

The Laird's Captive Wife

Joanna Fulford



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Dark warrior, rebellious bride... Taken prisoner by the Norman invaders who destroyed her home and family, Lady Ashlynn finds her life in jeopardy – until her saviour comes in the form of a powerful Scottish warlord. Black Iain may be fierce, yet Ashlynn feels strangely safe in his arms...Iain McAlpin's reputation is well deserved, and no one will capture his heart. Having loved and lost once before, Iain wants only to be free of the rebellious, enticing Ashlynn. But then a decree from the King arrives...and commands Iain to make his beautiful captive his wife!

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Ashlynn's choice was stark: take Iain as her husband, or accept a fate that would likely be much worse.

When the words were all spoken and the ring on her finger he kissed her, a gentle kiss which burned nonetheless and set her pulse racing. Understated and subtle, it was underlain with a deeper promise, and the implications quickened every fibre of her being.

For an instant their eyes met, but as so often his face gave little away. Did he share the resentment she felt? Given the choice, he would never have entered into this bargain. From the outset he had regarded her as an encumbrance. What possible argument could have persuaded him to agree to this?

They went out to the horses and Iain took leave of his king. He turned back to Ashlynn.

'Come, my wife.'

The use of that title sent another wave of heat the length of her body. Soon enough he would take her to his bed and make his possession complete...

Author Note

The setting for this story is the Norman Conquest, a period that has long interested me because it was such a watershed in English history. However, the Battle of Hastings was far from being decisive in political terms. For the next six years William had to contend with numerous rebellions, which he put down with great severity. One such rising was in Northumbria. In the winter of 1069–70 the King's army exacted a terrible retribution for this. Known afterwards as The Harrying of the North, it was one of the most infamous episodes of William's reign. Contemporary chroniclers describe the region as being littered with corpses because there were not enough people left alive to bury them. One estimate puts the number of dead at 100,000. Over twenty years later, Domesday Book records much of this area as 'waste and desolation'. It is alleged that William, on his deathbed, confessed that his treatment of Northumbria had been unjust and troubled his conscience greatly.

My heroine and her family are innocent victims of these events. When their manor at Heslingfield is destroyed by the King's mercenaries, Ashlynn is alone and penniless in a dangerous land. Her troubles are compounded when she falls into the hands of Black Iain, a notorious border warlord. Haunted by the past, and driven by his thirst for revenge, Iain believes he has no time for the kind of encumbrance that Ashlynn represents.

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For Helen, who shared so many childhood adventures.

Praise for Joanna Fulford's debut novel

THE VIKING'S DEFIANT BRIDE

'Fulford's story of lust and love set in the Dark Ages is reminiscent of Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*.' —*RT Book Reviews*

JOANNA FULFORD is a compulsive scribbler, with a passion for literature and history, both of which she has studied to postgraduate level. Other countries and cultures have always exerted a fascination, and she has travelled widely, living and working abroad for many years. However, her roots are in England, and are now firmly established in the Peak District, where she lives with her husband, Brian. When not pressing a hot keyboard she likes to be out on the hills, either walking or on horseback. However, these days equestrian activity is confined to sedate hacking rather than riding at high speed towards solid obstacles.

Recent novels by the same author:

THE VIKING'S DEFIANT BRIDE

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THE WAYWARD GOVERNESS

Prologue

The Scottish laird rested a moment on his sword, letting his gaze range the length of the defile where his men were now searching the bodies of the slain. Though the ambush had been successful the exhilaration of the fight was underlain by frustration as he realised the one he sought was not there. Surveying the scene now, his dark gaze hardened. Before he left he would find out what he wanted to know. Not all the men lying here were dead.

As the laird's shadow fell across him, the wounded Norman mercenary glanced up quickly, taking in the naked sword and the uncompromising expression of the man who held it. Then he spat. The Scot's gaze never wavered.

'Where's Fitzurse?'

The Norman returned him a cold stare but made no reply. A moment later the point of a blade was pressed against his throat.

'I'll ask you just once more,' said the quiet voice. 'Where is he?'

'We're dead men anyway. Why should I tell you?'

'Tell me and you can take your chance with the kites and the ravens. Refuse and I'll cut your throat and ask someone else.'

The man swallowed. 'Fitzurse rides north with the rest of his force.'

'Where?'

'Durham.'

'You're certain of this?'

'We're in his pay.'

'Paid to destroy everything for miles around?'

'Aye, for sixty miles around. On King William's orders.'

Recalling the devastation he had seen on the journey north, the laird felt his gorge rise. Once upon a time, in a past life, French society had been dear to his heart. At fourteen the world had been new and green, a place full of exciting possibilities of which France had been one. At the time it had seemed like a dream come true, a welcome chance to escape the cheerless confines of Dark Mount and his father's enmity. Back then the castle at Vaucourt had been the warm centre of his universe; the military training it afforded the highest peak of achievement. At Vaucourt he had grown to manhood. At Vaucourt he had first met Eloise...

That recollection inspired others less welcome. All the dead faces he had seen in the past days blurred and merged until he saw just one, the one that had been all to him. Time dulled the pain of loss but it did nothing to extinguish anger—or hatred. Both burned brighter for being cold.

'Why are you so anxious to find Fitzurse anyway?'

The prisoner's voice drew the laird back to the present. 'That's my business,' he replied.

'Suit yourself. It's nothing to me.' The other paused. 'I doubt if Fitzurse will care either.'

'Oh, he'll care all right when *I* catch up to him.'

'And who are *you* exactly?'

'My name is Iain McAlpin.'

The Norman's eyes widened slightly in recognition and with it the first flicker of fear.

'I have heard of you, my lord.'

'You're like to hear more, assuming I let you live of course.'

The other licked dry lips. 'I've told you what you wanted to know.'

'You can have your life, you Norman scum. I'll not soil my sword with you.' With that the laird sheathed the blade and walked away.

He headed back to the edge of the path where his men were waiting with the loot taken from the Normans.

‘Well?’ he asked.

His lieutenant shook his head. ‘Not a lot, my lord. We found only copper coin and a little silver. Hardly worth their effort to get it.’

‘Loot is only their secondary aim, Dougal. The first is revenge for the death of an earl.’

‘De Comyn was a fool.’

‘True, but he was also William’s chosen man and Northumbria will pay the blood price.’

He had found out early in life about the abuses of power, first at his father’s hands and later from other men. They were lessons well learned. Only when you were strong and feared could you protect yourself and others. His reputation might have come too late to help Eloise, but it now served well to protect all those for whom he was responsible.

Dougal eyed him quizzically.

‘What now, my lord?’

‘Tell the men to mount up. We ride for Durham.’

The other lowered his voice. ‘Is that wise?’

‘Wise? Aye, if I am to find Fitzurse.’

‘Have a care, my lord. The man has the king’s favour.’

‘That will not save him,’ replied the laird. ‘I have waited eight years for the chance to get him within my sword’s length.’

‘Aye, and you have just cause to seek him out. I know that if any man does.’

‘And your point is?’

Undaunted by that hawk-like stare his companion met and held it. ‘I’m only asking if Durham is the right place to meet him. The area is like to be swarming with William’s men. Fitzurse will be well protected.’

‘Not well enough to save him from me.’

‘Cut the bastard’s throat with my blessing, but what of your mission and your oath to Malcolm?’

‘Both will be honoured. He’ll get the intelligence he seeks at the appointed place and time.’

Retrieving the reins of a dapple grey stallion, the laird swung easily into the high saddle. ‘But come what may I shall have my revenge.’

Chapter One

'Keep your guard high, Ashlynn. Like this.' Ban held his own sword aloft in demonstration. 'That's it. Now let's try those moves again.'

Nothing loath Ashlynn closed in to attack, trying to remember everything her brother had taught her over these last weeks, her whole attention focused on the two blades. The clash of metal rang in the frosty air. Ban parried dextrously and for a moment or two she had the satisfaction of seeing him forced back several paces.

'Ha! Take that!'

He returned the grin. 'You grow cocky, little sister.'

Ashlynn redoubled her efforts, laying on with a will, and saw him give ground again. Exultant she laughed. Laughter turned to a yelp as a blow beneath the hilt sent the blade flying out of her grasp and he tripped her neatly, sending her sprawling on her back, his sword point coming to rest against her throat.

'Do you yield?'

She sighed. 'I yield...*again*.'

'Don't be disheartened.' He put up his blade and extended a hand, pulling her to her feet. 'That was much better.'

'Not good enough.'

'It takes time, Ash, and you've made real progress.'

His praise heightened the flush of colour in her cheeks. At nineteen Ban was a year her senior and had already established his fighting credentials, his career having been founded at Stamford Bridge and Hastings three years earlier.

'Progress of a kind,' she replied. 'Yet I think my skills would not long withstand those of a seasoned mercenary.'

'God send you never need to put them to the test.'

'God send none of us does.' She shot him a shrewd glance. 'And yet you think it may come to that, don't you?'

'William will not suffer resistance lightly.'

She knew the words for truth. In recent days the manor at Heslingfield had seen a steady stream of people fleeing north from Durham ahead of the approaching army. None would willingly stay to face the Conqueror's wrath, knowing it would be terrible indeed, for the slaying of the Earl of Northumbria would be avenged with interest.

'De Comyn should have listened to Bishop Aegelwine. If he had he might be living still. Commandeering men's homes and womenfolk was never going to win him friends.'

It was an understatement and they both knew it. What had followed the arrival of the new Earl of Northumbria was an orgy of violence and cruelty. Provoked beyond endurance, the people of Durham had risen up in the night and slain the hated invaders, almost to a man. The streets of the city had run with blood. De Comyn had been burned alive when the mob set fire to the house where he and some of his men tried to make their last stand. Of the original force of seven hundred Norman soldiers only two had lived to tell the tale.

Ban shook his head in disgust. 'The Normans are arrogant brutes and heed none when their minds are set on blood and conquest.'

'William will find the city empty when he comes.'

'Then his wrath will fall elsewhere.'

It was the reason he had begun to teach his sister the rudiments of swordsmanship. Women were vulnerable in these unsettled times, even those possessed of courage and spirit.

'Surely he would not punish the innocent, Ban?'

‘A man like William won’t bother with such distinctions. Why, he even burned his own men at York.’

‘He could not have intended it. No commander in his right mind would destroy his own troops. ’Twas only that the fire burned out of control.’

‘He seemed to find it an acceptable level of loss all the same. The man holds life cheap.’

She shivered, feeling the cold for the first time. By tacit consent they sheathed the swords and retrieved their cloaks from the foot of a tall oak. Then they began to retrace their steps towards the manor. Beneath their feet the snow, already ankle deep, scrunched with each step. It had come early this year and above them a lowering sky gave promise of more.

As they left the shelter of the trees they paused, seeing movement on the road in the distance. Roused from her thoughts, Ashlynn saw a small group of people heading that way.

‘More fugitives from Durham, would you say?’

Her brother nodded. ‘Aye, most likely.’

The bitter weather must surely have rendered any journey unthinkable that was not undertaken from strictest necessity. It was a measure of their desperation that the people came anyway. As they drew closer she could see they numbered a dozen in all, men, women and children, their frightened faces pinched with cold. A few pitiful bundles contained all that they had been able to carry when they fled the city. Ashlynn’s compassion woke and, exchanging a swift glance with her brother, she saw the same thought reflected in his expression.

‘I’ll take them to the kitchen house,’ she said. ‘They’ll need hot food before continuing their journey.’

‘No, I’ll go. You’d best change your clothes before Father sees you.’

Ashlynn nodded, knowing very well that he was right. She watched for a moment as he went to meet the refugees and then hurried off towards the women’s bower. She had only just reached her chamber when a servant arrived with a message.

‘Your father desires your presence, my lady.’

Ashlynn grimaced, more than ever aware of her unorthodox appearance. Having dismissed the servant, she swiftly divested herself of leggings and tunic, and dressed again in her blue wool gown. Pausing only to tidy her hair and throw a mantle over her shoulders against the chill she made her way to the hall.

Lord Cyneric had been sitting in his accustomed chair by the fire but hearing her step he looked up, his shrewd blue gaze appraising, surveying her in silence. Then he inclined his head.

‘Sit down, Ashlynn.’

Obediently she took the offered chair opposite and waited, wondering what this meant. For a moment or two he said nothing, his weathered face thoughtful. Almost it was as though he were seeking the right words. His expression was more sombre than usual and for the first time she felt the vague stirrings of unease. Had he found out about the sword practices with Ban? Was she about to be rebuked again for unladylike behaviour? Would her brother get into trouble too? It wouldn’t be the first time, of course. As long as she could remember, their escapades had landed them deep in the mire. Her mind, following that track, was quite unprepared for what came next.

‘It is time you were married, Ashlynn.’

For a moment she was rendered speechless and could only stare at him.

‘We live in dangerous times,’ Cyneric continued. ‘For your own protection you must have a husband, and one well able to defend you.’

She swallowed hard. ‘But I am under your protection, my lord.’

‘It may not be enough. The situation is dangerous and getting worse.’ He paused. ‘I would see you safely settled. Heaven knows you’ve had suitors enough. Yet at eight and ten you are unmarried still.’

Her face grew hot. It was true. By rights she should have been married long since. 'I never met a man I liked well enough.'

'You have had plenty of time to choose, but you have not done so. Now the circumstances force me to choose for you.'

Her heart lurched. 'My lord?'

'The Thane of Burford has asked me for your hand several times already and—'

'Burford!'

The name brought her out of her chair. In her mind's eye she could see the man for they had met several times during the celebratory gatherings for Yule and Beltane. Older than her by ten years he was of average height with a stocky frame and, like many Saxons, his colouring was fair. He was unfailingly attentive and courteous yet nothing about that homely, bearded face attracted her in the least.

Her father fixed her with a piercing gaze. 'He is much smitten with you, Ashlynn, and it's my belief he will make you a good husband.'

She shook her head. 'I do not love him, my lord.'

'It is not necessary to love your future partner in life, only to respect him. The rest will come later when you know him better.' He paused. 'You are a pretty wench, enough to twist any man around your little finger if you wished to.'

Ashlynn took a deep breath, fighting panic. 'I don't want to twist Athelstan round my little finger. I don't want to get to know him better!'

She had only ever behaved towards him with the requisite good manners though his interest in her had been clear from the first. She had never encouraged it knowing she could not return the sentiment. The thought of receiving much closer attentions from him was inconceivable.

'Ashlynn, listen to me—'

'No! I am not some chattel to be handed over thus.'

'I would not give you lightly to any man. Athelstan is worthy and he has been most constant in his affection for you. He will treat you well.'

'I will not agree to this.'

'My word is given. You will be married at Yule.'

The blue eyes widened. Yule was only a few weeks away. 'No!'

Lord Cyneric's jaw tightened but he held his temper in check. 'There is no time to be lost. Burford's lands lie further off some five days' ride, and he has at his command a large force of men under arms. He will protect you.'

'But I—'

'No more argument, Ashlynn. You will marry him and there's an end. This year our accustomed Yuletide feast will be to celebrate your wedding. Afterwards you will leave with your new husband.'

'My lord, please...'

'Enough. I am the head of this household and I shall be obeyed.'

If the tone had not been enough to convince her of the futility of further argument one look at that implacable expression was. Ashlynn turned on her heel and ran from the room, ignoring the exclamation that would have demanded her return. Half-blinded by angry tears she had no real idea of where she was going, only of a need to be alone for a while. In the event, her precipitate flight brought her to the stables and she slipped inside, pausing a moment on the threshold to look around. Mercifully the place was devoid of human company. Dashing the tears away with a shaking hand she made her way along the stalls until she came to Steorra's. The chestnut mare heard her step and turned to look, whickering softly in recognition and presenting the white star on her forehead for which she was named. Ashlynn stroked the velvet muzzle for a moment or two. Then she buried her face in the horse's mane and wept.

It was late when she returned to the hall. The evening meal was preparing though in truth she had little appetite for it. A group of people was gathered near the fire, among them her father and brothers. Ethelred was deep in conversation with his parent but Ban saw her come in and smiled. Then the smile faded a little and his eyes narrowed, taking in her altered appearance, for although she had sluiced her face with cold water before rejoining the company, her eyes were still suspiciously pink-rimmed, her face unwontedly pale. However, one warning glance held him silent and he merely watched as she turned away, extending her hands towards the blaze.

Letting the conversation wash around her Ashlynn kept her gaze on the fire, though in truth she saw nothing. All she could think of just then was being tied for life to a man she did not love, and being taken from her home and everything that was familiar to live in a distant place among strangers. Her father used the excuse of the troubled times but both of them knew it was more than that. Whenever he looked at her he saw her mother, the beloved wife he had lost just days after Ashlynn's birth. Though he tried to hide his resentment afterwards he had never quite succeeded. With this marriage she would be gone and the reminders with her.

In due course they took their places at table but Ashlynn's appetite had deserted her and she ate little. Around her the conversation continued, still very much focused on the political threat that hung like a pall over all their lives.

'Will Heslingfield remain safe from the Conqueror's anger?' said Gytha.

Her sister-in-law's voice penetrated Ashlynn's consciousness and she glanced up, her attention caught in spite of her sombre mood.

'We have done nothing to provoke it,' Ban replied. The tone was even enough but Ashlynn detected the criticism beneath. Her brother had been much in favour of the rebellion and their father's refusal to allow his kin any involvement had rankled with him. Lord Cyneric threw him a shrewd glance.

'Be thankful for it.' He frowned. 'All the same we shall be ready to defend ourselves if the need arises.'

'Against an army?' replied Ethelred.

'William will hold the city and use it as a base to consolidate his position as he has with York. Besides, the weather is on our side too. He will seek winter quarters for his men. We may perhaps see forays for food and supplies but little more, I think. We shall be secure enough until the spring.'

'If William finds none to punish within the city he will look elsewhere. Heslingfield may not be as safe as you think, my lord.'

Lord Cyneric frowned but he did not immediately reply, pondering his son's words. Though they did not always see eye to eye on every issue, Ashlynn knew her elder brother's opinion carried weight with their father. At three and twenty Ethelred had much of the look of his parent, being tall and well made and with the tawny hair and blue eyes that were a family characteristic.

'He is right, my lord.' Ban threw his brother a swift glance. 'It may not be safe to stay.'

'The women should be moved to a place of safety,' Ethelred went on, 'though heaven knows those are precious few these days.'

'We shall consider Gytha's situation in due course,' their father replied. 'Ashlynn is to marry Burford at Yuletide. Her future safety is assured.'

The news fell like a thunderbolt and for several seconds there followed a deep silence in which all eyes went from Cyneric to his daughter. Ashlynn felt her face grow warm as resentment rose like a tide.

'Ashlynn to wed Burford?' said Ban. 'Since when?'

She could hear disbelief in his tone. The same incredulity was registered in his face.

'Since this morning,' she replied.

He threw her a penetrating look. 'I didn't know you cared for him.'

‘Why should she not?’ replied Ethelred. ‘He is a worthy man in every way.’ He smiled at his sister. ‘Congratulations. I wish you happy, Ashlynn.’

As the others hastened to add their felicitations Ashlynn bit her tongue forcing back the angry denial that would otherwise have burst from her. Inside, her heart felt like lead.

‘You will be safe enough with Burford,’ Ethelred continued. ‘Would I could say the same about Gytha. The only way to go is north and the border country is dangerous enough.’

‘Aye,’ said Ban, ‘and always will be while men like Black Iain of Glengarron ride unchecked.’

‘Tis said he’s a friend of Malcolm Canmore, so he’s not likely to be checked, is he? Besides, the man commands a small army and raids with impunity deep into English territory. No doubt the rogue will use the current situation to his further advantage. If William is busy hereabouts he’ll not be able to see off the Scots as well.’

‘Black Iain or no Black Iain ’tis a risk plenty of folk are prepared to take.’

‘Belike he would not bother with refugees anyway. They are too poor to tempt him.’

‘Let’s hope so for all those wretched souls fleeing the Norman wrath,’ Ethelred replied. ‘He has been known to seize much more than gold and cattle. The tales of his deeds are legion.’

Lord Cyneric snorted. ‘Tales grow with the telling. The man would have to be at least ninety just to have had the time to carry out all the exploits attributed to him.’

‘Even if only half are true his reputation has been well earned, and I would not have my wife fall into his clutches.’ Ethelred threw another thoughtful glance at the two women. ‘But may not Gytha go with Ashlynn after Yule? I am sure that Burford would readily offer her his protection too, until such time as the situation becomes clearer.’

Ashlynn’s heart thumped. With every passing moment it seemed that this loathed marriage was becoming more real.

‘The idea has much merit,’ replied Cyneric. ‘I will speak to Burford on the matter as soon as may be.’

Gytha’s brown eyes revealed her anxiety more than words. The prospect of a lengthy journey in the depths of winter, with a young child to boot, did not appeal. Ashlynn could well understand it. However, she also knew that Gytha would do whatever was necessary to protect her son.

She was fond of her sister-in-law whose pretty plumpness and placid nature were enhanced by her gentleness. Sometimes she wished she could be more like her; wished she had the same sweet patience and outward serenity. Ashlynn promised herself that one day she too would comport herself with the same ladylike demeanour and good humour for Gytha surely was the model of a perfect wife. She loved Ethelred and her child and put their needs above her own with a degree of selflessness that Ashlynn wondered if she could ever emulate. For a start her tongue was too ready with quip or argument to admit of her ever being so completely under a man’s thumb. Yet Gytha did not seem to mind. Ethelred’s every word was law to her, even on those occasions when, in Ashlynn’s view, she would have done better to hit him rather than humour him. Yet Ethelred was a good husband in his way and the marriage was a success.

Ashlynn’s hands clenched in her lap. She accepted that she must marry one day and have a husband and family of her own. But not like this, she thought, not like this. Had she still been free to choose, the man she married would be very different from either Athelstan or her brother. Both had their good qualities: they were steady and hard-working and honest; kind enough too in their way, but they lacked vital passion somehow, passion and fire. And something more that was harder to define: a certain dangerous edge that should set the pulse and heart racing. Ashlynn acknowledged to herself that she had never met such a man. Now she never would.

Sleep proved elusive that night. Her mind was racing with thoughts of the Norman retribution and of her proposed marriage. Unless something happened to change her father’s mind, then in a matter of weeks she would be Athelstan’s wife. The duties of the role were familiar to her: she had been tutored in them since childhood. It was not the thought of running his household that filled

her with foreboding. Visualising her future husband, she swallowed hard. How was it that the good qualities he undoubtedly possessed could not render him any more attractive?

The new day dawned without bringing her any closer to an answer. Wanting to be alone Ashlynn avoided the hall and made her way to the stables. There she told the groom to saddle Steorra. Five minutes later he led the horse out.

‘Do you wish to be accompanied, my lady?’

‘No, Oswin, I’ll ride alone today.’

He held her stirrup and watched her mount. She smiled her thanks and headed the chestnut away from the buildings, following the path across the fields towards the wood about a league distant. She kept the pace gentle for the ground was hard and the snow tended to ball in the mare’s hoofs causing her to stumble. However, when they reached the wood the covering was less and they made better progress. Despite a warm gown and thick cloak Ashlynn could feel the aching cold in her hands and feet and face, felt it parch her throat and lungs with each breath. Above her grey clouds massed against the blue. More snow was certainly on its way.

She continued on to the edge of the trees as planned, intending to ride a wide loop around the wood before turning home. It was good to be alone for a while. The quiet countryside and fresh air were soothing, but nothing could detract from the fact that Yule was fast approaching. Ordinarily she would have looked forward to the celebrations. Heslingfield was renowned for its hospitality and the season was associated in her mind with joy and laughter and good fellowship. This year it would all be very different. Her throat tightened. Unwilling to think about it until she had to, Ashlynn nudged the horse with her heels. At once the mare broke into a canter. The swifter pace and the rushing air blew away some of the gloom and Ashlynn found herself smiling again in spite of everything.

She had almost reached the road before she saw the clouds of thick dark smoke rising into the sky. The wind brought with it the smell of burning. Ashlynn’s smile faded and she reined the horse in, staring at the billowing plume with a deepening sense of disquiet. Her mind turned over the possibility of a hearth fire but rejected it; the smoke was too high and too dense. She also knew it originated in the direction of Heslingfield. Instinct told her to get back there and soon.

Pushing Steorra to a swifter pace she rode for a mile or so before drawing rein again. The feeling of uneasiness intensified for the smell of burning was much stronger now. Moving forward with more caution she came to the top of the rise above the manor and looked down on a sight of horror: Heslingfield was ablaze, hall, barn, stable and byre sending great tongues of flame shooting skyward. Above the sound of the fire could be heard the dying screams of trapped animals. All around human forms lay crumpled on snow reddened with blood and trampled by the hooves of many horses. Ashlynn could only stare in disbelief, her face ashen, while fear closed like an icy fist around her heart. Then she screamed.

‘Nooooo!’ The word echoed across the winter landscape in a protracted and desperate cry of denial. Then she was spurring forward, her mount plunging down the slope towards the burning manor.

The roar of the fire was much louder now and the acrid stench of burning choked the air. The mare slid to a stop on her haunches, wild eyed with fear from the din and the hideous oily reek. Ashlynn could feel the heat of the flames on her face, see the sprawled bodies. Tears of rage and grief stung her eyes. By the shattered gate lay her father’s mangled form and near it Ethelred. Ban was nowhere to be seen but all around lay many others, retainers and servants, men, women and children, their eyes staring in sightless terror. None had been spared. Of Gytha and her child there was no sign either. Ashlynn looked around wildly and her horrified gaze came to rest at last on the burning hall and the women’s bower, and in a final leap of understanding she knew where they were. The image splintered in her tears as, leaning down the side of the horse, she vomited repeatedly until her stomach was empty.

Then, turning the animal's head she guided it away from the scene of devastation, coming to a halt on the edge of the pasture hard by. With a shaking hand Ashlynn dashed the tears from her cheek even as her mind struggled with the enormity of what had happened. With the knowledge came guilt. She should have been there. She should have stayed. Yet if she had, her blood would be staining the snow like theirs. What malign fate had chosen to spare her and destroy all she held dear?

Just then Steorra threw up her head and snorted. Instinctively Ashlynn looked up too, her gaze following that of the mare. The movement was followed by a sharp intake of breath and her heart lurched to see the mounted group not a quarter of a mile away across the fields. The cold light glinted on helmet and mail. Her jaw clenched. Normans! Had they seen her? All other thought fled before the knowledge that she couldn't stay to find out. If they caught her she would be as dead as the rest.

She urged the horse away and nothing loath the beast leapt forward, eager to be gone from the scene of carnage and blood. From somewhere behind her Ashlynn heard men shout. One glance over her shoulder assured her she had been seen. Spurring Steorra to a gallop she sped across the snowy fields towards the distant wood. If she could reach the trees it might be possible to throw her pursuers off the trail.

They retraced the route to the wood, hearing behind the muffled thunder of pursuit. Ashlynn estimated perhaps twenty armed men. Fear vied with rage in her heart and a determination not to meet her end here in the icy fields. Ahead she could see the wood and felt a small spark of hope for it covered a large area and she knew it well, having ridden over it since childhood. Soon enough she reached the edge of the trees and hurtled down the track, bent low on the horse's neck to avoid the overhanging branches that tore at her clothing and threatened to sweep her from the saddle. The snow was not so deep here but she saw with sinking heart that there was enough to leave a clear trail. The Normans couldn't fail to see it.

Ashlynn followed the path until it came to a fork and then branched off left. She knew the way would emerge from the trees close to the north road. After that she would be in the open for a while and the more vulnerable. However, her horse was swift and fresh and not carrying anything like the weight of her pursuers' mounts. It might give her the advantage and tip the balance.

At the edge of the trees she stopped briefly, scanning the open space before her. Her gaze lit on the copse hard by and seeing it the germ of an idea grew into being. Touching the mare with her heels once more she gave the horse its head. The game little beast flew along the road, her tracks mingling with those of other traffic, and then Ashlynn turned off into the trees again. The snow was sparser here and the dry leaves left no sign of their passage. Set back off the road and hidden among the trees was a rocky outcrop and she made for it now, knowing that on the far side was a shallow cave. She would stay there until her pursuers had gone past, then double back. If she made a circle through the fields she could rejoin the road further on. By the time the Normans realised what had happened she would be long gone.

She reached the outcrop in question and found the cave. There she dismounted and waited. In the distance thudding hoof beats announced the rapid approach of the Norman troops. Ashlynn put a hand over Steorra's muzzle, willing her to silence, holding her own breath as the riders drew nearer. The noise grew louder and louder still, drumming like the blood in her ears. Presently the thunder of hooves was so near it seemed she must see soldiers appear at any moment. In her imagination she could hear their triumphant shouts and see the grinning faces as they closed in for the kill. Then, just as quickly, the sound of hoof beats began to diminish. Ashlynn leaned against the mare's neck in undisguised relief. It had worked. They were gone.

She rode until the light failed and found an old barn by an abandoned homestead. The place had been deserted for years. Part of the roof was gone but the rest would provide some shelter for the night for her and for the horse. Exhausted and cold Ashlynn fought back tears. They would not help anything now. With an effort of will she unsaddled the mare and then set about finding something with which to make a fire. That part wasn't difficult for the fallen roof provided wood and there was

enough old straw lying around to start it. With cold fingers she drew the flint and tinder from the pouch on her belt. It took a while and several false starts but at length a spark fell on the tinder and glowed into life. Blowing gently she coaxed the spark to flame and fed it the old straw. Then she added small pieces of wood and gradually built up the fire to a size where it would at least afford some warmth. She had no food but just then it didn't matter; she could not have eaten it anyway. Somewhere in the darkness an owl cried. An omen of death. Hers perhaps. Ashlynn trembled. At one stroke everything she had known and held dear was gone. Heslingfield was reduced to ashes and her kin were slain. She felt tears spring to her eyes anew as the memory of that terrible hour returned. As long as she lived she would see the flames, hear the dying screams of living creatures burning to death, see the bodies scattered on the bloody snow.

She was a homeless, penniless fugitive. Fleeing where and to what? If she eluded the Normans she might find herself prey to robbers on the road, or to cold and hunger. She had nothing beyond the clothes she stood up in and the horse she rode. Perhaps later Steorra could be sold—if they both survived the journey, if the weather and hunger didn't account for them first. Suddenly the balance of survival hung on an awful lot of ifs. In that moment it occurred to her that death might not be so very bad.

Pushing the thought away, Ashlynn considered her options. They were precious few. Her only recourse was to keep heading north. If she could somehow reach the Scottish court at Dunfermline she would throw herself on the Princess Margaret's mercy. Since that lady was about to become Malcolm's new queen and was known to be a pious and good woman, she might take her into service in the royal household. However, Dunfermline was a long way off and a vast tract of dangerous territory lay between her and it. The reputation of the local warlords was well deserved—men like Black Iain of Glengarron, ruthless and dangerous. She shuddered, thinking that cold and starvation might be the least of her worries. In comparison, sleep seemed to offer a tempting oblivion, albeit only a temporary one. Wrapping herself in her cloak she lay down on a pile of rotting straw and closed her eyes.

In spite of her weariness she only dozed intermittently and awoke just after dawn. For some time she lay quite still, trying to recall where she was. Then she saw the lightening sky through the jagged roof of the barn and memory returned with a sickening jolt. Shivering she glanced at the fire but it was now a pile of comfortless dark ash and she got to her feet, trying to ignore the aching stiffness in her muscles. For a second or two she thought about remaining where she was but just as quickly rejected the notion. It was too dangerous to linger. She must ride for the border. It would not be quick or easy but it was her only hope now.

In her mind's eye she could already see the long road stretching ahead and feel the aching cold of nights spent in the open, for how often would she be able to find shelter and food? As she saddled her horse she knew the poor brute was hungry too. Heaven only knew how she was to find fodder enough on the journey north, but without the horse her plight would be desperate indeed. Resolutely pushing such negative thoughts away she pulled the girth tight. She was alive and she had the mare. There was that much to be thankful for at least. Even so it was hard to dispel the leaden feeling in her stomach.

She led the horse from the barn but had not gone half a dozen paces before Steorra threw up her head and whinnied. Ashlynn looked up quickly and froze to see the circle of armed horsemen not a hundred yards away. In the pale light of the breaking dawn she could see their mail and helmets.

'Dear God,' she murmured.

How had they found her? What evil chance had led them here? Were they the same men who had followed her before? Then she realised it didn't matter. They were Normans. If they caught her she was dead anyway. The thought awoke fierce resentment. If she was going to die she would at least give these scavengers a run for their money. Quickly she gathered the reins and mounted.

As she did so the riders began to advance at a walk, closing in on their quarry. Ashlynn took a deep breath and spurred the horse forward, moving from a standing start to a canter, heading for the

gap between the nearest horsemen. Her only chance was to try and barge through them. However, they anticipated it, moving swiftly to intercept her, narrowing the space, cutting off the escape route. Ashlynn reined and the mare wheeled round. Then seeing another gap she drove forward again. For one brief moment she saw the open ground beyond their horses and thought she might reach it. Then they closed on her and a strong hand seized her reins and yanked hard, bringing her mount to a plunging halt. She could see the wolfish smiles on the faces all around her. For a moment she closed her eyes, fighting the threatening faintness. When she opened them it was to see a mounted Norman knight in front of her. The cold eyes raked her from head to toe and she saw him smile before turning to his nearest companion.

‘A pretty wench, De Vardes.’ The words were spoken in the Saxon tongue though heavily accented.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Well worth the chase, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Indeed, my lord.’

Ashlynn kicked her mount forward in one last futile attempt to break free. The animal plunged but the grip on the bridle held firm. The Norman surveyed the proceedings with evident amusement.

‘Whither away, wench? Surely you would not deprive us of your company so soon?’

She looked around in mounting panic at the ring of grinning faces.

‘Get her off the horse.’

Men moved to obey. In spite of her resistance strong hands dragged her from the saddle. With pounding heart Ashlynn watched the knight dismount and move towards her. All her instinct was to flee but the two soldiers on either side held her fast. Then she was face to face with her captor.

‘Did you really think to escape?’ A mocking smile twisted his lips as he ran his gaze over her. ‘Of course you did. You couldn’t know that Waldemar de Fitzurse never loses his quarry.’

Ashlynn’s eyes blazed with rage and hatred. ‘Murderers! Norman brutes!’

The words ended in a gasp for he hit her hard, a stinging blow that brought the water to her eyes. Warm blood trickled from her lip.

‘These rebellious northern swine must be taught better manners.’ The words were quietly spoken but the tone sent a chill through her.

‘Shall I kill her now, my lord?’ The man called De Vardes stepped forward with a drawn dagger.

Ashlynn felt a hand in her hair yanking her head back and then the icy point at her throat, but her eyes never left Fitzurse. He would give the word now and all this would end with one welcome thrust of the blade.

‘Not yet,’ he replied. ‘I am minded to have her first.’ His hand casually brushed across the front of her gown. Ashlynn glared at him. The Norman’s smile widened. ‘I detect defiance here that would be humbled. The rest of you may take your turns when I’m done. If she’s still alive after that then she’s all yours, De Vardes.’

Ashlynn’s stomach lurched. The swift death she had hoped for would not come. They intended to make her long for it instead. She saw Fitzurse glance over his shoulder towards the barn.

‘Take her in there and strip her.’

Chapter Two

As they dragged her back towards the ruined building Ashlynn began to shout and fight like one possessed, her screams shattering the still morning air. It availed her nothing. If anything it seemed only to add to the enjoyment of the men who held her. They reached the barn and, kicking the door open, strode inside with Fitzurse following at leisure a few paces behind. Dry mouthed with horror Ashlynn struggled harder but in vain for they held her with ease. One man pinioned her arms while the other unfastened her cloak and let it fall, his hand moving across her breast with coarse and deliberate slowness. She shivered as he stepped in closer and gripped the neck of her gown. For one moment her gaze met his and saw the mocking smile before he ripped the cloth apart in one sharp downward jerk. Never taking his eyes off her face he did the like with the kirtle beneath pulling the material wide to reveal her breasts. Only then did he glance lower and the cold eyes glinted in evident appreciation. He was not alone.

‘Well, now, a very pretty little chicken,’ said Fitzurse. ‘I would see more, Duchesne.’

His henchman grinned. ‘As you wish, my lord.’

Ashlynn trembled as his hands reached for the fabric of her gown.

Outside among the trees at the top of the sloping pasture another group of horsemen drew rein in obedience to their leader’s command. Mounted on a dapple grey stallion he held the powerful horse in check with one gauntleted hand while his keen gaze swept the scene taking in the barn and the group below. Then he glanced at the man beside him.

‘It seems our information was correct, Dougal.’

‘Aye,’ replied his lieutenant. ‘It has to be them.’

‘It’s them all right. That blue roan destrier down yonder belongs to De Vardes. The cur never strays far from Fitzurse’s heel. In any case they’ve left a trail of devastation that a four-year-old child could follow.’

‘Aye, Reedham, Welbourne, Heslingfield.’ The other shook his head in disgust. ‘The cowardly dogs attack women and children because they like the certainty of winning, my lord.’

‘Let’s shorten the odds and find out how they greet our Scottish steel. We’ll hit them fast and hard. Pass the word back.’

As the latter hastened to do his bidding the rider on the grey horse never let his gaze shift from the scene in front of him. A few moments later he heard the soft scraping sound that accompanied the drawing of many swords. Then Dougal returned, blade at the ready, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

‘Just say the word, my lord, and let us at them.’

His laird nodded. ‘Kill as many as you can. We’ll take no Norman prisoners. But remember...’

‘Aye, I know. Fitzurse is yours.’

‘That he is. The bastard little dreams this day is his last.’

Lifting his sword arm he touched the grey with his spurs and called the charge. Quivering with excitement the big horse leapt forward, hearing behind the echoing battle cry as fifty riders burst from cover and hurtled down the slope toward the foe.

Taken completely by surprise the Normans could at first only stare at the advancing tide of horsemen. Then, as they awakened to the impending danger, the instinct for self-preservation returned. Amid shouting and confusion they scrambled to remount, turning then to face the enemy with scant time to draw their swords before the Scottish vanguard was upon them in a deadly wave of steel.

The laird’s blade cleaved its first skull and came back for a wicked lunge into the next opponent. He heard the death scream and was aware of the rider toppling sideways even as a third opponent closed in. Since both hands were engaged with sword and shield he used his seat and legs to guide the powerful horse beneath him. At the given signal the grey reared, striking out at the enemy with

its iron-shod hooves. Thrown off balance by the attack the bay destrier screamed and staggered, its rider crying out in agony as half a ton of targeted power drove downward, cracking bone and driving steel links through leather and padding into the flesh beneath. Grey-faced and swaying in the saddle the rider swore at the pain in his ruined knee. Before he could regain his balance the Scottish sword slashed across his breast. Saved by the mail hauberk he looked down, scrabbling for the reins in an attempt to wheel the horse away from the danger for the injured leg was useless. That moment's inattention cost him dear and with a savage thrust the Scot drove his blade into his enemy's ribs. The man's face held a look of shocked disbelief. Then the Norman's sword fell from nerveless fingers and he toppled sideways from the saddle to lie still in the snow amid a widening pool of red.

Reining in the grey, the Scottish warlord surveyed the field. Everywhere the churned snow was stained red and scattered with the fallen. The Norman numbers were dwindling fast as he knew they must but his gaze still sought one man. Rage burned anew as he discovered no sign of his quarry. Where the hell was Fitzurse?

Ashlynn heard from without the spine-prickling war cry from fifty throats followed by a warning shout in French and the sound of thudding hooves, then more shouts and the clash of steel. Fitzurse frowned. For a moment he was quite still, listening intently. The din without intensified and his men released their hold on her. Fitzurse's hand went to the sword at his side and in cold terror Ashlynn saw him unsheathe the blade. Seeing her expression he bared his teeth in a smile.

'Never fear, chicken, I'll be back and we shall continue where we left off. Waiting will only make the pleasure all the sweeter.'

With that he turned and strode to the door: then with one last glance at his prisoner he was gone.

For some moments after Fitzurse left Ashlynn remained where she was, weak with relief, her body trembling with horror and revulsion, still unable to believe the narrowness of her escape. Outside she could hear the unmistakable sounds of battle, the clash of arms and neighing horses and shouting voices. Her heart leapt. She had no idea who the new combatants were and cared even less, but while men slaughtered each other she might be able to make good her escape. If they saw her they would kill her but it could not be worse than remaining. Just a small taste of what Fitzurse had planned for her made a swift end at the point of a sword seem infinitely preferable. Even if the French did not survive the fighting the victors might well decide to investigate the barn. If they did they would find her and there was no guarantee their behaviour would be any different. On top of that she might just freeze to death for the cold was biting.

Shaking violently she pulled up the rent gown and looked about for her cloak. It had been slung aside when Fitzurse's men had begun to strip her. After a frantic search she located it at last and threw it about her shoulders, holding it together over her torn clothing. Then she crept towards the door.

Peeping through a crack in the woodwork Ashlynn watched the pitched battle without. A large mounted group of dark-clad and wild-looking warriors were falling with evident enthusiasm upon the Norman mercenaries who were putting up a fierce resistance. However, there appeared to be far more of the newcomers than there were of the French and several bodies littered the ground already. It meant the fight would be over all too soon. She must use the confusion to make good her escape. Taking a deep breath she opened the door a little way and slipped out, darting looks left and right. An area of open ground surrounded the ancient barn but beyond it was a copse that might afford cover. Summoning all her remaining courage she edged along the wall to the rear of the barn until at length it was between her and any observers. Then she ran.

She was barely halfway to the trees when she heard the sound of muffled hoof beats behind and then a shout. A glance over her shoulder revealed the approaching Norman horseman, and her heart leapt towards her throat. Without staying to see more she fled. The sound of hoof falls grew louder and then Ashlynn was jerked off her feet. Suddenly vision became limited to galloping hooves and flung snow and a horse's shoulder, every bone in her body jarred by the swift pace. The saddle pommel pressed into her stomach making it harder to breathe.

After what seemed an eternity the horse slowed and she had a confused impression of trees and the sound of flowing water. A large gauntleted fist dragged her upright and a mailed arm closed about her waist. Chain mail links dug into her back. Chill air met bare flesh beneath her torn gown. Ashlynn glanced up and with sick horror saw that her captor was Fitzurse.

However, his attention was not on her just then but rather on the mounted figure who had reined in some thirty yards away. Automatically she followed his gaze and drew in a sharp breath as her startled mind registered a powerful dapple grey stallion almost seventeen hands at the shoulder. The beast was impressive enough but it was the rider who commanded every ounce of her attention. Flowing black hair framed a rugged, cleanshaven face that was arresting for the angular planes of cheek and jaw. It spoke of a man in his late twenties perhaps, but otherwise gave nothing away. Its very lack of expression sent a shiver to the core of her being. Boots, breeches, tunic and gauntlets were all of leather as dark as his hair and a great fur-lined cloak was thrown about a pair of powerful shoulders. He emanated an aura of dangerous strength, an impression enhanced by the wicked-looking dagger thrust in his belt and the great blood-stained sword casually held across the saddle bow.

For the space of several heartbeats neither man moved. Then her captor laughed softly.

‘Well, well, I little thought to have the pleasure of meeting you again.’

‘Everything comes to him who waits,’ replied the other, ‘and I have waited long for this moment.’

Fitzurse bared his teeth in a mocking smile. ‘Ah, the aggrieved Scot. Not still smarting surely?’

‘Tis you will smart, Fitzurse.’

‘No, I shall have your head on a spear.’

The laird lifted his sword. ‘This shall determine that.’ Then the dark gaze flicked to Ashlynn. ‘I see you’re still in the habit of carrying off defenceless women.’

Fitzurse glanced down at his captive and his smile widened. ‘Do you like her? I’ll give her to you—by way of recompense.’

As he spoke his hand pulled aside the torn edge of her gown to reveal what lay beneath, ignoring her efforts to prevent it. The laird’s dark gaze took in every intimate detail and lingered. In spite of the cold Ashlynn’s flesh burned. Crimson-cheeked, she glared at the man on the grey but still that impassive face gave nothing away. Eventually his attention returned to her captor and when he spoke his voice was perfectly level.

‘The only recompense I’ll accept this day, Fitzurse, is your head.’

‘Attack me and the girl dies.’

‘Perhaps,’ replied the other, ‘but then so will you.’

Ashlynn watched as the stranger brandished the great sword aloft. The blade glinted in the cold light. With hammering heart she saw him nudge the grey stallion into a walk. She expected Fitzurse to advance and meet it, and could only pray that death would be swift when it came. However, instead of advancing, her captor reined back some ten yards and brought his horse parallel to the stream hard by. Swollen with rain and snow the stream was wide and twice its usual depth, the current swift and strong. Feeling his hold alter, Ashlynn’s eyes widened as an unpleasant implication dawned. Surely he would not... The thought ended on a shriek as he lifted her clear of the saddle and flung her into the swirling water.

Fitzurse called to his opponent. ‘If you want her, McAlpin, you’ll have to pull her out.’

Stopped in his tracks for a moment the Scottish laird swore softly, his hand clenched round the hilt of the sword. The other held in the curvetting stallion. He glanced once toward the stream, saw the woman catch hold of an overhanging branch and smiled grimly. Then he spurred forward to meet his enemy.

Ashlynn surfaced with a choking gasp for the shock of the icy water drove all the breath from her body. Dragged along with the powerful current she fought instinctively to keep her head above water. It was instinct too that made her grab for the overhanging branch. It arrested her progress but the water dragged relentlessly at her clothing and with each passing moment the cold sapped her

strength. If she didn't get out and soon, she was going to die. Somewhere in the background she heard the clash of swords. A frantic glance took in the fighting figures on the bank. Her clutching hands inched along the branch. As she shifted her weight the wood cracked like a whip. Ashlynn screamed and fell back into the water. It swept her headlong on its course for another hundred yards before slamming her against a large rock. Her icy fingers clutched desperately at the slippery surface for the force of the current threatened to sweep her away again at any moment. Mentally she wondered how long she could hold on. Another minute? Two? A voice inside her head said it didn't matter. If she did not drown the cold would kill her and then it would all be over. She closed her eyes.

The exchange of blows was fierce and evenly matched at first with neither man gaining the advantage until the Scot's blade cracked against his enemy's head in a savage back-handed slash. Had it not been for the helm the blow would have severed the top of Fitzurse's skull. The Norman reeled in the saddle, temporarily stunned. Iain wheeled the grey round to go in for the kill. Then, from somewhere behind him, he heard the woman scream. Involuntarily he glanced over his shoulder to where she had been. The branch was gone and she too. He frowned. That moment's diversion proved expensive for when he looked back Fitzurse was bent low on his horse's neck, spurring away through the trees. A hundred yards away three other riders in helmet and mail appeared. Seeing Fitzurse they reined in and waited. As soon as he had joined them, all four rode away at a gallop. The Scot glared after them then back at the stream. Just then the woman screamed again and, hearing it, he swore fluently.

Ashlynn could no longer feel her hands, only the drag of the water against her body. Soon she would have to let go and it would take her. Then, through the numbing cold, a voice penetrated her consciousness.

'Give me your hand, lass.'

She had a brief impression of a horse's neck and shoulder and a man's reaching arm. It towed her out and lowered her on to the bank. For a moment or two she lay there, gasping, unable to take it in, aware only of the cold, bitter, numbing and heart deep. Locked in its grip her body shook uncontrollably. Saddle leather creaked and then a pair of boots appeared in her line of vision. Her gaze followed them upward and came to rest on a face that was vaguely familiar. Memory began to return.

For a moment the Scottish laird was quite still, his gaze held by eyes the colour of cornflowers. They were the only colour in her face. The flesh on the delicate bones was deathly pale. He shuddered inwardly, reminded suddenly of another face and another time. This one would die too unless she got some warmth very soon.

'Come, stand up, lass.'

In response to that firm command Ashlynn struggled on to her knees. However, when she tried to rise, the sodden gown tangled itself round her legs and she staggered. Strong hands dragged her upright. She didn't see the swift appraising glance that took in every detail of her shivering form.

'I wager you'll live, but we need to get you out of those wet things.'

For a moment the words made no sense. Then, as the implication dawned, her hands clutched protectively at the torn edges of her gown.

'No.'

'Dinna be a fool. You'll catch your death.'

He reached for the front of her gown. Seeing his intent she turned to run but staggered again and almost fell, prevented only by the arm about her waist. Ashlynn shrieked, struggling to free herself from his hold but it was like doing battle with oak. The arm yielded not a whit. It swung her round instead bringing her eyes level with a broad chest. Panicking now she struck out with clenched fists. They might as well have been bird wings and, as they had relinquished their grip on her clothing, her garments fell open affording him an uninterrupted view of what lay beneath. He caught his breath. The reality close to only served to reinforce his earlier impression.

'Well now, not just a pretty face then.'

As soon as the words were spoken he regretted them, realising they were hardly calculated to reassure, but his temper just then was not of the best. Thanks to her his quarry was away and free. Just why he hadn't left the wench to drown was a mystery. Right now he half-wished he had.

'Be still, you little hellcat!'

'Let go of me!'

'I said be still,' he growled.

For answer Ashlynn kicked out and felt the blow connect. He gritted his teeth but his grip yielded not at all.

'All right, have it your way, you contrary little vixen.'

Without warning his hands closed on the edges of her gown and dragged it down over her shoulders. Ashlynn began to fight like a cornered wildcat. In her panic she saw only Fitzurse's men, felt their hands on her, restraining her while they did their will. It was all happening again. She wanted to scream but her throat was dry and suddenly it was harder to breathe for it was as though there was an iron band around her chest. The stranger's face loomed over hers. Then all colour drained from her cheeks and she was vaguely aware of him catching her before she fell into a dead faint.

She had no idea how long she was unconscious but when she came round it was to an awareness of voices, of men and horses. She was cold, her body shaking violently. Then something was supporting her shoulders and a hand was forcing a cup between her lips. She heard a man's voice.

'Drink this.'

The tone brooked no refusal. Hot sweet liquid carved a path down her throat and all the way to her stomach. Ashlynn gasped. He made her drink it all, but slowly, and by degrees the heat spread and began to warm the cold core within, enough for the shaking to subside a little. Becoming more aware she realised that she was swathed from head to foot in a huge fur-lined cloak.

Looking up for the first time she saw a black leather tunic. Above it was long dark hair and a face whose rugged good looks were only too familiar. Dark eyes met and held hers for a moment before turning their attention to someone opposite, out of her line of vision.

'We'll leave presently, Dougal. We've delayed long enough as it is and I want to reach Hexham tonight. Besides, the injured need tending.' He glanced up at the sky. 'We need to be back at Dark Mount before the weather closes in.'

'Aye, my lord.' Dougal paused. 'What about the lass?'

'We'll take her with us for the time being.'

'I can see your reasoning. For a drowned rat she's no so bad-looking. Dry, she'd be a welcome addition in any man's bed.'

Ashlynn's heart lurched. The man beside her glanced down briefly, his expression sour.

'This one would turn your bed to a couch of thorns.'

'Well then,' Dougal continued, 'sell her. She'd likely fetch a good price were ye minded to get one. Or ye could ransom her, did she have kin.'

He frowned. 'I'll decide later. In the meantime, where are the things I asked for? Where the devil is Archie?'

As if on cue another man hastened forward and handed over a bundle of cloth. 'Beg pardon, my lord. I'd a problem with the size.'

The laird looked down at Ashlynn again and then at the bundle he was holding.

'You'll be needing this.'

For a moment she stared at it and then back at him. Then, slowly, her dulled wits began to understand the significance of the great cloak around her and the immediacy of the soft fur against her skin. Her cheeks, so pale before, turned scarlet.

If she could have hit him she would have but both hands were imprisoned beneath the folds of the heavy cloak. 'How dare you treat me like this!'

'Dare had nothing to do with it, you wee fool,' he replied. 'Your clothes were soaking and little better than rags anyway. If you'd kept them on you'd have gone down with a fatal ague for certain.'

'Is that your excuse?'

'It needed no excuse. 'Twas a matter of common sense.'

Bereft of speech she looked away. The man neither appeared nor sounded even remotely apologetic. Instead he drew her to her feet and taking a firm hold on her arm led her aside to a clump of bushes. Then he thrust the bundle of clothing at her.

'Put these on. They're not the most feminine of garments, but they're all that's available and they do at least have the advantage of being intact.'

Ashlynn glared at him. The dark eyes grew flinty.

'Perhaps you'd like my help, lass?'

'No.'

'Then dress and make haste or by heaven I'll finish the task myself.'

Her jaw clenched but she took the offering without further comment and retreated a few yards behind a small clump of bushes. Bare of leaves, they were not ideal to the task but provided a degree of privacy from prying eyes. A glance over her shoulder revealed that her large companion hadn't moved. Indignation surged: the brute had no shame at all! Then she reflected that it scarcely mattered; there was nothing for him to see now that he had not already seen before.

Giving her attention to the bundle she found it comprised a cloak in which were wrapped shirt, tunic, belt, trows and hose all clean and of strong and serviceable material. With them was a pair of leather boots. With no little relief she hurriedly pulled on the hose and trows and dragged the shirt over her head before divesting herself of the big cloak. Finally she pulled the tunic on. Like the shirt it was decidedly roomy but, she reasoned, it would allow for greater freedom of movement. It would be a lot warmer too. She fastened the belt but even on the last hole it still hung loose on her waist. The boots completed the outfit. Like everything else they were too big but better than going barefoot. Finally she threw the cloak round her shoulders and fastened it. Then, having retrieved the borrowed fur she rejoined her companion.

He watched her come, observing the transformation wrought in one comprehensive look. His expression gave nothing away but under that penetrating gaze she felt her anger mount again. With an effort she controlled it. The knowledge that she was beholden to the rogue didn't make things any better. Trying to gather a few protective shreds of dignity she drew in a deep breath.

'I suppose I should thank you for pulling me out of the water.'

'Aye, you should. If it hadn't been for you, Fitzurse would never have escaped.'

'I'm sorry he did.'

'So am I.'

'Why did you want to kill him?'

'That need not concern you.'

His wrath was almost palpable. That she should have been in part responsible only made matters worse. In a more diffident tone she said, 'I am grateful for what you did back there.'

The reply was a snort that might have been compounded of anger or disgust, or both. It brought her chin up at once.

'You could have left me to drown. Why didn't you?'

'Believe me, lass, I was tempted.'

With that quelling reply the conversation died, for Ashlynn could think of nothing to say and her taciturn companion clearly had no wish to pursue it further. Instead he took his cloak from her and put it on. Then, resuming his grip on her arm, he led her towards a shaggy bay gelding that stood among the waiting horses.

'Get on.'

There was nothing for it but to obey. He watched her gather the reins and swing into the saddle. Then he mounted his own horse and drew it alongside. A few moments later the whole cavalcade set off.

They rode in silence for some considerable time. The stranger made no attempt to break into her thoughts and in truth she had no inclination for speech either. In her mind she saw Heslingfield in flames and the bodies of the slain all around. Her jaw tightened. She would never see any of her loved ones again. There had not been a chance to bury them either or say a mass for their souls. They lay unshriven on the cold earth for the crows and the foxes to pick the flesh from their bones, or else their ashes lay in the blackened ruins of the hall. They were memories too bitter for tears. Once she had imagined that an arranged marriage was the worst fate possible. How naïve she had been to think so.

It wasn't until noon that the cavalcade stopped to rest. The landscape had changed as they progressed, wood and pasture giving place to rolling hills and open heath strewn with boulders and dead bracken. A few scrubby trees leaned to the prevailing wind and, hard by, a brook tumbled over a rocky bed. The riders turned off the road and dismounted. Ashlynn watched the stranger step down.

'We'll stop here awhile,' he said. 'The horses need a rest and the men too.'

Glancing around she realised with a start that there were perhaps fifty of them all told, mostly long-haired and bearded and variously dressed in stout leather tunics and cloaked like their leader, and every one of them fully armed. Remembering that they had defeated the Norman mercenaries she shivered a little. Unaware of her regard the men opened saddlebags and drew out bread and cheese and pieces of dried meat. It was then she remembered that she had eaten nothing since the previous morning and precious little then. The stranger threw her a shrewd glance.

'Come.'

He steered her to a boulder nearby that was a convenient height to sit on. Then he opened his own saddlebag and drew out the food inside. When he offered her a piece of bread she took it and fell to devouring it at once. Observing this he passed over a chunk of cheese as well before falling to himself. The solid fare was coarse and plain enough but it lined the stomach and took the edge off the clawing pains she had felt before. They ate in silence and only when they had finished did he bend his gaze on her again.

'Tell me, how did you fall foul of the Normans, lass?'

She looked away. It was a painful subject and she had no wish to discuss it. He made no attempt to push her. Instead he let the silence draw out and waited, though the quiet gaze never left her. Ashlynn forced herself to meet it and drew in a deep breath. He had saved her life after all so she supposed he was owed an explanation.

'They burned my home and slew my family. I was the only survivor.'

'How came you to escape?'

'I wasn't there. I'd gone out for a ride and when I returned... when I returned the rest were dead.'

'I see.' He paused. 'Where was your home?'

'At Heslingfield.'

'Heslingfield!'

'You know it?'

Recalling only too vividly what he had seen there, he could understand her earlier reticence. He would not revisit the nightmare now. 'I know *of* it. Lord Cyneric was its thane, I think.'

'Yes. He was my father.'

'I never met him but his reputation went before him: a brave fighter by all accounts. He had two sons I heard tell.'

She nodded and blinked back treacherous tears. 'They died trying to defend our home. Ethelred fell beside my father. I didn't see Ban's body and there was no time to look.'

'How did the Normans find you?'

'They had not gone far by the time I returned. When they saw me they gave chase. I thought they would kill me too at first but Fitzurse...Fitzurse had me taken to the barn and stripped. He meant to take his pleasure and afterwards let his men take theirs.' She drew in another ragged breath remembering every detail of the ordeal at the Norman's hands, the fear and the humiliation and the impending horror. The stranger was silent, waiting. Ashlynn's gaze was on the ground and she missed the expression of pity and anger in his eyes. 'Before he could do what he intended, your men arrived and launched their attack. In the confusion I tried to run away. The rest you know.'

'Where were you heading before the Normans found you?'

'North, over the border.'

'You have kin there perhaps?'

'No. I'd hoped to reach the court at Dunfermline and perhaps enter service there, but I didn't exactly have time to make a detailed plan.'

He did not miss the ironic edge to the tone but let it go.

'The border country is wild and dangerous; too dangerous by far for a woman alone.'

'There was no other choice.'

'No, I suppose not.' He paused. 'You never told me your name.'

'You never asked.'

One dark brow lifted. 'I'm asking now.'

'Ashlynn.'

'A pretty name and most apt, I find.'

As he spoke he knew the words for truth. Dougal was right: most men would find her a welcome addition to their bed. Unbidden his mind went back to the scene by the river and relived it with startling clarity. He indulged the memory for a moment and then pushed it away. That kind of distraction had no place in his scheme of things.

Unable to follow his thought and uneasy beneath that apparently dispassionate gaze Ashlynn forced herself to meet his eye.

'You still have all the advantage.'

'Aye, I believe I do.'

'Is your identity such a closely guarded secret that I may not know it?'

This time irony was underlain by a hint of impudence. Moreover, there was an expression in those blue eyes that was almost provocative as though she were testing the boundaries. It was tempting to show her just how close those were, but again he let it ride. His turn was coming.

'No secret, my lady,' he replied. 'I am Iain McAlpin.'

The name seemed strangely familiar somehow though it resisted precise identification. It niggled like a bad tooth. Earlier she had heard him say they would stay at Hexham that night. Where exactly? Surely no inn could cater for so large a party. Had he friends then who would give them shelter? His men called him lord. Lord of what? Where was Dark Mount? The missing pieces of the puzzle plagued her. Rather than labour over it she decided to ask. The answer was given readily enough.

'Dark Mount is a fortress at the head of Glengarron.'

'Glengarron!'

'Aye.'

She was suddenly very still as, in one moment of total comprehension, the last pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

'You are the Laird of Glengarron?'

'That's right.'

Ashlynn felt her stomach knot. In her relief at having escaped the hands of the Normans she had put herself into others every bit as dangerous, for who in the north of England had not heard of Glengarron or the man they dubbed Black Iain? It was small comfort to think she had no gold, nothing

with which to trade for her freedom, in short nothing to tempt him at all. Then she remembered his earlier conversation with Dougal and her cheeks paled.

‘What are you going to do with me?’

‘I haven’t decided yet, but you’ll come with us as far as Jedborough at least.’

‘Jedborough?’

‘Aye, I’ve business there. When it’s concluded I’ll make my decision.’

She drew in a deep breath and tried to get her voice under control. ‘You could leave me at Hexham.’

‘I could, but I won’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘It doesn’t accord with my plans.’

Incredulous she glared at him but the gaze that met hers was unwavering and utterly disconcerting. Indignation swelled like a tide.

‘Why should I co-operate with you?’

‘Because you won’t like the consequences if you don’t.’

The threat was thinly veiled despite the mild tone with which it was delivered and, for a moment, it hung there between them. Given his previous experience of her, he was half expecting an outburst of rage. It never materialised, though her chin lifted at a defiant angle. In spite of himself he was amused and oddly touched. With somewhat grudging admiration he acknowledged that the lass had spirit as well as looks.

‘Why are you doing this?’ she demanded. ‘My future can be of no interest or importance to you.’

‘It isn’t.’

‘Then the only reason for holding me is concerned with profit.’

‘Good enough reason, in my view.’

Ashlynn strove against rising panic. ‘Leave me at Hexham.’

‘I have just said I will not. The matter is closed.’

‘I cannot...I will not go with you further.’

The dark gaze met and held hers but now there was no discernible trace of humour in it.

‘You can, my lass, and you will.’

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