



HISTORICAL

Nicole Locke

Her Christmas Knight

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Аннотация

A knight to protect her – this Yuletide By order of the English King, Alice of Swaffham searches London nobility for the traitor dealing information to the Scots. Little does she know that the mysterious spy she seeks is the man she once loved and thought she'd lost forever... If Hugh of Shoebury felt unworthy of Alice before, as the Half-Thistle spy, he can never claim her heart. Now he must fight not only to keep his dark secrets – and Alice – safe from a vengeful king... but also his burning longing for her at bay! Lovers and Legends A clash of Celtic passions

Содержание

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7

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62

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‘Do you want to dance?’

Alice stopped tapping her foot and turned to Hugh, who had caught her unawares.

His appearance was startling to her every sense. It still seemed impossible that he had returned to Swaffham. And after all this time it should have been impossible to be so affected by him. And yet she was.

Tonight his clothes were as fine as any nobleman's. But none of them softened the hard slant of his jaw or his piercing storm-filled gaze.

‘Which dance?’ Her eyes strayed to the lock of hair that fell loose and soft over his forehead.

There was a quirk to his lips. ‘The one that is beginning now.’

Aware of eyes on their exchange, Alice carefully chose her words. ‘Yes, I would like to dance.’

‘Then let us begin,’ Hugh said, taking her hand in a sure grip.

His palm pressed to hers and their hands entwined, his

callused fingertips brushing her wrist. He drew her closer as they joined the other dancers, holding her for longer than the dance provided. It was a dance she knew well, but for the first time somehow she didn't know it at all.

Author Note

Finally Hugh's story is being told! How can he possibly be the hero of Book Six, when he first appeared in *The Knight's Broken Promise*, which was Book One in the Lovers and Legends series? Well, I'm not writing these stories chronologically. In fact, as stand-alones, they can be read in any order.

But that doesn't explain why it took me this long, so I'll tell you. Hugh's past is so tormented that his story was difficult to write. Add in the fact that at the end of Book One he was committing treason, and I wondered what heroine could possibly understand him?

That's when I found Alice, who has been valiantly trying to save Hugh since she was six years old. The only problem? Alice has the King of England threatening her life...

Her Christmas Knight

Nicole Locke



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NICOLE LOCKE discovered her first romance novels in her grandmother's closet, where they were secretly hidden. Convinced that books that were hidden must be better than those that weren't, Nicole greedily read them. It was only natural for her to start writing them—but now not so secretly.

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To my brother.

Thank you for teaching me the value of kindness, the virtue of perseverance and the worthy ability to tie my shoes. You're the absolute best.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

October 1296, London

She wasn't going to make it.

Heat prickled down her back. Her hands, clutching a seal to her chest, grew damp. Alice stopped running, pressed her back against the stone wall and let out a steadying breath.

She was going to make it. She had to. She had come too far. It

was the labyrinth of passageways that was making her anxious. She didn't know where she was going.

It was the dark...which was more heavy and cold than the stone she rested against.

How long had she been running? She should never have agreed to the game—never agreed to visiting Court in the first place.

As if she'd had a choice. King Edward needed gold and her family—wealthy wool merchants—were being heavily taxed for it. To soften the blow, the King often invited her family to Court. Beyond delighted, her father had always taken the trips alone. This time round, however, the King had formally invited her. And one could not avoid a direct royal command.

But she could have avoided the seal-seeking game. Noting that the King wasn't in residence, she had tried to avoid the game. But someone had put her name in the bowl and it had been pulled. Then she and the others had been shoved into various darkened hallways to find a seal and solve the riddle.

Which should have been easy. Even if she didn't know and couldn't see where she was going, she'd thought she could depend on her ears to hear the lapping of the Thames or the running of the other seal seekers. But her ears had failed her. All was dead silent.

She rolled the seal in her hands, hoping the unusual shape would distract her from her thoughts. The seal was neither round nor square, and it was much too large for her hands, but it had to be the correct seal. She was sure that she'd understood the riddle:

Find the door that holds the light.

A door couldn't hold a light unless there was a light behind that illuminated it, and yet she had opened so many doors and there had been only more darkness.

Her breathing hitched. She mustn't think about her fear of darkness. She must consider only the light and where she hadn't been. If she concentrated on the riddle maybe she could forget the dark. Maybe.

Laughter. High-pitched and suddenly snuffed out.

Where had it come from? It had burst out and disappeared too quickly for her to tell. Was it the other seal seekers or someone hiding in the shadows?

She pushed away from the wall and walked to the left. She might be going in circles, but she had to move. The riddle had hinted at additional seals. The others might be ahead of her.

Not daring to run any more, she quickened her steps. If the other seekers were close and she slipped and the seal fell she would never find it again. But she couldn't be too cautious. If she was quick enough she'd have the prize—she'd be out of the dark.

Another step and another—until the floor dropped.

Stairs?

She swiped at the dark with her hands and feet until the corridor curved into a staircase. Keeping a hand on the stone wall, she shuffled her way down until she found her way to a heavily latched illuminated door.

There were more sounds, too—murmurs and whispers of a

crowd trying to be quiet. This was the door! She brushed her free hand against the smooth wood until she found the latch.

Other noises were reaching her ears—more laughter, and footsteps behind her. No time to waste. She placed the seal beside her feet, and used both hands to lift the latch. It held, as if someone on the other side was preventing it from opening. Did she dare call out?

No, the footsteps behind her were too close.

She jumped and used her body to press down on the handle. The latch broke free, but the clank echoed in the quiet corridor. The footsteps behind her changed direction.

No time to lose.

Grabbing the seal, she rushed into the too-bright room. Images of people and flames flickering in elaborate wall sconces distracted her. She collided with a wall wearing chainmail and started to fall backwards.

Thick arms wrapped around her waist and lifted her. Clutching the seal against her chest, she felt her feet leave the ground as she was pressed against the unmistakable curves of a trained warrior. Winded, and blinded by the sudden light, she felt his flat abdomen against her own, her breasts rubbing abrasively against interlocked steel, and still the warrior pulled her up...and up.

She was being held much too closely. She breathed in to catch her breath, to protest, and smelled leather and metal, and a scent that was this man's alone. A scent that hovered on

her memory...elusive, familiar. It filled her with such a sudden wanting that she clamped her mouth shut.

Images blazed in her mind. It couldn't be him. It shouldn't be him.

Another feeling assaulted her, more powerful than the embarrassment of being held too closely. It was even more deeply pitted in her stomach than her sudden inexplicable wanting.

She felt fear.

She blinked her eyes to focus and was caught by the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. No, not the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, because she'd seen these eyes before. Years ago. The fear went down her back all the way to her heels before it raced hot and fast to the top of her head.

She blinked again. No, these eyes were not the same—even though they were the crystal blue of a summer sky, so bright and too piercing to be real. These eyes had had that light taken from them. They were as clear and stunning a colour as to be almost impossible, but these eyes held something else—some darkness—as if an unseen storm was about to break.

Other features of this warrior were different, too. His blond hair did not wave around his shoulders, but was cut short, its curls tamed to just behind his ears. His skin was not pale from the clouds and mists of a small town, but was sun-baked. Underneath the torchlight his face was all hard, lean planes and too fierce for softness. There were lines, too, around his eyes—not from laughter, but from determination. His lips, which

curved sensuously and were made for smiling, were instead turned down deeply.

None of this seeming harshness hid the sheer beauty of his features. No, this man's perfection was marred by a nose that crooked a little to the left.

The seal slipped in her suddenly damp hands. She knew that nose. She had broken that nose. Reluctantly, against her will, she raised her eyes to his again. He was still studying her.

She felt permanently latched to him. She could not move even to let air into her lungs. Oh, she didn't want to, but she knew those eyes. And they knew her. There was no confusion in their blue depths, there was only...waiting.

But he couldn't be the man she knew. She hadn't heard from him or seen him for more than six years. She'd thought him dead. She wanted him dead.

'Hugh?' The name escaped before she knew she still had a voice, and the corner of his lips lifted.

She knew that crooked smile. She knew that smile all too well.

The bright room blurred. Her body felt like a whirling spindle. She felt the instant tightening of his hands against her back and his body bracing itself against her sudden lack of strength.

She was fainting.

A sharp pain in her back, a sudden shove forward, and Hugh shifted to keep their balance. It was all she needed to break eye contact. The dizziness left; the room turned bright again.

They were surrounded by heavily perfumed people. The

courtiers' dress of—multiple colours along with the copious amounts of gold and silver—glinted and glared in the torchlight. They were all staring at her. Their mouths moved, but she couldn't hear their words above the roaring in her ears.

She pushed away, but Hugh did not immediately release her. Instead he slowly lowered her to the ground. If possible, the chainmail was more abrasive and his body was harder than a stone wall. Her breasts tingled inside her chemise; swathed in her heavy skirts, her dangling legs entwined with his.

It was all too intimate, too heady. When her feet touched the floor it felt as if he'd dropped her from that imagined cliff.

Unsteady, she pressed her hand against his chest. Her body shook with the rise of his breath, the strong beat of his heart. Hugh's hands returned to her sides, and they were all too familiar, too proprietorial. He didn't have a right to such touch. He had refused her offer to have a right to such touch.

'Release me,' she said, not looking in his eyes.

He stepped away. The crowd moved into the space before her. Their voices finally reached her ears. The circular room was clanging and echoing with cries of protest, outrage, laughter, loud talk.

The courtiers stared and pointed at her chest. Embarrassment warmed her skin. Had the ribbons around her dress loosened as Hugh held her so tightly? Had she become undressed—here, in public, at Court?

She looked down, but nothing was indecent. The light green

ribbon that wound round her chest and sleeves still held her blue linen dress together. She was intact; there was nothing to cause her shame.

And she still had the seal clutched to her body.

The seal. She had the seal.

How could she have forgotten the game? How long had she been held by Hugh, staring at him as if she...as if she wanted to see him again? Embarrassment did more than warm her skin. This time she knew she turned red. Something she couldn't control. But what she could control was what she did about it.

Putting as much coldness into her features as possible, she looked up. He wasn't there. The crowd had surrounded her and was pushing her forward. Digging her heels into the flooring, she struggled against the crowd until they suddenly opened before her. With a last shove she was released into a small opening.

She righted herself, running one hand down her crumpled dress, and turned to glare at the courtiers—but a glint of red and gold at the corner of her eye shocked her into stillness.

Disbelieving, she turned towards the red and gold of the King's throne. It wasn't empty. Instead there was a very tall, very thin, bearded man reposing on the ornately carved chair.

Fighting the instinct to hide, she dropped in a deep curtsy. King Edward had returned to the Tower of London and he was staring right at her.

'Rise, my lady. It appears you have something of mine.'

She rose, her knees unsteady, her hands trembling. In fear of

dropping it, she pressed the seal to her belly. King Edward barely glanced at it.

She was suddenly acutely aware of falling very short of Court decorum. Hair tangled from running, purple dress crumpled by the crowd, cheeks flushed with bewilderment. Even her mind was in disarray.

But none of this was fair. She'd neither seen nor heard any formal announcement of his arrival. Literally, she'd been in the dark.

As if conjured by its name, darkness swirled around her chaotic thoughts. Was she about to faint?

No!

She raised her chin. Damn the dark and—if she could—damn the King, too, for making her feel inadequate. After all, it was his stupid game she'd been playing. What did he expect? And whoever had heard of a king taking so long to gaze upon someone's appearance?

But he wasn't looking at her appearance. He hadn't noticed the crumpled silk or the tendrils of hair that strayed out behind the silver circlet around her head. The King hadn't noticed her physical appearance. The King seemed to be assessing her.

She was going to faint.

'Who are you?' King Edward's deep voice echoed in the unnaturally quiet room.

She desperately wished her mouth wasn't so dry. 'Alice of Fenton, sire.'

‘From Swaffham?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

He chuckled. ‘Well, it seems you have won a prize.’

Alice didn’t know how to answer. Despite the King’s laughter his brow remained furrowed, and it gave him a troubled look.

She chastised herself. Perhaps he could not rid himself of worry when there were such heavy matters to deal with in the north. But with such concerns, why was he bothering with a courtly game?

His chamberlain was suddenly on her right. In his hands was an elaborate ivory hunting horn. Even in the great glitter of Court the horn glimmered bright, its three bands of carved silver sparkling like stars. If this was her prize for such sport, every extravagance her sister had told her about Court was true.

She bowed her head. ‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’

He inclined his head, but looked beyond her shoulder. She would have looked, too, but the chamberlain was handing her the horn. His manner was overtly stiff, his arms barely extended. It forced her to bend low and forward to retrieve it, or look as if she was refusing the prize.

She was practically wrapped around him when she heard his message, whispered so softly only she could hear.

‘You will go to the antechamber when the third song starts.’

Startled at the words, she didn’t react as the chamberlain grabbed the seal, shoved the horn into her hand and disappeared.

When she looked up from the horn the King was gone. She

had not acknowledged a king leaving the throne. What was wrong with her?

Courtiers swarmed around her, but her ears and eyes were numb to their excited chatter.

She heard music faintly in the background. Had she missed a song?

No, the chamberlain had just left, and the people around her were moving into a dance. It was the first song.

At the third song the King commanded a private meeting with her. Although the chamberlain had not said so, she knew this was not something to be repeated. Not that she would tell any of the people crowding around her to admire the horn. They were strangers all, and she had never felt that fact more than at this moment.

She tried to accept their congratulations, but mostly she waited for their interest to wane. It did so in very little time.

Soon she was left alone, while people danced, gossiped and flirted. She had never understood until now what it meant when it was said that people twittered. She watched people laugh too gaily and talk too loudly. If they would simply be quiet she could concentrate.

Two, she counted. She knew this song.

There wasn't much time before she must reach the antechamber. Certainly not enough to collect her thoughts, which were now more crumpled than her dress. She didn't know why she was being summoned, or why she had felt the King was

measuring her.

Maybe by her winning she had caught his eye. The Queen had been dead for years and he had yet to remarry. Was that why he had been assessing her? Did he wonder if she'd make a suitable mistress? Her heart lurched. It was an honour, but one that she had never hoped for; she certainly hadn't wanted to win the game that much.

She searched the crowd for bright golden hair. But she didn't need her eyes to know that Hugh was not in the room. Her awareness of that man was something she had carried most of her life.

There was no one for her to confide in. She had thought herself lucky that she had an entire week without her family prodding her to dance with men they thought suitable. But right now she would have appreciated a familiar face. What good was it to have a large family if none of them were around when she needed them?

The second song was ending. It was time for her to go. She was too frightened to look around—too worried that people would see where she was going and know what would happen to her.

The guards at the door seemed reluctant. They only stepped slightly out of her way, and opened the door the merest slit. She was forced to turn sideways to fit through. She certainly wasn't an honoured guest.

Once inside, she heard the door shut with a heavy metal clank. Immediately, the crowd and music were muffled. It was too late

for her to realise that she had taken comfort in the noise and people.

The room was lit by tall, narrow stained-glass windows. The natural light was calmer than the glitter and torches of the throne room. The sun had not set, which surprised her. It seemed that more time had passed since she had started the game.

The walls were finely decorated with red fleur-de-lis. Dark green velvet draperies hung from an elaborately carved four-poster bed. The huge fireplace was not lit, but shone brilliant white from many cleanings. On the far wall was a small round nook that was overpowered by a large golden cross.

King Edward sat in the middle of the room, next to a rectangular table that was laden with fine pewter and food.

There were no guards, no nobles nor courtiers vying for his attention. They were alone, and this was not an antechamber but his bedroom.

It was not these facts that gave her pause. It was the feeling of the room. Fine refreshments on the table, the King sitting and enjoying a repast, drinking wine... It was all so private, so...personal.

He turned his head to her. Bedroom or not, she was still before a monarch. She gave another curtsy.

‘Come, there will be no formality here.’ He waved for her to sit across from him at the table.

She did, her eyes never leaving his. His face remained unreadable, his eyes shadowed.

‘Would you like some refreshment?’ he asked, his eyes resting on the horn she had laid in her lap.

‘No, thank you,’ she replied, as deferentially as she could. She wouldn’t be able to get anything down her throat even if she tried. She was surprised she was able to speak.

‘You are nervous,’ he said.

She hesitated. ‘I am.’

King Edward sighed. ‘It cannot be helped. I wondered how you would fair, being of the softer sex.’

She was being judged. Had she disappointed him by being nervous? She had every reason to be uneasy—even to fear him. He was one of the greatest rulers in the world. But she realised that her nervousness stemmed from something more than simply knowing his power.

She was in a situation she couldn’t comprehend. Why would a king come back from war to play a game, and why she was in his private counsel, alone with him in his bedroom?

‘My fear is for what is expected of me, Your Majesty, not necessarily at your august company,’ she said.

He set down his goblet and raised surprised eyes to hers.

Her answer had gone too far. She had practically challenged a monarch.

‘I did not mean—’ she began.

King Edward gave a low chuckle and shook his head. ‘No, do not recant your answer. I am pleased with your honesty and I am relieved that you have no fear of me but of what is expected of

you.'

'I did not say that I did not fear your company—simply that I fear what I am doing here more.'

He leaned back in his chair, his creased brow softening. 'Ah, it is good to know that you are wise. It would be remiss of me to say you should not have fear.'

She boldly strode on. 'What is expected of me, sire?'

He reached for the flagon of wine between them and gave it a swirl. The wine's floral scent filled the air as he poured. His actions allowed her to watch him without his too knowing eyes staring back at her. Although he would not remember, she had been presented to him at Court when she was very young. He had changed much since she had last seen him. The shadows under his eyes and the cynical way he held his body told his age more than the grey of his beard.

'How did you escape my guards?' He set down the flagon.

It took her a moment to realise he was talking about the game. 'I waited in the dark until they were occupied by the other players, Your Majesty.'

'Although I am not pleased that my guards should be so easily distracted, it is good that you show both intelligence and patience,' he said. 'You will need both.'

She didn't reply. Being the last of three daughters, she had learned patience. The King was weighing his words and she was still waiting for an answer to her question.

'Did you enjoy finding the seal?' He grabbed a loaf of bread

and tore it. The crumbs scattered across the table.

‘I did, thank you.’

He chewed slowly. ‘You hold your prize as if I will take it back,’ he said. ‘I promise that it is yours, but I do desire you to place it on the table so that I may enjoy it in these last moments.’

Her eyes fell to the horn still clasped in her hand. She placed it on the table.

He set down the bread and pointed at the horn. ‘You have not looked at it closely, have you?’

There had been little opportunity for her to inspect her prize. She shook her head, fearing she would offend him.

‘Did you not find it odd that the prize is a hunting horn?’

‘No, Your Majesty, it is a fine prize.’ She glanced at it, and noticed that numerous pictures had been carved into the thick silver bands.

He picked up the horn and turned it in his hands. ‘There are many tales told here.’ He touched the smallest band by the mouth of the horn. ‘This is the resolution of the story, although how it is resolved makes little sense in comparison to the tales told by the first two bands.’

‘And those tales, sire?’ she asked.

The King seemed in little hurry for their meeting to be over. And if he thought he was putting her at ease by talking about a decorative horn he could not be more wrong. She felt tighter than the silver bands.

He gave a slight shrug. ‘It tells of kings warring and lovers

being torn apart. It is a typical story for troubadours.'

'And what is shown in the resolution that does not make sense?' she asked.

'We only see the lovers joined again, their arms cradling a child between them.'

'And this does not make sense?'

He set the horn down and reached for his wine. The liquid sloshed against the sides of the blue glass. In the light streaming from the stained-glass windows the dark red colour looked like blood.

'We do not see what happens to the kings. I have to admit I am biased, but there should be some balance between the two tales.'

She glanced at the perfect workmanship of the horn. 'Perhaps a band is missing.'

'Or the craftsman didn't think what had happened to the kings of different countries was important enough to depict.' He drained his goblet. 'I want you to know that I do not hold to such a belief. I could not care less what happens to the lovers, or to individual people. There are greater risks than the lives of two people. How old are you?'

'I have known twenty-two summers, Your Majesty.'

'You are old enough for what I need of you. You showed cunning and care in pursuit of the seal and you live in the very town that plagues me the most. So, although you have no training for such a task, I am ordering you to take on a mission of the utmost importance.'

‘I do not understand.’

She shifted in the seat that was no longer comfortable. Her first instinct was to leave the room, but she could not rise without his permission. Maybe she should not have been so clever in the game-playing. But she was coming to realise that perhaps it hadn't been a game.

‘I want you to know that what I speak of now is between us. If this information becomes public before your duty to me is accomplished, you and your family will be placed in this very tower—and not as guests.’

She wished now that she had taken his offer of wine. The liquid would have quenched her suddenly parched throat. She nodded her head to let him know she understood, although she didn't, not fully.

‘No need to lose your courage now. I am not asking you to break any commandments with God.’

Her heart did not ease. Maybe she wouldn't have to commit murder, but it was something grave. Something that was important enough to bring the King back to London. Something that he felt necessitated his making a threat to her family.

‘In any war, information is as important a part of winning as the ability with a sword,’ he continued. ‘Right now there are letters that are passing secrets from this very chamber to the usurpers in Scotland. For distinction, or for pride, all these letters are sealed with the impression of a half-thistle.’

She could not be following this conversation correctly. It was

too private, too important. The King of England was telling her that he had a traitor in his court. And the traitor closed his treacherous letters with a seal. A true seal.

‘The seeking of the seal...the riddle,’ she said, ‘it wasn’t a game.’

‘No, it was a test. I thought that whoever was cunning enough to find and escape with a fake seal would be cunning enough to find a real one.’ He tapped the table and smiled. ‘And, in case you were wondering, none of those seekers were randomly chosen to play the game.’

She had to concentrate on his words and not on the image of her sisters locked in the Tower. ‘What is it that you want me to do?’ She forced the words from her lips.

‘I think it should be clear to one who has beaten my best guards and won a testing game. It is the reason the winner’s prize must be a hunting horn. I wish for the winner to be a hunter.’

She must be shaking her head, for the King raised his hand and nodded.

‘Yes, Alice of Fenton from Swaffham. I wish you to find the Half-Thistle Seal,’ he continued. ‘Whoever has this seal will be the traitor. We believe that this traitor is in your very town—might indeed be among the people you know.’

She stopped breathing. This couldn’t be happening to her. He couldn’t possibly mean what she thought he meant.

‘I wish you to become a spy,’ he finished.

Oh, spindles—he did.

Chapter Two

The next morning was too clear and pretty for Alice's dark mood, so she took comfort in the night's damp that was still making the morning unpleasantly cold. Rubbing her arms, she walked briskly out through the iron doors and into the enormous courtyard.

The light had not yet crested the horizon and the courtyard was bathed in a glow somewhere between night and day. The dim light did not matter. She knew where she wanted to go. The kitchen gardens would be empty of courtiers and servants at this time. She needed the privacy. Better yet, she desired the ugliness of lacerated chopped vegetables and herbs. A mutilated barren garden might lighten her mood.

She had spent most of the night trying to resolve what the King wanted of her. When she hadn't been able to, she had tried to sleep. Nothing had worked. The night had not been long enough for her to resolve anything, and the dark had made her already nightmarish thoughts more frightening.

She rushed up the inclined hill, and turned to walk through the lavender-hedged entrance.

The kitchen gardens were empty. She pulled her skirts tight against her to walk the narrow paths between each planting. She didn't know why she bothered. Tearing her dress might be a welcome distraction.

In fact, she'd welcome company, too. She longed for Esther, her most loyal of servants, but she was too old for this trip.

Esther's cantankerous company would have kept her occupied with menial chatter. She'd would even have taken her father's flighty personality for a diversion.

Then she wouldn't have to worry about the task she had been ordered to do: to spy on her friends, to expose one of them for the enemy they were.

It would be impossible. The King was not asking her to delve into the personal belongings of strangers, but of friends. She would have to search their homes, their carriages, their wardrobes to look for a hidden seal. How could she betray her friends' trust?

A crunch on the pebbled path announced that she was no longer alone.

'Couldn't sleep?'

She did not need to turn around to know who was behind her. His voice, as familiar to her as her own, confirmed her other nightmarish thoughts. She had indeed seen Hugh again. In the night, she'd hoped she imagined him because of the unfamiliarity of Court.

Releasing her grip on her skirts, she turned to face him.

He stood closer than she'd thought was possible on the pebbled footpath, and the morning light was strong enough to illuminate what she could no longer deny.

His lean, rugged body was solid; the blond hair that had once curled around her fingers was bright. Everything about him was all too real. Including her sharp anxiety at seeing him again.

It was as if six years had been stripped away and she was sixteen again. Sixteen and spilling out her naïve adoration with no reserve, with no thought that her affections would not be reciprocated.

She remembered every inflection of his sneering reply.

Shame flooded her limbs. She wanted to flee, to turn away, at least to lower her eyes—but she could not.

He approached her slowly, stealthily. The blue concentration of his eyes burned away her confidence. Even her skirts hung limply, as if the very clothing she wore was as insignificant as she felt.

‘So it was you,’ she whispered.

He took a step closer. The glint of the morning sun softened his features, or maybe it just hid the harshness she had glimpsed last night.

‘Did you doubt it?’ he answered. ‘When it was I who had you in my arms again?’

Hot embarrassment swept through her. It had not only been the King’s mission occupying her thoughts throughout the night. Hugh’s arms, his slightly crooked nose and all her embarrassing confessions to him had haunted her dreams and had her wishing for the light of day so that she could pretend he did not exist.

She had almost convinced herself, too. When the King demanded so much of her, she didn’t need her thoughts occupied by her childish vow to marry him. Certainly she never wanted to re-live her begging him for a kiss when she was sixteen.

And now he stood right in front of her, like a mocking reminder of her foolish youth.

A reminder of how he had rejected her.

But that did not mean she had to listen to him or repeat the mistake of conversing with him. He had purposely made it sound as if her running into him had been a clandestine affair. As if she would ever consider such thoughts again!

She looked pointedly around him and lifted her skirts—but he blocked the only exit from the garden. For one flaring moment, she fought the terror of feeling trapped. No doubt he had done that purposely, too.

‘Let me pass,’ she said, proud that her voice didn’t betray her true feelings.

‘After this long time, that is all you have to say to me?’

‘I’d say less if you would let me by,’ she replied.

‘You have changed much, Alice. You used to be more talkative.’

‘Maybe I thought you were someone worth talking to.’

She took a step in his direction. She’d force him to move if she had to.

He didn’t move. ‘I merely guessed that you couldn’t sleep. It was either that or you never made it to your bed. But you have changed your gown. I was always partial to that colour grey on you. It almost matches the colour of your eyes.’

‘You have been too long at Court,’ she said. ‘Save your pretty words for the more feeble-minded.’

‘Just as well you didn’t wear grey yesterday, for it seems the King prefers purple,’ he replied, as if they were carrying on a normal conversation. ‘Did you return to your room last night, or did one of your many servants bring you a change of clothing?’

Why was he talking of her clothing? He was close enough that she should have been able to know what he was thinking, but his eyes were like opaque glass—reflective, revealing nothing.

She didn’t need this confusion.

‘Why are you here?’ she demanded. ‘I know it wasn’t to talk of my dress.’

‘After we had run into each other in the hall, I thought we could meet once again—but then you spent time with the King.’

‘Are you following me?’ she asked.

‘Only enough to see you.’

His eyes held hers and his lips curved almost sensuously, almost as if he wanted her.

She couldn’t take his looking at her like that—not now, not when she was too tired to keep her defences up. Why was he acting as if he cared? She knew that he didn’t, and never had.

Treacherous tears were building. She would embarrass herself if she stayed.

But he wasn’t going to let her pass. He was going to stand there with his beautiful smile and his confusing words. A thought occurred. Something... No. Someone had brought him here.

‘It is the King, isn’t it?’ she asked, although she knew she was right.

‘The King?’

‘You want to know what the King wanted of me. You don’t want me.’

Some emotion flitted across his eyes like a jagged cloud. His intensity towards her vanished and he shrugged. ‘You cannot blame me for trying.’

Oh, yes, she could. If she hadn’t already wished him to hell, she was doing so now. Callous, cruel, arrogant... She was glad his words had cut so quickly into her softening feelings. Her tears had dried and she could leave without another embarrassing scene.

‘I owe you no words, no explanation,’ she retorted. ‘I owe you less than that—I owe you nothing.’

‘Oh, do you?’ he replied. ‘In front of all those courtiers you would have fainted from exertion if I had not been holding you up.’

Let him think it had been exertion and not his presence that had caused her to feel faint.

‘You cannot keep me here for ever.’

His stance changed, became more relaxed. He had that air of boredom she had seen in the other courtiers. But Hugh didn’t fool her.

Oh, he was dressed as ornately as any courtier. The green of his tunic, woven very fine, lay perfectly over his chest and tapered slightly at his waist. His tan leggings fitted seamlessly over his legs and his boots gleamed new. Yet none of his frippery hid

what he had become. He was too unyielding, too rugged to look like anything but what he was: a warrior.

She had never thought of him that way, although he had trained for knighthood all his life. She had watched him broaden into a man, but he had always been Hugh...a girl's infatuation.

Now he was something more. Something she didn't understand.

'I do not need for ever,' he said. 'I need enough time for you to tell me what you did with the King.'

'Did?' she repeated. 'What I did with the King? Don't you mean "spoke of"?''

'Do I?'

He would not let her avoid this conversation. She had wanted—no, needed to confide in someone. And here was Hugh, asking her to do so. As if she would ever confide in him again.

'He congratulated me on my winning,' she said.

'Something more happened; the King doesn't just share pleasantries in his private chamber.'

'Nothing of importance.'

'Your blushing gives you away. You were never good at lying.'

She'd have to get good at it. Her sisters' lives were at stake.

'It is of little consequence for you.'

His eyes narrowed and he abandoned his appearance of nonchalance. 'Maybe you haven't changed. I see you have kept your stubbornness.'

She'd have preferred to keep her pride, but it hadn't take long

in Hugh's presence for her to know that it was still in tatters.

'I do not see how it concerns you.'

'The King and his friendships always matter to me.'

'I am hardly his friend.'

He eyes hardened with a heat that slid along her face, taking in her eyes, the slant of her jaw, and resting on her lips. She felt his eyes there, felt his words as he answered.

'No, I suppose friend doesn't quite capture your role in the King's life, does it?' His eyes were back on hers and the heat was gone. 'But I refuse to think you've changed that much. Whatever the King wants of you, you won't be able to do it.'

Shock caused her to ask, 'How do you know what the King wants of me?'

'It isn't hard to guess. You were in his private chamber for over an hour.'

He had been watching her—maybe even listening behind a door or a tapestry. The King had made her think it was a private conversation. There could only be one reason why Hugh would be privy to this secret: the King did not trust her.

Well, she'd show them both.

'What do you know what I can or cannot do? It's been six years. Long enough for both of us to change.'

'Not long enough. Not to betray your family like this.'

'It's not a betrayal. It's an honour!'

Colour left his face. 'To hell with this pretence. What has he done to you?'

He moved to grab her.

She jerked her arm away. 'Do not delude yourself into thinking I would welcome your touch again.'

Anger blazed in his eyes before he could hide the emotion from her. She fought the instinct to step back. Hugh wasn't pretending he was angry; he was acting as if he hated her.

'No?' He dropped his arm. 'Or maybe it is the King's touch you prefer.'

The insult seized at her thoughts. This wasn't a conversation about her spying. Hugh didn't know what the King had asked of her. He thought she was whoring.

Rage whipped and tightened her throat. 'I'd prefer anyone to you!'

'Then you have changed from the girl I once knew,' he said. 'What happened after you threw yourself at me and I refused? Did you throw yourself at another? Did he refuse too? Or were you simply waiting for the King to notice your...charms?'

She clenched her skirts so she didn't strike him. 'If I was, that would be my affair.'

His mouth curved cruelly. 'An interesting choice of words.'

Her fingers bit into the cloth. It didn't matter what he thought. He didn't deserve the truth.

'I don't have to listen to this.'

She stepped over the plants, not caring when her skirts snagged on some rosemary.

He shifted away and let her pass. 'There is no need to ruin

your gown in order to escape from me. I will go, but I will stop whatever has been started here.’

‘Only if the King wishes it.’

She smiled and knew it didn’t reach her eyes. Let him make what he would out of her words. She was beyond caring.

His hands flexed at his sides and he loomed over her before he settled back on his heels.

‘He will wish it,’ he bit out as he pivoted away. ‘I’ll make sure he wishes it.’

He was out of her sight before she could take two breaths.

She felt rooted where she stood. Rooted. And she was standing amongst the herbs.

A tight rumble rose involuntarily from deep inside her. She bit her lips to seal it in but the sound burst out of her. Then there were more—too fast, too quick to control—until she was laughing and crying in the garden. Hysterics amongst the herbs.

She clamped her hands over her mouth and wiped furiously at her tears. Frustrated at herself, she brushed at her skirts until she could take large gasps of air.

By the time the sun had risen and the opening of shutters echoed in the courtyard, she could breathe again and felt lighter. Better.

Better than she’d thought she would after seeing Hugh again. Maybe all she had needed was those hysterics to settle her thoughts.

She strolled further into the garden and picked an apple from

the harbour.

When she had first come to the garden she had thought being alone would sort out her thoughts, but it was her outpouring that had made two things painfully clear.

The first was that she knew herself better than Hugh did—and in more ways than she had ever guessed.

She could do what the King commanded. Spying was no more than discovering information and lies. It was no more than seeking the truth. Her worries over betraying her friends were misplaced.

She would find a way into their homes. If someone she knew was a traitor then searching through their belongings would not be a betrayal of friendship. If treason against her King had been committed, she had already been betrayed.

She couldn't believe she had ever wondered if she could spy. A wrong had been committed. What did she always do when there was an injustice? She made a plan and corrected it. If there was a wrong, she'd set it right. She couldn't believe she had ever questioned herself.

It had to be the surprise of seeing Hugh again that had muddled her thinking about spying.

Her thinking always became ensnared when it came to him. Their conversation today was proof of that. Over the years she had imagined many conversations with Hugh, but in her imaginings the conversations had made sense.

This conversation certainly didn't. He had never given her

an honest answer as to why he'd sought her in the garden. The flattery about her dress and wanting to see her alone had been a lie. He might remember differently, but she would never forget his rejection of her.

She bit hard into the apple. It was mealy from the cold, but she didn't care. He believed she was the King's mistress. He thought she whored with other men. He had come to the garden to find the answer for himself. Maybe he'd thought she would lie with him as well!

Hurrying her pace, she revelled in the crunch of the pebbles beneath her feet, but it didn't ease her heart. And that was the second pain-filled fact she had learned from her crying.

She was still in love with Hugh.

For six years she had fooled herself into thinking she no longer cared for him. How wrong she had been. She might as well be sixteen again, with all her wild longings.

But she didn't feel sixteen around him. There was something more now. She felt...

She took another bite of the apple. What good would it be to delve into what she felt around him? Hugh had ridiculed her youthful declaration of love. And now he thought she whored with the King.

What manner of man was he?

She knew the answer to that: the wrong manner of man.

Anger rushed through her limbs and sent heat to her face. She had been wronged for many years by Hugh. And, no matter how

much of a wrong it had been, she could never set her heart to rights.

Pivoting, she strode towards the exit. She had lost in the battle of love, but there was more to her than her heart. There was her loyalty, her honour, her determination.

Throwing the apple core onto some shrivelled clippings, she made her decision.

To hell with Hugh and her heart. No more distractions, deliberations or confusions.

She had a traitor to catch.

Chapter Three

November, 1296

Of course, making the decision to be a spy and knowing how to do it were two different matters entirely.

Alice walked purposefully through the town square to the widest house in Swaffham. Icy rain pelted against her. She clutched her green cloak tighter. It was a futile gesture. The rain had already found gaps around her neck and cuffs, and her dress lay coldly sodden against her trembling skin.

She sped up her walking, aware of other unfortunate drenched souls jumping out of her way.

Two weeks of wasted time at Court and travelling to Swaffham and she only had vague ideas of what she could do to find the Seal. It wasn't as if she could ask anyone how to spy. She was sworn to secrecy.

At least she knew what she had to do first. She needed

information about the people in town—which meant she needed to be around them and invited into their homes. And there was only one place to go for those types of invitations.

Pushing open the door, she walked quietly into the building that held many town meetings. The hall was a simple large room, filled with chairs and tables. The walls were covered with plain unembroidered panels of green linen cloth. A fire blazed in the hearth under the hood of a huge chimney, and showed light that the narrow windows fitted with oiled parchment could not.

Fresh rushes crunched under her feet and alerted the men whispering in different corners to her presence. Some of them looked up, but most kept to their heated conversations and ignored her.

She pulled her hood tighter around her face and walked briskly to the stairs leading to her sister's living quarters.

When she reached the landing, she knocked on the large wooden door. The moment the servant had ushered her into the private solar her sister Elizabeth flew down the narrow stairs at the back of the room.

‘Oh, Alice! I am glad you returned. You would not believe what I have been through in the last few days.’

Alice tried to untangle her wet cloak, but her fingers were swollen and red from the cold. The maid who had let her in concentrated on the knot and Alice gratefully lowered her trembling hands.

‘What has happened now?’ she asked.

Elizabeth took the remaining steps. ‘The town council will not listen to John.’

This was a familiar argument to Alice. Her brother-in-law might not have the respect of the town, but her sister had the respect of her husband. ‘Do they ever?’

‘They should!’

‘Because he’s your husband or because he’s the mayor?’

Elizabeth shook her head and gave a tiny exasperated grin. ‘Both.’ She strode across the hall, her slippered feet slapping against the bare wooden boards. ‘He is trying to initiate a law so that householders and shopkeepers are required to clean the streets in front of their houses and shops.’

The maid removed the cloak and herself from the hall.

Alice rubbed the cold from her arms. ‘That seems like a reasonable request, given previous laws that have cleaned the inside of the businesses and moved others farther away from residences.’

‘I thought so—since it is their own waste they wade through in the streets! With all this rain it makes everything slippery and dangerous. It is a wonder more children do not drown when they fall.’

‘You and John have done so much to clean this town, you would think they would listen to this.’

Elizabeth shook her head. ‘That is the penalty of working with the bureaucracy of officials and magistrates. Great for regulating guards to watch the ramparts and patrol the streets by night, but

if they have to actually do something, like clean their own homes, they argue and fight.’

‘What will you do?’

Elizabeth winked. ‘I have some ideas—but John says they could land me locked in irons.’

‘Doesn’t that make them good ideas?’

‘Oh, I have missed you!’ Elizabeth grabbed Alice’s hands and a frown marred the smoothness of her brow. ‘You are freezing!’

She pulled Alice’s hands away from her body and looked in earnest at her gown.

‘And you are soaking wet. Where have you been?’

Alice looked around at the house. The servants were trying to be discreet, but they were everywhere.

‘Is there anywhere we could go that’s private?’

‘Of course—my bedroom has already been cleaned and—’

She didn’t wait until her sister had finished answering, but immediately set out for the second and more narrow flight of stairs towards the family’s private rooms.

These rooms were warmer, filled with thick rugs, bright embroidered linens and cushions. It was her sister’s touch, but Alice didn’t take any comfort in the softness of the room, and she didn’t wait for the click of the door before she started talking.

‘I walked from the town’s gates—’ Alice started.

‘Why would you do such a thing? It is winter. Is there something wrong with the coach or the footmen? Is it the horses? Father did not order the leaking roof repaired and they are

terribly sick! What do you need me to do?"

Used to her sister's rapid-fire questioning, Alice walked to the hearth and poked at the fire to increase its heat. "No, no, it's none of those things. I merely needed to talk to you in private and didn't want my presence to be noted."

"Something happened to you in London?" Elizabeth pulled a red and green woven blanket from a chair and draped it over Alice's shoulders. "You should not have gone there alone."

She had always been glad that Elizabeth had stayed in Swaffham. She couldn't imagine confessing about going to dances to their oldest sister, Mary, who married into a family with even more land, and who only liked to talk about sheep. Not that she liked confessing anything. She'd rather depend on herself and not communicate any of her worries.

Which was probably why, now that she was here, she didn't know what to say. She couldn't lie and she couldn't tell the truth. Her sister was cunning and knew her too well. She would have to talk in half-truths in order not to raise her sister's suspicion. And she would have to find a reason to get invitations into everyone's homes.

As a wealthy merchant's daughter, she used to receive such invitations, but she had been refusing them for so long she was no longer offered any.

Now, not only did she need to be invited, she needed a reason that she wanted to be invited. Unfortunately, the only thing she could think of would force her to swallow her pride. But what

was pride compared to a king's order?

'I think it's time...' she began.

'Time for what? Do not be coy with me. You know I cannot stand it.'

She had expected Elizabeth to interrupt. In fact she needed her sister to interrupt so she would have time to prepare each sentence.

'You know how you are always saying that one day I'll be over Hugh?'

Elizabeth's hands flew to her chest. 'You are not making some cruel joke?'

'I'm not.'

Or at least a part of her was telling the truth. And her anger at him made the lie easier.

'I think that day has come.'

Elizabeth sat down hard on the edge of her bed. 'I am speechless. I never thought I would hear you say those words. Even if you felt that way, I never thought you would actually say it. How did it happen? You have met someone? Were you introduced?'

Oh, she'd met someone. She met the man she had foolishly fallen in love with, and he'd thought her a whore. Simply the memory of him tightened her guts and coiled her innards with irritation.

'Nothing like that!'

Her sister's brows rose and she gave her a knowing look.

Needing to be calm, Alice forced her mind to erase Hugh. She wouldn't tell her sister of seeing Hugh again. There would be no point. It wasn't as if he would ever return to Swaffham. He hadn't returned to the town in years. Here, she was safe from his presence.

If only her thoughts were safe from thinking of him.

'I have met many men,' she amended. 'It was difficult not to at Court. There was eating, dancing and games. I could hardly go to London and not meet someone.'

'Well, then, who was it that took your eye? Please tell me. Do I know him? You know I always thought Mitchell would be a fine match for you—especially now he's returned from his travels.'

Mitchell was close to her age, and as sensible as her sister's husband. He was indeed a perfect match for her. If only she could force her heart to agree to such a bargain.

She'd have to tell a truth.

'No one in particular took my eye.'

Elizabeth frowned. 'None ever do. You have always been this way. Ever since that ridiculous incident when you were six.'

'It wasn't ridiculous!'

'You defend him again?'

'I can hardly not defend him. I broke his nose!'

Elizabeth shook her head. 'You did not break Hugh's nose; Allen broke his nose.'

'I'm the one who swung my fist.'

'But Allen and his friends lowered you into that empty well.'

‘I hate the dark to this day. And if not for Hugh, where would I be?’

‘Happily married to a suitable man instead of pining away for years in vain hope. I thought you were over him?’

Alice slipped out of her shoes and placed them closer to the fire. ‘I am.’

‘Then why are you defending him?’

She raised one foot to the fire and revelled in the warmth seeping into her toes. ‘Because, despite what he has done, and despite the fact I’m no longer in love with him, he does deserve some bit of kindness.’

‘Truly?’

It was all lies—lies, lies. She was in love with him and he didn’t deserve kindness, but she had to continue her story.

‘I was scared witless after being left in that well. When Hugh came and fought them off—’

‘Getting his nose broken in the process,’ Elizabeth interrupted.

‘I was so relieved.’

‘And that relief manifested itself into some strange infatuation until you thought yourself in love with him.’ Elizabeth stood and paced the room. ‘It was childish, making that vow to marry him.’

‘I was six!’

‘But you made a vow. It didn’t matter what age you were. You were always stubborn, always headstrong. You have never broken a vow, never backed down from a challenge. I always feared the moment you vowed to marry him you would stick to it even if

you did not love him. Or that maybe you would fool yourself into loving him simply to fulfil your vow.'

Alice looked down. Steam rose from the bottom of her dress. This was not the conversation she'd wanted. Defending Hugh was a mistake, and had only alerted Elizabeth to her true feelings. She needed to change the subject or else she'd never fool her sister.

'Aren't you curious what happened to me at Court?'

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed, but she nodded her head in agreement.

'I noticed men and women talking...laughing. Together. It reminded me of you and John. It was...painful.'

Elizabeth bit hard on her lip, her hands tightly clenched in her lap. 'I did not know you felt that way.'

She didn't. She had always been happy for her and John. If there had ever been an occasional wish that she could be as happy, it had been quickly pushed away so she could concentrate on her projects.

She turned her back to her sister and thrust her feet and hands towards the fire. 'I didn't know I felt that way until I was at Court.'

'Curious that you should feel that way in London. It's not as if loyalty and love are in fashion there.'

'Maybe they seemed happy. Maybe I simply saw what I wanted to see. Maybe I want to be married.'

The squeak of the bed ropes and the flutter of her sister's dress notified her that Elizabeth was moving closer. Alice rubbed her hands and hunched her shoulders forward to hide her features.

She felt Elizabeth's eyes trying to prise the truth from her profile, but she didn't dare look at her.

'You could borrow a gown of mine if you are so cold.'

Did Elizabeth suspect? She couldn't, shouldn't look at her sister. 'No, I'll warm up in a while.'

'You've turned down so many proposals...'

'I know.'

Elizabeth turned her attention to the fire and rubbed her hands briskly. 'But I believe there are a few of those men still available.'

Alice nodded her head. Even if Hugh hadn't been behind her reason for refusing those marriage proposals, she wouldn't have married any of the men who had applied for her hand. But they were the ones she needed to gain information from.

Elizabeth sighed. 'Alice, are you serious about this? Is this how you truly feel? Look at me.'

Concern creased Elizabeth's brow and troubled her grey eyes. Alice would have to make her performance more convincing if she was to get those invitations.

She smiled. 'It is how I feel.'

'Because I do not want you trying to placate your family into thinking you are happy. You know Father would be overjoyed if—'

'Do not talk to me of Father and relationships. He's hardly one to talk about the raptures of love.'

Their father was overtly kind and generous with everyone. He loved their mother very much. Unfortunately, he loved many

other women as well. It had only been a slight relief that he'd always tried to be discreet on his trips to London, but since their mother had died all discretion had vanished.

'Fair enough.' Elizabeth frowned. 'This is not one of your projects, is it? You are not doing this out of some warped sense of setting a wrong to rights?'

She kept her eyes on her sister's. This, at least, wasn't a lie. 'It isn't.'

'It's not some silly vow you made while you were away?'

'No.'

It wasn't a vow—or a project. It was an enormous promise to the King. She felt the weight of it heavily on her shoulders. Or maybe it was all the lying she was doing.

Elizabeth's hands went to her face and wiped the tears under her eyes. 'I cannot tell you what this means to me.'

Alice grabbed her sister's hands. 'Don't cry.'

'All this time...' Elizabeth's voice broke. 'All this worry. I did not think you would even attempt to find someone you deserve.'

'Please don't cry. Please. I can't take your tears.'

Waving her hands in front of her face, Elizabeth beamed. 'I am happy for you!'

Alice clasped her sister's hands firmly together and willed Elizabeth to stop her happiness. Such sisterly joy pressed upon her more heavily than the lies she'd told. She still had more lies to tell, and it wouldn't do if she failed this early in her mission.

'I know you're happy for me, but it means nothing if I don't

actually have a husband.’

Elizabeth shook her hands free. ‘That is easy to remedy. St Martin’s Day is mere days away, and Christmas will soon be upon us. In fact, I can think of many upcoming affairs that John and I have been invited to. I’ll simply secure an invitation for you as well.’

Such invitations were exactly what Alice both dreaded and needed. Lies and deceit pricked sharply in her heart, but she’d do anything to save her family.

‘I knew I could count on you for help.’

Chapter Four

Hugh stormed through his old house—such as it was. The three-room residence was smaller than he remembered, the furniture rougher and the linens course. Abrasive, just like Swaffham. A small town with sparsely cobbled, cramped streets and not enough amenities where a man could get lost. Or, better yet, not be seen when he didn’t want to be.

He had never intended to return to this town of his childhood. A town he had been forced to travel to when his dying mother had written to his errant father and begged him to care for his son.

And so, at the age of five, Hugh had been carted off by travelling strangers. He had left Shoebury knowing he was leaving his mother, knowing he would never see her again. Knowing he was travelling to the care of a man who had never wanted him in the first place.

His father, Clifford of Swaffham, a knight impoverished, had been an abusive drunk. Many a night Hugh had dreamed he still lived in Shoebury with his mother—only to awake to cold and hunger. Many a time he'd thought it would have been better to be left alone in the streets without a parent.

Why his father had agreed to take him, he had never known. To this day Hugh didn't know if he hated his father or Swaffham more. The tiniest comfort he hoped for upon his arrival was Bertrice's food, and that held no flavour.

He rubbed the grit from his eyes. Even with her ankle healing from a recent break, Bertrice's food was better than fine. It was his mood that wasn't. He wanted to crack the clay cup in his hand, but he tipped it to his mouth and downed the ale instead.

Had nothing changed? Even his need to drink remained the same. He knew from experience that there wasn't enough ale in all the land to hide his thoughts from himself, and if he drank much more he'd wouldn't be able to keep his thoughts to himself.

Maybe if he poured out all his secrets he'd be rid of their poison.

The thought of finally being free of their crushing weight sent a mad euphoria through him—before hard reason dropped like an axe.

Laughing bitterly, he poured more ale into his cup. Pouring out his secrets would never happen. If it did, he'd be free—but only of his own head.

He renewed his pacing, stifling walls and bitter memories

assaulting him from every cobwebbed dusty corner. At Edward's court he shared his room with four other knights, but his suite was generous, its linens and wall coverings fine and warm in colour and purpose.

He kicked one of the thinly plastered wooden walls and a shifting of dust hit his shoe and hose. There wasn't a scrap of colour or warmth in this hovel.

He shook the dust off in disgust. He regretted telling Bertrice not to clean the rooms. She had been insistent, but his bitterness at returning had tainted everything. Now he could see that if he was to spend time here, he'd have to make this hovel hospitable. Pampered soft bastard that he was.

Not that courtly pampering had made him any kinder, or any more of a gentleman. He was an unscrupulous man in a merciless predicament.

He'd been ordered by King Edward to find the keeper of the Half-Thistle Seal. Because private information had been leaked from the King's chamber, Edward had lost a military surprise he'd been strategizing for months.

The Scots had not come as quickly to heel as the King had demanded since he'd won at Dunbar, and Balliol was now at the Tower of London. Since July, the King had relentlessly ordered nobles and clansmen to swear him fealty. Adamantly established sheriffs and governors to enforce his rule.

But that wasn't all Edward had done. He'd also launched spies to infiltrate and report that his orders were being completed.

Hugh was such a spy. His skill with sword and strategy had been noted, but not exemplified.

Hugh had had the honour of gaining the King's attention earlier this year, in April, after the death of the King's favoured knight, Black Robert.

Secrets. Hugh was good at keeping and discovering them. He was good at reporting to the King. He had all the information Edward could ever need, but not everything he wanted to know.

For one, Black Robert was not dead, and was in fact Hugh's closest friend and currently living on Clan Colquhoun's Scottish soil while married to a Scot.

As for the second secret—Hugh didn't need to travel anywhere to find the keeper of the Half-Thistle Seal. Hugh merely needed to look in a mirror or in the purse strapped tightly to his waist. The small seal had been pressing heavily since it had been hidden on the inside of his tunic. A metal thistle cut in half. One for him. One for Robert. Made so that Hugh could inform Robert of the King's whereabouts and of any royal decrees that might affect Clan Colquhoun.

How had Edward discovered the Seal so soon? Only a few messages had been sent. Necessary to warn his friend of the King's movements. Secretive, but innocent, and certainly not enough to start a war. Merely enough to save lives.

So many lives. The English...the Scots. How long could he protect both? Did it matter?

Ah, yes, it did—and that brought him to his third and

definitely most perilous secret: Alice.

A joke on him since he was ordered to pay close attention to the Fenton family. Of all the families in all the land that the King had ordered him to spy on it had to be—

Three sharp blows to the weakened door had pieces of chipped plaster falling to the floor. Turning sharply, Hugh sloshed the ale in his cup as he watched the inconsequential door withstand the pounding. His sole concern was who might be visiting this time of night.

Only Bertrice knew he was in the town. He wanted it that way—wanted to give himself at least a day before he had to face everyone. Face what he had to do.

Another bang on the door...another swirl of dust.

‘Hugh, open the damn door—it’s freezing outside.’

Hugh recognised the voice, unlatched the door and stepped away as a tall, thick giant of a man stormed into the tiny house and stamped his feet to dislodge the snow that had settled on him.

Blowing on his hands, the man turned. ‘It’s not much warmer in here.’

‘I can open the door for you to leave and find warmer accommodations,’ Hugh replied, latching the door and turning to Eldric, a man he had known since they’d fostered at Edward’s court.

‘I think I’ll take my chances in here,’ Eldric replied.

‘Are you sure about that?’ Hugh replied, assessing one of his oldest friends—one he had not seen for many years.

Many young squires had been shoved into the same room back then. There had been nothing to differentiate Hugh from the rest of the boys Edward fostered, but even then Eldric had been huge. Everyone had wanted to be his friend and his partner.

Having known too many tormentors in the past, Hugh had steered clear—which had only got him noticed by Eldric.

It hadn't taken long for Hugh to realise that Eldric wasn't like the children in his past. For one, his friend had whistled—a habit that would have been mercilessly mocked if Eldric had been a hand span shorter. The other thing was that he was always at ease with his place and with everyone around him. From a lowly servant to the King, Eldric took every meeting with a happy outlook.

Such an outlook on life had intrigued Hugh. Growing up in Shoebury and then in Swaffham he had thought his life sheltered though he'd always known his family's past darkened him. He knew it for certain when he heard Eldric laugh with an ease he could never manage.

However, there was nothing at ease about his friend now—and he guessed it wasn't only the cold that caused the certain tenseness to his friend's shoulders and expression.

‘What are you doing here, Eldric?’

Eldric pointed to the flagon still on the table. ‘Is there any left?’

Hugh knew better than to turn his back to fetch another cup. ‘Not much.’

Eldric's gaze took in Hugh's dust-covered boots, his travel-

worn breeches and wrinkled tunic. 'I can tell that.'

Hugh knew he was hardly in courtly dress and had drunk deep. But that was his own business, not this town's nor his childhood friend's. Years had passed since he'd seen him, and yet even though Eldric had scarcely been in his presence, he knew exactly how to challenge him.

In these small confines, there was only one way to accept such a challenge.

Turning his back, Hugh fetched another cup and flipped it over in front of Eldric, so that dust, plaster and insect remains fell to the ground.

Without so much as a telling tic, Eldric accepted the cup and poured the rest of the flagon's ale into it.

Hugh's humour lifted. Regardless of the unanswered question of why Eldric was in Swaffham, there was some of the same man he had known. Eldric was indeed still at ease with his world.

'As to why I am here...' Eldric shrugged. 'You have to know news of your presence in this town has spread.'

Gossip. He might have underestimated the power of the small town. 'I arrived today. I thought myself alone for tonight, but that's not what I meant.'

'Ah, you mean why am I in Swaffham?'

Hugh gave a curt nod. 'Not exactly your home town.'

'I've got cousins here now. And, though it is yours, I never thought you'd return.' Eldric took a sip and eyed the empty flagon. 'How can you be still standing?'

‘I am my father’s son.’

Eldric scanned the room’s sparse furnishings. ‘You weren’t exaggerating about your past.’

‘And were you about yours?’

Eldric sighed, his expression resigned. ‘Come, this is a gloomy conversation.’

‘Without any answers being revealed. It’s late, and I’m tired.’

‘Well, then, I’ll get to the point. I am like you...as you most likely would have guessed by now...if not for the strength of that ale.’

To cover his surprise, Hugh turned to sit. There was only one other chair in the room—his father’s chair, but Hugh had broken that long ago though the remains stayed in the corner.

Hugh didn’t know if he was more surprised that jovial Eldric was a spy or that he had disclosed it. He had heard that Eldric was commissioned, but had thought it only a rumour.

‘Edward sent you here?’

‘No, I’m on a...detour.’

‘Personal?’ Hugh asked.

Eldric gave a small smile.

Hugh didn’t expect an answer, but sometimes the most obvious questions slipped into answers.

‘Are we friends?’ Eldric said.

‘Yes,’ Hugh replied, surprised that the answer came easily despite himself knowing better. Maybe there was still some of that sheltered and naive boy in him yet.

Eldric nodded, as if Hugh had answered some other question not asked. ‘Good to know.’

Hugh sensed that there was more to say, and he intended to wait. After all, he knew about keeping secrets. If he pried too deeply Eldric would do the same. With his silence, it appeared Eldric knew a score of secrets—as did Hugh. Could it be possible that Eldric was a friend in truth? There was only one way to find out.

Shifting in his seat, he said, ‘I would think Edward would know better than to employ you to carry and catch secrets. It’s not as if you can hide.’

Eldric let out a startled laugh. ‘You’d be surprised how easy it is to hide in plain sight. People don’t equate my handsome stature with intelligence.’

‘Your intelligence must be all you’re relying on!’

Eldric did laugh then. ‘I may not have bested you, but my sword arm is still longer than yours.’

Hugh drained his cup. ‘Longer, but not sharper.’

‘Sharp enough. And in these quarters you couldn’t escape even with that footwork you learned from...’ Eldric’s voice faded and he shook his head. ‘Sorry, I heard the news.’

The unsaid name hung between them. ‘Black Robert’ of Dent—Edward’s favoured knight and Hugh’s mentor.

Hugh had been just as surprised as Eldric when Robert, who had been older and already making a name for himself, had taken him under his wing to train him.

Hugh had readily accepted, even knowing that Robert trained hard, and he had been pushed to do the same. Through that time Hugh had tormented himself, wondering if Robert knew of his shame because of his father's drunkenness and lost honour.

But Robert surely had to have done, because nothing was truly a secret at Court—which had made Robert's sully himself with Hugh's family reputation all the more startling.

Of course Hugh had heard of Robert's own rumoured history. How he might not be legitimately-born, which shouldn't be possible given his knighthood. Still, the vague rumour had persisted and surrounded Robert, despite Edward's affection for him and his alliance with a Welsh Marcher Lord.

Hugh hadn't cared. He was grateful for any kinship with the formidable knight, and had continued to follow Robert's prescribed training even when he left Court.

When he had seen his friend again Robert had been a changed man, but they'd stayed close.

'I heard you were the last who saw him.' Eldric shook his head. 'Still can't comprehend how the bastards got him.'

'He went off alone,' Hugh supplied. 'And he was just a man.'
'A legend.'

Even more so now in death.

A death that the English mourned, but that Hugh knew was a lie.

Secrets and more secrets.

Robert was still alive, and married into a Scottish family. And

if he was found he would be formally executed.

Hugh, who held his secret, would most likely be murdered on some abandoned road, his body left to rot in a forgotten wood.

He had made a vow that day to Robert, on Scottish soil, that he would never tell the King or his fellow man that Robert still lived. A solemn vow. A traitorous one, as well.

Hugh didn't care. The only thing he cared about was his friendship with Robert, and that he'd take to his grave...wherever that was to be.

However, that didn't mean he wanted to die any time soon, and Eldric merely mentioning Robert was a threat.

'What are you doing here, Eldric?' he repeated.

Eldric kicked at the dirt on the floorboards. 'Attending a dinner tonight. It's St Martin's Day.'

Holidays. Celebration. Hugh wasn't in the mood for merriment.

Standing, he signalled to the door. 'I shouldn't keep you, then.'

'I came to take you with me.'

Hugh bit back a telling curse. Wanting no company, he'd purposefully kept quiet about his arrival. He'd wanted one night to wallow in self-pity upon being forced to return here. One night to drink as if copious amounts of ale in this hovel didn't hold bitterness.

But that was not why he wanted to curse. It was because Eldric had been invited to a traditional dinner and he could bring a guest.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Weeks.’

‘Weeks’ meant he had been here before the King had sent him. If Eldric was a spy, it didn’t have anything to do with him and Alice.

So perhaps it was true that he’d come on a detour. But no detour took that much time in a town the size of Swaffham.

‘Weeks’ meant something else. Friend or no, Eldric wasn’t on any mere detour. Even if it was futile, Edward had sent Hugh here on a mission to find the Half-Thistle Spy, and he didn’t like any interference. Eldric being here for weeks was definitely an interference.

Of course Eldric could have lied about his time spent here, and hadn’t, which should go in his favour. But there were too many coincidences that Hugh didn’t like.

He also didn’t like it that his flagon and his cup were empty.

‘The fare will be delicious at the mayor’s house,’ Eldric said.

The mayor’s house meant Alice. The one woman he shouldn’t see. Not in the state he was in. Not ever.

Knowing his going could only be a trap, Hugh answered, ‘Why not?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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