

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman in historical attire. The woman, on the left, has her hair styled in an intricate braid and is wearing a lace headpiece. The man, on the right, has a short beard and is wearing a dark, textured garment. They are leaning towards each other, their faces just inches apart, creating a sense of intimacy and anticipation. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of greenery.

ELISABETH HOBBS

A  
MIDSUMMER  
KNIGHT'S  
*Kiss*

MILLS & BOON  
HISTORICAL

Elisabeth Hobbes

**A Midsummer Knight's Kiss**

«HarperCollins»

## **Hobbes E.**

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A stolen moment.....to reunite them! Since her mischief-making childhood with Robbie Danby, Rowenna has curbed her impetuous nature and become a lady. When she meets Robbie again in York he's close to claiming his knighthood, and their newly awakened affection inspires in Rowenna a decidedly adult impulsiveness! Yet Robbie's heart appears to belong to another...unless a Midsummer kiss can change everything...?

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**ELISABETH HOBBS** grew up in York, where she spent most of her teenage years wandering around the city looking for a handsome Roman or a Viking to sweep her off her feet. Elisabeth's hobbies include skiing, Arabic dance, and fencing—none of which have made it into a story yet. When she isn't writing she spends her time reading, and is a pro at cooking while holding a book! Elisabeth lives in Cheshire with her husband, two children, and three cats with ridiculous names.

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A Midsummer Knight's Kiss

Elisabeth Hobbes

# MILLS & BOON

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A MIDSUMMER KNIGHT'S KISS

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This book was written  
over the course of a mammoth house renovation.

Huge thanks to Rosemary and Peter  
for the part they played in that.

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## Chapter One

The first indication that Rowenna Danby was in trouble was the honking of the geese. She froze, standing on the sturdiest branch of the pear tree, with her hand outstretched towards one particularly ripe specimen. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the determined mass of white heading at speed towards her. Some devil had let the geese loose and they were making for their favourite forbidden place: the orchard where Rowenna was currently standing. She reached the tip of her fingers out and managed to pull the pear free, only for it to slip from her grasp and fall to the ground.

‘Bull’s pizzle!’

No one was around to hear her use her father’s favourite exclamation of annoyance, otherwise she wouldn’t have dared say anything so unladylike. She sat down and lowered herself until she could drop to the ground. The sound of ripping cloth accompanied her gasp as she landed in a heap, scuffing her knees and palms. She swore again, partly from the pain but mostly because of the large tear she now had in her already grubby skirt. She spat on her palm, rubbed it down her bodice and picked up the pear. The windfalls she had gathered before being tempted by the perfect fruit above her were heaped against the trunk of the tree.

The excited honking was growing louder and closer. Rowenna hesitated, caught between the urge to escape and the knowledge that if she returned without the pears it would earn her a whipping from Lady Danby. She scooped the pears up into her grass-stained skirt, then turned towards the path back to Wharram Manor.

Too late. A dozen geese blocked her route to safety. Avarice and determination gleamed in their beady eyes. Their honking became a crooning of anticipation.

‘Shoo!’ Rowenna stamped her foot. That did nothing to deter them. She clutched her skirts tighter and backed against the tree. ‘Hissssss! Get away! They’re mine.’

The ugly creatures only saw this as a challenge and edged closer, spreading out to surround her. Rowenna pressed against the tree. She found the smallest pear and threw it overarm, hoping to create a diversion. It disappeared beneath a flurry of feathers but all she had done was confirm that she had what they wanted. Now the geese knew she was the source of food they advanced on her with an alarming turn of speed. She hissed again, hoping to drive off the mob, but knowing she would never be able to get past without a severe pecking.

She bit down a sob of fright, but at that moment a dark-haired figure caught her attention. Rowenna’s spirits lifted.

‘Robbie! Help me!’

Her cousin Robbie was ambling towards the beck at the bottom of the village. He looked around to see who had called him and grinned at her predicament. Merriment filled his usually serious eyes.

‘Are you having trouble, D-Dumpling?’

‘You can s-s-s-see I am having t-t-t-trouble, you lumbering oaf!’ she retorted, mimicking his hesitant speech. The description wasn’t strictly accurate, but his nickname always made her blood boil. He didn’t lumber and he wasn’t an oaf, but Robbie was going through the awkward stage that afflicted most thirteen-year-olds where his limbs were too long. He moved gracefully, but with maddening slowness. Now he began ambling away from her.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked in alarm.

He scowled, looking hurt.

‘If you’re going to insult me, I’ll leave you to fend for yourself.’

Guilt prickled Rowenna’s neck. Robbie hated the fact that he struggled over some sounds. He would often go for hours without speaking if he was in company with people he didn’t know. Robbie had reason enough to be worried today, without Rowenna taunting him.

'I'm sorry, Robbie. Truly, I am. You know I don't think you're an oaf. Please, don't stand there laughing.'

Robbie strolled over, taking his time in retaliation for her meanness. He gave her another slow grin. Uncle Roger often said Rowenna was the only one who made Robbie smile, but now she would happily slap the smile from his face.

'You do look stuck, Dumpling. Lady Stick isn't going to be pleased when she sees what you've done to your skirts.'

Tears filled Rowenna's eyes. The private nickname she and Robbie had for his grandmother reminded her of what was certain to happen when Lady Danby discovered what she had done to her dress and to the fruit.

'Stop jesting! A fine knight you'll make, leaving a woman in distress.'

Robbie frowned and Rowenna knew her arrow had hit the target. He was determined to be a knight like his father and grandfather before him.

'I'm sorry.'

'Well then, Lady Rowenna, if I'm going to be a knight, you must give me a favour.'

'You can have a pear. Not one of the windfalls. I picked a good one from the high branch.'

Rowenna gave him a smile she hoped looked suitably ladylike. One of the few areas her mother and Lady Danby agreed on was that Rowenna should grow up with the accomplishments expected of a guildsman's daughter. She knew by now how to dip a curtsy and show a man how wonderful she thought he was.

Robbie folded his arms and rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner. She wondered if she had gone too far in her flattery. He was more used to Rowenna beating him at scoring points with the lance and rings or kicking his ankles as they sped round the field after a ball. While the village boys drew back instinctively when tackling her, Rowenna showed no such hesitation and most of them surrendered the ball voluntarily rather than risk being on the end of her solid boots. She vowed to try being a little more gentle in future games, at least towards Robbie.

'Please,' she begged. 'I don't want to get into trouble. It's a very nice pear.'

She cocked her head to her skirts, indicating the fruit. Robbie rolled his eyes again, but he grinned.

'You're behaving more like Eve, tempting me into sin with forbidden fruit, than a lady at court, only I bet Eve d-didn't have such a foolish smile. I s-suppose I can't leave you there, though.' He flourished an imaginary sword. 'Fear not, fair Lady Rowenna, Sir Robert Danby will save you from these knavish creatures!'

He ran towards Rowenna, circling his arms and yelling at the top of his voice. The geese scattered, their wings brushing Rowenna's skirts as some hurtled past her. Robbie danced out of their way to avoid a couple of sharp beaks that stabbed towards him. He cried out as one scored a hit on his thigh. Emboldened, Rowenna added her voice to the commotion and ran to the safety of Robbie's side. He seized her around the waist and almost caused her to drop her skirt full of pears. Laughing riotously, they ran to safety on the common green and hurled themselves down in a heap on the spongy grass and heather.

When she got her breath back, Rowenna leaned forward and punched Robbie hard on the upper arm.

'Ow! What was that for? I helped you!'

'Eventually!'

'You looked s-so funny, though, huddled in a corner, all wide-eyed and trying not to appear afraid.'

'And I've told you not to call me Dumpling.' She drew her knees up and muttered under her breath, 'You know I don't like it.'

Her father called her solid and her mother said Rowenna would grow more slender as she got older, but that seemed a long way off to the eleven-year-old Rowenna.

‘Lady Dumpling!’ Robbie crowed. He pointed a finger at her. ‘You’ve got mud on your face.’

‘And you’ve got goose muck on your britches,’ she retorted.

‘Well, your hair is like s-straw.’

‘And your face is one huge spot.’

‘But we’re both still better-looking than the twins or Henry and John.’

‘And more clever.’

They sat back, honour and humour restored by the insults to Rowenna’s two brothers and Robbie’s twin sisters. Henry was seventeen, John was four and the twins were almost seven. Rowenna and Robbie had grown together as the nearest in age with a strong bond.

‘Well, fair Lady Rowenna,’ Robbie said when he could catch his breath from laughing, ‘You promised me a reward for my s-service.’

Rowenna unfolded her skirt to reveal the bounty that lay within in her lap. She found the finest pear and held it out. Robbie leaned forward and took a bite from it while it was still in her hand. She watched the loss of her prize with a little regret. Robbie, who always seemed able to see her secret thoughts, pushed it towards her.

‘We’ll share.’

She took a bite; licking her lips to catch the last of the sweet nectar. Robbie’s eyes followed her movement hungrily and the strangest fluttering sensation filled Rowenna’s belly. He might be suffering the pains of early manhood, but beneath the spots and unsuccessful attempt at growing a beard, Robbie had a nice smile and a good nature. He had been Rowenna’s favourite playmate for as long as she could recall.

She reached across and rubbed Robbie’s arm where she had punched him and was surprised to feel muscle. She withdrew her hand slowly, letting her fingers trace the unanticipated contours. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him and wished she had suggested that instead of the pear. The thought took her by surprise and she wasn’t sure what was more alarming—that she had thought it at all or that she did not feel the slightest shame at the idea.

Mother had warned her that marriage wouldn’t be too far away in her future and she would have to become considerably more ladylike. She kept threatening to send Rowenna to live in the town house in York, where she could mix with the daughters and wives of city guild officials rather than the children of villeins and husbandmen in a small moorland village.

Robbie made her laugh more than any of the other boys she knew. He would be a good choice and their parents would be overjoyed. They could live together in Wharram and she wouldn’t be too far from home. She absent-mindedly handed Robbie the half-eaten pear, her mind full of visions of a future she hadn’t properly considered until now.

Her daydream was interrupted by the arrival of Rowenna’s mother striding from Robbie’s house. Robbie ran towards her.

‘Aunt Joanna, is M-M...?’

He trailed off, unable to finish the question. Anxiety surged inside Rowenna.

‘Your mother is well.’ Joanna hugged Robbie to her own swollen belly. ‘That’s why I’m here. She’s had her baby. Another daughter.’

Robbie’s eyes shone. After three pregnancies that had ended before their expected time, Lucy Danby’s baby had survived the birth.

‘I’ll stay with your mother until your father returns,’ Joanna said. ‘Go share the good news with your grandfather. I’ll follow on with Ro.’

Robbie ran off, long limbs spinning. Rowenna retrieved the pears and walked beside Joanna, no longer caring about the spoiled fruit, the scuffed hands or torn tunic. There would be work to do

and a new baby to take care of. Plenty to keep her busy enough to forget about the odd sensation of need that Robbie's expression had caused to spring to life inside her.



Robbie's grandparents were sitting in the Great Hall, Lady Danby at her embroidery frame and Lord Danby listening to a storyteller. Both started in alarm at Robbie's hasty entrance.

Robbie slowed to a walk and halted in the centre of the room. A fire was burning fiercely. It seemed excessive on what was a mild autumn day, but perhaps old people felt the cold more keenly. Even if it had been frosty, Robbie would have chosen a chill over getting too close to the flames. His aversion to fire and his refusal to even step into Uncle Hal's forge was something his cousins endlessly teased him about.

'You look a state, boy!' Lady Danby's voice was sharp. 'Why are you disturbing us? My husband said your duties were done for today and I thought you were gone to your own home.'

Lucy had insisted that Robbie start his knight's training as a page in his grandfather's house rather than with a stranger she did not know. In truth, Robbie would have preferred to be in the smaller, newer manor house his parents had built at the opposite end of Wharram Danby, but once his mother started screaming with birthing pains, he'd been sent back. He kept the thought to himself, though his eyes fell on the slender cane his grandmother used for walking—and for meting out punishments to her grandchildren and any of the village children who displeased her.

He delivered his news, breathing slowly in the hope of lessening his stutter. Sometimes his lips felt like a door that would not open, however much he pushed. It was always worse when he was nervous, which he usually was in the presence of his grandmother.

'Another daughter? Lucy must be overjoyed.' Lord Danby stood and made his way to Robbie, his milk-white eyes crinkling as he tapped his cane across the stone floor.

'A son would have been preferable,' Lady Danby remarked with a thin-lipped smile. 'What a pity Roger will return home to another girl.'

Robbie bit down his retort. There were seven years between him and his twin sisters, and another six between them and the new baby. His mother felt her failure to produce a son, however much his father assured her he was more than content.

'Still, boy, that does not explain your appearance,' Lady Danby continued.

Robbie glanced over his clothes. He did indeed have goose crap on his lower legs, as well as grass stains on his knees and fingers that were sticky from pear juice.

'S-s-someone let the geese into the pear orchard and they w-w-were attacking Rowenna.'

Lady Danby looked down her nose at him. Whatever the reason for his appearance, he suspected she would disapprove. The sight of the twins peeking around the corner of the dais at the end of the hall made him suspect who the culprits were.

'That explains, at least, why my cook has been waiting half the afternoon for the pears. Where is that idle girl now?'

Robbie was saved from answering by Rowenna and Joanna's arrival. As soon as Joanna returned to sit with Lucy, leaving instructions for Robbie to remain, Rowenna was summoned to stand before Lady Danby. She recounted her tale in a trembling voice and displayed her fruit, which was found wanting and sent to the kitchen to be boiled down into sweetmeats.

'You're a disgrace, Rowenna Danby.' Lady Stick reached for her cane. 'I had hoped you would begin to display some decorum, but I see you have not.'

'Decorum wouldn't have picked the pears,' Rowenna retorted, 'or seen off the geese!'

Robbie winced. Rowenna never knew when to hold her tongue. It was infuriating.

'Rude chit! Hold out your hand. You'll get two strokes now.'

Lady Danby's voice was iced outrage. Rowenna whimpered softly. She held her hand out. It was already scraped and red. Small drops of blood welled in places. The whipping would hurt much more than usual.

'It wasn't her fault! My s-s-sisters let the geese out.' Robbie rushed across the room and stood between Rowenna and his grandmother. 'If you're going to punish Ro, you should punish them, too.'

Lady Danby's eyes flickered to the twins playing happily in front of the fire and beckoned them over.

'Does your brother speak the truth?'

Anne nodded shyly. Lisbet, looking amused, scuffed the floor with her foot. They were identical, save for Anne's slightly straighter hair and a small mark on Lisbet's left knuckle, and looked more like their father than their mother. Lady Danby's face softened at the sight.

'That was naughty of you, girls. If you do that again, I will have to punish you. Now, go back to your game and be quiet.'

The girls scampered away, giggling with relief.

'Hold out your hand, Rowenna,' Lady Danby repeated.

Robbie watched with mounting, impotent fury as Rowenna thrust her hand forward and closed her eyes. The stick swished through the air and snapped down. Rowenna gave a wordless wail and bunched her fist tightly. Tears began to stream down her round red cheeks. She opened her hand again and the second stroke caused her to yelp as blood welled in her palm.

'I hope this will teach you to behave more like the lady your parents are trying to make you into,' Lady Danby said. 'It will be hard enough with the stain on your family to find you a place in society without you doing everything you can to thwart it.'

Rowenna flushed even redder, but to Robbie's relief she had the sense not to rise to this taunt.

'Now, Robbie. Your hand, for being so insolent.'

Boldly, Robbie met Lady Danby's eyes. He clenched his jaw and held his breath and was proud that when the stick met his palm he allowed no sound to escape him. He kept his hand outstretched until Lady Danby had lowered her cane before slowly closing his fist. He bowed deeply and asked to be dismissed, and it was only when he had left the room that he allowed hot tears to fall as he clutched his palm beneath his armpit to stop the pain.



Despite the unpleasant interlude, the evening meal was a merry affair. Robbie's father, Sir Roger, returned at sunset. He called on Lucy, then visited Wharram Manor, greeting his daughters by swinging them high into the air until they squealed. He enveloped Robbie in a strong embrace.

'Lucy is going to be vexed with me, I fear,' he told Robbie with a broad grin. 'My business was successful.'

Excitement coursed through Robbie. He had told no one of the business Sir Roger had left on, though he had found it hard to keep the secret from Rowenna.

His father named a place and person, but looked solemn. 'We'll talk more this evening when we're in our own home.'

As soon as he was able, Robbie sought Rowenna out and pulled her into Lady Danby's garden, determined that she should be the first to hear his news. He had been allowed more ale than usual and felt as though his head was padded inside with raw wool.

They sat side by side on the stone bench and listened to the bleating of the sheep on the moors. Rowenna ran her fingers over Robbie's palm. 'I'm sorry you got a whipping,' she said, fingertips tracing the lines on his palm. 'It was my fault.'

It was intended to be soothing, but made Robbie's chest tighten. He was becoming uncomfortably aware how even the glimpse of one of the village girls' legs could make his body do

all manner of alarming things. Before today Rowenna had never had such an effect on him and he was unsure he was comfortable with it.

He concentrated on examining her hand, unwrapping the wide blue ribbon she was using as a makeshift bandage. The skin on her palm had broken in three places and was dotted with raised weals across the mounds below her fingers where she had previously scuffed them. They would scab over in time, but were now weeping a little. The fury that had boiled inside him began to rise once more.

'I'm not sorry,' he said. 'But why did you have to be rude to her and earn yourself a second strike?'

'Why should I keep quiet when she is being unjust?' She gazed at him, eyes full of rebellion and outrage.

'Is s-speaking out worth the pain of a whipping?' he asked gently.

'Sometimes it is. Lady Stick didn't have to punish either of us. She just doesn't like us.'

Rowenna wrapped the ribbon round her hand once more and bunched her fist. Her expression grew fierce. 'She never tells Anne and Lisbet off the way she does us or John. She dotes on them! Mother says its because my father isn't her true son so I'm not really her kin. I don't know why she dislikes you, though. She loves your father and one day you'll be Lord Danby.'

Robbie's heart filled with pity. Uncle Hal was a bastard: the illegitimate son of Robbie's grandfather. He would never hold rank or title and nor would any of his children.

'She thinks I'm stupid because I s-speak poorly,' he muttered.

'But you aren't at all!' Rowenna exclaimed. She twisted round to face him. 'You're clever and kind *and* brave. That's twice today you have defended me. Thank you, Sir Robert.'

Robbie couldn't contain his excitement any longer.

'I will be Sir Robert,' he said, facing Rowenna. 'Father has secured me a place as a squire. I shall have to serve two years as a page so I'll be fifteen rather than fourteen before I become squire.'

'Are you going to go?' Rowenna asked quietly.

'Of course,' Robbie exclaimed. 'Why wouldn't I?'

Rowenna pouted. 'You'll become Lord Danby anyway one day. You could just stay here.'

'I can't just wait here until I inherit my title. I need to earn it. I want to serve in another household.'

'Then I'm very pleased for you. It's what you've wanted for as long as I can remember!' Rowenna was beaming, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. 'Where will you be going?'

'Wentbrig. To Sir John Wallingdon, who owes fealty to De Lacy of Pontefract.'

'That's so far,' Rowenna breathed with excitement. 'The same distance again as from here to York.'

Robbie looked towards the beck, even though it was too dark to see the moor or stream. His whole life had been spent in Wharram Danby or Ravenscrag. The furthest he had been was to York, when Uncle Hal stayed in his town house and invited Roger's family to visit. When he had to leave, a part of his heart would be torn from his chest, remaining in the home he loved.

Rowenna's eyes shone with dreams. 'I wish I could go with you. You'll get to see the whole country while I have to stay here.'

He took her hand and was surprised by the strength in hers when she gave his a squeeze in response. He cared a lot for her, for all the trouble she caused.

'I'll miss you most of all,' Robbie said. 'I'll write to Father and get him to tell you everything I say.'

'Perhaps I'll work harder at learning my letters so I can read them myself,' she replied. 'Father wants me to read and write as much as Mother nags me to learn to sew and sing. I'll have to if I'm to ever become a lady and satisfy Lady Stick. "A bastard's daughter who can't behave might as well be a dairymaid",' she said, mimicking Lady Danby's cold tones. 'I'll have to catch a husband somehow.'

Robbie couldn't imagine his best friend as a grown woman. She would for ever remain a wild, unruly girl who joined in with the village children kicking a blown-up bladder through the beck, or dirtying her skirts playing Blind Beggar Catch. For that matter he could barely see himself as the knight he hoped to become. He pulled Rowenna to her feet to stand opposite him. She smiled and her hand tightened on his, causing the hairs on his arms to rise. She was quite pretty, really.

'I would marry you,' he declared nobly.

She burst into peals of laughter. 'Yes, we should get married! Can you imagine what fun we'd have?'

Robbie blinked. He didn't think marriage was supposed to be fun. It should be passionate to the point of mortifying onlookers like his parents', or serious and prickly like his grandparents'. He couldn't marry Rowenna. Once more it struck him how unfair it was that she was a bastard's child. She couldn't help who her father was.

'Perhaps I'll meet a lord who will marry you and you will be Lady Rowenna after all. Lady Dumpling.'

Robbie ducked his head to avoid the playful swipe of her hand and they stared at the sky in silence. The stars pricked the blackness like gems on a velvet cloak. He plucked a rosebud and held it out to her.

'We'll always be friends, even if I become a noble knight and you're still hurling yourself out of trees,' he said.

She unwound the ribbon from her hand and held it out to him. 'Here. You asked for a favour earlier. Take this. I hope it brings you more luck than the pear did.'

Robbie coiled it around two fingers, then slipped it inside the pouch at his belt.

'I'll be returning to Ravenscrag tomorrow morning with Mother,' Rowenna said. 'Will you come visit us before you leave?'

'Of course.'

Father had said he could leave as soon as he liked, but he might delay for a few weeks. He lifted Rowenna's hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles lightly in the manner he had been taught, bowing low with a flourish. Her face grew uncharacteristically serious.

'Promise you won't forget me.'

Robbie put his sore hand to hers, palm to palm. They linked fingers and another rush of fondness for Rowenna filled him.

'I promise. We'll always be friends.'

She smiled widely, then unexpectedly leaned close and kissed his cheek. The sensation lingered long after she had darted back inside the house.



Roger was sitting in the kitchen when Robbie returned home. He looked up when Robbie entered.

'We need to talk.'

He gestured to a chair. Robbie sat, unnerved by the serious tone. Roger had poured two cups of wine and was turning one between his fingers. His hands were mismatched: one pink, smooth and hairless. Robbie had never asked why.

'Is something wrong with Mother?'

'Lucy is well. She's sleeping. This concerns you. What I am about to say must never be spoken of to another,' Roger continued. He stood and paced around the room. Robbie's heart began to pound a slow drumbeat.

'I have considered how to tell you and there is no easy way of doing it.'

'Tell me what?' Robbie urged.

Roger poured himself another cup of wine and drained it in one gulp.

'Robbie, I am not your father.'

The world folded in. Robbie lifted his cup to his lips, but it was as if someone else was drinking the wine because he tasted nothing. He thought about protesting that his father was jesting, or there was a mistake, but the look in Roger's eyes told him it was futile.

'We always wondered if you would remember the time before I met your mother, but you never did.' Roger twisted his cup between his hands and bowed his head.

'And now you have told me, you are s-s-sending me away?'

'You are not an exile,' Roger said. 'You want to go.'

Robbie stared around. He could remember nothing before this stone house full of laughter and affection, but now the walls trapped him.

Robbie's throat seized with an unspeakable pain. It was not in his nature to shout or rant, and experience told him that he stuttered worse when he did.

'Why are you telling m-me now?' he asked in a low voice.

'You have a right to know.'

'It's something I should have always known!'

Roger reached out a hand, which Robbie ignored, his heart tearing. The father who had soothed Robbie when he fell, played with him and taught him did nothing to ease the grief and confusion beyond offer a hand.

'You were too young to understand before and we couldn't risk you revealing it. There were reputations to consider. But you are almost a man and should know the truth about yourself.'

Robbie balled his hands. Roger's reputation was the least of his considerations when his world had been shattered. He flung himself from the stool, sending it crashing to the floor. He winced at the noise. The wine made his head spin, adding to the fug of emotions that surged inside him.

'Sit down and be sensible,' Roger said.

Robbie glared, bristling at the command in Roger's voice, and stood his ground.

'Is Sir John my father?'

Roger shook his head.

'Who is?'

'That doesn't matter.'

'It matters to me!'

'It is not my place to tell you.' Roger looked away. 'This changes nothing. I have no son of my own.'

Robbie glanced at the closed door to his mother's room. Acid filled his throat. If the new baby had been a son, Robbie would have been an outcast by now.

'You're my only heir. Titles can pass to adopted sons if there is no legitimate heir.'

Roger smiled, as if this negated years of deceit. Robbie had often marvelled at the way his father—no, his stepfather—swept through life with a carefree manner as if nothing had consequence. Did Roger not understand how completely he had destroyed everything Robbie had believed to be true?

'But you haven't adopted me. You've kept it secret.' Robbie began to shake.

'William of Pickering believes only true bloodlines matter. His son, Horace, might see differently when he becomes the Earl, but it is too much of a risk to reveal the truth. Secrecy is better. For now, at least,' Roger said.

'Lies are better, you mean?' Robbie exclaimed. 'What if I reject your plan and refuse to be your heir?'

'Then Wharram could pass to a stranger when I die. Everything my family has created will be lost.' Roger eyed him sharply. 'Would you do that?'

The portion of land owned by the Danbys, including Rowenna's village of Ravenscrag, was held in fief from the tenant-in-chief, William of Pickering. Whether or not Robbie cared if the manor passed to another of William's vassals—and at this point he was not sure he did—there were tenants

who relied on the Danbys. Another nobleman who was unfamiliar with the area might be less generous and fair with the serfs and peasants. Robbie couldn't be responsible for jeopardising so many lives. He shook his head.

'Does anyone else know?' he asked.

'Hal and Joanna, and my parents.'

Which was why Lady Stick had no liking for Robbie. He was not her blood any more than Rowenna was.

'Your reputation is safe,' he said stiffly. 'I shall tell no one and I shall be your heir. I'll leave for Wentbrig at first light.'

'There's no need for that.'

Roger looked distraught. He raked his fingers through his hair, a gesture that Robbie had unconsciously adopted. Robbie stared at the man, who he resembled so closely in manner and looks. No wonder the deception had been so easy.

'There's every need. You've done your duty and found me a position. I shall take it.'

He had promised to see Rowenna. Though he would break his word, how could he face her knowing what he did now, but unable to share his burden? He did not know what the future held, but it was not in Wharram.

He bowed curtly. 'Please tell my mother I am sorry not to see her. Farewell, Sir Roger.'

He left the room before he cried.

## **Chapter Two**

### **June 1381**

Her name was Mary Scarbrick and he loved her more than life itself. Robbie Danby knew with absolute certainty she was the woman he wanted to marry. She had hair so blond it was almost white and eyes the colour of his mother's sapphire rings. True, he had only known her a month, but it had been a month filled with the greatest passions and despair he had ever experienced.

Riding towards York in the retinue of his master, Sir John Wallingdon, Robbie passed the time in two ways: he searched as he always did for a hint of the father whose unknown identity plagued him whenever he was in the presence of noblemen and knights, and he dreamed of Mary. There was plenty of time to do both as the procession of entourages all converging on the road to the city stretched seemingly for miles and was making slow progress.

Mary was among them somewhere, though Robbie had lost track of which covered litter she was travelling in. The ladies seemed to move from one to another as they kept each other company. As lady-in-waiting to Lady Isobel, Sir John Wallingdon's wife, Mary would follow her mistress wherever that woman desired her to go.

Robbie sighed, thinking of the curve of Mary's lips, the tilt of her nose, the smooth whiteness of her cheeks. No woman in the country could come close to her perfection. He would do great deeds in her honour. He would write poetry that would cause the hardest heart to weep. He would dedicate his life to her happiness if she would let him.

All he had to do was be able to speak to her without his throat seizing and his tongue becoming lead.

As a squire in the service of an elderly knight of middling wealth he had little to recommend him, but one day Robbie would be a knight, Sir Robert. With the expectation of one day inheriting the title of Lord Danby, Baron of Danby and Westerdale, he would be a much more attractive prospect to a young woman.

His stomach squirmed as it always did whenever the matter of inheritance occurred to him. He had kept The Great Secret buried within him, but never a day went by that he was not conscious of the deception he was party to, simply by living under the name he bore. His conscience would not permit him to deceive a wife over his origins.

With the prospect of Mary in his future, he was more determined to win his knighthood on his own merit. Robbie pictured himself taking Mary back to Wharram Danby, his childhood home. His mother would naturally love her as much as Robbie did himself. Even old Lady Stick would have to unbend when introduced to someone of such elegance, despite her dislike of Robbie. His twin sisters would fall over themselves to gain her notice while his cousins would look on in envy at the woman Robbie had won.

Most of his cousins, at least. Robbie slowed his horse a little, dropping back to the middle of the cavalcade as he pondered what his cousin Rowenna would make of his intended bride. He couldn't imagine the meeting between the elegant Mary and spirited Rowenna, though they were similar in age. He would have to make time to travel to Ravenscrag and visit his cousin now he was home in Yorkshire. It had been abundantly clear in each of the notes she sent along with letters from Robbie's family that she was desperate to visit the city more frequently than her father allowed.

'What's wrong, Danby? Forgetting how to ride? Are you going to travel to York at walking pace?'

A mocking voice pulled Robbie back from his reverie. He ground his teeth and looked into the eyes of the squire who had come alongside him. Cecil Hugone had been Robbie's rival and friend—he was never sure which—since they had joined the same household within six months of each other

as untrained pages and become squires together. Hours of work under the hard eye of their master had gradually changed both boys from scrawny youths into well-built young men, but while Robbie was tall and leaner than he would have liked to be, Cecil was thickset and squat.

Robbie took a deep breath to steady his voice. 'Just thought I'd let you have a chance to ride in front without having to half kill L-Lightning to keep up with me.'

Cecil pursed his lips and Robbie knew his well-aimed arrow had found the intended target. Cecil never liked reminding he was not the best at everything.

'We both know my Lightning could beat your Beyard without you needing to draw back. You were thinking of a woman, weren't you, and I'll wager I know which one.'

Robbie couldn't prevent the blush rising to his cheeks. He wished he had grown a fuller beard to conceal it rather than the close-trimmed dusting he wore.

'You aim high for a poor Yorkshire squire,' Cecil said with a lift of his eyebrows.

Of course Cecil knew which woman Robbie had given his heart to. High indeed. Sir John was childless and his niece was rumoured to be the beneficiary of his fortune. Whoever caught the heart of Mary Scarbrick would find himself set for life and every man in Sir John's household, old or young, had been admiring the nobleman's niece when she had left her convent a month ago to serve as attendant to Lady Isobel. Cecil was included in that number and Robbie was certain he was equally determined to win Mary's hand. The thought that Cecil might win the woman Robbie loved drove him to despair at night.

With a full beard and corn-blond hair, Cecil drew admiring glances from every quarter. He was the third son of a family who had first come to England from France with Edward Longshanks's second wife. He was charming, handsome, good-humoured—and Robbie didn't trust him not to put his own interests first any more than he would trust a fox in a henhouse.

Roger, now Lord Danby, could trace his line back for three generations of nobility, but as for Robbie himself...

He furrowed his brow. The deception he was party to was a weight on his mind, as was the fact he had no idea who his true father was. Despite the letters Robbie had written requesting, demanding and cajoling, his parents had refused to name the man beyond saying he was of noble birth. By hoping to win Mary as a wife, Robbie aimed considerably higher than even Cecil suspected.

Cecil laughed, mistaking Robbie's discomfiture to do with their conversation. He threw his head back in a careless manner that Robbie knew for certain he practised when he thought no one was watching.

'That's it! You can't sit straight in the saddle because you're worried you'll snap your swollen prick in half!'

Robbie winced inwardly at Cecil's crudity. His intentions towards Mary were pure and Robbie himself was chaste. He yearned to marry her, not dally with her, then move on to another conquest as Cecil frequently did, if what he boasted about was true. Having said that, the affliction Cecil described did cause him trouble at times. That was only natural. There were nights when it felt like a knife was plunging into his groin and he was sorely tempted to seek out one of the maidservants of the household who had hinted that his particular attention would be received gladly. Sir John was elderly and presumably unaware of the behaviour of some of his household. For all Robbie knew, he was the only person not slipping from one bed to another after dark.

He loosened his cloak a little at the neck to allow the breeze to play about his throat. The weather in early June was warm and he could attribute some of the heat that flushed his body to that.

Robbie had learned over the years to speak through gestures to save his voice catching—a nod or wink, a shrug or a smile could make his meaning understood without having to endure the expression on the face of a listener who was no doubt branding him as feeble-minded. He had also discovered that enduring Cecil's taunting with good humour was the quickest way of putting an end to it and that replying in kind was even better.

'It's true,' he said with mock regret. 'I am considering having a s-special s-saddle made that is much longer at the front in order to accommodate my inhumanly large member. How fortunate you are, that you have never had to fret over such matters!'

Cecil laughed coldly and punched Robbie on the arm. 'A sting and a good one! So, tell me—what were you thinking about the fair Mary?' He leaned closer in his saddle and lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'How she'd be to kiss? What it would be like to bury your head between those tender breasts—or those supple thighs?'

'None of those!' Robbie said.

Cecil smirked. 'Something more dissolute than that, even! Between her rounded—'

'Guard your tongue if you w-wish to keep my friendship!' Robbie growled. He sat upright in the saddle and let his hand drop to the sword at his belt.

Cecil eyed the sword and the hand tightening on the grip.

'My apologies.'

Robbie took hold of the reins again, his temper, which was always slow to flare, subsiding.

'If you really m-must know, I was w-wondering how M-Mary would greet my cousin Rowenna.'

'A cousin! Is she fair?'

Robbie had last met Rowenna on a brief visit to York two years after he had left Wharram Danby to join Sir John's household. His memory was of a thirteen-year-old, still far too ungainly and unladylike in her mannerisms and interests, but who was showing signs of becoming a comely woman. Dark, unruly curls came to mind, along with a plump form and a determined expression.

He enjoyed a private moment of humour as he considered the likely outcome if he introduced Cecil to Rowenna, remembering the many times she had trounced him at games and scorched him with her tongue, but this ended abruptly as he thought of the games Cecil might introduce *her* to. He felt a curious prickle at the base of his neck, as though someone had blown on his neck with ice-cold breath. The idea of Cecil showing interest in Rowenna was not something he wanted to encourage. He shrugged in an offhand manner.

'She may be fair. I have not seen her for five years. She writes to me from time to time and tells me of home.'

Cecil wrinkled his nose. 'A writer. I suppose she reads also and is grey-complexioned and furrowed of brow from the effect of concentrating.'

'Possibly. I don't think she is too serious. She used to get us both into trouble. There was one time she made me drive the sow into the beck and...'

He tailed off. Cecil was losing interest already, Robbie noted with some relief. Women were made for dancing and wit and seduction in Cecil's world. A woman of a scholarly nature would bore him, though Rowenna's descriptions of life in Yorkshire had always been a source of pleasure to Robbie and a link with home.

Now he thought of it, a studious woman of letters did not seem like the Rowenna he recalled from their youth, and little like the author of the letters, which were witty and exciting, painting a vivid picture of home and of a vibrant girl who seemed to delight in living, for all she grumbled about how quiet the village was. She had always seemed more alive than anyone Robbie knew and he loved her for it. Loved her for the way she could draw him out of his inclination to solitude—though more often than not into mischief and trouble—in a way no one else managed.

He'd sought her out eagerly on that last meeting, hoping to share his tales with his closest friend, but she'd been too busy drubbing some sense into her youngest brother to properly listen to Robbie's tales of life in the nobleman's house and his duties as a squire. Once he had done with his business in York he would make a point of visiting Ravenscrag and seeing Rowenna in person.

'Come on, Rob, let's not idle here in the middle of the party,' Cecil urged. 'It's hard enough we are journeying north when there is fighting to be done in the south without having to travel at the pace of a grandmother walking to market. Let's work up some sweat on these beasts.'

Robbie glanced back over his shoulder, as if he would see evidence of the unrest that had recently arisen in response to the newly introduced Poll Tax. Thanks to Sir John's age and preference for dwelling at home, they had missed most of the riots that had supposedly taken place in the south of England.

'The last to the bridge pays for the wine tonight!' Cecil said.

He cracked the reins with a cry and cantered away. Robbie could afford to give Cecil a head start. He was the better rider and had more affinity with horses than Cecil did. He always had loved them since the time when his stepfather had put him astride his great destrier despite his mother's protests. Robbie took his time to scratch Beyard in the soft spot behind the bridle before he gathered the reins. The bay rouncy tossed his head and snorted, eager to let loose and put the ground beneath his hooves.

Robbie's spirits rose once again as he recalled that a tournament was planned for the assembled nobility once they arrived in York. He would take part in the *bohört*—the games for squires. He knew, without feeling the sin of pride, that he was a far better archer and swordsman than Cecil and that performing well was sure to win Mary's notice.

He clicked his tongue, urged Beyard into a canter and chased after Cecil. He reached the bridge first, overtaking Cecil and Lightning with ease.



Cecil bought the wine as promised and not too grudgingly. They sat in the noisy inn that evening, sharing it companionably and joining in the arguments regarding the rebellions, some knights sympathetic to their cause and others outraged that common men might rise up against the King. Robbie drank slowly and listened with interest as both sides made strong cases, but before long he found the heat and noise too great and his thoughts drifted once again to the matter he had been thinking of before Cecil's interruption on the journey.

Mary and Rowenna. That was it. They would love each other, of course. How could they not, when he loved them both so deeply?



York was much as Robbie remembered it from his last visit. After the small market town near Sir John's manor house, the narrow streets felt oppressive and the buildings imposing. As they rode through the streets, Cecil once more came alongside. He gestured to the building site where a new Guild Hall was being constructed. It would eventually replace the current Common Hall, but would not be ready in time for the feasts and banquets that were to take place over the next month.

'I've never been to York before. Are the women worth spending money on? You'll have to try find me an alehouse where we won't catch more fleas or the pox.'

Robbie grimaced at Cecil's condescending attitude. He knew the streets well enough and his mother had been professionally scathing enough about other brewers she had encountered for him to deduce where he would find decent ale.

'I can take you to the best alehouses, but I don't know many women of the sort you'd be interested in,' he said. 'I was a boy when I was last here! The only woman I know is my Aunt Joanna and she'd have your eye out with her adze if you tried your sweet tongue on her!'

Cecil laughed and slung an arm about Robbie's shoulder. 'Then we'll have to discover the delights together, won't we! Not tonight, however. I'm too weary after the early start and for once have a craving for my bed with no company in it.'

They travelled at a walking pace through the city to the bank of the smaller of York's two rivers. The inn was nestled into the walls, close enough to allow easy access to the tournament grounds and

festivities that would accompany the summer pageant, yet far enough away from the stench of the city and the early-morning cries of street hawkers selling their wares.

Robbie settled into his quarters in the inn that had been commandeered by Sir John's steward for the household. He was sharing a room with Cecil, two pages and four of the menservants. He would have preferred more space and privacy than the cramped attic room of eight men would allow.

'I still would have preferred the camp with the other knights,' Cecil grumbled. 'Don't you wish sometimes that Sir John was young enough to compete and had the inclination?'

Robbie made vague noises of agreement. He was fond of his elderly master, who had long since retired from active service to the King. The squires and servants had been dismayed to discover they would be quartered in an inn rather than the tents beside the ground itself. As Robbie inspected the straw mattress that was to be his bed for the month for obvious fleas, he had to admire the steward's choice. The room was clean, the straw likewise. Robbie unlocked the small chest where he kept his personal effects and checked his savings. Rowenna's ribbon, faded with age, was nestled in a corner. Robbie ran his fingers over it, remembering the night she had given it to him.

The night he had learned of his true birth. Even now the bitterness of Roger's betrayal and his blundering attempt to act as if the secret was of little consequence made Robbie's stomach lurch and fill with acid. Since they had parted that night with Robbie furious and Roger refusing to comprehend why, Robbie had seen Roger only once. That had been Roger's brief visit to Wallingdon four years previously, where they had spoken stiffly and publicly, aware of Sir John's presence and neither mentioning their argument. He would have to visit Wharram and see Roger at some point, but the idea filled him with anxiety and could wait.

He made his way downstairs and busied himself unpacking and polishing the armour Sir John no longer wore, until he was summoned to the main room of the inn, where the household would eat. He took his place at the table. His mind was only half on the prayers that Sir John intoned before they ate and half on when he might catch a glimpse of Mary. Unfortunately the litter bearing Sir John's wife and her attendants had travelled at a slower pace and would not arrive until the following day. Even when it did, the women would be eating with Sir John in the small chamber that had been set aside for their private use.

Robbie ate with enthusiasm, scooping up barley-thickened pork stew, and listened to the other men trading insults and jokes. Their language was coarse and their wit quick. Even without the affliction that caused his words to become trapped behind his tongue he did not have much to add. The meal was drawing to an end and the household beginning to drift away on private pursuits. The segregation between the male and female members of the household relaxed, someone struck up a tune on a pipe and Robbie sat back, contented to watch others conversing. He began composing a verse to Mary in his head, wondering if he had the courage to commit it to ink and try passing it to her. Perhaps before he fell asleep he would write it down. It was only doggerel, but he knew Mary had simple tastes and was a poor reader. He hoped the effort—and brevity—would gain him some standing.

Before long, however, he tired of the heat and bustle and allowed Cecil to persuade him to join a game of jacks in their attic room. As they were halfway to the staircase, a rapid and insistent knocking on the door to the street sounded throughout the room. The innkeeper hurried to open it.

'We're full. No rooms to spare.'

'I don't need a room,' came the reply. 'Is there a Master Danby here?'

Robbie stopped, surprised to hear his name spoken and in a female voice. He could make out the form of a cloaked figure in the doorway, partially masked by the innkeeper. Cecil, who was three steps ahead of him, grinned and whistled.

'You've lost no time in finding yourself a diversion for the night! I thought you didn't know where to find women and you've called for one already.' He thrust his crotch out and made an obscene gesture with his fist.

'I didn't call for a w-woman. There m-must be a m-mistake.' Robbie glared at Cecil in outrage as humiliation caused his cheeks to burn.

He gestured fiercely to Cecil to go on up the stairs, then walked back down, his curiosity piqued. He crossed to the doorway where the woman stood. She was clad in a deep blue cloak of light wool with the voluminous hood pulled over her face, obscuring her identity. Her head was downcast and her hands folded neatly in front of her.

'Who w-wants me at this hour?' he asked. 'I'm M-Master Danby.'

The woman drew her hood down to reveal neat black curls caught beneath a simple white cap. She raised her head and her dark-lashed eyes travelled upward and met Robbie's. They widened briefly and her face broke into a beaming smile, small dimples appearing in each cheek.

'Of course you are Master Danby,' she said. 'Don't you recognise me? I'm Rowenna.'

'D-Dumpling?'

Robbie couldn't help himself. The old name he used to call her slipped out amid the words that caught in his throat. With her arched brows, straight nose and high cheekbones she looked so unlike the round-faced Rowenna he had nestled in his memory and even further from the grey-pallored mouse Cecil had described. He was not even sure she was who she claimed to be.

This woman was stunningly beautiful.

She also looked furious at being reminded of the childhood name. Her eyes glinted. Her smile froze. Vanished completely. The smooth forehead ruffled into a familiar scowl.

Robbie knew then, in no uncertain terms, this was his childhood friend. He prepared himself for a smack on the arm and began to blurt out apologies, but Rowenna gave an imperious wave of her hand to silence him and her smile returned much quicker than Robbie was expecting. She lifted her chin and set her shoulders back, all sign of displeasure gone from her expression, which was tinged now with aloofness. The mannerism reminded Robbie of his grandmother.

'I had hoped your years away would have taught you how to speak to a lady,' she said.

Her voice sounded oddly dignified, coming from the girl who used to bellow in his face when they argued.

'I'm sorry! I w-was just s-s-s—'

'Surprised to see me?' Rowenna finished for him. Robbie stiffened instinctively, his eyes narrowing, and her expression became one of anguish. She put one hand to cover her lips, which Robbie noticed had become fuller and redder over the years, and placed the other on his arm in entreaty.

'Oh, Robbie, I'm sorry!' she gasped. 'I know you hate people finishing your speech. Forgive me!'

Her fingers slid slowly down his sleeve, coming to rest on his bare wrist. Her fingers were warm against his flesh. He was acutely aware of how the hairs on his arm stood on end at this unexpected contact. He shook his head, smiling to show she had not offended him, though inside he writhed with shame that he could not even greet his old friend with ease.

'I think we have both offended each other adequately so the s-score is s-settled.' He managed to spit out his words without too much faltering and was touched to see Rowenna waited patiently for him to finish, watching him with bright eyes that called to mind an inquisitive blackbird watching a worm. She inclined her head gracefully to one side, displaying an elegantly curved neck that made Robbie think of fresh cream.

'I agree. Greet me properly, then, Cousin Robbie,' she said.

And waited.

Fingers of fire raced over Robbie's body. Clearly she expected him to take the lead and set the tone of their reunion, but he had no idea where to start, being so unprepared for this moment. He leaned forward instinctively to embrace her and show how glad he was to see her again, but drew back as his heart gave a violent throb. Taking her in his arms after so long apart felt too intimate.

A kiss on her cheek would be acceptable, though this led to the thought of kissing her lips, sending shivers racing over his skin in the most alarming fashion.

He settled for taking her hand and lifting it to his lips, combined with a quick bow. She curtsied gracefully.

Robbie became conscious that they were standing in full view of those members of Sir John's household who had not departed. Cecil's assumption that the unexpected visitor was a whore came to mind.

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'I want you to come for supper tonight. Father was going to ask you tomorrow, but I begged him to ask for you tonight. You will come, won't you?'

'Tonight?' She had clearly lost none of her impulsiveness in the years they had been apart. He had other plans, but they had gone clean out of his head in the presence of Rowenna. He pursed his lips doubtfully.

'I shall have to ask permission from Sir John. The hour is late.'

'But will you come if he allows it?'

She didn't wait for his answer before continuing, 'Let me ask him, I'm sure he would not refuse the petition of a lady. Where is he to be found?'

Robbie glanced to the large recess where Sir John's private table was veiled by a thick curtain. Following his eyes, Rowenna walked purposefully through the room towards the alcove, her heavy cloak swaying from side to side. Robbie half expected her to pull the curtain back and demand entry in the direct manner she had demonstrated as a child. Robbie strode to Rowenna in consternation and caught her by the arm. She stopped, cocked her head at him and raised her eyebrows in surprise.

Robbie's lord and master was a kind man. Robbie had no complaints about the treatment he had received in the many years he had been in Sir John's service. He could be stern, however, and had very definite and fixed views on how a woman should conduct herself.

'I'll speak with him,' Robbie said firmly. 'You w-wait here.'

He slipped between the curtains, clenching his jaw in exasperation at Rowenna's assumption he had no plans of his own. He made his apologies for the intrusion and explained to Sir John that his cousin wished to address him. The old man listened, then gave a brief smile.

'Your cousin? Bring her in, then, Master Danby. I should be happy to speak a few words to her as she has come so far at such a time.'

He settled himself upright in the high-backed chair while Robbie slipped out to beckon Rowenna.

'He will see you. Be polite,' he cautioned.

Rowenna gave him a withering look in response to his warning and declined to answer. She adjusted the ribbons on her cloak, which had come slightly askew, folded her hands neatly and followed behind Robbie, head bowed submissively.

'M-may I have the honour to present my cousin Rowenna Danby, my lord?'

Sir John's expression when displeased had been known to reduce a clumsy kitchen skivvy to tears from across the Great Hall. He fixed Rowenna with such a gaze, his gimlet eyes examining her from head to foot.

'I believe you wish to speak to me regarding my squire.'

Like Robbie, Rowenna had grown up under the eye of Lady Danby and such attempts to intimidate her were sure to fail. He only hoped she would not speak as forthrightly as she used to when addressing Lady Danby—something that had landed her in trouble on many occasions.

To his relief—and slight surprise—Rowenna averted her gaze modestly and smoothly dropped into a deep curtsy with surprising elegance. She remained silent. Robbie glanced sideways and saw Sir John's expression soften, filling with approval. He motioned Rowenna to rise with a quick shake of his hand.

'I crave your pardon for the lateness of my visit, but my family are all eager to have my cousin with us again. It has been many years since we last saw him.' She looked at Robbie and her smile deepened, causing the dimples to return. 'Far too many years.'

Robbie smiled in return, his eyes meeting her dark-lashed pair. Surely they had not been that long when he had last seen her? He took her hand, fondness rushing through him.

'Are you here to ask my permission to marry?' Sir John asked.

'To marry!' Robbie exclaimed. A peal of laughter burst from Rowenna as if such a preposterous idea was the most amusing thing she had ever heard. She clasped her hand across her lips.

'I... No... I merely wish to claim him for a night... We... For an evening!'

Rowenna stumbled over her words as though her tongue was as awkward and disobedient as Robbie's and she had begun to blush as red as Sir John's wine. Her eyes flickered to Robbie's and widened. The two of them could once again have been children awaiting judgement from their parents. Robbie bit back a smile.

'I have no intention of marrying yet,' Rowenna added.

'Good. A squire is in no position to wed.' Sir John nodded at Robbie. 'I would advise a man to have made a name for himself before he takes a wife.'

Robbie's scalp prickled as he wondered if Sir John suspected his hopes towards Mary. Sir John addressed Rowenna once more.

'Young woman, where is your attendant? You have brought a chaperone, I assume?'

Rowenna gazed on him with clear eyes. 'Father planned to send the servant to ask, but I decided I would come instead.'

Sir John was stone-faced for what felt like a year. Then he chuckled. 'Neatly ensuring I am in no position to make you return home unescorted. Very well. Robbie, you have my leave for a short while. Go visit your kin, but be warned, I expect you attending to your duties as usual tomorrow morning. If you hope for any success tomorrow, you will not be late to bed.'

Robbie wondered whether his lord meant success in the *bohört*—the games for squires to take part in—or with Mary. He was still pondering that when he bowed and took Rowenna's arm to escort her from the alcove. He left her waiting in the outer room while he rushed two steps at a time to the bedroom and gathered his cloak and money scrip. Cecil and his companions were engrossed in their game of jacks and showed only mild interest in what he was doing. His inability to answer concisely worked in his favour as they returned to their game before he could explain.

He paused at the turn of the stairs and walked the bottom half slowly to give himself time to look at Rowenna. As a child she would have been scuffing her feet or twisting her ribbons into knots, but now she stood perfectly still, hands folded placidly and face serene as a marble statue in a cathedral. Only her eyes gave life to her, darting around the room and taking in everything that was happening.

She slipped her hand on to the arm he held out and they left the inn. A boy was sitting against the wall to the side of the door, his knees drawn up and his feet drumming a repetitive beat on the stones. He had a small brown puppy on a leash that began barking as soon as it spotted Rowenna, racing round in circles in a tangle of long hair.

'Get up out of the mud, lazy-legs,' Rowenna said cheerfully.

'You brought him!' the boy exclaimed, looking at Robbie in delight.

Before Robbie knew what was happening, the boy had hurled himself upright and barrelled into Robbie, flinging his arms about Robbie's waist. Rowenna was smiling. Robbie raised his eyebrow.

'You haven't met my brother,' she told him.

Robbie disentangled himself from the boy and held him back to examine him. The child bore the Danby black curls and had inherited his sister's determined expression. This must be Ralf, the child Joanna had been carrying when Robbie had left Wharram.

'I thought you said you had no escort,' he said, narrowing his eyes at Rowenna.

‘A child is hardly a chaperone. Besides, if I had admitted he was here, your master might have sent me away empty-handed.’

She gave him a smile that radiated the innocence she had displayed to Sir John, but her eyes gleamed with a wickedness that made Robbie’s toes curl in a thrill of surprised delight. Before he could answer she drew up her hood and turned away.

‘Come on. Father will be worrying why we aren’t back. The city isn’t as safe as it used to be.’

She began walking swiftly ahead. Robbie threw his cloak over his shoulder, checked his sword was buckled securely at his side, Rowenna’s mention of safety setting his senses on edge. With Ralf clinging on to his arm and asking a dozen questions, he followed her into the city. It was only when he crossed in front of the passage that led to the stables that he remembered he had intended to write his poem to Mary. Just as in his childhood he had been swept up in Rowenna’s plans and had been as incapable of disobeying her as he would be the pull of the tide.

## Chapter Three

Rowenna glanced back over her shoulder. Robbie and Ralf were walking side by side a few paces behind. Ralf was looking up at Robbie with eyes already filled with hero worship even though Robbie was swathed in a plain green cloak that covered the blue-and-orange livery of Sir John's household. When Robbie was knighted and dressed in finery or full ceremonial livery he would look even more attractive.

She stopped walking abruptly so that Robbie and Ralf nearly collided with her. Where had that description sprung into her mind from? She hadn't meant to consider his looks, only his bearing and the fact that Ralf was obsessed with knights. Ralf was bombarding Robbie with questions about life in Sir John's household, but giving him no time to answer any of them. His dark eyes were serious and he nodded politely. It occurred to her that he might have had other plans and that her arrival had not been welcome, but she had been so eager to see him again. The years apart had increased her fondness for him rather than diminished it.

She fell in beside them, with Ralf between her and Robbie, and gave him a furtive look from beneath her hood. A delicious fluttering filled her belly as she looked at him. The letters he had written to her had been packed full with details of his life, the places he had been and whom he had encountered. She had relished every one he sent, but nowhere had he mentioned how tall he had grown or how he had changed. In her mind he had been the same as when she had last seen him, only beginning to take a man's form with legs and arms too graceless and long. He had grown into a man and a remarkably handsome one at that.

Very handsome!

Rowenna bit her lip to stop a smile spreading to her lips at what she saw and looked again. His hair was cut short in the fashionable style, barely grazing his angular jaw, which bore only the slightest hint of beard. Unlike the rest of their family he was not cursed with unruly curls, and his dark brown locks were smooth and thick, parting to one side.

Her eyes travelled further downward. He had grown taller still since she had last laid eyes on him, but from what she could tell, the rest of his body had filled out a little to compensate. If his arms were any indication, he would be toned and muscular all over.

Watching her brother impulsively throw his arms around Robbie's lean frame, Rowenna had been filled with the almost uncontrollable urge to do the same. She recalled the awkward dance they had performed when they had greeted each other. Once she would have thought nothing of behaving in such a familiar manner as Ralf and hugging him. This Robbie was no longer the boy she had played rough and tumble with, but a grown man, and she was a woman now. The years apart had created a formality between them and to behave in such a forward manner would be unacceptable and unladylike.

Besides, when Rowenna thought of the word *hug*, a wayward part of her mind replaced it immediately with *embrace* and sent her thoughts running head over heels down unexpected paths. She burned inside with curiosity to see if the rest of Robbie's body really was as firm and taut as the arm she had taken hold of. It was an outrageous thing to think of her old friend, but she could not suppress the way her blood grew hot as it raced through her veins.

Despite her wish to get safely home, she slowed her pace. Ralf was still talking, describing a joust he had seen and tugging on the leash in his hand in a way that caused the puppy to be tugged back.

'Careful, you'll hurt Simon's neck. He's only small still,' she cautioned.

Hearing the name, Robbie grinned over Ralf's head and his eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement.

'Another Simon?'

Rowenna grinned back. Her mother had owned four dogs in succession and all had been called Simon. It seemed to be a private joke between her parents.

‘Mother says if something works she doesn’t see a reason to change it.’

She stopped short of grumbling that Mother would be content to stay in Ravenscrag for her whole life, despite having been born and brought up in York. She led Robbie into a narrow street between two closely packed rows of houses. During the day the shutters were thrown back so shopkeepers could display their wares. The street would be alive with noise and bustle. Now it was quiet and, though the evening was light, the houses loomed above, blocking out the rising moon. Rowenna edged a little closer to her companions and saw Robbie’s hand slip to the pommel of the sword at his side. He saw her glance and grinned, drawing his cloak back to reveal more of his weapon. The gesture was heartening. Robbie would have spent much of his time in Sir John’s service learning to fight. If they did encounter any danger, he would protect her, as he had always done.

They walked in silence. Rowenna’s mind had been overflowing with things she wanted to say ever since she had learned Robbie was returning, but now they all seemed dull or too personal.

‘You don’t mind me claiming you tonight?’ she asked eventually.

‘Why would I mind?’

‘I thought perhaps you might have other engagements, having just arrived in the city.’

He was silent for a moment, his brows knotting as if some matter had only just occurred to him, but then he shrugged.

‘I did, but nothing that could not wait until m-morning. When I have not seen you for so long I would be glad for you to claim me at any time you choose.’

‘Sir John said you hope to be successful tomorrow. What are you doing?’

‘Tomorrow is the first day of the tournament.’

Ralf had been listening quietly, but could not help interrupting with excitement, tugging on Robbie’s sleeve. ‘You are competing in the tournament? But you aren’t knighted yet!’

Rowenna hid her annoyance that her brother was intruding. If only Father had allowed her to collect Robbie alone as she had begged.

‘There will be a *bohört* for anyone who is not yet knighted, as well as the formal tournament,’ Robbie explained, smiling at them both. ‘I sh-shan’t be competing against knights, only squires.’

‘Will you joust?’ Ralf interrupted.

Robbie shook his head. ‘I may take part in the ring tilting, but I’m better with the sword and better s-still with a bow.’

‘Not the joust?’ Rowenna asked. ‘You used to enjoy that. Your father will be disappointed.’

The joust was the most prestigious event and the one with the chance of winning the greatest prize. Uncle Roger, Robbie’s father, had apparently been a keen jouster when he was younger. An injury at some point had weakened his shoulder and now he rarely held a lance.

‘I used to, but then I stopped. I will shine on my own, not walk in his shadow.’ A determined light filled Robbie’s eyes and his chin came up, giving his face a startling vitality. ‘I prefer to choose my own path to success.’

Rowenna bit her lip to hide her astonishment, hearing the fire in his voice. For his son to reject the discipline he had loved would strike Roger hard. Perhaps Robbie would say differently when he arrived at the house to discover his parents present. The street was busier as they rounded the corner into Aldwark. The small herb garden in front of the Smiths’ Meeting Hall was one of Rowenna’s favourite places to slip away to and watch the busy streets. Her home was only two streets beyond that, and when they arrived Rowenna would have to surrender Robbie to her family and his. She had so much she wanted to ask him about life in a nobleman’s household, the places he had seen and people he had met while she had stayed at home on the moors.

‘Ralf, run ahead and tell Mother that Robbie and I will be along shortly.’

Her brother raced off with Simon the puppy at his heels. Rowenna stopped beside the old fountain with the weathered stone lion's face that stood at the edge of the garden. The fountain had long since lost the cup on a chain so Rowenna dipped her fingers in the basin of the fountain and rinsed them as an excuse for lingering.

'Rowenna? I did not know you were in town!'

Surprised at hearing her name, Rowenna turned to face the sombrely dressed young man who was striding towards her. She recognised Geoffrey Vernon, her mother's cousin and a member of the same guild as Rowenna's father. Now she would be trapped in conversation until Judgement Day.

Her heart sank at the interruption, doubly so as she recalled the discussions between Geoffrey and her father regarding marriage with Rowenna.

*Don't reject Geoff. You might find it harder than you think to find a husband in York.*

The regret in her father's voice as he warned her cut deeper than any of Lady Danby's jibes. It would not do to snub Geoff, who, for all his lacklustre conversation, did not openly shun the daughter of a bastard. She discreetly wiped her hands dry on her skirts and dropped into a curtsy, while Geoffrey bowed in turn.

'I arrived yesterday and am here for the next fortnight,' Rowenna replied.

Delight filled Geoffrey's ruddy face and he filled the next few minutes with a succession of pleasantries and broad hints that he hoped to see Rowenna again before long. He allowed her no time to respond even in the short time he drew breath, but she listened with all outward appearance of interest, while inwardly cursing him for interrupting her time with Robbie.

'But you are out without the protection of your father! This will not do in these troubling times!' Geoffrey exclaimed. 'Please permit me the honour of escorting you home.'

Before he could take hold of her arm and forcibly enclose it under his, Rowenna slipped to one side. 'Thank you, but I am not alone. My cousin is with me.'

She glanced around and discovered Robbie had stolen round to the other side of the fountain while Geoffrey commanded her attention. He stood with arms folded, watching the exchange take place. In his dark cloak he blended into the shadow, but as Rowenna caught his eye he stepped forward and bowed with a flourish. He came to stand close at Rowenna's side. Geoffrey's face fell at the sight of the handsome young squire. He quickly made his excuses and left with a hasty bow to Robbie and a longer one to Rowenna, who acknowledged it with another graceful curtsy and a smile.

When Geoffrey had disappeared round the corner Rowenna turned back to Robbie, intending to apologise for the unwanted intrusion. She found he was looking at her with interest and amusement in his deep brown eyes. A grin was spreading across his lips. She folded her arms and held his gaze.

'Is something wrong, Robbie?' she asked sharply.

'Nothing is wrong at all. I am merely remembering how the Rowenna I left s-seven years ago would have responded to your acquaintance's none-too-subtle hints.' His eyes flickered downward, then settled on her face. 'Have you become a lady, Ro?'

Approval and wonder were clear in his voice, laced with something else.

A touch of jealousy as he spoke of Geoffrey?

Admiration?

Attraction?

The idea thrilled her. Years of mastering her impulses and behaving with decorum and grace had paid their dues. The urge rose up to throw her arms round Robbie's lean frame and pull him into a wild dance. She fought it down, knowing that would prove the lie to what he had said. Instead she inclined her head in acknowledgement, regarding him with a half-smile, though inside she sang triumphantly at his words.

'I'm trying to be. As you say, Robbie, that was seven years ago. Did you really expect me to be running around barefoot chasing after a pig's bladder?'

He looked a little guilty and she realised with a jolt of dismay that must be exactly what he was thinking.

'I finally tired of your grandmother's cane,' she said. She drew her hand out from beneath the cloak and held it out, palm upturned. 'Do you remember the whipping we got after the geese in the orchard? I still have a scar.'

She rubbed her thumb over the soft, plump mound between her first two fingers. Robbie took hold of her hand and lifted it to the light, cupping it in his palm. His hand was warmer than hers and the small hairs on the back of her hand and arm stood on end. Robbie was looking at her hand and to avoid looking at his face in case hers revealed something she did not want him to see, she kept her eyes on the scars. They were small, white marks about the size of grains of wheat along the ridge between her palm and fingers.

'You grazed your hand falling from the tree. I remember.'

'Jumping! Not falling!' Her pride momentarily overcame any intention to act as a lady. 'You're right, though. It bled and hurt so much when she whipped me, too. After you left I vowed that would be the last time she would use her cane on me.'

'I'm pleased she didn't hurt you again.' He looked at her earnestly. She saw the boy's eyes peering out from the man's face, bearing the familiar expression of protectiveness and outrage he had worn whenever Lady Danby disciplined Rowenna too harshly.

'Oh, Robbie, I have missed you. You always think the best of me. Of course, it wasn't the last time, but I made an effort for it not to happen without very good reason.'

She didn't tell him about the deeper wounds that had left scars on her heart, not her flesh—that a bastard's daughter would never have a place in society. Widowhood had released Lady Danby from the trial of tempering her nature in front of her late husband and as she had aged her tongue had become freer and crueller. But she was still Robbie's grandmother and he would not learn of her unkindness from Rowenna. If she had not loved Robbie so dearly she would have been racked with envy that his birth and position ensured him a path through life with an ease she would never have.

Feeling more confident in their intimacy, she put her arm under Robbie's, drawing him close to her side. He looked at her and his eyes flashed with a new light of interest that made sparks burst in Rowenna's chest like a hammer striking hot iron.

She stumbled, turning her foot on a pile of rough stones and slipping from the kerb, bumping into him in the process. His hand shot out, catching her in the small of her back to steady her. He slid it further around her waist until it came to rest on her hip and drew her close to his side. Rowenna bowed her head to hide the flush of embarrassment that raced across her cheeks. She, who was as sure-footed as a goat and could walk these streets with her eyes closed, had no reason to be stumbling and tripping in such an ungainly manner.

'Here we are,' she told him. They stopped opposite a large two-storey house set back from the road with Hal's workroom on the ground floor and their living quarters above. Robbie let out a low whistle of surprise and appreciation. Rowenna grinned, realising he had not seen the new house.

'Father bought it last year when he received a commission for ten swords for the Sheriff of York. He's determined to have a house that reflects his wealth and status.' A great throb of love filled her heart for her father. 'He's worked so hard to ensure his children would not be blighted by his birth.'

'Is his birth such a blight?' Robbie asked quietly.

A rich man who was still shunned by some members of York's society? Whose wife and daughter were not acknowledged as they passed through the marketplace? Robbie would never understand that all the wealth in the world could never compensate for the taint of illegitimacy.

'What else could it be?' she asked, bitterness creeping into her voice.

She gripped Robbie's hand tightly a moment longer, then tucked it under her arm and led him to the door. She had kept him to herself for long enough. Now she had to let his family claim him.



As Rowenna had suspected, as soon as they entered the house she no longer had sole claim on Robbie. Rowenna's parents greeted him with delight and Robbie's three sisters hurled themselves at him with shrieks of joy, even though small Joan didn't know him, but the warmest reunion was between Robbie and his mother. Aunt Lucy burst into tears and clutched Robbie to her tightly as if she never intended to release him. Finally she surrendered Robbie to his father, who had waited silently at her side. Robbie had grown taller and leaner than his father, and there were grey hairs in Roger's darker curls.

The two men faced each other and said nothing for what felt like a decade. Silence descended. Rowenna looked from adult to adult, all of whom stood watching closely. The feeling grew on her that she was missing something that everyone else understood.

Finally, Robbie took the hand that Roger held out.

'Good evening to you, Father.'

The tension lifted. Robbie dropped Roger's hand and turned back to Rowenna. She could not read his expression.

'You devious wench! You gave me no idea my family was here also.'

'I wanted to surprise you,' she said. It had seemed such a good idea, but now she was not sure.

Robbie crossed the room and took her face between his hands, turning it up to him, his marble expression softening. Her skin began to prickle with the anticipation that he was about to kiss her, but he only laughed.

'That you did.'

For the first time they were looking properly into each other's eyes in the light. She examined Robbie's with interest. They were greenish brown with flecks of a darker shade that reminded Rowenna of the burnt-sugar syrup her mother made to drizzle over Lent cakes. She licked her lips at the thought of them. Robbie smiled, creating tiny half circles at each side of his mouth. Rowenna wanted to dip her fingernails into them and trace the shapes.

She became aware that they were being watched. All four parents were standing by, observing Robbie holding her in such a familiar manner while she gazed at him like a newborn calf at its mother. An unfamiliar feeling of self-consciousness overcame her and she stepped back hastily before she inadvertently let anyone guess that her thoughts were careering off in wild directions.

If anyone noticed her reaction, it was her mother alone. Joanna Danby called Rowenna through to the storeroom to help serve the wine.

'Robbie is looking well, isn't he?' Joanna remarked as she placed cups on Rowenna's tray. 'He looks so much like Lucy it's quite startling.'

If this was a hint that Rowenna should spill out her thoughts of how well Robbie had grown, she was determined to ignore it. The strength of the feelings that had assaulted her on seeing him again was something she wanted to consider in private.

'He's grown too tall to be Lucy's son,' she said gaily. 'He even towers over Uncle Roger. They look nothing alike.'

Joanna looked at her daughter thoughtfully and it seemed as if she was about to speak, but Rowenna was well practised at holding her mother's gaze with an innocent expression and Joanna said nothing more to her. Rowenna bustled back through with cups of wine to discover that already the men were already arguing.

'By unorthodox means, but de Quixlay is better for the city than Gisbourne was!' Her father clapped his hands together loudly in emphasis. 'He's less corrupt and the fines he imposes are fairer.'

Uncle Roger strode towards Rowenna and scooped up a cup with a nod of thanks, then turned back to his brother. 'That wasn't the tune you were dancing to when the Common Hall was stormed last year!'

Hal glowered. 'Of course not! Only a fool would welcome violence in the streets, but Gisbourne had been minting his own coin and ruling by means that...'

Rowenna never discovered what means he had been ruling by, because her mother marched to the centre of the room in a flurry of skirts and held her hands up.

'I will not have this argument again!'

Joanna folded her arms over her chest and Rowenna knew the matter was finished. Her mother was a short woman, wide-hipped and buxom, who had raised four children and could command attention from everyone in the building with a single frown. She gave such a look to her husband and brother-in-law, who both became intensely interested in the contents of their wine cups. Joanna smiled.

'Not when we have guests and this should be a night of celebration. Rowenna, bring your cousin a cup of wine and we'll toast his safe return.'

Rowenna did as bid and squeezed beside Robbie on the settle beside the hearth. It was her father's house, but Hal held his hand out, palm upward, and invited Roger to speak. Roger formally welcomed Robbie back and wished him well in the tournament. Everyone cheered. Aunt Lucy sniffed. Roger slung his arm around her and kissed her full on the lips, which caused his daughters to protest loudly with embarrassed groans and Lucy to swat him away with a hand. Despite her outward disapproval, she leaned against him and rested her hand on his waist, Rowenna noticed. The argument was forgotten and the mood was merry.

'Do our fathers quarrel often?' Robbie asked quietly.

'Oh, all the time. They never fight in a serious manner, but more so since the unrest in the city last year,' Rowenna replied, taking a sip of wine. She wrinkled her nose, never much liking the sickly burning sensation in this particular wine. 'Both of them are as determined to be right as they always were.'

Robbie looked across at his father and his expression darkened a little. Did that explain the unexpected coolness between them?

'I remember. It seems there is unrest everywhere,' he said with a frown.

'Oh, don't say that or they'll start off again. You have no idea how persuasive I had to be to get Father to let me come to York this week! He thought I should stay safely in Ravenscrag in case there was any more trouble. I have to behave or he'll never let me attend the feast at Midsummer and I can't bear to miss that.'

Robbie gave a deep-throated laugh and tilted his cup towards her in salute. 'I can imagine you could persuade anyone if you got it in your mind to do so.'

Rowenna leaned back contentedly, wriggling the brightly coloured, padded mats into place behind her. The settle was small and her leg and arm were squashed slightly against Robbie's, which Rowenna was more than happy with. The room was slightly stuffy and she felt a little sleepy. It would be so nice to rest her head on Robbie's shoulder and drowse beside him. Joan went to bed, complaining she could not stay up. Anne and Lisbet sat with Ralf and teased Simon the puppy and two of the young cats that had slunk in. Her father and uncle had taken seats beside their wives on the settle opposite Rowenna and Robbie.



The evening passed far too quickly. Robbie obligingly answered question after question about his life in Sir John's household, though Rowenna could tell he found speaking so much a trial.

'I m-must leave now,' he said eventually.

It was a signal for everyone to go to bed. Rowenna began to gather the cups and took them into the storeroom. Robbie followed, bringing the jug. She stowed it back on the shelf and turned to go back into the room, but Robbie caught her hand to hold her back. She was startled when she saw how serious his expression was.

'Is something wrong?' she asked.

'Dare I tell you?' he asked, more to himself than her, glancing back to the noisy room they had just left.

'Tell me what? You know you can always tell me anything.'

'When Sir John talked of us m-marrying earlier, what did you think he meant?'

Rowenna tilted her head thoughtfully. 'I suppose he thought that as cousins we might be expected to wed. I haven't really given it much thought.'

'What if I told you I do plan to m-marry? That is, I hope to... ' he said, his voice low.

He looked hesitant, his warm eyes filling with a light that could only be described as adoring. Rowenna blinked. The conversation had taken an unexpected, but not unwelcome, turn. Her heart began to race, drumming a beat beneath her ribs that felt violent enough to break them.

'Tell me,' she breathed.

She would accept him, of course. For years she had idly daydreamed that Robbie would return and marry her since his jest the night before he had left. She had never met another man she preferred and she would be able to enjoy her stay in York without the task of trying to find a husband who would marry a bastard's daughter.

'Her name is M-Mary.' Robbie's eyes burned with passion.

A deep blush rose to Rowenna's throat. She hoped it would not creep higher than the top of her bodice. He loved someone else, not her. Embarrassment filled her belly, made her writhe inwardly, and for once she was thankful for the lessons that had been drummed into her by Lady Danby. How fortunate she had not blurted out the answer to a question that had not been asked, nor ever would be.

'Is something wrong?' Robbie was waiting patiently for her reaction with a solemn expression that made him look vulnerable despite his strength and height. Rowenna shook herself from her reverie and waved a hand as if blowing away cobwebs.

'I just thought... After you mentioned Sir John's mistake, I thought you were going to ask me. Can you imagine? How foolish you must think me!'

She giggled to show how amusing the idea was. Robbie looked confused, then gave a quiet laugh.

'Who is your Mary?'

'She is Sir John's niece.'

A knife buried itself in Rowenna's breast. Of course Robbie would have been introduced to many young women. That was one of the intended consequences of living in another nobleman's household. The letters she and Robbie had exchanged had always been warm and affectionate, but ink and parchment could not compete with a flesh-and-blood woman. Rowenna had been cloistered away in the middle of the moors as surely as if she had taken holy orders.

The disappointment that was beginning to fill her belly felt too acute for the dashing of a hope she had not even been completely aware of and she couldn't honestly say at that moment whether she was more envious of Mary for capturing Robbie's heart, or of Robbie's opportunities to meet lovers.

Robbie's eyes took on a faraway look. Rowenna wanted to clap her hands in his face to wake him from his daydream.

'She has golden hair and the bluest eyes you could imagine. She is tall and slender and graceful.' Everything Rowenna was not.

'You wrote nothing of this to me!' She slipped her arms around his neck and scolded him in as light-hearted a manner as she was able to muster. Robbie slid his arms around her waist. How cruel that he could touch her in such a tantalising, tormenting way and suspect none of the emotions that swelled inside her.

'And does your Mary return your affection?' she asked.

'I do not know. I have never spoken to her. She arrived only last month from a convent and already has m-many suitors.' Robbie looked wistful. 'You know I struggle to speak, but if I prove myself worthy in the tournament perhaps I can find the courage.'

Rowenna raised her eyebrows in astonishment. 'You don't know if she cares for you, but you intend to ask for her hand?'

Robbie looked doubtful. He was still embracing Rowenna as he talked about Mary, which no devoted suitor should contemplate. She unwound her arms from about Robbie's neck and took his from her waist, holding them before her.

'I did not believe you to be so bold. I wish you luck, if that is what you desire.'

'And what of you?' Robbie asked. 'Does anyone own your heart?'

Rowenna walked to the window, tossing her hair back over her shoulder breezily so he didn't read the answer in her eyes. 'Who is there in Ravenscrag who could? That is why I begged Mother and Father to let me come to York during the tournament. To find a husband.'

Did his smile falter? Was the slight twitch of his eyelid any indication that this news was unwelcome to him? Rowenna gave a careless laugh that belied the longing that was now churning within her breast.

She peered out of the window across the city. Who else was arriving for the tournament, preparing to be knighted, seeking someone to fall in love with? Robbie was not the only man in York. There was no need for him to ever know that he had been one of the potential suitors she had hoped to attract. If he thought her affections lay elsewhere, that might spark his interest.

'I intend to marry well, Robbie. I won't settle for anyone less than a knight or nobleman. Or a merchant who is hugely wealthy, at least. Then I'll take him to Wharram Danby and parade him before Lady Stick and she'll have to admit she was wrong.'

Robbie looked surprised at her ferocity. 'Do you w-want a loving husband or a prize stallion to show off?'

She burst into peals of laughter and was pleased to see Robbie start to grin.

'You once promised you would find me a husband, do you remember? On our last night together.'

'Yes. I do.' Robbie gave her studious look and she wondered if he was recalling what he had said just before he had promised that.

'I'm not sure I know anyone worthy enough to do you credit.' His face broke into a grin. 'Or brave enough.'

She laughed and swiped a hand out to bat him on the arm as she had used to. Not ladylike, but intimate in a way she would not dare to be with anyone else. He reached out and caught her wrist, trapping her hand in his. They stood together in the shadowy storeroom, hands clasped. Rowenna squeezed his fingers.

'I've missed you.'

'And I you,' Robbie said. 'May we both find what we're looking for and achieve the happiness we deserve.'

He kissed her cheek, then ducked through the low doorway. Rowenna rinsed the cups and left them to dry. When she returned, Robbie was at the door, bending to kiss his mother's cheek. He gave Rowenna a wink and left.



As she prepared for bed, Rowenna's thoughts kept returning to the way her heart had leapt as Robbie mentioned marriage. She could be happy with him.

Most of the times when she had imagined the grand knight whom she would marry to prove she was a lady, he had borne Robbie's face. Now they were reunited she could not shake the image from her mind. The disappointment had been over Robbie, not envy for his opportunities.

She sighed deeply as she unlaced the ribbon of her bodice, causing Lisbet to give her a strange look. She slipped into bed, wriggling down between the twins, and closed her eyes.

The way Robbie had spoken about Mary sounded more like infatuation than true love. He barely knew Mary and would be slow to muster the courage to speak to her. Meanwhile Rowenna would contrive to spend as much time with him as she could. Robbie's affection might kindle into a hotter flame than the one that burned for Mary. And if it didn't, then as she had told him, there would be men aplenty to win her heart.

## Chapter Four

Robbie brought his buckler up in front of his face and twisted at the waist. He succeeded in deflecting his opponent's sword before it struck him full on the helmet and the sword glanced off the edge of the small round shield instead.

Spectators roared. Beneath the cries of excitement, the whining scrape of metal on metal set Robbie's teeth on edge. He stepped back, feet apart, together, apart once more, light on his feet and bracing himself for another onslaught. He shifted his hand on the grip of his short sword and prepared to duck again. Deflection was the key here. That and not receiving too many blows that would leave his body pummelled to wine pulp.

Was Mary watching? Robbie gritted his teeth, knowing that to risk even the quickest glance towards the fences that held back the crowds would leave him open to attack. He had beaten his first opponent, a red-haired squire from Derbyshire, but lost to his second, so this bout would decide his fate. He swore inwardly that he had been drawn against Cecil. There were friendly grudges that both would like to settle, and an opponent with no reason to fight him beyond the competition would have been preferable.

Cecil raised his sword once more. He grunted, giving Robbie enough forewarning to be able to skirt to one side and receive only a light strike to the hip with the flat of the blade.

Now he was behind Cecil, who had foolishly manoeuvred himself into one corner of the square. It was Robbie's turn to strike a blow. Cecil was short, which gave Robbie an advantage, but thickset and powerful, which did not. Cecil lunged forward as Robbie brought his blade around. He drove his buckler flat into Robbie's belly and managed to knock Robbie off balance, but carried on lunging. Recovering quickly, Robbie brought the sword around in an arc and caught the flailing man across the shoulder blades. A second blow delivered rapidly to the lower back sent him sprawling forward. His buckler fell from his hand and another roar went up. Cecil raised his hand in submission and Robbie had won.

He lowered his sword and held out a hand to help the fallen man to his feet. They clasped hands, bowed and faced the arbitrator.

'Robert Danby, squire to Sir John Wallingdon of Wentbrig, is victor in this round.'

A pennant bearing Sir John's orange-and-blue standard was added to the growing line on a board showing which squire had won honour. Robbie felt a warm rush of pride at the sight, mingling with impatience. Today he had fought under his lord's colours. How long before he would be a knight and fight for his own honour and name? The two men retrieved their weapons and left to loud applause. They slumped beside each other on a bench and wearily removed helmets and breastplates. Half the day had passed before Robbie had taken his turn in the square. The sun was high overhead and the slight breeze did not even begin to penetrate the thickly padded layers each man wore beneath their mail shirts.

'Well fought.' He held his hand out to Cecil, who shook it before running his hands through his corn-blond hair. 'I thought you had me once or twice.'

'Perhaps next time I will. Are you competing again today?'

Robbie shook his head. 'Tomorrow I'll try my hand at the archery butts, and of course, I'll join the melee on the third day.'

Unlike Cecil and a number of the other squires who entered their name into every event, Robbie was content to watch the knights demonstrating their skill. The longing to prove his worth was almost a physical pain, but he reminded himself there would be enough time to once he was knighted. The chance to observe and learn was rare.

A pageboy brought ale. Robbie downed his in three gulps before untying his hood and letting it fall to the ground. His damp hair was plastered to his head and when he finally removed the padded

gambeson, his hose and the usually loose-fitting linen shift beneath it were sodden with perspiration and clinging uncomfortably to his body. He thought longingly of the fast-flowing beck at Wharram, where the water rushed ice-cold even in summer, and felt a sudden pang of homesickness.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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