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"A love that defines
the power of the times."

~ Romantic Times



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This is a work of fiction; everyone in the book is created out of whole cloth (although I did my best to portray them and their times as accurately as possible)

Summer's Storm

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EPILOGUE

A Note from Denise

Sighing against the weight of wet fabric in her basket, Philippa of Lindhurst shut her eyes and lifted her face toward the sun, now high in a cloudless sky. The spicy scent of fertile earth filled her lungs, while from the river's bank lark and thrush sang. Twined with their sweet voices was the sleepy plainsong of a droning insect chorus. In the distance oxen bellowed and men called as they worked the fields.

"Ungrateful wretch!" Lady Margaret of Lindhurst chided.

Startled, because she'd thought her mother-by-marriage wasn't paying attention, Philippa's eyes flew open. She turned on the narrow track to look at her husband's mother. Heavysset and small Margaret braced herself on her walking stick. Hatred cut deep creases in the old woman's sagging face and flared in the knife-thin line of her nose. Even the gray spikes of hair escaping her head covering seemed to quiver with insulted pride.

Margaret's watery blue eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened, promising a tirade. "I give you a morning spent outside the walls and how do you thank me? You drag your feet apurpose to steal more from me than I'd conceded." Never mind that the only reason Margaret took Philippa outside their walls was to wash the bed linens; Lindhurst's dowager lady didn't trust her servants not to steal the precious lengths of fabric.

"Roger will hear how you've misused me this day when he returns, you can count on that," the old woman added in vicious promise.

At the mention of her husband, Philippa turned her gaze to the contents of her basket. It wouldn't be a chiding she'd suffer if Margaret ever realized she'd been praying Roger never returned from wherever it was he'd gone.

Apparently satisfied by this humble reaction from her son's wife, Margaret whirled on her walking stick, then limped ahead of Philippa on the grassy track. Still dragging her heels, Philippa followed. Only a furlong distant, Lindhurst's walls lifted out of the trees, the mossy expanse of wood and stone pierced by a homely gate. Not for the first time in the past twelve years, Philippa's head balked, its reaction overwhelming her sense. Two hours of freedom just weren't enough and she knew how long it would be before she was allowed out again?

All thought of safety or sense died and her feet froze to the dry, dusty earth of the path. Of course, this was the very instant that Margaret chose to glance over her shoulder. Anger flared bright blue in her eyes. She spun on her walking stick.

"Come quickly, you stupid cow, or you'll pay my penalty," she threatened, lifting her fist to make certain Philippa understood it was pain she was promising. Then, she once more pivoted on the stick and began to waddle ponderously toward her home.

Deep within Philippa a tiny flare of defiance took light. Cow, was it? Who, of the two of them, looked more bovine? The corners of her mouth rose. With Roger away, it was safe to indulge in a bit of mockery.

Twisting her face into an idiot's expression, she dared to shamble after her husband's mother, exactly mimicking the old woman's painful, hip-sore gait. Just as Philippa knew she would, Margaret again glanced over her shoulder. She gasped, whirling yet one more time to face Lindhurst's rightful lady.

"How dare you!" she bellowed in outrage.

Philippa blinked until tears filled her eyes. "What is it, Mother Margaret? I beg you, tell me what I've done." Her mummery finished with a pitiful catch in her voice, then she turned her gaze toward her coarse wooden shoes. Oh, but Lindhurst's serving women would have laughed into the sleeves over this performance.

“Barren imbecile!” Margaret turned Philippa’s greatest shame into a curse. An heir for Lindhurst was the thing Roger and Margaret wanted most from her and the one thing she would have gladly given them.

“Why did my precious lad insist on Benfield’s spawn, an idiot bitch with airs too fine for his station? Neither you nor those paltry fields are worth the coins I paid for you. Mark me now, the day will come when I find a way to rid my son of you,” she finished, her voice low and hard.

“Aye, Mother, you’re right. One as valueless as I am shouldn’t be allowed to live.”

However piteous the snivel, it wouldn’t be enough. Instead, Philippa tensed her shoulder waiting for the blow. A moment’s silence passed, then another. Still, Margaret said nothing. The silence lengthened until the quiet unnerved Philippa. This was never the way their battles proceeded. At last, she peered cautiously up from her demure pose.

The old woman was starting out into the thick beech and alder forest that cloaked Lindhurst manor’s rolling hills. Only then did Philippa catch the indistinct sound of a man’s voice coming from beyond the closest trees. The creaking groan of a wagon followed, then the muffled thud of hooves.

“Who dares to trespass here?” the elder Lady Lindhurst demanded of no one in particular. Roger and his mother guarded their cloying privacy and their few possessions, of which Philippa was one, with an iron fist. Visitors, even itinerant merchants usually welcomed everywhere, were sent sternly from Lindhurst’s gate with a warning never to return.

The need to see who it was rushed through Philippa, even as she recognized the danger. Nothing drove her husband into greater viciousness than a man looking upon her or she upon any man save Roger. Nibbling on her lip in hesitation, Philippa glanced at her mother-by-marriage. That Margaret would tell Roger these strangers had come was beyond doubt. However, if Margaret forgot to instruct her idiot daughter-by-marriage to retreat within the walls, then no blame could fall upon Philippa for remaining where she was..

Ever so cautiously, Philippa eased her basket to the ground, then slipped with tiny, noiseless steps to the side. When she stood directly behind her husband’s mother, she offered up the prayer that she might be forgotten, then gaped in awe at the first visitors in all her dozen years here.

The troop exited the forest not but a score of yards distant from them. Astride a spirited palfrey with trappings and saddlecloth shot with gleaming metal threads, came a young, black-haired man. His vibrant blue riding gown and stockings of bright scarlet spoke clearly of his consequence. A deep green cap and a cloak the color of an autumn oak clasped with a golden pin completed his attire.

Harnesses jangling, four mounted men-at-arms followed this coxcomb. Each soldier sported a vest of boiled leather sewn with steel links, a sword fast buckled by his side and a metal cap upon his head. If their mounts weren’t the quality of their master’s steed, the beasts were still better than anything in Lindhurst’s stables.

Lurching and skittering along behind them came a silly little cart drawn by a plodding ox, his peasant driver flicking the goad behind his ear. Too small for hauling crops or any other goods Philippa could imagine, it bore a brightly painted frame raised above its bed with rolls of sheeting the ready to shade the wagon’s load.

Lastly, came a single knight atop a massive steed. Because his helmet and cap had been removed against so warm a day and left to dangle from his saddle, she could see his hair was brown. His beard was neatly trimmed, accentuating the bold line of his jaw. A knitted steel shirt and chausses of the same metal mesh clung to his powerful frame, yet the sleeveless surcoat atop his armor was unembellished. Likewise was his shield bare of any design. Still, there was something in his solitary air that warned of his prowess with the long sword belted at his hip.

As the coxcomb noticed the waiting women, he lifted his hand and the troop halted. Both he and the knight dismounted, then started toward them. Although the smaller man was by far the grander,

was the knight who held Philippa's interest. Against Roger's fine and golden beauty, this warrior's face was plainer, rawboned. His nose was strong with a slight crook, the flaw adding character. Dark, expressive brows curved gently above eyes . . . Philippa caught her breath in shock. His brown eyes were alive with golden lights as he watched her with equal interest.

Even as his lips began the upward quirk of a smile, Philippa dropped her gaze to her toes. *Idiot!* she chastised herself. What if Margaret had noticed their shared glance? Why, the old woman would take a whip to her, that's what. With her need to stare upon the travelers sated to the limits of her courage, Philippa was content to study her shoes and listen.

* * *

Temric FitzHenry, bastard of Graistan, permitted himself a warm breath of amusement. The little minx had stared boldly enough when she'd thought he hadn't noticed. Then again, with such an evil-looking hag for a mistress, he could understand her shyness. Too bad, for the glimpse he'd caught of her suggested she was a pretty thing, despite her homespun gown and rough head cloth. He frowned slightly, struck by a vague sense of recognition, then dismissed it when nothing came to mind. Perhaps it was that at eight and thirty, he was flattered to think a lass so young might find him interesting.

They were yet several yards from the women when Oswald stopped. Temric came abreast of him, then shot his noble half cousin a questioning look.

"Speak for me, Temric," Oswald demanded. "My English will not suffice."

Temric ignored the brief sting his Norman cousin's request did him. This wasn't the first time one of his father's relatives had asked his assistance with his mother's native tongue. Instead, he gave a bend of his head, agreeing without actually committing to that agreement.

"Ask after their lord," Oswald continued, jerking his head toward Lindhurst's simple walls as he spoke. "Mayhap they'll let something useful slip about those who rule here. Bah, so rustic a place hardly justifies its lord's strutting arrogance. What do you wager that the manor house within your gate uses the same thatch for roofing and mud and manure walls as do Lord Roger's peasants?"

At this, the elder of the two women made an outraged sound, her formidable gaze aimed at the bishop of Hereford's most valued employee. "I am Margaret of Lindhurst, lady of this place," she said, speaking in the Norman French of England's ruling class. "By whose leave do you come trespassing on my lands?"

Surprise shot through Temric. This couldn't be Lord Roger's mother. He once more scanned the woman's patched gown and the grizzled hair that straggled out from beneath her worn head cloth. The cottagers on his half-brother's lands didn't dress nearly as poorly as she.

He glanced at Oswald. His cousin's handsome face had taken on a smooth expression, no doubt to hide the fact that he'd just insulted the woman within her hearing. The bow that followed was courtly, as if there was nothing unusual about meeting noblewomen dressed in ragged homespun and wandering without escort through fields. Temric snorted in sudden realization. Like Oswald's fine clothing and his constant prattle, the young man's manners made innocent mockery of his idol, the powerful churchman he served.

"Well met, indeed, my lady," Oswald replied as he straightened. "I am Oswald, administrator to Bishop William of Hereford. My lord sends me here at Lord Lindhurst's request to fetch his wife, Lady Philippa. Her attendance is required in the legal matter your son brought before my lord."

The maid behind the old woman lifted her head at his words. Her gaze skimmed over Oswald and then flew again to Temric. Her expression was one of confusion mingled with fear. As swiftly as he'd been aware of her reaction, it was gone and she reclaimed her servile posture.

"How unfortunate that you've ridden so far only to turn around and ride back again," replied Lady Margaret. "My daughter-by-marriage goes nowhere save in my son's company."

Oswald stiffened. His dark brows drew down over eyes that were a snapping black. "You dare not refuse," he said, his tone that of a reprimand. "Bishop William, your son's overlord," he enunciated this so she'd not miss the importance of it, "was very displeased when your son appeared alone against his specific command that Lady Philippa attend the proceedings. I'm commanded not to leave this place save with the lady at my side."

The old woman shrugged in disinterest. "I care naught for your problems. Now, be gone with you, removing nothing of mine as you leave. Those who steal the fruits of my holding will pay dearly for it." With that, she lifted her walking stick and touched the working end of it midpoint of the young man's chest and gave Oswald a gentle and suggestive shove.

Oswald took a backward step, then glanced at his expensive attire. Torn grass and chalky dirt clung to where she'd touched him. Slapping away the dirt, Oswald then thrust out a hand. Sunlight caught against the gemstone of the bishop's heavy ring that he wore atop his glove.

"Madam, see this and know I have the right to insist upon your compliance. This ring is all your assurance that the Lady Philippa will be safely delivered into my lord's presence. For your son's sake, do not defy your overlord's command. Now, release Lord Roger's wife to me."

The dowager lifted her brows and sneered. "Fine clothing, pretty glass and a nimble tongue are all that stands before me. You show me not even a scrap of parchment or a bit of wax to prove your claims. If Bishop William truly wishes to speak with my lord son's wife, he should come here as my son first requested, instead of allowing Lord Graistan to curry his favor with hunting and riches."

Her piece said, she pivoted on her stick only to come face-to-face with the young woman behind her. "I forgot you," the old woman snapped. "Stupid bitch, you've no more brains than a fly. Haven't you learned anything yet of a woman's proper behavior? No modest woman lets foreigners look upon her. Now, go!"

When the girl didn't move, the dowager waved furiously toward the walls as if gesture alone would spur her maid to action. "Go! Be off with you," she shouted.

"Nay." The lass's single word barely had sound enough to be heard.

"What?! What did you say?" Lady Margaret's noisy shock died away into soundless gaping. Sudden respect rose in Temric. It would appear that this was the day pigs flew in Lindhurst.

"I'd know what a bishop wants from one so insignificant as me," the young woman said in perfect French, her voice quivering as if it cost her dearly to offer this incredible statement. Throughout the whole while that she spoke, she never once lifted her gaze from her toes.

Temric stared at her, trying to reconcile the meek creature standing before him with the bitter image who'd haunted his dreams this past year. He and Philippa of Lindhurst were kindred spirits raised to noble expectations, only to lose all because of their bastard birth. At last, he shook his head. This must be some imposter. The woman before him wasn't capable of the raging missive that he'd scorned as crass thievery her half-sister's right to inherit all their grandsire had owned.

It was his certainty that she lied that propelled him into crossing the distance between them. He wanted to see her face when she next spoke. "Are you Philippa, wife to Lord Roger?" he nearly demanded.

Lady Margaret gave a gurgling squeak, then aimed a round-eyed look at Oswald. "Hey," she cried out, "your man's too close to her. Call him back."

"Temric, is it Lord Roger's wife or not?" Oswald asked, ignoring her.

The old woman made a frantic noise deep within her chest as the maid lifted her head. Temric caught his breath. Now that they were closer, there was no mistaking it. Dear God, but she was nearly her mother's twin, despite the difference in their years. Where Edith of Benfield's eyes were a clear green, Lady Philippa's were both green and blue in one glorious instant. They shimmered like jewels against her creamy skin. Golden hair, a shade or two lighter than Lady Benfield's, escaped the rough

head cloth to straggle charmingly along her soft cheeks. All else was exactly the same: the lilt of the brows, the wide cheekbones, and the gentle curve of the jaw.

“I am the wife of Roger of Lindhurst,” Philippa of Lindhurst replied quietly to the clerical question.

Temric turned to confirm her words. “Oswald, we’ve found Lord Roger’s wife.”

“Nay!” Lady Margaret cried, shoving herself between Temric and her daughter-by-marriage. “Nay, you’re mistaken. She’s nothing but the village whore, a lying slut, who pants after my son. Would any lord dress his wife thusly?” All through this declaration she glared at Temric as if she thought to intimidate him.

“There’s no error,” Temric replied mildly, “and no point in you wasting your breath in further protest. I’m acquainted with her lady mother.”

“Are you certain?” Oswald demanded. “Can she give us further proof that she’s who she claims?”

Temric again turned his attention on the shy woman, only to find her watching him with a new and lively interest as she waited her inquisition. “My lady, can you tell to me your sister’s Christian name?”

To his surprise, Philippa of Lindhurst’s cheeks flushed, her eyes took light with joy. “Rowena. My sister’s name is Rowena. Tell me,” she pleaded gently, “what do you know of my sister?” There was nothing in her tone but the longing for a beloved sibling.

Temric’s relief was gut-deep. Between her sweetness and the honesty in her face, it was obvious that Lady Lindhurst knew nothing of the legal battle being waged in her name. It’d seem dishonorable to dream and wonder about a woman who was attempting to ruin his brother’s wife. He hadn’t realized he’d grinned until she smiled at him in return. His surprise at his own open display of emotion deepened into a subtle stirring in his heart. His dream image of Lady Lindhurst had been nothing but a poor reflection of her sister’s fire and spirit. Now, as he faced the true woman, he found her gentle innocence touched him more deeply than he’d ever imagined possible.

Turning, he looked at Oswald. “I think there’s no further reason to doubt. So too does it seem Bishop William was right to suspect that Lady Philippa had no hand in the suit.”

Oswald’s jaw hardened. “Aye, so it seems,” he said, his voice flat with growing anger as he shot a look at Lady Margaret. To Lady Philippa he said, “My lady, I pray you come with us to the bishop’s court.”

“Damn you, you’ll not have her,” Lady Margaret shrieked.

Before Temric knew what she was about, she pivoted on her crutch, then lifted the thing like a cudgel. Without word or cry, Lady Philippa swiftly hunched her shoulders and turned her back. The stick caught her upon her shoulder with force enough to knock her down.

“Nay!” Temric roared as he watched her fall. He lunged for the old woman and wrenched her makeshift club from her gnarled grasp and hurled it away from him. It landed yards distant.

Terror and hatred tangled in the old woman’s blue eyes, then she turned toward the walls of her home. “Aaiye! Come, come. I am attacked,” she shouted with a helplessness she didn’t own. It was a call calculated to bring whatever forces Lindhurst owned to its dowager’s aid.

Whatever else, five swordsmen against however many men Lindhurst kept wasn’t going to accomplish the bishop’s aim. The sooner they were gone, the better. Secure in the churchman’s needs, Temric leapt to the fallen woman’s side. As Lady Margaret again tried to push him back, he scooped Lady Philippa into his arms, cradling her close.

The old woman gasped as if truly shocked by his actions. “Lecher! Defiler,” she trumpeted. “You soil her with your touch!”

Temric spared her a scathing glance. “If you wish to complain, come to Graistan and tell Bishop

William that Temric, Henry of Graistan's bastard, has obeyed his command and fetched Lady Lindhurst for him."

At the announcement of his bastardy, the old woman's eyes hardened. "Commoner," she snarled. "I'll have you skinned alive for what you do, see if I don't. And, if your noble brother thinks he can take what is mine from me, he'd best think again."

With an angry hiss, she turned and hobbled toward her home, her arms pumping in rage as she went. "To me," she bellowed to stir her already tardy retainers into action, "to me! I'm attacked and Lord Graistan's men kidnap your lord's wife."

Temric was already striding toward his waiting men. "Hie, Oswald. Mount."

As his cousin sprinted toward his fine horse, Temric bore Lady Lindhurst toward his own team's mount. His men were all watching him their faces alert for the commands sure to come. "You stand here," he said to the one, "to protect our cart and driver as best you can. If you're outnumbered and pressed, don't resist. I doubt they'll harm one under the bishop's protection, not now that we've got what they want. The rest of you are with me."

It wasn't until he was ready to mount that he dared look at the woman in his arms. To his surprise, no tears filled her eyes at what must have been a bruising blow. Instead, she watched him with both surprise and trepidation. "You are taking me?" she asked in breathless question.

"Aye," he told her, trying to soothe while his whole body was tensed for battle, "but fear not. I vow you'll be safer with me than you are here. Now, up with you."

Lifting her, he set her sideways in his saddle, her back to his shield. As she held the tree steady herself, Temric mounted up behind her. It was a sin. He knew it was. Still, Temric pulled his half sister-by-marriage close into the protection of his body and spurred his horse into a gallop. Marry Mother of God forgive him, but he was hopelessly in love with the one woman on earth more unattainable to him than any other.

Philippa leaned her head against the knight's broad shoulder and reveled in the strength of his arm around her. His care and kindness enveloped her. Despite that he was a stranger and could well be abducting her, she felt safer with him than she had in her husband's home.

The horse beneath her broke into a gallop, the movement so sudden that her clumsy wooden sabots slipped from her feet and were lost. Air rushed past her, tearing at her head cloth, filled with scents of places she'd never seen and things she'd never done. The very thought made Philippa smile. She was free!

Rather than return to the forest, her abductor led his horsemen south through fields of rye and wheat. Peasants screamed against the destruction they wrought with their passage, throwing rocks and rakes at them as they passed. It was only as the fields began their gentle rise into rolling hills that Philippa's euphoria died.

What a fool she was. This knight was taking her to the bishop where her husband also awaited. After the churchman was quit of her, she must needs accompany Roger back to Lindhurst. Depression swirled into fear.

Oh, dear God, but she'd let her game of defiance go too far this time. Why, oh why, had she dared to identify herself? Not only would Margaret never forgive her for it, Margaret would see to it that Roger knew his wife left Lindhurst in another man's arms. His jealousy and outrage would know no bounds. Indeed, it would be in repayment for Philippa's defiance that Margaret would happily raise no hand to stop him, not this time.

Fear deepened. If his mother didn't stop him would he kill her this time? Surely not.

It wasn't as if Roger meant to hurt her. Or, at least, that's what he said. After each incident he would weep in shame, then beg her forgiveness, each time vowing this was the last time. But, it never was. The day would come when he would beat her until she was no more, all the while swearing that what he did was for love's sake.

Philippa shut her eyes and turned her face against her shoulder as fear ate up every other emotion. Four and twenty was too young to die. Ach, but she'd done this to herself; she'd said his name and this knight had touched her. Acceptance, dull and dark, crept over her. Not even God Himself could spare her from her husband's retribution for what she'd done.

"They're after us, Temric." The churchman's shout broke through her mournful thoughts.

"Then, we'll play the fox to their hounds," the knight behind her called in reply, his mellow voice grim. He reined his horse to a slower pace until the others were riding nearer. "You two," a thrust of his free arm indicated two of the men who rode with them, "go more slowly and toward Benfield Here." A swift yank tore Philippa's head covering from her head before she had a chance to gasp. "Drop this as you ride and do what you can to convince them you have her. Return to Graistan when you can. Robin, you're with us."

As he spoke he reined his horse into a sharp turn. Philippa slid in the saddle's seat. With a gasp she wound her arm around the knight's waist to steady herself.

He loosed a quick sound of amusement. "Good lass. I've no wish to lose you now. Hold tight and I'll keep you safe."

Would that it were true. Sorrow welled. Philippa swallowed it. Nay, she'd not waste what little life might be left to her in moaning. From this instant until she faced Roger all that mattered was the moment. She vowed to herself that she'd live each one to its very fullest, savoring every experience. With her eyes closed, Philippa opened her mouth to taste the wind.

Once Lindhurst's men had been left behind, they stopped in a glade to rest their horses. There were but two of the original party remaining: Oswald, the bishop's man, and the knight. They'd lost the last soldier several miles back when his horse had been lamed. Oswald had been the last of the

to excuse himself into the concealing brush. While they waited for his return, the knight was speaking to her about the bishop's call.

It was hard to concentrate on what he was saying when they stood in such a beautiful place. The smell of damp vegetation rose from beneath her stockinged feet in a rich wave of sensation. Towering high above her, tall oaks filtered the mid-afternoon sun until everything within the grove was dappled and gilded. The knight's massive brown steed wore patches of light and dark, some sweat, some shade, snorting and shivering as he tore at saplings and spindly grass. Beside him, the churchman's smaller mount answered with an arrogant toss of his head.

"--reach Graistan by early evening if you can bear--"

These words caught her attention. Must she confront Roger so soon? A flicker of fear woke her with the memory of Roger's last rage. The aching bruises from the blows had lingered for weeks. Fear dissolved into the need to escape another beating. Unfortunately, she was married to Roger. That meant there was nowhere she could go that her husband couldn't reclaim her.

Desperately unwilling to think along these lines any longer, Philippa focused her attention on the knight in front of her.

Temric, that's what he'd told her to call him, allowing her to set no title before his name. She rolled the odd name against her tongue a few times and decided it suited him despite its strangeness. How old was he? Surely no more than two score. She liked his mouth. His lips were finely molded and curved ever so slightly upward at the corners. The carefully trimmed beard he wore only set off its beauty. As he shifted into a patch of light, the sun lay a shadow along the crooked line of his nose and streaked gold into his deep brown hair. Philippa sighed. How could she ever have thought so bold a face ordinary?

Of a sudden, he fell silent. "My lady," he said, leaning sharply toward her.

His aggressive movement was too reminiscent of Roger; instantly, Philippa folded her hands and turned her gaze to the moldy forest carpet. All her senses tautened, lifting into a new and aching awareness as she awaited his reaction. She heard him draw a swift breath. She tensed, because she didn't know him or what this might foretell.

"My lady," he said again, speaking more softly this time, "why do you not listen? Would you rather that it were Oswald who explained this to you?" A touch of hurt filled his gentle voice, as if his inattention had somehow slighted him.

Philippa dared a sly glance in his direction and found evidence of her accidental insult in the dark cast of his eyes. That she could have hurt him struck her to the core. The need to ease the harm she had done was strong. Still, she knew better than confess to the real reason behind her inattention; telling the whole truth, especially when it had to do with inattention, was most often the cause of her pain.

Daring much, she lifted her head to look up at him. "Forgive me," she said and truly meant it. "You have been kind and deserve better from me. I fear your stealing of me has left my thoughts so addled I'm incapable of concentration."

It was the wrong thing to say. With the reminder of her leave-taking from Lindhurst came the certainty of the beating awaiting her at her destination. Against that, anxious words tumbled unbidden from her lips.

"Oh, why did I let you take me? I should have stayed at Lindhurst. Would that this were but a dream. Then, I might awaken to find you and this ride no more than a shadow in my mind."

His face softened in pity. "Poor lass, are you so frightened? Take no heed of what your lord and dam said. Oswald truly is commanded to take you to his master, Bishop William. Or, do you fear because I am your sole protector now? Know you, I'm well seasoned in the ways of battle, having been for nigh on twenty years my brother's master-at-arms. Here," he extended his hand toward her palm up, fingers slightly curved, "touch my hand be assured when you feel my strength."

Startled by his complete misunderstanding of her fear, Philippa could only stare mutely at his bared hand; his steel-sewn gloves were presently tucked into the belly of his surcoat. His fingers were beautiful. Strong and supple, they tapered gracefully to their tips, better suited to a saint than a warrior.

Did she dare touch so large and powerful a man? Lifting her head, Philippa looked shyly up at him. He offered her a brief smile, the motion waking gentle lights in his brown eyes.

As fear of him ebbed, curiosity woke. Was one man's touch the same as another's? Even as that thought filled her, the echo of Margaret's voice, screaming of indecency, rose from the recesses of her mind.

Defiance flared. Well, Margaret wasn't here, was she? Philippa extended her hand, then laid her fingers into the rough cradle of his palm.

It was different! Where Roger's hands were always moist, this man's skin was warm and dry. His palm was hard and callused, yet as her hand slid against his, it was a surprisingly silky sensation.

His fingers closed around hers. Her pulse leapt. A rush of heat flashed through her, burning in her cheeks. Very different, indeed.

Lost in the sensation, she turned her hand in his to align their palms. He laced his fingers between hers. As she stared at their joined hands an alien warmth woke, both disturbing and oddly welcome at the same time. Even as she strove to control it, the sensation grew until it seemed to consume her. Panicked, she tore free of his hold, then sighed as the intensity receded, leaving her feeling normal once again.

"Philippa." His voice was hoarse and deep as he made her name a plea.

Stunned by his familiar address and his intimate tone, she lifted her head to look up at him again. His face had softened. It was masculine need that had put the golden lights in his dark eyes. She drew a quick, fearful breath. Margaret was right, all men were the same. They used any woman they could to satisfy their base needs. Temric had only disguised his carnal nature with gentle behavior; now, he would take her just as Roger did. Trapped between sharp disappointment and terror against what would surely follow, she could only stare helplessly at the knight.

A cool breeze circled them, ruffling the neat strands of his dark hair. The horses snorted and stamped. He reached for her. Frozen in fear, Philippa waited for his assault. His arms encircled her in a light embrace. In the distance, a crow loosed its raucous call. He splayed his hands against her back, the gentle pressure of his touch forcing her a step closer. His lips parted.

"May God have mercy on my soul." His words were barely a breath.

He lowered his head until his mouth brushed hers. The rasp of his beard against her jaw was rough-soft. His mouth was gentle against hers, a quiet caress, the taste of him surprisingly pleasant.

Philippa's eyes widened. Her breath caught. There was no hurt!

Ever so slightly, his lips moved on hers. A shiver wracked her. This was better than touching his hand.

And, wrong, terribly, terribly wrong.

Oh, Lord, what if Oswald saw and told Roger? What little hope Philippa cherished that her husband might forgive her for this day's events shattered. Fear of Roger's fists grew until it overwhelmed her fear of Temric's reaction should she refuse him. She dared to take a small step back from him.

Temric only sighed, making no attempt to grab her back. His hands slid down her back to rest upon her hips. Confused and unsure of what next to do, Philippa watched silently as he opened his eyes. The gold was gone, leaving the brown dead and dull.

"Forgive me," he pleaded in a whisper. "I had no right."

His words were shattering her. In that instant Philippa knew Margaret was wrong. This man was

not like Roger in any way.

~~Suddenly, his touch was welcome and his nearness ceased to be frightening.~~ Instead, the need to have him closer filled her. She ran her tongue over her lips and savored the taste of his kiss. To think there'd been no pain! Could this be why some of Lindhurst's serving women spoke with fondness of their men?

Temric watched her, the longing in his gaze so intense it hurt her. "You should have been mine," he said, his voice filled with despair. "How I wish I'd known of your existence before you were wed. Had I, I'd never have let another have you. To see how his dam mistreats you tears my heart in two."

Stunned, Philippa stared at him. Fear gave way to a new ache. What pain might she have escaped if she'd been given to this knight instead of the one who'd bought her. It was as if she'd been given a glimpse of Heaven, only to be turned away from the gates.

He made a sound deep in his throat, then his hands were smoothing upward from her hips to once again embrace her. This time, Philippa knew no fear. When his arms tightened, begging her to come to him, she leaned willingly against his chest, her hands splayed against his surcoat. It was she who raised her mouth to his. Their lips met, her mouth softening beneath his as, this time, she found much pleasure in the way his lips moved against hers.

"By the curly hairs on Christ's holy ass! What is this?!"

Oswald's cry rang through the glade. Birds screeched from the trees. His temperamental palfrrey leapt into a nervous, whinnying dance.

Terror shot through Philippa. She shoved free from Temric's embrace and whirled to face the cleric. Oswald yet stood where shock had halted him, his blue gown hitched high above his scarlet stockinged knees. When he realized she watched him, he swiftly tied the drawstring of his chausses and dropped his gown.

Philippa shot a panicked look at Temric. He shook his head at her. "Nay, no fear, *ma petite*," he said quietly, "not on my account. I'll see you bear no blame for this." Shooting her a swift smile, he turned to face Oswald.

The cleric's brows were yet perched high upon his forehead. "Temric, I cannot believe what my eyes have seen."

"Would that you had not seen it," Temric retorted with no sign of shame or embarrassment in his manner. "However, if you choose to relate to her husband how I so cruelly forced my attentions upon his wife, then I will accept the responsibility and he may have my head."

Philippa started in horror. Sweet Mary, but it wouldn't be just her Roger would kill over this, but him, as well. Fear for herself disappeared beneath a new and desperate need to save him from his husband.

"Nay," she cried out, "you must not believe him. Temric seeks only to protect me from my sin when it was I who tempted him. Mother Margaret knows that I am Eve incarnate. Now you have seen evidence of how right she is in her judgment." As she lied, she folded her hands in supplication.

Temric shot her a quick frown. "My lady, you must not abase yourself on my behalf," he said hoarsely. "Oswald, this would never have happened had I not ignored Father Edwin's warnings and spent this past year in conversation with Lady Lindhurst."

Astounded, Philippa whirled to look at him. "What sort of explanation is this? You make it seem as if we'd been lovers, when I have never seen you before this very day," she protested, glancing between the cleric and the knight to gauge their reactions. "This I vow, Oswald," she told the cleric.

"He already knows that, little one," Temric said, his mouth twisting in wry amusement. "The conversations in which I have indulged were all of my own imagining. If my thoughts were inappropriate, well then, I never believed I would meet you." He shrugged. The gesture, meant to be nonchalant, failed.

His admission made Philippa frown. "Why would anyone wish to imagine me? I am nothing no one."

Temric's expression flattened. "We are equals, you and I." His tone was rough.

Equals? Philippa blinked in surprise, then remembered his parting words to Margaret. He was a bastard born and somehow knew that she was, too.

Astonishment deepened. But how could he know that? She'd learned the truth from her stepfather, who'd told her he was sworn to secrecy over the true nature of her birth. It was a certain thing her mother hadn't told anyone. Nay, Edith of Benfield had always refused to acknowledge her sin, even to the child she'd stained by it. How was it Temric knew?

In the next instant, her surprise died. Who cared how he knew. All that mattered was that they were equals.

She lifted her gaze to meet his and awe washed over her. It was his heart she saw in his eyes. Even if his caring for her had begun in the similarity of their births, it had changed. With his gaze he was telling her he now wanted her solely for who she was.

The longing to accept what he offered filled her. In his gentleness she might have found her own value. But, that could never be. Instead, all she would know of him were these past moments.

As if he shared this terrible realization, Temric's eyes darkened and he returned his attention to Oswald. "I will say that you aren't the only one who'd be astounded to learn I have behaved with such abandon."

The churchman made a sarcastic noise. "What you have done cannot be so easily waved away. Mayhap with prayer and penance there is hope for your soul, but your case would be better served with at least a pretense of shame."

"Shame?" Temric snorted. "I'm not ashamed to bear some feeling for her. Who couldn't after witnessing how she's abused by those who should care for her."

"Nay!" Oswald bellowed. "I'll not have you make less of what's happened with this sort of excuse."

Striding forward, he caught Philippa by the arm and drew her with him toward the horses in the glade's corner. Only when they were near the beasts did the cleric turn to face the knight. "You do wrong to speak so boldly to me, presuming our blood ties will keep me silent on your behalf."

Anger darkened Temric's face. "I care not what you say or to whom you say it," he snarled. "God forbid I should be spared anything for the sake of my sire's filthy blood."

"Churl!" Oswald threw back. "Your words do my uncle a great disservice. He loved you."

Temric's chin jerked up as if he'd been struck. "What do you know of my sire's heart?" he roared back, his shoulders tense, his hand clutching his sword's hilt. "Nay, if I die and am condemned to hell for this day's events, I'll go to my fate alone and unsupported, just as my father willed."

The ancient hurt in his voice echoed against the massive trees, then cut Philippa to the core. She recognized the ache of betrayal in his tone and knew his pain. They were, indeed, equals. Whatever his father had done to him, her mother had done no different when she'd wed her bastard daughter to the monster of Lindhurst.

Philippa flung herself away from Oswald to drop to her knees at the glade's center. "Nay," she cried, fighting off the cleric as Oswald tried to force her back to her feet, "no more, I pray you. I cannot bear that you might be hurt or die because of me." Her words crumpled into a sob.

The tenseness melted from the knight. His hand opened on his sword. Hopeless sadness came to life in his dark eyes.

"Forgive me, my lady," he said quietly. "I should have kept my dreams to myself. Above all, I had no right to journey to Lindhurst in an attempt to see how the reality measured against what I imagined. Instead, I have hurt you as I never intended." His voice softened. "Rise, *ma petite*. You

must never kneel before me. It is not meet.”

~~“That much is true,” Oswald muttered, cupping a hand beneath Philippa’s elbow as he forced her to rise.~~

When she once again was on her feet, the bishop’s man wrapped a protective arm around her and glared at his bastard cousin. “I accept your apology on the lady’s behalf,” he said sternly, “but more is needed. Temric, for your soul’s sake, you must vow never to touch Lady Lindhurst again. Swear, tonight, that you’ll seek out Graistan’s priest and make your confession, once we’ve returned.”

Temric gave a brief nod, then once again closed his hand around his sword’s hilt. “I so vow. The words were bitter and harsh.

“Then, I am satisfied,” Oswald said, the relief in his voice deep. “As for this particular occurrence, I think it would be in my master’s best interest if we all forget what happened in the glade. Come, my lady, it’s time for us to go. You’ll ride with me.”

Even as he drew her toward his steed, Philippa looked over her shoulder at the knight. Temric watched her in return, but his face was closed, his expression flat. All evidence of his care was gone, as was the bitterness he bore his sire. Like her, he kept his pain buried deep within him.

Philippa caught a sad breath. It really wasn’t fair. In one short hour, she’d met and lost the man who should have been her husband.

Although it was nigh on Vespers before Philippa caught sight of her destination, the sun yet stood high in the sky, what with Midsummer Day so near. As she eyed Graistan Castle, all her worries gave way to awe. Bathed in what was still day's full light, the slate roof of the great square keep tower gleamed a darker gray than the strong walls that surrounded it. Clinging to those walls were more than she'd ever imagined might exist. It was a peaceful patchwork of village and field that rolled away from the town's walls. Philippa loosed a surprised breath. More fool Roger for ever coming into disagreement with so powerful a nobleman.

Once they'd ridden through the town's gateway, Philippa drew back against the cleric's claustrophobic reaction. There were so many people, dressed in everything from homespun to bright gowns that rivaled Oswald's own, rushing up and down the town's narrow streets. Tall narrow houses crammed one against the other, lined both sides of the lanes, looming high over Philippa's head. The air reeked of tanning, butchering, and cooking, while the sounds of people shouting, carts groaning, asses braying and bells ringing assaulted her ears. It was enough to make her long for Lindhurst's simpler surrounds, no matter what her return might cost her in blood.

Entrance to the castle was through a wall so thick it made a tunnel of its gateway. As Oswald's tired horse plodded out of the gateway's opposite end and into the bailey, Philippa tensed against the thought that Roger might be waiting to fall upon her just inside the yard. Even as she thought this, she breathed in scorn. What a fool she was! Roger couldn't know she was arriving just now, not when Temric had virtually abducted her.

The grassy expanse caught between the castle's two sets of walls was alive with as much color and motion as the town beneath it. The noise was astounding. Hobbled horses grazed, while sheep and goats bleated, and cows lowed from the pens and folds that sprawled like a maze across the yard. Caught in cages were birds of every sort from ducks and geese to peacocks and finches. From one of the many faceless sheds that lined the inner wall, each one topped with reed roofing, a smith worked his hammer beating out a steady rhythm as his bellows sighed in great gusts. In what little open space was left the children of the castle's craftsmen laughed and chased.

The inner gateway wasn't as thick as the outer gate. Once they were within the tiny, inner courtyard, all Philippa could do was gawk, wonder overwhelming all other emotion. The keep tower was huge, its faces whitewashed as it soared high overhead, its door raised a full storey above the courtyard. A steep set of stone stairs clung to its side, offering access to that doorway. As in the bailey, buildings clung to the inner walls, but these were built of stone and roofed in slate.

As Oswald turned his horse toward what was surely the stable, an old man with hair as white as winter appeared in its doorway. When he saw Temric, he lifted a leathery hand in greeting. "Temric! Home so soon?" he called out in the commoner's tongue. "Where's my cart?"

Philippa listened with interest, grateful that she could understand him. It was Margaret's distrust of her serfs that had begun Philippa's lessons in the guttural tongue of England's peasantry. Margaret was unable to bear abasing herself enough to learn the language, it was Philippa's love for those same commoners that had made her fluent.

"We've brought the lady with us and left the cart to follow," Temric replied in the same language. "Where is everyone?"

Philippa's brows rose. Everyone? How could there possibly be more people living in here than she'd already seen?

"Hunting. Won't be back for three days," the old man said as two lads raced past him, one coming to catch Temric's mount while the other came more cautiously toward Oswald's horse. As Philippa waited for Oswald to dismount around her, the old man spoke on. "Thank God they took the arrogant Lord Lindhurst with them when they went." As many lines as crossed the ancient's face, his frown added more folds. "For myself, I cannot ken how they tolerate him and his strutting."

Philippa choked back her startled laughter. It wasn't polite to laugh at her own husband, although it was true, Roger could strut. Contentment followed. Not only was Roger not here, but he wouldn't be back for days. Wondrous! She had days for freedom. Oswald dismounted, then Philippa slid off the saddle, letting the churchman steady her as she dropped.

"Come," he said, his tone brusque, "Bishop William will be pleased at our swift return."

"Your lord is away," Temric said, returning to the Norman tongue of his noble father. He left his horse's side to join them. "Gareth, here, tells me that they've all gone hunting and will be gone for the next few days."

"Without me?" Oswald's cry was petulant.

Temric gave a brief shrug. "So, ride out and join them if you wish. You know well enough where Rannulf's hunting lodge lies."

Philippa stiffened against his words. If Oswald went to the bishop, wouldn't the churchman want to hurry home, bringing Roger with him? "Nay, don't leave me," she cried, then wracked her brain for some reason why he should remain here with her.

Shooting her a quick glance, Oswald drew himself up as he eyed Temric. "She's right. I cannot leave her unchaperoned with you," he said, misunderstanding her concern.

Temric drew a harsh, shocked breath. "Oswald, you took from me my vow regarding Lady Lindhurst. My word has always sufficed in the past, or has this one incident erased all my years of honorable behavior?"

Oswald gave a start, then sighed. "My pardon, cousin. You're right. I've no cause to doubt your word." His face softened even more. "If they're hunting, why not come with me and join the sport?"

"I cannot and you know it," Temric retorted with yet a touch of irritation in his words. "Bishop William has no tolerance for servants such as I in his presence."

"I forgot me," Oswald said with a grimace. "Sometimes, these dual roles of yours confuse me. Why not be knighted? Then you could join us as a full member of our family."

Startled, Philippa glanced at Temric. He wasn't a knight? That Oswald urged him to accept the title now suggested Temric had previously refused it. Now, why would a man who already lived the life refuse the honor and title of knighthood?

Temric's expression was bland, still Philippa recognized it for the mask it was, used to disguise the pain he carried within him, just as she used her pretense of dull-wittedness to hide her own emotions. Her sense of connection to him deepened.

"Don't tread upon what is my private life." Temric's words were quiet but firm. "When my father failed to write down what he'd promised me, he gave me the right to make that decision myself. And, so I've done in refusing. Leave it be."

Oswald only shrugged. "Know that I think you're a fool, but more fool me who stands here arguing with a blockhead instead of racing for the hunting lodge. My lady." He gave her a brief nod and then dashed across the courtyard toward the stairs and access to the hall.

Worry surged through Philippa with his departure. "Nay," she called after him. "If you go to them, they'll know I've come and return."

"Not likely," Temric said with a quiet snort. "Bishop William came tapping at our door because he hungers for the creatures residing in my half-brother's chase. If the prelate says he'll not return for three days, then save that heaven and earth move, he'll not return."

Philippa turned to look at him, hope straining to rise even as she held it in check. "Are you certain?" she demanded.

"Absolutely," he replied, offering her a brief smile. "Come, my lady. Enter Graistan's hall and take your ease with your lady sister."

Astonishment ate up Philippa's worry. "What! My sister is here?"

Temric sighed. "Aye. Your sister is married to my half-brother, Lord Graistan."

~~Even as excitement exploded in her at the thought of seeing her sister after so many years,~~ crashed into a new and devastating awareness. She drew an agonized breath as the kiss they'd shared in the glade became worse than adultery. "Nay, this cannot be. If our siblings are wed, then we are like unto brother and sister."

It was a short, hard nod Temric gave to acknowledge her statement. "Thus does Oswald command me to seek out Graistan's priest and beg for penance." If his voice was flat, his dark eyes were filled with sadness.

Philippa gazed up at him, again studying the crooked line of his nose and the fine, upward tilt of his mouth. The memory of his gentleness, of how his lips had given her pleasure, swept over her. How could what they'd done be a sin? From deep within her came a tiny voice. Half-related, she whispered. Philippa smiled as the answer blossomed in her, then repeated what she'd heard.

"We're but half-related. It was the unrelated halves of us who kissed." Until this moment, she had never realized how capable a sinner she was.

Temric's eyes widened at her suggestion, then golden lights flared in their depths. His expression mellowed in pleasure. "For shame, my lady," he said with the breath of a laugh. "I think Oswald would find such an argument unacceptable. On my part, I thank you for your forgiveness toward me."

"And, I thank you for your kindness," she replied, her voice lowering in sudden shyness. "You've stolen me from Margaret and brought me here in safety. So, too, have you given me three full days of freedom in my sister's company when I thought never to see her again. There aren't words enough to express what lies in my heart for you."

He caught his breath, stepping back as if she'd physically touched him. "Say no more," he breathed harshly. "I cannot bear it. Now, if you please you may precede me into the hall so I can see I saw you safely arrived into my brother's home."

Bowing her head against her own roiling emotions, she did as he bid and strode across the courtyard for the keep stairs. A stone-roofed porch shielded the upper landing and the hall's door. Stepping through the open portal, she stopped just inside the door to gawk like the bumpkin she felt.

The room seemed to stretch endlessly out before her, its floor covered with a thick layer of rushes. Painted linen panels covered every inch of the walls, while small fires, meant for light instead of heat on this warm day, burned on the twin hearthstones, set equidistant from one another at the room's center. Massive beams, painted in bright shades of red, green and yellow, framed half the ceiling. The other side of the roof line disappeared behind a wall of wood fronted by a balcony. Philippa frowned at this overhanging box of wood supported by arches of stone rising from the hall's floor, for she'd never seen the like.

As Temric joined her in the doorway, her need to know what it was made her put a hand on his arm. "What's that," she asked, pointing.

He yanked his arm out of grasp. "You mustn't touch me," he warned, a touch of alarm in his voice. "I'm sworn."

Philippa paid no heed to his protest as she asked again, "Up there. What is it?"

"That," he said, barely affording the structure that stunned her half a glance, "is where my brother keeps his private chambers, his solar, his bed and the women's quarters."

Private rooms?! Philippa stared. At Lindhurst they all lived in one room half the size of the hall. There were curtains around the dais where Roger kept his mattress, while everyone else, herself included, found their rest on the hard-packed earthen floor, with Margaret hoarding the spot nearest the hearthstone.

"Lady Lindhurst," Temric said, drawing Philippa's attention back to him. A round, dark-eyed

serving woman now stood next to him. "This is Anne, maid to Lady Graistan. She'll escort you upstairs to the women's quarters."

"My lady," the servant said, bobbing her greeting. "We didn't expect you for days." Although the woman's words were appropriately respectful, as she spoke she eyed her better in open disbelief. Finally, she turned to Temric and said in English, "Are you certain this is Lady Lindhurst?"

Only then, did Philippa realize the ragged image she presented. No headdress covered her hair. Her shoes were gone, her stockings stained and torn. The gown she wore had once been Margaret's and was too big, with only a braided yarn belt to catch it around her waist. In contrast, Anne wore a neat white undergown beneath a plain green overgown.

Philippa's heart fell. If the maid was repulsed, what sort of scorn would Rowena aim at her beggarly relation? Surely, the lady of such a place as this would want nothing to do with her. As her humiliation grew, her gaze slipped to Temric, hoping he didn't also see her as the rustic yokel she must seem. Even as she prayed he'd give her the assurance she needed, she knew he couldn't. Her half-brother was lord of this place, meaning he was accustomed to such wealth.

As if he recognized what ached in her, his face softened. "There's nothing for you to fear here, not even that," he said, the corners of his mouth lifting into a quiet smile. "Now, go upstairs into your sister's protection. After you've greeted her, tell Lady Rowena I'm returned and won't be joining the hunters."

There was such respect in his voice that Philippa's heart steadied. He was right. There was nothing for her to fear here, not as long as he resided within the keep's walls.

"Thank you," she whispered, wishing there were some way to make him know just how grateful she was for his caring.

With a brief flash of an answering smile, he nodded then turned on his heel and strode across the hall's width. Philippa watched him until he reached a doorway in the room's side, then glanced at the maid beside her. Anne's mouth was ajar, her eyes wide. When she realized she was being watched, she snapped her mouth shut.

"This way, my lady," the maid said, starting for the stairs.

Philippa followed her up, then out onto the balcony that fronted the private chambers, shooting breathless glances over its edge at the hall below her. When they reached the final door, Anne threw it open, then stepped aside so the noblewoman might enter before her.

Her hands laced against a sudden surge of shyness, Philippa stepped through the portal and glanced about the chamber. Here, narrow windows had been hewn from the stone of the west and south walls, allowing ribbons of daylight to stream through them and illuminate the chamber. In the brightness, the walls glowed, having been painted blue with yellow lines forming a crisscross pattern upon their faces. Women filled the room, some using distaffs to turn wool into yarn, others sewing finished homespun into garments. Like the maid behind her, all of them wore white undergowns beneath green overgowns.

That was, all save one. She sat at one side of a small chess table, the table placed nearest the windows where the light and air was the best. Her gown was a pretty blue, while the thick plait that descended beneath her white wimple's hem was as glossy and dark as a raven's wing. For the moment, the woman was studying her pieces while her opponent, a small boy, his dark hair glowing coppery in the light, bobbed and shifted on his stool.

As the occupants realized they had a visitor, busy fingers stilled and the low thrum of conversation died away into silence. The woman at the table looked up, a tiny frown marring her smooth brow. Philippa bit back a smile.

"Rowena," she said in simple greeting.

In the fourteen years since she'd last seen her sister, much had changed, but much had stayed the

same. Rowena's slender jaw line, the upward tilt of her eyes, the short, straight nose, these were features they shared in common with their mother. Indeed, the only sign of Lord Benfield, Rowena's sire, was his in daughter's black hair and the bright blue color of her eyes. Dark circles, speaking of illness, clung beneath her eyes and there was an invalid's pallor to her cheeks.

Concern woke. "Are you ill?" Philippa asked in quiet concern.

"She's not," the boy answered swiftly in Rowena's stead. "She was to have a baby, but now it's gone. That makes her cry and be tired. Papa says I'm not to pester her."

"Jordan!" Rowena cried in warning, but the child lacked teeth when her voice trembled and tears welled in her eyes. She bowed her head, as if seeking to hide her emotions. When she again raised her head, her expression was smooth and quiet save for the confusion that marked her brow.

"I am Rowena, Lady of Graistan. Who are you?"

It was the tone of challenge in her sister's voice that made laughter bubble up in Philippa. Despite her sadness over the lost child, Rowena was still every inch herself. "Oh, say you haven't forgotten me, when the years haven't dimmed my memory of you. Truly, I shan't be content until you tell me how it is you're here, lady of this glorious place, when you should be in some convent, veiled and serene."

Astonishment flashed through Rowena's eyes. "Philippa?" she gasped.

"Aye, 'tis me," Philippa cried, her happiness so great it propelled her across the room. She knelt before her sister, then placed her hands upon her sibling's knees. "Rather than grieve so over your babe, take comfort in knowing your womb isn't lifeless like mine."

The confusion in Rowena's eyes deepened, even as she blinked away a new set of tears. "Who are you?" she repeated, a different sort of ache in her voice this time. "You cannot be my sister."

"Lady Wren, it's your move," the boy Jordan called out, toying with one of his men on the gaming board as he spoke.

Rowena looked at the child. "I fear our game must end now, Jordan. This is Lady Lindhurst, who newly come to our home. As she and I must speak, why don't you run to Gareth and tell him to saddle Scherewind for you?"

With a scream of glee, the boy launched himself off his stool toward the door, only to stop and return more slowly to Rowena's side. "Thank you, Lady Wren," he said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek, then once again spun toward the door and bounded out of the room. As if his departure were a sign, the women in the chamber returned to their chores, keeping their voices low as they spoke, so they could listen to their betters talk.

"Wren?" Philippa asked with a laugh when he was gone, easing back to sit on her heels. "What sort of name is that? Who is he, your son?"

"My stepson," Rowena replied, waving her half-sister to the stool the boy had vacated. As Philippa settled herself upon it, Lady Graistan continued. "He calls me Wren because his tongue snarls when he tries to say Rowena." Her affection for another woman's child glowed in every word.

Then, she paused to stare in bewilderment at her sister. "How can we sit here speaking as if we were loving sisters, when you seek to steal from me my inheritance? Don't dare not preter otherwise. Bishop William received a petition from you as well as my mother requesting he set aside my father's will."

Shock tore through Philippa. "John of Benfield is dead?!" Her heart twisted so sharply that she shut her eyes against it, then bowed her head in swift prayer. Her family was all she could call her own, thus the loss of any member was almost more than she could bear.

"When?" she asked without lifting her head. "Why didn't Maman send word? Oh, that I could have seen him one last time," she breathed this last. As the shock ebbed, the rest of what Rowena said penetrated.

Philippa straightened, her eyes wide as she looked at her sister. “I sent no petition, not to bishop nor even a priest. What inheritance? There’s nothing to share between us save Benfield manor house.” Even as the words left her lips, she knew she was wrong. “Ah, but there must be more than that, or I’d not find you married and installed in so grand a place as Graistan.”

Rowena’s brows lifted slowly as she studied her poorer sister. At last, she shook her head. “You truly know nothing of this.”

“Nay, nothing at all,” Philippa assured her, “but I want to know. Tell me. If someone has spoken in my name, I have the right to know who and why,” she said, only to startle herself with her forcefulness.

The consideration deepened in her sister’s eyes. “The inheritance comes through our mother’s sire. Last year he died after outliving all his sons and leaving no heir but our mother. By the dictate of his will, his rich holdings pass through her only to her legitimate children.

“Our father”--Rowena paused--“my father wrote a will before I was wed in which he named you our mother’s bastard, making me his only heir. Now, your husband and our mother protest your disinheritance, claiming that you’re legitimately born of my father, just as I am. They seek to take half, if not all, of what should be mine.”

Philippa sighed in understanding. Here’s how Temric knew of her bastardy. Her grandsire’s death had freed Rowena’s sire from his vow of secrecy with regard to her birth. Here, too, was where Margaret had been so desperate to prevent her daughter-by-marriage’s departure from Lindhurst. Only as long as Philippa stayed under their control could they be certain what she might say.

A smile touched her lips. By God, but for the first time in twelve years, it wasn’t she who quaked because of them, but they who trembled in their boots over what she might hold within her. If she spewed the truth, Roger would be revealed as a liar and thief.

Her sense of power evaporated. Aye, but if she told the truth, Roger would surely kill her. Then again, if she held back what she knew to be true, he might forget that Temric had touched her. Although she’d save herself, lying meant Rowena would lose what was rightfully hers. For want of her promised dowry would Lord Graistan set aside his impoverished wife to take another, richer bride?

Fear for her sister lifted in her heart. Philippa looked at Rowena. Sweet Mary, Lord Graistan might well kill his wife for this. God knew, Roger would. As confusion threatened to tangle her in its tentacles, Philippa folded her hands in her lap and studied her twined fingers. “Against this news, I’m surprised you didn’t throw me from your chamber when you saw my face. Who would happily greet a thief?”

“Say you’ll not support our mother in this,” Rowena begged, then before Philippa could respond contradicted herself. “Nay, say nothing. It isn’t fair of me to ask anything of you. Instead, I should thank you for coming to me without hauteur or scorn, when I expected only hate for what I’ve gained through your abasement.”

“Scorn and envy? Me?” This was so strange that Philippa forgot all else to look at her sister. “Never,” she declared only to realize this was a lie. She grimaced. “Oh, well, I did envy you once, but that was long ago.”

A sharp shake of her sister’s dark head negated this possibility. “That isn’t possible. It was you who had the pretty gowns, the lessons, even a cot to yourself. I had nothing, not even my mother’s or my father’s love.”

“But, you were free,” Philippa retorted in growing surprise, “while I was forever trapped inside. No one stood over you saying that if you weren’t obedient or didn’t make perfect stitches, sing on kneel or eat just so at the table, no man would have you to wife. I wanted so badly to run with you, but I never dared Maman’s ire. She didn’t even like it when I spoke of you.” Reaching out, she caught her

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