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The Norman's Heart
Margaret Moore



Historical

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The Norman's Heart

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Iron-willed Groom...Sir Roger de Montmorency demanded obedience. And the last person he expected to defy him was his very own wife! But the rebellious Mina challenged his authority as surely and swiftly as she fired his Norman blood. Headstrong Bride...Lady Mina Chilcott knew she wasn't the most beautiful of women, but she demanded respect... especially from her husband. And she would have it before he claimed his husbandly rights. Though her vow soon seemed impossible to keep, as the handsome Roger had laid siege to her maidenly heart.

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What a silly little fool Mina had been for thinking that Roger de Montmorency might be any different from every man she had ever known.

She had been a dolt to feel anything for him.

The idea that Sir Roger could make her swoon with ecstasy without even trying was enough to make her grind her teeth in anger. The boastful, vain, pompous creature! No doubt all the women he had made love to so far had been serving wenches or peasants who believed there was something special about a nobleman, or who wanted something in return, like money or advancement.

Well, she knew better. Noblemen were men first, and seldom noble. If her betrothed thought he could just crook a finger and find Mina Chilcott waiting patiently in the nuptial bed, he would soon learn otherwise....

Dear Reader,

Kathe Robin of Romantic Times had this to say about award-winning author Margaret Moore's new Medieval, *The Norman's Heart*: "A story brimming with vibrant color and three-dimensional characters. There is emotion and power on every page." We hope you enjoy this delightful story of the marriage of staid Sir Roger de Montmorency and the willful Lady Mina Chilcott.

Taylor Ryan's first book, *Love's Wild Wager*, was part of our popular March Madness promotion featuring talented new authors. With her second book, this month's *Birdie*, she returns to Regency England and Ireland to tell the touching story of a woman of noble blood who was raised on the streets.

Our two other titles for the month include *Man of the Mist* from Elizabeth Mayne, the sweeping tale of a Scottish officer who finally returns to claim his young bride, now a grown woman. And from longtime Harlequin Historical author Lynda Trent, *The Fire Within*, a haunting story of lovers who must choose between the past and the future.

Whatever your taste in reading, we hope Harlequin Historicals will keep you coming back for more. Please keep a lookout for all four titles, available wherever books are sold.

Sincerely,

Tracy Farrell

Senior Editor

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MARGARET MOORE

Prior to embarking on her writing career, Margaret Moore studied English Literature at the University of Toronto, taught basic military training in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve and worked for every major department store chain in Canada.

Margaret is married to a man whose eyes really change color. They have two children and live in Scarborough, Ontario.

To the independent Warren women and the self-confident men who married them.

Chapter One

Rain pelted against the stone walls of Montmorency Castle and drummed on the closed shutters. The wind moaned softly about the battlements, and heavy clouds scudded across the full moon.

Inside the hall, Sir Roger de Montmorency paced impatiently, ignoring everyone, including Sir Albert Lacourt, who leaned against one of the many trestle tables, his arms crossed and his head bowed as if deep in thought. An occasional sharp glance at Sir Roger betrayed some anxiety on his part as well.

A huge fire burned in the new hearth, and most of the wedding guests huddled near it, awaiting the lavish evening meal intended to welcome Sir Roger's bride. The bright banners of the visiting nobility hung from the walls; fine beeswax candles burned upon the linen-covered, flower-strewn tables, and in honor of the festive occasion, fresh herbs had been sprinkled over the rushes on the floor.

Dudley, the steward, a Saxon who had been in the service of the de Montmorencys his whole life, looked about to have an apoplectic fit as he scurried between the kitchen corridor, the tables and the door. The maidservants, idly waiting to serve the food, stood near the corridor and whispered among themselves. Dudley signaled them to hush before he peered again into the rain and the dark of the night, running his hand over the few remaining white hairs on his nearly bald head. The question in his eyes and the unspoken words on the tip of his tongue were obvious to all present: What was keeping the bride?

Sir Roger, his usually inscrutable face full of annoyance, suddenly stopped his pacing. "We have waited long enough," he announced. "Everybody sit down."

The wedding guests glanced uncertainly at one another, for this was a serious turn of events that did not bode well for the future alliance between the de Montmorencys and the Chilcotts. On the other hand, they had been waiting for some time and were very hungry, so they moved to their respective places. The movement of the crowd revealed an elderly and frail priest who was sleeping slouched on a stool, his back against the wall.

"Father Damien, give us your blessing," Sir Roger called out as he strode to take his place at the high table on the raised dais. When the priest did not respond, Sir Roger bellowed his name again.

Dudley hurried to the priest and gently shook him awake. "The blessing, Father," the Saxon said quietly and respectfully, although he glanced uneasily over his plump shoulder at Sir Roger. "It's time for the blessing."

"What's that? Is she here at last?" Father Damien asked, peering about myopically. "Where? I don't see anybody."

"She's not here, but we will not wait," Sir Roger said loudly.

"Ah, my son," Father Damien said in his high, cracking voice, "shouldn't we wait—"

"No!"

Everyone in the room jumped a bit and Father Damien immediately started to mumble a brief blessing.

His duties finished, the priest moved to his place at the table with surprising alacrity, and Sir Roger turned to his oldest friend. "You sit here, Albert," Sir Roger said in a tone that would brook no denial as he indicated the seat that was to have been his bride's.

Sir Albert did as he was told with obvious reluctance.

The servants also moved swiftly, and Dudley seemed to relax somewhat as the first course arrived, apparently none the worse for the delay.

Albert looked at Roger, an expression of condemnation in his usually mild brown eyes. "Your guests could be delayed by the storm, Roger, and—"

“And if that is so, they should have sent a messenger on ahead to tell us.”

“I understand your impatience, Roger. I, too, would be far from happy if my future bride was delayed. However, let us hope they have stopped at an inn to wait out the storm.”

“That would be the sensible thing to do,” Roger said as a roasted capon was set before him by a buxom serving wench whose shapely lips fell into a pout when he ignored her.

Roger stabbed the meat angrily. “Unfortunately, Chilcott is not a sensible man. They could be anywhere between his estate and mine.”

“At least he has the sense to pick a fine husband for his half sister.”

Roger snorted with unsuppressed contempt. “Save your flattery for someone else, Albert. He might have made no end of trouble over his broken betrothal to my sister if I had not agreed.”

“So why did you not insist that Madeline marry him? You could have stopped her marriage to that Welshman. He impersonated Chilcott, after all. I must confess I expected you to kill the fellow, Roger, right there on the steps of the chapel. When you offered to knight him—God’s blood, I almost dropped dead myself. It’s a good thing he refused. Think what Baron DeGuerre would have said!”

“If the Welshman had sworn fealty to me, the baron would have been appeased. Besides, I wanted the guests to enjoy themselves after I had gone to such expense for the feast. They were all sitting there like statues until I made the offer. But it doesn’t matter now.” Roger wiped the trencher in front of him with a piece of bread. “For the first—and last—time in my life I acted like a softhearted fool.”

“Or as if you had a heart,” Albert mumbled under his breath as he pulled the wing from a roasted duck.

“What did you say?” Roger demanded.

“I understand your predicament,” Albert replied. “Still, Baron DeGuerre will be pleased that this alliance is going to come about after all.”

A foot soldier appeared at the wide doors of the hall. Because Roger had heard no cry of alarm, he assumed that the matter was some minor household trouble. Dudley hurried toward the man and listened to his words.

For a moment, Roger felt some pity for his steward. Dudley was not a young man, and between the anxiety over the preparations for his lord’s wedding, which he had planned with as much care as if Roger were the king, and this unaccountable delay, he had aged considerably.

Roger’s anger at Chilcott grew even more. It was an insult to him and to his steward that Chilcott didn’t have the courtesy to arrive on time.

Dudley came bustling toward the high table as fast as his plump legs would carry him. “My lord!” he said, looking as if he feared the castle were about to fall down around his head, “they are here! In the inner ward! Lord Chilcott and his half sister and their retinue!”

Albert gave Roger a censorious look, which grew deeper when Roger made no move to get up, let alone leave the hall, but Roger didn’t care. “Have the servants show them to their quarters,” he ordered brusquely. “They can have wine and fruit there.”

Dudley wrung his hands and chewed his lip. “Forgive my impertinence, my lord, but should you not greet them? Or at least invite them into the hall to dine? They have journeyed a long way, and—”

“Arrived too late. If they wish more to eat, they may join us at the table. Or not, as they please. I am not interrupting my meal for latecomers who do not have the courtesy to advise me of any unexpected difficulty.”

With a baleful look at Albert, who gave a slight, resigned shrug of his shoulders, Dudley nodded and hurried out of the hall, wringing his hands with dismay.

“Just what do you hope to gain by this discourtesy?” Albert asked quietly.

“Are you accusing me of incivility?”

“Yes. There could be many reasons for their tardiness. If you had only waited a little longer—”

“I don’t care to hear their excuses.”

“She is your bride, after all.”

“You don’t have to remind me.”

“Aren’t you curious to see her at all?” Albert asked, impatience creeping into his voice.

Roger looked at his friend with some surprise. “Not in the least. I daresay she’s like that popinjay Chilcott, a vain, overdressed, affected young lady whose spending habits will cause me some grief before I train her out of them. Nor do I intend to encourage tardiness from my future wife, now or at any time. If you’re so interested, why don’t you go and greet her?”

“Because I am not the groom,” Albert replied.

“And because it’s raining hard enough to put dents in the stones,” Roger added laconically.

Albert grinned slightly, then frowned. “It still doesn’t make it right for you to be rude.”

“I’ll be seeing the woman for a long time to come,” Roger said in a tone that signaled the end of the discussion. “And this meal was too expensive to be ruined with delay.”

Lord Reginald Chilcott, knight of the realm, lord of several manors, whose ancestors had sailed with William the Conqueror himself, stood shivering in the dark courtyard of Montmorency Castle gazing mournfully at Sir Roger’s steward. Rain dripped off his bedraggled velvet cloak; his once finely perfumed and dressed hair hung limply about his narrow shoulders, and he wiped his aquiline nose, which was now dripping from within and without. Behind him, his men muttered discontentedly and his wagons were soaking. The smell of damp horse was nearly overwhelming.

“Not coming to greet us?” Chilcott repeated incredulously for the fourth time. “You are absolutely certain?”

“Yes, my lord. You must understand, the hour grew late and Sir Roger does not like to be kept waiting. If you had sent a messenger—”

“We did not realize Sir Roger keeps his bridges in such poor repair that a summer’s storm would wash them away, or we would have,” a woman’s voice interrupted. Dudley tried to see past Lord Chilcott to what appeared to be a cloaked and hooded woman mounted on a rather inferior beast.

“Mina!” Chilcott chided, his tone between a plea and a warning as he turned toward the woman.

The woman dismounted. “It is true, Reginald, and you know it.”

She faced Dudley, who tried to see beneath her hood without being overly obvious. “My lord has told me to show you to your quarters, where wine and fruit will be brought to you,” he offered.

At that moment, one of the servants left the hall. The light from the open door poured into the inner ward and was reflected in the many puddles. Simultaneously they heard the chatter and raucous laughter of those assembled in the hall, as well as the clatter of wooden dishes and metal goblets, no longer muted by the heavy oaken door.

Mina Chilcott slowly turned toward the steward. “The evening meal is not yet finished,” she observed.

“No, my lady,” Dudley mumbled, not quite sure what to do.

“We cannot go into the hall looking like this!” Reginald Chilcott said in a voice that was almost a screech. “We’re soaked to the skin! My clothes are nearly ruined, and your skirt is covered with mud.”

“Surely that is not unexpected, given the weather. Nevertheless, Reginald, I will go to the hall of this most courteous knight,” the bride said with what sounded suspiciously like sarcasm.

This did not seem the type of gentle, soft-spoken woman able to win any man’s heart, let alone Sir Roger’s, Dudley thought despondently.

“I would suggest, Reginald, that you tell the men to stable the horses, then go to the kitchens and make sure they are fed before bedding down for the night wherever this fellow says. Your name, sir?” she suddenly asked.

“Dudley,” he replied, taken aback by the unexpected courtesy in her voice. “I am the steward here.”

She nodded, then tilted her head up. “It’s stopped raining,” she noted, and threw back her hood.

Finally Dudley saw her face, and he wanted to moan with helplessness. The baron could not have chosen a more unsuitable bride for Sir Roger if it had been his intention. Why, this woman had red hair—not auburn, not red gold, but brilliant red, like the barbarian Irish—and, worse, freckles! Above all else, Sir Roger liked an unblemished complexion. She was tall, too, nearly as tall as her intended husband himself.

“Thank you, Dudley,” she said, turning to face Lord Chilcott, who was sniffing again. “This place is smaller than you led me to believe, Reginald. Still, what is that saying? Beggars cannot choose? And I daresay Sir Roger sets himself a good table. Since I am hungry, I am going to eat.”

“But Mina,” Reginald spluttered, “you cannot simply walk into Roger de Montmorency’s hall unannounced!”

“Do you not believe my betrothed will be pleased to see me?” she asked with an undisguised sneer. Without waiting for an answer, Lady Mina Chilcott turned on her heel and went toward the hall.

Dudley let out a low whistle, which he cut short when he realized the lady’s relative was still there.

“Exactly,” Chilcott muttered. He faced his men. “Do what she says, oafs, before you catch your death from a chill!”

“What do you wish to do, my lord?” Dudley asked deferentially.

“Follow her, of course, to make sure she doesn’t ruin everything,” Chilcott said helplessly. Then he glanced down at his wet garments. “After I change my clothes, of course.”

Mina stood uncertainly inside the entrance of the hall of Montmorency Castle. It wasn’t as large as her father’s hall, yet it was very brightly lit, warm and decorated with pennants and flowers. Several well-dressed nobles were sitting at long tables, eating. The smells greeting her made her mouth water, and she took a step farther inside.

Then she realized the handsome man sitting at the center of the high table was staring at her. From his position of importance, she knew he must be Sir Roger de Montmorency, her betrothed.

But such a look! Cold, appraising, arrogant. He must know who she was, yet even now, he did not rise to greet her. He simply sat and stared at her with those dark, forbidding eyes.

Did he think he could intimidate her with that look? She was no spoiled young girl raised in sheltered gentleness. Nor was she a peasant to be overwhelmed with any nobleman’s rank and wealth. She was Lady Mina Chilcott, and she could be just as self-confidently arrogant as any man. Her father had raised her to be that way, even if that had not been his intention.

So she stared back. Her betrothed was extremely well formed, with muscular shoulders and a broad chest that narrowed to a slender waist. He wore a simple tunic of dark green with no ornamentation of any kind, nor did he wear any jewelry. It struck her that he had no need for extra adornment.

Surprised by this observation, her gaze returned to his undeniably handsome face. Unexpectedly, he did not wear his hair in the conventional Norman manner, cut around the ears as if a bowl had been overturned on his head, the way Reginald did. Instead, he wore his hair long, like the wilder Celts. Indeed, he seemed to have more in common with those brazen warriors than Reginald or the other noble Normans she was used to.

Despite her bravado in the inner ward, her refusal to be alarmed and her very real hunger made worse by the abundance of food around her, Mina wondered if she had made a mistake by not taking the steward’s advice to go to her quarters.

No, I am in the right, she thought resolutely. He should have greeted them in the courtyard and offered them the hospitality of his castle. Instead, he had left them outside as if they were merchants or traveling performers, not honored guests.

With that thought to bolster her courage, she took a deep breath, lifted her chin and reminded herself she was the legitimate daughter of a knight, even if her mother had been a Saxon. Then she marched straight down the center of the hall between the tables.

The gray-haired nobleman on Sir Roger's right rose, a welcoming smile on his pleasant, careworn face that warmed her as much as the blazing fire. One by one the other men and women who were gathered in the hall fell silent, waiting expectantly. Only an elderly priest seemed not to notice the interruption as he continued to eat.

Still Sir Roger only looked, although his brow lowered ominously. What would he think of a woman who dared to embarrass him in front of all these people? No matter how she felt about the arranged marriage, Mina had given her word. Was it wise to anger her future husband?

Mina slowed her steps and lowered her eyes demurely. When she reached the dais at the far end of the curved hall, she made a deep obeisance. "Forgive my intrusion, Sir Roger," she said softly. "I fear, however, that no one informed you of our arrival."

Finally, finally, Sir Roger de Montmorency got up, still fixing her with his dark, measuring stare. His thigh-length tunic was belted about his waist and exposed long, lean legs. She noticed that his hands were slender and sinewy, obviously strong and surely capable of handling the heaviest weapons with ease.

"You are late and sent no word," her betrothed said in a voice as unfriendly as his expression. "We could not wait the supper."

"The bridge not five miles from here has been washed away... my lord," she added, with just enough of a pause to give her time to glance up at him. Let him see her eyes, too. Let him realize that she knew he had been unforgivably rude to herself and to her half brother, who was of a higher rank.

A vein in Sir Roger's forehead began to pulse, and she surmised she had scored a hit. "I'm sure it is not your fault," she said sweetly. "Underlings are often all too anxious to take advantage of a kind and generous lord." What a lie! she thought as she waited for him to respond. She could well imagine how he would treat his tenants. They would probably all welcome a mistress who understood what it was like to be mistreated.

Sir Roger made no answer, nor did his expression alter.

A particularly colorful curse rose to her lips. How could he continue to be so rude, with all these people watching? Was he that sure of himself that he did not fear their censure?

Looking at him, she thought he probably was.

"May I sit?" she asked, though it was not a request.

"My lady, please, take my chair." The gray-haired knight moved quickly aside. He smiled again, a kind but knowing smile. "I am Sir Albert Lacourt. Naturally we are delighted by your arrival, but you are quite wet through. Are you certain you would care to—"

"I was most anxious to meet my future husband," Mina interrupted calmly as she came around the table, removed her cloak—and suddenly realized that her soaking dress was clinging to her body like a second skin. She felt her face flush with embarrassment, and a quick glance at the assembly proved that she was making a spectacle of herself. Even the ancient priest was looking at her as if he had never seen a woman before. Considering she might as well be naked, perhaps that was not so far from the truth.

Nevertheless, she said not a word and took her chair as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"I, um, trust your journey was most pleasant except for the final portion," Sir Albert said.

"Yes, it was," Mina replied.

A serving wench with enormous breasts and a brazen manner that suggested her duties did not end with the hall but probably extended to the lord's bedchamber, as well, set down a platter of meat with a clatter.

Mina turned to Sir Roger and realized his gaze was fastened on her own breasts. "I see you are hungry, too," she remarked evenly.

A disgruntled frown flew across her intended's face before he turned his attention to the trencher before him.

“The storm was so severe, we were sure you had taken refuge somewhere along the road,” Sir Albert observed after a moment of awkward silence.

“We would have, but Reginald was most certain of a kind welcome here and insisted we continue,” she answered truthfully, keeping any hint of irony from her words.

Reginald finally appeared at the entrance to the hall. The reason for his delayed arrival was apparent immediately. He had changed his clothes and dried his hair as much as he could. Now he wore a long tunic of a heavy brocade that seemed to emphasize his thinness rather than make him look sturdier, which, Mina suspected, was its intention. He stood there awkwardly, frantically trying to curl his hair with his fingers.

To Mina’s considerable chagrin, Sir Roger immediately stood up and strode toward her half brother. “Lord Chilcott!” he cried, his deep voice decidedly pleasant. “How pleased I am to see you again!”

Mina tried to stifle the flush she felt coloring her face. She rose immediately and spoke to Sir Albert. “If you will excuse me, sir, I fear I am greatly fatigued after all. Good night, Sir Albert. It was a pleasure making your acquaintance.” Her gaze fixed on the buxom serving wench, who was once again making her way along the table refilling wine goblets. “I wish to be shown to my quarters.”

“Of course, my lady,” the wench said, her air of insolence noticeably diminished. Mina heard the men approaching, but she did not look at them or say anything.

Instead, she followed the maidservant, who tossed her long, honey brown hair and led the way toward the stairs leading upward to what Mina assumed was the upper hall.

Once away from the crowd, Mina smiled to herself, for she was certain that whatever else she had accomplished in the hall, she had shown the mighty Sir Roger de Montmorency that she could not be completely cowed.

As Roger walked back to his place with Reginald Chilcott at his side, he watched his future bride glide toward the stairs behind Hilda. She had not waited to be excused, or even said a farewell. God’s blood, what kind of woman had he agreed to marry?

“Sit down and eat,” he growled at the overdressed Reginald, who blushed noticeably, his face turning nearly as red as his scarlet tunic. His elaborate garments were quite a contrast to the severely plain gown his relative had worn. Either Mina Chilcott was not nearly as vain as her half brother, or her garments were merely an extension of her frigid personality.

His almost brother-in-law cleared his throat awkwardly. “Mina is...she is not an easy person sometimes, Sir Roger,” he explained haltingly, “but she was most competent in managing my father’s estate in his final years when he was not able to do so himself. Perhaps once you are married, she will...mellow?” he finished hopefully.

Roger thought it highly unlikely that a woman of Mina Chilcott’s coloring and temperament could ever be made to “mellow.” He caught Albert’s censorious eye and pushed some particularly savory venison in a rich, spicy sauce toward the younger nobleman. “Please, eat.”

With a grateful smile, Reginald started consuming an astonishing amount for one of such slender build. Mercifully it seemed that Reginald would rather eat than talk. Albert, too, stayed quiet, and most of the guests talked softly among themselves.

At last Reginald belched delicately and said, “A very fine meal, my lord. My compliments to your cook. Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I, too, shall retire.”

“If you wish, I shall have someone bring you some mulled wine to your bedchamber,” his host offered with more graciousness, since Reginald was leaving. Roger signaled for Dudley to come toward the table.

Reginald’s eyes widened and he nodded. “Yes, Sir Roger. I would like that. Thank you very much.”

Roger kept his amusement to himself, though it seemed the young fool was taking an offer of mulled wine in much the same way another man would take an offer of a vast estate.

“Excuse me, Sir Roger,” Reginald continued as he rose to follow Dudley. “Thank you.” Reginald and Dudley headed toward the stairs, with Reginald pausing to greet some of the guests on his way out of the hall.

When they were gone, Roger took a large gulp of his wine.

“That was an interesting display of childishness, Roger,” Albert noted dryly, “although I was pleased and surprised to see that you were not totally without some manners.”

“Is it childish to make it plain that I do not care to have my meals interrupted for any reason? Is it childish to expect to be informed of a delay? Nor do I consider it childish to be less than impressed when a person I do not know dares to chastise me in my own hall about my tenants and my bridges.”

“I’ve warned you often enough about that bridge. Besides, they are your guests.”

“Bridge or not, they were late.”

“If the bridge is out, they couldn’t have sent a messenger on ahead.”

“So they should have stayed at an inn.”

“She said she was anxious to meet you.”

Roger’s only response to this observation was a derisive grunt as he reached for more wine.

“Granted she’s not very attractive, but there is a certain something—”

“She’s a shrew. Or a harpy. Call her what you will. I hate red hair and blemished skin.”

“She knew she was in the right, and she acted like it,” Albert said firmly as he eyed his companion. “I found her rather refreshing. And those are freckles, not blemishes, and there were only ten.”

“You counted?” Roger raised one eyebrow speculatively. “If you think her such a prize, why don’t you marry her?”

Albert flushed and looked away. “You know why not. Besides, you made the bargain, not me.”

“With that buffoon Reginald. I must have been mad.”

“You could always break it off.”

“It is a tempting thought.”

“She has a fine body,” Albert noted while his attention wandered to the huntsman, Bredon, who was tossing bones to his favorite hounds. The dogs yapped and scrambled through the rushes for the tasty titbits.

“A fine body she displayed to the entire hall,” Roger replied, still sounding annoyed. In actuality, he was recalling her exquisite shape. Indeed, she might have been nude, the way that soaking gown clung to her body, with her nipples puckered from the chill.

“It could be worse, you know,” Albert said. “She could be much uglier.”

“She could be much prettier, too.” Roger shoved back his chair and stood up. “With courtesy in mind, I believe I shall see that my guests have been attended to properly. Is Dudley back yet?”

“Here, my lord!” the steward replied, rushing forward.

“Where did you put them?”

“The two new chambers in the upper hall, my lord.”

“Good. Now have something to eat and get yourself dry or you’ll catch your death. I have no desire to find myself another steward.”

“Aye, my lord.”

Ignoring the rest of his guests, Roger strode toward the stairs leading to the new upper hall, added within the past year. His castle was not a large one, but he had been expanding it since he had come of age and been confirmed as lord dependent upon swearing fealty to Baron DeGuerre.

His plans had not included marrying the half-Saxon half sister of Reginald Chilcott. To be sure, Reginald was willing to be generous to get her off his hands, but Roger didn’t doubt that with his looks and reputation, he could have married a very wealthy, influential woman instead of this red-haired termagant.

Did she think him as foolish as Reginald, to be tricked by that little act of ostensible contrition? He had seen the determined, haughty look in her eyes as she came toward him in the hall. Those big green eyes of hers said everything: that she was a stubborn, arrogant creature who had been insulted and meant to let him know it. It had only been toward the last that she affected the docile woman's role.

She would soon discover that he was not so easily fooled, although he had to admit that she had been wise enough to be subtle with her criticism.

But God's teeth! She was not the type of wife he wanted. He wanted lineage, wealth, beauty and submissiveness. He wanted a wife who would understand who ruled this castle.

Of course, there would be compensations for such obedience, not the least of which would be provided by her husband's prowess in the nuptial bed. Every woman Sir Roger de Montmorency had ever made love to had said he was the best.

Mina Chilcott would have to learn that he would not countenance another such performance as she had given tonight, and the lesson might as well start immediately.

Roger took the short flight of stairs toward the upper chambers two at a time and strode along the narrow corridor, the resounding thump of his boots on the wooden floor sounding like a drumbeat heralding the start of battle.

As for Mina Chilcott's compensation, that would have to wait.

Chapter Two

Roger rapped once on the door to his betrothed's bedchamber, then shoved it open. He had not bothered to check the preparations for this guest chamber, but a quick glance assured him that all was ready and quite comfortable, from the brazier that provided some warmth against the chill to the new tapestries on the walls and the thick coverings on the bed. He had even purchased a carpet for this room, an almost unheard-of luxury that he intended to have moved to his own bedchamber after the wedding.

Hilda stood inside. She half turned and giggled when she saw who was in the doorway. Roger looked past Hilda to encounter the frosty gaze of his bride. Clad only in her wet white shift, Mina Chilcott glared at him while she reached for her gown, which had been laid out to dry on the only chair. He had thought her soaking gown had displayed her body outrageously; he instantly realized that a wet linen shift was truly next to nothing. He could see the pink tinge of her nipples and the reddish triangle between her legs.

He suddenly realized he had never made love with a redheaded woman, and the idea was not completely distasteful to him.

Mina grabbed hold of her gown and held it against herself in a futile and late attempt at modesty. "Sir, what is the meaning of this intrusion?" she demanded.

Roger forced his expression to remain impassive as he returned his gaze to her face. His bride was not as unattractive as she had appeared before, now that she was no longer chilled. Her skin was smooth and pale, pink tinged with a blush that hid her freckles. Her drying hair no longer hung limply about her slender shoulders, but waved and curled about her heart-shaped face. Her eyes, which had looked green in the hall, appeared bluish gray in the flickering light of the candles. They dominated her features and offset the luscious fullness of her lips. Perhaps he had been too hasty in his judgment of her.

"Hilda, go below," he ordered, his tone tempered by his continuing appraisal of the woman who was to be his wife.

With a toss of her head, Hilda obeyed. However, she came much closer to him than necessary on her way to the door as if to remind him of the countless nights of mutual pleasure they had shared. Unfortunately for Hilda, he had already decided to end their liaison. For one thing, as aptly demonstrated by her departure, the serving wench was becoming far too impertinent. For another, once he vowed to be faithful to his wife, he had every intention of abiding by his pledge. His honor

would not allow him to do otherwise, even if he didn't particularly care for the woman. He simply would not break any vow, for any reason.

"Sir Roger, what is the meaning of this intrusion?" Mina Chilcott repeated, her tone calmer and her eyes much more enigmatic than they had been at their first meeting, or even moments before.

Sir Roger de Montmorency was reminded that he had intended to put his betrothed firmly and forever in her place. He was used to unquestioning obedience, respect or fear, and his wife was not going to be any different. "Perhaps I came to assure myself that my servants were attending to you properly," he said. "You implied that I was somewhat remiss in my supervision."

She held the dress a little higher. "Hilda seems quite competent. In a number of ways, I suppose," the young woman finished casually, although there was a brief flicker of condemnation in her eyes that Roger did not like.

He walked toward her slowly and deliberately. "I am the master here," he said in a commanding tone that was not a shout, but deep and resonating, nonetheless. "I will do as I wish, within the bounds of honor, and it is not for you to criticize, ever. When you are my wife, you would do well to remember that I am used to obedience. I will accept nothing less."

"And I am used to being chastised, Sir Roger," she answered quite calmly. "For the present, I am neither your lackey nor your wife, so I ask you again, will you please have the goodness to leave?" Then, to Sir Roger de Montmorency's considerable chagrin, Mina Chilcott had the effrontery to turn her back to him.

His anger turned to shock when he saw the marred flesh above the neckline of her shift. The white, silky skin was covered with long, thin scars, as if from a lash or a switch. For a moment, he was speechless at the thought that anyone could have inflicted such damage on this woman. Any woman. "Who did that to you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"A man who wanted me to obey," she replied matter-of-factly, twisting to look at him over her shoulder. Her face was expressionless, except for her remarkable eyes. They were full of defiance, and such resilient inner strength that he could not quite believe those flashing blue gray eyes belonged to a mere woman. "Good night, Sir Roger," she said.

Astonished by what he had seen, and not quite sure what to say, Roger left the room, slamming the door behind him.

A deep shudder of released tension shook Mina's body as she slowly lowered her arms and threw the gown back over the chair. She rubbed her arms to restore some warmth after clutching the cold, wet gown. Still shivering, she stoked the coals in the brazier, fighting the memories from her past, especially the horrible years after her beloved mother's death, which always brought a chill to her.

She slipped out of her damp shift and hung it over the chair, as well. Taking the heavy coverlet from the bed, she wrapped it around herself and went to the narrow window, where she looked out at the rainy night. Clouds now completely obscured the moon, and everything beyond the nearest wall was in darkness.

This castle was not at all what she had expected, considering the awestruck way Reginald spoke of Sir Roger. Her half brother was forever reminding her what a favorite her betrothed was with the powerful Baron DeGuerre and how long the de Montmorencys had held this land. She had expected something much more impressive than this simple structure with only one round curtain wall and the interior buildings lining the walls. Indeed, when they had first entered the inner ward, she had thought they were merely in the outer wards, not the courtyard.

As she watched the moon appear at the edge of a cloud, it occurred to her that if there was anything impressive about Montmorency Castle, it was the master, not the place itself.

Sir Roger de Montmorency was not quite what she had anticipated, either. He was as vain and arrogant as any man, but in his case, not without some cause. Nor was it a surprise that he expected unwavering obedience.

She sighed softly. She was used to such expectations, which did not mean she intended to give in to them. Or to him. For too long she had been at the mercy of others. She had learned to endure in silence and to pray for the day when she would be free.

But what freedom was there for an unmarried woman? None, she had discovered after her father's death, and even less respect. She was merely a valueless commodity to be disposed of in marriage with the least trouble possible, or sent to the seclusion of a convent.

Marriage had seemed by far the lesser of two evils. As a nobleman's wife, she would at least share in the respect due her husband.

Sir Roger obviously demanded and commanded a great deal of respect, so her plans were being fulfilled in one way. However, it remained to be seen if he could earn such a response from her. Thus far, she didn't find that likely.

Still, things could be worse, she reflected as she walked back to the brazier. Sir Roger had ambition, another quality she had wanted in a spouse. It had to be ambition that would cause him to join with the Chilcotts, whose greatest asset was not wealth or power but the value of their ancient name. She was ambitious, too, or at least eager to better her lot.

She could also appreciate her future husband's self-control, perhaps better than any other noblewoman. Despite his anger, Sir Roger had not hit her. Her father would have beaten her for considerably less aggravation, but then, her father often beat her for nothing at all.

A greater mystery, perhaps, was what Sir Roger made of his bride. She had angered him, and he had understood all too well that she acted not as she truly felt in the hall below, but as might be expected of a woman in her position. It was something new to discover that somebody had seen through her deception.

She recalled the unexpected tone in Sir Roger's voice when he asked who had scarred her back. He had sounded angry, yet it was a different kind of anger, as if he wanted to punish the person responsible.

Or was it pity? She frowned and crossed her arms. She didn't want or need pity. She wanted a place in the world. And she wanted respect.

Mina went toward the bed. She surveyed the linens and lightly brushed her hand over the fine coverings. Her gaze roved over the other furnishings, simple but finely made, chosen with a discerning eye. The hour was growing late, and she suddenly realized she was exhausted. She blew out the candles and prepared to get under the covers.

Then she heard a woman's giggle and a man's low voice in the corridor. Sir Roger's voice, she thought. Curious and quite used to listening at doors to avoid future trouble, she got out of bed, drew the coverlet around herself again and opened the door a crack, peering along the corridor. Someone had taken the torch from the iron bracket outside her door and doused it in a nearby bucket of sand, so the only light was provided by another torch flickering near the spiral stairs.

Mina could discern two shapes, one a woman with her back against the wall, the other, larger one obviously a man—and obviously Sir Roger. The woman laughed, low and guttural, as she slid her slender arms up his muscular ones. "I thought you were planning to do without," she whispered, and Mina recognized Hilda's sultry voice.

Sir Roger's bride turned away and closed the door softly, her mouth a hard, grim line.

Roger removed Hilda's hands from his shoulders. "No," he said quietly but firmly. "It's finished between us."

Hilda gasped, and even in the darkness he could see the panic in her eyes.

He suspected she had been waiting for him, to see where she stood now that he was to be married. He had no intention of punishing a woman who had pleased him by sending her away from her home. "You need have no fear," he said. "You may remain as a servant in the hall."

"I can't, my lord!" Hilda protested, starting to weep and covering her face with her hands. "She'll not allow it! She hates me already, I think. The looks she gives me! She knows about us, or guesses—and rightly, too, as you well know. I'll have to leave here!"

Roger grasped Hilda's upper arms and waited until she uncovered her tear-streaked face. He spoke slowly and deliberately, so that she would hear his sincerity. "I say that you may remain in this castle. You are a good woman, Hilda, and a fine servant. No one may force you to leave. Do you understand?" He thought of the stern condemnation he himself had received from Mina Chilcott's censorious eyes. He let go of Hilda and stepped away. "Nevertheless, you had best keep your distance from me in the future."

Hilda nodded and smiled tremulously. "I...I will, my lord. Thank you, my lord." A little of Hilda's usually seductive manner asserted itself. "We had some good times, didn't we, Sir Roger? If she don't treat you right—"

"I will be faithful to my wife, Hilda."

"Yes, my lord. I should have known." She sighed again as she turned to walk away. "I hope you'll be happy, my lord."

Roger didn't answer. What was there to say?

"Would you be so kind as to order an escort for me?" Mina asked Sir Roger as she joined the men at the high table the next morning to break the fast. The mass had been mercifully brief, yet something of a trial, for Father Damien mumbled and even fell asleep at one point.

A seat had been left vacant for her beside Sir Roger, she noted, which was an improvement from the previous evening. Sir Albert sat beside the empty chair, and again she was warmed by his pleasant countenance and kind smile. Reginald sat to Sir Roger's left, and seemed rather overwhelmed by his host, to judge by the constant ingratiating grin on his face.

As for Sir Roger, she did not really know what his expression might be, because she did not deign to look at him after the first glimpse, which had made her blush and remember all too well the last time she had seen him, when he'd been enjoying his lustful rendezvous with the serving wench. Apparently she was more ashamed of his conduct than he.

The unbridled arrogance of the man, to practically make love with another woman right outside his betrothed's bedchamber door! She would be relieved to be away from him.

"I wish to ride out today," she announced, "since the storm has ceased. We were unable to see the land around the castle last night in the rain and the dark."

"I cannot waste my time riding about the countryside," Sir Roger said brusquely and not unexpectedly. "I have business to attend to."

Mina was glad the hall was not as crowded as last night. She didn't particularly want everyone to see the curt manner with which Sir Roger treated her. "Of course," she answered with seeming affability. Truly, she didn't desire any company. She wanted to get away by herself, as she often did when she was dispirited, which had to be because of the tiring journey in yesterday's rain and the unfamiliar bed, nothing else. "You must oversee the repairs to the bridge," she continued just as pleasantly, "as well as any other edifices that may have crumbled in the storm."

Hilda sauntered by the table and set a platter of bread and fruit in front of her. "And perhaps you are tired," Mina added innocently.

Sir Roger gave her a black and questioning look, and Hilda scurried away. Mina kept a sly, triumphant smile from her face as she took an apple and bit into it, enjoying the sweetness and juiciness of it.

"I will be happy to—" Sir Albert started to offer.

"I need you," Sir Roger interrupted.

"I thank you for your concern, Sir Albert," Mina said with a smile, "but I am quite comfortable going out alone." She daintily dipped her fingers in a bowl of scented water beside Sir Roger and

delicately wiped them on her napkin before rising. “Good day, gentlemen. I shall look forward to your gracious company at the evening meal, when I have returned from my ride.”

“I will not provide an escort,” Sir Roger reiterated.

“I understood you the first time, sir,” she replied evenly. She caught sight of Reginald, who was desperately shaking his head and winking as he tried to warn her to acquiesce to Sir Roger’s wishes. She could easily ignore her half brother.

Sir Roger shot a glance at Reginald, who flushed bright red and cleared his throat awkwardly. “Mina, perhaps it would be better if you were to stay here today. It was a long and difficult journey, and the rest will do you good.”

“How kind of you to think of my well-being, Reginald. I appreciate it all the more for its rarity. Now I bid you a good day,” she replied, curtsying with maidenly modesty.

Roger wasn’t deceived. He saw her slightly stubborn smile and the hard gleam of determination in her eyes.

He recognized that look on her face. The best knights had it, for it revealed an unyielding desire to win in any situation. Inflexible fortitude was an admirable quality in a nobleman—but certainly not in a woman. There was only one kind of desire he wanted in a woman.

Then Mina Chilcott swept out of the hall without so much as a backward glance. God’s blessed blood, she was like no woman he had ever met before. Thank God.

Reginald cleared his throat again. “There, you see, my lord,” he said eagerly. “She can be reasonable.”

“Good,” Roger replied, but he was far from convinced that Mina Chilcott had any intention of obeying either him or Reginald. That smile, that superior little smile—the man who had trained him in the arts of war had always smiled like that when he expected Roger to fail, and that smile had too often proved prophetic. He had come to hate that smile of Fitzroy’s very much.

“If you excuse me, my lord,” Reginald said, “I have not much of an appetite this morning.” He got up and wandered in the general direction of the outer door, then into the courtyard.

“If he consumes that much when he has little appetite, I fear for the contents of my larder,” Roger said sarcastically.

Albert shifted in his chair. “Your betrothed has spirit, my lord,” he offered. “Very stimulating, and surely suggestive of a passionate nature, too.”

Roger looked at his friend with some surprise. “What’s this, Albert? I haven’t heard you comment on a woman in years.”

“And you seem to be going to great effort to be unpleasant,” Albert noted.

“I am the way I am,” Roger replied. “If she’s going to be my wife, she had better get used to me.”

“I’ve seen you be quite charming toward other women, Roger,” Albert chided gently. “I should think you would make an effort for your betrothed.”

“It is precisely because she is my betrothed that there is no need for any exertion on my part. She will be in my bed on our wedding night whether she wants to be or not. Or whether I want her or not, for that matter.”

“You are a heartless creature, Roger!” Albert said with very real dismay.

“I am the way I am,” Roger repeated coldly, getting to his feet. If he had no heart, that was not his fault. It was God’s, or fate, or the whim of nature that had taken his parents from him too soon. And it was the fault of his parents’ friends, who had decided it was best that Roger go to Castle Gervais to learn the ways of knighthood while his sister Madeline was sent to a convent.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Albert said. “I just thought you could be a little friendlier to her. I’ve heard some things... I don’t think she’s had a particularly easy life.”

Roger thought of the scars on Mina’s back, and although to a casual observer his face would have seemed expressionless, Albert saw that his words had affected his friend.

“Very well,” Roger said. “I will make an effort to be polite, if that will please you.”

“It will, indeed.”

Roger gave Albert the ghost of a grin as they headed to the door. “I daresay it’s quite a trial shepherding Reginald.”

Albert chuckled companionably.

“We had best see what damage the storm brought about,” Roger said. “I am especially concerned about the mill. If the water was strong enough to ruin a bridge, it might have damaged the wheel.” He halted abruptly when he looked into the yard.

Mina Chilcott, attired in a long blue cloak that made her chameleon eyes look like the sky in the first days of spring, sat upon her horse with absolutely no escort in sight. Her mount was a brokendown nag who had obviously seen better and younger days, quite a contrast to the splendid stallion Reginald rode.

Reginald hurried up behind them. “I say, Mina!” he called out nervously. “I won’t give you an escort, you know.”

“Don’t fret, Reginald,” she said with an infuriatingly cool smile directed at Roger. “Unlike some people, I have learned to do without.”

Roger stared at her, very well aware that Hilda had used similar words when she had waylaid him in the corridor the previous night.

He marched toward Mina Chilcott. He would not provide an escort, and no woman—not even this one—should ride alone and unprotected. Before he could reach her, however, she kicked her horse’s side and went galloping out of the gate, the beast moving with more speed than he would have thought possible.

“Stop!” Roger shouted, running a few steps after her, but she either didn’t hear him, or, more likely, ignored him and rode on.

“Saddle my horse!” he called to one of the lads gawking out of the stable door, suddenly cognizant of the humiliating spectacle he had made of himself. When the boy rushed to do his bidding, Roger turned and glared at Reginald. “Your sister has seen fit to disobey both of us,” he said through clenched teeth. “I am going after her and when I find her, I fully intend to make sure she understands that was not a wise decision!”

Chapter Three

Mina smothered a pleased laugh as the troop of mounted men thundered past her hiding place in the grove of beech trees beside the road. She could see well enough to catch the grim expression on Sir Roger’s handsome face, and the frightened one on Reginald’s. He hated a pace faster than a walk, so this headlong gallop after her had to be terrifying.

Poor fellow! There was no need for Sir Roger to insist upon his presence, for she was quite sure Reginald had been compelled to go either by a direct order, or the force of Sir Roger’s malevolent glare.

The other soldiers simply looked intent upon keeping up with their lord. She could well imagine the harsh words with which Sir Roger would upbraid them if they fell behind.

When the sound of the horses disappeared in the distance, Mina took off her stiffened headband and wimple and walked her horse along a narrow path through the unfamiliar woods. The land around the rise on which the castle stood was flat and even, but a short distance away, the forest began, as well as the slight swell of rounded foothills. Squirrels scampered overhead, and she caught the occasional call of a jay nearby.

As she continued on her leisurely journey, she realized her future home was located in very pretty countryside. The path wound close to tended fields, and she could hear snatches of conversation among the peasants. They spoke of the coming harvest and their families, and they made jokes. Sir Roger must be a good lord, she thought, or she would hear complaints and grumbles from people thinking themselves unheard by anyone from the castle.

Soon she reached a babbling brook, its banks covered with purple scabious, ladies' bedstraw and rushes. She bent down to drink the clear and delicious water. Sitting back on her haunches, she sighed contentedly, taking in the beauty of her surroundings and her few moments of peace. Long ago she had learned to savor such rare moments, and to store them in her memory to recall again when her life grew more difficult.

How many more such solitary rambles would she enjoy? Very few, probably, unless she could convince Sir Roger that they were safe and enjoyable to the point of being a necessity. That might be possible, although she was quite certain that Sir Roger would never see it that way. Surely he never stopped to admire a lovely, sunny summer's day, or watch the birds and squirrels preparing for the winter.

Was there anything he enjoyed simply for the pleasure it gave him? She could easily think of one thing, she realized with a frown, her mood spoiled by the remembrance of Hilda in her betrothed's arms. Yes, that no doubt gave him pleasure. But did it give him peace?

Wrapped in her thoughts, she slowly walked the horse back toward the main road, stooping periodically to pick a bouquet of wildflowers. How sweet they smelled, the various scents blending in the warm air with the odor of the thick carpet of earth and leaves beneath her feet.

A rabbit peeped cautiously out of the undergrowth, making Mina smile. Was it a mother rabbit looking for food? Or a male rabbit looking for a mate?

Suddenly the rabbit dashed across the pathway as if it had been frightened. Then Mina heard the sound of horses on the road.

As she suspected, it was Sir Roger, Reginald and the soldiers. Since she had accomplished her goal, she did not try to conceal herself.

"Mina!" Reginald called out, relief in his voice as Sir Roger gave the signal to halt. "Where have you been?"

"Picking flowers," she answered calmly, ignoring Sir Roger's glare. The other soldiers shifted nervously in their saddles. "There was no need for alarm."

Sir Roger swung down from his horse and marched toward her, his frowning lips matching his glaring black eyes. "It is dangerous for a lady to ride out alone." His forbidding gaze seemed to bore into her.

"Really, Sir Roger? Your lands are not safe? Outlaws do not tremble to hear your name?"

Roger stared at this foolish young woman with the limpid eyes who dared to imply that he could not maintain the safety of his people. "No forest is safe for a lone woman."

"Of course. How stupid of me to forget."

She went to go past him, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her close. Her horse's reins fell from her hand, and the flowers she carried in the other were crushed against his chest. "You are not stupid, but you are a lady. And if you want to be treated as one, I suggest you act like one." He pulled her even closer, so that her breasts were pressed against his hard chest. "Or would you rather I did not treat you like a lady?" he whispered huskily. "I could, you know. Do you think that simpleton Reginald would come to your aid if I dragged you off into the trees. Or perhaps that is what you would like?"

"You would not dare—"

"I dare whatever I like, my lady. This is my land, and you are to be my wife. If you do not wish to anger me again, I suggest you do as you are told."

"Or you will what? Rape me?" she demanded, her voice low so that the others could not hear, but so intense he couldn't doubt the passion and the conviction behind them.

She twisted away from him as he gaped at her, stunned by her blunt words. He had only been trying to frighten her into obedience.

"My lord, I can believe you are capable of anything, and if I am to act like a lady, might I suggest you act like a gentleman?" She tossed the destroyed flowers aside and crossed her arms. "You are right about Reginald. I know that as well as you do. Better, I daresay. Rest assured, Sir Roger,

when we are married and in public I will be a docile, obedient wife. But do not ever try to take me against my will, because if you ever attempt to destroy the one shred of dignity I have left, you will regret it.” She grabbed the trailing reins of her horse and moved to mount.

He yanked her around and her gaze darted from his strong, lean fingers on her arm to his stern face. “You are hurting me, Sir Roger.”

He let go of her. She mounted quickly and spurred her horse into a gallop, heading down the road toward the castle.

Roger stalked to his waiting horse, too angry and distressed to notice the curious, astonished expressions of the others. God’s blood; she had surprised him—and not just with her words.

A woman who was not afraid of him, even at his most domineering. How did she get that way? From what source did that incredible resolve and the fierceness in her glowing gray eyes come? She was undeniably shocking. Even more surprising, perhaps, was his other reaction.

He liked her. He admired her poise and her assurance. More importantly, he could respect her.

He put his hands on his saddle, ready to leap onto his stallion’s back, when another response besieged him. He wanted her. The perception of his desire was nearly as shocking as its magnitude.

But there could be no denying what he felt. What he had first experienced the moment he had brought her body into contact with his. There in the woods, with the scent of flowers about her, her hair loose and unkempt and her cheeks flushed, she seemed wild and untamed. Free. Passionately free. God’s teeth, if he could but turn a portion of that passion to himself...

“I must apologize again for my sister’s outrageous behavior,” Reginald said. Startled, Roger glanced at the gathered men and mounted his horse. “She is an independent creature, despite my father’s attempts to subdue her.”

“How did he attempt it?” Roger asked as they nudged their horses into a walk. “Did he try beating her?”

“Of course,” Reginald replied, obviously believing that Roger intended to use that method of correction himself. “But I am afraid it had little effect.”

“I suppose he starved her, too.”

“He thought fasting was good for the soul. Everybody had to, or so he said. Fortunately, my uncle took me to France and I escaped the old villain’s eccentricities.”

Obviously Mina had not escaped such severe eccentricities. The beatings would explain the scars. What kind of man could beat his own child so viciously?

“You...you aren’t planning on calling off the wedding, are you?” Reginald asked when the castle came into view.

“No,” Roger replied curtly, reflecting that it was a good thing Gaubert Chilcott was already dead, or he would be tempted to teach the fellow something about pain.

That night, Mina sat in the place of honor at Sir Roger’s right hand. She was trying to concentrate on the food, but she was all too aware of the man beside her. She could smell the scent of the crushed wildflowers that lingered about his clothing, an evocative reminder of their confrontation that day.

After what had happened, she had expected to see Reginald hurrying toward her with the news that Sir Roger had decided not to marry her. Instead, her betrothed was sitting beside her as if nothing at all untoward had taken place, and Dudley had already begun preparations for the wedding feast the next day. The ceremony would be at noon outside the chapel, presided over by Father Damien.

Nor was she the only one anxious in the hall, she realized. Everyone assembled seemed to take their cue from Sir Roger, and his silence was most unnerving. She had to remember that her actions might influence his mood and thus the tone of the gathering in the hall. It was not a responsibility to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, at this particular time, she could not bring herself to speak, especially when her gaze kept being drawn to Sir Roger’s right hand and the lean, sinewy fingers that had gripped her arm that morning, the slender fingers that tomorrow night would touch and perhaps caress her.

Unbidden, her gaze strayed to his handsome profile. The black-browed eyes. The straight nose. The full lips. The strong line of his jaw.

Suddenly Sir Roger turned to her. With a flushed face, she quickly looked away as he spoke, his inflection as placid as his countenance. "I have arranged to have an escort at your service whenever you wish to ride out again," he said, his voice deep and low in her ear.

"That will not be necessary," she answered, staring straight ahead.

"I am afraid I must insist."

"I thank you for your kindness, Sir Roger, but I believe I will have too much to do to allow me the pleasure of a ride anytime soon."

"I see."

Was he disappointed? A strange and unfamiliar pleasure at the thought that she could make him feel any disappointment whatsoever made her heart miss a fraction of a beat. She hadn't thought it possible this simple and quite honest refusal would have any effect on him at all. "I fear I am going to be too busy settling into my new duties and responsibilities," she explained.

"Are there any other requests you would care to make?" he asked after a moment.

"None, Sir Roger," she answered truthfully. Then she made a little smile. His lips twitched slightly, as if he wanted to return her smile but wasn't sure how—or perhaps how such a thing would be received.

For the first time since she had arrived, Mina felt that Sir Roger was not looking at her as if she were an article he had paid too high a price for, or a creature that filled him only with fury. She imagined ... hoped...he was looking at her the way he usually looked at a woman he was attracted to.

The notion excited her, a flame kindling in the region of her heart and spreading outward until her whole body felt warmed by its glow. She yearned to tell him how a favorable response from him would please her, yet she could not, with all the people in the hall.

Instead, she reached out and touched his hand lightly. Instantly he pulled it back, then grabbed his goblet. His action had more rebuke in it than anything he might have said. He had reacted as if her touch were leprous.

The burning heat of shame washed over her, and she quickly returned her attention to the food, to Reginald, to Sir Albert, or to anything other than Sir Roger.

After the last of the fruit was cleared away, a minstrel and small group of musicians appeared bearing a lute, tabor, fithel and harp. Sir Roger didn't seem the type of man to find solace or enjoyment in music and, indeed, when the opening chords were struck, he appeared quite bored. She was in no mood for entertainment, either, but she gave the men her attention as if enthralled.

The minstrel was a very thin young man with a pockmarked face and straggly blond hair. Every other minstrel Mina had ever seen had been as vain as Reginald. She could only assume that this minstrel's voice would supply the beauty his visage lacked.

She discovered that she had surmised correctly about the minstrel's voice. It was deep and rich, and he infused the appropriate emotion into every word. Nevertheless, her interest flagged considerably when he began a long lay about a woeful knight trying to win the heart of his lady. The knight sounded like a dolt for persisting where he was so obviously unwelcome, and the lady seemed a vain, dishonorable creature for believing the fellow's flattery and finally giving in to his constant pleas, thereby committing adultery. If that was love, she could certainly do without it.

"My lord!" Dudley whispered, appearing at Sir Roger's elbow. "The Baron DeGuerre has arrived."

Sir Roger stood at once, mercifully cutting short the minstrel's verses, which seemed composed entirely of the knight's exclamations of his lady's perfections. "Is his chamber prepared?" he asked, with the merest hint of anxiety as he hurried to greet his overlord.

Mina looked at the table, hiding her satisfied expression as excited murmurs raced through the hall. So, even the great Sir Roger de Montmorency could be intimidated.

When the baron entered the hall and received the kiss of greeting from his host, Mina could see why he would be. The two men looked quite capable of defending Montmorency, or any castle, singlehandedly.

The baron was a formidable man, with piercing, icy blue eyes, a powerful build and brown hair that, like Roger's, fell to his shoulders. He wore a long tunic of unrelieved black, with no ornamentation of any kind. Suddenly everyone in the hall looked vastly overdressed, except for Roger. Even the little bits of embroidery around the neck of her own gown seemed ostentatious.

She also noted that whatever anxiety Roger had felt before, it disappeared—or was very well hidden—when he was in the baron's presence. They seemed much more like two good friends, perhaps even brothers, than overlord and underling. The other wedding guests rose and bowed as they passed by.

Mina stood as the men approached the high table, wondering if this new gown were quite fine enough. It was the nicest one she possessed, apart from the dress she was to wear to her wedding, yet she found herself wishing she had more jewels, blond hair and no freckles, especially when the baron ran his eyes over her as if she were a mare brought to market.

She straightened her shoulders. She was not a horse, and her father's family was of higher rank and greater antiquity than the baron's. She knew exactly how the baron had risen in the world, so she would not allow herself to be dismayed by him, either.

Reginald hurried around the table and made a deep, obsequious bow. "Baron DeGuerre, I am honored to meet you at last!" he exclaimed, acting as if the baron were the king instead of an upstart born in obscurity who had fought and married his way to a higher station. "Allow me to present my sister, Lady Mina Chilcott."

The baron nodded at Reginald and stopped in front of the table. Mina made her obeisance, not once taking her eyes from the baron's face.

"Lady Mina," the baron said, his voice low and mild. There was a very shrewd look in his blue eyes, though, and she guessed the mildness was a deception.

"I am honored," she replied softly, darting a glance at Roger, whose mien was annoyingly inscrutable.

Roger continued to introduce the baron to the wedding guests, starting with Sir Albert, who had evidently met the baron before. As they made their way through the hall, Mina sighed and sat down, still watching them. So, that was the great Baron DeGuerre. He was certainly an impressive man, and one, she guessed, like Roger—used to unquestioning obedience.

Nevertheless, there was something rather sad about his eyes that for a fleeting moment had made her sense he was one of the most unhappy men she had ever seen.

However, the baron's troubles were of considerably less importance to her than her own, and when the men returned to the high table, she soon felt out of place and very lonely. She didn't know the people they spoke of, or the places they had been, so she rose and excused herself.

Sir Roger didn't seem to notice.

Roger was not quite drunk, even though he had consumed several goblets of wine, and he wanted to be. Usually he was quite proud of his ability to drink without getting stupid or sleepy, but tonight he wanted to drink himself to oblivion even if that meant embarrassing himself in front of the baron.

He had to do something to drive Mina Chilcott out of his thoughts. He should be listening to the baron and his news of the doings of the court and other nobles, but her one light touch had nearly driven him mad with desire.

He should not be remembering how lovely she had looked in the woods, or how much he had wanted her. He should not be envisioning Mina naked beneath her coverings, or trying to decide what he should do first on his wedding night. He should not be thinking of her unyielding pride as she had stood before the baron, unwavering. Unafraid. Worthy in every way to be a nobleman's wife.

At least Reginald, that fawning, embarrassing dolt, had finally stumbled off to his chamber, one arm draped around the ever-helpful Hilda. Where had Hilda been during the evening meal? Not that he had noticed her absence particularly, until she had suddenly appeared after Mina had retired. Was she afraid of Mina? By God, she should be. Mina Chilcott jealous would probably be a sight to see.

Would she ever care enough about him to get jealous?

“Falkes de Bréauté’s mercenaries continue to behave like untamed beasts,” the baron continued. “I think the king will have to get rid of the man somehow, although—Roger?”

“Baron?”

“Forgive me, Roger,” the baron said indulgently. His eyes, however, blazed with irritation, which got Roger’s undivided attention immediately. “I was forgetting this was the night before your wedding. Perhaps I should stop telling you the news and allow you to retire.”

“My apologies, Baron,” Roger said, instantly and truly contrite. “I was listening.”

The baron nodded, and his vexation seemed to evaporate. “Be that as it may, your wedding is tomorrow, and I have kept you here far too long. This news can keep.” The baron moved conspiratorially closer. “She is quite different from Reginald, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“God’s blood,” the baron said, shifting and leaning comfortably against the back of the chair, “I’m glad of it. Reginald’s a harmless enough fellow, but I couldn’t imagine living with him. She is a shapely wench, isn’t she? I must confess that red hair took me by surprise. I can only surmise she has a temper to match.”

“I believe so, my lord,” Roger acknowledged.

“Well,” the baron said, rising and stretching his muscular arms over his head, “if anyone can handle a tempestuous woman, Roger, it would be you.” He looked shrewdly at the younger man. “If you don’t want her, you have only to tell me. I have discovered that the Chilcotts’ property is not what I had been led to believe.”

It occurred to Roger that the baron’s second wife, who had been some years older than the baron, had recently died. Although Roger admired Baron DeGuerre, he knew the man was a clever schemer who might have some unknown reason for wanting Mina Chilcott for himself.

That idea did not please Roger at all. “I have made an agreement with Reginald,” he said. “I intend to keep it.”

The baron smiled, a truly warm expression of satisfaction he rarely bestowed. “Good. I believed you to be a man of your word, and now I know it is so. A long and happy life to you!”

“Thank you, baron,” Roger said with great politeness. Inside, he was seething with rage. The baron had no need to test his honor, not after the years Roger had spent in his service, and after he had agreed to tie himself to a useless fool like Chilcott with a marriage that the baron had proposed. Baron DeGuerre should know that for Sir Roger de Montmorency, disloyalty was more terrible than any of the mortal sins, and worthy of the most ghastly hell imaginable.

“I did not mean to offend you, Roger,” the baron said sincerely. He looked down at his own powerful hands, which had fought so many times and killed so many men. “I was thinking of your happiness. If you would rather not marry Mina Chilcott, I will not take it amiss.”

“Are you interested...?” Roger let his deliberately tranquil voice trail off suggestively.

“Gracious God, no! I have no wish to marry again,” the baron responded with unquestionable sincerity.

“I have no complaint to make about the arrangements,” Roger said, his suspicions allayed, though he was somewhat unhappy for his overlord. Baron DeGuerre’s two marriages had given him wealth and status, but perhaps, Roger thought, perhaps that was all.

What was wrong with that? What other reasons could a man have for marrying? “I do have one cause for some trepidation,” Roger said in a more jovial tone. “I fear that on my wedding night, my bride may be harder to pierce than my shield.”

The baron chuckled. "I do not doubt your ability to kindle passion in even the coldest maiden." Roger raised his goblet in acknowledgement, and the two men shared a companionable laugh. They did not see Mina, standing on the stairs in the shadows, a deep frown on her face.

Unable to sleep, Mina had waited for the noise in the hall to cease. The cacophony had died down, but she had not heard Reginald and wondered what was happening to keep him below. Then she thought she heard Hilda's giggle. She had tried to tell herself it didn't matter what Sir Roger was doing, or with whom. They were not married yet. Even then, many men had dalliances with women other than their wives.

She had looked out the door anyway, to see Hilda supporting an obviously drunk Reginald and helping him into his room. Mina tarried a little longer and soon saw Hilda leave Reginald's chamber and go below. Perhaps looking for Sir Roger?

Again Mina tried to convince herself that it didn't matter, and again she didn't quite succeed. She crept down the steps, listening carefully. When she drew near the hall, she realized that most of the guests had also retired for the night. Hilda was nowhere to be seen, nor the ubiquitous Dudley. Only Sir Roger and the baron were awake and talking together at the high table.

She had turned, prepared to go back to her chamber, when she caught mention of her name. Slipping into the shadows, she stayed and heard them talking about her as if she were no more than any common wench. To Mina, they seemed like grotesquely leering jesters making sport at her expense.

What a silly little fool she had been for even starting to think that Roger de Montmorency might be any different from every man she had ever known. She had been a dolt to feel anything for him. He was like all the others.

She began to walk back to her chamber, recalling what she had overheard. The idea that Sir Roger could make her swoon with ecstasy without even trying was enough to make her grind her teeth in anger. The boastful, vain, pompous creature! No doubt all the women he had made love with so far had been like Hilda, serving wenches or peasants who believed there was something special about a nobleman, or who wanted something in return, like money or advancement.

Well, she knew better. Noblemen were men first, and seldom noble. If her betrothed thought he could just crook his finger and find Mina Chilcott waiting patiently in the nuptial bed, he would soon learn otherwise.

Chapter Four

Sir Roger de Montmorency's wedding day dawned gray and unseasonably cool, with a heavy drizzle and chill breezes that made it seem as if an October day had somehow found its way to July by mistake.

"What are you going to do?" Albert asked the groom, who stood at the door of the hall staring gloomily out into the inner ward. "You could have the blessing in the chapel rather than outside the doors, I suppose."

"I suppose," Roger answered. "But the chapel is too small. All the guests won't be able to go inside, and those who do not fit will probably feel insulted." He sighed deeply as Dudley bustled about the hall behind him, admonishing the servants or mumbling to himself. "God's wounds," Roger snarled, "this wedding is too much trouble. And it's costing a fortune, too."

"Chilcott's paying for most of it," Albert reminded him. "And the baron's pleased."

"He should be," Roger muttered.

"She's not as bad as all that."

Roger didn't respond except to close the door and turn around just as Hilda sauntered by. She gave him a tentative smile. "Has Lord Chilcott managed to crawl out of his bed?" he asked the maidservant, mindful of the goblets of wine the young man had ingested, and grateful that he wasn't the one paying for it.

"Aye, my lord," Hilda answered with a throaty chuckle. "But the poor fellow looks like a corpse."

“And his sister?”

“She’s not come out of her chamber, and I don’t think she intends to until the wedding. The door’s locked and she’s not letting anybody in. Says she wants to be alone. To pray. I, um, didn’t think I should wait.”

Roger had no idea what Lady Mina was doing, and he was in no humor to try to decipher her mood. “See that Lord Chilcott is well cared for. I don’t want him too sick to attend the ceremony.”

“Aye, my lord.” Another less cautious smile, and Hilda was gone.

“If he can’t drink well, he shouldn’t drink at all,” Roger remarked grimly.

“Not everyone has your capacity, Roger.”

“Then he should have gone to bed, like you.”

“What do you suppose the bride is doing?”

“What does it matter, as long as she’s at the blessing on time.”

Albert cleared his throat deferentially. “What are you going to do about Hilda? It’s well known that you two have been rather intimate.”

“So what of that?”

“So you’re getting married today. I don’t think your bride will appreciate the knowledge.”

“I don’t care what she thinks. Besides, it’s finished.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you were to send Hilda to one of your smaller estates, at least for the time being.”

Roger gave Albert a disgruntled look. “I think I’m capable of making my own decisions.”

“Very well,” Albert said with a shrug. “Do as you wish.”

“I intend to.” Roger eyed his friend. “For a man who has never married, you seem to be quite adept at dispensing advice to the prospective groom.”

When Roger saw the torment in his friend’s eyes, he regretted his hasty words. He knew the sad story of Albert’s youth and the reason he looked far older than he actually was, and he realized he had been cruel to speak to Albert in such a way.

Rather than admit he had acted cruelly, however, he said, “If the weather doesn’t clear, we’ll have the ceremony in the hall. It can be decorated early, I suppose.”

“Would you like me to tell Dudley?” Albert offered, and Roger was relieved to see that apparently all was forgiven.

“No. Let’s wait awhile. In the meantime, I’ll make sure the guests’ men and animals are being well treated.”

“As long as you’re not late for the wedding,” Albert said.

Although Albert’s tone was innocuous enough, Roger slanted him a suspicious look. “I won’t be,” he said firmly before he marched from the hall.

When Hilda and Aldys, one of the older and more experienced maidservants, arrived to help Mina dress for the wedding, they were surprised to see the bride sitting serenely in the small chair. She was already attired in a lovely gown of rich, dark green velvet girdled with a supple belt of bronze links and delicately embroidered about the neck and long dangling cuffs with fine gold thread. Beneath the gown she wore an undertunic of thin golden silk. Her thick, wavy hair was brushed and ornamented with a slender circlet of gold. In her hands she held a fine coverlet of embroidered linen.

Hilda and Aldys glanced uncertainly at each other, wondering if they were going to be chastised for being tardy.

“This should go to my lord’s bedchamber,” Lady Mina announced, nodding at the coverlet. She pointed at a silver carafe standing on the table nearby. “And that wine, too. They are marriage gifts from my relatives.”

“My lady,” Hilda said, “forgive us for not coming sooner.” She bit her lip and wiped her perspiring palms on her homespun gown, for she knew, despite Sir Roger’s guarantee, that she should

still be wary of Sir Roger's wife. "We were busy with the preparations below and did not know you were waiting for us, and—"

Lady Mina held up her slender hand, and Hilda was quite taken aback to see how work worn it was. Why, this fine lady had hands like a scullery maid. She was no pampered, spoiled person, Hilda thought, impressed, and Lady Mina's next words confirmed her estimation of her new mistress. "I prefer to dress myself, not being used to maidservants. Is Lord Chilcott well enough to attend the blessing?"

"Yes, my lady," Hilda answered softly and with true respect, taking the coverlet. It was very soft and she resisted the urge to rub her cheek on it.

"Good. Go now, and fetch me when it's time for the ceremony."

"If you're sure you don't need any help..."

"I am quite sure I have everything prepared," Lady Chilcott answered, her eyes on the carafe that Aldys hurried to pick up.

When Hilda and Aldys left the chamber, they paused and looked at each other. "What do you make of her?" Aldys asked. "She didn't look angry."

"No, she didn't," Hilda replied thoughtfully. "She's a deep one, she is. Did you see her hands?"

"She's done some work with them, that's for sure, and not just sewing," Aldys said solemnly.

"I think I'm going to like her."

"She hasn't had you sent away yet, at least."

"Why should she?" Hilda demanded with more bravado than she felt.

Aldys gave her friend a skeptical frown as they went up the spiral stairs to the tower bedchamber. "You know why."

"She needn't know about that. Besides, those days are done with," Hilda replied.

"I wouldn't want her angry at me," Aldys remarked forcefully.

"Sir Roger rules here, not her," Hilda said as she pushed open the door of Sir Roger's large bedchamber and quickly laid the coverlet where Lady Mina had directed, a slight sigh escaping her lips. The linen didn't reach all the way across the plump feather bed.

Aldys, who had never been in the room before, moved much slower and took her time looking around.

The walls were plain, undressed stone. There were no tapestries, although there were hooks, indicating that tapestries might be hung there in the colder weather. A huge chest with a painting depicting Daniel in the lion's den stood in one corner, a bronze brazier was in the other, and in the middle of the room was a round table and one heavy carved chair. There was only one other item of furniture in the room, and that was the immense bed, with tall posts carved to look like trees covered in vines, and thick bed curtains surrounding it.

"Come," Hilda said, giving the coverlet a final look. "Dudley will be having seven fits if we're not back soon."

Aldys, still overwhelmed by the size of the bed, only nodded in response.

Several minutes later, Reginald Chilcott knocked softly on the door to Mina's bedchamber. The bride herself opened it, attired in the wedding finery that he had given her as part of his wedding gift. If Mina had her way, she probably would have worn any old rag, despite the presence of numerous noble guests and Baron DeGuerre. Her hair, loose and adorned with the thin circlet, framed her unusual face in a most becoming manner.

He noticed as he entered that she was quite alone. "Where are the maidservants?"

"I sent them away. Is it time?" Mina asked, neither her face nor her voice betraying anything except mild interest.

"Nearly," he replied, not sure what to make of her. He hadn't been able to fathom her since he had arrived from France to find this decisive, stern woman in place of the wistful child he had known. "You look...you look quite lovely," he said encouragingly.

She gave him a skeptical frown as she sat down on the only chair.

“No, Mina, I mean it. I really do. That gown suits you perfectly. You...you look like your mother in that color.”

Mina smiled at Reginald, overdressed and with his hair overcurled as usual. She wasn't sure what was most ridiculous—the long, lavish plume on his brightly embroidered cap, the incredibly bright color of his green tunic or his parti-colored hose. And yet, as he stood there excited and eager to see her pleased with his gifts, she saw again the bewildered, insecure boy being taken away to France with his uncle to avoid any taint from his father's Saxon wife. She had not been very old then, but she remembered that of all her half brothers, Reginald was the only one who had ever said a kind word to her. “Thank you for providing it.”

“That's not what I meant,” Reginald answered sincerely as he stood awkwardly by the door. “I always liked your mother, you know. The first time Father brought her home, she kissed me and said she hoped I would be her friend. Her voice sounded like music. I was quite sorry to say farewell to her when my uncle took me away with him.” He came a little closer, toying with the heavily decorated leather belt around his waist “I know it wasn't easy for you, with my brothers and sisters. I'm sorry I wasn't able to help. But, Mina, I think Sir Roger will be a good husband for you. I truly do.”

Mina rose and went to the window. “He'll be a husband, and more than that, I don't expect.”

“He's not the cold brute he seems, really. He was most kind after those horrible ruffians left us in the woods. He was even polite to the abbot who was captured with us, and I assure you, that was no small feat. I mean, for a man of God, you should have heard him! He acted as if Sir Roger had been personally responsible for his discomfort. And it was Sir Roger who suggested this marriage, you know.”

“I thought it was the Baron DeGuerre.”

“No!” Reginald came a little closer. “He suggested only that I marry Madeline de Montmorency. It was Sir Roger who came up with the alternative.”

“He only thought of it to please the baron,” she said.

“Mina, you mustn't take such a cold view of this. I mean, if Sir Roger didn't want to marry you, he wouldn't. He and the baron are such good friends, I'm quite certain the baron wouldn't hold it against him if he changed his mind.”

“You're forgetting the value of our family name, Reginald. The baron needs your goodwill as much as you seek his.”

Reginald did not look convinced.

“I suppose the baron will be trying to make another match for you one day soon,” she said matter-of-factly, trying to alter the course of the conversation.

“What?”

“You would be a great prize, Reginald.” Not for a woman like herself, perhaps, who despised weakness, but he was a harmless, good-hearted fellow, and many a woman could do worse.

“I'm...I'm not ready after what happened last time,” he stammered.

In the next moment, however, he was pensively fingering one of his carefully arranged curls, and she had to suppress an indulgent smile. “Well, I would take care some woman doesn't try to seduce you into marriage.”

“I will,” he answered solemnly. Then he blushed and cleared his throat. “Since you've raised, um, the subject, Mina, is there anything you need to know...about the wedding night?”

“I know what is expected of me,” she answered just as solemnly.

Reginald looked very relieved. “Well, that's good. Excellent.”

She might have been tempted to smile again at her sibling's comical discomfort, except for the sudden vision of a naked Sir Roger waiting for her in bed, his dark eyes watching her. Her pulse started to race, and it took some deep breaths to restore her calm.

“When do you return to France?” she asked.

“Oh, that,” he said. “Well, as a matter of fact, Mina, Sir Roger’s offered to let me stay here for a while. Southern France is so hot this time of year, and the travel would be so uncomfortable, I’ve agreed. And—” he lowered his voice and knit his brows together with genuine concern “—I do want to make sure he’s kind to you. I’ve heard how Father was near the end, and I think I owe you that much.”

Mina suddenly felt rather remorseful for the unflattering things she had thought about Reginald in the past. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

There was a loud rap at the door, and Hilda’s head appeared. “It’s time, my lady,” she announced solemnly. Her gaze ran over Reginald. “My lord,” she said with some awe.

“Well, Mina, shall we?” Reginald asked, holding out his arm to escort her to her wedding.

“Yes, Reginald,” Mina replied, and with a purposefully blank face and a heart lacking any expectation of true marital felicity, she went.

Chapter Five

Roger surveyed his hall while taking small sips of the expensive wine imported from Agincourt. He was glad that the weather had cleared enough to allow the wedding ceremony to be held outside the chapel. Everyone had been able to see the bride and groom as they stood in front of the doors and pledged their troth, albeit barely looking at each other. For his part, Roger’s gaze had been fastened firmly on doddering Father Damien, who seemed blissfully unaware that the couple he was joining in holy matrimony didn’t seem particularly thrilled by the idea.

At least the guests appeared to be enjoying the celebratory meal. Dudley had compelled the cooks to outdo themselves. Every dish of meat had a special sauce, and many smelled of an extravagant use of spices. The bread was wonderful, the fruit as fresh as could be, and the wine the best.

The decorations in the hall had been enhanced, too, with more flowers and linens. Reginald had provided a multitude of candles, so that the large room would continue to be brightly lit as the evening wore on.

Unfortunately, Roger’s pleasure in regarding the scene before him was definitely diminished by his growing obsession with the woman sitting beside him, now his wife.

He had expected his bride to be a vain, foolish woman of no particular beauty. He had anticipated finding his wedding ceremony no more exciting than any trade arrangement, and his wedding feast to be simply an expensive extension of the transaction. He had thought that he would take more pleasure in the baron’s company than anyone else’s, and find his new wife’s presence less distracting than that of a horsefly.

Instead, he had discovered that Mina Chilcott was quite unlike any other woman he had ever met. As she sat beside him tonight, he couldn’t help noticing how the green gown she was wearing enhanced her eyes and brought out the subtle purity of her skin beneath the few freckles, or how the gold circlet emphasized the golden highlights in her astonishing red hair.

His first impression of Mina, though, which had been rapidly corroborated, was of her fortitude and astounding inner strength, not usually qualities that excited one about a woman.

Tonight, it dawned on Roger de Montmorency that to win Mina Chilcott’s respect would be no common thing, and to have her desire him would be worth any effort it might take. He didn’t doubt that later, when they were alone in bed and he caressed her with his expert hands, he would bring her such ecstasy as she had never known. Yes, he would earn both her respect and her desire. More than that, he didn’t need or want.

Harboring such thoughts, Roger slipped into a companionable mood. Now he could overlook Father Damien’s mumbling of the blessing outside the chapel that had made him a married man, although at the time he had ground his teeth with frustration. Instead, he remembered the moment he had put the ring on Mina’s slender finger and repeated Father Damien’s words. She had not trembled

or blushed, but thrust her hand toward him with a vigor he found exciting. No timid wench, Mina, and he hoped she would do everything with such enthusiasm.

Glancing at her seated to his right, he noticed that she was not eating, despite the plethora of fine foods placed before her. Well, he supposed many brides lacked that kind of an appetite.

“A bountiful feast,” the baron, who was seated on Roger’s left, remarked, as if he had been reading his host’s mind. “You’re not eating much.”

Startled, Roger looked at his own trencher and saw the baron’s observation was not without merit.

“I regret I cannot stay beyond today,” the baron said.

“I, too, my lord,” Roger responded.

“Reginald told me you have invited him to remain with you?”

Both men turned and looked to the other side of Mina, where Reginald Chilcott was already displaying every sign of getting drunk. “I’m glad,” the baron said quietly. “He’s a nonsensical young man, but I have hopes he might improve under the proper supervision.”

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