of what transpired in France and his marriage to Lady Vianne. But it was not enough, and he had obliged in expanding the tale—to a point. Not that the point was overly fine since they knew him well and he had seen they understood things he did not impart.

Throughout, his grandmother had sat as straight as her aged back allowed, on her lap *The Book of Wulfrith* chronicling their family's history begun two hundred years ago by the renowned storyteller, Sir Elias de Morville, who had remained a family friend after returning to France to take his place as his sire's heir.

When belatedly Warin informed his sister-in-law that Calais' infiltrators had called themselves Les Fléaux de l'Anglais the same as her cousin's sire was named during his pirating years, Séverine had pressed for more, hopeful of proof Amaury de Chanson lived, but there was no more to tell.

She had been disappointed, as were all who wished her young cousin who trained at Wulfen to be reunited with his sire, but his grandmother's disappointment was overshadowed by ebbing patience. As evidenced by fingers beginning to pluck at the pages of *The Book of Wulfrith*, great her longing to add to what was known about not one but two distant relations, the second being Eugénie d'Argent who had likely saved Vianne's life. And he had seen the same in the eyes of Fira who would succeed as its keeper, though...

He clenched his teeth over the possibility his youngest sister would not long serve as keeper for further evidence she suffered The Falling Sickness that proved fatal for their sire's beloved second wife.

Just a misstep and knock on the head, she had assured all after she was found on her back in the stable days past. Her family wanted to believe it but dare not, and that meant restricting her movements.

Though Warin had wanted to honor her request to accompany him so she could meet Vianne, Héloïse was firm

her granddaughter needed further time to recover from her *misstep*.

Fira had been quiet about her disappointment, but Warin had seen a glimmer of defiance in her eyes. Thus, he had shared the insight with his brother's wife, and Lady Séverine for whom he had believed he could feel much before she gave her heart to Hector had told she also feared Fira would steal away. Then she assured him she and his second sister, Ondine, would do all they could to keep the youngest sibling safe.

Knowing the lady had much to occupy her while Hector trained warriors at Wulfen, not only administering the barony alongside the steward but tending their child, Warin had instructed the Captain of the Guard to have his men watch for Fira and allow her explorations providing she accepted an escort. She would not like it, but it was a reasonable compromise.

“Hold!” Sir Rhys called—and with good reason, Warin was disconcerted to discover since he should have been the first to see what lay ahead.

I need sleep, he told himself as he reined in. Once he had a full night in his own bed, he would come right. The question was—would he be alone on the mattress or would the woman he wed share it with him?

The latter, he hoped, it now firm in his mind and heart they would remain married.

“Is that her?” Dangereuse asked as she brought her horse alongside.

“Assuredly,” he said, though at this distance he could not know which of his men escorted her upon Woodhearst. And certainly not the reason the two paused to speak with villagers—what looked an elderly couple and a good-sized man whose back was bent beneath a sack of grain on one shoulder.

Though Warin did not sense danger, to which he would be more sensitive were Vianne not in the company of a warrior, something about this bothered. He looked to Rhys and, seeing his eyes narrowed on the lady he had freed from De Talliere

many months before Warin did the same, guessed something troubled him as well. And when his brother-in-law looked around, confirmed it.

They exchanged nods and Warin said, “Let us make ourselves known.”

They spurred forward and, moments later, Vianne’s escort came around. As his hand went to his sword hilt, the elderly couple drew back and peered behind as if to gauge whether they could hide in the wood before being overtaken.

But then Vianne gripped her escort’s arm and said something that caused the warrior to release his hilt and the couple to ease their stance while the one shouldering the sack shifted it to the opposite side. Though the big man stumbled as if he might lose his balance, only his cap went askew. After the old couple deferentially dipped their heads at the lady, they resumed their trek the direction from which Warin’s party came with their beast of burden trudging behind.

Then the lady and her escort were speeding past the three, and that which had firmed in Warin’s chest constricted in anticipation of their reunion.

Vianne’s blood had coursed faster upon seeing it was Warin who rode on them—and faster yet when she recognized Sir Rhys and Lady Dangereuse. Now as both parties reined in and she looked closely at the man she wed, she felt light of head.

“Lady Vianne,” he acknowledged with formality as if she were not—

You are not, she reminded herself of the role both played to remove her from Calais. Sir Owen, Esta, and her brother might believe Warin would forego an annulment, but—

She nearly gasped at the realization his formality was likely due to her being with a man unknown to him, but before she could acquaint him with her brother, Gunulf gave his name.

Mouth curving, Warin greeted the young man, and as he introduced him to his kin, Vianne searched for evidence of his

injuries. The only thing visible was a somewhat pallid face and shadows beneath his eyes. Had he traveled before sufficiently healed, or did his injuries make it difficult to sleep?

“You look well, Wife,” he said, confirming he had exercised caution until Gunulf’s identity was known. But that he had been cautious surely meant he remained in accord with dissolving their marriage.

“I am well, and you?” she said.

“I heal, every day drawing nearer to regaining full use of my arm and leg.”

There was nothing to indicate they were the victims of war, but he *was* astride. “Then God attends to our prayers,” she said and looked to Lady Dangereuse who, as Warin had told, was very much alive. Indeed, the beauty of silvered dark hair glowed as if—

She resisted looking to the lady’s midriff. Vianne *was* well as told, but still too near the loss of her babe to rejoice in another’s blessing without tearing out some of her stitched emotions. “I am glad to see you again, Lady Dangereuse. Pray, know I am sorry for what you and yours suffered for granting me sanctuary.”

“’Tis in the past,” Warin’s sister said, “and we do not hold you accountable any more than we could blame clouds for bringing rain that can as easily flood as nourish.” Further she surprised in urging her horse forward and setting a hand on Vianne’s arm. “I know you tried to force the trade to save me, and I regret whatever *you* endured in returning to France as you did not wish.”

As she knew from Vianne having confided her pain for the years lost since departing England and adamantly stating nothing would induce her to return to that country. But then this lady’s life was threatened...

“Since I would reconcile my past with my present wherever possible, I am determined all shall come right, Lady Dangereuse.” When that woman’s expression faltered as if she questioned what was behind those words and Warin’s gaze

was more deeply felt, Vianne moved her smile to Sir Rhys. “Accept my congratulations on your wedding.”

He inclined his head. “We count ourselves blessed.”

Since neither De Arell offered like congratulations, it had to mean they made no assumptions about the permanency of her own marriage of which they were surely informed.

As Lady Dangereuse removed her hand from Vianne’s arm, Warin said, “All is well with the villagers?” He nodded at the three who were now nearly even where they walked the clearing’s edge.

“In seeking to shorten their journey from the mill to their village,” Vianne said, “the man and his wife cut through a portion of wood that, unbeknownst to them, remains muddied from last week’s rain. Their cart becoming stuck and attempts to free it resulting in a broken axel, they were fortunate the big man also went the shorter way and agreed to carry their milled grain.”

“He is well built,” Warin said, “and yet struggles to keep the sack aloft though ’tis of no great size and they are not overly distant from the mill.”

“He is not altogether right,” Vianne said. “The elderly couple told he is mute and somewhat bent of back, and one of his legs drags. Too, having seen some silver hair come free of his cap, he is not young.”

Warin watched the man who lumbered after the elderly couple, and Vianne sensed suspicion, but then he winced as if discomfited and said, “Let us ride.”

NOT MUTE, but neither near enough fluent speech and an English accent to dare conversing. But in time he would voice what strained the bars of patience he had erected around the first set of bars it took years to pry open so he could extricate the thick of his tongue and mud of his mind. Though not fully through them and knowing he might never be, he *had* freed

himself of captivity that was far from imagined for very real manacles and chains.

“Mason!” the old man called the name of the *mute* who had communicated it to the village priest by writing it in the dirt crudely. Being more than proficient in letters despite having little use for them these past years, it was pretense—as was nearly all about him since coming to these shores, he acceded where he leaned against the tree though his name was called again.

He had been gone longer than needed to relieve himself, and the old couple he had happened on in the wood so suddenly he nearly exposed his pretense would become alarmed if he did not return soon. Unfortunately, he ached for carrying the sack in a most unnatural way for a body that did not suffer maladies affected to douse suspicion and make him appear harmless.

Oui, harmless, he reminded himself. I am that to those not my enemy, but those who are...

He did not need speech to flow beautifully to bring men to their knees, especially after all he endured that further strengthened rather than broke his body as anticipated. Well-planned guile and a honed blade was what he needed. Hopefully, the Wulfriths would not prove the enemy he had thought they might be before he learned what he could about the family by listening for talk of those of the Barony of Wulfen—and Woodhearst as well for the second brother’s award of it following the violent death of its previous lord who none seemed to mourn.

Was Warin Wulfrith worthy of the lady whose fleeting reaction to the baron’s unexpected appearance further revealed feelings she sought to hide? Not that it mattered, he reminded himself of the reason he was here. Providing the Wulfriths did not thwart him—

“Come, Mason!” the old man called, this time with some fear. “Since still we have half a league to cover, ye must refresh yourself.”

He who had taken the name Mason straightened, kneaded the muscles of his shoulders and neck, then reached his arms high and leaned back to stretch muscles long bent opposite.

“Pray, Mason! Are ye there?”

As the mute of him could not answer, he ran through the trees, leapt the undergrowth, and halted when the voices of husband and wife were clearly heard. After ensuring his cap covered hair he ought to cut down to the scalp, he returned the bend to his back and continued forward with a drag of one leg.

“He be there!” the old woman called.

“Lord, ye gave us a fright!” her husband said, hastening forward. “Are ye well, Lad?”

Lad only because though he was thirty years aged, the couple were twice that. Halting, he pressed a hand to his abdomen and smiled grimly.

The man gripped his shoulder. “Did ye eat at the inn after deliverin’ the priest’s message?”

Mason shook his head.

“Then not as bad as feared. I tell ye, good wife Hawley be a poor cook for how many folk turn sick after eatin’ her slop. Dunno what she puts in her pot, but boilin’ it brown does not kill the corrupt of it.” He made a face. “Even were I starvin’, I wouldna risk it.”

Being on the tall side, though not as tall as Mason at his true height, he had to bend a little and crane his neck upward to peer into the younger man’s face. “Though time be runnin’ ahead of us, do ye need to rest ere we continue, we can.” Receiving a shake of the head, he patted Mason’s shoulder. “Well then, come and drink and have a bite to hold ye a bit longer, then we be on our way.”

He liked the couple, and more of their fellow villagers than not. For that, he would exercise caution to ensure whatever came of his time upon Wulfenshire did none of them ill.

A quarter hour later, appearing to labor beneath the sack he could have tucked under an arm and still more than matched

the man and woman's pace, Mason trailed them. And once more wondered at the nature of the relationship between Warin Wulfrith and the lady who, when she and her brother paused to speak with the three come from the miller's village, had given the name of Vianne Wardieu—that name and her occupation known to him for overhearing idle talk weeks past.

Why had the mistress of King Jean's advisor not only returned to her homeland but come to Wulfenshire? And was she here to stay in the arms of a new lover, or would she return to her old one once Calais' fate was known?

The *mute* Mason gave a grunt that was as much disgust as appreciation for the wanderings of his mind, which had mostly been beyond him during years spent quarrying stone. There had been no time for such, nearly all of what went in his head devoted to healing and survival. Succeed in both, and the door to vengeance and reclamation of what was lost to him would open.

And so the door had. Though he had yet to fully exploit his escape, he would. And God help any who tried to return him to that hell.

CHAPTER 29

When he had swept up Charliese who ran at him the moment Esta released her, he had told himself the warmth pooling beneath his skin was due to riding amid the heat of a humid, sunlit day. Forget summer had yet to descend on this island kingdom. Forget even amid the worst of those months it was rare for heat to burrow under his skin.

When he had sought to give his full attention to the little girl who was exuberant despite disappointment her cousin had not accompanied Dangereuse, he had told himself his diverted thoughts were also due to the ride and more pronounced for a body not fully healed. Forget the pace had been relatively easy. Forget it was only hours in the saddle rather than a day.

When he had handed Charliese back to Esta with the promise to spend time with her later and the child became indignant over him taking the arm of the lady she did not know was her stepmother, he had told himself his harsh correction was due to poor sleep. Forget weariness had doubled since riding into the outer bailey. Forget the ache of his arm was more deeply felt. And forget how great the longing to gain his bed though he was refreshed with drink and viands well before he related what transpired after Vianne took ship to England.

Now with her one side of him and his uncle the other, his tale of what led to the defeat of the French was nearly all told when he paused to ensure the hall remained clear of servants. They had a right to know how their countrymen had kept hold of Calais, but not what next he would tell that was of great

relevance to Vianne. His sister and her husband having been apprised of the death of Pierre, he saw their attention was on the lady in anticipation of her reaction.

Moments later, it was seen in wide-flung eyes, and her response was much the same upon learning Aubert Marianne had owned to the likelihood of siring De Talliere's heir.

And there was more to tell, Warin having received tidings from Paris the day before he departed Calais. He angled toward Vianne. "You recall I told that in fleeing us, the Dauphin and Rollon de Talliere rode so near their horses went down?"

"And both barely got astride again to escape," she whispered.

"They did, but blame for the unhorsing that could have seen the prince captured fell upon the king's advisor—as did the noose about his neck after the raging King Jean returned to Paris and learned the Dauphin's reason for imprisoning De Talliere and of the likelihood it was you who warned the Captain of Calais of the attack."

Nearly all color left her face and her lids fluttered. "You are saying..."

"De Talliere is as dead as his son, Vianne."

She pressed a hand to the table as if to steady herself, then thrust back her chair and stood. "I..."

Had Warin not hastily risen as well, nearly cramping his healing leg, he might not have caught her. It was not her footing she lost but consciousness, and when he turned her toward him, her forehead dropped to his shoulder.

Though the others moved to give aid, he said, "I have her." Ignoring his arm's discomfort, he lifted her against his chest and, limp more pronounced, descended the dais.

As he neared the stairs, Dangereuse swept ahead to precede him up the steps and, before the solar, paused and raised her eyebrows.

Though Vianne would have been given her own chamber, since he did not know behind which door she slept—and wanted her beside him as on their wedding night—he said, “Aye, the solar.”

Allowing him but a glimpse of her smile, his sister opened the door and entered ahead of him. When she turned back the bedclothes to reveal crisp sheets, he knew Owen, anticipating his nephew’s return for his receipt of the king’s missive, had vacated the chamber.

Warin settled Vianne on the mattress and sighed over unburdening his arm, the relief of which made him feel a stripling struggling to heft a sword.

As he stepped back, Dangereuse drew the sheet over Vianne. “As you are in need of rest as well, I shall leave you to it,” she said and, moments later, closed the door.

Warin stared at the woman in his bed, then removed his boots. Though he longed to lie down, he moved toward the sideboard to complete his ablutions—of utmost importance, cleaning his healing wounds.

“Truly, he is dead, Warin?”

He came around. Seeing in her golden eyes how desperate she was for confirmation, he returned and lowered to the mattress. “Since it was Chevalier Joffrey who sent word, there is no doubt.”

“It is over then.”

Though he had believed it over once she was aboard ship, clearly she had feared that just as De Talliere had retrieved her once from England, he would try again. “It is over.”

Squeezing her eyes closed, she turned away, and when he started to draw her into his arms, jerked free. “I cannot...I need to...”

He stood, but not to leave her with head tucked and shoulders quaking. He went to the side of the bed nearest the door—a husband’s place for the protection of his wife should an intruder enter.

For her soft weeping, only when he settled beside her did she react. Snapping up her chin, she pleaded, “Pray, leave me ___”

“I will not.” He slid an arm beneath her and pulled her to him.

Resistance fleeting, she pressed her face into his chest and wet his garment with tears.

“All is well and will be well,” he spoke the same as done in Calais before placing the ring on her hand. Though he hoped that would calm her, her weeping became less restrained, and all he could do was stroke her head until she quieted.

Then he slept, though he did not know it until she raised her face and said, “Forgive me.”

With much effort, he brought her to focus. “Nothing to forgive, Vianne. At the end of a cruel journey, one would have to have inhuman strength to contain emotions so long dammed.”

“You believe mine a cruel journey?” she said with the disbelief of one who does not trust another to understand something he has not suffered.

It was true he could not fully understand it, but though he had yet to have all of her tale, he believed she was as much a victim as any woman who must sacrifice some of her soul to survive. “Aye, cruel.” He swept hair from her eyes. “But as told, it is over. You have come home and are staying.”

“In England.”

It bothered she did not speak of Romary, but he said, “In England.” And though he wanted to add that an annulment need not be sought, he thought it best broached with a kiss. Or perhaps that was his body talking, fatigue that had made him long for bed in remission now her curves fit him and mouth was so close.

He leaned in—not all the way lest his timing was terribly wrong—and when she parted her lips, pressed his mouth to hers.

Tentatively, she pressed back.

My wife's permission granted, he thought, that having been just as imperative with Blythe for the belief the gift of a woman's body was no gift did she not wish it unwrapped regardless of rights granted her husband.

Though his arm and leg protested as he levered up to roll her beneath him, it was Vianne's protest that stopped him. And more powerful that for her words.

"The annulment, Warin! We cannot do this."

Though much of his mind was on how to quickly divest them of their garments, enough remained on this woman to heed her. And make his wishes known. "I would not have our marriage annulled. I want us to make—"

—"the best of it," she finished.

He did not think he had been going to say that, but he could not be certain for his body once more distractingly warm. Still, he said what sounded right considering what he felt for her, "I want to make a life with you."

Emotions dashed across her face, then she said, "I do not want that."

Staring into her tear-bright eyes, he said, "Now you are free of De Talliere, what do you want?"

"To return to my family and remain at Chesne providing they suffer no more than already they have." She moistened her lips. "Though King Edward says he shall seek to restore me to society, just because his subjects behave as commanded in his presence does not mean they will outside it. And you have a daughter to consider. For her illegitimacy, already she must scale a formidable wall to become the lady you would have her be. I will not add to the height of that wall, and you should not wish it no matter how much you desire me."

These were things he had considered and believed would be overcome in time. Did he delude himself? Did desire and other things felt for her have the power to make him see less sense than he ought?

For muddling thoughts and fatigue, he could not know. But surely better he would once armed with what she had yet to tell. With a sigh felt all the way through his body, he dropped onto his back. “I have waited on your tale. You must agree it is due, Vianne.”

“Non.”

Frustrated by her refusal, it was good he kept his gaze on the ceiling.

“But this I promise, Warin—if we are denied an annulment, since it is your right to know as my husband, I will tell it then.” She touched his arm. “But if you would like, I will share how my brother came to be here.”

He shifted his jaw. “I listen,” he said though that was less true for his body urging him to use time he would have spent on her tale on the rest it needed.

Still, he mostly attended to what had to do with the missive she had protested him reading upon returning to consciousness after her miscarriage. What her family’s steward had done angered far more than being denied her tale. Believing she was rejected by those who ought to love her regardless of what she had done, she had forced a trade not needed in the end. Thus, more she suffered De Talliere and lost her babe—and nearly her life—as she might not have had she remained in England. And greater the crime for the steward disappearing before justice was served.

“And here I thought it punishment,” he said, though he did not realize he spoke aloud until she asked what he meant. “That for failing to keep you from sacrificing yourself, the king sent me to recover the missing information about Calais—and you if you wished it.”

She frowned. “You no longer think it punishment?”

Had he said he thought that? He had—and mere moments ago. *Lord, I need sleep!* “Not punishment, Vianne.”

“Then what was it?”

“A blessing.” At her gasp, he said, “Aye, for bringing you out of that. I could not save my first wife, but you...” He

closed his eyes. "God gave me that."

As he surrendered to sleep, he heard what sounded Vianne's voice but was surely that of his first wife when he stopped grudgingly courting her and she ceased resisting.

"I think I could be very happy with you, Warin." More words were spoken, but now that sleep had his attention, it would not share him.

HE WAS LETTING HER GO. As she wished. And he did not.

Having sought her out after awakening to find she left the bed during the night, then agreeing to her wish to return to Chesne with her brother who departed this day, it seemed their marriage was solely in the hands of the Church. He might want to fight the outcome if it proved different from what he desired, but he was determined he would not.

Charliese was upset upon learning Vianne was leaving Romary as not expected for jealousy she had cast at the lady on the day past. Then the imp, perched on his thigh as they broke their fast, had set to charming him into wedding Vianne who she claimed Esta agreed would be a good mother.

Warin had felt put through. Averse to offering hope where there might be none, he had said, *Whoever I choose to mother you will be more than good, little one.* And sidelong he had seen Vianne sitting with Esta at the hearth turn her face away.

Now astride alongside Squire Gunulf and wearing the gown of heavy hem, she smiled at Charliese and raised a hand in parting. Though the girl had been pouting where she stood between Esta and him in the outer bailey, she pulled her hand from Warin's and returned the wave.

When brother and sister guided their horses over the drawbridge, the child insisted on seeing them out of sight, which was unfortunate for Warin having things to do ahead of the physician's arrival. Though a full night's sleep had cured much of what ailed him, the wound to his arm he had

neglected to clean and salve before joining Vianne on the bed was more felt for there being no question of infection. Even before exposing the wound this morn, the throb, burn, and smell had told what he would find.

As one did not take infections lightly since they could debilitate and even kill, discreetly he had sent for the physician, not wanting Vianne to feel she must remain at Romary with her heart set on reuniting with her family. It was the same for his sister and her husband who were to return to the demesne she administered until their youngest brother became its keeper. Hopefully, the De Arells would be well on their way before the man of medicine arrived.

“You look better, Warin,” Dangereuse said as she and Rhys returned with him to the donjon. “How are you feeling?”

“As surely you noticed, my limp is nearly absent.”

“I do not speak only of war injuries.” She glanced around at Esta slowly following with Charliese who had proclaimed she was no baby to be carried. “Do you love her, Warin?”

That surprised—until he reminded himself this was the sister of his childhood whose joy was stolen upon wedding a man she should not have. Blessedly, at last united with the one their sire had intended for her, she was happy again. And more so for providing her son a father who loved him as if his own and whose influence and insight continued to correct behavior Dangereuse had previously believed best dealt with by dedicating to the Church one capable of becoming a great warrior with the proper training. And that Sebastian now received at Wulfen.

Dangereuse looped an arm through his. “Surely you know that do you not give answer to a woman, she may regard it as permission to provide her own?”

He could have ignored that and had the excuse of her pressing him in front of her husband, but that would have been answer enough. Lowering his voice so Charliese would not hear, he said, “I feel more for the lady than I expected to feel for another woman—so much I would not seek an annulment. But that is what she wants.”

“To protect you and Charliese.” It was said with little question.

“I believe so—or mayhap I but wish it.”

“I say not, Warin. Despite her past that will be difficult to address for a time and our grandmother’s discomfort with what it could bode for Charliese and you, as Lady Vianne seeks to protect you when it would benefit her to lay claim to our name, methinks she would make a good mother *and* wife.”

He considered her, next Sir Rhys. Though the knight was party to their conversation, he distanced himself by showing what appeared genuine interest in the inner wall that yet bore marks of the destruction wrought on Romary when its former baron was besieged and a flaming arrow loosed upon Warin from that very wall.

Returning to his sister as they passed beneath the raised portcullis, he said, “I am in accord regarding Lady Vianne, but this is the way of things for now.”

“For now,” she acceded.

He exhaled, and when his lowering shoulders caused pain to flare amid infected flesh, assured himself, *Nothing the physician cannot set aright. All will be well.*

CHAPTER 30

Chesne Castle, England

June 19, 1354

Happiness amid sorrow was no easy thing to balance, but she tried.

The hardest part of reconciling with her family a fortnight past had been her sire's reaction, though Gunulf had prepared him and her sisters by leaving Vianne at an inn outside the walls until they were ready to receive her.

For her brother acquainting her with the depth of the old baron's incapacity, she had not expected her father capable of expressing himself as well as he had when his long-gone daughter stood before him and her wary sisters—one of whom was somewhat recognizable, the other barely for being so young when Vianne departed.

Arnulf Wardieu, of Christian name ending in *ulf* as was tradition for the eldest son, had stared at her so long that though the heart of her wanted to believe it was the best he could do to welcome her home, fear had whispered he could not bear showing more than that expressionless mask for shame over her notoriety. But then the side of his face that did not slump had lifted and he had stretched forth his functioning arm and spoken her name.

Vianne had dropped to her knees before him where he sat in a chair, lowered her head to his lap, and wound her arms around his thin waist. He had spoken, and she had understood him well enough to know he was pleased she was home.

When their weeping was done, her father had encouraged his other daughters to embrace her. Whereas Rhoswen had done so with reserve, the youngest less so, holding to her longer, smiling shyly, and whispering that Vianne was as beautiful as told—as if Plesance and Rhoswen were not. Though Vianne did not think the sisters greatly resembled each other, their departed mother had bequeathed all lovely faces and figures.

Awkwardness had persisted those first days and increased when Gunulf returned to his lord, but it had eased this past sennight, for which gratitude was owed the elusive Sir Yates.

Having heard Rhoswen mutter a disparaging remark about Vianne, he had risen from the high table where he worked the accounting, pointed at her, and rebuked, *You do yourself no kindness in ignoring your sister's service and value to the Crown—and her sacrifice now you know the truth of her blackened reputation. That is ill enough, but to show her no respect...* He had shaken his head. *I thought you pleasingly different from most ladies at court.*

As if unable to tolerate her presence, he had left the hall, and Vianne rendered speechless had risked approaching her sister who swayed as if the floor might collapse beneath her. It had been worth it, Rhoswen accepting the arms come around her and, after tears, hugging Vianne.

Though that last had been brief, accompanied by Plesance later that day, Rhoswen had apologized and explained the reason for her anger. Because of Vianne's notoriety, not only had she no prospects for a good marriage, but no true friendship with other ladies who, though unworthy for casting another's sins on the sisters, should at least be civil.

Vianne had forgiven her and herself sought forgiveness and received it. It was then Rhoswen confided the hope a blessing would come of being shunned—that she would be glad of it for keeping her free to wed a man for whom she felt so much she was afraid to name it love. That man being Sir Yates, Vianne had set to repairing her sister's standing, of which Rhoswen remained unaware those first days for Plesance's warning their sister donned a thorny suit of pride

when others sought to do for her what she believed she could do herself.

Four days past, Rhoswen had railed at the two after catching them extolling her virtues within hearing of the king's man. Though subtly done by Vianne who had years of experience at the French court, because of Plesance's struggle to keep her thoughts private for how much they delighted and made her giggle, they were had. And not only by Rhoswen.

Several times Sir Yates had shone disapproval on the eldest and youngest sisters—though once he had let a smile slip.

It was then Vianne glimpsed in him what Rhoswen saw beyond his partially ruined countenance. Of usually bland or dour expression, one could say he was not handsome, but that brief smile proved otherwise, and it made her wonder how many Rhoswen had seen and under what circumstances. However, she did no more than wonder, it being enough that, despite her sister's dented pride, the knight and she began speaking again. And with something more than civility.

“Vi...anne?”

Ashamed her thoughts had drifted from her sire into whose mouth she spooned small bites of stew he could chew without dirtying his beard and injuring his dignity, she exclaimed, “Forgive this wandering mind,” and dipped the spoon.

“Nay!”

When she looked up, he moved his eyes to the contents and shook his head. Just as his warrior's body was not what once it had been, neither his appetite.

Setting the bowl on the table, she returned her regard to him.

Fairly certain of the reason he raised his eyebrows, she nodded at the two seated at the high table, her sister having informed their temporary steward that her desire to learn how to administer a demesne was no whim since one day she would aid her husband. “My mind was wandering the direction of Rhoswen and Sir Yates,” she said.

His smile lacked symmetry, but there was no mistaking his pleasure over a shared observation.

“You like him, Sire.”

He nodded.

“As do I,” she said, recalling the crack in Sir Yates’ demeanor when she delivered the valuables she had hidden in her gown and requested they be used to restore what the steward had stolen from her family. Upon turning back the cloths that held gems, gold, and silver, the crack had widened and she had her first real smile from the king’s man.

When she had asked if it was enough and told she had coin as well and a few other precious items, he had assured her it was sufficient even beyond outfitting her brother with weaponry, fine armor, and destrier once he earned his spurs. He had even suggested she hold back a portion. She had not, hopeful any excess could be put toward her sisters’ dowries.

“Vi...anne?”

She blinked. “I was wondering how we might make Sir Yates stay.”

Another nod. Then as done often, though sometimes with words despite the struggle to form them, he asked the state of her heart by touching his and pointing to hers.

To him alone she had confided her love for Warin, it easier for the coward of her to share with one who, if he wished to force his opinion on her, could not easily. Still, she was in no doubt he believed she should become the mother a little girl needed and, God willing, birth children whose Wardieu blood would course alongside Wulfrith.

“My heart is better every day,” she said.

Now a glower that told he knew a lie when he heard one and he was offended she thought him too incapacitated to identify it.

She sighed. “Forgive me for saying what I long for, not what is true—yet.”

He jerked his chin. Apology accepted.

“Are you sure you cannot eat more, Father?”

“Sure,” he said thickly.

“Then what am I to do with the rest?” She lifted the bowl.

One side of his mouth hitched. “Bru...tus.”

Immediately, the aged hound poked its head above the arm of its master’s chair.

Vianne exaggerated a grimace. “He takes on fat, and you know Plesance blames me.”

“Faithful...old...soon gone.”

Pained over the sense he spoke not only of the hound, she composed her face, then placed the bowl before the dog who thrust his muzzle in it.

Sitting back, she closed a hand over her sire’s that still served him fairly well. “I love you.”

“I...you.”

There went her emotions again, and in response to her tears, his eyes moistened.

Here happiness amid the sorrow of his infirmity and her longing for a man it would benefit only her were she to hold to him.

Be quick to use your influence, King Edward, she silently appealed. As there is hope in the waiting—selfish hope that you might fail—it must be extinguished.

An hour later, with her sire settled in the chamber constructed for him just off the hall, Vianne was lowering beside Plesance at the hearth where they would continue lessons in the intricate embroidery popular at the French court when the Captain of the Guard entered—and not alone.

Though Sir Yates rose from the high table to greet one he surely knew for having received his training at Wulfen, the moment their visitor’s gaze landed on Vianne, it was her he advanced upon.

“Sir Owen,” she said as he halted. “What do you—?” Fearing she had the answer for the grim of his mouth, she asked, “Warin?”

“Aye, infection in his arm. Though the physician quickly tended him and healing began apace, five days gone he lost what was gained. A great fever put him to bed, and when I left a day and a half past, still he was there.”

Vianne dropped into the chair behind and, feeling her little sister catch up her hand, said, “Will he recover?”

“For that we pray. As requested of me, I am here to take you home.”

“Warin asked it of you?”

A hesitation. “Nay, my niece, Fira.”

“Fira?”

“Shortly before the infection returned, she gained her eldest brother’s escort to Romary to meet you, unaware you had departed. Not long after Hector returned to Wulfen, she found herself bedside tending Warin—and quite well.”

As if forgetting the seriousness of the tidings he delivered, his expression softened. “That young lady is a wonder, and has been since her birth. Though I was not at Stern for that event, my mother, Lady Héloïse, confirmed my sister-in-law’s claim her babe did not protest the loss of the womb with a scream but greeted the world with a burble of laughter. It made me wish as only glancingly done before to have children of my own.” He trailed off. “You must think me callous to speak of such things with my nephew’s life in question, a life that may have been lost since I departed Romary.”

She did not think that, despite being anxious to learn more about Warin upon which to hang hope that he would not leave her a widow.

“As told, Warin made his request to Fira that you return to him,” Sir Owen continued, “albeit not directly.”

She frowned. “I do not understand.”

“In his fever, it was not the name of his beloved first wife he spoke. It was yours.”

“Oh,” she breathed, and though she wanted to believe it meant something—and that something was in accord with her heart, she feared selfishness lay that direction.

“You will come, Lady?”

Even were it only in his dreams Warin truly wanted her, she would not deny him. “I shall,” she said and, grateful for the squeeze of Plesance’s hand, stood. “I will require a half hour. Pray, refresh yourself while I speak with my sire and gather what is needed for the journey.”

The knight nodded and crossed to Sir Yates who greeted him with respect due an esteemed warrior and former instructor, then introduced him to Rhoswen with a bit of a flush and what seemed almost pride. He might not know it—or had yet to accept it—but what Rhoswen wanted, likely she would get.

As for what Vianne wanted, there was only one thing—that Warin live so he could find happiness.

If possible with me, the thought passed before her mind for it being her name he had spoken in his struggle to hold to life—a foolish thought best put away. And she would. Just not yet.

CHAPTER 31

Romary Castle, Wulfenshire

June 21, 1354

Fira of fiery hair and lovely, somewhat mischievous countenance had left her brother's side, though venturing only as far as the landing atop stairs whose lanterns alleviated the dim of approaching night that had surely seen Chariese put to bed.

"Glad tidings!" She flashed pretty teeth at her uncle who paused, then moved her smile to the lady coming off the steps behind him. A moment later, she was on her toes and pecking a kiss on the cheek of one whose heart fluttered with hope over the young woman's pronouncement. And there was more. "The fever broke this morn, my lady!"

Her voice was wondrous, though not as much as the words that nearly made Vianne sob.

"The physician?" her uncle asked.

Lady Fira turned to him. "He tells the infection resolves, and I myself saw the flesh to be markedly improved. Too, the seepage is no longer foul."

He lowered his lids. "Praise the Lord."

Vianne did, certain her prayers and those of her family who had seemed genuinely saddened by her departure had elevated the prayers of the Wulfriths.

"As always, Esta has been most helpful," Fira said, and Vianne saw a twitch about her mouth that reminded her of

Plesance's struggle to hide delight from one who had yet to see things her way. Quite possibly, Warin's youngest sibling also extolled the virtues of one to whom her audience was not receptive.

But to Vianne's surprise, Sir Owen said, "She is a good woman."

Might the two have shared further kisses in her absence? she wondered, though only fleetingly for needing an answer of greater import. "May I go to your brother, Lady Fira?"

"Of course! Upon hearing horses in the inner bailey, for that I left him."

"I thank you." Vianne stepped past the two and entered the solar. Candlelight revealing Warin was on his side in the center of the bed, she closed the door quietly, then crossed to the chair drawn near, removed her mantle, and lowered.

His restful face swelled her heart for what appeared confirmation the worst was past. During the ride, she had yielded to the thought that him speaking her name in his sleep indicated he returned her love in some measure and her arrival would imbue him with the strength needed to heal. As he had begun recovering in her absence, it had been merely fanciful. Still, she did not regret coming, the empty of her filling just in being near him again.

She glanced at his bandaged arm and hesitated in reaching for his hand when flickering light revealed a sheen on his brow. Then the fever said to have broken was not fully resolved? Or did it creep through him again in readiness to flare anew?

Vianne touched his brow. It was not hot, but quite warm. Hoping it was due to the chamber being overheated, she rose and opened the shutters of the nearest window to let in the cool of night. Returning, she lowered to the mattress edge.

When he murmured something that could not have been her name, she lifted his hand and touched the scars on his palm and ribbing his fingers.

"Vianne?" *Now* her name on his lips, now his eyes on her.

“I am returned,” she said and closed her hand over his.

“I have dreamed you. Do I dream you again?”

“Non, I am here.”

“Would not a dream say that?”

It felt good to smile. “Had not Sir Owen come for me, certes I would be all dream.”

The narrowing of his lids evidence he remained uncertain, she touched her mouth to his. “A dream would not do *that*,” she said, drawing back.

“You are wrong. That very thing this lady of my dreams does often. Then disappears.”

“Not this time. See—still I am here.”

Warin stared at the vision of the woman whose features and figure were clear even in candlelight, no blur nor distortion about her as when she moved behind his lids. “You came because they feared I would not rise again.”

“Oui.”

So she could be bedside during my last hours, he thought. Just as I wished to be with my first wife and was denied.

“I could not refuse,” she said, “even had Sir Owen not told...”

He frowned. “What?”

She released his hand. “He said your sister reported you called my name in your fever.”

He did not remember that, the gap further proof of how senseless he had been in his struggle with death. And there was proof of another thing for her name being the one he spoke, which told Fira and his uncle much he had tried not to dwell on. “Surely spoken when I dreamed of you,” he said.

She parted her lips to say something but hesitated. When finally she spoke, he was fairly certain it was different from what was first upon her tongue. “I feared we would not arrive in time, and yet you are conscious and on the mend.”

“I am glad you came. There are things we must discuss, Vianne.”

“They can wait.” She started to rise.

He caught her arm, and as if she feared undoing his healing, she did not resist when he drew her back. “As those things are the way forward for us, they should not wait.”

“What way forward do you speak of?”

Daring to believe he heard more hope in her voice than wariness, he said, “Stay and gift me your tale.”

“Gift?” she exclaimed.

“I would know you better, Vianne Wulfrith.”

Tears rushed her eyes. “If the Pope is willing, not long *Wulfrith.*”

“Tell me.”

“As already agreed, I shall if we are denied an annulment.”

Rather than directly dispute they had an agreement, he said, “Then there is no reason not to tell me now.”

Her eyes widened. “Already the Church has ruled it is not possible to annul the marriage?”

Warin pushed onto an elbow and was relieved much of his earlier weakness had abated. “Nay, what is not possible is to give up on you—at least, not easily.”

“Warin?” she questioned.

He set a hand on her cheek and was relieved he felt only mild discomfort in that arm. “Neither do I understand it, just as I did not understand how it came to be with my first wife. But I am sincere in saying if you will hold to me, I will hold to you. And be glad of it.”

Her jaw convulsed.

“As you must know for word received ahead of our vows that the recovered ships would likely make port in time, I was not as receptive to an annulment as I allowed you to believe to

overcome your objections. I hold that—” A sweep of fatigue like when first he fell gravely ill made him close his eyes.

“Warin, are you—?”

“’Tis just the toiling of a body healing itself.” He returned to his side, and before she could press for them to speak later, said, “As I mean to discuss this now, it will be easier if you lie down.”

She looked to the space beside him that would accommodate her only were she comfortable with less than a foot between them, but before he could shift to provide more room, she raised her legs and settled on her side facing him. “Better?”

He nodded. “Though I hold marital vows to be sacred, I allow that in the absence of consummation, dissolution is acceptable so one or both have the chance for a life well spent on respect and even love.” He returned his hand to her cheek. “Ere you sailed, I had begun to imagine—and want—a life with you.”

Hoping her sharp breath portended surprise of the good sort, he waited and, when a tear spilled, brushed it away. “Tell me your tale, Vianne.”

“Very well,” she breathed. “Then regardless of whatever it is we feel for each other, you will agree dissolution is best for you and Charliese.”

He did not believe he would, but withdrew his hand.

“As you know, my sire is a Wardieu. As you may not know, he is also a De Morville of France. My grandmother—”

“De Morville, you say?” he interrupted. “You speak of those descended from Sir Elias, the poet and storyteller?”

A smile touched her mouth. “Many who learn I am of his line attribute to him my ability to weave words.”

Warin nearly laughed. “You know not his connection to my family, do you?”

She frowned. “I am unaware for it being my grandmother who brought the De Morville name to England in 1307 when

she accompanied Princess Isabella of France to wed our king's sire. Two years later, she married Baron Wardieu. A year after that, my sire was born."

Deciding this detour was worth taking though his body wanted more sleep, Warin recalled the pertinent details of her ancestor. "Two hundred years gone, wishing a troubadour's life rather than that of a fighting man, the young Elias de Morville defied his sire and departed France. During his adventures in England, he was befriended by the Wulfriths who completed his knight's training, preparing him to overcome what would eventually be required to gain the love of a woman named Honore. The whole of his story is included in *The Book of Wulfrith* he began for us, and of which my grandmother is its current keeper. In training my sister, Fira, to take her place, ever they are expanding on and updating our history."

She gave a little laugh. "I would love to..."

He knew what she did not finish for being less certain of their marriage than he. "I believe you will, Vianne. Now let us return to the tale of Sir Elias' descendant."

She nodded. "Here you will understand why I mentioned my French grandmother. In early 1346, before the war began in earnest, my sire sent me to wed a distant De Morville cousin in France. At thirty, Balian Artois was twice my years, handsome, charming, and kind. Though I missed home and disliked the French court where he served as the eyes and ears of the Duke of Normandy who is now King Jean, I liked him well and believed I could be as happy with him as he seemed with me." She frowned. "You saw the ring on a ribbon I carry in my purse."

"I did," he said and made no mention of Charlie's confession that she had not only trespassed on that purse but donned the ring.

"I cherished what he gave me to wear around my neck until he could place it on my finger, but..." She paused. "...the day we were to wed, he died not from illness nor accident. En route to the church, he was slain."

“Lord,” he said, then, “I am sorry. Who slew him?”

“A man who caught him unawares—he who wanted me and could not have me.”

“De Talliere?” Warin nearly barked.

“It is so, and his defense was he and others were present when Balian treasonously commented that Edward of England had a better claim to the throne of France than Philip or his son, Jean. Thus, not only was Rollon pardoned, but elevated for his loyalty—and, I believe, guile since it was no secret he lusted after me. I knew his motives the same as King Philip and his son, but as there were supposedly credible witnesses to Balian’s words, all fell in Rollon’s favor.”

“And you were forced to become his mistress.”

“Non, not then. My fall came years later.” She nodded as if encouraging herself to continue. “When my requests to King Philip to return me to my family went unanswered due to the loom of outright war with England, I managed to get word of Balian’s death to my sire so he could make the arrangements. During the long wait, I struggled to negotiate the court lest I become prey to Rollon and others who sought to take advantage of the vulnerable Englishwoman in their midst. Thus, when King Edward sent an ambassador to Paris for talks ahead of the invasion that, ultimately, gave him victory at Crécy and Calais, I stole an audience with the man.”

“And instead of getting you home, he enlisted a spy,” Warin said darkly.

“Non, he told my sire had requested King Edward’s assistance in returning his daughter to England, and for that, he had discussed me with King Philip. However, the only assurance given him was that he who claimed wardship of me would find a husband to replace the traitor to the French Crown. Thus, there being nothing the ambassador could do, he left me to continue evading men more often desirous of making a mistress of me than a wife. Rollon being among the latter, he tried to present me with a ring he said was worthier of my beauty than what I wore around my neck. Sickened over imaginings of becoming the property of he who put Balian in

the ground, I refused, and for every day I endured being little more than a prisoner, the angrier I became.”

She breathed deep. “When the ambassador returned to Paris, he slipped me a letter from King Edward that told King Philip refused to send me home and asked for my aid in the war soon to land on French soil so it not be fought on English.”

“You believe Edward did all he could to get you home, Vianne?”

She hesitated, said, “I did then, though there are times the hard and suspicious of me questions if I was an opportunity exploited for being in the heart of the enemy camp.” She frowned. “Do you believe it?”

Further he considered it. “More than I do not. Despite Edward’s flaws, he is mostly a good man and a great king.”

“And yet to be a great king, sometimes one must sacrifice the few to protect the multitude,” she said. “Thus, I would not be entirely surprised were I deceived into becoming a sacrifice.” She sighed. “I know it sounds cowardly, but I prefer to believe what I did for my country was not the result of a lie fed me, but for making the best of what could not be overcome.”

“Regardless, the king owes you much.”

After some moments, she said, “I am home. That and whatever is needed to cause as little pain as possible for those I love is all I ask of him.”

Silence, during which Warin hoped the king failed her with regard to the annulment, then she continued, “Edward having anticipated I would agree to send word of what went at court to aid in seating the rightful heir on France’s throne, his letter told all was in place. I had but to pass my findings to an Italian merchant of fine cloth who often visited the palace to meet the needs of the ladies, and he would send it on its way.”

“Chevalier Joffrey being one of those along the way,” Warin said.

She harrumphed. “That I would never have guessed.”

“Which is why he was perfectly positioned.”

She nodded. “I thought I had but to listen and report on anything of consequence, but it was more complicated. I had to delve, and soon realized the only way to do so and survive was to play a part abhorrent to me for the necessity—and danger—of flirtation.”

Recalling the parts they had played for the disagreeable priest on their nuptial night, Warin understood her reaction to him naming it that.

“Eventually, I became adept at gaining information while dancing out of reach of those intent on pressing their attentions on me. Surprisingly, I had two allies. One was the recitations commanded of me when it was learned I wrote poetry and songs like my ancestor. As I was a source of entertainment for King Philip, I exploited it by putting more effort into my compositions and gained some protection from him.”

“Most surprisingly, my second ally was Rollon, whose continued pursuit the king enjoyed for how much it amused. The one time I entreated him to stop his advisor from feeding the rumor I warmed his bed, he told I had but to agree to wed him. Though still I refused, as Rollon’s power grew, there was good in his pursuit for his ability to punish others who also sought what I would not give. Thus, I was afforded further protection that often cleared the way for me to gain information from those *I* pursued.”

“Shortly after Jean succeeded King Philip, Rollon ended his pursuit to wed another—a lady younger than I whom his son wished for a wife. Thinking he would be content enough to leave me be, I was relieved though it meant losing that protection. And perhaps he would have been content had I not chosen the wrong time to search his apartment for proof of a rumor King Edward would need if it proved true.” As if seeing that day, her eyes went distant. “Having watched Rollon depart the palace, I thought it the perfect opportunity to find the documents. But hardly had I begun looking when I heard his voice in the corridor and had only enough time to flee his desk and gain the cover of his bedchamber.” She shivered. “The

cause of his return proved a mishap with his horse that required a change of clothes.”

“Vianne,” Warin said and regretted the harshness of his voice lest she think his anger directed at her rather than De Talliere. “Come close.”

“Why?”

“I do not think cold is what makes you quake, but I believe the warmth of my body will aid.”

From her hesitation, he thought she would refuse, but she turned and, as she settled her back against his front, he guessed she yielded for it being easier to tell the rest were she not facing him.

Sliding his bandaged arm around her, he curved his hand beneath her waist. Minutes passed, during which his body relaxing against hers tempted him to sleep. Had her silence persisted much longer, he might have succumbed.

“Even had there been sufficient cover to conceal me, there was no time to gain it. I knew I was about to be found in an apartment I had only two reasons to trespass upon. The first would see me hung until nearly dead, cut down, and further tortured ahead of my heinous end. Though the second would be another kind of death, I chose that, telling myself I could continue serving my king and one day escape Rollon.”

Her next breath was so full he had to ease his arm to allow it. “I stood near the bed as a harlot would, and when he entered, I gave him the smile only ever given others whose intelligence I sought. Then I told though I was disappointed he had wed and abandoned the chase, at long last I yielded to desire.” She cleared her throat. “I think he believed me because he needed salve for the injury long dealt his pride and to wield it against those who mocked his pursuit of me.” She shivered harder. “Though fairly recently wed, he did not hesitate to...”

“Vianne, you need tell no more. I understand you had no choice.”

“Non, you do not understand—not fully. And you must to accept an annulment should be had if possible.”

As it would do no good to argue, he said, “I listen.”

“Though Rollon was pleased I was yet virtuous, he was disappointed by my response. Blessedly, rather than realize it was mostly due to revulsion, he said I but required *practice*.”

That last word enunciated and with much sibilance, Warin was swept back to when he kissed her before proposing marriage. Though he had named that intimacy *practice*, he had referred to the kiss of peace following the speaking of vows. Now, understanding her reaction, greater his satisfaction De Talliere and his son could no longer threaten her.

Another clearing of her throat returning him to the present, he asked, “Do you need drink, Vianne?”

“Non, what I need is to tell this and never again.”

Hearing tears in her voice, he longed to turn her toward him, but she did not want that. Yet.

“Having no care for the humiliation his wife would suffer when word reached her on his estate east of Paris, he made me his court mistress. For the part I wrote to preserve my life and to continue aiding England, I came to understand why some desperate to escape their circumstances for having no way out, take their lives.”

Warin stiffened. “You considered doing so?”

“Only self pityingly. Blessedly, no matter how small my hope, I nurtured it. And easier that when I discovered the elixir of overly imbibing.”

“It made relations with him more tolerable.”

“Oui, loosening me such that there was less chance he would discover I felt no desire and sooner allowing me to find solace in sleep needed to face another day of gleaning information ahead of another night...”

He wanted to put end to her tale, but as it seemed a poison in need of purging, resisted.

“It became easier to gain what King Edward needed, not only for things he did not take precautions against me seeing when I was alone in the apartment, but for conversations with others when he thought me asleep. One was with his son who did not know I was behind that door. Though ever Pierre made it clear he did not like the woman with whom his sire was obsessed, once I became Rollon’s mistress, the strain between us increased. I knew Rollon did him wrong in wedding the lady whose betrothal he had sought, and that he remained angry. What I did not expect was greater anger for the humiliation dealt the woman over her husband’s philandering and that I was firmly in its path—the Englishwoman whose bewitchment of his sire pained the lady with whom he was besotted. I regretted the ill done her, but could only hope there was good in her rarely suffering Rollon’s attentions, that it was something of a balm for the sly comments made about her empty womb.”

Vianne peered over her shoulder. “I know the Church believes it wrong to prevent pregnancy, but I took herbs, not only for having no wish to bear his child but to avoid further humiliating the lady by giving him what she could not for his neglect.”

“Twice the herbs failed,” he said for her having revealed in Normandy her miscarriage there was not her first.

She looked forward again, whispered, “Oui, and yet both pregnancies undone.”

He thought that the end of it, but she continued, “Early last year, when I could no longer deny I was with child for missing four menses, knowing Rollon would soon notice the change in my body, I had to tell him. Though I had sought to prevent pregnancy, once I accepted a babe grew in me, my heart wanted it so something beautiful and innocent would come of what was ugly and sinful.”

She moistened her lips. “Despite Rollon’s jealousy over attentions paid me by a Gascon lord and mild trespasses I permitted to probe for the man’s allegiance to Edward, I was unprepared when he accused me of claiming another man’s child was his. I resisted slapping him, but when he named me

a harlot as though I was not already that to him, I did strike. Shockingly, he struck me back so hard I spun and my abdomen hit the edge of a table. He left me where I dropped, and that night when he returned and found me awakened by cramping and bleeding, he was repentant—said he had not meant to harm me nor the babe and apologized for believing I cuckolded him.”

Her body jerked with a swallowed sob. “I did not play my part well that night, being angrily grieved though I told myself I ought not feel for a child sired by him. But the loss tore at me, and lest I spew more that would see me as dead as my child, afterward I did not speak to him for days, though he did everything to please me except leave me be. When I was able to feign forgiveness, though only for being armed with determination to scrape him raw of information before leaving him, he was more accommodating than ever. Seeing light ahead of me, more easily I formed words of love to match those he spoke. Then in November last year, I had what was needed to hook Edward into sending a man to meet with me.”

“King Jean’s plan to take back Calais.”

“Oui, though I did not reveal it was that port city against which forces would be sent, nor the date.”

“For that, Sir Rhys met you in Guines when you accompanied De Talliere to discuss extending the truce.”

She nodded. “As you know, I withheld the missing information, insisting I deliver it personally so Edward’s man would have to take me to England.”

“And he did.”

“Unfortunately, we were chased by Rollon’s son and his men all the way to the ship, across the channel, and onto Wulfenshire where Sir Rhys’ men were mortally injured and him nearly so when he sought to give me time to flee.”

Recalling the capture of his sister and Sir Rhys, the battle on the shore, and Vianne offering herself to save Dangereuse, Warin said, “All for naught,” and waited for her to continue.

When she did not, he asked, “How did De Talliere receive you when you were returned to him?”

“With much suspicion. He told he believed my claim of abduction, but for months I could not leave the manor, and when I was permitted outside on the grounds, I was required to wear the yellow hood—for my protection, he said, which allowed his men to more easily keep me in sight should there be another attempt to abduct me. He did not trust me nor my tale, and for that and fear he would react violently when he learned I was with child again as I had not known I was when I fled him, I delayed revealing it. Certain he would suspect Sir Rhys or another of siring the babe, I thought its chances better were he to learn of its existence at court.”

She laughed bitterly. “Not that it saved my first babe, but I need not have a sense beyond the natural to have felt how much greater the danger at the manor. Then just as my belly began showing it was no great meal straining my seams, King Jean ordered me to attend his birthday celebration. The day I returned to Paris, Rollon realized I was pregnant and questioned who was responsible.”

Again, she looked around. “When he handed me onto the dais to present my composition that subtly acknowledged Pierre’s cruelty in drowning the English brigands who aided in recovering me, I feared there was no hope for me nor my child—and more I believed it when I saw you in the audience and thought you had come to avenge your sister’s death.”

“When all I wanted was the date of the attack and to bring you home should you wish it.”

She turned into him and, golden eyes staring into his, said, “You do know why I slapped you in the courtyard and set the guard on you?”

“You feared were you found with me in the absence of protest, greater Rollon’s belief he had not sired your child.”

“I needed to protect my babe as I had not the first.” She blinked, causing tears to scatter upon her cheeks. “Still, I lost it as well—as if God deems me unworthy of motherhood.”

Warin hurt for her and the possibility he could lose her so soon after finding these feelings again—feelings the dreamer of him felt compelled to confess. But where to start?

Eyes drawn to her trembling mouth, that was where he started by tilting her face higher and coaxing her lips to part beneath his.

She sighed into him, but that was all.

He drew back, and when her half-closed eyes opened, said, “You did what you had to—and courageously.”

Muscles in her face spasmed. “You have my tale, and it is so ugly you would be a fool not to do all in your power to end our marriage.”

“Instead, I do all in my power to keep our vows sacred, and easier that now I am armed with what came before me.”

“Non, Warin.”

He brushed his lips across hers. “Do you hold to this man, he will hold to this woman who shall make a worthy mother for his child and others does God will it. Children born of love.”

Her breath caught so violently she pressed a hand to her mouth and coughed to clear her lungs. When she lowered it, he expected a response to his sideways profession of love—that it was returned, but she said, “My tale is done, it grows late, and we are in need of sleep, especially you.”

“Vianne—”

“Let us further discuss this on the morrow when we are rested and thinking better.”

He did not need to think better where she was concerned, but he was tired and knew if he pushed her at a time she also needed rest, he would no more convince her than he had thus far. “On the morrow,” he agreed and drew his arm from around her.

The timing could not have been better. Hardly was she up than there came a light rap.

“Enter!” he called as Vianne turned to face whoever would have caught them abed.

Or perhaps it was poor timing, he considered as the door began opening. Had we been found in what appeared a compromising position, the grounds for annulment would be shaken.

It was Charliese who entered in her night chemise, hair tousled and sleepiness about her face—until eyes that first sought her sire jumped to Vianne.

“You be back!” she cried, then snapped her mouth closed and looked behind as if fearing she had alerted Esta she was out of bed and the woman was flying down the corridor.

“Close the door quietly, Charliese,” Warin said, “then properly greet Lady Vianne and tell for what you have risen well ahead of day.”

The girl who, even were she not truly of his blood, was becoming a child of his heart, eased the door closed and ran to Vianne. “Well come home, Lady Vane!”

Home... Warin’s emotions tautened, but lightened when she dropped a tiny curtsy in which Esta had been schooling her and caught up Vianne’s hand. “I was afeared you not return, but I have bad dream Papa sick again and come to be sure it not real. And here you be!” She looked to Warin. “You still better, aye?”

“More so now than during your visit ere supper.”

“’Cause I prayed for you or ’cause Lady Vane come back?”

“Both,” he said, “and now that you know I am well, you should return to bed.”

Her lower lip jutted. “If Lady Vane stay, I stay. You love me, too.”

He nearly laughed at her observation. When she had spoken of Vianne these past weeks, he had said nothing that would cause her to believe he had great feeling for the lady, and yet she must have sensed it.

“I do love you,” he said and closed his eyes to rest them a moment—then a moment longer and another.

When his daughter said, “I sit with you, Lady Vane,” he lifted his lids halfway and saw her raise her arms. “Just a little, then you carry me to bed.”

Glimpsing distress on Vianne’s face and seeing it transition to what looked longing, Warin realized Charliese’s appearance was a godsend. Here not only a man who loved Vianne, but a child she could love.

He watched her lift the girl and move to the bedside chair, then he began the sleep toward morning when they would finish what was begun.

CHAPTER 32

Her arms felt empty, and she need not open her eyes to confirm Charliese, who had fallen asleep on her shoulder, had been removed after she also slept.

Vianne raised her lids.

Awash in morning light come through the windows, Warin sat in the chair wearing a belted tunic and chausses and watching her where she lay on the bed to which she had been so carefully moved she did not recall it.

Looking more whole than on the night past, face no longer flushed, hair damp and put through with a comb, he said, “A very good morn to you, my lady. You slept well?”

She glanced down her body over which the coverlet was drawn. “Since I did not rouse when I was moved here, I must have.”

“I moved you at dawn after Esta came for Charliese and the physician further confirmed my recovery.”

She smiled her relief. “Prayers answered.”

“Some,” he said and, sitting forward, clasped his hands.

“Warin—”

“’Tis the morrow, Vianne. We are rested and thinking better.”

She had drifted to sleep pondering what it sounded he revealed when he spoke of children made with her being born of love. It did not seem possible he felt that much for her,

especially now he knew her past, but if he did, surely it was more reason to set him free. It was one thing for her to love him in silence, quite another for him to openly love in return, making himself and those dear to him vulnerable even if King Edward could gain her tolerable acceptance amid society.

Sitting up, Vianne glanced down her rumpled self as the coverlet slid to her waist. "First I would see to my ablutions."

He stood. "I shall leave you to it."

"Here?" she exclaimed.

"Aye, though Sir Owen had a chamber prepared for you ere riding on Chesne, I had your pack brought here this morn." He nodded at it. "I may be overly confident of my argument, but I chance henceforth you shall awaken beside me and I beside you."

It sounded so wonderful, she had to look away.

"Will a half hour suffice?" he asked and, at her nod, said, "I shall send drink and viands ahead of my return." Then he strode to the door absent a limp, for which she thanked the Lord. For all he had endured to bring her out of France, he remained whole.

Vianne had completed her ablutions and just drawn a clean gown over her head when a knock sounded. Leaving her laces loose, she opened the door.

Esta smiled. "I intercepted this from a kitchen servant." She indicated the tray she held upon which sat a cup of milk and simple foods for breaking one's fast.

Vianne stepped back and followed her to the table at which a lord's business could be conducted in the privacy of the solar.

After setting the tray on it, Esta came around. "Are you back to stay, my lady?"

Having felt that question trailing the woman like dust scattered from her skirts, Vianne was prepared. "I think it best I do not, but that is what Sir Warin and I shall discuss this day."

“Then I will pray what comes of your discussion blesses you, him, and Charliese.”

She spoke as though whatever was decided would be good for all three. But if she stayed, Warin and Charliese could pay for her notoriety. If she left, she would pay the price of ever longing to be here with them and—

Immediately, she amended that last. It was hard to accept her absence would benefit all, but it would save her the hurt and regret of causing the suffering of others.

“Lady Vianne?”

Finding herself watched, she stepped past the woman and quenched her thirst before turning her attention to the viands.

She had taken only a few bites of sliced apple pressed onto bread when Esta touched her arm. “My lady, do not underestimate those who, by the grace of God and all that has been instilled in them, are worthy of the Wulfrith name. Many of them do not marry as the world believes they should, but as they believe—and often with their hearts.”

Vianne met her gaze. “But I am—”

“For feelings he has for you beyond desire and obligation, I am right in believing he would have you remain his wife and become Charliese’s mother, aye?”

Vianne nodded.

“I am well enough acquainted with Warin Wulfrith that none need tell me he is unafraid of your past, and certainly not your future providing it is with him. That precedent of the heart was set by many a Wulfrith come before, and of recent as well. His sire defied all who spoke against him wedding his second wife whose affliction with The Falling Sickness made many believe her possessed by evil. His eldest brother wed the French lady, Séverine, in the midst of our war with France. His sister, Ondine, wed the half-Scot King Edward counted a traitor. And his cousin, Percival, wed a lady most scandalous. Regardless of what the world thinks, and though the Wulfriths may struggle in going the way of the heart, in the end those hearts reside where they will.”

Her words so moved Vianne she longed to embrace her. And she might have if not for the possibility Warin would return and find yet another mess made of her emotions. “I thank you, Esta.”

“But?”

The quake in the shake of Vianne’s head making her feel an old woman, she said, “I do not know.”

Esta set her hand on her cheek. “Trust me when I tell if happiness lands in your palm and you do not close your fingers over it, regret will burden you ’til your end days.”

Recalling Sir Owen owing to Esta being a good woman, Vianne asked, “As it has burdened you?”

Her gaze wavered. “For what I was ere serving the Wulfriths, it was never truly in my palm, but I begin to hope...”

“What?”

She lowered her hand. “That I will not die an old woman whose greatest joy was witnessing the happiness of others.”

“Things are better between you and Sir Owen?”

“Slowly better. Though we make our way through the mud of our past, only God knows if there is a shore on which we can drag ourselves from the sludge.”

“Then Sir Owen’s struggle to allow his heart to reside where it will is greater than that of other Wulfriths?”

She swallowed loudly. “You may not believe it possible my past is worse than yours, but more repentance is required of me.”

Vianne frowned. “I cannot know what parted Sir Owen and you, but surely it is wrong that he, who is not without sin, demands your past continue shadowing your present—and *his*.”

“I hurt him terribly.”

“Years and years ago, oui?”

“Aye, but it was very bad.”

“Still—”

Esta sighed. “I will tell you.”

“Non, you need not.”

The woman glanced toward the table as if considering the support of a chair, but stood taller. “As you are aware, I was a prostitute. What you do not know is that when I caught the eye of a handsome knight while laundering my garments at the river, *he* did not know my profession for being a visitor of the lord whose barony lay distant from Wulfenshire. I was too taken with he who treated me like a lady though the common of me was obvious, and too ashamed of what else I was to tell him the truth.”

Her shoulders rose with a breath. “Years earlier, orphaned just out of girlhood and considered the beauty of my village, I fell into the power of one who provided good food, decent shelter, and pretty clothing in exchange for making goods of my body.”

“Truly, you need not tell me,” Vianne said as tears flooded Esta’s eyes.

“The next week, on my usual day of laundering, Sir Owen returned and was just as kind, then the week after. Certain my attentive knight would soon seek what was sold to others, I determined to provide it without charge, but...” Her lips pressed. “Though I knew he was attracted to me, he never trespassed beyond kisses and light touches, and when he tried to learn of my family and where I lived, I claimed I had a sire so dependent on me he would welcome no suitor over his threshold until he remarried in two months—which I was certain would be past the time Sir Owen completed training our lord’s personal guard.” She sniffed. “It was laughingly told, since never would one of the nobility pursue marriage with a commoner. And though he said, *Well then, two months it is*, I thought it the prelude to charming me out of what he did not know I would freely give *him*.”

“It was not the prelude,” Vianne said.

“Nay. Though the weather cooled, he continued meeting me at the river and never pressed for more than wondrous exchanges that were so different from...” She shook her head. “Then he brought me a gift. I did not realize two months had passed, but he did and expected my sire, who should have been remarried by then, to allow a suitor over his threshold. His gift a ring, he said he wished to wed me once he had my sire’s consent.”

Tears slipped down her cheek. “It was fantastic that the brother of the Baron of Wulfen would wed a commoner. It was frightening since he expected to cross the threshold of a home I had not, the only threshold I crossed that of a brothel. It was terrifying since he intended to approach a sire I had not, the man who had charge of me being he who negotiated the price of my body.”

She swiped at her cheeks. “Hurting over the unveiling of my sins for the hurt they would cause him, I realized how much I felt for him. It was new love, but I did not think I fooled myself in believing it could grow beautifully old given a chance—one it had not.”

“What did you do?”

“I said I liked him and his kisses, but there was another I wished to wed and preferred to wait on him.” Briefly, she closed her eyes. “I wounded him, and yet better that than pierce him through should he learn exactly what he wasted emotion on. Thus, I apologized and returned the ring, and he said but one thing as I walked way—that he did not believe me. I should have quietly heeded that. Instead, I tried to further dissuade him by calling over my shoulder that being noble did not make a man more desirable. It was cruel and surely proved suspect since I had not shown that side of me.”

Understanding dawned. “He followed you to the brothel.”

“Aye. He must have sat outside for hours, warring with disbelief and disgust as I swelled my eyes with crying. When he entered that eve, he found me on the smithy’s lap and, for resisting work, with a bruised cheek I could not entirely cover. He came straight for me, and when the brothel owner

intercepted him to present other offerings, dumped coins at his feet, pointed at me, and said I was the one he wanted.”

“But not for what others would have from you.”

“We have never spoken of that night, but I believe he sought only to buy time in which to confront me.” She replenished her breath. “For how much he offered, I knew he would not be denied, and so I ran, and the brute who kept men from damaging the women—and punished them when they did not cooperate—caught me and thrust me toward Sir Owen. When I tried to veer away, the owner grabbed me, and this time it was no backhand he dealt. Intent on beating me, he shouted an apology over his shoulder to the knight who did him honor in entering his establishment and, thus, was unprepared to be set upon.”

Vianne gasped.

“Aye, Sir Owen flung him off me, followed, and landed fists that cracked bone—and might have killed the man had not the brute brought a chair down on his head.” She shuddered. “It knocked Sir Owen senseless enough that other patrons came at him. I tried to stop them, but...” She touched her ribs. “More a mess was made of me, but this the worst for how long it took before I could more than sip breath without great pain.”

“I am sorry, Esta.” Vianne drew out a chair. “Pray, sit.”

“Nay, soon I must return to my little charge who has missed you very much,” she said, then continued, “For days, I was in a cold and dirty place though I hardly knew it. I would awaken, ask the fate of Sir Owen, be denied an answer by whoever tended me, drink a little, refuse food, and return to the dark. When the solace of that dark receded, I learned nearly a sennight had passed and I was in the cellar so my room could be used by another. It was the brothel owner, face bruised and abraded, teeth broken, and arm in a sling, who provided the answer I sought. The sheriff had collected the knight dumped in the street and returned him to our baron, and rumor was the man’s family had come and taken him home to heal.”

Esta steadied herself with a hand to the table. “When he asked where I had previously encountered Sir Owen, I denied having done so and told it was his aggressive approach that made me run and suggested the knight mistook me for another. He did not believe me, for how to explain my attempt to stop others from beating the man? He let it be but told my workload would be twice as heavy until he was compensated for the damage caused by the knight.” She shook her head. “All I could do was hope Sir Owen never returned, allowing me to resume my miserable existence without the pain of looking upon one I could never have—worse, a man to whom I had caused great harm. The next day, unable to stand fully upright, I was put to work in the kitchen until I healed enough to be presentable.”

“Oh, Esta.”

“Days later, that was where Sir Owen’s brother found me, hobbling around and lightheaded for shallow breaths that were my only defense against pain.”

“For what did he come?”

“I am certain he was not told all of what led to his brother’s injuries, but as his family knew he intended to bring home a wife, they surely investigated, and it could not have been difficult to discover the ugly truth that caused a Wulfrith to be ejected from a brothel. Thus, though he told that Sir Owen healed, I feared he meant me ill for how much anger he exuded.”

“Instead, he brought you home to serve their mother, Lady Héloise.”

“He did, though I did not know it when he entered the kitchen. The ire I thought directed at me was for the brothel owner who worked me though I was far from healed. One moment I was sobbing and holding to a table with both hands, the next I was in the baron’s arms and he was ordering the owner to collect my possessions and deliver them outside. When he was told I owned not even the old gown on my back and was greatly in debt to my *employer*, the baron said he

could collect his money when he presented himself at Stern Castle—if he dared.”

“I would have liked to meet Warin’s sire,” Vianne said.

“He was a worthy man, and his sons follow his lead and that of others come before.”

Vianne honored the woman’s silence until focus returned to Esta’s eyes. “I am guessing Sir Owen was not expecting you to appear at Stern.”

She grimaced. “Regardless of what his brother intended, *that* was a certainty. Still, I asked the baron what to expect at the end of our journey. He said Owen loved me, no longer wished to love me, and might eventually shed what remained of his love. However, were forgiveness possible, he would ensure I was present for the forgiving and far less broken than when he took me from the brothel.” She sighed. “Lady, can you imagine how it felt to hear that from one like him?”

For being a commoner taken from a brothel, even more startling than the grace shown me, Vianne thought.

“No man nor woman is without fault, my lady, but when you find one who seeks to overcome them in the sight of others, you stand as long as you can in their light.”

“That is why you stayed after the baron died of the pestilence? Hopeful eventually the light he shed on you would draw Sir Owen back?”

“For how small my hope, more I was fed by love for Lady Héloïse and her grandchildren. That was enough for me to stay—and ever shall be even if I never regain what I lost of Sir Owen.”

“I pray you will, Esta.”

“As I pray you will find Warin in my tale, and greatly it aids in trusting him to know what is possible and to protect it well.” The woman leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Now I leave you to finish your meal and prepare for the talk with your husband.”

As she crossed to the door, Vianne called, “Methinks you a bit sly.”

Esta turned. “One does what one must to gain and hold close a friend,” she said, then softly closed the door behind her.

AS VIANNE COULD EAT NO MORE, she paced, though not for long.

Despite this being Warin’s chamber, he knocked, giving her time to loosely tie her laces and smooth her hair before calling to him to enter.

At the sight of him in the doorway, next the door at his back, then the strides carrying him to her, her heart surged. *He wants you to stay*, it whispered. *He would not have you waste years on longing as Esta and Owen have. Trust him as Esta believes you can—and he has shown. Stay, Vianne.*

When he halted and reached to her hands, they were not to be had. Not because she did not wish him to touch her, because she wished to touch first. She set them on his shoulders, slid them around his neck, and as his eyes widened, pressed her lips to his.

With what seemed the force of one trying to catch hold of something whose rapid descent would see it shattered, his arms came around her. With what seemed the thirst of one soon to be denied the cool and sweet of life-giving drink, his mouth closed over hers.

It lasted only moments, then he lifted his head. “What is this, Vianne?”

“If I can stay without hurting you and Charliese or others, that is what I want.”

He searched her face so long she began to worry, then he said, “No matter how well we strive to protect ourselves, there will always be hurts. That is the way of this world across which all cast shadows, some longer and darker than others.

But do we resolve to be strong through our hurts and the hurts of others, leaning into our faith and accepting help and helping others, they can be overcome.”

What he said so moved her, she could only stare.

Then he was smiling. “Would I could claim those words as my own, but they were passed down to me. Unfortunately, I do not always hold them near.”

Thinking of the man who had carried Esta away from the brothel to a life where her value had nothing to do with the carnal appetites of men, she asked, “They are your sire’s?”

“I first learned them from him, but as recorded in our family’s history, they were given by the twelfth-century Lady Anny Wulfrith to her eldest daughter.”

“They are wise.”

“You will heed them, Vianne? Rather than run from real and imagined hurts, brave them by raising your shield of faith and allowing others to raise theirs alongside you?”

The image that evoked of Warin with his shield before hers and their shields before Charliese, made her emotions teeter. “Though still it could prove better were I to leave no matter how much I wish to stay, I shall strive to heed them.”

He raised his eyebrows. “How much do you wish to stay?”

“Very much,” she said and hope that sufficed for now.

“Why?” It did not suffice. As she searched for the right words, he brushed his lips over hers. “Perhaps it will help if I say it more clearly than I did on the night past—I feel for you as felt only once before. It is love, Vianne, though a different love.”

The smile toward which her mouth traveled faltering, she whispered, “How different?”

He touched his brow to hers. “It is the love of one far more a man than a youth and more precious for what was required to capture so wild and wondrous a thing. You are in my heart, and even do you cast me distant from yours, I do not think I could cast you out of mine. That is my love.”

Vianne had only enough breath to say, “And mine.”

He chuckled. “Not quite the profession I expected, but I can be content—for now.”

“Non!” she cried and dragged air down her constricted throat. “*You*, my husband, friend, protector, are in *my* heart. And this heart loves you, Warin Wulfrith.”

“Vianne Wulfrith,” he drew out her name, then kissed her deeply.

Longing to drink from him as he drank from her, she pushed a hand through his hair and urged his face nearer. There had been passion before, but this was more, not only for love both sides, but for it being good and right in God’s eyes, unlike—

Do not think there! she silently commanded, and when his hands moved up her sides, not groping but caressing as if all of her was precious, she slid a palm between their chests and thrilled to hearts whose beats were so perfectly in time they could be mistaken as being only one.

She was losing herself in Warin, and for the promise of a lifetime of losing themselves in each other, she wanted this—until a loosening of stricture about her body and blessed cool evidenced he unclothed her. Though it was the natural order of relations between husband and wife, once more her thoughts pried at doors that needed to remain closed.

Rollon’s loathsome hands dirtying her, making her feel wounded through skin and bone. Wounds so embedded in head and heart no amount of salve nor bandage could reach them. Wounds—

“Vianne.”

Not his voice. Warin’s. Focusing on the man she loved, she watched as his dilated pupils warred with the green.

“Are you not ready for this?” he asked as if he felt what she felt.

For that, she was ready, and yet...

“I am your husband. Tell me what you fear that you ought not in my arms.”

How could she not tell him when over and again he proved worthy of trust? Realizing they had moved nearer the bed, she looked down and saw her laces were undone and that just as her bodice was bunched between their chests in preparation to draw off the gown, so too his tunic as if—

Not *as if*. Remembrance of the fine linen was in her fingers and greater remembrance of his abdomen and chest in her palms. Had she behaved a harlot?

“Speak to me, Vianne.”

She looked up. “In Calais you asked if I would always be more broken than whole. What if I am in too many pieces to be put back together?”

“I spoke of physical injuries, Vianne.”

“And I do not.”

He was so slow to answer, she thought she had given him something to consider which would make him rethink a life with her, but he said, “Just as there will always be hurts, all of us are in pieces. Do we stay strong and faithful, we can put ourselves back together—and less daunting that aided by others. That I have seen you do since first we met.”

Her breath caught. “Have I?”

“For that you are here with me.”

She wanted to believe it, but... “What if the stitches do not hold?”

“As the threads of husband and wife are entwined, one strengthening the other and further strengthened by faith, they shall hold you together just as you hold me together.”

She frowned. “What say you?”

“This.” He kissed her brow and nose, fixed his gaze on hers. “With a flicker of light, you pried open my heart, with that small light carried high ventured into its shadows, with it growing toward a flame refused to leave.”

“Warin,” she choked.

“It is true.”

The smile in his voice further lighting *her* heart, she said, “As methinks you more a weaver of words, I dare not try to match them lacking paper and ink.”

“Then match them with kisses,” he said gruffly.

That the lady who would remain a Wulfrith did, leaving only enough space between them to provide breath and none for thought beyond making love—until both shed of garments, Warin lowered her to the mattress. Then one who did not belong here once more cast a shadow over her.

He knew it immediately and, arresting the descent of his head, said, “Look at me.”

When she did, she saw her husband...her love.

“Tell me what you fear that you ought not in my arms,” he encouraged again.

“I do not know I can do this well.”

“Why?”

“There is no virtue about this body as was gifted by your first wife and you deserve.”

“Vianne—”

“Listen. Though what you make me feel is far more than what I began to feel for Balian, I am afraid...”

“Of what?” he said when she refused to allow the shadow to trespass on him as well.

Despite what it would tell of her—of what she had done to survive—she said, “I fear I will not like what comes after your beautiful words, touches, and kisses. That unable to hide it from *you*, I will disappoint.”

His chest expanded against hers. “If there is to be disappointment, the blame will be mine. But as I can be patient in matters of utmost importance, and for there being a sea of difference between relations bound up in duty and those

enfolded in love, I do not believe either of us will be disappointed.”

She swallowed. “I do love you.”

“And I you. Hence, do you need more time we will wait.”

She vied with uncertainty, then determined to trust him in this as well, said, “Let us make our marriage ever unbreakable.”

“That we shall,” he said, then kissed her as the prelude to what came after. And the one time the shadow crept near again, he had only to say, “I am Warin. Tell me stop, and even does it feel I bleed, I shall but hold you.”

Reaching up, she touched the burn scars barely visible beneath his whiskers. “Beloved husband, do not stop,” she whispered. “Pray, do not.”

“WITH YOU.”

Warin thought the softly spoken words the start of another dream, but feeling breath against his collarbone, knew it was of this world and the woman tucked into him.

He drew back his head. “With me, Vianne?”

She raised her face, and he wondered how she could be more beautiful disheveled from their lovemaking than the perfectly adorned lady who had courageously stood before the French court to recite her composition. Because in being patient and giving her no cause to stop him, neither was disappointed—that together they crossed from the shore of relations bound in duty to the shore of those enfolded in love?

“I was thinking of when we fled those come after us in Normandy.”

That surprised as did the curve to her lips. “And?”

“I was afearred then, but since I have wanted to *ride wild* again and swim a horse—with you.”

He smiled. "Then that desire shall be granted as often as possible."

"When?"

"A sennight should see me well enough healed to show you about your home of Woodhearst, providing opportunities aplenty to ride wild, swim our horses, and discover the best hidden places to make love and..." He trailed off lest now was not the time to speak of the blessing of lovemaking beyond that of becoming one.

"Make children?" It was said with less tremor in her voice than expected.

"I would like a babe born of our love and to give Charliese a sister or brother," he said, "but my feelings for you are not dependent on that. Does God will it, I shall rejoice in such a child. Does He not, I will rejoice in having you at my side through life."

Could there be a lovelier smile than that with which she gifted him? he wondered. And when she said, "As shall I," he questioned if there could be lovelier words. Only the four she spoke next. "I love you, Warin."

"As I love you, my beautifully notorious Vianne Wulfrith."

EPILOGUE

Eltham Palace

Kent, England

December 24, 1354

She was quite pregnant. But then, when was she not? some said on the sly and others with awe if not admiration. Since Philippa of Hainault's marriage to Edward III in 1328, a dozen times she had birthed sons and daughters of which seven survived. Very soon, perhaps before year's end, she would deliver their thirteenth child.

And how she glowed sitting beside her husband in the hall made all the more magnificent for the Christmas finery in which it was adorned for the royal family to celebrate with the leading nobility of England—and some of France.

Though Vianne's menses had flowed this month, further delaying the day she might rest her own hand on the wondrous swell of a life growing within, she did not envy the woman. She was happy for Philippa and prayed this child would be among those who survived.

"You are ready?" Warin asked as they advanced nearer their audience with the king and queen who received their guests upon the dais.

Vianne looked from the royals to the two others there. Standing back and to the left of Edward was Sir Yates. Standing behind and to the right of Philippa was Sir Achard, one hand on his sword, the other gripping a gold-capped staff.

Holding Warin's hand tighter, feeling her wedding ring into which three rubies had been set that Charliese declared represented each of them, Vianne returned her regard to the king and said, "It would be easier had he told what he intends."

Though the gleam in Warin's eyes agreed, he said, "All will be well."

With him at her side, it would. These six months they had faced opposition to their marriage, including cutting words from which he could not entirely shield her, but with the aid of their families, they stayed above it. Or mostly.

Warin had bruised his knuckles on the teeth of the son of a southern baron visiting the Sheriff of Wulfenshire. His brother, Rémy, had thrashed a fellow squire for making a sidelong comment about his sister-in-law—referring to her as *the harlot of the French court*—for which he himself suffered a blackened eye and was punished alongside his victim for losing control as was unacceptable for one trained at Wulfen.

Vianne had felt terrible for what it cost him to defend her, though Warin assured her Rémy's reaction had more to do with his wife who had died birthing another man's child and unwarranted guilt that made him determined to raise the child as his own once he was of an age and experience to administer his family's sister castle of Lillia. Thus, though the slur against Vianne was behind the first swing, it had not been the power behind those that followed.

"There your sister," Warin said with a nod.

Rhoswen was among the ladies come from the queen's apartment whose corridor lay to the right of the dais. Three months past she wed Sir Yates after he appointed an experienced steward to oversee their sire's demesne, and upon his return to London, Philippa offered his new wife a position.

Shortly after the sisters' reunion at Eltham Palace this morn, Vianne learned neither did Rhoswen tolerate ill spoken against her. For that, the queen had rebuked her—though only for lacking subtlety, Vianne was assured. As for the lady who spoke against Rhoswen's sister, Philippa informed the woman

she would be on her knees in gratitude did she know the truth of Lady Vianne Wulfrith, then told control of her wagging tongue would greatly enhance her prospects for a good marriage.

Now seeing Rhoswen *subtly* smile and wave, Vianne did the same. Then she and Warin advanced another pace, and with one more couple before them, as easily saw the royals as they were seen.

Though her encounter with Edward's eyes was brief, she glimpsed mischief there. His response to the missive sent requesting withdrawal of his aid in gaining an annulment had been curt but amused—*No action necessary. Your king knows what he knows. May your joining be blessed.*

It was. Not yet in all ways, but in what mattered most—the love of one man for one woman. And God, Owen, and Esta willing, more blessings ahead.

The progress made between Warin's uncle and Vianne's friend was slow, but despite the trainer of knights' return to Wulfen, it advanced. Nearly every week's end, Sir Owen found a reason to visit Romary, and many the hours spent with the woman whose love he was not yet ready to return in full. However, there was no question the family who accepted Vianne as belonging to the Wulfriths in name as well as heart would afford Esta the same once Owen committed to the happiness long denied them.

Remembrance of Dangereuse and Fira introducing their new sister-in-law to the rest of their womenfolk at Stern causing the sights and sounds of the hall to blur, Vianne thanked God to whom she clung even when it felt He did not cling to her, who opened doors and granted her strength, and who had closed the circle scribed by the twelfth-century Wulfriths and Elias de Morville by weaving Warin and her into that gap.

“You are smiling, Wife.”

She was and now saw they were at the front of the line. “I am thinking of God's faithfulness well beyond what is deserved.”

“For which I shall be ever grateful,” he said, then glanced at the dais where Edward and Philippa’s exchange with a northern baron and his lady appeared near its end. “Hopefully, we are about to learn why we were *commanded* rather than invited to attend.”

Not that one is much different from another, Vianne thought, then considered there could be a difference with the Wulfriths, their ability to train England’s worthiest warriors being of greater importance than a king’s whim. Though fairly certain they were at Eltham for Edward deciding it was the time to restore her to society, her certainty was little consolation against apprehension.

Feeling her heart accelerate, she reminded herself of Fira’s words of months past before her return to Stern Castle—words that aided in keeping Vianne’s chin up when she met the other Wulfrith ladies.

You are one of us, the young lady had said where she lay propped on pillows. *First, in between, and in the end, you are a Wulfrith*. Then having been thrilled to learn she was descended from Elias de Morville, she had added, *As ever you were meant to be*.

Seated bedside, Vianne had leaned in and embraced the young lady Warin feared had suffered an attack of The Falling Sickness. When that day husband and wife returned from *riding wild* and Warin learned of his sister’s disappearance and an exploration of the castle proved for naught, he had assembled men to search the demesne.

Hours later, they returned empty-handed, and as he organized more men to widen the search, a disheveled Fira was seen slowly approaching the walls. And beyond her another thing, providing the sight of an archer on the wall was as keen as required of one who flew arrows. He had said it was only a glimpse but was adamant the beast was of the two-legged sort.

Thus, Warin had spurred forth to retrieve Fira and sent his men into the wood to verify what the archer saw and take action if necessary. They had scoured the area, but no such

beast was found, and neither was it part of Fira's account of her venture.

When first confronted over her disappearance, she had lightheartedly scorned concern for something she deemed *nothing*, then less lightly when Warin posited The Falling Sickness was responsible.

With a streak of stubborn, a spark of anger, and a glint of what might be the fear of the hunted, Fira had maintained that in sleuthing for *The Book of Wulfrith*, her return was delayed by curiosity over ruins she happened on and a turned ankle that led to a tumble.

Warin had not believed it, certain an attack was supported by how long she slept afterward as verified by Vianne who sat vigil once the young lady went adrift. When Fira awakened, fear of the hunted had glinted larger in her eyes. However, when Vianne but asked after her chronicling of the Wulfriths, she had eased until it was passion for their history that lit her. Of course, that led to more talk of Elias de Morville and Fira's assurance his descendant would be embraced by other Wulfriths yet to meet Warin's wife. And so she had been.

Movement on the dais returning her to the present, Vianne watched the knight and his lady depart, opening the path for Warin and her to revere the royals.

"Baron Wulfrith...Lady Vianne," King Edward greeted them when they halted before him and Philippa. "Well come to Eltham Palace."

"Your Majesties," Warin said, bowing as Vianne curtsied. "We are honored to be invited."

"As we are to have the Lord and Lady of Woodhearst join our festivities." Edward settled his eyes on Vianne. "The apartment is to your liking?"

"It was generous to afford us such," she said and looked to Philippa. "And kind to give my sister a place among your ladies, my queen."

"Lady Rhoswen is a fine addition to our retinue." Her eyes twinkled. "She carves out her place well, showing loyalty

where it is due.”

Certain she referred to Rhoswen’s defense of her sister, Vianne said, “I am happy to be reunited with my family. It was too many years.”

“And too much sacrifice,” Philippa said.

Vianne felt the squeeze of Warin’s hand. “At the time, Your Majesty, but the weight of regret is much diminished when between the end of a journey gone dark and the beginning of a new journey one is arrayed in the light of love.”

The queen glanced at the joined hands of husband and wife. “No better balm, though we do have more.”

“Your Majesty?”

Philippa looked to her husband, and when Vianne followed her gaze, Edward raised a hand to the side.

Though Sir Yates, face appearing less ruined—was it fanciful to believe it was for love of Rhoswen?—had not been deeply shadowed by the canopy covering the dais, she had not noticed he held a silver box the width of his hand and twice its length. And as he neared, she saw it was engraved with flourishes embedded with gold.

“Warin?” Vianne rasped.

How breathtaking the smile in those green eyes and reassuring his hand holding hers. Still, she was unnerved.

Returning her attention to the king, she saw Sir Yates pass the box to Edward and the latter give Sir Achard a nod.

Stepping alongside the queen, thrice the knight brought the staff down on the dais, and as guests quieted, called, “By the Grace of God, the King of England and France and Lord of Ireland demands your attention.” Once silence reigned, Sir Achard withdrew.

The king stood, and after assisting his wife in rising, passed the box to her. Now looking past Vianne and Warin, he called, “Hear, noble lords and ladies! Though of greatest import we gather at Eltham to celebrate the birth of our Savior, there is another we honor ahead of the festivities. We speak of

her who, remaining true to king and country, aided in saving English lives.”

That last setting the guests to murmuring, he looked to his former spy. “We speak of you, Lady Vianne Wardieu, now of the Wulfriths. For selfless service amid false rumors of which we shall hear no more, we are pleased to welcome you home at long last.”

For how dry her mouth, fast her pulse, and soft her knees, she was thankful Warin moved his hand to her elbow. And now with the king not only throwing her a rope to pull her out of the morass of those rumors but knotting it around her waist, more she needed that bracing for how dizzying her relief. Despite the rumors being far from false, and some here knowing it, Edward’s threat ensured only the foolish continued speaking ill of her. And in proclaiming her value to the English people, even less chance the foolish would be foolish.

“Our most high and beloved wife,” Edward prompted.

Philippa tipped up the box’s lid, revealing a bed of purple silk from which her husband lifted something. When he raised it high, the gasp resounding around the hall masked Vianne’s. His pronouncement intended to reinstate her family’s honor and restore her to society was more than hoped for, but this...

“Approach, Lady Vianne Wulfrith,” the king commanded.

The slight loosening of Warin’s grip seemed a question, and when she looked up, he raised his eyebrows. Though he believed her capable of advancing on her own, he would have her confirm it.

As he knows, you are no fainting flower, she told herself. To you who repeatedly risked death to gain intelligence, this is no great feat. To you who stood before the enemy and recited compositions, this is child’s play.

Vianne nodded, and when he released her, stepped forward.

“Though earnest words are sufficient to express our gratitude,” Edward said for all to hear, “we find it good to acknowledge worthy contributions by bestowing a gift that can

be passed through the ages to those whose births may be too distant to catch even the whisper of those contributions and sacrifices. Hence, we present this misericord fashioned for a lady most daring.”

He extended hands across which lay a small sheathed dagger of the sort used to dispatch a wounded enemy. “Quite appropriate, we believe,” he said as she accepted what proved much more than a misericord.

Beneath a hilt of dark wood polished to a shine and above a scabbard fashioned of horn ribbed in silver was a crossguard better fit for protecting a woman’s hand than a man’s. Center of it was no jewel as favored by those of the nobility but the enameled badge of the brotherhood of chivalry founded by Edward and named the Order of the Garter—a circular belt of blue and center of that the arms of Saint George comprised of a white shield faced with a red cross. The badge being quite small, she started to carry it nearer her face to read the words encircling the belt.

“Honi soit qui mal y pense,” the king supplied the motto for their ears alone.

Vianne looked up. “Shame on him who thinks evil of it,” she translated.

“Again, appropriate, Lady Vianne.”

Yielding to the tickle inside, she asked low, “Perchance this my invitation to join the brotherhood?”

His answer was delivered with a smile. “*Brotherhood*, my lady, though were the world upended, we believe you would be under serious consideration.”

“And I would be honored, Your Majesty.”

“Only that?”

“My warring is done. Now I would live and love.”

“As due you.” He looked to the misericord. “Draw the blade.”

She did and first noted the keen edges, then etchings of waves halfway down the blade that ended with a walled city

and written in script beneath it—*Calais, 1354*.

“Now the other side,” he said as she raised brimming eyes.

She turned the dagger, and down that length of blade were the letters she had adopted at the age of ten and six to identify the source of the intelligence sent him—*AVS*.

As her throat protested the work required of it, he said low, “À votre service.”

“At your service,” she whispered.

He inclined his head. “Though your service to the Crown is worthy of trumpeting, no more than this can be afforded you, not only to protect those who continue gathering intelligence, but you as well. May this serve as assurance your value is well known by those whose estimation is of greatest import.”

“I thank you, Your Majesties. Ever I and mine shall treasure it.”

Edward nodded. “Now, as there are more guests to receive, let us have your husband adorn you.”

Warin stepped alongside, and taking the misericord, said, “You are worthy, Vianne Wulfrith.” Then he sheathed the dagger and secured the elegant weapon on her girdle. “Most worthy, my heart.”

Suffused with warmth, she was tempted to kiss him before all. But temptation only—until it was not.

As if he knew her mind, he raised his eyebrows.

“*You* are worthy,” she whispered to the man with whom she was far more whole than broken, then slid her arms around his neck, and as guests began murmuring again, pressed her mouth to his.

Notoriety, she mused as he deepened their kiss. *Not always a bad thing*.

Dear Reader,

If you enjoyed the fifth tale in the 14th-century Age of Honor series, I would appreciate a review of [NOTORIOUS](#) at your online retailer. A few sentences is lovely. A few more, lovelier.

Watch for PERILOUS, the next book in the series releasing Winter 2023/2024, featuring Lady Fira Wulfrith and Sir Amaury de Chanson. An excerpt is included here.

Blessings ~ Tamara

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

I hope you enjoyed this tale of Sir Warin and Lady Vianne, the latter a descendant of Ranulf and Lizanne Wardieu of *LADY AT ARMS*, my first medieval romance published by Bantam in 1994. Not only have I revisited the Wardieu family in *NOTORIOUS*, but the Masse family of the 11th-century *DAUNTLESS*, Sir Elias de Morville of the 12th-century *THE RAVELING*, and Liam Fawke of the 14th-century *LADY UNDAUNTED*. It's a joy to include characters of previous books in my current series, so don't be surprised if I continue doing so.

As a historical note, though *NOTORIOUS*' 1354 attack on English-held Calais is fictional, its precedent was set three years after King Edward III took possession of the strategic port city. The French being determined to recover it, they devised a plan to bribe the commander of one of the citadel's gate towers to admit troops during the night. Little did they suspect he would report the plot to King Edward who, receiving tidings on Christmas Eve, assembled a small army and secretly crossed the channel with his son, the Black Prince. On the night of January 1st, 1350, the French army estimated to number 1,500 men-at-arms and 4,000 infantry, approached Calais. When one of the commanders and his men arrived at the tower, the gate was open, the drawbridge down, the portcullis raised, and coming out to receive his *thirty pieces of silver* was one believed to be a Judas. What followed before King Edward sprang his clever trap makes for

fascinating reading, but the result was three of the principal French commanders were captured, and troops not slain by arrows or in hand-to-hand fighting fled. It was a humiliating disaster for France's King Philip whose son would soon succeed him.

So what's next for the Wulfriths? PERILOUS, the sixth book in the Age of Honor series, will deliver the long-awaited tale of Chevalier Amaury de Chanson and his heroine, Lady Fira Wulfrith in Winter 2023/2024. For a peek at what's in store for these two en route to their Happily Ever After, an excerpt is included in ebook and paperback formats.

As always, thank you for joining me on my wondrous pen and paper journey. ~ Tamara

PERILOUS: BOOK SIX

EXCERPT

CHAPTER TWO

Two cries. Though he ought to have grown callous enough to continue on his way though they were of a woman, he could not.

“God’s rood...God’s tears...God’s patience!” Amaury de Chanson snarled and stretched his legs longer, risking his cover should a fellow villager catch sight of one whose affected limp and slightly bent back made it appear a great discomfort to walk. Of course, if the woman was being subjected to a vile act by one who recognized this newcomer to the Barony of Woodhearst, greater the loss of his cover for what he would do to the wretch.

He expected more cries and the sounds of a struggle to continue pointing him toward one who lacked the strength of her assailant, but she had gone silent, as confirmed when he paused to strain for sounds beyond those of the wood.

Leave her be, urged his vengeful side that had convinced him the pending reunion with his son who would now be nine was not balm enough for one who had escaped seven years of grueling captivity.

“Would I could,” he growled so deeply he nearly looked around to be certain the voice was his rather than a lurking demon.

Still, something of a demon, he acknowledged unrest that had seen his grip on the rope holding him to God slip to its frayed ends. Because he had not lost hold of the raveling

strands and managed to ascend some of that twisted length since his escape, he continued in the direction whence the cries had issued.

Moments later, he leapt the stream and was so intent on trees ahead he nearly missed movement far left and just back from the bank.

The flailing body was of a very young woman, gown up around hosed knees and gloriously red-blond hair spread beneath head and shoulders. However, her assailant had fled, quite possibly having heard Amaury eschew stealth to sooner end the evil done here.

Guessing her so hysterical she believed she was yet under attack, he knew he risked more than his cover to aid her should she think it was he who set upon her. Still, accepting his carefully constructed plans could be snuffed for behaving humanely though he should have no recall of how to do so, he moved toward her, slowing only to return a hitch to his stride and bend to his back.

“Woman!”

Her only response was a cessation of flailing that then became intermittent convulsing. As he neared she whose face was turned opposite, he saw her mouth was filled with a wad of her plain woolen skirt as if it had been thrust inside to quiet her.

“Cur!” Amaury named whoever had done this and, lowering, sought to remove the material. But her teeth were clamped just as her lids were tight over her eyes. Seeing breath flare her nostrils, he took a moment to study her profile. Though she was not as young as believed based on her slight figure, she was of no considerable age—at most, ten and eight to his thirty. Likely a villager, though not from his own and just as likely wed—

“Non,” he amended, seeing no ring on that hand, only callouses on the palm of a woman whose life must be one of toil.

After ensuring his cap covered his hair, he set a hand on her shoulder. “Open your eyes. I...” Mind faltering over what he meant to say, he was moved toward anger, not only for words being hard to come by, but abandoning muteness he enlisted to ensure no obvious French accent slipped from him in this country at war with his.

Keeping anger where it belonged, with an affected English accent and resentment he could not entirely disguise, he said, “I mean you no harm. Tell what I can do to give aid.”

A low moan parted her teeth, causing the material to drop from her mouth, then she murmured what sounded *gloaming*, turned her pretty freckled face toward his, and raised her lids to reveal eyes of a green brighter than his own. “Who are you?” she whispered as if fearful of being heard.

Relieved she neither reacted violently nor slung accusations, he clipped, “Mason. You?” Two words only—one the name he had taken upon making his home in the northernmost village of Wulfenshire by scratching it in the dirt for a priest, the other a request to learn her identity so he could see her returned to her village were she also bound to the Barony of Woodhearst.

“I am very tired,” she declined to provide a name, though perhaps it was the best she could do after what she had suffered.

Amaury opened a hand in a gesture of peace, then slowly reached to the hem of her skirt knotted up as if to keep it clear of the mud through which her boots had squelched. When she remained unmoving, he flipped the garment down her legs and, noting a sheathed dagger on a leather girdle, thought it a pity she had not the time to draw it and fend off her assailant.

Returning his regard to hers and seeing only a bit of fear and no outrage, he said, “Who attacked you?”

Her blink caused dark lashes to shadow the tops of her cheeks, then she narrowed her lids. “Attacked me?”

Was she so traumatized her mind shielded her from what was done her?

Talking himself down from impatience that urged him to continue on his way, he said, “Twice I heard you cry out, and here...” *Words, Amaury*, he silently commanded his own mind to throw wide that door. “...found you struggling.”

“Struggling,” she echoed. “Is that what it looks like? A struggle?”

Was something amiss between her ears? Might she who appeared a woodland sprite of childhood tales be wrong of mind?

As you are, Amaury de Chanson? posited the voice that had not left his side through all the years of striving to think and act along a straight line that delighted in going crooked and taking him the long way around thoughts—sometimes stranding him midway.

“Does it truly look a struggle?” she pressed, tone almost demanding.

Catching himself back from answering in French, he said, “Aye, you looked to be hurting and...fearful. Whoever did this to you—”

“No one did this to me!” she said forcefully, flecking his hand with saliva. “No one!”

Denial then, whether ravished or nearly so, and still no fear of him as expected though clearly she did not mistake him for her assailant. Too, she did not try to rise.

“You will not tell anyone of this,” she said, now with desperation and, he realized, crisp speech unlike most villagers.

If not for her callouses and simple dress, she could be mistaken for a lady. Might she serve one? Perhaps the Baron of Woodhearst’s new wife, Lady Vianne?

“You will not tell, will you, Mason?”

She worried over her reputation, virtue considered the greatest gift a bride could give her groom, its loss to another jeopardizing her prospects if not entirely ruining them.

“I will tell no one,” he said, then thoughts running fairly straight, saw gain here. “That is, if you do me a good...turn as well.”

Having tried and failed to moisten her lips, the tip of her tongue disappeared behind her teeth, then she glared and said, “What price, Knave?”

Knave, she named him though he had trampled his cover of muteness to aid her. Settling into his haunches, he let his hands hang between his knees. “A fair exchange. I keep your secret and, should we...cross paths again, you keep mine.”

She tried to push onto her elbows but fell back. “Methinks I could sleep the remainder of the day,” she said with so little breath he had to piece the words together, then more loudly, “As I know not your secret, you need not worry I shall reveal it.”

“My secret is that, fearing you suffered great harm, I broke a vow of silence,” he said and was pleased by how easily he came by that.

Her tongue clicked off her palate, and again she sought to moisten her lips. No more successful, she croaked, “None will hear it from me.”

“I thank you. Now let me help you to the stream so you may wet your mouth.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

It would be easy to sweep up the slight woman and carry her, but remembering the bend to his back and lameness he could continue to affect since she had not seen his advance, Amaury slowly rose to less than his considerable height, then placing most of his weight on one leg, reached to her.

She raised an arm but paused in setting her hand in his that drew her regard and closely narrowed her lids. “The getting of those must have been nearly as painful as the ones on your face.”

He had thought her too shaken to notice marks on his jaws and cheeks that were hardly disfiguring for how thin they were. If not for the necessity of scraping away whiskers nearly

every day since his arrival upon Wulfenshire, likely they would have escaped her notice. But not the streak of silver on his chin when the whiskers grew in abundance.

“Your other hand as well?” she asked.

Clearly, she wanted to know the cause of the disruptions on sun-browned flesh, but their bargain made no provision for revelation of where and how he had labored after that night on the shore of Calais. Years and years of laboring...and healing...and plotting...

“Both hands,” he said and flicked the other front to back as if neither were those marks of consequence. “But the pain was acceptable.”

Compared to what was barely tolerable, he silently added, feeling revenge’s flames leap higher. Though he knew the Lord would have him be content with reclaiming his greatest treasure—which he would when the time was right—the one who had rendered his son an orphan and sought to make it permanent had yet to answer for that and all other things done Amaury, Mace, and his niece.

Dear Séverine, he silently named one whose fortitude had preserved his son’s life during the last of the siege, the pestilence come after, and all other things endured before their dangerous crossing to England to secure Mace’s training with English kin long lost to the De Chansons. Now, shockingly—hopefully, wondrously as well—she was wed to the baron whose lands comprised the greatest portion of Wulfenshire.

These things he had learned since his escape and arrival upon Wulfenshire, though he had yet to reveal himself to his son and niece for how precarious his position—not only for being French but the pirate, Fléau de l’Anglais, whose capture or death the King of England would greatly reward. And then there was his loss of eloquent speech.

Though the latter no longer greatly hindered, fluidity mostly recovered after those first years, it yet cast a shadow of vulnerability he could work to his advantage in the right circumstances despite a stab to his pride. In the wrong circumstances, it impeded communication such that it was

difficult to reason his way out of danger. Fortunately, thus far the warrior of him had overcome that obstacle, his fists and facility with weapons speaking for him. And speaking well.

“I am sorry,” said the woman from whom he had drifted away—another vulnerability, though one he believed a result of anger and stress for the long years rather than injury to his head.

He nearly flashed a smile to clear concern from her brow as often done with Alainne, but lest its falsity was obvious, reached nearer. “It is in the past,” he lied, knowing the sooner this woman was out of his hands the better.

And that in truth, he thought when she accepted aid in rising and something he had not felt in a long time moved from her fingers and palms to his, next his wrist to his throat. Worse, when she stumbled against him, the feeling swept to feet encased in boots that were fine compared to the tattered things that had long passed as footwear and had to be held together with strips of whatever foul cloth could be had.

“Forgive me,” she gasped, whipping up her other hand to grasp his coarse, homespun tunic. “My legs are—” A loud swallow jerked her body, causing greenery caught in her tresses to come free. “They hurt...are weak.” Now a whimper. “I am so tired.”

As told before.

Amaury knew some women were scheming—though certainly no more than men—but instinct and awareness of what she had endured told she sought nothing beyond his support. And when she dropped back her head to peer at him out of an uncommonly pretty face surrounded by disarrayed hair, he believed fear now evident in her eyes was genuine.

“I must go home, though not until this is remedied. You cannot understand, but I dare not be seen like this, Mason.”

With the appearance of ravishment, he thought and, pitying her, momentarily forgot how much time she cost him. What had befallen her could knock her off whatever good path she was on, and it so frightened that she was about to ask a

stranger in the wood to give further aid. Which he would not. He had done what he could and must resume what her cries interrupted.

Maintaining the bend in his back he did not think she had noticed, determined to hide attraction he resented and she would fear, he said, “Unfortunately, as I am somewhat lame, I can but offer my arm to get you to the...stream so you may drink. Then I must leave you.”

She blinked. “You are lame?”

“Bad leg and shoulder.” As she looked to the bend in the latter, he drew her to the side, forcing her to release his tunic. Then he braced her arm between his and his ribs and turned his fingers up into her palm.

He loathed behaving a cripple, but there were advantages, above all giving few cause to perceive him as the threat he could become with but the raise of a shoulder and straightening of a leg. Then there was the inclination of many to look away from a face best rendered unrecognizable. And of course it saved him the effort of masking emotions some would find frightening when he dwelt on things that could have made a savage of him had his captors not ensured he had only enough freedom of movement to labor as neither a warrior nor merchant were meant to do.

After urging the fiery-haired woman toward the stream with his practiced limp, and progressively taking more of her weight, he handed her down to her knees.

“How did you get the scars?” she asked as she settled in preparation to scoop up drink.

Remaining standing, he said, “An accident.”

She peered up at him through those long lashes, then sighed as if accepting his right to privacy, cupped her hands, and leaned forward. And might have fallen in the water had he not caught her shoulder when she swayed.

Almighty, I cannot leave her like this! he appealed as he drew her back.

When she looked up again, he barely had time to clear frustration from his face. “For how great my fatigue, this time it must have been very bad,” she said with some slur, then raised a shaking hand and touched fingers to the tip of her tongue. “But I did not bite it.” Her lids started to close. “It worked.”

Ill of mind? he wondered again. *Or merely shock?*

“Woman, sit back and I will get you water.”

When she settled onto her heels, he lowered beside her and scooped a handful nearly equivalent to what both hers would hold, then shifted and reached to her mouth.

She glanced longingly at the drink offered her, and when he nodded encouragement, bent her head. Settling her lower lip on the edge of his hand, she drank from the cup made of it until all that remained in his palm were her lips. It was brief, but again he was bothered—so much he nearly did not offer more.

This time she raised her head before her lips reached bottom and said, “I thank you for your kindness. Now I shall rest before making my way back.”

He liked her dismissive tone. Having done what his conscience demanded, he could leave her without regret. Or so he told himself.

When she sank further back and lowered her head, causing loosely curling red-blond tresses to curtain her face, he remained unmoving.

She looked nearly a child, and a man of even some honor did not leave one so vulnerable in the wood—especially after an attack that could resume with his departure.

“Les blessures de Dieu!” he snarled, and not for the first time noted the curiosity that curses came easily to tongue and lips—even those disguised as appeals to heaven.

“God’s wounds,” she translated and raised her face. “Are you of France, Mason?”

This time he kept his curses to himself. Not only had he fully exposed his accent but spoken in his native language. Though more he longed to leave, unable to bring himself to do so, he lied again. “Nay, but I was many years there fighting for our king and was much among the French before being... injured.”

“The same as my brothers,” she reflected.

Likely archers, the King of England requiring men of the common learn the bow—and for the strength of those archers had surely defeated the French at Crécy, he thought, then eased to sitting beside her.

She pushed off one shoulder hair still poked through with leaves and grass, then angled toward him and squinted as if the sun were in her eyes. “You have proven honorable in aiding me. I thank you again, but I am well enough recovered you need not keep watch. Soon my legs shall be firm, and I will return home.”

Heed her, impatience prompted, but unable to ignore the possibility worse would befall one still fatigued by her ordeal, he said, “As the damage is already done, it cannot hurt if I am a bit later.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So you say, but it frustrates—perhaps even angers—you.”

It shamed that, despite surviving great trials by learning to control the expression of his emotions—many scars and bruises aiding in mastering the appearance of one so dull he accepted what was demanded of him—he failed to do so now. But then, that had been a matter of life over death with much incentive to lull his captors. This was a relatively harmless woman he was unlikely to see again. And even less likely after he established himself on the neighboring Barony of Wulfen that would place him nearer the son he longed to look upon before determining how best to reclaim him.

As may not be best for him, his conscience trespassed on the one corner of his heart he had purged of most things ill upon learning Mace lived. His son being little more than a babe the night it was believed his sire was slain by an English

patrol, he could not possibly remember Amaury. But the man who had loved Alainne and made a child with her remembered their boy. If he could get him back without endangering him and jeopardizing his future, he would. If he could not, somehow he would endure watching from afar as his son grew into a man and warrior.

“What is wrong?” The woman set a hand on his forearm, once more rousing awareness of her.

Though the resulting frustration of drifting again made it imperative he cast off her touch, he should have exercised subtlety. Instead, the wrench of his arm that left her gripping air justified the offense in her green eyes. She was only being kind.

Yet distracts you from what matters, reminded anger edged in revenge, And what matters is ensuring the one responsible for so many lost years thieves no more from you nor your son.

It was true, but he regretted his behavior. Lacking words formed well enough to be believed, he sought a distraction for the one who continued to regard him darkly. Then, finding a sideways excuse for his violent reaction, he said, “You are a woman alone in the wood as you ought not be and just had a very bad...” He nearly left his mouth open while searching for the word, the usually intentional practice of which had been effective in lowering his captors’ guard.

“Aye, Mason?” she prompted with the indignation of one tempted to walk away from an answer too long in coming. Guessing she would were she able to trust her legs, he found the elusive word and said, “After an *experience* such as yours, I would expect you to be frightened of me, and yet even before you knew I was lame, you did not try to flee.”

Through narrowed lids she considered his face, next the cap he wore even when there was little chance of encountering others, then said, “Even aware of your debility, I should be afeared, but...” She lowered her gaze down his body whose loose garments concealed a muscular build more impressive than before the siege of Calais as had been necessary for what was required of him during captivity. “I can bite, scratch, kick,

and am fairly adept with this”—she touched the dagger on her belt—“but I have little doubt you would best me unless I had some distance on you and my bow to hand.”

Amaury did not hide his surprise. “Bow?”

Her mouth tucked toward a smile. “The youngest of my brothers says had I the strength to pull the string of a long bow, I might be as lethal as he.”

As thought, an archer, perhaps one who marched on Calais after the defeat of the French at Crécy.

“So your brothers are archers,” he said with more interest than felt for preferring the light of her to the dark and the hope such talk would see her sooner recovered.

“The youngest exceptionally so,” she said. “The others are more accomplished with swords...daggers...maces...”

Common men-at-arms the French did not hate as much as the King of England’s archers. And yet, even after all these years following the storm of arrows that devastated French forces, still they relied on men of the wieldy crossbow whose missiles could penetrate armor but at a very slow rate compared to those flown by the long bow.

“Has your youngest brother all his fingers?” he asked as he probably should not, especially if hers had come home missing those which the French were fond of severing when a bowman was captured. Were the Englishman not also slain, never again could he draw the string and loose havoc on the enemy.

Offense once more darkening her eyes, she said, “Of course he has all his fingers. He has yet to see battle and, I hope, never shall.”

For all her prayers, likely he would. England was not done trying to reclaim its ancestral French lands, just as France was not done trying to keep hold of them—and might yet harbor hope of adding this island kingdom to its possessions.

Amaury wanted to spit over the greed of rulers. Never was it enough to have desires exceedingly beyond need met. Always there must be more, the greatest expense of which was borne by those they ruled. *That* he who once enriched himself

by pirating English merchants had further learned when the loyalty of those holding Calais for the King of France was rewarded with broken promises and near starvation. In fact, the greatest consideration shown them was by King Edward who had not slain the citizens who were put out of the city to preserve food stores. And further the besieger surprised in supplying them with food for their journey to safety.

I drift again, he realized and returned his attention to the woman who watched him. “As the war with France is... ungodly, your hope is mine,” he said.

Breath raised her shoulders. “I thank you for giving me no cause to fear you, Mason.” Then she looked to the stream.

When her lids began lowering, he nearly groaned aloud. How much longer before he—?

A screech brought up their chins.

Looking skyward, Amaury mused, *An owl in the day. Not rare, but neither common.*

“Oh!” The woman pushed upright and swayed so slightly he did not think it necessary to steady her as he also rose. Shading her eyes to follow the bird’s flight, she said, “Methinks I know that owl—am near certain of it—though the snake...”

Snake? Curiosity bade him ask her to elaborate, but it would prolong his vigil.

“Gone again,” she bemoaned, then turned to him. “As I am ready to make my way home, I shall release you from your self-imposed obligation.”

He inclined his head. “I am glad you are recovered, Woman.”

She thanked him again and stepped past.

He should have departed then, but what was another minute compared to all those lost? With less grudging than he ought to feel, he turned to watch her go.

Shortly, she came around and called, “’Twas ill-mannered not to give my name. I am Fira Wulfrith, sister of the new

Baron of Woodhearth as well as the Baron of Wulfen.” Then with a whirl of those knotted-up skirts, she resumed her trek.

Amaury’s impulse to laugh was so unexpected for how unfamiliar delight had become that she would have heard him had he been unable to contain it. But he did allow a smile.

Though he might have entertained that the sprite of uncertain sanity was a lady, never would he have guessed her the sister-in-law of two women who had wed into the Wulfriths—first Séverine and very recently Lady Vianne with whom he had become fleetingly acquainted when she fled Calais ahead of the French seeking to take back the city.

“Quite possibly I will see you again, Lady Fira,” he murmured, “though best you not see me.”

If that to which he aspired came to be, he would have to transform somewhat, and he could not have her recognizing his build nor face that must be kept scraped clean of whiskers.

When she went from sight, he slid fingers beneath his cap into hair he should have shaved before now but...

It was not vanity, that having long expired. It was the memory of morning light come through a window and being awakened by Alainne’s gentle tugs on his hair as she separated the strands into dark and light. The longer he feigned sleep to prolong the wondrous prickling sensation, the likelier a braid would be fashioned of light strands. Then there was the sensation of her unraveling it after their lovemaking...

A cry slapped him back to the present, then he was running and cursing himself for not staying near the lady until she was safely out of the wood. He needed to be somewhere else, but not at the cost of further ill done her.

Blessedly, when next he saw her she was emerging from the tree line onto the open land before Romary Castle that was the seat of her second brother’s barony. As she was alone and moving with what appeared a slight limp of her own, he slowed his advance, certain her cry was the result of a fall. Too, the moment she came to the notice of those on the walls, it would serve him ill to be caught anywhere near her—

especially had she been physically assaulted as he believed, a crime deemed more heinous for her being a lady.

That moment was now, as heard in shouts carrying across the expanse and seen when the castle came fully into view, its drawbridge down and much activity before it. Doubtless, the Baron of Woodhearst had discovered his sister missing and organized a search party. As the lady was safe from further harm, and it was not the time to alert any that this enemy of England was distant kin to the D'Argents the same as the Wulfriths, he must leave.

And be quick, as evidenced by the blond man spurring his horse from the castle toward the lady with his men following. It was Warin Wulfrith whom Amaury had seen months past when that warrior aided the Captain of Calais in preparing for the arrival of the King of France's army.

Unbeknownst to that Wulfrith and Lady Vianne whom he wed before putting her on the ship to England to ensure her safety, Amaury had played a part in keeping the city in King Edward's hands. Granted, his assistance had more to do with revenge against French infiltrators than his belief King Jean was no worthier to wear the crown of France than his departed sire, but he also believed the King of England a better steward of Calais—perhaps even all of France should Jean's son prove as inept when it was his turn to wiggle his backside onto the throne.

Oh, you are bitter, he thought as he ran full strength and stride, having little doubt the baron's men would not pause to learn the cause of the lady's dishevelment and limp before searching the wood for one who could be responsible. But there might be good—non, better said *satisfaction*—in bitterness directed where due. Much satisfaction.

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt of PERILOUS, the sixth book in the Age of Honor series. Watch for its release winter

2023/2024.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Achard: AA-shahrd

Ada: AA-duh

Adelaide: AA-duh-layd

Annus mirabilis: AAN-oos Mee-RAH-buh-lihs

Amaury: AW-moh-ree

Arnulf: AHRN-uhlf

Artois: AH-twah

Aubert: OH-behr

Audrey: OW-dree

Baldwina: BAHLD-wee-nuh

Balian: BAH-lee-ahn

Barra: Bahr-uh

Benoit: BIHN-wah

Blanchefleur: BLAHNSH-fluu

Blythe: BLIYT~H

Briant: BREE-ahn

Caen: KAHN

Calais: KAA-lay

Chanson: SHAHN-sahn

Charliese: SHAH-lees

Château de la Madeleine: SHAA-toh day lah MAA-duh-leen

Chesne: CHEHZ-nee

Chevalier devenu noir: sheh-VAAL-yay DUH-vaan-yoo noo-WAHR

Chevreuse: SHEH-vruuz

Clémence: KLAY-mahns

Colbern: COHL-buhrn

Crécy: KREE-see

Creuseur: KROO-zuur

Dange: DAHN-zhuh

Dangereuse: DAHN-zhuh-ruuz

Darden: DAHR-dihn

Dauphin: DOO-fuhn

D'Archi: DAHR-see

D'Argent: DAHR-zhahnt

Daschiel: DAA-shee-uhl

Dunn: DUHN

Elias: uh-LIY-uhs

Emil: EH-mihl

Ermine: UHR-meen

Esta: EH-stuh

Eugénie: OO-zhay-nee

Filomena: FIHL-uh-meen-uh

Fira: FIY-ruh

Fitz Géré: FIHTS ZHAY-ree

Fitz Simon: FIHT-sih-muhn

Fléau de l'Anglais: FLAY-oo duh LAHN-glay

Ferrand: FEH-rahn

Gisa: GEE-suh
Godfroi: GAWD-frwah
Guarin: GAA-rah
Gudrun: GOO-druhn
Guines: GEEN
Gunulf: GUHN-uhlf
Gustave: GOO-stahv
Gyrth: GUHRTH
Gytha: JIY-thuh
Hector: HEHK-tuhr
Héloïse: AY-loh-weez
Honi soit qui mal y pense: OH-nee swah KEE maal ee pahns
Honoré: AH-nohr
Ida: IY-duh
Ingerger le Grand: EENG-uh-zhehr luh GRAHN
Ingvar: EENG-vah
Jankin: JAYN-kihn
Joffrey: JAH-free
Kenilfairn: KEHN-uhl-faarn
Landon: LAHN-dohn
Lavonne: LUH-vahn
Leofwine: LEEF-wiyn
Les Neuf Preux: lay-NUUF-pruu
Lianor: LEE-uh-nohr
Lillefarne: LIHL-uh-fahrn
Lisbette: LIHS-beht
L'Isle Bouchard: LEEL-boo-shahr
Lothaire: LOH-taar

Louis: LOO-wee
Mace: MAYS
Maedine: MAY-deen
Maël: MAY-luh
Marionne: MAA-ree-oh
Masse: MAAS
Mathe: MAA-tay
Mercia: MUHR-see-uh
Montjoie Saint Denis: MAHNZH-wah SAAN du-nee
Moreville: mohr-VEEL
Murielle: Myuur-ee-uhl
Norbert: NAHR-buhrt
Odo: OH-doh
Olivier: oh-LIH-vee-ay
Ondine: AWN-deen
Oriflamme: OH-ree-flaam
Owen: OH-wihn
Paulette: PAH-leht
Percival: PUHR-sih-vuhl
Philippa: FIHL-ih-puh
Plantagenet: plaan-TAA-juh-neht
Rambouillet: RAAM-boo-yee
Ravvenborough: RAY-vuhn-buh-ruh
Reginald: REH-jihn-uhld
Rémy: RAY-mee
Rhoswen: RAHS-whihn
Rhys: REES
Romary: ROHM-ree

Robine: rah-BEEN
Roche: ROHSH
Roslyn: RAHS-lihn
Rufus: ROO-fuhs
Plesance: PLEH-suhns
Sanche: SAHNSH
Sévère: SAY-vehr
Séverine: SAY-vuh-reen
Siegfried: SEEG-freed
Signaleurs blancs: SEEN-yuh-luu blahn
Sinjin: SIHN-jihn
Soames: SOHMZ
Stace: STAYS
Stern: STUHRN
Sweyn: SVIHN
Tostig: TAH-stihg
Tournoi d'Honneur: tohrn-WAH DAH-nuur
Ufford: UH-fuhrd
Vianne: VEE-aan
Villeneuve-le-Hardi: VEE-luh-nuuv LAHR-dee
Wardieu: WAHR-doh
Warin: WAH-rihn
Wulfen: WUUL-fehn
Wulfrith: WUUL-frihth
Yates: YAYTS

PRONUNCIATION KEY

VOWELS

aa: arrow, castle

ay: chain, lady

ah: fought, sod

aw: flaw, paw

eh: bet, leg

ee: king, league

ih: hilt, missive

iy: knight, write

oh: coat, noble

oi: boy, coin

oo: fool, rule

ow: cow, brown

uh: sun, up

uu: book, hood

y: yearn, yield

CONSONANTS

b: bailey, club

ch: charge, trencher

d: dagger, hard

f: first, staff

g: gauntlet, stag

h: heart, hilt

j: jest, siege

k: coffer, pike

l: lance, vassal

m: moat, pommel
n: noble, postern
ng: ring, song
p: pike, lip
r: rain, far
s: spur, pass
sh: chivalry, shield
t: tame, moat
th: thistle, death
t~h: that, feather
v: vassal, missive
w: water, wife
wh: where, whisper
z: zip, haze
zh: treasure, vision

GLOSSARY

BLIAUT: medieval gown

BRAIES/BREECHES: men's underwear with fastening cord

BUSTLE: often made of foxtails, worn under skirt to exaggerate buttocks

CASTELLAN: commander of a castle

CHAUSSES/LEGGINGS: men's close-fitting leg coverings usually of wool

CHEMISE/SHIFT: a woman's loose-fitting undergarment or nightdress

COIF: hood-shaped cap made of cloth or chain mail

CORSET: close-fitting undergarment for shaping a woman's figure (and some men)

COTE: mid-thigh fitted jacket; buttoned up front with close-fitting buttoned sleeves

COTEHARDIE: lavish cote; usually thigh-length for men and full-length for women (buttoned or laced)

DAGGES: fabric edges cut into points

DEMESNE: home and adjoining lands held by a lord

DOUBLET: padded mid-thigh jacket; buttoned up front with close-fitting buttoned sleeves

DONJON: tower at center of a castle serving as a lord's living area

FEALTY: tenant or vassal's sworn loyalty to a lord

FORTNIGHT: two weeks

GARDEROBE: enclosed toilet

GIRDLE: belt worn upon which purses or weaponry might be attached

KNAVE: dishonest or unprincipled man

LEAGUE: equivalent to approximately three miles

LIEGE: superior or lord

MAIL: garments of armor made of linked metal rings

MISCREANT: badly behaving person

MISSIVE: letter

MORROW: tomorrow; the next day

NOBLE: one of high birth

NORMAN: people whose origins lay in Normandy on the continent

PARCHMENT: treated animal skin used for writing

PELL: used for combat training, a vertical post set in the ground against which a sword was beat

PIKE: long wooden shaft with a sharp steel or iron head

POLTROON: utter coward

POMMEL: counterbalance weight at the end of a sword hilt or a knob located at the fore of a saddle

PORTCULLIS: metal or wood gate lowered to block a passage

POSTERN GATE: rear door in a wall, often concealed to allow occupants to arrive and depart inconspicuously

QUINTAIN: post used for lance training to which a dummy and sandbag are attached; the latter swings around and hits the unsuccessful tilter

SALLY PORT: small hidden entrance and exit in a fortification

SENNIGHT: one week

SHIFT/CHEMISE: a woman's loose-fitting undergarment or nightdress

SURCOAT: loose robe worn over armor

TAPETS: decorative pieces of cloth dangling from sleeves and hoods

TRENCHER: large piece of stale bread used as a bowl for food

TUNIC/OVERTUNIC: linen shirt

UNDERTUNIC: shirt worn under tunic; considered underwear

VASSAL: one who holds land from a lord and owes fealty

WIMPLE: cloth headdress worn by married women and nuns, covering head, neck, and sides of face

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PAGAN BRIDE 1995 Bantam Books (Lady Of Fire rewrite)

SAXON BRIDE 1995 Bantam Books (Lady Of Conquest rewrite)

MISBEGOTTEN 1996 HarperCollins (Lady Undaunted rewrite)

UNFORGOTTEN 1997 HarperCollins (Lady Ever After rewrite)

BLACKHEART 2001 Dorchester (Lady Betrayed rewrite)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamara Leigh signed a 4-book contract with Bantam Books in 1993, her debut medieval romance was nominated for a RITA award, and successive books with Bantam, HarperCollins, and Dorchester earned awards and became national bestsellers. In 2006, the first of Tamara's inspirational contemporary romances was published, followed by six more with Multnomah and RandomHouse. Perfecting Kate was optioned for a movie, Splitting Harriet won an ACFW Book of the Year award, and Faking Grace was nominated for a RITA award.

In 2012, Tamara returned to the historical romance genre with the release of Dreamspell and the bestselling Age of Faith and The Feud series. Among her #1 bestsellers are her general market romances rewritten as clean and inspirational reads, including Lady at Arms and Lady of Conquest. In 2018, she released Merciless, the first book in the Age of Conquest series, followed by seven more unveiling the origins of the Wulfrith family. And now—NOTORIOUS, the fifth book in the new Age of Honor series chronicling the 14th century Wulfriths.

Tamara lives near Nashville with her husband, a German Shepherd who has never met a squeaky toy she can't destroy, and a feisty Morkie who keeps her company during long writing stints. Then there's Boog...

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