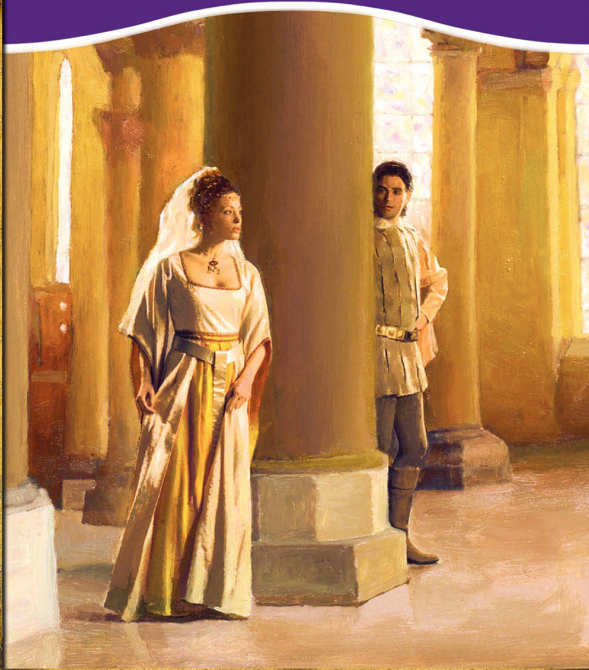


MILLS & BOON®

The Bought Bride
Juliet Landon



Vintage Historical

Juliet Landon
The Bought Bride
Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»

Аннотация

NORMAN KNIGHT...ENGLISH LADY CONQUEST, REVENGE AND...PASSIONLady Rhoese of York was an undoubted prize. A wealthy landowner, she would fill the king's coffers well if one of his knights were to marry her. Judhael de Brionne accepted the challenge. Desiring her land, the army captain was prepared to take Rhoese as part of the deal. After all, she was beautiful enough—albeit highly resentful—and surely he would be able to warm his ice-cold bride, given time....

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She was to be married at the King's discretion.

Rhese was vulnerable, exquisitely beautiful, tempestuous, yet with a hint of fear, and not quite as ice-cold as she would like people to think.

Until now, Jude had only toyed with thoughts of marriage. The possibility of taking an Englishwoman to his bed permanently had never been more than a passing thought during his eight years in England. Until now.

This one presented more than a challenge....

Praise for Juliet Landon

The Knight's Conquest

“A feisty heroine, heroic knight, an entertaining battle of wills and plenty of colorful history flavor this tale, making it a delightful one-night read.”

—Romantic Times

The Bought Bride

Juliet Landon



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Chapter One

Michaelmas, September 29th, 1088—York

A sneaking cold wind whipped the light woollen shawl off Rhoese's head to reveal a rippling helmet of auburn hair the colour of ripe chestnuts. She snatched the scarf and tied it briskly around her shoulders, trapping the two heavy plaits that reached to her waist. A halo of spiralling tendrils fluttered around her face. 'One cart of timber from Gilbert of Newthorpe,' she called to the scribbling clerk at her side. 'Mark that down, Brother Alaric. Two cows worth twenty pence each from Robert, brother of Thorkil.'

'Yes, yes,' said the cleric. 'Not too fast, my lady, if you please.' With Robert's goad to prod them, the cows were not inclined to wait in order.

'Be quick, man. Master Ralph is here with his corn payment.'

Bundles of thatch, baskets of salted fish, live hens and fresh eggs, sesters of honey and rounds of cheese, sacks of malt and grain were carried into the fenced compound at Toft Green and accounted for by Lady Rhoese, her bailiff and her clerk. It was Michaelmas, a time for the payment of dues in her first year as a landowner in her own right. Men had been coming since early morning to hand over their shillings and pence as rent for ploughland, croft and meadow, for two mills and two town dwellings, all noted down on rolls of parchment that buckled

beneath the cleric's quill. Over his head, the canvas shelter began to flap and rattle with the first squall of rain.

'How many more, m'lady?' he said, throwing the quill down and taking another one from behind his ear.

Rhoese held back the wayward wisps of hair with one hand and strained her eyes towards the great stone archway where Micklegate passed through York's city wall. The light was already fading and soon the gate would be closed for the night, though there were still stragglers who had walked all day to bring what they owed. A cart passed through, rattling and jolting behind two oxen, loaded high with sheep fleeces, and a party of riders surged behind, impatient and obviously in high spirits.

'Who's coming, Bran?' she called to her bailiff at the gate.

'They're Normans, m'lady,' he replied, frowning.

'Close the gate after the cart. Quick,' she ordered. Instinctively, she took a step backwards under the cover of the canvas shelter. The steady stream of wagons and animals passing along the track towards her demesne had attracted some heed, and several of the riders had stopped to watch the distant scene of organised chaos, their attention caught by bellowing steers and bleating ewes. Rhoese's guess that the Norman party were huntsmen returning from a day's sport would not be far wrong, with a spot of harmless trouble-making already in their minds. Damned Norman upstarts.

It was this unease, born of past experience, that kept her wary of what was happening beyond the stockade that surrounded her

large compound, so that when two of the horsemen came as far as the gates to watch more closely, she backed even further into the shadowy recesses of the shelter. Since the last king's great national survey of two years ago, the estates that she had inherited from her mother had gone largely unchallenged since, at the time, she was still living at home, the rents and dues from her estate merely augmenting those of her late father, a king's thegn and wealthy merchant of York. Now, she was on her own, a target for property-seeking Normans, and vulnerable. One of the many risks of becoming independent.

Lowering her voice, she continued dictating to the cleric whilst trying to ignore the two inquisitive riders until some mysterious unseen force made her turn and look. One of them was watching the scene in the yard, but the other watched her, and only her. He was tall in the saddle and powerfully built, that much she could tell in one glance, not a man she had seen before in York, nor one she could have forgotten easily. His dark hair ruffled like thick silk in the stiff autumn breeze, and his eyes looked across at her like level daggers beneath straight black brows.

He saw her start, and beckoned to her, a signal she quickly decided that a servant would not ignore. Pretence was the answer. 'My lord?' she called, walking unhurriedly towards him. A sheep scuttled across, stopping her halfway.

'Where's your master?' he called. His voice was abrupt and deep, used to command and to obedience, taking it for granted

that she could speak French.

She shrugged. 'Away, sir,' she replied.

'And your mistress? Where's she?'

'Away too.'

'So who's in charge here?'

Again she shrugged. 'All of us. We're trusted.'

'Your name, girl?'

She took a deep breath, ready to lie. But the bailiff was not happy about the number of fleeces in the cart, and his loud query was meant directly for her. 'Lady Rhoese,' he called. 'This load's two short.'

A howl went up from the carter. 'There ain't, m'lady. They're all there. Honest.'

The horseman dismounted and threw his reins to the man by his side, and Rhoese saw that he would be intent on an explanation. The deceit was already over, and she had not enjoyed even this short-lived attempt at subservience.

Defiantly, she faced him as he came towards her through the gate. 'My name,' she said, crisply, 'is Lady Rhoese of York, daughter of the late Lord Gamal of York, and granddaughter of a former sheriff. Is that enough for you, or would you like me to quote my entire pedigree? I can, if you wish it, but I'm rather occupied, as you see.'

Lazily, he strode forward as if her defiance meant nothing to him, his hair lifting off his forehead like a thatch in a gale. 'I'm sure you could. So why the deception, I wonder? Is that your

way?’

‘Oh, with Normans, sir, I use any wiles I can devise to keep their noses out of my affairs.’

‘You appear to have strong opinions about Normans, my lady. What have they done to deserve it, I wonder?’

For some unaccountable reason, she felt her heart hammering and squeezing her breath from her lungs, further irritating her after she had sworn never again to be affected by a man. This man was standing within her compound as if he owned it, his great legs planted like trees, his hands splayed over slim hips where a gold-buckled belt sat low on a linen tunic with bands of blue and gold. Expensive attire. Unwillingly, she noticed his muscular neck, shoulders and chest like a wrestler, and she found herself doing what she knew men did when they looked at her, peeling him down to his skin to see what lay there. She realised she was blushing, and the smile in his eyes told her that he knew why.

‘As for that, sir,’ she said, lifting her chin, ‘if you don’t know the answer, then it’s clear you’ve not been in England long. It would take at least a week to tell you what damage you and your kind have done to us in the last twenty-two years. Fortunately, we still have our dignity and our language left. Those are two things you’ll never remove, thank heaven.’ She looked around for her bailiff and called to him in English. ‘Bran! Get this overweening lout from under my feet, will you?’ To the Norman, she spoke again in French. ‘As you see, sir, I’m too busy for small talk. Another day, perhaps. Pray excuse me.’

As she spoke, however, even her show of hostility was not enough to blind her to each detail of his face, the faint shadow round the strongly angled jaw, the firm wide line of the mouth, the dent in the chin and the long straight line of the nose. His high cheeks had already caught the shine of the rain, and the eyes that had been no more than dark slits were now widening at her brave animosity, deep brown, dark-lashed and unnervingly bold. She flinched, suddenly and inexplicably uncertain of herself, her eyes sliding reluctantly away to avoid reaching any more liberal conclusions about his remarkably good looks. A bitter voice breathed in her ear: he would be no different from the rest, Norman or English.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I can see you have much to do. Are you the owner of this demesne or is your husband joint owner?’

‘You ask too many questions, sir. And your friend is waiting.’

Her attempts to dislodge him made him smile. ‘Hmm.’ He grinned. ‘Another time then, lady. Perhaps you’ll be at the ceremony tomorrow, eh? As a tenant of the king, you’ll surely be there with your donation?’

His probing irritated her. ‘Oh, who knows how much curiosity value we English landowners have these days? We’re a dying breed. Why not show ourselves while we still have the chance? Is that what you mean? Good day, sir.’

He found no ready answer to that, but nodded curtly and strode away through the gate with a word to the bailiff who held it for him. Without another glance, he was back in the saddle and away

at a canter, while Rhoese struggled to drag her mind unwillingly back to the pandemonium in the yard and to breathe past the uncomfortable knot of fear in her throat.

There was no doubt at all that she had overdone the antagonism for no reason except that he was a Norman. Or was there another reason, something too recent to be excused or explained? Something to do with men in general, those unreliable, feckless, self-seeking creatures? For the last ten months she had been reassessing her need of them, and now no other feelings remained except contempt and a wish for vengeance. Cold, hard, sweet revenge. Submission and humility she reserved only for special occasions when nothing else would do, having discovered to her cost how severely they were undervalued.

The cleric had stopped writing and was clearing away his tools before the rain spoiled his script. A bundle of rolls bounced about in the wind. 'Who was that, my lady?' he said, sticking his quills back into his hair.

'I've no idea,' she said. 'He'll not be back.'

Brother Alaric, the lady's chaplain as well as her accounts clerk, was not a gambling man, but even he felt tempted to put some pence on the return of that admirer before the next sunset.

The two riders had passed the crofts of Toft Green before one of them smiled and glanced at his stony-faced companion. 'You should see your expression,' he grinned. 'It's a picture.'

'All right. So tell me. Who is she?'

‘That, my fine friend, is one of York’s two remaining women landowners, and I cannot tell you of a single male who doesn’t long to get his hands on it. Yes—’ he laughed ‘—her and the property. Snapped your head off, did she? Well, she would. She’s been here in this corner of the city for the last ten months, since her father died, and she doesn’t let a man within a yard-length of her. Except her chaplain, of course. And her brother.’

‘Well, there could be several reasons for that. She’s the loveliest thing I’ve ever seen, Ranulf. Those great dark eyes spitting fire. That body.’ He sucked in his breath, recalling the thick auburn hair, the full mouth, the skin moist with rain that ought to have told him she was a lady, even without the usual head-covering. She was the stuff of men’s dreams and fantasies. ‘She tells me her father was Gamal. Who was Gamal, exactly?’

‘A king’s thegn. One of the last here in York. A wealthy merchant. Disappeared at sea last winter. Traded in furs and walrus ivory, mostly. His wharf is alongside the river by the bridge. Big warehouses and several ships.’

‘The business is still going, then?’

‘Yes, the trading was taken over by his assistant, a strapping young clever-dick called Warin. Not only the trading, either.’

‘Oh? What else?’

‘The widow. He moved into Lord Gamal’s house and settled in with the second wife. A shrew. Danish. Didn’t take her long to accept a bit of comfort. But the daughter, Lady Rhoese, moved out and set up on her own. Took her father’s death

hard, apparently, and doesn't want any more to do with the stepmother.'

'Or the stepmother's lover, who presumably gets his hands on more than the widow?'

'Exactly. There may have been something between him and the daughter. We're not sure.'

'We?'

'The court. The laugh is, Jude, that she believes that by keeping quiet and out of the way she'll be quite safe.'

'From what?'

'Norman attention. Marriage, and the usual property take-over. It's the only legal way a man can get at her estate, unless she sells it to him, of course, although plenty of women lost theirs illegally, as you know. But the idea of a woman holding an estate in her own name is ridiculous when she's supposed to be rendering knight-service to the king for it. She'll have to lose it eventually.' The young man named Ranulf wiped the drips of rain off the end of his nose and looked down sadly at his soaking green woollen tunic. Even for the hunt, he liked to do his best to earn the nickname 'Flambard'. Flamboyant was what he had always been, and even as the king's chaplain there would be no sombre clothing for him at a court known for its extravagant dress.

'So the king knows about her, does he?'

'Most certainly he does. Since he saw that survey his late father did two years ago, he knows exactly who's got what, where it is,

how much it's worth and how much revenue he can expect from it. He's got her estate earmarked for whoever will pay him most to get their hands on it. Better start saving up if you want to put in a bid.'

'Then he'll marry her off?'

'Just like that, whether she likes it or not. And she won't.'

'So she'll lose everything.'

'Everything.' He pointed to a tall wooden fort on a mound beyond the thatched rooftops. 'Over there, see? That's one of the castles, and over there—' his hand swung further to the left '—is the big castle. King William the Bastard had to dam the River Fosse to make the moat for it. The city people were not too happy about that.' He laughed, thinking of the flooded houses and orchards.

But Jude was more interested in Lady Rhoese of York than in the two castles, which he had already seen on his way into the city. 'Tell me more about her,' he said.

The smile widened. 'I can tell you that we took bets.'

'On what?'

'On how long it would take you to win her.'

Jude's eyebrow lifted at that. 'I see. And how long d'ye think we'll have before the king returns to London? Do I have days, or will it be weeks?'

Ranulf patted his horse's wet neck. 'Well, we've got the St Mary's Abbey ceremony tomorrow, and then the king will want to go hunting again.'

‘When does the king not want to go hunting?’ Jude murmured.

‘And I expect that two or three days later we shall return to London. That doesn’t give you much time, does it?’

‘Indecent haste, in the circumstances.’

‘Think you can do it?’

‘I intend to try. But I’ll want to know more than you’ve told me.’

‘Then you’d better know that the king has begun proceedings —’ he glanced behind him, lowering his voice ‘—to confiscate her late father’s estate.’ As keeper of the king’s seal, the young Ranulf Flambard was in a better position than most to know that.

Their manner became suddenly serious. ‘Now that,’ said Jude, ‘is not funny, is it?’

‘No, it certainly isn’t.’

‘Does the Lord Gamal’s widow know yet?’

‘No, but she soon will. The sparks will begin to fly when she finds out before the ceremony tomorrow. She’ll be prevented from donating to the new abbey. And, worse still, she’ll be thrown out of her house because the land it stands on will be part of the new abbey buildings.’

Rhoese called to the men, their hair now blackened with rain, who hurried to unload the carts and pen the animals. ‘Come inside to sup, when you’re ready.’ The storerooms were packed with foodstuffs and fleeces from the dales. ‘And bring the carters in too, Bran,’ she reminded him. ‘They’ll have to stay overnight.’

The great hall was quiet after the blustering wind, enclosing

her and Brother Alaric like a warm blanket that smelt of wood smoke and the nourishing pottage that hung in a cauldron over the fire. Blue smoke swirled and hung in the wooden rafters before filtering out through the heavy thatch, and Rhoese's glance swept possessively round the substantial space that was the men's living, cooking, eating and sleeping quarters all in one. Her own small bower was situated apart, between two storehouses for more privacy, but here she was still mistress of the house. Here were stout timber pillars dividing the side aisles into curtained cubicles drawn back to reveal fur-covered benches that became the household's beds each night. There was the daily food store at one end, and another door to the croft outside.

A woman stirred the pot over the burning logs within a circle of stones, looking up as her mistress entered, at once filling two wooden cups with honeyed mead for her and the red-nosed chaplain. A young maid lifted a sleeping cat off a fur-covered chest where she expected Rhoese to sit, but saw that she was still looking in silence at her beloved territory as if to remind herself of its sanctity and of the time when she had first escaped the wounding intrusions into her grief.

Rhoese took the cup from her nurse with a whisper of thanks. 'Where's Eric?' she said, sipping.

'Wrestling with Neal,' said Hilda, disapprovingly.

'In the rain?'

Two young men came in at the far end of the hall as she spoke, half-naked, laughing, and dripping with wet, reddened with the

exertion and the grip of strong hands. Eric's smile in his sister's direction would have given a stranger no indication that he had known of her presence by every keen sense except sight, and now he came forward with one hand resting lightly on his friend's shoulder to greet her with a wet cold peck on the cheek. 'I beat him.' He laughed.

'My lady,' said Neal with a courteous nod of the head, 'he did beat me only because I let him.'

'Rubbish, man!' Eric gently punched his friend in the general region of his shoulder. 'I had you down twice.' For all his blindness, Eric led the way confidently to the fire and stood before it to peel off his sodden loincloth, heedless of Els and Hilda, Rhoese's maid and nurse. Neither of them could quite ignore the sight, for one of their advantages was that they could indulge themselves without being seen. Like his sister, Eric was beautifully made, tall and graceful with deep auburn hair tied back in a pony-tail that the rain and wrestling had partly undone. At twenty years old he was nearly three years younger than Rhoese and four years younger than Neal, the Icelander who was his constant companion. With Neal to act as his eyes, Rhoese had no fears for Eric's safety, not even from the women whose eyes followed him everywhere.

Openly admiring, Els was nudged roughly into action by the nurse with a curt nod to take her mistress's damp clothes and give her dry ones to wear. Mechanically, Rhoese co-operated with a lack of conversation they all noticed, especially Eric who had

expected an animated account of the day's takings. Rubbing his hair with a linen towel, and still naked, he found his way to her side to perch on the edge of the chest lid.

'What is it, love? Are you not pleased? I thought it was going well.'

It had gone well, though at that moment she had been possessed by a strange sense of foreboding that had been growing since the brief visit of the Norman, who had not even offered her his name. It was usually the first thing inquisitive men did. She recalled the shiver of fear she had felt instead of pleasure while she had treated him to her scorn, and the cool self-assurance of the man as he walked towards her with his too-many questions. No, she would certainly not be at the ceremony tomorrow, not even to see the new king.

'Yes,' she said, 'I am well enough pleased. Everyone came who was supposed to.'

'Father would have been proud of you.'

Only one year ago, Lord Gamal still lived, and she had loved Warin, her father's most trusted assistant, a man with an excessive ambition that included the pursuit of his master's daughter. At the time of his first interest, Rhoese had neither understood nor cared about his reasons, being then only twenty-one years old and ready to be caught by a man with enough brash persistence. Warin's success with York lasses and his tales of escapades in Norway and Iceland had excited her and had more than made up for his lack of sophistication and finesse. He had

been eager and impulsive, and she had been swept into his big lovmaking arms with hardly time to savour the chase, such as it was. Her father had approved, and neither he nor Rhoese had seen any weakness in the man that could not be put down to the ignorance of youth.

Ketti, her Danish stepmother, had also encouraged the relationship, having taken quite a fancy to the young merchant whose affability towards her as Gamal's young wife could not be faulted. She was, after all, only a few years older than Warin, and to take on the role as future mother-in-law to a twenty-four-year-old man did not come naturally to her.

It was only a few months before Warin persuaded Rhoese to become intimate with him, since they intended to be betrothed as soon as he came back from the next trip to Iceland. Rhoese had truly believed that nothing could go wrong with her plans, even going as far as to clear out her father's merchandise from her property on Toft Green ready for their eventual occupation as a married couple. She had given herself to him here, in this very hall, just before he went off with her father on their voyage north to buy furs. Having no experience with which to compare the event, she assumed with a kind of contentment that Warin was probably better than most, if women's looks at him were anything to go by. But although the boat returned three months later with walrus ivory, unicorn's horn, furs and Warin, her father had been lost overboard in the icy waters of the North Sea and, by November of last year, 1087, Rhoese and Eric knew themselves

to be orphans. And she was pregnant, having just passed her twenty-second birthday.

‘You all right, love?’ Eric said, holding her arm.

‘Yes. Just remembering, that’s all.’

‘Don’t.’

‘I must.’

‘Was it that woman with the howling bairn this morning?’

‘No, I think not.’

‘Then what?’

A squall of rain hit the thatch and burst through the door, flinging it hard against the wall and bending the flames over the logs with a sudden ferocity. ‘Shut the door!’ Hilda yelled as more men entered, unsure of the kind of welcome they were getting.

The effect of her father’s death was worse than anything Rhoese had personally suffered until then, her mother Eve having died when Eric was born. Without her adored father, she saw her world turn slowly upside down, for she had awaited his return before telling anyone her secret. He was to have been the first. But the shock of losing him so abruptly and with no very plausible explanation made her ill, and she lost the foetus one terrible night with no one to help except Hilda and Els, the only ones except the chaplain to be told the truth. Eric had discovered it for himself.

Warin’s sympathy over her grief was correct but barely adequate, and nowhere near enough for her to be able to tell him about the second cause of her anguish, especially when his

attentions had already begun to veer noticeably towards Ketti on the pretext that she had lost most by Gamal's death.

Hurt, unwell and desperately unhappy, Rhoese began to spend more and more of her time here at Toft Green, in the hope that Warin would come and help to prepare it for their joint occupation. But that had no effect. Then one day she found him and Ketti lying together. Warin's defence—that he was merely offering Ketti some comfort—was unconvincing, and the outrage of his betrayal so soon after the other tragedies broke Rhoese's heart. There was no blazing row, no confrontation, simply a silent and hopeless withdrawal to her own house on Toft Green, the energy to fight for what had almost been hers having gone the same way as her happiness, her well-being, and her aspirations.

Hardly had she and Eric removed the remainder of their belongings than Warin moved in with Ketti, taking his aged father to join Ketti's cantankerous mother and the twelve-year-old son Thorn by her first marriage. The change-over was complete, and Rhoese redirected rents and dues from her Yorkshire properties to herself and Eric for the maintenance of an independent household.

Immediately, Ketti's hopes for a comfortable widowhood diminished at this withdrawal of supplies, and she protested. But Rhoese saw no reason to contribute her profits when Warin had taken over Lord Gamal's mercantile business, his large warehouses along the Ouse wharf, his two ships, his wife and the house on Bootham next to the expanding new abbey of St Mary.

In the ten hectic months since her father's death, Rhoeese had erected a protective shell of ice around her damaged heart, keeping it cold with thoughts of revenge that, as yet, had done nothing to salve the deep wounds of rejection. Now, there was no man she could trust with her love except her brother, whose blindness from birth seemed not to matter when he had so many other rare qualities. He had already expressed a wish to join the monks at St Mary's, and Rhoeese had sent a hefty donation for the new buildings, the foundation-stone of which was to be laid by the new king himself on the morrow. They now awaited a message from Abbot Stephen to say whether he would accept Eric as a handicapped novice.

He squeezed her arm gently. 'Go and prepare, love. We have guests to supper, and I'll play the harp for you afterwards, if you wish it.'

'And are you going to sup naked?' she replied. 'As an extra entertainment?'

'Neal!' he called across the fire. 'The lady has a suggestion.'

Judhael de Brionne's desire to know more about Rhoeese had not even begun to be satisfied by his friend Ranulf's disclosure concerning the stepmother's tenancy problems. It was about the woman herself that he needed to know, and in characteristic style had soon decided that he could find out for himself, in private, more than he could be told by well-meaning friends eager to win wagers.

Alone, an hour after curfew, he rode through York's puddled

streets to where the south-west corner of the high city wall enclosed Toft Green, where dark outlines of thatched huts within a stockade clustered around the great hall, with the scent of wood smoke carried on the blustering wind. Under cover of darkness he waited in the hope that, sooner or later, someone would show themselves and tell him more about how a Yorkshire noblewoman ruled the roost.

He did not have long to wait for a door at the back of the hall to open, emitting the soft glow of firelight, the strains of a harpist's song, and a woman's figure silhouetted against the interior. Jude urged his stallion forward a few paces so that he could watch her cross to one of the smaller buildings and, now that the rain had ceased, to leave the door ajar, presumably to shed some light on the inside.

In a few moments she had emerged again, this time carrying something beneath one arm and closing the door stealthily behind her before slipping along the side of the hut towards the trees at the end of the croft, diving into their deep cover like a stoat sure of its direction. Jude's heels touched the stallion's flanks to direct him along the track until a gap in the wooden stockade allowed them through. Heading for the same trees, they picked a way silently over damp leaves, showering both man and horse with droplets from the branches.

The horse snorted indignantly, and the noise resounded through the quiet woodland, sending the pursued woman skittering aside with a yelp of alarm, then with a burst of speed

that Jude was trained to anticipate. The shadows were black and unhelpful, but Jude's eyes were keen and used to seeking in the dark, nor did the stallion have any difficulty in following the fleeing woman's crashing leaps that more than once brought her down by clothes caught on tangles of undergrowth and low branches.

With wildly fumbling fingers she tore herself free at last, only to find her path blocked by the huge snorting horse and its stamping hooves, then, as she dodged away, by its great hindquarters. A hand came out of the darkness to seize her, and at that same moment she hurled the bundle away into the undergrowth with all her strength, yelping with terror at the restraining arms that pulled her backwards and held her, squirming and protesting. There was fear in her voice, and pleading. 'Let me go... please! I am the Lady—'

'Lady Rhoese of York. Yes, I know who you are,' Jude whispered in her ear. 'And you are breaking the curfew, which is worth a night's imprisonment, as I expect you know. Now, my lady, do I detect a change in your former manner, perhaps? Are you so dismissive now of inquisitive Normans?'

'You!' she snarled, twisting inside the cage of his arms. 'What are you doing here after curfew, sir? Let me go, damn you!'

'My, how your heart is beating.' His hand had delved under her cloak, moving upwards over her ribcage to encircle one breast, his thumb monitoring the frantic thudding beneath her kirtle, an offence as serious as breaking the curfew.

‘No...no!’ she protested. ‘No man may hold a woman so. Let go!’

‘So tell me what you’re doing out at this time of the night and who you’re going to meet. A lover, is it?’ His hand stilled, but did not withdraw.

‘You have no right to know. My business is my own.’

‘Not at this time of the night, lady. Tell me.’

Her hands could not prise his arms away. ‘If you must know, I was on my way to St Martin’s Church,’ she said, angrily, ‘to speak to Father Leofric. His tithes are due today.’

‘And it couldn’t wait until tomorrow? The priest is hardly going to starve for want of a tenth part of your dues, is he?’

Rhosee was silent. Her visit had nothing to do with the tithes, but she could not tell this Norman the real purpose when it was his earlier snooping that had prompted it.

‘All right,’ he said, turning her round to face him, ‘if you won’t tell me more, you can explain yourself to the sheriff tomorrow, if you prefer. Curfew-breaking is serious, and you should be setting an example.’

‘Look...no...please! There’s no need for that.’ Her hands pushed against his chest, registering the soft wool of his cloak and the lower edge of the cloak-pin on his shoulder. Unable to see much of him, she could feel his breath on her eyelids as he spoke, and the withdrawal of his hand left a cool imprint below her breast. Now, all the fears and forebodings generated by his earlier interest, and in the dues she was receiving as he watched, surged

back like night-demons, warning her not to antagonise him further. The Normans were a powerful force, and an appearance before the Norman sheriff could easily undo all her attempts to stay out of the public eye. The man must be appeased. ‘No?’ he said, softly. ‘Then you have another suggestion?’

‘Hospitality?’ she offered. ‘You could come into the hall and hear my brother play. He’s a fine harpist. I can offer you mead, or ale?’

‘And poison me, no doubt?’

‘No, indeed. That’s not what I meant. My chaplain himself will pour your drink, if that’s what you fear.’

‘Anything else, lady? Have you anything else to offer me?’

Rhosee froze, aware in every fibre of her being the direction his questioning was taking, and preparing herself to feel the insult and the helplessness of her situation, yet unable to prevent the sudden flare of excitement as she recalled how he had stood before her in the yard, his eyes beating hers down, challenging her attempts to dismiss him. She had felt that same excitement then, and had tried to counter it with a nonchalance that did not exist. She felt it again now and could find no sharp answer this time, not even when he moved her slowly backwards to press her against the broad trunk of an oak.

In the dark, excuses flitted across her mind like bats too fast to see. Then it was too late even for protests, and the shell of aloofness she had nurtured during the last ten months weakened under the tender-hard pressure of his body. She felt the

muscles of his thighs through the fine fabric of their clothes, his soldier's arms bending her into him, the assuredness with which he handled her. His expertise showed in the way he angled her head into his shoulder and held it there with the most careful imprisonment, signalling that there would be no hastily snatched uncultured performance, even though the setting could have been improved upon. Later, Rhoese tried to excuse her lack of resistance as being useless against such a confinement, telling herself that she could not have evaded his mouth, even though she could.

There were no thoughts, only the warm insistent pressure of his lips slanting across hers that she knew was not meant for her delight but for his alone. His arms across her shoulders tightened, his grip on the nape of her neck was merciless, forbidding her mind to wander, compelling her to heed what she was forfeiting and reminding her that his was the conquering side, not hers.

Snatching at fleeting protests and thoughts of mal-treatment, she tried to remain indignantly unresponsive, but soon realised that any reaction from her, either for or against, would have been swamped by the fierceness of his lust. Like a man starved of lovemaking, which she knew could not be the case, he explored her mouth from every angle with breathtaking skill and, when he paused, it was only to cover her throat with his kisses before returning with renewed passion to her mouth again. Warin, her only real comparison, had been eager and vigorous, but never with this man's masterly accomplishment, and though Rhoese

would have preferred to rate him as no more than a clumsy molester of helpless women, she was far too moved to label him so when her legs were already turning to water.

She felt a hardness press against her belly, her own answering leap of fear and excitement, and the keen contradictory betrayal of her shaky emotions. How had she allowed this to happen? And why? ‘Stop!’ she called to him. Her head was held back while he tasted a path towards her ear. ‘Please...no more...you must stop. You have forgotten yourself, sir. I am an English noblewoman and this has gone far beyond talk of offerings. Let me go home now.’

He was breathing heavily against her skin, his shuddering sigh barely acknowledging her protest. Yet, even now, one hand had begun its own well-informed journey on to her left breast, hurrying Rhoese even further towards a warning. Grabbing his wrist, she tried to pull him away, but her hand was ignored and, as her cries were silenced by his mouth, she understood that it would be he who called a halt, and that this had less to do with the offence of being out after curfew than with her discourtesy to him in the yard.

This time, the beguiling movement of his lips over hers was just enough to keep her mind teetering on the brink of bliss while his hand like thistledown explored her in studied disregard of her command. Far from forgetting himself, he was very much in control. ‘Must?’ he whispered. ‘Are you still telling me what I must and must not do, lady?’ The stroking continued, stealing

her protests away like a wind-torn web, weakening her lungs so that she could not answer him. 'Now I think we are beginning to understand one another at last,' he said. 'Would you not agree?'

His question was easy enough to answer, for he'd shown her in no uncertain terms what he wanted. That much she could hardly fail to understand. Less sure by far was her own understanding of herself, for now the unresponsiveness she had believed was hers to command had begun to desert her. She was responding, despite everything she could do to hold herself apart, to keep her mind level and cool. He would know. He was expert at this. Yes, he would surely know.

No, don't let him know. Pull away, before it's too late.

She pushed at him, viciously, heedless of the damage, and with the desertion of his caress and the sudden halt to her arousal, an anger took its place with a carelessness that shocked even Rhoese. 'You mistake, sir!' she snarled. 'It would take more of a man than you'll ever be to understand my contempt for your kind. I would find it easier to understand the mind of a toad. Presumably you have had your amusement at my expense, so now you can—'

His hand over her mouth cut off the rest of her tirade. 'Do not start again, my lady, if you please. There are plenty of dark hours left for my amusement, as you put it, and your unwillingness is of no consequence to me. If you value your noble chastity so highly, you had better learn to curb your tongue. I thought I'd made that clear. Shall I show you again who is master?'

Norman cur. Low-born scum. ‘No,’ she whispered. ‘Leave me be. I can find my own way home. Just leave me.’ There was the parcel to retrieve from the undergrowth, and her anger boiled not least because the whole episode had apparently been engineered to chasten her and to amuse this arrogant Norman who would now laugh about it, share the experience with his friends, itemising the points of interest, enjoying her humiliation. Most of all, her anger was inwardly directed towards herself for allowing this to happen without making any attempt to fight back or to injure him. Weak, stupid woman. So much for her scorn of men. Deeply ashamed, she lashed out at him with a delayed but futile attack upon his wide shoulders, hammering at him in a burst of rage.

‘She-cat!’ he laughed. Even in the darkness he caught her wrists. ‘Come, lady. It’s time you were locked up safely for the night.’ He stepped away, still holding her securely.

‘Locked up? No!’ she cried, pulling. ‘That’s not what you agreed.’

‘Hush, woman. I know what I agreed. I’m taking you home to your bower back there. You need not be concerned; I shall trespass no further on your domain, but nor is this the last you’ll be seeing of me, so don’t think it.’ He hooked a hand beneath her armpit and led her towards the waiting stallion.

How would she know him? Chain-mailed and steel helmeted, they all looked more or less alike. Would he be in civilian dress or in war-gear? ‘Your name, sir. Who are you?’ she said.

‘You’ll discover that tomorrow, in the daylight.’

‘I doubt it. You’ll not see me tomorrow if I can help it.’

‘You think not? Well, I know different, my lady. Take it from me, we shall meet again tomorrow.’

There seemed to be nothing to say to that, for the last thing she wanted was to prolong a pointless discussion.

Without disturbing even the sharp-eared hounds, Jude returned her safely to the door of her bower, opening it for her before she could reach it, though his arm detained her until he had taken his proper leave. ‘Until tomorrow, my lady,’ he said with a slight bow. ‘Do not venture out after curfew again.’

‘No indeed,’ she snapped. ‘Who knows what ruffians one might meet?’

‘Exactly,’ he countered. ‘York is a violent city. Sleep well.’ In one fluid movement, he mounted the stallion and swung away, cantering off into the shadows in the direction they had come, leaving Rhese shaken and puzzled, her body still tingling from his daring treatment. She was also concerned for the package she had intended for Father Leofric that would not benefit from spending a night in wet undergrowth, though she was not inclined to venture out again into the woodland that night. Turning in sudden fury, she aimed a savage kick at the innocent door, wincing with pain of a different kind as she hobbled into the dark warmth of her bower.

Dawn came ever later during those early autumn days, and the household was up and about before it was light enough for

Rhose to enter the woodland to retrieve the linen-wrapped bundle from its damp bed of leaves. To her relief, it was intact and undamaged. Last night, with the fear of a sudden interest in her ownership of an apparently thriving estate, she had felt the need to take this priceless treasure to a safer place. Father Leofric was the obvious one to understand the worth of a leather-bound, gem-studded gospel-book, its pages covered with a Celtic script and intricate patterns lovingly worked by skilled nuns in the last century. There was only one such nunnery where nuns' scholarship rivalled that of monks. It was Barking, in Essex, many miles away from York, but no ordinary citizen ever owned such a thing meant for the glory of God and for the use exclusively of holy men and women. And royalty. If it was ever found in her possession, she would have to offer a very convincing explanation of why it was in her keeping and, more to the point, why she had not delivered it immediately to the proper authorities. The brief joy she had derived from owning such a thing had long since been drowned by the fear of its discovery. She held the bundle close to her body as if it were a child.

Stooping to examine the ground, she noted the huge hoof-prints. Footprints, too. There was the oak. There was the slippery heel-print where she had tried to keep her balance. And there, when she closed her eyes, was the shockingly intimate and unlawful pressure of him against her, his hands roaming where they should never have been and which she should be trying to forget instead of remembering. An insistent pulse beat in her

throat as the memory of his mouth reached her, catching at her breath and holding it until the tremor passed. ‘Men,’ she whispered. ‘Traacherous men.’

Chapter Two

Ketti's House, Bootham, York

The sheriff's man reached Gamal's widow just before dusk at her large house in the area near St Mary's Abbey. He would have to deliver his message with some brevity if he wanted to reach home before the city gate closed at sunset.

With water forming a large puddle on the wooden floor around his feet, he delivered his most unwelcome news, if not with enjoyment, at least with a distinct absence of sympathy. Everyone in York knew of the woman's faithlessness. He stared the couple down with pale protruding eyes and wiped drips off the end of his nose with his wrist. 'If I may say so,' he replied to their protests, 'the news cannot be much of a surprise to you when my master the sheriff warned you during the summer that the consequences of ignoring the king's summons for knight-service would be the confiscation of property.'

'In the summer,' the woman called Ketti yapped, stumbling over the Norman-French, 'I was a newly grieving widow. I had other things on my mind.' Immediately, she wished she had a better grasp of the language when the sheriff's man glanced sideways at the strapping young man by her side, coolly assessing his bedworthiness by a pause at the bulge below his pouch.

'Yes,' he said, bringing his eyes slowly back to her angry blush. 'In scarce one month you must indeed have been grief-stricken,

lady.’ He cast an eye around the fine dwelling while Ketti and the young man, who had once intended to become her son-in-law instead of her lover, faced each other like a couple of rival mastiffs, each of them thinking how best to savage the other.

‘It’s Michaelmas,’ Warin pointed out as if it would make some difference. ‘The end of Holy Month. Where are we to go? This is our home.’

‘That’s something you should have thought of earlier,’ said the sheriff’s man, omitting the respectful ‘sir’ that an older man would have warranted. ‘My lord the sheriff has instructed me to tell you that this land has been donated to the new abbey of St Mary for their extensions. The house and all the outbuildings will be demolished once the king returns to London, and you will have to find somewhere else to live. You will be sent signed confirmation of this in due course.’

Warin, bold, brawny, and not inclined to negotiate if it threatened to take longer than his limited attention span, would have liked to throw the impudent messenger out on his head, but even he could see the danger in that. He could also see, perhaps not for the first time, that he might have been a mite too hasty in his change of allegiance from daughter to stepmother, now that the latter was not as secure as he had thought.

Ketti swung her white veil over one shoulder. ‘And I’ve already told you, whatever your name is, that my husband died last winter. He was in no position to send knights for the king’s service.’

‘But no message was sent. No excuse. No fine or relief in lieu of men. As you know, lady, a thegn holds his estate from the king in return for properly equipped knights whenever the king should need them. And the king has needed them sorely in this first year of his reign. His brother and uncles defied him. He needed all the men he could get. Any thegn who fails in this duty must forfeit everything to the king. That’s always been the law and you must have known it. Now the monks need this land for their new building plan, and you will have to—’

‘Bugger the new building plan!’ Warin bellowed, unable to contain his anger any longer. It was bad enough to have made a wrong decision, but to have this pompous little toad-face telling him what they had ignored in the hope that it would go away was too much to suffer politely. The time for civilities had passed. His healthy outdoor complexion darkened with fury and his fair curls stuck wetly around his face. ‘We’ve had your building plans up to here in York,’ he blustered, levelling his fingers to his brow, ‘and we’re sick to death of them! You’ve raided our fair city and razed it to the ground, wrecked our homes and livelihoods, dammed the bloody river to make a moat for your bloody castles—’

‘Warin...stop...shh!’ Ketti warned, placing a hand on his arm.

But he shook it off. ‘We’ve had to rebuild our warehouses, relocate our businesses, give up our orchards and grazing, see our houses engulfed in your stockades, see them trampled underfoot, and you dare to tell us that we can’t live here now? We’ve built this place with hard-earned sweat on our land, and there’s

nobody...nobody,' he yelled to the man's damp receding back, 'going to get us out. Tell that,' he called across the courtyard, gesturing rudely, 'to your lord the sheriff, whatever his bloody name is.'

His return to Ketti was nothing like the hero's welcome he thought he deserved. 'You idiot!' she screeched, resorting at last to English. 'What good d'ye think that'll do. Eh? He'll go straight back and tell the sheriff, the sheriff will tell the abbot, the abbot will tell the king, and before you know it there'll be a crowd of his strong-arm men here to tip us out into the street. You couldn't have waited for the king to go back home before you shot your mouth off, could you?' Her plain, sharp-nosed, thin-lipped face was blotchy with anger, and her fair-lashed pale eyes bulged more than ever in the stare of scalding reproof that Warin had already grown tired of.

The king, she was certain, had bided his time in this matter, waiting until he was up here in York at the end of the first difficult year of his reign. Feeling that some show of benevolence was appropriate, he had granted permission for the monks of St Mary's to extend their new abbey next to the church of St Olaf, and had granted them properties to sustain them with tithes due four times a year. He had come all the way up here to Northumbria with an impressively inflated retinue to lay the foundation-stone and to show them how bounteous he could be, when he wanted to. And like sheep, the rest of the Norman landowners in Yorkshire had followed suit, donating land to the

new abbey so that it would be said in years to come how they cared about the spiritual life as well as the temporal one. Liars. It was their own insurance they paid into, for their own quicker passage through purgatory.

Craftily, the king had let the monks have Bootham, the stretch of land beyond the minster next to the new abbey grounds where booths and stalls were set, and where the late Gamal of York's house stood. Now he could confiscate it for the best of reasons.

Ketti's screeching assault stopped Warin in his tracks, shocking him into a counter-attack. 'Well, what did you expect me to do? Stand here and be spoken to like a child who's been scrumping apples?' he yelled back at her. 'Don't be so daft, woman. He's not going to do anything before the king leaves for London.'

'Even so, you fool, you might have thought up a better way of handling the matter than by insults. Where d'ye think that will get us? You'll have to go to them and find out how we can get ourselves out of it.'

'It's no good me going to speak to anyone,' he snapped. 'I'm not the owner. You are. You go.'

'What good will it do for me to go?' said Ketti, spreading her hands so that the tips of her wide sleeves skimmed the floor. She was not minded to do her own dirty work if someone else could be found to do it for her. 'So what are you doing here?' She waved a hand with some drama. 'If you want a home with me, go and fight for it. You wrestle with your mates like a prize bull; go and

wrestle with the sheriff for a change.’ She turned away, glaring at the smirking face of her twelve-year-old son Thorn. ‘Get out!’ she snapped. ‘This is private.’

‘Ketti.’ Warin’s voice dropped to a wheedling pitch, warming her back. ‘Ketti, my love. We shouldn’t quarrel over this.’ He took her by the shoulders and pulled her back against him, sliding his great working hands over her breasts and kneading gently, knowing how that was guaranteed to soften her.

Her hands came up to cover his. ‘Get off,’ she whispered, pressing herself backwards into him.

Warin was careful to conceal his smile. It had worked already. ‘No,’ he said, bending to her veil-covered ear. ‘You’re so lovely, Ketti.’ Her breasts were, in fact, the only lovely part of her, and not even the self-seeking Warin could pretend that she had either a face or a nature to match. ‘There’s no problem,’ he whispered. ‘We’ll go and move in with Rhoese. She’s still your ward. She’s obliged to help.’

Her hands snatched his away and threw them aside as she whirled to look at him, her face suddenly hard with jealousy. ‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ she said. ‘To live with her. My stepdaughter. Still hankering after her, aren’t you?’

Still puzzled by his faulty timing, Warin’s blue eyes opened like a child’s, though behind his façade of innocence was a frantic attempt to backtrack. He caught at her hands, holding her still. ‘No, sweetheart. Not to live with her, of course not,’ he blustered. ‘What, then?’

‘Look, she’s got her own place at Toft Green. She moved out of your home, didn’t she? Well, what d’ye think she’d do if we said we had to move into hers because we have nowhere else? Eh?’ He shook her hands to make her reply.

But Ketti’s face was still hard. ‘You think she’d move out of Toft Green, don’t you? Rubbish. She won’t. She’s still crazy for you. She only moved away because she couldn’t bear the sight of you with me. She’d let you into her bed every time my back was turned. No, my lad. I’m not having that.’ There was a finality in her voice that Warin knew better than to challenge.

‘Well, then,’ he said, ‘we’ll try sending her to the king to see if she can negotiate another patch of land for this one. Once she sees the threat of us moving into her house, she’ll fall over herself to be helpful.’

In that one respect, he was a better judge of the situation than Ketti, though the flutter of pride and excitement he felt at her jealous suppositions was sadly misplaced. Rhoese would not have let him into her bed if he’d been the last man alive in England.

By dawn next morning, the news had been delivered to Rhoese at Toft Green that her stepmother had been deprived of everything she had inherited from the Lord Gamal. The steward who delivered the message had been with the family for as long as Rhoese could recall and was almost in tears. ‘Go and collect your things,’ she told him. ‘You can live here with us.’

The man knelt and kissed her hand. ‘My lady,’ he stammered. ‘My wife...may I...?’

‘Of course. Bring your wife.’

After he had gone, Eric voiced his doubts. ‘Was that wise?’ he said. ‘To take him so soon? Him alone?’

‘After that woman took what was mine?’ she replied. ‘It may not have been too subtle, but it was vengeful. And if they think they’re going to come and move in here, they’re mistaken. They’re not.’

Eric sought her hand and took her from the end of the hall out into the croft that was fenced with a wattle hurdle to contain pot-herbs and medicinal plants. The greenery dripped with diamonds and rustled with the sounds of recovery after the heavy rain. ‘Rosie,’ he said. ‘Whatever you think of her, she’s our kins-woman and we cannot refuse to help. You know that. She’s also your legal guardian.’

Together, they leaned on the whitewashed wall of the house beneath the steaming overhang, and Rhese knew a sense of despair yet again at the constant negativity of the Danish woman’s influence upon her life. Ketti had been married to Lord Gamal for only five years with no apparent advantage to anyone except herself and her family. Her son Thorn was well named, and the old hag who was Ketti’s mother rivalled the yard cockerel with her cackling. They could not be allowed to disturb the peace of Toft Green.

‘Yes, I know it. And she knows it too. That’s what she’s trading on. But the problem is hers, Eric. Why doesn’t she get her Danish kin to help?’

‘She knows that you know the archbishop, love. She’s hoping you’ll go and speak to him, I suppose. You could, if you wanted to.’

‘I don’t want to. Let her go and live with the cows.’

‘Rosie!’ he laughed. ‘That’s wicked! Go and see Archbishop Thomas. He and Father were friends. He’ll be able to help, somehow.’

‘Today’s the stone-laying ceremony with the king. He’ll be busy.’

‘Afterwards, then. When the king’s gone off hunting.’

She sighed. ‘I really don’t see why I should.’

‘Yes, you do, love. I shall probably be safe at the abbey in a week or two, but you don’t want to be landed with her, of all people. Or Warin.’

‘He’ll not put a foot in my house,’ she said, angrily. ‘I’ll go.’

‘When?’

‘Later on, after the stone-laying. I may see Abbot Stephen, too.’ She linked an arm through his and snuggled against him. ‘I wish you would not leave me, love,’ she said. ‘I know you want to, but I shall miss you so sorely.’

‘I think it’s for the best. I can do no good here. I can’t inherit. I can’t protect you. I can’t seek a wife. I can’t fight for the king. I’m a liability. Best if I go and play my harp to the monks and do a bit of praying for souls. I can do that.’

‘But you’re my adviser. My counsellor. Who will I turn to?’

‘We’ve had all this out before, love. It’s been decided.’

‘Abbot Stephen may not want you, after all.’

He smiled at her teasing. ‘Then I’ll have to stay with you, won’t I? But don’t you dare go and tell him of all my bad habits, just to put him off.’

‘I will,’ she said, kissing his cheek. ‘I will. That’s what I’ll do. But this business worries me, Eric. The last thing I wanted to do while the new king was up here in York was to show myself. You know what he thinks about women who hold land. His reputation is every bit as bad as his father’s.’

‘Then find the archbishop, love. He’s a Norman, but at least he knows you and our family. He’ll listen to you.’

The crowds that packed into the city’s narrow streets were thicker than ever that day, and as Rhoese and Els pressed forward against the flow, a seething mass of bodies surged through the arch in the wall, back towards the minster. The former king, William the Bastard, had visited York only to demolish it; his son had decided to give something, for a change, and those who had come to watch this phenomenon supposed that he must therefore be of a different mould from his brutal parent.

With a growing panic at the possible consequences of any delay, Rhoese had dressed in her best linen kirtle, dyed with damsons, over which a wide-sleeved gown reached to her knees, its borders decorated with a tablet-woven braid. The ends of her long plaits had been twisted with gold threads, and a fine white linen head-rail was kept in place by a gold circlet studded with amethysts, sitting low on her brow. Her last-minute check

in the bronze mirror had been perfunctory, to say the least, for she found no pleasure in the reflection nowadays, nor were there smiles of recognition that had once sent back secret messages of love. Instead, she had pulled down her kirtle sleeves well over her wrists, adjusted the leather pouch at her girdle and hustled Els out of the door.

Only a few minutes ago, the possibility of a quiet word with the Norman archbishop had seemed like a reasonable course of action, but her doubts grew into real obstacles as they approached the minster garth where the great white cathedral reared above the rooftops like a sleeping lion covered by cobwebs of scaffolding. Beyond it, the timber-and-thatch palace that was usually accessible to everyone was almost engulfed by a sea of fluttering pennants, tents, makeshift kitchens and stables, and armies of soldiers and monks who strode about or stood in groups, their gowns flapping in the breeze. Because the king was staying there, the archbishop's palace was being heavily guarded.

Two long lances crossed in front of them. 'Can't go in there,' one soldier said, looking Rhoese up and down. 'Not unless you've got something to give to the monks.' He winked at his companion.

Quickly, she seized her chance. 'I have land,' she said. 'Where do I go to make my donation?'

The man hesitated. 'You got the documents, then?'

'Of course I have, man,' she snapped, 'but I'd be a fool to bring them out in a crowd like this. The clerks have records. Just tell

me where they are and have done with your questions.'

The lances were withdrawn. 'Over there, lady.' The soldier pointed to the largest leather tent outside which stood a table covered with rolls of parchment. A tonsured cleric sat behind it and by his side stood a tall Norman soldier who pointed to something on the parchment before them. He straightened and looked directly across at Rhoese as if he was expecting her, his head easily topping the men and horses passing in between.

She recognised him immediately, even though his head was now completely encased in a shining steel helmet, the nose guard of which hid the centre of his face. Small shining steel rings enmeshed his upper body down to his knees, split up the centre of the skirt for riding. Leather straps and silver buckles held a sword low on his left hip. A brawny young squire fed his huge bay stallion something sweet from his hand, and Rhoese was both puzzled and annoyed to see them there when she had been so sure of escaping his attention, after last night. The clerk lifted his head to look at the two women, then bent it again to his scroll, and they had no choice but to approach in the full critical stare of the man who had acquainted himself with her so forcefully. Hours later, she was to recall how that short walk was like pushing through deep sand, and how breathless she was on arrival.

Deliberately, she avoided looking at him, but spoke in English directly to the clerk instead. 'Master Clerk, I wish to speak with my lord the archbishop. Would you direct me to him, please?'

The cleric looked up at her, allowing the roll of parchment to

spring back over his hands. He caught it and set it aside. ‘You are?’ he said.

‘The Lady Rhoese of York,’ she said. ‘Daughter of the late Lord Gamal.’

‘Speak in French,’ said the Norman. ‘Tis the language of the court, as you both well know.’

The cleric seemed surprised, but merely glanced at him before rising respectfully to his feet. ‘Lady Rhoese, we were just looking at your—’ He stopped abruptly at the Norman’s signal.

‘At my what?’ she said. ‘My estates? Is that what you have there? The survey taken two years ago of the Yorkshire lands? And who wants to know what I hold? Meddling Normans and their like?’ Her glance at the tall Norman was unmistakably accusing, but it was no match for a thirty-year-old captain in the king’s service used to commanding men twice his age, and the fierce message from beneath the level steel brow of his helm took only seconds to make its impact. She had better say no more along those lines, it said. Remember last night.

The brown creased skin of the cleric’s face relaxed into soft folds like a well-used pouch and his hands slid furtively past each other into the sleeves of his faded black habit. ‘Yes, my lady,’ he said. ‘I have it here because the king himself needs to see it.’

Rhoese felt the blood in her veins freeze as a chill wind blew across the crowded field. ‘Mine?’ she whispered. ‘My property? Are you sure?’

‘Quite sure. In fact, his Grace is with Archbishop Thomas

at this very moment. Your arrival will be of some interest to them, I should think.’ He gathered the scrolls up like a bundle of firewood and clamped them under one arm. ‘I shall take these to him and tell him you’re here. It will save some time. Would you mind waiting with Judhael de Brionne?’ he said, indicating the soldier. ‘He’ll escort you, m’lady.’ Half-smiling at her in apology for the lack of choice, he turned away and disappeared, leaving Rhoese more puzzled than ever and wishing she had not come.

The Norman had hardly taken his eyes off her. ‘I understand you’ve been told of the confiscation of your late father’s estate,’ he said, matter of factly. ‘Is that why you’re here? To plead for reinstatement?’

Briefly, it occurred to her that this man could hardly have cared less whether she had heard or not, otherwise he would not have risked a mention of it so casually, moments before she was to meet the king, and again her anger flared keenly at the incessant and callous theft of English land and property into Norman coffers. ‘It’s a game to you, isn’t it?’ she hissed at him. ‘To see who can take most, fastest, every last acre of it, no matter how many generations have held it. Just like your forebears the Northmen. No, Norman, I’m not here to plead for reinstatement. I’d not waste my breath so foolishly.’ Her brazen stare swung away with her last words, conveying her despair as well as her consternation at seeing him again so soon, face to face.

‘No,’ he said, flatly. ‘No game, I assure you. I was about to suggest that, if you had come to plead, you’d be wasting your

time as well as your breath. Once his Grace has set his mind on something, he doesn't budge. But I see you need no advice from me on that subject. You northerners are fierce protectors of property, are you not?'

'Yes, and despite what I said yesterday, you've managed to find out what I am owed, who from, and for what. Haven't you? Well, it will be interesting to see how long it remains in my name now. You must be well pleased with your spying.'

'If you think the king is interested in you as a result of anything that I saw yesterday, lady, then think again,' he said, harshly. 'There is only one part of it so far that interests me.'

Holding her anger back on so tight a rein would normally have made her more aware of the precise implications of every word he said. This time, however, it was only his reference to the king's interest that caught her breath and held it like a hard ball of fear in her throat, and though she opened her mouth to speak, nothing came. Before she could loosen her lungs, the cleric reappeared, beckoning to her and Els to come forward, and they were led by him through groups of curious men across to the archbishop's thatched hall.

It was now almost unrecognisable, thronged with heavily mailed guards and their squires, monks and high ecclesiastics still in their jewelled vestments, scribes and messengers in the royal livery, nothing like the place she had visited with her father when he had been greeted as a friend. Her original idea to speak to Archbishop Thomas before he left with the king was already

losing any appeal it had once had.

The man called Judhael de Brionne was close behind her, and there was to be no turning back. 'Go on,' he whispered, as if challenging her to dispense the same aggressiveness she had shown to him. But at first sight it looked as if such an attitude would be irrelevant, confronted as she was by such an unexpected sea of faces and a crowd of male bodies in a hall ten times the size of her own. Between every wooden pillar and alcove, men of all ages stood around in varying degrees of involvement, some clearly bored and restless, other attentive and hovering like hawks above rolls of parchment on the table before the archbishop, diving into the heaps to scavenge for information. Sprawled across a chair at the far end was a man she knew to be only twenty-eight years old and totally devoid of either charm or grace. William the Second of England. His hand fondled the thigh of a slender young lad who stood next to him, whispering into his ear and giggling.

At the entry of Rhoese and Els, the buzz of conversation stopped, making their long walk down the hall more like an hour's trek at the side of the Norman, while the inane grins and loud comments that she knew were meant for him fell upon her ears also. 'Well done, Jude,' one of them called. 'Keep your armour on, Jude,' another said. 'You'll need it.'

Normally, she would have insisted on fierce reprisals for this lack of respect, but the knight would allow her no time to respond, and she knew that she would not leave here any the

richer for having met the king, or the archbishop. Furthermore, each step she took gave her a better understanding of why it was being said by the English that this new royal court was a disgrace, inclined to every kind of vice and corruption. In the shadows, men stood close together, openly embracing.

Her ears burned more hotly than her cheeks as she and Els sank into a low curtsy before the king, while any hope of being treated fairly evaporated like a pond in the height of summer. This was exactly what she had hoped to avoid for so long, and now she knew her time was up.

The natural light in the hall came from square holes set high up in the walls kept open by wooden shutters on pulleys. Extra lamps were perched on wooden beams nearest the king, and it was by this light that she now saw the man with whom she had hoped to speak in private: Archbishop Thomas of York. By his side stood a woman, except for herself and Els the only other female in this vast hall.

‘You!’ Rhoese whispered. It was Ketti, her stepmother, with not even a maid to accompany her. Deep inside, a part of her hardened still further at the realisation that no good could come of this either, while bewilderment, despair and foreboding returned to wipe out whatever words she had been preparing.

Even after one year, the new king had gained a reputation for getting to the point with a suddenness that left people hardly knowing to what they had agreed. It was no different for Rhoese, nor was she helped by the deeply unpleasant rasping voice that

needed all her concentration to understand it. ‘Lord Gamal’s daughter,’ he barked, erupting from the chair like an unleashed hound and coming to stand before her. He was stocky and belligerent, bull-necked and florid.

‘Yes, your Grace,’ she said. His eyes were odd, one flecked with brown, the other bluish-green. Quickly, she looked away.

‘Well, I’ve called in your father’s estate, so that’s that. If I cannot rely on my tenants to provide men when I need them, I’ll give my property to men who can.’ He looked around him, well content with his summing up. ‘He didn’t even send out three merchant ships last year at his own expense, so I’m told, and that’s another failure,’ he said, looking this time directly at Ketti.

Against all protocol, Rhoese interrupted him before being invited. ‘But your Grace...my father died...lost overboard. Surely these are extenuating circumstances?’

‘Eh?’ the king bellowed, visibly reddening. ‘Extenuating what?’

The hall fell ominously silent.

‘Circumstances, sire,’ she said.

There was a sound and a slight movement from one side, and the archbishop moved forward into a pool of light where a fitful ray of sunshine caught the gold panel on his chasuble. ‘Too late to go down that road, my lady,’ he said quietly into her ear. ‘The Lady Ketti has already explained that to his Grace. You are here to help her at this difficult time. She’s going to need a home, you see. Isn’t she?’ He held out his ring for her to kiss.

Archbishop Thomas had known her father well. The York merchant had brought back rarities, furs, falcons, walrus-ivory and wine for the Norman churchman's pleasure, and they had trusted each other. No doubt the archbishop believed he was returning the favour by helping Gamal's widow after the confiscation of her livelihood. Yes, she was going to need a home. Rhoese's.

She looked across at her stepmother dressed modestly in grey with not a jewel in sight, her mean little face the very picture of pathetic humility, her hands clasped tightly around a rosary of jet and bone which Rhoese knew not to be her best. Cleverly, the woman had got to the archbishop first to remind him of the wealth of her ward Rhoese, and how her stepdaughter had recently refused her friendship when she, Ketti, needed it most. Their eyes met, and Rhoese read the blazing malice and jealousy behind the mask of pity. 'My stepmother has a large family of her own, my lord,' said Rhoese, hearing the heartlessness of her reply fall upon the silent hall.

'They're in Denmark, woman,' barked the king. 'And what's more, it's high time you were married.'

Rhoese frowned, unsure of the exact nature of his pronouncement. She felt the strong clasp of Els's hand, then she turned to look behind her for the knight to see whether he had left her to her own devices and was unaccountably relieved to see that he was at her back, less than a pace away. Her eyes travelled upwards over the steel links to his eyes and found that

they were fixed on her with an expression she could not interpret. Still baffled, she turned next to the archbishop whose kindly face was, for a Norman, usually easy to read. ‘What?’ she whispered.

‘His Grace is telling you that he wishes you to be married, my lady.’

‘But I don’t want...I haven’t...no! This is your doing!’ she said to Ketti, furiously. ‘How could you? You know full well that I have no intention of marrying. Your Grace, marriage is not for me, I thank you.’

To her utter humiliation, the king appeared to be enjoying the dispute as if it were an entertainment for his delight, and his bellow of laughter was so unexpectedly loud that Rhoese stepped back, causing her to trip over the Norman knight’s foot. Instantly, her elbow was supported by his large hand, her back by his body, holding her upright until she could find both feet again.

The king squeaked as he replied to her, ‘I hadn’t thought...ugh...hadn’t thought of marrying you myself, woman,’ he laughed. ‘Did you think...oh, my God...that I was offering you...?’

‘No, your Grace, I didn’t.’

‘Well, thank God for that,’ he blasphemed, impervious to the disapproval on the archbishop’s face. ‘I was trying to tell you that you won’t need your house in York when you’ll have one with a Norman. I’ve had a good—’

‘A Norman?’ Rhoese snarled, glaring at the king.

His laughter stopped as abruptly as it had begun and his face

reddened again to a tone deeper than his pale red hair. ‘Yes,’ he snapped with a sudden anger. ‘A Norman. What have you against that idea? Is a Norman not good enough for you? Or is not any man good enough to fill the role of husband? Eh? Is that why you’re still unmarried? What age are you?’

‘Almost twenty-three, sire, I think.’

‘God! You should have had a brace of bairns by now, woman.’

He could not have known it, but that was probably the most hurtful remark he could have made, but to make it in public before a hostile crowd, and before her vindictive stepmother who had stolen the man she was to have married, made it doubly harrowing. Rhoese paled, swaying with the pain, and once more the hand came to steady her beneath one elbow.

The king noticed nothing. ‘Well, as I said, I’ve had some good offers for you from my loyal vassals, lady, and you have your stepmother to thank for releasing you from her wardship. She was quite reluctant to let you go, were you not, lady?’ He looked across at Ketti, who bowed her covered head demurely, hiding the triumph in her eyes. ‘Yes, so she was. And anyway, no women in my reign will hold land in their own right. I’ll not have it. It’s against God’s laws, isn’t it, my lord Thomas?’

The archbishop bowed. ‘Indeed so, sire,’ he said. ‘I’m sure Lady Rhoese will see your reasoning, once she gets used to the idea. English women, I believe, are not used to having their husbands chosen for them. Is that not so, m’lady?’

She had nothing to lose now except her life, and it was only

the thought of Eric, her brother, that made her worth anything to anyone as a person rather than as a commodity. 'English women are used to having their husbands chosen for them,' she replied stoutly, looking directly at Ketti, 'but they are invariably given some say in the matter. A woman has the right to say no, if she doesn't approve.'

'Not in my reign she doesn't,' said the king, loudly. 'And it's time this matter was settled. I'm getting bored with it, and I've been ready to go hunting since we got back from the ceremony. I'll have no more argument. Lord Gamal's widow and her household can have the place at Toft Green and you'll have the husband I've decided on. So there.'

Shaking her head in despair, Rhoese saw that to try to reason with this man would be pointless. He was unpredictable, and closed to any argument a woman could put forward. His sense of humour was grotesque in the extreme, and his insensitivity was too humiliating to be suffered by prolonging the discussion. Again, she turned to the knight behind her for one last glimmer of understanding from someone, anyone, but he was looking across to the other side of the hall where there was a jostling and a shoving accompanied by bawdy shouts and hoots of laughter. A man was emerging, summoned by the king's beckoning hand.

'Come on over, Ralph!' he called, roughly. 'It's your bid I've accepted. She's yours, and her estate. It's quite a fair size. I don't know what the rest of her is like; you'll have to find that out for yourself. Eh?' The laughter he generated by these coarse remarks

brought hot waves of shame to her cheeks and a suffocating fear that rose into her throat like a sickness. Vaguely, she felt a firm grip around her upper arm, pulling her hard against a chain-mail chest, and when she looked for the source of her support, she found that the knight was still not looking at her but at the man who was being almost pushed forward to where they stood.

‘Come closer,’ said the king to Rhoese, ‘and meet your future husband. He’s a good fighter, is Ralph. None better. A loyal vassal. He deserves a reward. Here, Ralph de Lessay, put this in your bed to warm it, man. This should get you a few heirs, if you know how to go about it.’

There was a roar of laughter and applause so loud that none of Rhoese’s protests were heard, yet still the grip on her arm was maintained as if the knight had forgotten to release her. Nor had he laughed.

‘Let her go, Judhael de Brionne,’ the king commanded. ‘It’s your turn next. This one’s for de Lessay. Let go, man.’

The grip slowly relaxed, casting Rhoese adrift into a sea of grinning faces and clapping hands through which she could still make out her stepmother’s jubilant expression. Turning her back on it, she came face to face with a man of more than middle age, a deliberate move on the king’s part to get another lucrative offer for her when this husband died, making her an even richer prize than she was now. It was a favourite artifice.

Ralph de Lessay, it seemed, had as little grace as the king and as much excitability, for he grabbed Rhoese unceremoniously by

the shoulders before she could stop him, pulling her hard into his sweating face for a mouth-stopping slobbering kiss that left a trail of spittle to drool down her chin. His soldier's grip hurt her intensely.

She brought up her arms to push, to wipe her face with her sleeve, to keep him at arm's length. Gasping for air, she sobbed to the king, 'No, sire! No! This is unworthy. This is not the way the daughter of a king's thegn should be treated. Please, let me go home, I beg you.'

The king's face straightened into a sober block of recognition like a child who had suddenly become aware of a misdemeanour. 'Yes,' he said, tightening his mouth. 'That's enough. Take her home, de Brionne. It's time we were away on that hunt.' With a sudden about-face, he turned and strode through the hall, knowing that the crowd would part for him like the Red Sea, and soon the place was emptying except for the clerks, the archbishop and his assistants and those most involved with the whole disgraceful incident.

Thoroughly shaken, Rhese was the first to find a voice, determined not to give Ketti any pleasure by an exchange of incivilities that she would win, hands down. From the archbishop, however, she hoped for something that might still lend a grain of dignity to the proceedings, something that might allow her to walk away from this nightmare with her head held high. A blessing, perhaps? A word of comfort that would remind her of some small benefit? 'My lord?' she whispered. 'Am I...is he...?'

Oh, my lord, is this truly happening to me? Can he do this?’

He had seen it before and he knew that William Rufus could do exactly what he pleased with any remaining English property, especially a woman’s. ‘Yes,’ he said, scowling at the stupidly grinning face of the man who had won her, ‘he can. And may I suggest to you, de Lessay, that you get a grip on yourself and behave with some dignity towards this woman who is to be your wife. Go and bathe, man. You stink like a fishmonger.’

Taken aback at the unflattering comparison, Ralph de Lessay’s shoulders slumped as he turned obediently away, and Rhoeese saw how the bald patch on his head was scabby and brown where the summer sun had blistered it. At the same time she had to resist the temptation to hug the archbishop for saying what she herself would like to have said.

To Judhael de Brionne, the archbishop said, ‘Take the Lady Rhoeese home, Jude. There’s nothing to be gained from hanging about here. The marriage will be in York before our return to London, I’m sure. His Grace doesn’t like delays.’

Ralph de Lessay, euphoric after his success, seemed to have second thoughts about the mode of Rhoeese’s return to her home. ‘Wait!’ he called, coming back to them. ‘I’ll take her myself. I’ve a mind to see...’

Swiftly, Judhael de Brionne caught him by his mail beneath the chin, almost lifting him off the ground with one hand and hurling him backwards into the king’s chair with such force that the man and chair went crashing over into the rushes. ‘You’ve

seen enough, short-arse!’ Jude snarled. ‘Do as the archbishop says and take a bath. You stink!’ Without waiting to see the man recover, he placed a hand under Rhoese’s armpit and walked her at an urgent pace out of the hall and into the bright light of day, with Els almost running to keep up. Neither of them even glanced in Ketti’s direction, so missed her change of expression from satisfaction to admiration.

‘Let go!’ Rhoese said, swinging her arm up. ‘We can take ourselves home.’ Over their shoulders, men watched for the inevitable scene.

He caught her around the waist, ignoring her yelp of protest. ‘Yes, lady, I know you can. And the sooner we get away from this place the better. Come on!’ He swooped to gather her knees over his arm, then hoisted her high on to the stallion held by his squire, dumping her without ceremony behind the high saddle to which she was bound to cling to avoid falling off. From that height it was difficult for her not to look at him, and through her confusion and anger, she noted every detail as if to compare it with the scruffy and disgusting knight who had insulted her so publicly. Under English law, he would have been punished for that. Here before her was a tall confident knight whose hands had supported her, whose appearance was immaculate from gleaming helm to polished spurs, whose stern expression told her he was not one to cross, unless she was prepared to be hurt. Formidable was the word that sprang to her mind.

‘You’ll ride pillion with me,’ he said. His look took in the

beauty of her full mouth and the perfect flushed bloom of her cheeks before returning to her eyes, settling into their anguished velvet brownness with a slow blink. He would know exactly what to do with her, his look said, unlike that boor he had knocked flat.

Her mind stopped working, and for once she found nothing to say to him. But as he leapt into the saddle as if vaulting over a gate, swinging one leg over the horse's neck, she could not help the shiver of unwilling pride that, after that degrading scene of a few moments ago, she was riding high behind a man with some sense of how she must be feeling, even if his way of responding to it was less than gentle.

Over the knight's broad shoulder she saw that Els was similarly seated behind the squire on a chestnut gelding and that her arms had already encircled the young man's waist. As Rhoese felt the horse move away, she clung with one hand to the cantle until the knight's hand came round to find it and take it to the belt at his waist. 'Hold on to that,' he said over his shoulder, 'and stay close.'

'Why would I want to stay close to you?' she said under her breath.

'Because it's easier on the horse,' he replied, as if she should have known.

It had not taken the knight, Judhael de Brionne, long to reach a conclusion about how best to win this woman, though it had already begun to look as if bets could be lost to those who had put money on his success. The matter that Ranulf Flambard had mentioned yesterday had accelerated far more suddenly than

any of them had anticipated, and now she was almost out of bounds before the game had begun. And yes, she had been correct in her assessment: it was a game to take from the English whatever was available, both a game and a business at which he had already benefited. It had been all the more satisfactory for being quite difficult, English laws having been designed to cover every small point regarding possession of property and women. Nevertheless, since the first William's death, his son had shown himself to be less particular about keeping the English laws intact. This afternoon's fiasco was an example of how happy he was to bend any rule that would put more money into his treasury, whether it was fairly done or not. Like his father, William Rufus had no qualms about going back on his word if another bidder made him a better offer. Ralph de Lessay must be displaced.

Jude felt the touch of Rhoese's shoulder on his back and her little thumb stuck into his belt. The king had been his usual unpredictable self, dragging de Lessay out of the crowd in the excitement of the moment as one more spontaneous and bountiful gesture of the day. As if the woman had not been embarrassed enough. It had not been well done. He had felt her sway with consternation. Her body was soft, and though she was showing the world her indomitable spirit by spitting fire at every man in sight, he had seen the pain behind her eyes and felt the shockwaves as the king's demands had shaken her. Man or woman, it made no difference to William Rufus. He used them both the same.

Ranulf Flambard had been eager to hear how Jude would go about winning the body, if not the heart, of York's unassailable beauty. Ranulf had offered what he believed were helpful suggestions, none of them particularly original and most of them quite missing the point that she was obviously immune to that kind of approach. Jude knew better than that; any woman with such a chip on her shoulder for whatever reason required a different kind of handling. She was not for the faint-hearted, and certainly not for a seasoned hard-bitten campaigner like de Lessay who hauled on his reins as if he was pulling a boat in.

But things had moved ahead with unsettling haste, and what had started out as a game meant to last a week or two, as such games usually did, had now grown into something more serious. Not just that she was to be married at the king's discretion: that happened all the time. Not because she was wealthy, either, or because she had made an enemy of that weasel-faced stepmother. No, there was something more to it than that, something that had disturbed Jude since he had first seen her counting her rents. She was vulnerable, exquisitely beautiful, tempestuous yet with a hint of scaredness, and not quite as ice cold as she would like to be thought. He had seen the look used on him that men used on women, and though it had been quite unconscious, he was experienced enough to recognise it. Until now, he had only toyed with thoughts of marriage, laughing at his father's urgings to find himself a wife and enjoying his reputation as a breaker of women's hearts, both married and single. The possibility

of taking an Englishwoman to his bed permanently had never been more than a passing thought during his eight years here in England. Until now.

But this one presented more than a challenge; more like a crusade to discover the cause of all that anger, to channel it into the positive energy of loving. Too bad that oaf had tried to kiss her with that great broken-toothed mouth of his. Now he, Jude, would have to show her how it ought to have been while she was still weakened, and then he would have to find the best way of removing de Lessay from the position into which he had just been hurled by the king.

The ride through York's crowded streets would have taken only minutes if there had been more than one bridge across the river, for the minster garth and Toft Green, not so far distant as the crow flies, were on opposite banks. To Rhoese, with her mind in complete turmoil once more, the journey was a total blank. Normally, she would have enjoyed seeing the traffic of pilgrims and merchants, foreign faces and strange dress, traders and their stalls, women calling greetings; but not on this day and not from a seat behind a Norman, of all people, those most feared and hated of all strangers, as foreigners were known. Even after twenty-two years, they were nowhere near being accepted, nor did it appear that they were making any effort to be. And now, it looked as if she would be tied to one for ever, bought and sold, betrayed by the stepmother who not only wanted to possess her home, but also wanted her to disappear.

They crossed the wooden bridge over the River Ouse where her late father's ships were tied up along the wharves, giving up their precious cargoes from the northern ports. Few merchants would set sail this late in the year; fewer still could understand why Gamal had chosen to do so, to his cost. Rhoeese wondered if Warin would be there and whether he might look up and see her riding behind this taciturn Norman knight. There was no sign of him, however, and then they were on Micklegate, literally 'the big street' in Old Norse, and almost home. Then she would have to tell them how all their worst fears had materialised in the time it took to say a Pater Noster.

Dismounting, the squire opened the gate at Toft Green and let them through into the deserted courtyard where only a dignified line of geese waddled away from the hooves. 'Take the girl in,' said Jude to his squire. 'Tell them we're coming.'

Rhoeese would have preferred not to rely on this man's say-so, but it was a long way for her to drop without assistance and she was left sitting alone on the horse's rump as the knight led both horses across to the stable and tied the reins to the ring on the wall. Then he came to her to place his hands upon her waist, and she had no option but to lean forward and be caught in his arms like a child. Without a word, he carried her straight into the dark stable where the warm aroma of dung, hay and horseflesh mingled sweetly and where he stood her carefully upright against the timber wall with the bulk of his body closing her in.

She wanted to remonstrate, but this confrontation seemed as

unreal to her as the previous one and nothing made sense any more; nothing and no one. In one quick pull he removed his helm and placed it on a sack of oats, pulling back the mailed leather-lined coif from his head to reveal a layer of thick dark hair that stuck like silk to his skull. Once again, he was the man with whom she had had words yesterday, and now she knew for sure that this was a continuation of that, where he was about to settle the score with the last word.

She placed her hands flat on his steel-linked chest, but he pushed them away with one quick flick of his wrists and, picking up the hem of her long sleeve, used it to wipe her chin of de Lessay's odour that still clung there. He held her face, watching her eyes show confusion and anger before they clouded with defence. And a warning. 'Oh, no, Norman,' she whispered, pushing at him again. 'Oh, no, you're out of your depth here. I do not owe your kind any thanks for this day's work, nor am I ready for another mauling. There is no man I want near me—'

He did not wait to hear the rest, for none of it was relevant to him and there was no time to explain. Catching her wrists, he held them behind her back as he pressed her against the wall, and though her intention had been to writhe, to scratch at his eyes, kick and scream, the invasion of his mouth held her completely immobile, draining the energy from every limb. Concentrating all her awareness into that moment of tantalising sweetness, she was suspended like a star in space and time, forgetting to fight or to think about objections or the futility of it all. Something at the

back of her mind flared like a dying flame in a draught of pure air, blazing briefly to illuminate a gem, something precious and sublime, just beyond her reach. Then it was gone, and his lips were releasing her, hovering warm and firm over hers with just enough space for words. 'You are wrong, woman,' he whispered. 'It is not I who am out of my depth. Is it? And I shall get closer than that, believe me.'

Her eyes opened and her body sprang into action without her bidding it, pushing, twisting, panting with the effort. Then, as he made no move to release her, she was obliged to wait and to watch his eyes, knowing by their direction that he had not finished with her and that she would be made to wait until he had. And though his arrogance both angered and unnerved her, the taste of him was still seeping through her senses, lingering and enthralling her, holding her in readiness. Again she felt his mastery as her eyes closed, and what she thought she knew about a man's kiss was wiped out at the next touch of his lips, like finding a superb wine after knowing only stale water.

But it was too sweet to be borne for long after the dreadful events of the afternoon, and her heart pleaded for some respite from the surfeit of emotions. She tore her mouth away with a hoarse cry of anguish. 'Let me be...no...please...go away. Leave me! Leave me!'

At once, he released her, catching her elbows as he had before when the ground had lurched beneath her feet, waiting for the inevitable questions and reproof, feeling the trembling anger

through her arms.

‘Who are you?’ she said. ‘Do you insult Norman women so freely, sir?’

‘Judhael de Brionne,’ he said, adjusting the linen head-rail over her hair. ‘I am Count Alan of Richmond’s vassal, and I came with him in the king’s retinue. And I don’t think it would help matters for you to know what I do with Norman women, my lady. More to the point is that you should see how some Normans are more skilled than others. You may have been sold to de Lessay for the moment, but that will have to change.’

‘I can scarce believe I’m having this conversation,’ she said, intending to cow him with her wide blazing eyes. ‘You are telling me, are you, that as well as being married to that...that boor, you want me to take you as a lover? Is that it?’

He placed a hand on the wall behind her and lowered his face to hers so close that she could see only his eyes making inroads into hers, reading far more than she wanted to reveal. ‘No, my lady, that is not it. I am telling you as clearly as I know how that you will be mine. Understand? Mine.’

‘Ah, so it is the property. You saw it. You wanted it, and now you see a way to get it. Well, that didn’t take too much effort on your part, did it? So now all you have to do is to offer the king more, which he’ll not refuse, of course, and then you can add my estates to those you hold from Count Alan. Well done. But if you think you’ll get any co-operation from me, knight, then you’ll be wrong. You won’t.’

His nose almost touched hers, so close did he look into her heart. 'I don't need your co-operation, Rhoese of York. I thought I'd already demonstrated that. And I also believe that your protests are a mite too strident to be sincere. Would you like me to show you what I mean?'

'No,' she whispered. 'No...no, don't. You do not know...'

'No, there's quite a lot I don't know that I intend to find out. But you had better know this, my lady, that you are on the losing side. Your snarling and snapping and keeping yourself chaste will get you nowhere. What I set out to take, I get. Now, I shall take you in and I shall return tomorrow to escort you back to the king. He'll want you to make your mark before witnesses, I expect. But I shall have spoken to him by that time.'

'You're very sure of yourself, knight. What if he refuses?'

He smiled and levered himself off the wall. 'You can begin by using my name. I'm known as Jude.'

'And I'm known as the daughter of Lord Gamal,' she replied sharply, 'and I'm capable of making my own plans. English women are not so biddable as your Norman dames.'

'We'll see,' he said, still smiling. 'Come, show me your hall.' He held out a hand, closing his strong fingers around hers and leading her out into the light. And this time Rhoese saw no point in depriving him of the last word.

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