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My Lady De Burgh

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His Whole Family Was Cursed!How else to explain this rash of marriages by the Brothers de Burgh? Robin de Burgh alone swore to remain unwed, despite ironic fate, which used foul murder to mate him with The One–spirited Sybil, a damsel in distress who insisted she needed him not!When convent walls became more prison than refuge, restless novice Sybil knew 'twas time to leave. But never did she expect to trade her wimple for a wedding veil, even when Sir Robin de Burgh, knight most impudent, demanded she put her life–and her heart–in his hands!

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Содержание

My Lady de Burgh 6
Contents 7
Chapter One 8
Chapter Two 16
Chapter Three 24
Chapter Four 31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 36

"Have you some bodily rash that makes you constantly rub yourself?"

For one brief moment Robin was so stunned by her words that he simply stared, then he threw back his head and burst out laughing. Obviously her life as a novice had not dulled her wits or her tongue. There was nothing he liked more in the world than to laugh—well, almost nothing—and in his experience few women had a talent for amusement. Not this one, however. She annoyed him and challenged him, yet did not fail to keep him entertained.

Robin was tempted to tell her that the problem with his clothes lay in the fact that he was wearing too many.

"Indeed, you have guessed it aright, and well I could use with some help with a certain itch that needs to be scratched," Robin drawled. He saw her eyes widen and her cheeks grow pink.…

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For all my wonderful readers in Japan, with thanks for all your generosity, support and enthusiasm

Contents

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 One

The de Burghs had been cursed.

Robin was certain of it. Although the family continued to be prosperous and powerful, all of its members seemingly healthy and strong, there was an insidious force at work that was gradually weakening its ranks and scattering the de Burghs across the countryside. And Robin knew well its name. Marriage.

Just four years ago the seven sons of the Earl of Campion had been bachelors and determined to remain so. Then, as if directed by some unseen hand, one by one, Dunstan, Geoffrey and Simon had taken wives. Even the earl himself had wed again at Christmastide! And now Robin had been called home to the celebration of his brother Stephen's nuptials.

As he glanced around the great hall of Campion Castle, Robin was not cheered by the sight of the many couples. Instead of tendering congratulations, he wanted to howl in outrage. Not only did he protest the fate of his siblings, but of the three de Burghs yet unmarried, he was the oldest, a knowledge that made him decidedly tense. And with good reason. Robin had no idea how the other two felt about it, but he was starting to sweat.

It was not that he had anything against women. They provided a welcome diversion at times, some more than others, of course, but even the most comely or entertaining did not tempt him in the slightest toward a lasting union. The very thought of being shackled to one of them forever made Robin lift a finger to loosen his suddenly tight neckline. Already, he felt the noose closing around him, collaring him forever to some unknown, unnamed female.

Although usually the most lighthearted member of the family, Robin was becoming downright surly as he contemplated his future. As both a man and a knight, he resented the feeling of helplessness that assailed him. He wanted to strike out, but what use was his skill with a sword against a phantom? Robin gritted his teeth even as he wondered how much time he had left. Although his brothers appeared to have succumbed without a fight, he refused to accept his fate so easily.

Surely there was some way to prevent what lay ahead! Robin had been taught that reasoning could extricate him from most situations, and normally he would have asked his father for advice, but the earl had already been felled by the curse. In this instance, whatever wisdom he offered would be suspect. And there was no sense in approaching his married brothers.

Robin's options were dwindling, and he felt the cold, clammy press of desperation. He had always thought the de Burghs invincible, for they were powerful men, strong warriors, learned in varying degrees and skillful at running a vast demesne. Wealth and privilege and capability had resulted in an inbred arrogance that continued to show itself, even in those who now called themselves husbands, but Robin felt his own confidence faltering. Only three de Burgh bachelors remained; perhaps it was time they put their heads together.

Having made his decision, Robin moved into action swiftly, seeking Reynold among those who crowded the vast, vaulted hall. He found the younger de Burgh seated on a bench, his back against the wall and his bad leg stretched out before him. Normally glum, Reynold appeared even more grim than ever, and Robin wondered if he was counting his last hours of freedom, as well.

Flashing Reynold what he hoped was an encouraging grin, Robin sank down beside his brother and tried to think of what to say. No one had openly broached the subject of this sudden alarming propensity for marriage, and Robin was not sure how to begin. Luckily, Reynold spoke first.

"Can you believe it?" he asked, shaking his head as he gazed at Stephen. "After all the women he has dallied with, I never thought to see him settle down. Or give up his taste for wine."

"Nor did I," Robin agreed. He studied Reynold carefully, but his brother's expression was unreadable, as usual. However, he was determined to plunge onward. Although the de Burghs would rather die than admit a weakness, clearly honesty was called for in this instance, and time was running

out. Perhaps together they could somehow bring about an end to the weddings. Hopefully, before his own.

"I never expected to see any of our brothers wed," Robin said, slanting a glance toward his sibling. "Don't you think it odd that they are all doing it? And so quickly?"

Reynold shrugged stiffly. He was never talkative, so Robin wasn't particularly disheartened by his lack of comment. And there was no point in waiting any longer. "Well, I do. I think it damned odd," Robin said. He leaned closer, to speak in a low undertone. "In fact, I think 'tis the work of a curse."

Reynold swung round to stare at him, but Robin was undeterred by the scrutiny. "How else would you account for it?" he demanded. "Just a few years ago we were all bachelors and liking it well enough. Now, as if manipulated by some mysterious force, the de Burghs are being shackled to females, one by one, even Father!" Robin shuddered. "I tell you, we must do something before we are next!"

Robin followed Reynold's glance down to the cup in his hand and frowned. He had been drinking a bit much of the freely flowing wine, but who wouldn't, when faced with his sentence for the future? Surely, even the implacable Reynold must be worried. "Aren't you concerned?" he asked.

His brother's stoic expression changed not a whit. "About what?"

"About being snared by some woman!" Robin said, waving a hand toward their once-carefree brothers, who now hovered near their respective wives, smitten and witless. "About becoming one of them!"

Reynold snorted. "I should be so lucky."

"Lucky? I tell you, they've been cursed!" Robin protested.

Reynold eyed him as if he had lost his mind. "Look at them, Robin," he said. "Do you think they're unhappy?"

Robin obediently glanced toward the sibling who stood closest in their line of sight. It was Stephen, and Robin had to admit that his charming brother looked even better than ever, but that was probably because he had quit drinking. Of course, he was grinning like a fool, as they all were, even surly Simon. As for Geoffrey, the scholar, he was crowing over the infant in his arms, just as if he had personally given birth to it, and Robin felt a stab of something alien.

"Of course, they all appear happy, otherwise they wouldn't have gone through with it, would they?" he said. "I tell you, it's all part of some blight upon the family."

"Most men would trade their souls for such a blight," Reynold murmured. Something stark and wistful passed over his face, only to be replaced by a scowl. "There's no curse," he muttered.

"And just how can you be sure of that?" Robin asked, annoyed by Reynold's skepticism.

"Because I will never marry," he said, and rising to his feet, Reynold stalked away, limping slightly.

Robin frowned. Was it his imagination or had his always moody brother become even more surly? It was probably because he alone of the seven de Burgh brothers remained at Campion. Robin wondered if he ought to stay on after the celebration instead of returning to Baddersly, a demesne he had been holding for Dunstan. But the thought of all the changes that had been wrought here in his absence, especially the addition of a new lady of the castle, a stepmother, made him wince. He wanted to go back to the Campion of old, not this new, unfamiliar place.

It seemed just yesterday he and his brothers had all lived here together, playing tricks on one another, relying strictly on each other, confiding only in each other, sometimes including their sire and sometimes not, though little enough got past the Earl of Campion. Oh, there were squabbles, of course, but they had been one, big, boisterous clan.

Now everything was different. His brothers were scattered all over the kingdom, living with their wives, returning for Christmas or an unusual occasion such as this one. It just wasn't right.

Robin grunted in dismay at the emptiness that yawned before him whenever he considered his family. Although his wasn't a bitter nature, he felt betrayed somehow.

Yet he was loathe to blame his brothers. They obviously were befuddled or under some kind of enchantment. How else to explain their sudden perplexing behavior? Robin had grown up with them in a household of men, lived now among the knights of Baddersly, and he just couldn't comprehend this abrupt penchant for taking wives.

It had started with Dunstan, the eldest, and the man Robin most admired in the world. Having served the king as a knight, Dunstan had won a demesne of his own, Wessex, and was now known as the Wolf of Wessex. When he wed Marion, a woman whom all the de Burghs held in affectionate regard, Robin had been startled. But the marriage had been forced by circumstance, Marion's guardian having threatened her. And since Dunstan lived apart anyway, the new arrangement had little altered things at home.

Poor Geoffrey had been forced to wed by king's decree, in a union designed to end the warring between Dunstan and his neighbor. At the time Robin had been thankful for his own escape, though sorry enough for Geoff, whose bride was a horrifying creature. She had since become more agreeable, but Robin still retained his sympathy for his brother, although Geoff seemed as devoted to her as Dunstan was to Marion. Still, the circumstances surrounding both couples were so unusual that Robin's suspicions hadn't been aroused.

It was Simon's nuptials that had shaken him.

Simon, the fiercest of them all, a warrior through and through, had, of his own volition, fallen for the woman who had bested him in battle! By the time Robin and his siblings had reached Simon, he was too far gone to help. Geoffrey had even insisted on matchmaking between the two, an act Robin considered tantamount to betrayal of his own flesh and blood.

It was at that point that Robin began to think of Dunstan, Geoffrey and Simon as possessed. And this celebration for Stephen, who was known for sampling the charms of women far and wide, had just confirmed his opinion. If Stephen could marry, then the rest of them were doomed. His once strong brothers had been felled, weakened and ensnared, and Robin had no intention of being the next to surrender.

Not that he particularly disliked women. He had dallied with a few, and they had provided him with most pleasant divertissement. Most pleasant. But outside the bedchamber, their appeal waned. For the most part, Robin found them to be petulant and demanding creatures, and he was not going to be saddled with a lifetime of that, no matter how happy his brothers appeared!

Perhaps Reynold yearned for such a fate, but Robin did not, and he would be taken for a fool before he would just sit around waiting for his own ruin. The more he thought about it, the more determined he became. With or without help, he was going to try to discover whatever bedeviled the de Burghs before it was too late. Drawing a deep breath, Robin knew a powerful surge of resolution, only to feel it flag as he came to a disappointing realization.

Unfortunately, he didn't know a thing about curses or how to remove them. The earl had raised his sons to be educated and enlightened, and they scoffed at witches, sorcery and the like. Although Robin had always been more inclined than the others toward the power of charms and talismans and relics, he had no idea where to find a totem to ward off weddings. As far as he knew, there was no patron saint of bachelors, unless one counted monks, and Robin had no desire to take a vow of chastity.

Quickly, he dismissed the Church as a source of aid in this matter, for its views on marriage were well known. No, he needed someone who possessed expertise of a more mystical nature. Robin racked his brain, but the only people he suspected might be familiar with such things were the l'Estranges, Stephen's new wife and her relatives. The hall had been buzzing with vague gossip about them ever since Robin had arrived. But somehow he didn't think the bride would appreciate it if he accused her, however obliquely, of being part of a scourge upon the de Burghs.

Robin frowned thoughtfully. Although he couldn't approach Brighid, she did have aunts, and they were rumored to have a knowledge of healing and other unusual skills. Perhaps, if he didn't seek to redress the wrongs of his older brothers, already lost to their wives, but sought strictly to prevent his own impending doom, Robin could coax them into helping him.

Taking a fortifying drink, he rose to his feet, immediately regretting his abrupt movement as he became slightly light-headed. With a grimace, he set his empty cup down, unwilling to replace Stephen as the drunkard of the family. He had always been his own man, neither envious nor imitative of his brothers, and he was not about to start now. Drawing a bracing breath, he headed through the festive crowd in search of the Mistresses l'Estrange.

They were not hard to find, for they wore very colorful costumes that stood out in the throng. The shorter, plump aunt even had some kind of little bells sewn on her sleeves, an obvious sign of eccentricity, if not otherworldly abilities. Robin grinned, feeling a renewing surge of his innate confidence. Surely, she could help him.

"Mistress l'Estrange?" he asked, and was rewarded by a jingling as the small, white-haired woman turned to greet him, a welcoming smile upon her face.

"My lord!"

"Please call me Robin, Mistress," he said, inclining his head graciously.

"Of course! And I am Cafell. Have you met my sister Armes?" she said, gesturing toward a taller, more taciturn woman.

Robin nodded again. "Mistress." He had intended to begin with the less dour one. Although not possessed of Stephen's reputation, he could play the charmer as well as any other de Burgh, and she looked more agreeable than her sister. But having gone this far, he didn't want to wait. It seemed imperative, suddenly, that he take some action.

He flashed them one of his best grins. "May I say what a pleasure it is to welcome you into our family."

"Why, thank you, my lord Robin," Cafell said, preening happily.

"Robin will do," he said, inclining his head once more as he subtly tried to maneuver the older woman to the side. Unfortunately, her sister followed, so he was forced to address them both.

"Indeed, I count your arrival as a stroke of good fortune for myself since I am in dire need of your special talents," he said smoothly.

Cafell's brow furrowed. "You have an injury that requires healing?"

Robin laughed. "No. My problem is a bit more unusual than that." He lowered his voice. "A most delicate matter, really—"

Armes cut him off with a sharp look. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the heritage of the l'Estranges, would it?" she asked.

Robin drew up short. Perhaps there was some sort of protocol involved here that he knew nothing about. "Well, yes—"

"Oh, good!" Cafell said, clapping her hands with glee, despite her sister's admonishing look. Robin glanced from one to the other in question. Although Cafell appeared delighted by his request, Armes remained rather forbidding. He wondered just what abilities she had and whether he was going to end up with even more trouble. He was already fending off one curse; he did not care to have another laid upon him.

"Tell us! What can we do for you?" Cafell said, interrupting his gloomy thoughts.

"Sister, I hardly think—" Armes began.

Cafell waved her arm in an airy gesture that produced little jingling sounds. "Oh, Brighid can hardly complain when she—"

"But he is a de Burgh!" Armes protested, while Robin swung his gaze from one sister to the other, trying to follow the conversation.

"All the better!" Cafell said, rubbing her hands together in a manner that began to alarm Robin. He started to reconsider his plan and stepped back a pace, only to feel the little woman's touch upon his arm. "Don't go, Lord Robin!" she admonished before turning to her sister.

"Armes, we must at least hear him out, for the sake of common courtesy, if nothing else. We are related now, after all," she added, which didn't hearten Robin one bit. She turned back to him brightly. "Come, now, tell us what troubles you."

"Well," Robin began. He eyed Armes warily, but she finally gave him a stiff nod, which he interpreted as a gesture to proceed.

"Go on, dear," Cafell urged.

"Well, I was thinking about all these weddings," Robin said. Warming to his subject, he drew a deep breath and plunged onward. "I find them all odd, following so closely on one another, when just a few years ago, we de Burghs were all bachelors."

Armes frowned. "What's so odd about it? Seven healthy young men of marriageable age are bound to seek out spouses, especially lords from such an important family."

"To carry on the dynasty!" Cafell noted, gleefully.

"Perhaps," Robin admitted, though privately he didn't accept that explanation. His brothers had never seemed intent upon reproducing until after they were wed. And why all of them at once? Dunstan had married late, but the others were doing so younger and younger. "Could it be that someone has put some kind of, ah, spell on us all?"

"Probably your own sire," Armes muttered, and Robin blinked, wondering if he had heard her aright.

"Oh, he's jesting, aren't you, Robin?" Cafell said, playfully striking his chest. "Your brother warned us that you were a trickster."

Robin felt his hopes ebb. Perhaps he was known for a few pranks here and there, but he was deadly serious, and he didn't know how to impress his urgency upon the eccentric l'Estranges.

"I think he means it," Armes said, and they both studied him with renewed interest.

"Why, Sister, I do believe you're right! But, why would you want to—"

"He's worried about himself," Armes said in a rather disgusted tone that made Robin straighten, though he could hardly take offense at what was the truth.

"Oh, you poor boy!" Cafell exclaimed, patting his arm, which produced more little bell sounds. He glanced around, uncomfortably, but she only leaned closer, as if to impart some secret. "I wish we could look into your future, to reassure you, but Brighid frowns upon those things, you see. Although I admit she is growing more open-minded of late." Cafell looked a question at her sister, who firmly shook her head.

"I do not think she would appreciate that sort of interference with her new family," Armes said.

Robin felt his shoulders droop in disappointment. He didn't want a bit of soothsaying; he needed a curse lifted. And even if these two were willing to help, it didn't appear they had the necessary skills. Abruptly, he brightened as a new course struck him. "Perhaps there is someone else you know, in the same line of trade, so to speak, who might be able to consider the problem?" he asked hopefully.

Armes sniffed. "'Tis not as though we belong to a guild, young man!"

"We really know of no others with such talents beyond our own family," Cafell explained gently. At Robin's crestfallen expression, she patted him again. "Now, don't despair. We shall think of something!"

The two women exchanged glances, then Cafell frowned pensively. Finally, she said, "Well, there is Cousin Anfri."

"A complete charlatan!" Armes sniffed.

"How about Mali?"

"Dead," Armes replied. "The l'Estranges are not blessed with many progeny."

Robin wondered if the union with Stephen would change that, but Cafell suddenly yelped, startling him. “What about Vala?” she said.

“Oh, poor Vala, she was quite the beauty, and so gifted,” Armes said.

“Didn’t she marry one of the Welsh princes?” Cafell asked.

“Yes,” Armes replied. “What was his name?”

“Owain ap Ednyfed?”

“I believe so,” Armes said with a nod. “But I understood that she died not long afterwards.”

“Did she? I was of the opinion that was not certain, but it is possible,” Cafell said. “So much fighting over there through the years, you understand, one prince against another or Llewelyn himself, and, of course, against the king. We were lucky to be well away from it all.” She paused. “But I thought there was a daughter.”

Armes frowned. “I don’t recall. That was a long time ago, and there was only hearsay—”

“Perhaps, Lord Robin could go and see!” Cafell suggested. She leaned forward, whispering confidentially, once more. “Vala was very gifted.”

Robin perked up at this news. “Where would I find her?” he asked.

“Why, in Wales, of course. That’s where most of the l’Estranges are, except us, of course.”

Robin stared at the two women, who were smiling benignly, and stifled a groan. Stephen and his bride had returned from Wales with rumors of war at their heels, the Welsh princes seizing lands and rousing the people against Edward. Were these two gentlewomen trying to get him killed? Having no intention of marching into a country in the midst of battle, Robin eyed them askance.

The l’Estranges seemed to be oblivious to such danger, however, and they waited expectantly for his answer, so he choked out a polite thank you and excused himself with a nod. As he walked away, Robin realized he had reached an impasse in his efforts to lift the curse.

But his lack of success was hard to accept, for if he did nothing, then surely he would find himself wed. And soon.

Robin watched his host raise a cup in salute to the de Burghs and wondered, not for the first time, what on earth he was doing on the Marches while unrest was abroad in the land. Whether prompted by concern for his way of life or drunk on too much wine or just eager to escape the press of people at Campion, he had left his family home in search of the mysterious Vala, against all tenets of good sense.

Arriving unannounced, he had nonetheless been welcomed by the lord and lady, who proceeded to hold a feast in his honor, a celebration with which Robin was vaguely uncomfortable. From the veiled hints, he gathered that they thought his unexpected arrival, coming so soon after Stephen’s, meant that he and his brothers were engaged in some sort of covert mission for the crown. Robin would have laughed aloud, if it were not for the tense atmosphere that hung thick over the castle.

It wasn’t until late, after he had been regaled with the transgressions of Llewelyn and his brother David and their followers that Robin finally approached the topic that had sent him recklessly to the boundary between England and Wales. He leaned back in a casual pose and tapped the edge of the table.

“So, tell me, do you know anything of a prince named Owain ap Ednyfed or his wife, Vala?” Robin asked.

The lord and lady exchanged glances. “What of them?”

Robin smiled benignly. “Relatives in England were asking about her.”

The lord frowned. “She died long ago.”

Something about his curt reply made Robin alert, and he shook his head as a servant offered him more wine, for he needed his wits about him. “Was there a child?” he asked.

Again, the surreptitious looks were exchanged, and he could feel the lord’s eyes boring into him, probing him for secrets. No doubt, they thought him privy to knowledge of an uprising or the

fate of their holdings. Little did they guess that his query had more to do with a dotty pair of so-called soothsayers than any questions of Welsh independence.

Somehow Robin didn't think they would find his quest amusing, and so he gracefully retired early. He was no warmonger like his brother Simon, and this visit had made him determined to turn around and hie himself back to safer ground as soon as possible.

Unfortunately for the remaining de Burgh bachelors, it appeared that he had met not just an impasse, but the end of his road. Idly, Robin wondered what the lord would say should he ask the direction of a local wise woman, perhaps some ancient Celtic practitioner, and he snorted to himself. The whole idea of finding someone to lift a curse seemed absurd now that he was well away from Campion Castle and the l'Estrange aunts.

He was too easily swayed. How often had his brothers traded on that trait, especially Stephen, who had sold him plenty of counterfeit religious relics in his youth? And, apparently, age had made him no wiser. Desperate to avoid the same fate as his siblings, he had latched on to the first scheme presented to him, no matter how foolhardy, when he would do better to pursue more traditional avenues.

A true relic might counteract the curse, Robin mused. Perhaps he should approach a priest or even make a pilgrimage to some shrine, though he had no idea which one. Saint Agnes was the patron saint of purity, but since it wasn't really purity he craved, Robin dismissed that idea with a grunt.

The sound, followed swiftly by another, echoed off the castle walls and Robin slowed his steps. Although full of rich food and wine, his de Burgh senses were still as sharp as ever, and as he reached the dark passage before his assigned chamber, he felt the presence of another.

The local situation being what it was, Robin slipped a hand to the dagger he kept tucked at his waist. Larger and more lethal than the usual dining knife, it could be silent and deadly when wielded with his skill. His fingers closing around it, Robin turned slightly, just in case a cudgel was poised behind him, a distinct possibility considering that everyone here thought him a spy.

But when he pivoted to glance around, Robin saw that no assassin stood there, only the man who had served him at table. Still, the fellow had a furtive air about him that kept Robin alert. "My lord," he whispered, looking back over his shoulder as if he would speak in secrecy.

"Aye?" Robin answered, though he had no wish to be further embroiled in the problems of the Marches.

"She did not die, but fled," he said.

"Who? Vala?" Robin asked.

The man gave a stealthy nod. "And there was issue, a daughter who lived, though all would deny it now. I saw her myself!"

Intrigued, Robin stepped closer. "Where are they now?"

But footsteps rang out in the passageway behind, and the man grew wild-eyed, edging past Robin hurriedly.

"Wait!" Robin called after him.

"Look to a refuge for women in your own land, my lord, one for those burdened by sorrows!" he said. Then he disappeared into the darkness, leaving Robin to contemplate the whole curious episode with a jaundiced eye. Just when he thought the road had ended, instead it opened up in all directions.

But did he care to follow?

Robin moved restlessly atop his massive destrier and wondered what on earth he was doing poised outside a nunnery. And not just any nunnery, but Our Lady of All Sorrows.

It had been a long, strange ride. Although he had seen no further sign of the servant who had spoken to him so clandestinely, Robin had bid goodbye to his host, determined to forget all about the woman who had married a Welsh prince. But somehow, once he left the border, Robin had ended up at the nearest abbey, the only place he would deem a refuge for women, and there he had inquired

about other such houses. And when he heard the name of Our Lady of All Sorrows, he knew a sudden urge to travel there.

Robin told himself that simple curiosity drove him, for the conflicting tales of Vala's fate would interest anyone. And he had always loved a good puzzle. In addition, he might well provide a service for Stephen's wife's family, who, no doubt, would be happy to learn their kin still lived. Perhaps even a reunion could be arranged.

Yet, despite these smug assurances, Robin was aware of some other, deeper compulsion urging him onward. Whether it was concern for his own future or a simple desire to put the matter to rest, he wasn't sure. But when he discovered that the nunnery lay not far from Baddersly, he returned to his brother's demesne in good time. There he left behind his men-at-arms, so that he might continue alone on the last stretch of a journey that even he was beginning to view as bizarre.

And so he found himself on this bright early-spring day looking upon the gatehouse to a small abbey surrounded by groves of tall elms. And faced with his destination at last, Robin felt a twinge of shame at what had brought him here. His selfish desires to avoid marriage, which the Church so encouraged, seemed a blaspheme upon this sacred house.

Our Lady of All Sorrows obviously was a place of peace, of quiet women, pure of soul and body, devoting their life to worship. And, for a long moment, Robin remained where he was, hesitant to enter the sanctuary that lay within, to disturb the stillness, broken only by the soft call of birds among the branches above him.

It was while he was considering his course that the cry went up, rising from within the walls to drift upon the wind and reach his ears, faint and frantic. At first, Robin could hardly think he heard aright, but soon the words came to him loud and clear. Although he had never imagined such issuing from a holy house, he could no longer ignore the astonishing plea.

Robin charged through the gates even as "Help! Murder!" rang in his ears.

Chapter Two

Robin barely paused to tether his horse before rushing toward the heavy doors of the abbey. Inside he found absolute chaos as nuns and servants ran either toward the screams or away from them. Brushing past the others, he strode ahead, hand upon the hilt of his sword, until he burst outside once more, into some sort of walled garden.

He surveyed the area quickly, taking in the small group of women standing in a circle. To one side of them, a nun was seated on a stone bench, making loud gasping noises, a less shrill version of the shrieking he had heard, while two others tried to comfort her. The lone man, probably some sort of servant, appeared to be as horrified as the women, and detecting no threat from him, Robin relaxed slightly.

Still, he kept his weapon at the ready as he stepped toward the small knot of females. Several of them fell back as he approached until at last he could see what held their attention and had caused the furor. In the center of the group a young woman lay prone on the grass, obviously dead.

As Robin took in this sad sight, the nuns seemed suddenly to become aware of his presence, for those nearest him squeaked and quailed, gathering together in a trembling huddle, leaving two others who remained apart, apparently unafraid. Robin's eyes went to the closest of the duo, an imposing figure whose eyes brimmed with intelligence and concern. Assuming she was the abbess, Robin opened his mouth to introduce himself, but a voice stopped him.

"Come to finish off the rest of us, have you?"

Robin started, stunned that someone would accuse him, a de Burgh, of doing murder, and he glanced down to where the second fearless female crouched near the deceased. Again, he prepared to speak, intending to deliver a scathing denial, but when he took a good look at her, his mouth stopped working. In fact, for a long, helpless moment, every one of Robin's bodily functions shut down, and all he could do was stare. At her.

Like the others, she wore a wimple that left little of her face showing, but what he could see was distinctive. Beautiful, in fact. Her forehead was smooth and pale, her brows delicate, tipped at the corners and an intriguing reddish color, like summer sunlight or autumn harvest. They hovered over eyes a lovely shade of blue that fascinated him. Though he could see nothing of her hair, her face was oval, ending in a stubborn little chin topped by lips set, too, in a stubborn manner. Oh, but what lips! Gently curved, they held a hint of color that reminded him of exotic berries or ripe fruit.

And suddenly, he was desperately hungry. Robin felt the world spinning around him as he gaped, rushing from beneath his feet to hurl him headlong into a future for which he was unprepared, but at the very last moment, he gulped, his fingers clinging tenaciously to the life he had known. And in that instant, he recognized her.

She was the One, the female who would destroy his existence as he knew it, enslave his mind, ensnare his body and suck all the fun out of everything. Well, it wasn't going to happen. Robin felt his mouth begin to work again, and it turned down into a fierce scowl. Curse or no curse, he was not going to marry this woman. Ever. And it was impossible anyway, he realized, as a sudden dizziness claimed him.

Day of God, he was destined for a nun!

"If blood makes you queasy, you had better sit down." Robin heard the voice, rife with disdain, and realized that she was speaking. Obviously, she no longer deemed him the murderer, but now she thought he might faint at the mere sight of death. Robin wasn't sure which presumption was more insulting.

He glared at her. "I am not a killer, but neither am I likely to swoon at a little blood," he said, injecting a healthy dose of contempt into his voice. Then, in a gesture of dismissal, he flicked his

gaze to the abbess. “I am Robin de Burgh of Baddersly, where I stand in stead of my brother, Baron of Wessex,” he explained with the innate confidence of his family.

Even if she had no idea who he was, the abbess ought to recognize his name. At the very least, she would be familiar with the surrounding holdings, especially one as large as Baddersly. “I was outside and heard the cries for help and came directly,” Robin added.

“My lord,” the abbess said, inclining her head graciously. “I am the abbess here. We are honored by your presence, though you find us in a quandary, for it appears that one of our fold has met with an accident, or worse.”

“No accident this,” she said, drawing his attention once again. “But murder most foul.”

“Ah. So it was you I heard shrieking,” Robin said. Although he suspected it was the other nun who continued to sniff and moan upon the bench, he could not help mocking this one in return for the taunts she had tendered him.

“Not I!” she answered, her eyes flashing, and Robin smiled smugly, pleased to get back some of his own.

“’Twas Catherine you heard, and we are grateful to her for sending up the alarm,” the abbess said, halting the argument that Robin sensed was forthcoming from the younger woman who eyed him so rebelliously.

“In fact, it appears that her cries served us well since they summoned you, my lord. ’Tis most fortuitous that you were passing by at this moment,” the abbess said, and Robin made no move to contradict her. After what had happened on the Marches, he thought it wise to be more discreet concerning his interest in the former Vala l’Estrange. And this unfortunate business might provide the perfect opportunity to make subtle inquiries without revealing his true purpose.

“Has the coroner been summoned?” he asked.

“Actually, I think he has just arrived,” the abbess replied. When Robin looked around, she smiled slightly. “I believe you are the coroner, my lord. The man who holds Baddersly has always taken that office, though there has been little enough need for him in recent years, thank the Lord.”

“But his sudden appearance here might be no coincidence,” she said, rising to her feet, and Robin’s outrage at her accusation was tempered by curiosity as she stood. She was taller than he had expected, but still the top of her head would barely reach his chin. She appeared slender, yet shapely, allowing Robin’s imagination to wander until he told himself it was most unseemly to speculate on what a nun might look like naked.

“Sybil!” the abbess scolded. “You have no reason to speak so of Lord de Burgh, whose aid will be most welcome.”

So her name was Sybil. Robin rolled it around in his mind, and, again, he felt that fierce sense of recognition. Sybil. Her name spoke of ancient mysteries, oracles and exotic lures tendered to unsuspecting men. Robin frowned. Luckily, he could not be counted among them, for he distrusted her on sight.

“As penance for your speech, you will work with Lord de Burgh on his investigation into the sad death of Elisa, providing him whatever assistance he might require,” the abbess said.

Horrified at her words, Robin opened his mouth to protest, but Sybil was quicker. “But he might be the murderer!” she exclaimed.

Robin felt his face flush. “As well could she be!” he countered. If Sybil was the One, why did he feel like thrashing her? Surely, his brothers had not suffered this odd reaction to their intended spouses!

“I hardly think either one of you is responsible, but you may keep an eye upon each other, if you are so uneasy,” the abbess said. “That is, if you will be gracious enough to aid us, my lord? I could send a message to the bishop, of course, but since you are already here…”

Robin tore his attention away from Sybil and back to the abbess, knowing full well that the older woman had neatly maneuvered him. But it little mattered in this case, for he had his own reasons for agreeing.

"Certainly, Reverend Abbess, I would be most happy to help you in any way I can," Robin said, firmly ignoring Sybil's complaints. She made a noise that sounded awfully like a snort of contempt, but stepped back to gesture toward the prone body in invitation, as if daring him to investigate. Did she think he would fall faint at the sight? Robin nearly laughed aloud, for he had been in battle. He was a de Burgh.

"Who found her?" Robin asked as he knelt beside the dead woman.

"Catherine and I," Sybil answered in a belligerent tone, and Robin pondered what she could possibly have against him. Perhaps she was one of those nuns who held a grudge against men. Or mayhap she simply resented his intrusion into her ordered existence. Still, she seemed too sharp-tongued for a holy woman. And too beautiful. And too shapely.

Robin glanced down at the body, the dead one, in an effort to tear his thoughts away from the live one that was claiming far too much of his interest. "Did you touch her?"

"Of course, we checked to see if she still lived!" Sybil replied, her answer sending the nun Catherine into a new fit of wailing. Robin glanced up at the One sharply in reprimand, and her mutinous expression made him wonder if all that bravado covered up her own fears. Or her own guilt.

Wonderful. Not only was he was destined for a nun, an abomination in itself, but a murdering nun. That made her worse than his brother Geoffrey's wife, who had killed her first husband defending herself, but at least belonged to no holy order. Nay, Robin told himself, quite firmly, this woman was not meant for him, no matter that she seemed for all the world to be the One. She was a woman of God, and he would do well to remember as much.

Robin shook his head and tried to concentrate upon the matter at hand. "Did you move her or was she exactly like this when you found her?" he asked. The dead woman's form was twisted, the upper portion lying mostly on her back, while the lower rested on her side. Blood had seeped from a wound to the back of her head, but was no longer fresh. Dark, thick and drying, its condition told Robin that she probably had died during the night, certainly not within the last hour.

"I only turned her slightly," Sybil said, her voice still ringing with animosity.

Robin ignored it to continue his study of the deceased. Nearby lay a large rock with blood upon its surface that appeared to correspond to the woman's injury. Indeed, the situation of the body made it appear as if she had fallen and struck her head, though it would take a mighty tumble to do such damage. Robin looked around, his gaze lighting upon the nearby stone wall, and he mentally judged the distance from its top to the ground. If Elisa had been climbing over the top during the night and had slipped, she might well have met her death.

"Perhaps 'tis no murder, after all," Robin said, "But an unfortunate accident." Although he didn't want to speculate on the nun's reason for clambering over the high stone barrier, Robin knew that she would likely not be the first member of her order to engage in clandestine meetings.

"Nay! Elisa would not have been on the wall," Sybil said, following his thoughts as easily as if he had spoken them aloud. He glanced up to see that she had crossed her arms in front of her in a stance so belligerent that Robin didn't know whether to laugh or growl in exasperation. "Besides, 'tis too convenient," she added. "More likely, the murderer arranged all in a effort to appease the gullible."

Robin bristled at the insult, but, instead of arguing, he lifted the dead woman's head, carefully inspecting the wound to see if it matched the marks on the stone. Long ago, he had learned the secret of concentration from his father and his brother Geoffrey, and so he tried to focus solely upon what he was doing, despite the sound of the abbess herding the nuns from the scene.

All of them, that is, except for Sybil. She remained, continuing her complaints, and even though Robin heeded not her words, she definitely was a distraction. How on earth had she come to be a

nun? Obviously, this order did not hold to the tenets of silence, Robin decided, even as he heard her voice on the edges of his awareness, tempting him to stop her mouth, preferably with his own.

Loosing a low oath that he hoped might offend a woman of God, or at least make her be quiet, Robin assessed the injury before him. During the studies of his younger years, he had taken an interest in medicine, so the sight did not disturb him. Nor was he likely to faint away as Sybil had suggested. But he did find something interesting.

"You're right," he said suddenly, finally putting a stop to the incessant flow of speech from Sybil's lips. "She was murdered," he said into the blessed silence. The peace was brief, however.

"What? How do you know?" Sybil asked, and he gently turned Elisa's upper body onto her side.

"Look here," he said. When Sybil gamely knelt beside him, Robin tried to ignore the pleasant waft of her scent. She was too near, but there was no help for it. Gritting his teeth, he pointed to a spot on the back of the dead woman's head. "Another blow."

Sybil looked at him then, her eyes wide, and he saw that they weren't just blue, but a light, lovely color surrounded by a rim of darker blue. He felt himself swaying, nearly falling, before he caught himself. Drawing a deep breath, he looked at the dead woman.

"She was struck twice," he explained in a strained voice. "Obviously, the smaller injury did not kill her, and your murderer was forced to render another blow. If she had simply fallen, she would have been hurt only once."

"I knew it," Sybil said beside him, her tone so rife with excitement that it roused an answering clamor within his traitorous body. Against his will, Robin felt alive, as if every humor within him was cavorting and screaming, She's the One! He had to struggle for breath, taking in a deep draught to steady himself. And although his fingers itched to reach for her, instead he wiped them on the grass and rose to his feet, greeting the returning abbess with no little relief.

"I am sorry, Reverend Abbess, but I fear your worst suspicions were correct. She was killed," Robin said.

The abbess shook her head sadly, her gaze resting for a long moment upon the dead woman before she returned her attention to Robin. "Then I must trust you to discover who did this foul deed, for we cannot have someone preying upon the good women here."

Robin nodded his agreement, and the abbess once more inclined her head toward the body. "Now, let us allow the infirmaress to attend Elisa."

"As you wish," Robin answered. "I have examined the wounds, but I would like to look around here a bit," he added, though the garden area was well trampled by those who had come before him. Walking slowly about the body, Robin knelt to inspect the ground several times, and found nothing unusual for his efforts. His keen-eyed brother Dunstan might have been able to make something of the tracks in the grass, but the comings and goings of onlookers had obscured whatever slight impressions might have been here earlier, leaving Robin no trail. Of course, the knowledge that Sybil's blue gaze followed his every move didn't help.

Did she feel the attraction between them, or was a nun oblivious to such things? More likely, this one was too shrewish to notice, Robin thought. And he was saddled with her for the duration of his stay here! Suddenly, Robin wondered if he could solve the murder while avoiding Sybil and keeping to his original mission to find out about Vala l'Estrange. It seemed a complex assignment, but Robin was too much of a de Burgh to give in to doubt. He had never failed at anything yet.

Although he had learned nothing in his search, Robin was determined to continue it outside the nearby walls. Rising to his feet, he turned to the abbess. "I would inspect the area on the other side, and I will need to speak with all of the nuns," he said.

"We will make arrangements to have them meet with you in the hall," the abbess replied. "And, of course, we will provide you with chambers in the guest house. Sybil can show you to a set of rooms."

The thought of being alone with the One made Robin's entire being rouse to alertness again. His gaze immediately transferred to Sybil, though against his will. It was an altogether unsettling sensation. He had always been the master of his fate, but now he sensed an ominous sway in his command. Is this how his brothers had felt, helpless victims of an overpowering something beyond their control? Although seized by lust, more was involved here than mere sex, though how could that be when he hardly knew her, and what he did know of her, he heartily disliked? And yet, he was drawn to her, yearning to discover everything about her, her history, her facets, her secrets.

Robin shook his head to clear it and told himself in a firm, manly, decisive way that this woman held no power over him. But somehow he was still studying her as she hovered over the dead woman, presumably awaiting the approach of the infirmaress and other nuns…other nuns. That knowledge brought Robin a certain comfort, for no matter what her unusual effect upon him, Sybil could not be meant for him.

Obviously, something had gone awry this time, allowing him to escape the curse, for his intended already had answered a higher calling. Safe in that assurance, Robin donned a smug smile as he watched her take charge of the removal of the body, issuing directions that were the province of the infirmaress. Apparently, Sybil made no discrimination, but alienated everyone with whom she came in contact.

Robin might have laughed, if he hadn't been so exasperated. He turned to the abbess, who now stood beside him. "Rather forceful for a nun, isn't she?" he commented in a dry tone that did not hide his opinion.

The abbess lifted her brows. "Oh, Sybil is not a member of our order, though she has long dwelt with us. She remains a novice, having never taken her vows. I sometimes fear she is destined for the outside world, with all of its heartaches," the abbess said, and Robin felt his complacency drop away, along with his grin. Not his world, he thought, with something akin to panic.

Seemingly oblivious to his reaction, the abbess left him to speak with one of the other women, while Robin reached up to tug at the suddenly constricting neck of his tunic. With a scowl, he glared at Sibyl, outraged at what he considered her duplicity. Perhaps she was not a nun, but that didn't mean he was going to turn around and marry her. It was not as though she could make him, he thought mutinously, for how could she? Hold a knife to his throat? Lure him into a compromising situation? Robin grunted in amusement.

In truth, there was naught she could do, for he was prepared for any tricks. Already, he was one step ahead of his brothers in that he knew what was afoot. Seizing upon that small advantage, Robin felt his innate confidence returning. After all, forewarned was forearmed, and Robin was a master of weapons.

As Sybil stood watching the nuns take away Elise, she clenched her hands at her sides to prevent herself from following. The grief she had set aside momentarily returned, fresh and sharp, making her want to put herself between Elisa and the women who would prepare her for burial, as if she might, by dint of her own fierce will, somehow delay the inevitable or change the events that had transpired.

Swift upon the heels of those thoughts came a shocking rage, directed at a religious existence that somehow had allowed this abomination, at the world in general and, finally, at Sybil herself, where it turned into a gnawing guilt that threatened to eat away at her very being. The words if only, if only, beat so loudly in her head as to drive her mad.

If only she had gone to the abbess when she had first suspected that Elisa had taken an unhealthy interest in someone outside the nunnery walls. If only she had pressed her friend to give up the relationship. But Elisa had never admitted she was seeing anyone, and Sybil, well aware of the punishments awaiting a nun who strayed from her vows, had said nothing. At the time, Sybil had thought she was keeping a confidence. Now, she saw things differently, for banishment or excommunication would have been a better fate for Elisa than death.

If only she had done something! But Sybil had never dreamed that Elisa's preoccupation had gone so far. She had been behaving strangely, yet who would have thought such an innocent would tryst right within the convent walls? Or that the lover she was meeting would do her in? Sybil shuddered, her intrinsic courage at odds with the frightening reality of the outside.

It was an old conflict. Having abided at Our Lady of All Sorrows since her childhood, Sybil knew no other existence, yet she had always possessed a healthy curiosity about the world. That sense of wonder had tugged at her, keeping her from her vows even when others urged her to take them. Those nuns who had lived outside the walls had impressed upon both she and Elisa the dangers to be found there.

If only Elisa had heeded the warnings. Guilt rose to swamp Sybil again, for hadn't she, too, been stricken with a restlessness that the nunnery could not satisfy? A harsh, bleak winter had left her eager for spring, anticipating some change in the air instead of the same deadly dull march of days. As had happened often before, she felt stifled, as if she were choking on her very existence, but what else was there for her?

She had no family, no entrée into a venue she knew nothing about. How would she manage, even if she arranged to leave? The Church liked to keep those who had once entered these walls within them always, and Sybil felt the heavy burden of her duty, of promises made to nuns now dead. Then she would try to be pious and worthy, but her unruly nature always was at odds with her good intentions. And eventually, the monotony would begin to slowly constrict her again until she felt she couldn't breathe, that her life here was no better than bondage.

Then she would turn her head toward the west and wonder what lay beyond the orchard and the fields and even the village itself…. As if through no will of her own, Sybil turned her head, but this time she saw a sight that had never greeted her before: Robin de Burgh.

He looked strange in the little herb garden, though others of his sex had been here before on occasion—servants usually. He was different somehow. Larger, more masculine, he seemed to fill the small space with his strength and his maleness, as out of place as a bull among the delicate early-blooming violets. No, not a bull, with its rage and clumsiness, but something else wholly beyond her experience.

Sybil's brow furrowed at that puzzle. She didn't care to be caught at a loss, and her reaction came swiftly and automatically, outrage pushing aside her guilt and pain. How could the abbess ask her to work with this, this man? Not only was he a member of the outside world, but he was a male! He had no business involving himself in the affairs of the nuns. He was an intruder into this sheltered place, a reminder of what existed outside, bold and untamed and unknown.

Sybil seethed. She had taken exception to him the moment he strode into the garden, free and strong and confident, his clothes boldly declaring his station and the set of his wide jaw bespeaking his arrogance. He represented all that she was not, and Sybil was honest enough to admit that she resented his power and his sex. But there was more to her rancor than simple envy.

What she most disliked about Robin de Burgh was the way he made her feel, for he affected her as no one ever had before. It was apparent the instant she laid eyes upon him. She had been kneeling over Elise, shocked and stunned, Catherine's screams ringing in her ears, when she lifted her head. And there he had been, bigger than life, bigger than anything she had ever seen. She had noticed men before, monks and clerks and laborers from the home farm, even villagers, but never had she seen anyone like Robin de Burgh.

His chest was broad, his shoulders massive, his arms and legs thick with muscle, and yet he moved with a grace that belied his form. A knight, the abbess had called him, which explained the strength of his body, but not the reaction of her own. Sybil felt as though she had taken a blow to the chest, her heart pumping, her lungs struggling for breath, and then she had looked upon his face….

He was beautiful.

Sybil had slipped back upon her heels, dumbstruck that a mere man could exhibit such perfection: thick, dark hair, a comely brow over wide cheeks, tanned and unmarked, and eyes that reminded her of burnt sugar, rich and clear and sweet. As if they weren't bad enough, then there was his mouth, which made her own feel dry and wanting. Indeed, her entire being seemed seized by unruly desires, and, not one to meekly accept such disturbing sensations, Sybil had spoken, drawing his ire, eager for it, in the hope that his hold over her would be broken.

But it wasn't. Even now she burned with an odd sort of need for this man, and this man only, a feeling that made her even more resentful of his presence here and the task the abbess had laid before her, to work with him. It was intolerable, Sybil vowed, and would soon be put to an end. He might be coroner, but she would find Elise's murderer herself and be rid of Robin de Burgh and the havoc he wrought.

Just thinking of him had quickened her heartbeat, and Sybil glared across the small expanse of the garden at him, but that did little to ease her distress. Indeed, her gaze was caught by the shift of his wide shoulders as he began to move, and she trembled like a weakling as her attention drifted down his tall back to the narrow hips that were hidden beneath his mail coat. Cheeks flaming, Sybil drew a deep breath and shook off this unhealthy preoccupation with a male form, quickly transforming her dismay into anger.

"Where are you going?" she demanded even as she hurried after him.

He didn't bother to stop and acknowledge her, but spoke over one of those massive shoulders of his. "Outside to have a look about the grounds."

Sybil hesitated a moment, seized by a cowardly urge to quit his company, but it was swiftly overwhelmed by curiosity. And determination. Should this knight find something, she refused to remain ignorant of it. Besides, she was to keep an eye upon him. Although her instincts told her he was not a killer, still she owed it to the abbess to do her duty. And right now her duty was Robin de Burgh.

And so she followed. He did not wait for her, and she cursed his long legs that seemed to eat up the ground as he strode through the passage to the great hall. Oblivious to the stares of those around him, he continued out the main doors and around the building, unerringly heading toward the walls of the herb garden, which looked out over the orchard.

There she found him pacing along the stone barrier, head bent, as if he expected the murderer to have left his mark upon the grass. He paused, here and there, just as he had in the garden, kneeling to inspect the ground, though Sybil could see nothing. Finally, he lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes so beautiful that Sybil nearly swallowed her tongue.

"There's nothing here," he said, with a grimace.

Sybil could do no more than stare stupidly at him while she tried to control the sudden trembling in her limbs.

"Have there been any strangers about?" he asked.

Sybil shook her head. She found it difficult to concentrate on his words when his mouth moved. She had torn her attention away from his eyes only to find it engaged by his lips. Out here in the vast expanse of the grounds, he seemed more approachable, more real, as the sunlight dappled his features, and somehow the notion made her heart pound erratically.

Then his mouth moved again. "No one unusual?" he prompted, and his questioning look made Sybil wrest control of herself from whatever forces were affecting her.

"No. None that I am aware of beyond the occasional cleric, but I deal mostly with boarders, not travelers. We should check with Elizabeth, who handles lodging for the poor, pilgrims and others seeking but a night's stay. And the abbess would have more contact with visitors."

"And the servants knowledge of packmen and the sort," Robin mused. Rising to his feet in one graceful motion that almost stopped her breath, he glanced toward Sybil again, and she felt his attention clear down to her toes. He seemed to study her with a wary sort of animosity, that had

Sybil wondering just what his complaint was before she realized he probably disliked being paired with a woman.

"If you're to help, then let us be about questioning these people while their memories are fresh," he snapped, confirming her suspicions.

Well, she didn't care to be stuck with him either, Sybil thought, lifting her chin, but the abbess had decreed that they must work together, so she would obey. She could only hope that the killer would be found soon, for once the murder was solved, Robin de Burgh would be on his way.

And Sybil would be glad of it.

Chapter Three

Although Robin didn't like spending any more time than necessary with the One, she appeared to be not only his assistant as coroner, but his sole contact within the nunnery—unless he wanted to go chasing after the abbess. Striding away from the orchard after an especially long, unsettling glance at her, Robin had to slow his steps for her to catch up with him, even as he tried to avoid looking upon her. It was a nearly impossible task, but he managed it while barking out a request for a messenger.

After all, he couldn't remain here indefinitely, when no one at Baddersly knew his exact whereabouts. He had promised the solicitous steward there that he would not hare off without a word, as his brother Simon had done before him. God knows he didn't want Florian to think he was entangled with a female, as Simon had been. And anyway, he needed some clothes and personal effects, more than the few he had brought with him, for he had no idea how long he would be staying.

That thought made him frown. For the sake of the residents here and his own peace of mind, Robin hoped that he could soon find the murderer, ask about Vala, and be on his way—far away from Sybil. In the meantime, however, he had to suffer her to show him a chamber in the guest house; simply following her into the building was an exercise in both restraint and agitation.

Watching the subtle sway of her hips, Robin gritted his teeth in an effort to control his baser impulses, even while he wondered what the abbess was thinking to put someone like Sybil in charge of tenants. No wonder the old woman thought her destined for the world! A beautiful young novice like his One had no business being anywhere near the guests, let alone taking them to their rooms.

If he were running things, Sybil would find herself cloistered as far as she could be from outsiders. Why, he could just imagine some lecherous old nobleman leering at her, or worse, and the thought wrought havoc with his temper. Although he usually took a lighthearted view of nearly everything, Robin suddenly found himself struggling against a fierce surge of possessiveness.

Sybil ought to be protected instead of flaunted before the eyes of any stray man, whether tenants, clergy, servants or whoever. And Robin certainly didn't trust the nunnery walls to secure her. Indeed, he was surprised that she wasn't the one lying dead, murdered by some jealous admirer or unwanted suitor. The thought made him suck in a harsh breath, as if someone had kicked him in the gut, and it was all he could do not to reach out and grab her to him, just to keep her safe.

Robin shook his head, struggling to gather his straying wits. In all probability, if he were to touch her, the One would scream her head off, and then she wouldn't be the only one suspecting him of murder! Deliberately, he backed away, though his whole body seemed to rebel against such a course. Robin tried to reason with it.

Just because he felt this odd sense of recognition in connection with Sybil did not mean that she was his responsibility. Why should it matter to him what happened to her, if she got herself in some kind of trouble or even was involved somehow in the death of the nun? She was not his concern, Robin told himself. Still, he felt atypically disoriented as she led him through the guest house to a private chamber, as if his mind was at war with the rest of him. And losing.

Robin took a deep breath and looked around. It was a well-appointed room, better than the average wayfarer could expect, and he nodded in approval as he dropped his pack upon a low stool. The bed was larger than he had anticipated, and he stared at it long and hard before his gaze swung back toward Sybil. Although the door remained open, the knowledge that they were alone together sent his blood rushing to nether regions.

Along with the surge of lust, Robin felt that curious sense of familiarity, as if he had known this woman forever, that despite her black looks and tart tongue, they were made for one another. For a long moment, he even had the notion that should he hold out his hand, she would take it, joining him eagerly. But instead of extending his fingers toward her, Robin lifted them to the neck of his tunic, where he tugged hard. Tempted as he was by the sight of that bed, he knew that such urges

led to madness, or at least to marriage. And with a groan of panic, he hurried from the premises so swiftly that his companion was forced to run after him.

Once back in the main building, they were met by a grim-looking older nun with a coarse complexion. A forbidding creature, she nodded stiffly at them and without a word, led them down the corridor once more to what she called "the day room of the novices," a spare chamber with little more than a narrow table and benches.

It hardly seemed a cozy place, and for the first time, Robin wondered what kind of life these nuns, even the novices like Sybil, must have. As a de Burgh born into wealth and privilege, he was well used to his comforts, but what comforts did Sybil have? The question disturbed him, and he sank down onto a bench irritably. What did it matter to him how she lived?

"Although the order is gathering in the chapel to say prayers for the dead, as is only proper, the Reverend Abbess has decreed that each must leave, one at a time, to speak with you," the old nun said, her fierce expression leaving no doubt of her disapproval.

"As for you, Sybil—" her voice a venomous hiss, the nun turned her bulky figure toward the smaller novice in a vaguely menacing fashion that made Robin half rise from his seat, "I assume that you will find some time to appear in the chapel and pray for the one who has left us, especially since you claimed to be her friend."

Sybil blanched, and Robin stood, immediately taking exception to this harridan who was harrying his…whatever. He had to struggle against the urge to knock the old woman down, although his brain told him that attacking a nun might not be the best way to begin his duties here. Drawing a deep breath, he launched an entirely different type of offense.

"Thank you for your most gracious assistance," he said, giving the bully his best de Burgh smile, the one with the dimple. After all, he had not grown up around Stephen without learning a few of his older brother's tricks. "Would you care to be the first to join us?"

The old woman blinked, the only sign that his wiles had dented her rigid facade, but drew herself up stiffly. "I certainly would not! I have other responsibilities that require my attention, along with religious duties that must be observed, though some of us neglect them!" she added, with a cold glance at Sybil.

"Later, then," Robin said, bowing slightly in a show of graciousness. But his eyes narrowed as he watched her go, putting her to memory, just in case she did not return. Her attitude, though perhaps normal for her, made him wonder if she were avoiding the questions he was bound to ask in pursing the killer.

Turning back to Sybil, Robin was relieved to note that she had regained her color. "What ails her?" he asked, inclining his head toward the doorway.

Sybil shook her head. "That is Maud. She often gets her tail puffy."

"Her tail puffy?" Robin echoed, bemused.

"Like one of the cats that prowl the gardens and fields when met with another," Sybil explained.

"She doesn't seem overly fond of you," Robin commented.

Sybil shrugged. "She likes very much to be in charge, and considers herself second only to the abbess. No doubt, she resents my assignment."

"Ah. She would assist me herself," Robin said, thoughtfully.

Sybil pursed her lovely lips. "Don't flatter yourself. Maud would rather draw her own conclusions, without answering to anyone. Right now, she probably is put out because she thinks I have the abbess's favor, which she is always currying. But she is mistaken, for this assignment is a penance," Sybil noted, making her disdain for his company very clear.

Why did she dislike him so? Robin swallowed the prick to his pride and studied her, but she swiftly turned her face away. Had she something to hide? He wondered once again if her odd behavior stemmed from guilt, but felt a swift, fierce resistance to that notion. Although he had no intention of marrying her, Robin would not care to see her hang for murder. His protective instincts rose to

the fore, but he promptly squashed them, reminding himself that Sybil's troubles were none of his business. As coroner, he would do his best to see justice done, whether the intriguing novice was involved or not.

Robin's grim musings were interrupted by a faint knock upon the door. Striding forward, he pulled it open, only to hear a gasp as a slight nun eyed him fearfully. It was Catherine, the screamer, so he drew a deep, steadying breath and put on his best de Burgh manners.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Please come in." He tried to put the nun at ease, for he needed whatever information these women could provide him. His suspicions about Sybil aside, Robin guessed that the killer was someone known to the deceased, probably a man to strike such a blow, though a strong woman like Maud might do such damage as well. And if she got her tail puffy enough, she just might attack, Robin mused.

Still, Elisa's killer had most likely been a man and one with whom she had had close, perhaps even intimate, contact. Most murders were the result of too much drink or overwrought passions, and since the nun could hardly have been carousing at an alehouse, that left one probability, Robin thought grimly. He hoped that someone at the nunnery knew the identity of the fellow.

Catherine, however, was not that someone. When questioned, she alternated between moaning, crying and useless babbling about a vengeful God. Since Robin was fairly certain that a more earthly being had been involved, he finally let the nun return to the chapel. Although mindful of her mourning, he nonetheless was relieved to be rid of the weepy woman. He had to admit he preferred Sybil's contempt; it was better than caterwauling.

Robin's eyes narrowed. For someone who had given him a running argument earlier, the One was being awfully quiet. He slanted her a glance, wondering what was going on in that lovely little head of hers, but she only returned his curious look with a mutinous expression. Obviously, there was no use in pursuing that line of inquiry. He could only guess that she was not speaking to him now that they were alone.

Robin would have been amused, if he hadn't been so concerned about his investigation. He'd better have more success with the next nun, or he was going to be here forever. That notion made him glance surreptitiously back at the One even as he tugged at his neckline.

"Is there a problem with your clothing?"

Robin blinked, surprised at the sound of her voice, but not by the scornful tone of it. What was she asking? Something about his clothes? He felt heat surge through him even as he lifted his brows in mute question.

She sent him a pointed look. "It just seems to me that your tunic is too tight since you are always pulling at the neck of it. Or have you some bodily rash that makes you constantly itch and rub yourself?"

For one brief moment, Robin was so stunned by her words that he simply stared, then he threw back his head and burst out laughing. Obviously, her life as a novice had not dulled her wits or her tongue, and Robin couldn't help but feel a rush of pleasure. There was nothing he liked more in the world than to laugh, well, almost nothing, and in his experience few women had a talent for amusement. Not this one, however. She annoyed him and challenged him, yet did not fail to keep him entertained.

Robin was tempted to tell her that the problem with his clothes lay in the fact that he was wearing too many, but that hardly seemed appropriate banter for these surroundings. Instead, he assumed a sober expression and stepped toward where she sat on the bench watching him warily.

"Indeed, you have guessed it aright, and well I could use some help with a certain itch that needs be scratched," Robin drawled. He saw her eyes widen and her cheeks grow pink, but his own face betrayed nothing as he turned and pointed behind him. "There's a spot on my back that I can't quite reach…. If you wouldn't mind?"

Robin heard her snort and bit back a grin. “What? Are you not sworn to tend to the ailing and unfortunate?” he asked over his shoulder. “I assure you that it is not contagious, at least I do not think so, though I cannot quite be sure, of course.”

He lifted his brows at Sybil, who, by now, was actually sputtering, and decided that she was not well versed in jests, which made her a perfect foil for him. It was almost if he were young again and tormenting his brothers—only better. He turned around to face her once more.

“Perhaps this spot suits you better?” he asked. “If you could just rub my chest.” Or lower. Robin put a hand over his heart to indicate his need, but his grin faded as wide blue eyes met his own and held. For one, long breathless moment, they stared at each other, aware of an underlying attraction so powerful that it seemed the very air around them conspired to force them together. Indeed, Robin nearly took a step forward, but the door opened, echoing loudly in the silence.

He whirled around, with a combination of irritation and relief, to face the new arrival. She was older and shy and quiet, just the kind of female Robin thought of as suiting her vocation. Glancing at Sybil, he lifted his brows slightly. Now here was someone she ought to emulate. Not surprisingly, she appeared to be in disagreement, for she gave him a mulish frown that made his lips twitch.

Robin couldn’t help it; he was beginning to find her indefatigable scorn amusing. After all, how many women disdained a de Burgh? Of course, this one was a novice, and could be excused on that score, even if she didn’t act a bit like a religious woman. And that probably was just as well, Robin decided, as he began questioning the new arrival, for Sybil was far more interesting.

The decorous nun was just too quiet, shaking her head in answer to every one of his queries. Robin was beginning to wonder if she could speak at all when she finally lifted her head. “Elisa was the treasuress, and I am the sacrist, so we did not have reason for speech,” she said. Privately, Robin revised his original opinion of her, for what kind of woman required a reason to talk to another? Aloud he echoed, “Sacrist?”

“I care for the church fabric and plate,” she said, lowering her head demurely.

“So you don’t have much contact with outsiders or strangers?” Robin asked.

She shook her head.

“What about those within the order? Have there been any quarrels recently?”

She looked horrified, as if he had suggested some kind of sacrilege, and Robin decided that he definitely preferred Sybil’s plain speaking to this female’s delicate sensibilities.

After a few more useless questions, he let the paragon go and leaned back against the wall, brooding, as he once again considered what kind of life these women had. He had known that some orders didn’t encourage conversation, but knowing and seeing for himself were two different things, and the discovery unsettled him.

He had never given much thought to the religious world, none of the de Burghs having the least inclination for that sort of calling. They didn’t have the temperament for it, but then, neither did Sybil. How had she ended up here? Holy houses offered a home for those who were devoted, a haven for those who had not the money or prospects for marriage, and a possible route to power for those without their own. Which had brought Sybil here? Robin was inclined to think the latter, but then, why hadn’t she taken her vows?

She was a curious conundrum, he thought, letting his gaze slide back to her once more, and though he had always been attracted to puzzles, never before had he met the female kind. Evidently intending to rebuff his interest, Sybil gave him a glare that only sparked it further. Robin wondered what had happened to her infamous contempt when they had stared at one another, for he had seen no sign of it then.

Before he could pursue that intriguing line of thought, the next nun appeared. Although not as quiet as the previous member of the order, she appeared to be even more timid. She was older than Sybil, but kept darting glances at the novice, especially when Robin asked about Elisa’s personal life and possible quarrels within the order. Was she loathe to speak in front of Sybil?

"Have you seen any strangers about?" he asked, but the woman only appeared shocked by the idea. And afraid. Her fear struck Robin with new resolve, for holy women should not have to suffer such fright within the very cloister walls. "Very well. Thank you. And I promise you that I shall see to it that no one here is harmed," he said.

She nodded, a tiny movement of her head, but it was that small motion that made Robin realize she was not just frightened by a nameless murderer, but by himself. And he was taken aback by the discovery. No man had cause to fear the de Burghs except their enemies, and women…well, women had always been thrilled by the presence of his family members and grateful for the protection they offered.

Never had he incited anyone to horror, and Robin didn't like the feeling. He frowned. Was it because he was a man inside the sheltered world of the nunnery, or was something else involved? With a curt word, he excused her, and as she scurried away, he wondered how the devil he was going to find out anything from women like these.

"They are not accustomed to…knights," Sybil told him, spitting out the last word as if he were some kind of monster. He was tempted to ask her if he would be more acceptable if he were unable to defend himself and them, but he kept his mouth shut as he mulled over this disturbing development.

He was still lost in thought when Sybil stood to greet the woman at the door. This nun was quite elderly, to the point of deafness, so Robin was forced to nearly shout into her ear. He repeated his questions over and over until Sybil saw fit to point out that the old woman had her own room from which she rarely ventured forth, so saw little of others. Upon receipt of that information, Robin ushered the elderly nun out, while casting a dubious glance over his shoulder at his companion. As he suspected, Sybil appeared to be fighting back her amusement at his discomfiture.

With a scowl, Robin turned his attention back to the nun who was leaning on him and called to a servant passing in the corridor. He asked the girl to escort the elderly woman back to the chapel and to fetch him some paper and quill, so that he might better record the names of those he had already seen. His scholarly brother Geoffrey had often made notes when he was studying, and Robin equated this tedious investigation to a learning experience.

When he again entered the room, Sybil was wearing a look of surprise instead of her usual surly glare. "You can write?" she asked.

"Of course, I can write," Robin said. "My father, the Earl of Campion, sets great store by learning. Can you not?"

"Of course, I can write! I have been schooled by the nuns since I was very young," Sybil said.

"Too bad they couldn't teach you better manners," Robin observed dryly. When she looked as though she was going to make a sharp retort, he spoke again. "I thought you religious women were supposed to be humble," he added, his expression all innocence. Was that a tic in her cheek? Robin decided that goading her was far better than fighting with her, and that jesting was better than both. "About that itch…" he began, only to whoop in laughter when she threw something at him.

Luckily, he was blessed with quick reflexes and she with poor aim. He ducked, though it proved unnecessary as her toss went wide. As it sailed by him, Robin saw 'twas only a wooden cup that had been abandoned in the corner, and he watched it fall to the floor, where it rolled across the tiles. His blood up, Robin glanced back at his foe, in anticipation of a lively exchange, but the shocked look on her face told him there would be no more missiles, at least not immediately.

Obviously, such outbursts were new to her, as well as frowned upon in the nunnery, but Robin found himself wanting to hand her another cup, to stand before her and egg her on to release some of whatever it was remained pent up inside her. Robin sensed that behind those novice's clothes lay a passionate woman, stifled by her surroundings. And suddenly, he wanted to release all that tension in quite another manner entirely.

With a grunt of denial, Robin tugged at the neck of his tunic, caught himself and grimaced. He was becoming far too cozy with the One for his own good. It was none of his business what kind

of temperament she possessed or what kind of life she led here or anything else about her. He was better off sparring with her than making such speculations or worse, enjoying himself with her. Robin blanched, the arrival of a servant with his quill the only thing that saved him from incipient panic.

He had just mumbled his thanks when another nun arrived, one who, he soon discovered, disapproved of the whole questioning process. Although she gave him no rebuke, she answered him as shortly as possible, until Robin sat back and ran a hand through his hair in exasperation.

"I'm just trying to find out who killed Elisa, so that no further blood is shed," he said, his patience already tested this day.

"I hardly think anyone else here will meet such an end," the nun replied, with a sniff. Robin studied her carefully. Was her disapprobation meant for him or the deceased?

"And why do you say that?" he asked. "Was there some reason why Elisa was targeted when others were not?" The question probed as close to his own suppositions as he dared without revealing them outright. Unfortunately, it resulted in a squawk of protest from Sybil and a demure look from the nun. Sending his companion a caustic glance, Robin wondered whether her presence was a help or a hindrance to him.

Definitely a hindrance, he soon decided, for the nun would say nothing further, finally excusing herself huffily. After she left, Robin pointedly closed the door behind her. "Just what are you doing?" he asked, advancing on the One with nothing but menace on his mind.

"What do you mean?" she asked, rising to her feet, in fearless, foolish challenge. Although he had to admire her pluck, he was in no mood for her posturing.

"You know very well what I mean!" Robin said, his voice silky yet threatening. "If you plan to interfere with my work, then I shall have you removed from the room."

"You cannot!" she answered. "The abbess told me to—"

Robin cut her off. "The abbess told you to assist me, not impede me!"

"I will not let you speak ill of the dead!" she answered, that tiny tic in her cheek the only evidence that she was not as composed as she would have him believe. Nor as brave. Robin felt the bluster seep out of him.

"Sybil," he said in a gentler tone. Stepping forward once more, he reached for her, but she winced, seemingly as wary of him as he was of her. However, Robin doubted that it was rooted in the same cause, for she gave no indication that she recognized him as anything other than a boorish knight who was disrupting her existence and maligning her friend. With a sigh, Robin dropped his hand and moved back, wondering how he was going to find out who Elisa's lover was if he was not allowed to allude to the possibility of there being one.

Another puzzle, perhaps unsolvable, Robin thought, before the moment was shattered by the entrance of one of the nuns. Taking a deep breath, he turned away from Sybil and tried to focus on the task ahead. Graciously seating the woman, he poured on the de Burgh charm, while sending a warning glance to his companion.

To her credit, she did not protest again, but neither did he make any headway. The older nuns claimed to have had little contact with Elisa, while the younger ones professed ignorance of her personal life. Surely, within the small confines of this community, someone must have heard something! Although Sybil informed him that gossip was proscribed by the bishop, Robin did not believe that the good women, no matter how devoted, had given it up entirely.

He was so frustrated by the end of the day that he began to wonder if he was going to have to begin the questioning all over again—alone. Obviously, Sybil had been a friend to the deceased, and, as such, put a damper on any revelations the other women might provide about her. With mixed feelings, Robin considered asking the abbess to assign Sybil some other task. It would be better for him, too, if he were rid of her, he thought, quelling an unruly objection somewhere in his body. Presumably, it lodged in his nether regions, yet it seemed to be higher up in his chest, which held his yearning for the family life he had no more.

With a frown, Robin realized that despite her tart tongue and surly behavior, he was going to miss the One, not just immediately, but maybe forever.

Chapter Four

Despite his feelings, or perhaps because of them, Robin abruptly rose to his feet, determined to leave the room and seek out the abbess. Indeed, he went so far as to open the door, only to be faced with the formidable Maud, who stood just outside the threshold. Had she been listening or spying? Robin didn't see how she could learn much through the nunnery's thick walls and doors, yet who knew what kind of intrigues went on in the cloister? Certainly, these women had little enough to entertain them.

Recovering quickly, Robin greeted the nun with feigned warmth. Although he might have denied it, he was only too eager to postpone—mayhap indefinitely—his plans to dismiss Sybil and latch on to Maud. After all, here was someone who wasn't afraid to speak her mind or gossip malevolently. Indeed, Maud looked as if she had made plenty of enemies and would be happy to add more to her collection. Ushering her inside, Robin donned his best smile, though it appeared to have little effect. Maud soon made it obvious that she had returned only under duress.

"The abbess insisted that I come, though I have no idea why since I know nothing of this business," she said, with a pinched expression that dared Robin to argue with her.

"Although pleased as I am, as always, to do the Reverend Abbess's bidding, I do not see what right she has to be here," Maud added, looking pointedly at Sybil. "I hardly think I can speak freely when I know that my words might be misconstrued or bandied about later by others. Perhaps, if she were to leave the room…" Maud suggested.

Although Robin had just considered the same course, he found he didn't care for the notion quite so well when Maud proposed it. Logic warred with unfounded emotion for an instant, until reason prevailed and he bowed his head graciously toward the harridan. "If you would feel more comfortable—" he began, only to be cut off by Sybil's protest.

"The abbess told me to remain with Lord de Burgh," she said, in a voice that brooked no dispute, and Robin couldn't help admiring her courage.

"Indeed?" Maud replied, lifting one eyebrow in a manner that managed to insinuate all sorts of things, none of them complimentary, especially to a novice. Robin felt his blood churn in response, urging him to Sybil's defense, but he kept his face expressionless.

"Indeed," Sybil replied firmly, giving no indication that the barbs had struck her at all.

Whether Maud sensed his annoyance or Sybil's stubbornness or only had been issuing an idle threat, Robin didn't know, but she conceded with a scowl. "Very well, then, but I warn you not to interfere with my speech or repeat anything that I say," she said, glaring at the younger woman.

Sybil dropped her head in a gesture of submission that didn't fool Robin one bit, and he wondered if Maud had planned to speak in front of her all along, perhaps even to taunt her with gossip. The older woman reminded him of a spider, hatching plots and tossing webs around the hapless nuns. Whatever she might say, Robin knew he must keep the focus on Elisa and not worry about Sybil, who seemed more than capable of holding her own anyway.

"I assure you that you may speak freely," Robin said, smiling at Maud. "Indeed, I was hoping that you would do so as I fear that the other nuns have not been of any assistance to me at all, but you…" Robin trailed off, inclining his head respectfully. "You appear to be far more knowledgeable and observant. Surely, you must have an idea as to the culprit."

Ignoring a choked sound from Sybil, Robin gave the harridan an encouraging smile, and she acknowledged his flattery with a lofty look. "Naturally, I am more perceptive than most of these flibbertigibbets who neglect their duties," Maud said, raising her bulky body until she sat arrow-straight upon the bench. "However, 'tis not really my place to comment."

"Ah, but I cannot finish my work here until I have come to some sort of conclusion," Robin pointed out.

"Well," Maud said, making a show of hesitation. "I refuse to pass judgment upon the organization of the order, but in my opinion Elisa was far too young for such a responsible position as treasuress," Maud said, her jealousy obvious. "Such a post required her to have more contact with the outside world than is wise, what with the submission of bills from tradesmen and servants and clerics and who knows who, let alone all that fraternizing with the bailiff."

Maud sniffed haughtily. "So I, for one, am not surprised that she came to a bad end." At her caustic words, Robin shot a glance toward Sybil and nearly groaned. Not only was the tic working in her cheek, but her hands were fisted at her sides, as though she might strike Maud at any moment. However, she was valiantly keeping her mouth shut, and, for that Robin was grateful.

Tearing his gaze away from Sybil, he returned it firmly to Maud. "Go on," he urged. Obviously pleased at gaining his ear while at the same time thwarting her rival, the older woman nodded.

"Well, as we all know, only evil can come of too much association with outsiders," she said, again looking at Sybil, as if to accuse her of misbehavior or even of being a bad influence upon Elisa.

Robin quickly reclaimed her attention. "Did you notice any strangers about or anyone who might mean Elisa harm?"

Maud lifted her chin imperiously. "Unlike some, I do not have much contact with those who are not of the order. And, as I said, she dealt with all sorts of questionable persons, from those men who work the home farm to the bailiff. I heard that she had a certain male acquaintance in whom she showed an unseemly amount of interest, but not being privy to her personal associations, I cannot tell you more. Perhaps Sybil can elaborate," Maud suggested, her mouth twisting with the gibe.

Robin was out of his seat, putting himself between the two women before Maud realized how close she had come to reaping the results of her taunts. "Thank you," he said, while Sybil made incoherent noises behind him. "You have been most helpful." He led the nun to the door, pouring on the de Burgh charm and promising to seek her out if he thought of any further questions. And when at last she left, as regally as she had entered, Robin shut the door and turned to face Sybil.

One look at her face told him why she had never taken her vows. Although she tried hard to suppress the truth, she was far too volatile for a life of humble devotion. Indeed, she was brimming with life and passion—and fury, which was now directed at him.

"Why did you stop me?" she cried, rushing toward Robin with fists flying. "'Tis long past time someone gave that horrible woman her due!" She struck out at him, raining blows upon his wide chest. Robin let her rage and rant, mostly about the horrible Maud and the poor defamed Elisa, until finally he caught her wrists and held them fast. Then, as if the wind suddenly had turned, letting out her sails, she collapsed against him in a fit of weeping that Robin found far more painful than her fists.

Releasing her hands, he put his arms around her, drawing her close. She buried her face in his tunic, and he held her tightly, trying his best to give the comfort she needed. All thoughts of his position as coroner or hers as novice or even as the One, slipped away, as she released her grief. The most glib of the de Burghs, Robin had no words to give her, only the strength of his body, and despite his initial wariness, he found himself offering it up to her easily.

And when her sobs subsided, Robin became aware of other things, namely, the way she seemed to fit perfectly against him, her head tucked under his chin. Swift on the heels of that discovery came awareness of the press of her form, her soft breasts, the curve of her waist and the heat that warmed him wherever they touched. Drawing a deep breath, Robin felt himself stiffen, his masculine form growing into a telltale bulge against her belly.

Sybil lifted her head, as if startled, and Robin could have cursed himself, but when he looked into those blue eyes, wide and teary, his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. A stray curl had popped free of her wimple, and he saw that it was red, a lively color fit for this woman. Entranced, Robin lifted his fingers to tuck it back into place, but that brought his thumb in contact with the softness of her skin, and he stroked the delicate curve of her cheek in wonder.

He had to taste her. The urge came over him so violently that Robin shuddered with the force of it. He wanted to, needed to kiss her, right here, right now. He felt as if his future, his very life, depended on it. And Sybil gave no demur. Indeed, she stared up silently, her luscious lips parted in a tempting pose, just as though she were as enraptured as he.

Desire rose like a tide, thrumming through his blood, and for long moments, Robin struggled vainly against it, grasping at the wits that seemed to have deserted him. Try though he might to resist, he was weakening fast, and well he might have given in, had it not been for the sound of a knock upon the door jolting him into awareness of his surroundings.

Suddenly, Robin realized that he was embracing the One, and he swallowed in panic even as Sybil gasped, as if she, too, were flustered, or even horrified. They broke apart, backing from each other, and just in time, for they had barely separated when the door opened. It was the abbess who entered, and Robin eyed the good woman with no little alarm. Then, finding the bench against the back of his legs, he sat down hard, while a flush that had nothing to do with his still-excited body rose in his cheeks.

Luckily, the unsuspecting abbess had her head bent, and did not seem to be aware of the undercurrents around her. Of course, the poor woman was mourning in addition to performing the duties of her office, and Robin immediately felt guilty for his misbehavior in her holy house, though he hadn't really done anything. Yet.

"Has all of the order been here, Sybil?" she asked, turning to the novice. Robin's gaze followed, and he saw that Sybil appeared strained, her hands clasped before her and her face pale and tearstained. At the sight, Robin felt even more the cur, as if he had failed her somehow, though he knew he had given her comfort as best he could. It was what had nearly happened afterward that bothered him, both the wanting and the wishing her well away, a perverse combination, to be sure.

"And have you learned anything?" the abbess asked, swinging her gaze to Robin. He stared at her stupidly, the only lessons he could recall were those in desire and restraint, and how the blue of Sybil's eyes remained undimmed by weeping.

She appeared to be recovering more swiftly, however. "Reverend Abbess," she said, drawing the nun's attention back to herself, an action for which Robin was inordinately grateful. "Isn't it true that Maud has long thought herself your closest assistant, perhaps even your favorite?"

The question brought Robin back to his senses quickly enough, for he could see where she was going with that line of inquiry, and he rolled his eyes in frustration. As much as he disliked old Maud, he couldn't quite picture her killing off her rivals. Why bother when she could torture them indefinitely with her slurs?

The abbess smiled gently. "Maud is very eager, but I can hardly appreciate one of my flock more than another."

Robin recognized a diplomatically worded answer when he heard it, but Sybil would not be placated. Obviously, her feud with Maud was a long-standing one. "But suppose that someone, believing herself to be in a coveted position, wielded power over others of the order, going so far as to sabotage those who stood in her way?"

The abbess's expression reflected her concern. "Surely, you are not suggesting that one of our own murdered Elisa?" she asked.

Robin rose to his feet. "We are simply exploring all possibilities, Reverend Abbess," he explained. "And although we might deem it unlikely, we must remember that not all nuns are as devoted as you are. Although we might wish otherwise, they are afflicted with the same jealousies and passions as laywomen," he said, with a sidelong glance toward a certain passionate novice.

The abbess frowned, obviously dismayed by his words, but Robin persisted. "Think carefully, and if you can remember any quarrels or suspicious incidents occurring among the residents here, please let me know," he said.

"I will," the abbess promised, though she appeared none too pleased by the prospect.

"We appreciate your cooperation," Robin said to smooth things over. "I would also ask you if you have noticed any strangers about, anyone Elisa would have come in contact with?"

The abbess paused thoughtfully before answering. "I have met with the usual clerics and freemen and travelers." She shook her head, as if frustrated. "I fear that we have fallen into lax habits here. The nuns are often asked to make trips to the village and conduct business with those in the area. As I'm sure you realize, although we are a small order, the home farm requires much organization and employs many of the local people."

"Are there any who might hold a grudge against the nuns or Elisa in particular? Was there someone that she might have seen more of than was usual?" Robin asked, ignoring the low hiss of Sybil's indrawn breath. But the abbess could only shake her head, uncomprehending of such violence or any lapses on the part of her flock.

Robin spoke gently, hiding his frustration, but he had hoped that the abbess might be able to give him a hint, at least, as to the identity of the killer. So far, none but Maud would even admit that Elisa had had a relationship with a man, and all she could do was refer him to Sybil.

Robin's eyes narrowed. He had thought Maud's bitter words a result of the rivalry between them, but he had heard more than once that Sybil and Elisa had been close, had seen it himself, as evidenced by her wild display of grief. And now he glared at the One with new suspicion. All along, he had suffered her presence, allowed her to stifle his questions, to keep the name of her dear departed friend from being sullied, and all along, she probably knew more about the death than anyone.

Biting back a scowl, Robin turned his attention once more to the abbess, but it soon became clear that she could shed no further light upon the murder. Before dismissing her entirely, he asked if he might meet with the servants and people who worked on the lands owned by the nunnery, and she consented. It would be more than he could accomplish this day, of course, but right now Robin wasn't concerned with the lay residents of the area. His gaze slid to the other occupant of the room in grim anticipation.

First, he had a certain novice to question.

Sybil watched the abbess preparing to leave and had to bite her tongue to stop herself from begging the nun to stay. And when the abbess actually stepped out the door, Sybil felt like running after her. It didn't matter where she went as long as it was away—far away—from this man who so disturbed her. Sybil took a deep breath, her heart pounding with the revelations of the last hours. To her shame, few had anything to do with Elisa's death. They had to do with him.

He had a dimple.

It was tucked into his left cheek, and appeared when he smiled just so, Sybil remembered with a kind of stunned surprise. And, not only that, he laughed! And not just any kind of laugh, mind you, but one so rich and deep and joyous that it seemed to melt something inside her. Sybil's face flamed as she recalled just what this man was capable of doing to her insides, and the rest of her, as well.

She wasn't sure what was worse, the fact that she had stared up at him like a besotted ninny while he held her in his arms, or that she had willingly gone into them in the first place, pouring out her grief as if a dam had burst. The memory made Sybil feel ashamed, embarrassed, a fool, and yet, she knew she hadn't thought so at the time. Tucked against that big, hard body, she had felt safe and warm for the first time in her life, as if she were home at last…. Sybil drew a ragged breath and shut her eyes against such nonsensical thoughts, but still the discoveries dismayed her.

He smelled like wood smoke and leather and something indefinable, something that was singularly his, and it was the most wonderful scent Sybil had ever encountered. She wanted to bury her face in his tunic again and just breathe. And this time, she wouldn't cry, she would wrap her arms around his strong body and…what? Sybil shook her head. She knew even less about men than she knew about murder, but she was learning.

She had learned that this one possessed compassion. Despite all their heated exchanges, snapping at each other like dogs vying for the bone of the killer, when she had lost her composure

entirely, he had enfolded her with his body, treated her to a gruff tenderness that made her weep all the more for the lack of it in her life.

Oh, she had vague memories of sweet nuns, of being held in gentle arms, but who here would have helped her this day? The abbess and most of the nuns would have been appalled by her outburst. Some would have been frightened, some pitying, and a few might have stepped forward to try to aid her. But none could have given her what this strange man had offered: his arms and his strength and his comfort.

When he had first arrived, Sybil had resented what Robin de Burgh could do to her; now she was heartily afraid of it. Before, she had had no idea what was lacking in her life, but now she knew, and she yearned for more with a fierceness that made her tremble. 'Twas a most dangerous desire, for comfort was not all that he gave her with his body. To Sybil's horror, he also had roused in her a certain curiosity for something else in that hushed moment when all the world seemed to dim in the brightness of his being.

His eyes, like some kind of sweet and heady syrup, had held her spellbound, while against her belly she had felt something hard. Sybil had recognized that it was a part of him, and the knowledge had thrilled her, filling her with a power she never knew existed. Her fingers had spread upon the hard expanse of his chest, and she had wanted to rise upon her toes, to somehow make herself closer…

"Perhaps you would allow me the benefit of your knowledge?"

The sound of that deep, harsh, intensely male voice nearly made her jump. "What?" Sybil said, swinging round to face him in stunned surprise. Surely, she had not heard him right! Could he tell what she was thinking?

But the look upon his face was not one to lure her. Indeed, he wore a hard scowl that marred his beautiful features, hiding his dimple and his laughter, but that nevertheless could not mask the goodness in him. "Who was the man Elisa took an unseemly interest in?" he demanded.

Sybil glared at him, revising her opinion, and not to the good. She refused to listen to any slurs upon Elisa's name, especially an echo of Maud's horrible slanders! But before she could protest, he stalked across the tiles and grasped her by the shoulders.

"What are you hiding?" he asked, and Sybil knew she ought to spit in his face, but he was touching her, and the heat from his fingers blazed up and down her arms and all through her body until she felt unnaturally weak. Her anger at his insinuations faded away, replaced by a bizarre fascination with his lips. Considering the hard, wide planes of the rest of his face, they appeared soft and a shade lighter than his tanned face. From there her gaze drifted to his cheek, and when she found the spot where his dimple lay hidden, Sybil had to fight against a sudden urge to seek it out with her fingers —or her mouth.

With a low moan that sounded suspiciously like an oath, Robin released her abruptly and turned his head away. "Were you meeting him, too? Is that why you conceal his identity?"

He seemed unaccountably angry, but Sybil could only stare at him dumbfounded. He thought she was seeing a man? She didn't know whether to laugh or to slap him in outrage.

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