

Chapter 1

“France.” King Edward, third of that name, tapped at the large map spread out on the table.

“I know where it is, my lord.” In fact, Adam de Guirande had been there, so the miniature depiction of Notre Dame that adorned the beautifully written word *Paris* made him smile in recognition.

“It should be mine.” The king’s hand caressed the outline of England, spanned the Narrow Sea, and slammed down on France. “Mine, Adam.”

Adam was saved from the need to comment by the sudden appearance of Queen Philippa. Her veil askew, her cheeks rosy, she looked as if she’d been playing in the woods surrounding Windsor Castle, an impression further reinforced by the smudges on her skirts and hands. Adam could not but smile at her, this very young woman who, he knew from his wife, still retained an inordinate fondness for climbing trees, albeit she restricted such pastimes to when she was adequately out of sight from the court—and especially her mother-in-law.

“Edward?” She danced across the room, those almond-shaped eyes of hers a brilliant brown. “You promised we’d go riding.”

“I did.” The king drew her close and busied himself with ordering her veil. “Hoyden,” he murmured fondly, and she grinned at him. Edward turned to Adam. “We can talk more of this matter later. For now, I must attend to my lady wife.”

“My lord.” Adam bowed, thinking they were well-matched, those two. Not yet seventeen, King Edward needed someone who now and then encouraged him to be the lad he still was, and his two years younger wife was an ideal companion on such escapades. Besides, Philippa was not only a playmate and a welcoming pair of arms at night, she was

also the one person Edward felt he could confide everything to.

“Her and John,” he’d said to Adam as recently as last night. “But John is still too much of a child.”

Since Prince John was not quite thirteen, that was probably a correct assessment, and Philippa was a keen observer of everything that went on at court. Only a fool would underestimate her, and Adam prided himself on not being a fool. He might be a minor knight, his education was not among the best—he could write and read, but not with sufficient fluidity to enjoy reading—but there was nothing wrong with his brain.

The king and his wife left the room, holding hands. Adam returned to his perusal of the large map. He rubbed his face. Ever since the previous French king’s death—more than a year ago, in early 1328—Edward had kept a careful eye on the events in France. King Charles had left a pregnant wife, and when Queen Jeanne was delivered of a girl child, the French had unanimously acclaimed Philippe of Valois as their next king, causing Edward to seethe. After all, he was King Charles’ nephew, a grandson of Philippe le Bel, and therefore he had as much a right to the French crown as did Valois. More, even, seeing as Valois was the son of a count, while he, Edward, was the trueborn son of a king.

The French—understandably, in Adam’s opinion—did not agree. Unfortunately, the king’s mother, Queen Isabella, did, albeit at present she advocated a cautious approach.

“For now, we must keep Cousin Philippe happy,” Queen Isabella had said earlier today. “Only once you have the superior forces required should you attack.”

God make that very much in the future, Adam thought. He had no desire to ride to war. At present, all he wanted was to ride home to Tresaints, the small manor just north of the Malvern Hills that was his home and where his wife was soon to give birth. As was his wont these days, Adam sent a silent prayer to the Virgin, begging that she keep a protective eye on his beloved Kit.

When Adam exited the king's large chamber, he bumped into his brother-in-law, Richard de Monmouth. As red-haired and blue-eyed as Kit, Richard was in many ways eerily similar to his half-sister, though Kit, thank the Lord, sprouted no beard. And where Richard's hair was a bright shade of red, Kit's was substantially darker, a rich shade the colour of good Bordeaux wine.

"Lord Mortimer wishes a word with you," Richard said, falling in step with Adam as they passed through the gate to the middle ward. Once out of the shadows, Richard stopped and lifted his face to the sun. "Spring, at last."

"Aye." At home, the ewes would be lambing, and knowing Kit, she'd be out in the fields with the shepherds when she should remain at rest. Twins...His throat clogged, and he cast a look at the chapel. A candle—no, three candles: one for Kit and one each for those unformed beings resting in her womb.

Richard elbowed him. "It's not the first time a woman is delivered of twins."

"The first time my woman is." Childbirth was always a risk for women. God had ordained thus, and there was little to do but pray.

Mortimer was pacing back and forth, dictating to one of his clerks. The long skirts of his richly embroidered robe swirled as he walked, revealing hose in bright green and a matching tunic beneath the purple and black of the robe. In silk, Adam would hazard: these days, Lord Roger Mortimer was almost always in silk—or velvet—as befitted one of the richest men in the country. One of the most powerful men as well, the new Earl of March ruling the realm side by side with Queen Isabella on behalf of the young king.

"Ah, Adam!" Lord Roger brightened.

"My lord." Adam reciprocated Mortimer's smile and at his invitation sat down on one of the few chairs. The clerk was dismissed, a page brought wine and goblets, and for some time they discussed everyday matters such as the health of Lord Roger's namesake and grandson, or how the work was progressing with the chapel Lord Roger was presently building at Ludlow.

A comfortable sharing of news between two men who had known each other for twenty years and more, ever since the night Lord Roger found Adam badly beaten and half-naked in the lower ward of Ludlow castle. At the time, Adam had been but a twelve-year-old lad, victim of his father's cruel abuse. Now he was a landowning knight, and all because of Mortimer's patronage.

"Have you heard the news about Lady Eleanor?" Mortimer asked.

"Lady Eleanor?" The land was littered with ladies so named, but Adam suspected Lord Roger was referring to Eleanor de Clare, the unhappy widow of Hugh Despenser, may he rot in hell.

A fine enough lady, in Adam's opinion. She'd paid a heavy price for having been married to Despenser, what with being locked up in the Tower while three of her daughters had been forced to take the veil. This smelled far too much of petty vengeance—the girls were innocent of any crimes, and yet it was them who had now been immured for good behind the walls of various convents.

"Abducted, no less." Mortimer grinned. "By William la Zouche." He laughed. "That must be a right uncomfortable marriage bed. Imagine bedding the man who helped capture your husband."

"They are wed?"

"Oh yes, and our lady queen is livid." Lord Roger cracked a walnut. "Let's hope la Zouche has a true fondness for the lady. If he abducted her to get at her share of the de Clare inheritance, he will be disappointed. For now, I'll not allow her to get her lands back."

Allow? Adam regarded his former lord and master from under a fall of his thick hair. It was the king who should decide on such matters—or at least be involved.

Lord Roger shrugged. "Well, enough of the gossip. What do you think about France?"

"France?"

"Yes, France: the kingdom on the other side of the Narrow Sea now ruled by Philippe, though both my lady love and her

son feel it should be him on the throne.”

“I think France has little reason to accept an English king,” Adam said.

“Just so.” Mortimer studied one of his many rings. “We do not see eyes to eye on this, Isabella and I. She says it is Edward’s God-given right to claim his Capet inheritance, while I...” He shrugged. “There is enough to do here.”

England was a restless realm. Some months back, the Earl of Lancaster’s attempted rebellion had been crushed, but just because one grandee was neatly hobbled and leashed did not mean the rest of the English barons were fully amenable.

Mortimer constantly had his back against the wall, defending his position as premier peer and effective ruler of the kingdom. As a consequence, his network of spies had grown larger than ever, Mortimer ensuring every royal appointment was filled by a man more loyal to him than to King Edward. It sat badly with Adam—and he loved Lord Roger. It had King Edward’s uncles, the earls of Norfolk and Kent, gnashing their teeth, and as to the rest of the young men who made up the king’s inner circle, they considered Mortimer a dangerous rabid dog.

“Edward, however, keeps on harping about his right to France.” Mortimer cracked yet another walnut. They sat in silence while he separated the nut from the shell. “Stubborn young fool.” Mortimer smiled. “Having said that, if ever an English king has the balls and the ability to conquer France, it is our Edward.”

“You truly think so?” Adam asked.

“I do.” Lord Roger stretched leisurely. “Takes after his grandsire rather than his sire, thank the Lord.”

Adam sipped at his wine. “His father was a disaster as a king, assuredly, but not a bad man.”

Mortimer’s brows shot up. “Edward of Caernarvon? Weak and with the constancy of an addled hen. Not qualities I associate with a good man.” He pursed his lips. “Well, he is safely gone, and I wish him well—as long as he stays well away from here.”

“Aye.” Adam turned his goblet round and round. “I

wonder where he is.” He’d been made responsible for smuggling the officially dead king out of England—a mission that could have ended with his and Kit’s deaths. It chafed at him, that to this day he did not know who had authorised the two ambushes that had attempted to kill him, Kit, Edward of Caernarvon, and Adam’s man-at-arms, Egard.

No matter how often Adam turned this over in his mind, only three people had the clout and the information required to do so: King Edward, Lord Roger, or Queen Isabella. They were the only people fully acquainted with the planned route, whereby Adam was to take the former king, disguised as a friar, to Canterbury—well, Dover—and there ensure he got passage to France.

“Sometimes, your face is very easy to read,” Lord Roger said, and Adam flushed and raised his goblet to his mouth. “You can’t let it go, can you?”

“Would you if someone had been instructed to kill not only you but your lady wife as well?” Adam retorted.

“No.” Mortimer poured them both some more wine. “It may be a case of overzealousness.”

“My lord?”

Lord Roger averted his face. “If I were to tell you that aye, there was an arrangement to kill the former king, what would you say?”

“You ordered it?” Adam asked.

Lord Roger shook his head. “I did not. Neither, I can assure you, did your young lord, our king.” He fidgeted on his seat, strong fingers crumbling what remained of the walnut shells.

“The queen.” Adam was not surprised. For various reasons, he had already excluded King Edward and Lord Roger from his list of suspects.

“It is not quite as you think,” Mortimer said. “She feared the former king would ride directly to Philippe in France, and that would have turned everything upside down. Philippe is no friend of Isabella—or of her half-Capet son—and would have been delighted to place means and men at Edward’s disposal.” He flashed Adam a crooked smile. “Philippe is a

man who upholds a rigid morality—at least when it comes to others. To see his sweet cousin openly take a lover such as me...” He left the rest unsaid.

Adam nodded, no more. Lord Roger Mortimer was a married man, and in Adam’s opinion, he was doing Lady Joan a terrible wrong by living so openly in sin with Queen Isabella.

“So she found someone she entrusted with the task of shadowing you and, if Edward showed any indications of wanting to flee, kill him.” Lord Roger met Adam’s eyes. “She did not think you capable of killing him in cold blood, should it be required.”

Adam’s instructions had been clear: should the former king attempt to abscond, he was to be killed. It had never been put to the test, and Adam was prone to agree with the queen—he did not have it in him to murder a man.

“I was taking precautions.” Queen Isabella glided into the room. She must have been listening for some time.

Adam rose to his feet, bowing slightly in her direction. “Precautions? And did that include killing all of us?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! My instructions were clear: should one in the group attempt to escape the others, he was to be killed. I didn’t even tell my man who he was to kill; all he knew was that he would probably be disguised as a friar.” She licked her lips. “He also knew you would be riding with his potential victim, as would Kit.”

“He knows me?” Adam asked.

Isabella inclined her head. “I was not aware of his resentment, though.”

“Resentment, my lady?”

Isabella sighed. “The man I chose dislikes you—as was made apparent when we were in Warwick.”

At first, Adam did not follow. And then he remembered the heated quarrel. “Robert de Langon.”

Queen Isabella nodded.

Adam closed his hand into a fist. De Langon, casually ordering the murder of Adam—and Kit! Next time he clapped eyes on that maggot, he’d throttle him.

“Had you told us about the ambushes when you first returned, he’d have been hanged by now,” Lord Roger said with something of an edge to his voice. “I still don’t understand how you could think either of us capable of ordering your death.” He encircled the queen’s waist, pulled her close enough that he could rest his head against her hip, should he want to. These overt displays of affection made Adam uncomfortable. Since Lancaster had knelt in the mud and submitted to the king’s justice, the queen and Mortimer had become far less circumspect, and it wasn’t only the king sending glowering looks their way.

Isabella studied Adam with a quirk to her beautiful mouth. How a woman could be at the same time so ravishing and forbidding was beyond Adam, but it was an alluring combination, perfect features hiding a core of steel that was rarely visible to those who did not know her. At present, her green eyes were as cold and hard as ice.

“He never suspected you, Roger. It was me he thought capable of such a sinister deed.” She laughed softly. “Adam sets a high store by your honour, my love. Mine, on the other hand, he drags through the dirt.”

“My lady, I...” Adam’s face heated. She held up her hand.

“There’s nothing you can say. Besides, how can I blame you? Indirectly, it was my fault, however unintentional.” She made a dismissive gesture. “I must talk to Lord Mortimer alone.”

Adam bowed and left.

He retired to St Edward’s chapel, pushing the heavy red door open. This time of the day, it was empty, and Adam lowered himself to his knees and spent some time in silent prayer. To be precise, he tried to, but he was distracted by what he had just heard. On the one hand, he was relieved to have finally cleared up the matter of who had tried to murder him and his wife. On the other, he was consumed by a fiery rage. Should de Langon ever show his face in court again, Adam would be more than happy to challenge him to a trial by combat, no quarter given.

With an effort, he cleansed his mind of any thoughts of de Langon. He focussed on the fluttering flames of the three little

candles he had just lit. He wanted to go home, be there for Kit when she birthed their children. That made him smile. Mabel would no more allow him to enter the birthing chamber than she would have Kit giving birth in the pigsty.

Behind him, the door creaked. Adam turned and lurched to his feet to bow when he recognised Queen Philippa, shadowed by some of her ladies. His damaged foot protested at the sudden movement, and for an instant his leg dipped.

“I did not mean to disturb you,” Philippa said, coming to stand beside him. She looked at his candles. “For Lady Kit?”

“Aye.” Adam could not quite suppress his sigh.

“Why don’t you ride home?”

“There is nothing I would rather do, but...” No point in saying more than that, Adam fixed his gaze on the eastern window, spring sunshine setting the red and yellow glass ablaze.

“Edward says no.” Philippa bit her plump lower lip. “I shall talk to him.”

“He may not like it, that you intercede for me.”

“For you?” She laughed, a soft tinkling sound that had Adam smiling in return. Their queen had a remarkable capacity for imbuing every space with her calming presence. “No, Sir Adam, that will not help: I shall instead remind him of how much he cares for Lady Kit.” She gave him a teasing smile. “Surely, by now you’ve worked out that my Edward has quite the chivalric side to him?”

Adam strangled a laugh. Beyond likening himself to St George, the king rarely spouted anything indicating such chivalric attitudes. His young lord was more into horses and weapons than the ladies, being quite oblivious to females other than his wife.

“You’d best go and pack.” Queen Philippa settled herself on her knees, gesturing for her women to do so as well. “You’ll be riding for home before vespers.” She grinned, and for an instant she looked more like a mischievous urchin than a queen. “Shall we make a wager?”

Adam laughed. “No, my lady.” He bowed again. “Your servant, my lady. Always.”

Chapter 2

“I know exactly how you feel.” Kit stroked the panting ewe’s head. “Two babies, kicking at you from the inside in their haste to meet the world.”

“You should not be out here,” old John said. “A lady like you, so close to her time, and here you are, kneeling among the sheep.”

“Every lamb that is born healthy adds to our wealth.” Kit sat back on her heels. “Besides, it is at least four weeks before I am due. What would you have me do? Remain in the solar and indulge in baked goods and dried fruit?”

“Better than being here in the mud.” But John smiled. “What does Mabel say?”

“You know your sister.” Kit set her hands to the ground and heaved herself upright without overbalancing. “She nags.”

“Ah. Well, she has always been good at that.” John grinned. “God knows she kept the rest of us in good order, despite being only a year or two older than me.”

Kit nodded, no more, attempting to catch her breath.

“My lady?” John hovered. Kit waved him away, watching as he dropped back down to help the second of the little lambs into the world.

“Kit!” William came striding over the pasture, all long legs and flapping gown. “What are you doing out here? Adam would have my guts for not keeping a better eye on you.” He gestured at the sky, as yet mostly dark, though a faint line of pink tainted the eastern horizon. “You should be sleeping!”

“Tell that to the ewes.” Kit rubbed at her back. “They mostly lamb at night.”

William took hold of her arm. “To bed, Kit. Mabel says—”

“Mabel says this, Mabel says that.” Kit snorted. “Truth be told, Mabel has little experience of either carrying or birthing a child.”

“Not necessarily out of choice, my lady,” John said. “Her babe died, as did her husband.”

Kit spread her hands in an apologetic gesture. “You’re right. That was uncalled for.”

“Inside,” William said. “Bed. Now.”

With no further protest, Kit accompanied him. Besides, her toes were freezing, and she needed to relieve herself.

They stopped at the chapel. Kit glanced at William, they shared a smile, and entered. The building was the oldest on the manor—or so Kit’s mother, Alaïs, had always maintained—a small whitewashed space in which the painted decorations were kept to a minimum. Not that any of this was visible in the wavering glow of the single candle burning on the altar, but Kit did not need light to know exactly where the statues of the three saints were. They sat just inside the door, St Winifride, St Wulfstan, and St Odo. A Welsh saint, a French saint, and an English one—apt in a manor built by a Norman knight upon returning from the Crusades.

William sank into his own thoughts before the altar. Kit clasped her hands over her swollen belly and wondered what Adam might be doing. She fidgeted, bumping into William. As tall as her husband, William also had the same fair hair and similar build as his brother, but where decades of earning his living with his sword had left Adam a collection of compact muscles, William had ink-splotched fingers and a tendency to squint—this after years of peering at documents and Holy Scripture.

Currently, he was Tresaints’ resident priest—and Adam’s steward, overseeing an ever-growing combination of pastures, woodlands, and fields. Being in the king’s service came with its rewards, and God knew they needed it: with all these children, more land was always welcome.

Beside her, William was praying, and she fell in, adding her voice to the whispered Latin.

“Amen,” he finished, and she echoed him before crossing herself. There was enough light in the chapel now for her to make out the Holy Virgin as she stood beside her son on the central panel of the triptych that adorned the altar. Kit

whispered yet one more prayer, this one directed to the Virgin, “See me and my babes safe through the coming ordeal.” It seemed to her the painted Virgin smiled.

Some hours later, Kit was in the kitchens, discussing food with Mall. There was plenty of salted herring left, and at present two dozen were soaking in cold water prior to being cooked. “Pottage with leeks,” Mall said, “and split peas.” She smacked her lips. “Will go well with the herring.”

In Kit’s considered opinion, little went well with herring, but she nodded all the same.

“Mistress?” Tom the Foundling almost fell into the kitchen. “There are people coming down the lane. John said to fetch you.”

Kit rose, steadying herself against the table. “People?”

“One of them’s a lady, and she has the prettiest palfrey I’ve ever seen, and—”

“A lady, Mama,” Meg interrupted, jumping up and down. “A real lady, and she has—”

Kit waved the children silent. “A lady?” She made for the door, Meg skipping beside her.

“A pretty, pretty lady,” Meg warbled, jumping up and down with such enthusiasm her dark braids escaped her coif. “Will they stay?”

“We shall see.” In her head, Kit was already considering how to lodge these unknown guests.

“Ah, there you are.” William looked anything but happy. “We have visitors.”

“So I heard. Who?” She accompanied him over the little bailey towards the gate.

“You’ll never guess,” he said, just as the first rider came through the gate. Kit’s belly cramped, and she took an instinctive step closer to William.

“What’s she doing here?” she whispered.

Beside her, Meg gasped in admiration, eyes riveted to the figure clad in green and blue, the hood of her mantle thrown back to reveal a veil in the sheerest of linen.

“I am sure we will find out.” William set a hand to her

back, sufficient support for Kit to stiffen her spine.

“Sister,” Kit offered reluctantly when the neat little mare came to a halt in front of her. Alicia Luytens and she shared a father, but where Alicia had been born in wedlock, Kit was the child of an illicit union, the damage further compounded—at least in Alicia’s eyes—by the fact that Kit’s mother was a salter’s daughter.

Alicia did not reply, narrow face set in an unreadable expression as she gazed at her surroundings. “My father was born here,” she said to her male companion as she dismounted. “Imagine that! Such humble beginnings.” She landed lightly on her feet, made as if to enter the manor house, but Kit blocked her way.

“I do not recall inviting you,” Kit said.

“You didn’t. I came anyway—to see.” Thinly plucked brows rose in arcs as she took in Kit’s rounded state. “Another one? Really, some breed like rabbits, don’t they?” She laughed, tugging at her dark green mantle, a beautiful thing edged with squirrel fur. Gloves of a matching green covered her hands, and the silk in her blue skirts rustled when she moved. In comparison, Kit’s everyday russet was drab and unflattering, straining over her large belly.

“Why are you here?” William planted himself in front of Kit, arms crossed over his chest.

“Why not? Widow Luytens had a penchant to see her father’s birthplace.” Her companion threw the reins of his horse to one of his servants and strolled forward. “Small, but with potential,” he said, studying the recently refurbished manor house. He was dressed for travel, sensible clothes in good grey worsted and a heavy cloak lined with fleece. His dark hair fell in soft waves to his shoulders, a neat beard covered his cheeks, and eyes as cold and hard as pebbles alighted for an instant on Kit before he reverted to scrutinising the various buildings. The nerve of him! Kit wanted to spit in his face.

“And you are?” William asked.

“That,” Kit said, “is Robert de Langon—recently dismissed from the king’s service for slandering me.” To Kit’s satisfaction, this had de Langon paling. “And in view of what

you said, you are not welcome here at Tresaints—either of you.”

Alicia snickered and made a new attempt to reach the manor house. John surged forward, accompanied by his grandsons.

“Best leave,” John said. “My mistress does not want you here.”

“Maybe that is not for her to say,” Robert de Langon said. “After all, Tresaints was part of Katherine de Monmouth’s dowry, not the impostor’s.”

“And I was cheated by my brother.” Alicia swept the neat bailey yet another lingering look. “I should be compensated. I am looking at marrying again.” She simpered at Robert.

“Fortunately, my father amended the contracts,” Kit said. “Everything is in legal order—as confirmed by the late Earl of Pembroke.”

“I have rights!” Alicia hissed. “This is fine land and a good manor. Why should you have it and not me? I shall make claims on my brother, and then we’ll see.”

“You do that.” Something knotted itself in Kit’s belly, but she succeeded in sounding unperturbed. “But your quarrel is with him, not with me.”

“Knowing Richard, he’ll not part with anything of his to compensate me,” Alicia said.

“Knowing you, you don’t deserve any compensation.” Kit looked Alicia up and down. “You look in the best of spirits, despite being so recently bereaved. But then, I suppose you were overjoyed at hearing your husband was dead.”

“He abused me!” Alicia hissed.

“Ah. Is that why you had him killed?” Kit said, noting out of the corner of her eye how Robert took a step back from Alicia.

“I did not!” Pale blue eyes glared at Kit.

“So you say.” Kit studied her sister. “Have you told Robert about your foiled attempt to poison Queen Isabella and Earl Roger?”

“I...” Alicia spluttered, throwing a look at Robert.

“Is this true?” Robert said.

“She misconstrues.” Alicia’s face, always an unfortunate

collection of angles and sharp planes, tightened into a grimace. She sniffed and wiped at her long nose. "I was forced to do it. My mother's life hung in the balance."

"Not a great loss to the world," Kit muttered. Lady Cecily inhabited quite a few of Kit's rare nightmares, an apparition dominated by a nose as sharp and long as Alicia's and a mouth set in a permanent snarl.

"She was my mother!" Alicia scowled.

"I can but commiserate," Kit retorted. "And now I must bid you leave."

"What, no hospitality offered to weary travellers?" Robert de Langon asked.

"You are no friend of my husband—or of me. Neither is Alicia, so the answer is no." Kit raised her chin and stared him down.

At long last, he sighed. "We'd best get going," he said to Alicia. "It's quite the ride to Worcester." Once he was astride, he looked down at Kit. "I trust you were not lying about the contracts. Such things are easy to check, and I must of course look out for the interests of my wife-to-be."

"It will not avail you if you do." Kit even managed a cold smile. "Good day to you. I shall be sure to tell my husband of your visit. I dare say he will be less than pleased." She took a step forward. "It would be foolish to anger Adam de Guirande. He has the ear of the king—you do not."

De Langon sneered. "For now."

The moment they were gone, Kit turned to John. "As of now, the gate is kept closed. Always."

"Yes, my lady." John was already halfway to the gate, yelling orders. Meg and Tom scampered after him.

"What was that?" William asked.

"Intimidation." Kit clenched her hand to stop it from shaking. "I must send word to Adam—and Richard."

"Richard?"

"The contracts name Katherine de Monmouth, not me. They will have to be rewritten."

"Or amended." William took hold of her shoulders. "Calm down, Kit."

“My home!” She placed her hands over her heaving stomach. “This is my home, William!”

“And so it will remain.” He drew her close enough to kiss her forehead. “It will.” Kit rested against him, eyes closed. Long, slow breaths, and the loud thumping of her heart calmed.

“It’s all very odd,” she said once she’d regained her composure. “Alicia and de Langon—does Richard know?” She scraped at a spot of wax on the sleeve of William’s gown.

“She’s a wealthy widow. As a widow, she can arrange her affairs as it pleases her—and it seems Robert de Langon does.”

“They suit.” Kit straightened up. “May they find what they deserve in each other.”

“God help them,” William muttered. “De Langon is from Gascony, isn’t he?”

“He is. A minor lordling who hoped his father’s generous gifts to the new king would ensure an exalted position among the king’s friends.” Kit crouched to wipe her youngest son’s face. Harry beamed up at her, pudgy—and dirty—fingers gripping at her skirts. “But as Adam tells it, Edward rarely noticed his presence—or absence.”

“Ah. That must be difficult.”

“He’s not a nice man.” Kit took hold of William’s offered hand and hauled herself upright. “He doesn’t deserve any compassion.”

“All men deserve compassion,” William admonished. He winked. “Some less than others, to be sure.”

Six days later, Kit returned from a difficult lambing just before vespers. Her hands and forearms were covered with blood and other fluids, and all of her ached. She stood for a moment looking to the west, the setting sun colouring the sky that particular shade of pink one only saw during winter and early spring. The nearby shrubs swelled with buds, yellow coltsfoot dotted the ditches, and Easter was not quite a fortnight away.

“You look a right disgrace, m’lady,” Mabel said, appearing from the direction of the brewing shed. “Look at you, all

bloody and stained. What would your lord husband say if he saw you right now?"

"You smell?" Kit suggested, laughing at Mabel's responding scowl. "But you're right; I look a sight." She unrolled her sleeves. "I need a bath."

"Aye." Mabel's face softened. "And some days in bed, from the look of it." She took Kit's hand. "You need your rest, m'lady. Now if you would only do as I say and—"

"No." Kit gave Mabel an irritated look. "I will not be confined to my solar."

A recurring point of contention between them, with Mabel repeating over and over that well-bred ladies always retired to their chambers prior to a birth, while Kit maintained there was no need, not here at Tresaints, where there was no one to see the lady of the manor going about her business as usual, despite her bulk.

Mabel rolled her eyes and bustled off to arrange a bath.

A rare luxury, to wallow in hot water before the hearth, and Kit sank down with a pleased little exclamation. Other than the fire and the single candle on a nearby table, the room was dark, even though the single shutter had been left open to allow what remained of the daylight to stream in through the newly installed greenish glass, multiple small panels arranged in neat diamonds.

Kit closed her eyes. Ever since Alicia's disconcerting visit, she'd been on edge, and even now that she'd sent off a messenger with letters to Richard and Adam, it nagged at her. Simple malice, William insisted, and he was probably right, but for Alicia to come all the way to Tresaints, she was not making idle threats. It would keep. It had to keep, and Kit had to leave it to her husband to sort it.

The door opened, and an icy draft tickled her bare shoulders. "Leave," she said without turning to face the door. To her relief, the door shut, and she sank deeper into the water. Footsteps, and for an instant her heart was in her mouth, but then she recognised the slightly limping tread, and she sank even lower in the water to hide her smile beneath the surface.

Icy hands slid down her arms and pulled her upwards.

A familiar mouth came down on hers—an odd kiss, his face upside down.

“Sweeting,” Adam murmured against her lips, and his hands slid over her breasts to stroke her belly.

“You’re here,” she said, and that made him smile.

“Aye, so it seems.” He nipped her ear. “How are you?” Yet again his hands—no longer cold—slid over her belly. “Mabel tells me you refuse to rest as you should.”

“If Mabel had her way, I’d have been bedridden for the last month.” She covered his hands with her own, guiding them to where the skin bulged and shifted. “They are restless.”

“A miracle.” Adam splayed his fingers. “So much life within you.” For an instant, his fingers disappeared before returning with some of the soft soap Mabel made. A delicate fragrance of soapwort and rose filled the air as he carefully washed her belly, her breasts, her thighs and arms. And then he had her dip her head and began the process of washing her hair, strong fingers massaging her scalp until she groaned.

No words, just his hands and fingers expressing how much he loved her, worshipped her, even, and by the time he was done, she was tingling all over, her wet hair hanging heavily down her back. He gestured for her to stand and dried her as meticulously as he had just washed her. It was cold, to stand naked while he wiped her down with various linen towels.

“Come here.” He opened his arms, and she stepped into the comforting warmth of his body, his well-worn tunic soft under her cheek, his chin digging into her head. “You’re big,” he said, laughter colouring his voice. “Can’t quite get my arms around you.”

He swept her up in his arms and deposited her in bed. She was covered in blankets, then he undressed and slipped in to join her, naked skin against naked skin. She luxuriated in his presence, in his familiar scent of leather and horses. He held her close, his mouth at her nape, one hand caressing the contour of her hip. Kit’s eyes grew heavy. Her man, keeping her safe with his warmth and strength.

“You must have ridden like the wind,” she said through a yawn.

“I always do when I’m on my way back home.” He rubbed his unshaven cheek up over her shoulder blades, a scratchy sensation that had her turning towards him—at present a difficult process, what with her belly.

“But still, the message...” Her voice trailed off. The message couldn’t have reached him.

“What message?”

Kit struggled up to sit; he followed suit. “Alicia was here. With Robert de Langon.”

“What?” He rose off the bed, all six feet and more of him quivering with anger. “That sheep’s turd of a man was here? Here?”

“A week ago.”

“Damn him! What did he want?”

Kit gave him a summary of the events while he walked back and forth, the reddish light from the fire dancing over his naked body. Golden fuzz covered his legs and arms, grew considerably thicker on his chest and darkened round his groin.

“And you’ve sent a message to Richard as well?” Adam asked once she was done. He came to sit beside her.

“I have.” She rested her head against his shoulder. “William says it was an empty threat.”

“It is. I will ensure it is.” He pulled her into his lap. “Alicia, with her eyes set on de Langon? This is a right mess.” His chest rose on a deep inhalation. “It was de Langon who set out to have us murdered last year.” Words spilled out of him at an alarming rate, about Queen Isabella and her little plan. Kit pressed her ear closer to his chest, half of her listening to the reassuring sound of his heartbeat, the rest attempting to make sense of all this.

“Do you believe her?”

“About not aiming to have us murdered? Aye, I do—mostly. But at the same time, I find myself pondering her choice of man to do the job. She maintains she had no idea de Langon disliked me, but only a person blind and deaf would not have noticed.”

“You forget Queen Isabella expends little attention on

those beneath her.” Kit pressed her lips to his clavicle. “She may have been speaking the truth.”

“We must hope so.” He sighed. “I wonder if Alicia knows Robert attempted to kill us.”

“Not something he’d share with his future bride,” Kit said. “On the other hand, she wouldn’t have cared—we both know that. No love lost between her and me. What will you do about de Langon?”

“Ensure he understands it is best for him to leave England.” He dragged his fingers through her tangled, damp hair. “Preferably with his viper of a chosen bride.”

Chapter 3

Tresaints had visitors some days later. A large group of men, headed by the man Adam considered his best friend, for all that Thomas was a royal earl and Adam nothing but a minor knight. All the same, the sight of the Earl of Norfolk trotting down the long lane to Tresaints had Adam pursing his lips: the earl was a long way from home.

“We’ve been in Gloucester,” Thomas told Adam once he was off his horse. “Some matters to sort regarding some land I hold. And I visited with Berkeley.”

Adam was spared the need to reply as Kit came forward to greet their guest. Thomas visiting Berkeley was odd. Where Thomas was critical of Roger Mortimer, Lord Berkeley was one of Lord Roger’s most trusted allies, married to the eldest of the Mortimer offspring, Margaret. By now, she’d given him four or five sons, and from what Adam had heard, it was a happy enough marriage. Berkeley was also the man Mortimer had put in charge of the imprisoned Edward II, and that in itself ensured there was little love lost between Thomas and him.

“Kit! As round as an apple and as rosy,” Thomas said, a hand closing on Kit’s elbow when she attempted a reverence. “Don’t do that. You may never rise again.” He grinned; Kit smiled back before taking a step backwards, thereby bumping into Adam. He slipped a proprietary arm round her shoulders.

“Ale?” he asked.

“Food.” Thomas patted his belly. “A full day on horseback has left me starving.” He did a slow turn. “Is it my imagination, or has the house grown since I was here last?”

“It has been expanded.” Adam swelled with pride. “New kitchens, new rooms, a new gatehouse and new stables.” Nothing in comparison with the earl’s magnificent Framlingham or Walton, but Adam loved his home.

“You’ve been quite the builder,” Thomas said with a laugh. “Almost as busy as Mortimer.” His brow clouded. “That man is constantly improving his many abodes.”

“And you do not?” Kit asked.

“Oh, I do.” Thomas gave her a brief smile. “But I find I have fewer castles than he does to renovate.” He cleared his throat. “Any new horses in those stables of yours, Adam?”

“A few.” Adam led the way. “Goliath breeds true.”

“God spare us,” Thomas muttered. “In temper as well as looks?”

“No.” Adam laughed. “His get are more biddable than the sire.” He held the door open for the earl, and they stepped into the murky warmth of the stables. Goliath was stabled furthest away from the door, while Adam’s Flemish stallion, a surprisingly docile beast named Raven, was half asleep in his stall some yards away.

“And was Berkeley doing well?” Adam asked casually as they stood admiring the new foals.

“We didn’t discuss his health.” Thomas leaned over to scratch the little colt. “We mostly talked about practical matters.” He straightened up. “And my brother.” Even in the weak light, Adam could see the scowl on Thomas’ face. “He maintains Edward died in 1327.”

“What else can he say? He was the one who informed our king of his father’s death.”

“He’s lying! You know, he knows, and I know! And damn him, it’s my brother we’re talking about here.” Thomas inhaled. “You swore to me in January that he was hale but if so, where is he? That fool of a castellan at Corfe told Edmund he’d seen him a year ago, but since then we’ve heard nothing.” He whirled. “So maybe he *is* dead and maybe he wouldn’t have been dead had I done something—anything—to help him.”

“He’s not at Corfe.” Adam kept his eyes on the dark bay hide of the foal.

“But he is alive?”

The desperate hope in Thomas’ voice had Adam nodding. “As far as I know.” He looked at his friend. “I can’t tell you

more than that. I have sworn an oath not to do so, and I have a wife and children to think of.”

“As I have a brother.”

“And a nephew,” Adam reminded him sharply. “Our young king would not benefit from it being common knowledge his father is alive.”

“Our young king would not even be king then,” Thomas retorted. “Nor would the Great Seal reside in the hands of Queen Isabella and her lover.”

It was Adam’s turn to scowl. “Anyone threatens my lord, and I’ll—”

Thomas held up his hand. “No one is threatening Ned. And yes, I know as well as you do my brother is not cut out to be king. But from there to remain forever behind walls...” His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “It’s not right.”

“As God ordains, Thomas.” Adam stood aside to allow Thomas to exit the stables first.

“As Mortimer ordains, you mean. Together with dear Isabella.” Thomas shook his head. “I did not think a woman could be so ruthless.”

“She’s protecting her son.”

Thomas’ brows rose. “Don’t be obtuse, Adam. It may have started out like that, a concerned mother defending her young, but these days it is more about defending herself—and Mortimer—from her son.”

Adam didn’t reply. Only a fool would disagree with that statement. Time was running out for Queen Isabella and Lord Roger, and God alone knew how it all would end.

When they entered the hall, Kit ushered them to a table set close to the large hearth. Ale, one of Mall’s excellent leek pies, and a little platter of dried fruits—not much to offer an earl, but Lent fare was what it was.

Thomas’ men were seated some distance away, and from their single-minded concentration on trenchers and platters, they’d not eaten since they broke their fast.

“Did you know Godfrey of Broseley was apprehended in

Gloucester some weeks ago?" Thomas speared a roasted clove of garlic, eyes glancing briefly at Kit.

"Apprehended?" She clasped her hands in front of her.

"Aye. They were set to hang him, but..." Thomas fell silent as he chewed, "he got away."

"What? That man has more lives than an accursed cat!" Adam exploded.

"Maybe. Or someone didn't want him to tell the assizes that he believes the old king is alive." Thomas shrugged. "Whatever the case, one morning he was gone."

"Gloucester?" Kit's voice quavered. "He's in Gloucester?"

"Not anymore." Thomas wiped his hands and sat back. "Last anyone heard, he was making for Bristol."

"Still too close," Adam muttered, throwing Kit a concerned look. She'd gone as still as Lot's wife—after she'd become a pillar of salt.

"Likely, he's in France." Thomas leaned forward and gave Kit a smile. "Nothing left for him here, not with Thomas Wake and Lancaster laid low."

Adam took her hand. "Thomas is right, sweeting. He has no reason to stay."

"Unless he's still looking for the former king," she replied. "He strikes me as a determined man." A shiver coursed through her, and for an instant her composure cracked, eyes wide with fright, fingers tightening like a vice round Adam's digits.

"Shhh." Adam drew her close, glaring at Thomas over her head. "He'll not hurt you again. Ever."

"I'm sorry." Thomas poured Kit some more wine. "I did not mean to disconcert you. I just felt you should know." He cleared his throat. "Broseley would be a fool to come back here. That old man you've got guarding the gate would have him looking like a hedgehog before he made it down the lane."

"Aye, John has his own score to settle with Broseley," Adam said, and Kit's mouth twitched into a weak smile. He lifted her hand to his mouth. "I'll send to Bristol in the morning. Let's see if we can find out where he went—a man as ugly as Godfrey cannot have gone unnoticed."

Scar-faced and about as wide as he was tall, Godfrey of Broseley was difficult to forget, menace leaking from him like wisps of smoke from a hearth. The scar to his face was Adam's handiwork; the scar that supposedly adorned Godfrey's groin was the result of Kit's knife, which was why Godfrey had abducted Kit last summer, threatening to kill her unless Adam told him where the former king was held. Seven days in hell—for Kit, at the mercy of Godfrey, but also for Adam, searching for her.

"I've already set men to do just that," Thomas said. "And should Broseley still be there, I've sent word to the sheriff. Thomas Rodborwe is good at his job."

Thomas went on to change the subject, but Adam wasn't listening, submerged in dark thoughts about Broseley. The bastard should have been dead, and it was Adam's fault that the miscreant was still around to draw breath. He tightened his hold on his eating knife, a series of quick stabbing movements that reduced the dried fig before him to fragments.

Beside him, Kit laughed. There were roses on her cheeks, a sheen to her eyes, her recent discomfiture clearly a thing of the past as she leaned towards Thomas.

"You protest too much," she said. "I think you secretly like romances."

"Like them?" Thomas beckoned for Stephen, Adam's page, to replenish his goblet. "What is not to like? But it's all so predictable. Either it all ends in tragedy or the lovers are happily reunited."

"Two very different outcomes," Kit objected, "not at all predictable."

"Tristan and Iseult? Death. Guinevere and Lancelot? Very tragic."

"Guinevere was married elsewhere," Adam interjected. "They deserved a tragic end."

"Ah, ah." Thomas wagged his finger. "Love, Adam. So powerful it sweeps everything else aside. What can mortal man do against such forces?"

"Fight the urge," Adam said drily.

"Sometimes, that doesn't help." Thomas studied his hands.

Kit's lashes swept down to shield her eyes. Black jealousy twisted like a snake through Adam's innards. Until he caught the look she gave Thomas: compassion, not passion.

"He wed impetuously," Kit said later, walking slowly up the stairs to their solar. Tallow candles in shallow sconces lit their progress, light flickering over the whitewashed walls. "Not always a guarantee for contentment." They'd bid Thomas good night, Adam's squire, Gavin, escorting the earl to the chamber above the kitchens—part of the extensions made last year, and furnished with a new bed and new tapestries.

"No." Adam steadied her up the last few treads. "Not everyone is as fortunate as we are."

Kit reclined against him—an instant of her warm, rounded shape against his chest. "Ours was not the best of beginnings."

"I disagree." He held the door for her. "The beginning was quite spectacular. But afterwards, when I found out you'd duped me—"

"Not me! I was forced, you know that. It was Lady Cecily who—"

"Shush, sweeting." He dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. "I know." Now and then it still rankled, that Lady Cecily should have played him the fool by replacing her true-born daughter with her husband's bastard to safeguard the Monmouth fortunes. Not that he ever regretted his wife: he'd never known Katherine de Monmouth, but rumour had her as grasping and cold-hearted as her mother, hoping for more than marriage with a mere knight such as Adam de Guirande. "In truth, she did me a favour, the witch." He tugged at her veil. "Without her scheming, I would never have met you."

Kit gave him a brief smile. "Or I you." She twisted. "Will you help me with my laces?"

He helped her out of the heavy wool kirtle, lifted her chemise over her head, and dropped to his knees to undo her garters and roll down her hose. His hands closed on her ankles; he slid them upwards, over her thighs, her hips, her flanks, all the way to her bosom, two soft breasts nestling in his grip.

He undid her heavy braid, and hair the colour of a fox

pelt spilled down her back, grazing the upper slope of her buttocks. Her belly protruded like a giant orb, and he couldn't resist the desire to set his hands on it, caressing the taut skin.

"As round as a harvest moon," he said.

"But not quite as yellow," she teased.

"No. You're more of a pearly pink." He backed her towards the bed, had her sit and watch while he undressed.

"We shouldn't," she said, giving him a coy look. She was right: they should abstain during Lent, and besides, it was a sin to lie with your wife other than for procreation, but Adam had long since decided this was a sin so minor so as to not matter. He took great pleasure in his wife, was careful to ensure her pleasure was as great as his, and surely the good Lord would not deny them something so full of joy. Not that he'd ever shared these opinions with a man of God—this despite his own brother being a priest—nor did he intend to.

"Would you rather we didn't?"

"No." The tip of her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

"Good." He pulled a heavy sheep's fleece off the bed and knelt before her. She widened her legs, and he covered her dark curls with his hand. She was moist and warm, eyes glazing as his finger slid back and forth. He leaned forward and kissed her, his tongue following the contour of her lips. They kissed for a long time, a slow dance of tongue and lips, a gentle exploration that left him short of breath and with a thudding cock. Kit shifted closer to the edge of the bed. He entered her. Hot. Tight. There was a sudden rush of air as she exhaled, leaning back to move her belly out of the way and give him better access. Adam slipped his hands under her buttocks, lifted her closer, and drove into her.

They lay close together afterwards, her cheek on his chest.

"Mabel says lovemaking this close to birth may well start things off." She ran a hand over her belly; he followed suit, marvelling at all the life contained within. It bulged and shifted under his touch. His seed: his children.

"Really? Why?"

"Mabel says it's akin to the father knocking at the door

of the womb.” She giggled, her hand sliding down to fondle him. “Knock, knock.”

Adam spread his legs. “Is that an invitation, my lady?”

Her warm lips left a series of moist imprints down his chest. “Always, my dearest lord and husband. Always.”