

Chapter One

WILTSHIRE, 1100

A chill of foreboding gripped Adelise as Old Sarum Castle loomed before her. The high, windswept mount, the site of battles for more than a thousand years, was a fitting lair for the man they'd come to meet: Robert de Bellême, Earl of Shrewsbury, dubbed "The Devil".

Ivo, riding at her side, noticed her shiver. "We won't stay long, cousin. Just time enough for me to swear obedience."

"But you told me this was only a courtesy visit! Why do you have to swear fealty to him? He's not our overlord, and Shrewsbury is miles away to the north!"

Ivo shrugged. "It's the king's will. He's not satisfied with our progress at rebuilding Corfe, and he wants Earl Robert to advise us. My swearing fealty to him ensures we won't argue about the expense."

"I suppose that's reasonable."

She'd heard that all the timber castles, hastily erected after the conquest, or taken over from the English, were being rebuilt in stone, and Robert de Bellême was an expert in military architecture.

Ivo flicked the reins. They rode up past the piles of dressed stone that would form the curtain wall around the town, and dismounted at the door of the great hall.

Adelise steeled herself for this meeting. Earl Robert's reputation was well known, and little good was said of him. A man-at-arms escorted them inside and announced them in a bellow that echoed through the hall.

Her first sight of the earl didn't reassure her.

He sat at the far end of the hall in a massive earl's chair of intricately carved black bog-oak, surrounded by a guard of armored knights, their hands resting on the pommels of naked swords. They stood like statues, oozing a menace that reflected the source of his power, further emphasized by the hanging pennants and battle bannerettes, the only decoration in the lofty stone hall.

Earl Robert was about seven-and-forty, but didn't look his age; a tall man, with black hair cut straight across his brow and shaved up the back, in the military style. His bleakly handsome face was pale except for the blue-black shadow on his craggy, shaven cheeks.

Unlike his frowning guard, Earl Robert's thin lips held a perpetual slight smile that had no humor in it.

As she waited beside Ivo to be presented, he fixed his coal-black eyes on her. A chill swept up her spine, so she stiffened it and clenched her stomach. Gazing into those eyes, she could easily believe all the whispered stories told about his cruelty.

She recognized that smile — the look of a cat with a mouse trapped in the corner of a bare stone room.

She made a warding sign against the evil eye beneath her cloak. Although she'd concealed it, the icy smile broadened as if his eyes saw not only the gesture, but bored past her own eyes and opened her very soul to his pitiless gaze.

She could feel her heart thumping as she shuffled forward at Ivo's side. Never had one man made her so fearful, so unwilling to advance. She hung back as far as possible as Ivo knelt to put his hands between those of Earl Robert in the sign of fealty. At least, as a woman, she'd be spared that.

Standing with downcast eyes, aware of his attention focused on her, her breath came fast

and shallow. Could he smell her fear?

She jumped as he spoke. His voice struck her like a scouring wash of icy water, forcing her to glance up.

“My dear Ivo, you didn’t tell me your cousin was such a beauty.” He smiled with a charm that came nowhere near the reptilian eyes. “This *is* your little cousin, is it not?”

“Yes, my lord!” Ivo spoke quickly, dazzled by the earl’s magnificence and eager to please. “Adelise, daughter of the late Ralph de Corfe.”

The earl looked her over slowly from top to toe. “Hmm. Not so little, after all. Tall and stately as a queen, and sporting a regal pride withal. Could one so proud be a faithful vassal, do you think...?”

He trailed off, looking to her for an answer. Adelise swallowed, and at last found her voice.

“So my cousin has sworn for me, my lord,” she said through stiff lips.

“Indeed. But I would have *you* swear, fair Adelise.”

She gasped. “My lord, it’s not the custom—”

“*I* say it is, in this case. Since your father’s death, *you* are the acting castellan of Corfe.”

As she hesitated, his voice shed its bantering tone and lashed her in a venomous hiss. “And all about me know to instantly obey my orders. On your knees, girl!”

Appalled, Adelise dropped to her knees and, at his gesture, put her hands between his. A part of her mind registered surprise that his hands were so warm, almost feverish. She’d expected them to be serpent-cold, but instead her own were icy from fear.

She rattled off the words of the oath after him. At the end he clasped her joined hands firmly in his left, preventing her from rising. He placed his right index finger under her chin, tilted her face up and leaned close to give her a smile that only increased the churning in her stomach.

“That wasn’t so difficult, was it? You have but to obey me, fair Adelise, and you will find me an amiable lord.”

The bantering tone was back. Now it was as if the implacable command had never been uttered. Adelise gazed wordlessly into those eyes, a rabbit hypnotized by a snake. At last, he released her.

“As a reward for your obedience, you may sit at my right hand tonight, as hostess of the feast. My lady wife is unfortunately ... absent.”

Adelise repressed a shudder. She well knew the story of how, last year, his wife had fled to her mother to escape his cruelties.

The earl put himself out to be charming at the feast; had she not known of his reputation Adelise could have been beguiled. Fortunately, apart from some flowery compliments, he spoke little to her but carried on a long, low-voiced conversation with her cousin. To her disgust, Ivo appeared flattered by this attention, hanging on the earl’s every word. They seemed to reach some agreement, and Robert turned back to her.

“I’m afraid, my lady, I must borrow your cousin for a while. I have an important matter to put before the king, and I judge Sir Ivo to be well suited to plead my cause.”

Ivo smirked, and Robert continued, “Your retinue, of course, must accompany him on so important an errand. But never fear, I’ll provide a guard of my own men to escort you back to Corfe.”

“As it please your lordship,” Adelise murmured, then turned, seeking the source of a sudden burst of laughter down the table. She saw a gross, red-faced knight who’d collapsed onto the table in a drunken stupor. His head had fallen into his greasy trencher, and his companions were laughing at the bubbles in the mixture of gravy and drool blown by his snore.

“Who is that mannerless lout?” she asked.

“Sir Hugh de Verneuil,” Ivo said. Then, for some reason, he laughed. Earl Robert merely smiled.

Almost two months passed before Ivo returned to Corfe.

Adelise was frowning over the castle ledgers, chewing the end of her quill, when her English servant Gytha announced him.

He entered, shouldering Gytha aside. Gytha crossed the solar and went through into the bedchamber, casting a concerned glance at her mistress. Wondering at this, Adelise laid down her quill and stood.

“Welcome, Cousin. You ... my, how you’ve changed!”

She took in his auburn hair, formerly cropped short at the back and sides in a military style. It had certainly grown during his absence. Ringlets coiled over his forehead, and the now longer hair at the back and sides was beginning to curl. She also took in the new and splendid clothes: a wine-colored velvet tunic over blue hose, with a jeweled belt encircling his slim waist. Ivo smiled at her surprise.

“It’s the fashion at court, dear Coz. But let’s leave court gossip until later. I have great news! I prevailed upon the king to arrange a marriage for you—”

The blood rushed to Adelise’s face. “I gave you no leave to arrange anything of the kind!” Then she collected herself, and gave a brittle laugh. “You *are* jesting, aren’t you?”

“—to Sir Hugh de Verneuil,” Ivo finished, unperturbed.

Adelise’s anger switched to shock at such an outrageous choice, but she rallied.

“Have you lost your wits? Do you think I’d consent to marry that oaf?”

“Why not? Next year you’ll be twenty; it’s a scandal you remain unwed. The time for mourning your parents is long past, as the king rightly observed. And Hugh is a great lord.”

“He’s a great lout who’s old enough to be my grandfather! And he’s so *gross*, and *ugly*, and *vile*—”

“And rich, and high in the favor of the king and Robert de Bellême—”

“All the more reason for me to disdain him! I could never trust a toady of Robert the Devil!” Adelise spun away. Her long auburn hair, uncovered in this private chamber, swirled with the movement.

She drew herself up. At her full height, she was as tall as most men of her acquaintance. She turned and glared at her older cousin, eye to eye.

“Forget this, Ivo. The matter is closed.”

He replied with a thin smile, not in the least abashed. “Indeed it is, Coz. But not in the manner you may wish. You’ll obey my command, and put the best face on it you can.”

“*Command!* By what right do *you* command me?”

“It’s a command I relay from the king. Disobey *him*, and you’ll go straight into his dungeon until you change your mind.”

Her blood ran cold. To be imprisoned, to lie in filth and darkness, with no caress of sun or breeze or misting rain on her skin — *no!*

“I will die first,” she hissed.

He shrugged. “In that case, I must put a guard on you, to stop you from doing anything foolish.”

Adelise forced down her rage. If she were to find any way out of this dire situation, she must be as subtle and cunning as Ivo was now showing himself to be. Why had he changed so much? She studied her cousin through narrowed eyes.

The family resemblance was strong. They shared the proud, upright carriage, the graceful vitality, and the sensuous full-lipped mouth. But Adelise possessed a soft and generous mouth,

while Ivo's bottom lip usually protruded in a pout that gave him a sulky look. Still, he was very handsome ... and where had that jeweled belt come from?

Ivo tossed his head in a new, unfamiliar gesture, and patted his curls. In that instant, she knew, with a frisson of distaste, whose hand had bestowed the valuable belt, and the likely reason why.

King William Rufus was unmarried and there'd never been talk of marriage, or of heirs of his body on either side of the blanket. Instead, the whispers concerned pretty page-boys and the young cockscombs who thronged the court, scandalizing sober knights and churchmen.

Ivo watched her with an air of triumph. Infuriated, she gave in to the abrupt urge to strike out and hurt this man whom she'd always looked on as an older brother and protector.

"You must have performed a singular service to so enjoy the king's favor," she sneered. "Knight of the bedchamber, perhaps?"

Ivo's face flushed. "Earl Robert interceded for me!" he shouted. "He has the king's countenance, since he—"

"Since he paid him so much money for the earldom, money he'd extorted from his vassals in Normandy!" Her voice rose to match his. "And since he provides such a model of all that's vile that even our sovereign lord looks like a saint beside him!"

"Have a care, sweet Coz," Ivo mocked, recovering his poise. "What you say is a bit close to treason."

"It's no more than the truth." Her voice trembled with emotion. Then she burst out, "Ivo, why are you doing this? We've been together since we were children. I thought ... I thought you *loved* me."

At some level, that reached him. Ivo flinched. A look of pain flashed across his face, then his expression went blank. When he spoke again, it was as if he recited something he'd rehearsed.

"It's because I love you that I'm taking such care to provide for you. Sir Hugh is your equal in standing."

"But he's so gross! And he's too old!"

"That he's old is to your advantage; you won't be under his control for long. Just produce an heir, and your future is assured. Then *you* will control his lands as well as your own after he's dead. And you'll still be young enough to choose another husband more fitted to your taste."

He turned and walked to the door, paused with his hand on the latch and looked back at her over his shoulder. "The king wills it. You have no choice."

"So tell me, what do *you* gain from this devil's bargain, Ivo?" she yelled after him.

His mouth merely twisted in a mocking grin as he left, slamming the heavy door behind him. Faintly, she heard him calling for a guard.

Fists clenched, Adelise stood frozen to the spot. Presently, she noticed her old nurse Gytha had crept out of the bedchamber, and stood watching her.

"You heard?"

"How could I help but hear, milady, with the both of you shouting so?" Gytha wrung her plump hands. "I feared something like this might happen. Ever since you and Sir Ivo went to Old Sarum Castle..."

Adelise nodded grimly.

"Better you'd stayed here, me love, out of sight and mind of the grand lords. But that can't be mended now." She shook her gray-streaked fair head and went on, "We knew something like this might happen someday. Your betrothed is dead, God rest him, and a great heiress like yourself isn't free to marry as she chooses."

Adelise sighed. "I know, Gytha, but—" her voice broke.

Desolation overwhelmed her as she faced the bleak future Ivo had mapped out. She tried to

continue, but a deep sob wracked her throat and tears fell. Gytha rushed to fling her arms around her darling. They sank to the floor, and Gytha cradled the taller, younger woman in her lap as she used to long ago, when Adelise was small. They spoke in English, their own secret language.

“But I hoped — that my husband — would be one I could *respect*, at least, if not love,” Adelise gulped. “Not one — whose very aspect — fills me with loathing.”

Gytha rocked her back and forth, like a child. “Of course you did, me pet, with the example of your own dear parents before you,” she said, then suddenly stopped rocking and seized Adelise to her with startling strength.

“I know! There’s a way to cut this droil short, along with his worthless life, if you’ve got the stomach for the task.”

Adelise looked up at the unexpected steel in her maid’s voice.

“Many men lust after your beauty, you know. They don’t all like that fashionable skinny-boy look. Between now and your wedding night, I’ll teach you ways to make an old wretch like fat Hugh think himself a cocksy boy again.” She smiled grimly at Adelise’s shocked expression.

“Aye, the two-backed beast is rightly called the little death. To gift its wanton arts to a fat old fool... A young, lusty bride like yourself could easily coax him to die of an excess of pleasure, I’m thinking.”

Adelise stood silent as Gytha dressed her. On this dreaded day she must leave these familiar walls and travel again to Old Sarum Castle, held now by Hugh de Verneuil on behalf of Robert de Bellême. And tomorrow ... tomorrow she’d be married.

Her linen travelling gown had practical gathered sleeves, with white embroidery at the hem and neckline. It was dyed a sensible autumn-brown color that wouldn’t show the stains of travel. Gytha settled the cream cotton veil, tied off the headband and pulled the pleated fabric down from under it to cover her forehead and shade her face from the sun. Though still early morning, the air held a promise of unseasonable heat, so she wore nothing but a short muslin shift underneath, and no over-gown. Gytha stepped back to survey her mistress.

“There. You look as well as can be in that dull mud-color. It does at least favor your eyes. I reckon it’s enough to set that old lecher’s heart a’galloping at a pace too sprightly for his health.” She smiled dourly. “I look to see you a widow soon, me love, if you just mind me lessons.”

Adelise blushed at the memory of all the strange and fascinating lore that Gytha had shared over the past week.

“There’s so much to remember. But I do wonder, Gytha, how you came by such a ... singular abundance of knowledge.”

The old nurse cackled. “I had three husbands. Each came and taught me in his own fashion, not that I was in any way backward meself, mind you. Two put me aside for me barrenness, though the lack of children weren’t for want of trying, and the third died happily on top of me, as I pray Hugh will do on you.”

“Oh, Gytha!” Adelise gave a nervous laugh. How much she’d learned over the past week! Not only of the arts of love, but of Gytha herself. She’d known of her maid’s marriages, but their recent intimate conversations had fleshed out the bare bones of the story. Gytha’s loss had been Adelise’s gain, when she became the focus of all her nurse’s frustrated mother-love. Impulsively, she flung her arms around the old woman.

“I owe you so much! You’ve given me everything. Service, friendship ... and, since my parents died, you’ve also been a mother to me.”

Before Gytha could reply, a young page knocked and called, "My lady, the captain of the guard says you must come now, if you're not to miss the tide at the ferry."

They hurried down to the bailey. There, a guard of twenty knights and men-at-arms waited in their hauberks of chain-mail and conical helmets, all but their leader ready mounted and impatient to be off. Ivo had left yesterday, to seal the marriage settlement, taking half the castle guard. These men were strangers; retainers of Sir Hugh and Earl Robert, previously sent to escort her from Old Sarum, then kept here to help in the tax gathering.

The knight commander of the troop strolled over, his ice-blue eyes assessing her.

"May I say, my lady, what a delightful ornament you'll be to our household."

Adelise merely stared back at him. The compliment, though bold, was just acceptable; his look and tone made it an insult.

He tried again, moving a step too close.

"You will find our lord's court dull, I fear. Sir Hugh has grown indolent in his old age. If you feel the need for more ... *lively* company, ask for Sir Jacques, the guard captain." He paused. "That's me."

Adelise continued gazing at him in silence, then said, "The tide waits for no one. Let us proceed, captain, *if* you please."

With a sour smile and ironic bow, he turned to rejoin his men.

Holy Mother. What sort of disorderly household am I getting myself into? Adelise mounted and glanced across to Gytha, who'd just been boosted up by a grinning guard onto a nag by her side. They exchanged grimaces, promising an exchange of confidences later. Inevitably, her thoughts circled back to the feast she'd endured two months before, seated at the side of Earl Robert de Bellême, and the coarse, drunken oaf who'd made such a spectacle of himself.

Her intended husband.

A spasm ran through her at the prospect of sharing Sir Hugh's bed. Perhaps she should drink enough at the wedding feast to ensure she'd feel little of what he did to her. With luck, her husband would solve the problem by dying of the stroke that his florid complexion and drinking habits promised.

Or ... could there be another way to escape the whole ghastly business?

Earl Robert must be the one behind it. But what could his motive be? Some political advantage, no doubt, but what possible gain could there be in pandering to such a drunken old fool?

The earl would be there for the wedding. She would steel herself, confront him and demand to know his purpose. Perhaps, then, she could suggest an alternate course to gain whatever it was he wanted.

The travelers reached the flat valley of the East Avon River in the lengthening afternoon shadows, crossing by a log bridge.

As they turned onto the north road on the eastern bank of the river, the scenery brightened. The road wound between thickets of silver birches, alder and willows. Light sparkled on the river and downs to their left, with glowing accents where the chalky subsoil showed through the heath. On their right the gloom of the New Forest, that great royal hunting preserve, loomed in sharp contrast.

Gytha cast a wary look over her shoulder at the forest.

"I hear tell desperate outlaws lurk in there," she said. "Men who appear and disappear at will, as if by enchantment."

Adelise shrugged. "I imagine William Rufus guards his privileges well. Any poachers would risk having a hand lopped off, or being hanged from the nearest tree. This strong guard should

be proof against any attack.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than she saw them confounded!

Facing the woods in her side-saddle, only Adeline saw the dense flight of arrows arcing toward them from the trees. The audacity of the attack left her staring in disbelief, the clutch of fear at her throat cutting off any cry of warning.

The arrows divided in their flight, falling among the guard in front and behind, sparing the two women.

Screams and yells filled Adeline's ears. The ranks disintegrated in the space of a moment. Amazed to be still alive, she snapped out of her fear-frozen state and ducked away from flailing hooves as the horse behind her, an arrow in its neck, screamed and reared.

Its hoof struck her palfrey's rump. The gentle animal, untrained to war's alarms, tossed its head in panic, jerking the reins from Adeline's hands. Then, with chaos all around and the river to one side, it bolted toward the apparent haven of the forest.

“No!”

The instinct to survive sent a surge of energy through Adeline. Time slowed as she clutched the horse's mane, praying she'd burst through the attackers before they could draw a bow.

Her mount, however, sensed the archers and propped as it reached the trees. She cursed it and kicked her heels into its side. A man dropped from a branch to catch the dangling reins. The horse skittered sideways. With a cry of despair, she lost her balance and tumbled off into a patch of bracken.

“Aha! What have we here?” a rough English voice demanded. “A high-bred Norman bitch, if I'm not mistaken, come a-running to the dogs of the forest!”

Adeline sat up, breathless but unhurt, to meet blue eyes glaring from between a thatch of dark matted hair and beard. Panic surged through her again. She scrambled to her feet and turned to flee.

Three bowmen sprang from the trees and seized her arms. Adeline jerked just once in their grip. She stood, trying to catch her breath, shocked at the speed of events. Outrage at such rough, disrespectful handling drove out some of her fear.

The first man, thickset and powerfully built, tethered the palfrey to a sapling. He looked her insolently up and down, his gaze dwelling on the ripe curves under the close-fitting gown.

“A right comely one, too.” He licked his lips and threw a searching glance around the forest, before reaching out to cup her breast.

Adeline jerked back from his touch.

“Get your filthy hands off me!”

The man guffawed.

“That's not all I'll be putting on you, me fine filly — or in you.”

Adeline gasped. The full horror of her position crashed into her consciousness.

Her tormentor glanced at his companions. “The attack goes well. They can do without us for a while. Let's get her into yonder bushes, lads, and see if a highborn Norman lady be made like other women!” The others growled in hungry anticipation, like the dogs he had named them.

Desperation snapped Adeline out of her fear and into violent action. She tore her right arm free and swung a blow at the man holding her left. He cried out and lost his grip, but the other caught hold again.

“God's blood! She's a strong one, Bert!” he grunted, as they both struggled to subdue her.

“All the better! She'll give us a lively ride!”

He gestured to the fourth man. They bent and seized one of her ankles each then stood, holding her suspended, spread-eagled and helpless among the four of them.

“Come, away with her before the master sees!”

They ran toward the shelter of the shrubbery, carrying her feet-first. Adeline's frantic mind

caught the one ray of hope. Whoever “the master” was, he apparently wouldn’t approve of his men’s actions.

“*À l’aide! Au secours! Help! Help me!*” she screamed.

Brambles caught at her clothing, tearing off her veil. One of her captors caught it and stuffed it into her mouth, muffling her cries. The gown rode up over her thighs, and the ribbons binding her hair unraveled to stream across the grass behind.

Torture on the rack must be like this! Their unsteady gait over the rough ground jerked her this way and that, now bouncing painfully on the ground as they moved inward, then flinging her up into the air, her joints cracking as her captors moved apart.

They reached a small clearing and dumped her on the ground. The air whooshed out of her lungs, blowing out the gag. Cold damp grass pressed against her bare legs and behind. Their faces leered: avid, cruel, scarcely human, their eyes feasting on her exposed flesh. She struggled desperately, hearing a keening, whimpering noise, like an injured animal.

They pulled the gown and shift up over her head and thrashing arms. One threw his weight on the skirts, imprisoning her upper body in the suffocating mass. Another punched her stomach, winding her again.

Blind panic slashed at her. The keening sound stopped; Adelise realized the noise had been hers. Could she endure this and remain sane? And what would they do to her afterward? Would it be that cruel knife she’d seen in the leader’s girdle?

Her struggles grew weaker. She tried to breathe, but her stomach had cramped from the blow. The stale air trapped inside her gown gave no sustenance. Not the knife, then; she’d perish of suffocation.

She could do no more. Her muscles remained taut, in an instinctive survival fashion, but she scarcely felt the rough hands prizing her legs apart.

Adelise’s consciousness dimmed. *Lord God, Jesus and Mary, accept my spirit.* She began slipping away along a shining path opening up in her mind. At the end of that path she’d join her dear parents, and she would go unsullied. Death would claim her before the rapists did.

“HOLD!”

A stentorian roar brought her back from the edge of the abyss. It seemed to vibrate the very ground beneath her. The hands on her body stilled. The voice of command came again, edged with icy menace.

“Release her! You know we don’t make war on women!”

The hands left her instantly and the weight jerked off her gown. Fresh cool air feathered across her face, bringing her the blessed damp scent of the life and fertility of the forest.

Adelise filled her lungs. Terror came back with the return of energy. But she was free, and the fighting spirit of her ancestors possessed her. She rolled over, came up on her knees and thrust the skirts down over her hips.

She found herself face-to-face with the man called Bert. Fingers crooked, teeth bared in a snarl, she gathered herself to lunge and claw at his eyes.

Bert’s eyes, however, looked beyond her. “Tell that to the Normans,” he muttered.

All sound and movement in the forest seemed to freeze. The man’s defiant expression suddenly crumpled. He lowered his eyes and swallowed. Her other assailants edged away from him, distancing themselves from the words and Bert’s attempt at leadership.

She was safe, apparently. They feared the bull-voiced man, and he spoke for her. A wave of relief washed over her, followed by a fit of uncontrollable shaking.

Just at the moment when the silence became unbearable the voice came again from behind her, speaking with a measured emphasis.

“I know your grief, Ethelbert. For that reason only, I’ll overlook your insolence this once. But, understand this,” the dread voice rose to boom through the forest, “no man of mine may force himself on *any* woman. Disobey me in this, and you’ll be *outcast* — after I lop off your

manhood for pig-food, first!”

The man’s hard face blanched. He raised clasped hands.

“Nay, forgive me, milord, I pray you! Let me but stay your liege-man, and I’ll obey you faithfully in all things!”

Adelise clenched her teeth to stop their chattering. She turned to follow the man’s stare, eager to see the face of her deliverer, the possessor of that voice that could command such terror and obedience.

She quailed at the sight that met her eyes.

A mail-clad giant loomed high over them, mounted on a huge chestnut destrier. An iron helmet, unlike any she’d ever seen, covered his head down to the tip of his nose like a brutal mask.

The part of his face that she could see, between the helmet and the mail coif of his hauberk, was clean-shaven like a noble. His lips were rigid in suppressed fury. The thin line of a scar stood out, as if slashed with a quill dipped in white ink. It ran down his cheek to below the left corner of his mouth. He wore a great two-handed sword slung across his broad back, the hilt jutting over his right shoulder like a grotesque parody of the Holy Cross.

Then, the awesome head inclined a fraction.

“So be it. We will not speak of it again.”

Ethelbert prostrated himself as the knight continued, “Leave the girl with me. A more fitting vengeance awaits you at the road. See to it.”

Adelise wondered what this meant.

The four men bobbed their heads and scurried off, leaving her, still kneeling on the ground, alone with her grim rescuer. He swung a long leg over his horse and alighted beside her.

Standing so near, she saw he was a good hands-breadth above six feet. To her overwrought imagination, he appeared like some demigod out of Norse legend.

She winced as his great hard leather gauntlet, backed with steel plates, closed over her soft hand. He raised her to her feet in an effortless surge of power that left her gasping.

Her fear must have still been obvious, for he said, in a voice now deep and calming, “Don’t be frightened, girl. You’ll come to no harm from me.”

Adelise started at his perfect French; the conversation so far had been in English.

“I warned those louts off. Now all my men will know you’re under my protection.”

She nodded, recovering some of her poise. No need for him to know she spoke English; it could be of some advantage later... But had he heard her call for help in both languages?

Adelise swallowed. “Sir, I must thank you for—”

“Save your thanks. You’ll have little enough cause for gratitude before this day is out.”

A chill prickled up her spine. He kept his hold on her hand and led her and his horse back out of the forest. On the way he unhitched her palfrey and led it along.

Bunching her skirts in her free hand, Adelise had to hop and skip over the rough ground to keep up with his long-legged stride. She arrived in a flurry, flushed and panting, to join the motley group on the road.

The survivors of the attack knelt on the verge, now relieved of their weapons and armor. Some thirty outlaws stood over them, each with a long yew bow and quiver of arrows, girt about also with knives, clubs and bucklers.

“Gytha!” Adelise gave a cry of joy to see her maid safe, but now arguing with a young outlaw.

“Milady! Were you hurt?” She started toward Adelise, but her companion caught her by the arm and whispered urgently in her ear. Frowning, Gytha stood and studied her mistress’s dour captor.

Adelise noted that four of the men-at-arms were separated from the others, kneeling on the opposite side of the road with their hands bound. Their lips moved in prayer. Her recent attacker

Ethelbert stood beside them.

“You said there were six, Ethelbert,” Adelise’s captor rumbled.

Ethelbert touched his forelock.

“Aye, milord. Two are dead already from the arrows.”

The giant nodded.

“Good. We’ve no time to hang them. Do your duty.”

Before Adelise understood his intention, Ethelbert seized the nearest man by the hair, pulled his head back and cut his throat. Blood spurted, and the man’s cry of anguish turned to a ghastly gurgle.

Adelise screamed and spun around to face her captor, beating her free fist against his chest, bruising it on the chain-mail.

“You — you *barbarian!*” she shrieked.

“Barbarian, am I?” The mouth below the iron mask snarled. He seized both her hands in one of his and clasped them painfully together, shaking her.

“I’m dispensing the justice your Norman courts deny my people. These men have richly earned their doom!”

“Why? Why, what have they done?” Adelise cried, trying to block her ears to the moans and screams behind her.

He gave her an exasperated look, then dropped her hands, folded his arms and gazed bleakly at the executions. When they were done, he nodded, and turned back to her.

“Now I must decide how to dispose of you. Who are you, wench?”

Adelise, with a great effort, pulled herself together from the horror of the killing. She stiffened at his disrespectful address and what it implied. Her clothes proclaimed her a lady, but he was choosing to ignore it.

So, she was to be at the *disposal* of another man. And one from whom she could expect even less mercy than from her cousin Ivo, for all that this one saved her from rape.

The revelation that the attack had been made not to abduct her, but for revenge on the six men in her guard, whatever their crime may have been, added to her affront. Obviously, to her captor, she was nothing more than an unexpected bonus.

Controlling her trembling with a mighty effort, she drew herself up and looked him in the eye-holes of the iron mask.

“I am Adelise de Corfe, and you’d do well to think of the consequences of harming me or my servant!”

He stood still for a long moment. She could sense the unseen eyes boring into her.

“So ... the heiress of the stolen lands of Corfe and Purbeck,” he rasped at last. He seized her wrist again, so tightly her hand went numb.

“Stolen?” Adelise sparked. “My father was granted those lands by King William the Conqueror!”

“They were not in the gift of William *the Bastard!*” The outlaw roared out the contemptuous nickname old King William’s enemies had given him. He appeared to struggle with himself for a moment, before moderating his voice again.

“We’re wasting time. Come on!”

Adelise had no choice whether she came or not, as he dragged her along behind him to where the survivors of the guard knelt on the roadside. He took his stance in the middle of the road, between the bloodied corpses and the living. They gazed up at him in terror.

“Carry this message back to your lords and men,” he bellowed, raising his free fist. “If you treat my people like animals, you’ll be slaughtered like the swine you are. This I, Edmund called Longshanks, promise you.”

He turned suddenly to Adelise and muttered, for her ears alone, “You, wench. Are you a virgin?”

Her head spun at the incongruity of the question. She snapped back at him, “That’s no business of yours!”

His tone lightened.

“Answer me, wench, or I’ll bare that beautiful *derriere* yet again, and spank the answer out of you!”

Adelise flushed at this reminder he’d seen her nakedness.

“I was travelling to my wedding when you interrupted our progress. Does that answer your question?”

She thought she might have gone too far; but, to her surprise, what she could see of his face appeared to be smiling.

“I see. You’re telling me you’re a virtuous noblewoman, unmarried, and therefore I’m to understand you’re a virgin.”

Adelise nodded tightly.

“Don’t fear I have designs on your body, virtuous or otherwise. I merely ask to assess your worth to your people. Your anxious bridegroom will certainly enhance it.” He started to turn away.

Adelise gathered her courage, and raised her free hand to stay him. She must assert her position, or who knew what her fate would be.

“You’re disrespectful, fellow! And I’m not only referring to your insulting question. You know I’m a noblewoman, yet you persist in calling me *wench*, as if I were any commoner.”

All vestiges of humor left the visible part of his face.

“It’s only you who calls yourself noble. Yet if enjoying stolen property and wearing fine clothes made one noble, why, any thief could be an earl, and his bawd a countess.”

Adelise opened her mouth to protest, but he turned back to the prisoners with a dismissive shrug.

“Hear me again! Tell your masters they can have this woman back on payment of fifty pounds ransom. If they fail, I’ll make her my body-servant!”

Adelise stiffened, both at the amount and the threat, then he spoke again.

“And mark this well: they must pay out of their own treasure. My eyes and ears are everywhere. Should I hear of new taxes, they’ll never see her again! And if the tax-gatherers come skulking around to make up the loss after I return her, an arrow will find each one!”

He paused to let that sink in. Some outlaws who understood French sniggered, and whispered a translation to their companions.

“Mark this, also. Have them send a messenger into the forest, carrying a white banner, to arrange the exchange. My men will find him and bring him to me.”

One of the prisoners, less cowed than his fellows, glanced up at him. The giant stabbed a finger toward him.

“You! Repeat these messages, so I know you’ve got them right.”

The man gulped at being singled out, but repeated the speech accurately enough.

Now Gytha came forward, planted herself in front of the huge outlaw, arms akimbo, and stared up at him.

“If you take me lady, you must take me along to care for her.”

“You show a fine concern for this Norman, goody,” he grunted. “Yet you’re English, I see.”

“There be Normans and Normans, sirrah,” she said. “Milady is a Norman of a different stamp to this offal before you, as you’ll find out for yourself soon enough, if you but have the wit to see it.”

“Gytha, please, watch your tongue!” Adelise hissed in English, appalled at the punishment her insolence might bring on her head, but the outlaw only laughed.

“Nay, let her come. But you must be blindfolded, goody, like your mistress, so that you don’t betray our hide to our enemies. English or not, I don’t trust you.”

He turned back to Adelise.

“So, you speak English. An unusual skill for a Norman.”

“I taught her as a babe,” Gytha said. “It was our own private language.”

Adelise sighed. She and Gytha had thrown away their only advantage by speaking out.

The giant lost interest and turned away, shouting orders. His men by this time had loaded the arms and booty on the surviving horses and begun trotting off into the forest. At length, only the destrier and Adelise’s palfrey remained. Several horses had been killed by the arrows, and the outlaws had apparently come on foot.

The young outlaw held the palfrey’s reins, and he and Gytha seemed to be arguing. Adelise didn’t see the outcome of this, as Edmund Longshanks took his great sword off his back, slung it on the pommel and vaulted to the destrier’s saddle.

Kicking the stirrup free, he growled, “Mount! Put your foot in the stirrup and throw your leg over. You must ride astride.”

Adelise tried to do as ordered; but because the stirrup was far too long for her, her knee hit the horse’s crupper. Edmund’s arm swung around in a fast backhand swipe, catching her around the waist and sweeping her onto the horse’s back behind him. Gasping, she settled herself, bunching her skirts under her to hide as much leg as possible.

Edmund twisted round to face her. She quailed at the sudden nearness and looming size of him; all hard metal, hard leather and harder man. Then she saw no more as he wound her veil around her head, covering her eyes. Her breath quickened and she fought down rising panic, reliving the moment when the would-be rapists had blinded her with her gown.

Her mind clutched at his recent promise to protect her. She forced herself to relax.

Adelise could feel him turn to the front, then flinched as he drew her hands around his waist and tied her wrists loosely together. “Just so you’re not tempted to lift the blindfold, wench.”

As the immense horse moved off, she teetered and gripped him convulsively, the rings of chainmail cold and unyielding under her hands.

“Gytha? Are you all right?” Her enquiry was as much to reassure herself as her companion.

“Aye, milady. Mounted up and coming along with you.”

Satisfied for the moment on that score, Adelise held her fears at bay by speculating on the mystery of her captor’s identity. He spoke good French and English, but with a strange accent, overlaid by some kind of unfamiliar burr.

At first she’d thought him a renegade Norman, perhaps a son of one of the barons who’d rebelled against the Conqueror some twenty-five years before. But his talk of stolen lands suggested he was English. That didn’t make sense either, as it was four-and-thirty years since the conquest. He probably hadn’t even been born then...

Adelise gave it up for the moment. After a time she realized, with some shock, that her fears had quietened enough to leave her feeling more excited than afraid at her predicament. In some strange fashion, she sensed herself safer with this formidable stranger than she’d been under the protection of her over-familiar guards.

Suddenly, she understood why she felt like this.

This violent abduction forced a clean break with the past — a past in which she’d known herself to be no more than a pawn in the plots of Ivo, Earl Robert and the king: helpless, ignorant and afraid for her future.

I’m still a pawn. But at least I’m aware of why.

She shuddered, thinking back to the fear and bewilderment that had possessed her at her meeting with Robert de Bellême.

The horse stumbled, bringing her back to the present, and the discomfort of the broad chain-mailed back she was forced to lean against. Surely he could have arranged another horse for her?

If her captor wouldn’t treat her with the respect due to her, he could at least show some

consideration for her as a valuable commodity. Although she couldn't see, she could hear the silence that seemed to despise her very existence, and feel the unyielding chain-mail grinding against her body.

Adelise felt her color rise with her anger. Somehow, she vowed, she'd force him to respect her.

Chapter Two

It didn't take long before Adelise's legs ached from being forced apart and chafed by the broad back of the destrier, not to mention the bulk of the man seated between them. Her bottom throbbed from bouncing on the rear curve of the saddle, her arms were numb from being stretched around his body, and her breasts were sore from rubbing against the rough chain-mail.

As if that wasn't enough, she was getting a cricked neck from twisting her head aside to avoid smashing her nose on his metal-clad back.

Her cheek struck that same chain-mail again as the horse lurched over rough ground. An involuntary whimper of anguish escaped her.

"If you'd rest your head against my back, you wouldn't suffer those blows," her captor grunted, breaking his long silence.

Adelise's temper had long passed the point of diplomacy.

"Yes, my lord," she snapped. "I'll follow your kind suggestion, and grind my face to pulp on your hauberk. That should at least reduce my value and the ransom you'll receive!"

He didn't answer, but his chest vibrated under her arms. Was he laughing?

Her anger swelled. After the horse had walked a few more paces and she'd just opened her mouth to scream her frustration in his ear, he said, "Here's a good place. We'll rest awhile, and I'll take off my hauberk for your comfort."

The horse stopped. She heard a rattle of harness as it shook its head and snorted. Her captor untied her hands, and twisted round to remove the blindfold. Blinking at the sudden light, she averted her eyes from his grim bulk and saw a beautiful glade, lit by the slanting rays of the late-afternoon sun sparkling on the limpid waters of a stream.

Gytha, also blinking, sat on Adelise's palfrey, doubled up with the young outlaw with whom she'd been arguing.

Edmund dismounted. She could see no sign of his troops in the glade.

"Where are your other men?" she asked.

He reached up and lifted her down, his big hands pressing painfully into her waist under her ribs as he took all her weight. For balance, she had to put her hands on the hard, mailed shoulders. Reaching the ground she staggered, then sat down suddenly as her numb legs collapsed under her.

"They've scattered, to make their way home in twos and threes. Do you expect us to ride together, leaving a broad trail for our enemies to follow?"

He turned away, dismissing her, lifted off his helmet and dropped it on the ground, bent over and dragged the hauberk up over his head to let it fall in a tinkling heap, revealing a sweat-soaked padded aketon underneath.

"Faugh! This stinks like a cesspit. Watch them, Leofric, while I bathe."

Unlacing the aketon as he went, he disappeared behind a clump of bushes beside the stream.

A strangely fastidious outlaw, thought Adelise, disappointed that he had turned his back and she hadn't seen his face. So far he'd revealed only a thatch of tawny hair, flattened to his skull by the weight of the helmet.

She turned to Gytha as her maid, groaning and complaining, dropped to the ground beside her.

"By Our Lady, I don't know how men can ride like that. I declare me loins ain't ached so much since me first wedding night, for all that the young cock between them just now was facing the wrong way. But how is it with you, milady?"

She turned to Adelise, and gasped. "God's blood! What's this? Your sweet cheek is black

and blue. Has that nasty wretch—”

“No, Gytha. I’ve just bruised it against his hauberk. He’s taken it off for me now.”

She hesitated and glanced at the youth called Leofric, who bent to hide a smile, pretending not to listen. Adelise lowered her voice.

“Gytha, we must be careful in what we say. Don’t provoke them. You saw what happened to those poor men.”

Her maid’s normally jolly face turned bleak. “Them ones what got their throats slit? I reckon the rascally swine deserved it. I heard them laughing about what they’d done at dinner in the great hall, not five nights ago.”

“What! What did you hear?”

“They was out tax gathering. When one man couldn’t pay, they stripped him naked, strung him up by the wrists and whipped him. While they took turns whipping him, they also took turns raping his wife before his very eyes, for all that he begged them to spare her, she being pregnant and sick. The poor soul died of their rough handling. I reckon she was wife to that there Ethelbert.”

“But ... that’s terrible! Why didn’t you tell Ivo?”

Gytha sighed.

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, me love, but ... Ivo knows.”

“What?”

“Yes. Your cousin cares less than you might think about such matters. He was always easily led, that one. When your dear father was alive to set the example, he behaved himself. But now, with the company he keeps—”

“Then you should have told me! I’d have seen to it that the flesh got flogged off their backs, at the very least!”

“Well, well. I didn’t want to bother you, what with your grief,” she said, evading Adelise’s eyes.

“That’s no good reason. It’s nigh on three years since Father and Gilbert died. I fear I’ve grieved overlong, to the extent I’ve neglected my duties, and you’ve indulged me in it. You disappoint me, Gytha.”

Gytha’s head drooped. The mild rebuke was the harshest criticism Adelise had ever given her. She glanced back at her mistress, and sighed again.

“Your pardon, milady. I confess I’ve kept a few disturbing things from you since your father died.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because I saw the way Ivo was going, and feared for you, should you clash with him. Even as a child he could be vengeful, and without your father’s protection — God’s blood! Is *this* the surly brute in the iron mask?”

Adelise followed the direction of Gytha’s gaze, and gasped in turn. Their captor strode toward them, squeezing the water out of his hair, clad only in close-fitting braies slung low on his hips and reaching to his calves.

He was the most impressive creature she had ever seen, or imagined. Muscle padded his shoulders, jutted like plates on his chest and rippled the golden skin of his belly. The scars of several old wounds failed to mar this perfection. His upper arms were almost as thick as her thighs, and yet she saw nothing heavy or brutal about him; his height set it all in proportion, and he moved with an athletic grace. His by-name, Longshanks, was indeed fitting.

In that instant, Adelise vowed she’d never practice the arts Gytha had taught her on Hugh de Verneuil. She’d kill him with poison or dagger first, or use them on herself, rather than suffer the touch of such a coarse brute.

Edmund dropped his arms then, and she clearly saw his face: firm, authoritative, but handsome and *youthful*. He’d seemed so much older in his helmet and armor, but he could

scarcely be more than five-and-twenty.

The thin scar down his cheek only served as an accent to draw her eyes along it from the strong line of his jaw and past the corner of his firm mouth.

She found herself wondering how that mouth would appear when relaxed in a smile ... or softened for a kiss.

Her eyes followed the scar upward, over the strong cheekbone where it ended. Adeline looked into eyes of the clearest gray, like the rare windowpanes of a cathedral. They seemed to reveal a cool intellect, but also hinted at a passionate nature held in careful check.

Even as this thought struck her, she mocked herself for such a flight of fancy.

He paused to give the pair of them a keen glance, before turning to speak to Leofric.

“They didn’t try to run?”

Gytha answered, leaning back on her hands and simpering outrageously as she fluttered her eyelashes up at him. “Why, milord, I think we be far safer under *your* gracious protection, than to be at the mercy of any cocksy wight of the forest. Besides, our bottoms be so wrizzled from the ride that—”

Annoyed, Adeline shot to her feet and interrupted in a formal manner.

“Sir, it seems I must crave your pardon for calling you a barbarian. I was not then aware of the outrage on Ethelbert’s wife. My maid tells me it was common knowledge at the castle. It’s unfortunate I wasn’t told.”

He looked down his nose at her. “Would it have made any difference if you had been?”

She flushed. “My cousin Ivo has the stewardship of the estate until I’m of age, but officially, as my father’s heir, *I* am the castellan. I’m distressed Ivo did nothing to punish those men; the only excuse for him I can bring to mind is that they weren’t *our* men-at-arms. Their master is either Robert de Bellême or Hugh de Verneuil, so perhaps he lacked the authority to punish them. I’ll certainly tax him with it when I see him next. Such a thing would never have happened in my father’s time.”

His manner had softened as she spoke, but suddenly that hard look was back on his face once more.

“Can you be so sure of that, wench?”

“I can indeed! My father was a true knight, just and ever courteous to women—”

“To his own women, perhaps. But there are certain deeds of Norman knights that would never be revealed at their family hearth.”

Before she could respond to this insult, he caught her hand and pulled her toward their mounts.

“We’re wasting time. We must ride, and it’s still far to home.”