

# The Untold Story of the Sheriff of Nottingham

## Chapter 1--The Secret Passage

He remembered the first time he saw her.

Hair black as a raven's wing, eyes as blue as the cornflowers that grew in the fields, he remembered that she was a simple beauty, much like a wildflower or ripe apple; at first, easily passed over, blending into the surrounding; but once he looked closer, there was something captivating about her that made him want to gaze forever. She had rosy, pink lips, and the brightest smile in the entire room, and when she threw her head back to laugh, she seemed like the most graceful creature ever to walk on English soil. and Her eyes had twinkled softly in the candlelight.

Unlike now. Marian's face was pale, and her eyes were crinkled in fear, as she walked up to him.

"Are you sure you were not followed?" he asked. His voice echoed strangely in the stone tunnel. The air smelled rank with mildew and moisture, and he tried to ignore the scrabbling of rats in the walls.

"No," she replied. "Then again, we can be sure of nothing in these troubled times." In the fire of the torchlight, her face was cast into shadow, and its flickering created an eerie gloom about them.

They paused for a moment, letting the weight of her words fall between them, making the stifling air around them even heavier. Then, in the space of two heartbeats, they came together in a passionate embrace.

William de Gray hungered for Marian in a way that he had never known with any other woman. As his mouth found hers, he wanted to cry from the sweetness of her kiss, the joy he had found with her, and the knowledge that it might shatter at any moment.

Kissing her deeply, he could feel her melt against him. He loved this warmth, this vulnerability that he gave him, trusted to him. It felt like a precious gift. He ran his hands through her hair, loving its silken texture, its smell of honeysuckle; all he wanted was to lie with her at night and stroke her hair.

*Well, perhaps not all I want,* he thought as he felt his passion rise and press against his hose. He wanted to show Marian how much he loved her in this moment, this precious, bitter moment that might never happen again.

"I apologize for interrupting," said a voice in the darkness. "But thwarting treason and treachery cannot wait for the end of lovers' kisses."

Instantly, Will and Marian broke away, glancing a bit embarrassed at each other.

"Good evening, Your Highness," said Will, bowing deeply. Marian curtsied to her uncle. "Or is it so late that I should I say Good morning?"

"None, for it is neither," replied King Richard. "It cannot be a good morning when I have that rat Little John trying to snatch my crown and my life."

The king stood tall in the dim light, his shoulders broad and proud. He was a tall man, large with battle-honed muscle. With a straight nose and sandy brown, curly hair, he looked as

fierce as his namesake, the lion. It was said among his men that he could slay three men with one stroke of his sword. Despite all his prowess, he was not invulnerable.

*Indeed, the king is more vulnerable here at home than on the battlefield,* thought Will. *At least in battle, his enemy stands before him. Here he must deal with the deceit and backstabbing of the court.*

"You two know this, and I will not waste breath in telling you why we are gathered in this dark and dank passage. The abominable events of months past have led us here. Will, I trust you like a brother, and you have proved yourself time and again. You along with Marian are the only people I can trust in this whole putrid court. People's loyalties change like wind: constantly and in the blink of an eye," he said.

"Uncle, are you not afraid that you will appear weak if you leave? It may give strength to Little John's excuses to seize power and incite the lower nobles who are itching to rise in the ranks," said Marian.

"Foolhardy, exceedingly pious, and brazenly honorable is Richard the Lionheart," said Will. "But no one can call him weak."

Richard nodded, cupping his niece's chin with his strong, rough hand. "What other choice do I have, my darling? I cannot sit here as a duck on the pond and wait for the hunters with their arrows. The safest place for me is far away," he said.

Turning to Will, he clapped him on the shoulder. "And you, my friend, my brother in all but blood, know me too well," he said. He let his hand drop and gazed at the floor, as if all the secrets of the world were written in its dirt. "How can I claim to be God's chosen leader for his kingdom on Earth if I do not protect and reclaim His most holy city? How can I allow those barbarians, those infidels, to rape and pillage the land of our most holy Christ?" He shook his head. "No. An earthly kingdom is one thing, but a heavenly kingdom is quite another."

That was Richard: he was one of the few kings in the history of England who actually cared that they were God's chosen steward, and he wanted to prove that by killing as many Saracens as he could and retake Jerusalem.

"That is why I am leaving William in charge of being my eyes and ears while I am away. He will keep the sharpest eye on my brother, and he will report to you with any information he has. You must write to me, Marian, but using only the most careful of language. If your letters end up in the wrong hands, it could mean Will's death, mine, or yours," said Richard.

"Or all three," added Will.

"Indeed," said Richard. That was Richard, a man of few words. He was sometimes called the "Yes or No" king, because of his terseness.

The severity of the position struck William. He had never been a spy at court before; he was simply a man of the forest. All he wanted to do was tend the king's forests and help the people of England whenever times were rough. He did not know if he had the stomach for it, but he would find out. He had to; Richard's life meant more to him than his own. He would gladly give his life in exchange for the king's, because England, and the preservation of God's divinely chosen regent, meant more to him than a long life.

"There is another thing," said Richard. The way in which he said those words made William's stomach clench. "You saved the bastard," he said. "I am not sure whether I should be glad or furious with you, but I suppose he is my brother. He now trusts you. I appointed you Sheriff of Nottingham, and he agreed. This places you in the most convenient of positions to let

me know any information you may find. You have my authority, as king, to do whatever it takes to keep in John's good graces and to let him believe he can trust you."

William nodded solemnly, and his mouth was set in a hard line. He glanced to Marian and saw her face fall as she accepted what he must do. He knew she feared for his life, and he loved her all the more for it.

Richard continued. "William, *whatever it takes*. You may have to do some things that you will hate. The people of Nottingham may come to despise you, as they will see you as John's toady and nothing more. You are to tell no one of your loyalties. As far as anyone knows, you have become sick of me leaving England to fight a fool's errand in Jerusalem," Richard said with a rueful grin.

"Never, my king. I will never think that," said William.

"But you must *say* it," said Richard fiercely. "You must say it so convincingly that the people have no choice but to believe it. Are you willing to become a hated man, knowing that what you do will ultimately benefit us? Benefit England?"

Drawing his dirk, William suddenly bowed to one knee. He placed the tip on his chest, directly over his heart.

"I swear on this dagger, that if I ever disobey your commands or become disloyal to you, or the greater good of England, it will plunge through my heart," he said fervently.

Richard bid him to rise and he did. They embraced, and William knew that his life would change from that moment.

"I wish there were someone else to take your place," Marian murmured. "Do you realize what this means, William?"

He turned to her and took her hand. "What, my love?"

She smiled bitterly, the first time he had ever seen her do so. It was not a look that he ever wanted to see again.

"That I cannot be your love," she whispered. "We must hide in secret, never showing ourselves together in amorous affection. We cannot be wed until Richard comes back. If anyone sees us as anything other than mere acquaintances, they will instantly know where your true loyalties lie." Tears began to slide down her face.

Taking her into his arms, William's heart sunk to the bottom of the floor. Of course. No one could see them together in courtship, much less know anything of their love. He knew he wanted to take Marian as his wife in that very moment. If there were a priest, he would swear the rights before the sun came up. She was so intelligent, so kind, and generous that he knew he would never love anyone as much as he loved Marian.

She cried softly into his chest, as William stroked her hair. When she had calmed, she turned to the king and said, "Let us pray that you come back soon, dear Uncle. I wish you all the best in your journey and will pray for your safe arrival and quick return." She gently released herself from William's arms and embraced Richard. She blessed him quietly, prayed that the Holy Virgin would look out for him and all his men, and that they were able to take back the city without much bloodshed.

Richard thanked her, then clasped hands with William one last time, looking him silently in the eye. They were brothers in all but name, and he would do anything for Richard.

Quietly opening the door and slipping out of the secret chamber, Richard let William and Marian alone.

All they could hear was the drip of water from far in the distance and the flicker of the torch flame. They did not say a word, but steadily looked at each other.

Suddenly, they embraced once again, but it was not only their arms that locked about each other but their lips as well. William's mouth sought Marian's in the dim light, as if he wanted to pour all his strength and love into her. He ran his hands down her sides, gripping her waist, pulling her body closer to his. He wanted to make her feel as good as she made him feel all the time, to give her those tiny, pulsing sensations that he felt whenever she was near.

She began tearing at his shirt, and he pulled it off, not caring if it were muddied by the floor. She touched his chest, running her palms from the center to his broad shoulders, squeezing his muscles, hard from swinging axes and hauling away forest debris.

Kissing wildly, their tongues danced in a sensual cavort, until William felt his cheeks become wet.

He stopped for a moment, and ran his thumb lightly across her face to brush away the tears that fell from Marian's eyes. He pulled her head closer to his, and kissed her slowly, deeply, until his head began to swim. When he came up for air, he whispered into her ear, "I promise, we will be together. This will all be worth it somehow."

Will wondered how it all led to this. He wondered what may have happened if he had not gone to court that season. He usually did not, as he had no grand aspirations to rise in the ranks of the nobles. All he wanted was to be the caretaker of the forest, guard its borders, and care for the trees and animals inside. Indeed, he felt more of a connection sometimes with the beasts and fowl of the wild, tall forests of England than with people. At least deer did not try to stab you in the back whilst shaking your hand.

But as he looked at Marian, he could not regret going. Even if it had bound him up in all this royal treachery; even if he would now have to act as a spy and pretend to be the toady of Prince John, he could feel no remorse over attending court, because it was there that he had met the love of his life. As he stared at her heart-shaped face, Will was transported back to when he first met Marian.

## Chapter 2--The Fortress

It was one of the rare occasions in which King Richard was in England. After suffering a humiliating defeat, he was at the royal castle to rest and settle some of the disputes that had arisen during his time away. He also needed to levy taxes, for maintaining an army halfway across the world to fight against the pagan Saracens did not come cheap.

That could all wait, though; the first night of court was for feasting.

Had it not been for Richard, Will would have never gone. He was a solitary man, more suited to the forest than a royal palace.

"Come on, Will," said Richard, clapping him on the shoulder after one of their hunts. "You cannot expect me to fend for myself amongst those snakes, can you?"

How right Richard had been.

Will was not a man easily impressed, but when he rode up to the castle, he inhaled sharply.

"Impressive, is it not?" said Richard.

Indeed, it was. The fortress thrust skyward atop a sharp hill, tucked on a bend of the river. Will knew that when they topped the rise, they would have a magnificent view of the French countryside, with its sparkling river and dark forests, but it was not for the scenery that the location was chosen. It could not be attacked river-side, and it would be difficult for attackers to climb uphill. The walls were grossly thick, and the keep was protected by a second, inner wall.

"My lord, this is massive. It looks like Cerberus guarding the gates of Hades." He shook his head. "It is beautiful."

"I designed the embossed walls myself. Let those French bastards try to take it," he said, laughing.

"How long did it take to build?"

Richard looked slyly at Will. "One year," he said.

"A year!" Will exclaimed. In a world where cathedrals took two hundred years to build, a year was the blink of an eye.

Richard nodded. "Philip nearly shit himself when it was finished that quickly," he said. "Now he will think twice before encroaching on Normandy. Come on, the court awaits." Richard clicked his tongue and the horses began trotting uphill.

Inside the castle, William was reminded of an aviary of the most exotic birds. Everyone seemed to have a different colored dress, and the court displayed their wealth ostentatiously: pearls and diamonds dripped from necks, rubies sparkled in earlobes, and delicate gold bands graced tiny, delicate wrists, pale from not having to work outdoors. People moved about the room from toe to heel, their steps as delicate as their manners. People greeted each other with the utmost respect for the rules of court and courtly behavior.

It was all too overwhelming for William. He simply wanted to return to England, even if he had to cross the tumultuous Channel once again, and breathe in the fresh air of the forest, not all the perfumes of the women. He had grown up around the court; he and Richard had been like brothers, but it was Richard who was groomed for royalty, not William. When Richard went off to study manners, customs, and rituals for this greeting or that, William had helped his father patrol the kingdom.

The courtiers moved in and around each other, servants bearing trays of wine, proffering them to guests. Richard mingled easily among the others, persuading this lord or that to pledge more in the way of taxes for the next year. William stuck to Richard's side, until he spied her from across the court.

Her black hair fell in perfect spirals, and the her light blue dress set off the color of her eyes. She was tall, yet slender, with hands pale from staying indoors. A beam of light fell from an open window, and the dust motes floated about her like a halo. William at first glanced away, distracted by some joke of Richard's, but as he looked closer, he saw that the lady had a beautiful smile. It reached the corners of her eyes, unlike the other ladies of the court, who merely pretended mirth when there was none in their hearts. She tilted her head back in laughter, and William heard a sound like bells. He wanted to approach, but he had to be introduced first.

"Your Grace," said William. "Who is that beautiful lady over there, next to the woman in the purple dress?" He gestured softly with his head, to avoid appearing overly interested. William addressed Richard by his formal title when they were in the company of others, but alone he called him by his childhood name.

"Do you mean my niece, Marian?" he said. "She is quite lovely, is she not?"

William looked at Richard and indeed, saw the resemblance of the family. Like Richard, Marian had a rather strong jaw, but it suited her, because she had a long face, and even longer limbs. William noticed her height; she was nearly a head taller than all the other ladies at court, and he was intrigued. He regarded her form as tall and willowly; she was far from gangly as she must have been as a youth. When she covered her laughter with her hand over her mouth, William admired her graceful, slender fingers, and the way she seemed confident with every gesture.

William swallowed, his mouth suddenly feeling dry. "Why have I never seen her before?" he asked.

Richard was holding up an arm in greeting to a nobleman from across the room. He lowered it and turned to William. "She has lived here, in Normandy, for most of her life, learning about court and completing her education here. Her mother, my sister as you know, said that French tutors are the best in the world. Although Philip wants to hang me from my own turrets, I cannot help but agree that the French possess the best educational systems," he said. Richard looked over to William and saw that his body strained forward, with his eyes firmly locked on Marian, and a look of determination on his face. Richard smiled knowingly. "Do you want me to introduce you?" he asked.

William did not want to offend his almost-brother by something so intimate and carnal as desire. He had no designs to make a mockery of Marian, nor attempt to steal her virtue, as so many of the other nobles did. Indeed, sometimes the court seemed like one huge game of marriages, affairs, and trysts, that William had lost much of his faith that love actually existed.

He cleared his throat and said, "If it would please Your Grace, I should be honored to have the fortune of meeting one of his noble family members."

His feigned nonchalance did not fool Richard. He clapped William on the shoulder and said, "Nonsense. Even a blind man could see that you're already half in love with her. You already have my blessing to marry if it should come to that. Marian is one of the kindest, gentlest souls you will ever meet, and she would be good for you, rough woodsman. Come."

Richard gestured with his hand, and they moved through the crowd, the nobles bowing and the ladies curtsying in greeting whenever he passed.

William's heart began beating more forcefully the closer they came. He had greeted women that he had been interested in before, but something about Marian made her different. Was it that her eyes seemed to see through the artifices of the court? That she moved with humility and grace, something no other noble ladies did?

*It cannot have anything to do with her beauty,* William chided himself. *Do not lose your head so soon. She could be spoiled or selfish or have some secret defect that hides her true self from the court.*

Richard stopped in front of Marian and a group of ladies around her. They all curtsied in acknowledgement and murmured their greetings. When Marian straightened from her curtsy, she met William's gaze.

The ground seemed to have dropped from underneath him. He was becoming undone by the blue of her eyes and the intensity of her stare. It reminded William of one of Richard's hunting hawks. He could spend all night simply looking into her eyes. She smiled softly and all thoughts left William's mind.

"William? William?" said Richard. "My friend, have you suddenly gone deaf?"

Shaking his head slightly, he broke his gaze with Marian. It felt as though a tether had been severed, and he longed to take it back. He turned ever so slightly to Richard.

"Your Grace?" he said. Some of the other women tittered and giggled over William's mystified expression.

"I said, my friend whose ears may have turned to stones, that this is my niece of my dear sister, Marian. This is her first season at court, and I hope that you assist her in learning all there is to know about life back in England," said Richard. "Marian, this fool is William, one of my dearest friends from my youth.

William took her hand. Was it only himself that felt a tingling when they touched, as if their hands had a mysterious band that traveled down their arms and into their stomach? Her hand was softer than the petals of a lily, and as he lifted it to his lips to kiss, he could smell rose water she used to cleanse her skin. He gently kissed her fingers and lowered her hand, careful to not be overly noticeable to the other ladies of the court. The gossip mill was always hungry for more, and it would hound him for weeks if he were not careful.

"My lady, it is the highest honor I could ever have to make your charmed acquaintance," he said. "I do hope that I will see you often in the days to come," he said.

In every single day to come, he thought. For the first time, William would not mind if the court lasted for weeks.

"William," said Marian, and his stomach leaped at hearing his name on her lips. "It is a wonderful pleasure to know you here. I thank my dear Uncle for introducing you. I am sure that there are so many people to meet here that I will need help in keeping all of the names and faces straight in my mind."

Her voice was as soft as her hands but had a strength to it; William was reminded of the first light of the morning, when the sun had not even reached the rim of the earth yet, but still illuminated everything in its path. He would learn that that was Marian: delicate yet powerful.

Their eyes held each other's for a moment, and time suspended for William. He did not notice the birds darting among the rooftops of the castle, nor the smell of roasting meat from

the kitchens. William did not even notice how all the courtiers were mingling and pressing around the king, asking for this favor or that. Marian's eyes filled his entire world.

Taking William's arm, Richard said, "Come now, William, we have many more people for you to become acquainted with, and I am sure you will see Marian and her friends tomorrow at the hunt."

Although he wanted to plant his feet firmly into the stone floor and stay with Marian for hours, he succumbed to the strict rules of court and began to move away. Before leaving, he said, "I look forward to it with the greatest pleasure," and his heart nearly skipped when she replied, "As do I."

### Chapter 3--The Hunt

It was a marvelous day for a hunt. The sky was bright and clear, the sun warm, yet not too hot, and there was a delightful breeze that blew through the trees and made the leaves whisper of secrets untold. Many of the noble men and several of the ladies sat atop their horses, clutching the leather reins, eager for the first spotting of the hart. Birds darted from treetop to treetop, which made the falcons perched on the master falconer's hand swivel their heads with predatory interest. The greyhounds yanked at their leashes, eager to be released into the forest. Everyone was eager to get started, but the king had not yet arrived.

At last, Richard galloped up to the group on his chestnut colored horse that stood at least sixteen hands high, as several of his personal guard followed behind. Will rode beside him, patting the black mane of his own well-trained horse.

"My apologies for the delay," said Richard. "If Will had not kept me up all night with his drinking game he found in some of the taverns, my arrival would have been more prompt." The king stifled a royal yawn and grinned slyly at William.

"If his Highness had not been such a sore loser, then the game would have ended far earlier," rejoined William. He smiled, laughing and fighting off the sleepiness that hovered around his eyelids from the previous night. True, he had stayed up too late with the king, but he had remained awake far later into the night, thinking about Marian. He wondered if she had thought about him at all. Had he made a good impression? Did she think him boring or trite or commonplace?

He had thought of her beautiful voice, the way that her hair fell around her shoulders, black and shining, and how her eyes flashed mischief when her uncle was not looking.

As if by thinking about her had conjured her from the thin air, Marian trotted up with some of her friends. William loved how the breeze played with her exquisite riding dress, how she sat in the saddle, as if she had been born for it, and how she smiled at him in that moment. It was as if she were shy and brave at once, and he had a strong hope that she might return some of the affection he was feeling then.

"Good morning, good lady Marian," he said. The summer wind smelled of apples and dew, and it would be a fine morning indeed if Marian were by his side.

"Good morning, William," she replied. Her wimple on her head helped protect her face from the sun, and William wished it were off so she would show her gorgeous hair once more. "So we have you to thank for this postponement of rich diversion?" She smiled and her white teeth matched the color of the clouds above them.

"My lady, I assure you, I would not postpone rich diversions of *any* nature," he said, raising his eyebrow, feeling the coy words leave him before he thought twice. It was not like him to be so forward, but the feeling she inspired in him made him want to be a bit daring. "Especially when they may involve seeing such a beautiful lady as yourself."

Marian blushed and looked down, and he loved the twin, pink spots that appeared on her cheeks. "You are too kind," she murmured.

"Let us be off!" shouted Richard, as the trumpeters blew the horns to signal the start of the hunt. The dogs were released, and they bounded into the forest, yelping and searching for the scent of the elusive deer.

William nudged his horse to trot, but not before he spotted John, Richard's brother, speaking with someone. He would not have paid any attention to it, but the lone horseman trotted back to the castle, not into the woods with the hunting party. That John would speak with anyone was not necessarily suspicious, but William knew that he coveted Richard's throne like Lucifer had coveted the Lord's. But Marian turned and gestured with her hand for him to follow, and they set off.

The hunt lasted all day, and William and Marian rode side by side for the majority of it. The forest smelled of wet earth, as the horses ground up the dirt, and fresh flowers that bloomed in the spring and were now bursting with color. There were chitters of squirrels and hammers of woodpeckers in the distance. Insects droned by William's ears, and he had to swat a few of them away. This part of the forest was easy-going; the land was level, and there were no large stones or bushes to impede their path. It made William miss the forest near his home in England.

Neither of them paid much attention to the actual hunt; William peppered Marian with questions about life as the niece of the king, life in France, and what she thought of her first season at court.

"Uncle Richard always keeps a very close eye on me," she said. "He is so protective of his late sister's daughter. Sometimes, too protective. I was most surprised that he introduced us."

William felt a pang of appreciation for Richard. He had softened just enough to open the doors for an opportunity to speak with Marian.

"Do you every feel pressure as King Richard's niece?" asked William. Their horses rode close together. He wished that there was not that distance between them; William briefly wondered what it might be like if they sat in the same saddle, with her body pressed against his.

"Only all of the time," she responded, laughing. "Everyone tries to say who I should marry, which family would be the best for me, how it would seal this alliance or that."

The thought of Marian marrying another made William's heart beat faster with fear. He clutched the reigns tighter.

"But Uncle Richard has promised that I could marry whoever pleases me," she added.

William softened his grip on the reigns ever so slightly.

These questions were interspersed at times with mad dashes to chase the spotted hart, as the thrill of the hunt caught up with them both. Seeing Marian riding hard on her horse sent a thrill through him. He tried not to notice how her hips thrust slightly forward with each stride.

When the hunting party had calmed, Marian returned his inquiries with questions of her own, about his childhood as son of the Head Personal Guard of Richard's father.

"Richard and I grew up together," he said. "He was always older than I was, so at first, he was the one getting me out of trouble when I nicked bread from the kitchens or fell into a well. Then, when we grew older, I was the one to rein in his reckless tendencies." The horses walked softly through the springy heather of the woods.

"And your father? What was he like?" she asked.

William paused. His father was one of the most honorable man he had ever known.

"My father loved King Henry II as a brother. He would have given his life for King Henry, and I think it was that which had the greatest impact on Richard and I. My father taught me what it means to truly sacrifice yourself for someone. Richard and I grew up as brothers, and I would gladly do the same for him."

Marian paused, considering his response. She thought it was noble and valiant of William to be willing to lay down his life for his king. Her heart quickened at the thought of someone so protective.

Turning their conversation to the royal family, she asked William what he thought of King Philip of France's machinations against the English crown, and whether Richard would be able to defend his territory in Normandy. They spent the next hour talking of the intricacies of French-English relations, and William was impressed with the insights Marian had into politics; most of the women he met neither cared nor paid attention to the dealings of the royalty.

"I had no idea that ladies such as yourself would care so much about politics," said William, as they trotted near the back of the hunting party.

"You cannot expect us to stay locked up in the castle and sew all the time," said Marian. "That would make for a very boring life." The hounds bayed in the distance as they caught a fresh trail of the hart's. The entire castle would eat well that night, and William could already taste the gamey meat of the deer.

"No, but I find that most of the ladies, well, to be honest, the entirety of the royal court, to be nothing but vicious gossips," said William. "The only ones who care about politics are the ones who want to rise."

"In which case, you mean, everyone," responded Marian.

William laughed. "Yes, but everyone is usually wrapped up in themselves. You seem to have a grasp beyond the superficial. For example, every lord wants to always be greater than what he is. Every viscount wants to be an earl, every earl wants to be a marquess, and every marquess wants to be a duke," he said. The horses ambled slowly, and he enjoyed trading banter with Marian.

"And what does every duke want to be?" asked Marian, gently guiding her horse through a patch of wildflowers.

"An even richer duke," responded William.

"Ah, not a king?" said Marian.

"If they are wise, no one would ever want to be king," said William. As he guided his horse past a rotten log, he moved steadily closer to Marian, until they were side by side. "I have seen the toll the crown has taken on Richard already. He is but five years my senior, and he already has more silver in his hair than some lords have in their treasuries."

Marian was silent for a moment, and the horses snorted, and swished their tails. "You are wise, Sir William," she said. "You see things that others do not. I very much enjoy speaking with you." A horn began to blow.

"I should hope so, my lady, otherwise I fear that I have wasted your whole afternoon," he responded. "But the horn signals the deer. Let us be off!" And they leapt into a gallop.

The hunting party chased the hart through the forest, until an excellent marksman brought down the deer. No one had ever met this marksman before, but everyone congratulated him on such an excellent shot.

As they trotted back to the castle, William did not want the hunt to end, and the look on Marian's face told him that she did not want to return to the castle so soon either.

When they arrived, William dismounted first, then helped Marian to dismount. She placed her hands on his shoulders, and he loved how she felt in his arms, sturdy and robust. Marian was no wisp of a woman, and he wondered briefly what she looked like beneath the

layers of cloth, silk, and velvet. His heart thumped steadily under his chest to feel her so close to him.

For Marian, the feel of his shoulders let her know that he was strong, and she felt the strength of his arms pull her from the horse. Even under the pounds of linen and silk that she wore, Marian felt light in his arms. For a brief moment, she felt as though she were floating, and she did not want her feet to touch the earth.

When he set her on the ground, his hands did not leave her waist for a moment. She looked up at him, and the fading afternoon light cast a glow around her face. The dust motes danced in the air above her and she looked like one of the saintly pictures of cherubs painted on the castle ceilings.

"Thank you, William," she said. "I look forward to seeing you."

"I return the sentiment, my lady," he said.

*As soon as possible, he thought, for I have met an angel on earth.*

## Chapter 4--The Dance

William felt like he had two left feet when it came to dancing. He had never moved gracefully in all his life, and he avoided the dances whenever possible. However, on that night, Marian looked so elegant in a lavender, velvet dress, with modest pearl earrings that he felt that he had to take her by the hand and ask to be her partner. His heart thumped in his chest when he thought about asking her. What if she said no? What if he tripped and made a complete fool of himself?

Her hair was secured with a net lined with pearls as well, and it gleamed in the soft candlelight. Marian looked like a swan gliding between couples, giving a small curtsy here and there in greeting. William's palms sweat and he dried them on his hose.

The band played well, at first simple, lively tunes to entice the crowd and perform for the pleasure of King Richard. The air was fresh and cool, blowing the scent of rosemary through the windows. They could not have asked for a better English, summer evening. William gave a small step forward, but then thought better of it.

*This is foolish. She is a maiden, not some enemy knight from France,* he thought. *Surely you can ask her to dance.*

Richard walked up beside him. "Will you stand there like a statue all night, or will you ever ask one of these lovely women to dance?"

William straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. "I am simply taking my time," he replied.

"Well," said Richard clasp him on the shoulder. "Do not take all night." He merged with the crowd.

He might have stood there all night, had William not seen Sir Henry begin to talk to Marian. A flash of jealousy provided the impetus for him to stride into the crowd and walk up to her. As he walked toward her, Marian laughed at something Sir Henry had said. Surely she did not find the dry, boring Henry attractive? Did she favor him more than William?

When he strode up to them, Marian fell silent. She looked at him with a twinkle in her eye that suggested hope, but William was too carried away by petty jealousy to notice her desire.

"Good evening, Marian," he said. He gave a short bow to Sir Henry. "Sir Henry, I would like to apologize for depriving you of the presence of the king's niece, but I was wondering if I may have the honor of asking the lovely Marian to the next dance. It is my absolute favorite dance, and she appears to be a most excellent companion."

Marian smiled, her face lighting up like the brilliant summer sun. "Of course, Sir William. Sir Henry will not mind my absence for a while, will you?" she asked, turning to face him. Henry appeared as though he very much would mind but the courtly manners took over whatever response he might have wished to give and simply said, "Not at all. Please enjoy the dance." He motioned for them to proceed and walked away.

William was astounded that he was so bold. He had never bothered to go through the hassle of wooing a woman, because he had never met one that fascinated him as much as Marian. She was quick-witted, charming, and had a good head on her shoulders. Being connected to royalty had not made her spoiled or selfish. As he grasped her hand, leading her to take their places, he felt as though her hand belonged in his.

It was approximately two weeks after the hunt. William and Marian had seen each other at meals, and occasionally when Richard happened to bring Marian with him when he was meeting William for the day. He would make some excuse or other, and they would be left in the gardens, or in the great room where the feasts and dances took place. With each conversation, William grew to like Marian more, and he loved simply being near her. He would have felt completely in the dark regarding her emotions, except she began to touch him in the smallest of ways: a hand on the shoulder here, a touch of her hand against his there. When they looked at each other, he felt certain that she could feel the same heat as he did.

They took their places among the other nobles and started in the position. They would dance before the meal of the evening, a feast with the catch of the day from the hunt. That day it would be hart and pheasant.

The band had taken a short break to relieve themselves, but they quickly resumed their positions.

"What dance is next, that is your favorite, Sir William?" asked Marian. She gently squeezed his hand harder, and a thrill ran through William.

Glancing away, he grinned sheepishly. "To be perfectly honest with you, Marian, I have not the faintest idea. I only wanted to ask you to dance, whatever it may have been," he said. They took their places on the floor.

"Well, I am glad that you did," said Marian. "I find Sir Henry a very great bore, and I was only pretending to laugh at something he said. The poor man simply does not know how to tell a witty joke."

Relief coursed through William. Still, he had to make sure. "So you do not...you do not favor Sir Henry?" he asked timidly.

When she looked William in the eyes, he saw yearning and eagerness in her expression. "No," she said. "Can you not tell that I favor you?"

William's heart could not have soared higher, even if it were a swallow. "Marian...I love...love so much to hear those words," he said.

The dance began and they faced each other. He bowed and she curtsied. They moved forward and back, all the men in the room dancing in synchronization, then the ladies followed suit.

"Of course," Marian responded. "I have thought of you every day since the hunt. You have been in my dreams a time or two." She completed the steps of the ladies' part and he mirrored with the men.

*You have been in my dreams every night,* he thought.

"Is it possible that we meet each other in our nightly wanderings?" he asked. They turned to face each other.

"I certainly hope so," she said. "I would very much like to meet you during the night." She gave him a mischievous grin, and he felt a faint stirring in his loins.

They continued with the dance, and William had to concentrate on every step he took.

"If I did not know better, Sir William," said Marian. "I would say that you are nervous." She smiled and glanced out of the corner of her eye. The candles burned brightly from the chandeliers, making the tapestries on the walls light up with bright, pastel colors.

William did not return the smile, but simply said, "You would be correct to assume, my lady. I have a penetrating fear of looking like a fool in front of an audience."

"Do you have anything else that is penetrating, Sir William?" Marian asked, whispering so that others in the room would not overhear. There was little choice over the volume of the music, that poured over the dancers and set the rhythm, but William still turned to her, looking shocked.

"My lady, I will surely lose my place in the steps if you continue to speak thusly," he said. "And my worst dream will come to fruition." Marian walked around him, in time with the music. She loved the way he smelled like fresh hay and the barest hint of heather and grass. Marian inhaled softly and sighed, loving just to be near him.

"And do you, indeed, ever come...to fruition?" She whispered the words when she was closest to his ears, when he was facing away from her.

William shivered to hear her voice so close to his ear. Glancing down her dress, he deeply desired to see her body without it. He had no idea that she could be so saucy, and he felt himself becoming aroused. The fact that she enjoyed his company and returned his desire ignited his passion.

The song came to a close, and they bowed and curtsied once last time to each other. He loved that he had managed not to make a complete fool of himself. Even better, he knew that Marian returned his affection for him. He no longer felt as though he were groping blindly in the dark, hoping for something that might not even be real.

The strings of the lyre began to play once more, and William turned to Marian. He said, "May I have the honor of this dance?"

"Always," she said. "Each and every one will always be yours."

He felt himself falling deeper and deeper into a great chasm, but he felt no fear. The fall was exhilarating and excruciatingly beautiful, and he had never felt anything like it.

## Chapter 5--The Library

William was in the library, pouring over maps of England and France. He wanted to understand more about the borders between Normandy and France, and where exactly Richard's power extended to. If he were to ever become the master of the wood in Normandy, he would have to know exactly where, and which, forests lay in Richard's domain.

The library was beautiful; it was all circles and elegant lines. The roof was domed, and everywhere was lined with the best cedar from Lebanon. The panel, shelves, and furniture shone with the oil and beeswax the servants rubbed into the wood to preserve it. There were books lining the walls, each bound in vellum, and the room smelled of honey and old leather. Some of the books had chains around them, deterring thieves, pinning them to the shelves where they were placed. Only with the help of the Master Librarian could they be removed.

Windows let in natural light, and it was one of the few places in the castle where there were large windows; everywhere else had tiny slits, to avoid incoming arrows from invading armies. The light falling through was soft and buttery that morning; it was as though it did not want to intrude too much into the consecrated stillness of the library.

Silence reigned in the room. It was a pleasant escape from all the constant noise of the castle. Everywhere, he would always hear servants beating on rugs and tapestries to rid them of dust, animals crying out before they were slaughtered, and raucous laughter from the knights. Every night there were feasts that lasted well into the wee hours of the morning, and there was many a drunken belch or lusty cry echoing through the halls.

It was the day after his dance with Marian. After they had finished, he had talked with her all night, sitting near a window. They had each clutched a goblet of wine and spoken for hours of the new epic poem that was slowly circulating through England. It spoke of a might hero by the name of Beowulf defeating a hideous monster, his mother, and Grendel. William had recited parts of it to her, and they had spoken for hours of the meaning of bravery, honor, and heroism.

Now, although sleep pulled at his eyes, he was pouring himself into the study of Richard's kingdom. If he was to be a good steward, he needed to know every inch of the terrain. He was so consumed by the maps, cities, and charts that he did not hear the door open, nor the padded footsteps of Marian as she entered the room. Her head was bent toward an open book, her lips softly forming the words as she read. Only when she spoke did he realize that anyone else was in the room.

"Oh, William, I did not know you were here. Forgive me, I will leave you in peace," she said, but she did not move. They had to act as though they followed all the courtly etiquette. If anyone ever discovered them alone, it would cause a scandal.

"No, no," said William, quickly rolling the maps back up into their original scrolls. "You are not disturbing me in the least. 'Do you need help finding something?'" He asked. He walked around the enormous table, taking quick strides toward her.

Marian held up a book. "I simply came to read a bit by the window," she said. William thought Marian had never looked lovelier, even including the night before. For the dance, she had worn a formal gown, with jewelry and trappings, but today, she wore something simpler that served to highlight her beauty even more.

The sunlight falling on her face illuminated her almond-shaped eyes; they were so piercing in the light that they looked aquamarine. They were an ocean that William would have no remorse to drown in.

"What are you reading?" he asked. He stood transfixed by her stare, almost immediately forgetting about the book.

She smiled guiltily as though she had been caught doing something naughty. "Well, because you spoke so highly of the story of Beowulf, I asked my uncle if by chance he had a copy. I did not have much hope, because Uncle Richard has always been more interested in fighting than literature," she said.

William nodded. Richard was more comfortable in stabbing someone in battle than he was in chatting about philosophy or letters.

"But by good fortune, he had a copy," Marian continued. "He said that it was a warrior's story meant for a warrior, and that he had greatly enjoyed it. I wanted to read for myself the things that interest you."

It was the highest compliment Marian could have paid William. He was both deeply honored and impressed that she would spend her time reading something to know him better. His heart beat faster in admiration for the remarkable woman in front of him. He felt his throat become dry with a tangle of desire and happiness.

"So," he said, clearing his throat, trying to disguise how much the gesture had touched him. "Why did you decide to come here?" He gestured

"It was becoming far too stuffy in my room. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction for me to find any relief from opening my window." Marian gestured through the room. "The light is good here, and yet it is placed in the shadow of the turrets, so it does not ever become too hot in the summer, nor too cold in the winter."

"Yes, there is something quite beautiful and illuminating in this room," he said. "Although I am not so sure it is the light."

Marian blushed softly. She walked closer to William. "What are you looking at?" she asked. She stood so close to him that he could smell her sweet perfume, an elegant blend of roses and lavender. The heady mixture intoxicated him as no wine ever could. He had trouble forming thoughts, let alone words.

*I am looking at the most stunning woman I have ever known*, he thought. His breath hitched and he nearly said the words aloud. He longed to tell Marian how he truly felt about her, but the time was not yet right.

Instead, William gestured to the pile of maps in front of him. "I simply want a better understanding of how far Richard's territory extends," he said. "Between England and France, there are a lot of forests."

"No, there are not. Between England and France lies nothing but ocean water, not forests," said Marian, grinning.

William laughed. "Touché, my lady. Come, look here," he said.

Marian moved closer to the map. William felt his breath hitch as she put her body between him and the table. He could barely contain himself as he felt her hips press against his waist. He raised his hand to her.

"Your hand, fair Marian," he said.

She lifted her hand and placed it in his. Her skin was so smooth that it reminded him of soft blankets in winter. The warmth of her palm sent tingles down his spine.

"This is where we are," he said, gesturing with her hand, using it to point out cities. "And this," he spread her hand all over the whole of Normandy. "Is all forest. If I am to be a good steward of Richard's resources, then I must know all there is to his kingdom." He paused. "There is so much to explore," he said softly.

"Indeed," she said. She turned around to face him. They were so close that William could see Marian's pupils and feel the heat from her face. "So much to explore," she whispered.

He leaned in to kiss her.

When their lips met, William felt a warm, melting sensation, and he let it travel through his body. His heart pounded, and he did not ever want to let go. He pressed his lips to hers gently at first. Her lips were as soft as rose petals, and it was everything he had dreamed about for weeks, since the day he had first seen her.

Marian seemed to melt a little against his body, and he wrapped his arms around her. He gently touched the back of her head, and pressed harder, wanting to feel more of her against his body.

His eyes closed, and William thought he might never recover from the kiss, from what it did to him. It shattered his expectations of what a kiss could be, of what it meant to truly desire someone and love them beyond all reason.

*Because it's true, he thought. I think I love her.*

From their weeks together, he only wanted to know more about her. He had never thought he would find love this soon, or with someone as wonderful as Marian. She was saucy, funny, and smart. She did not act like the other women at court, and she was humble and sweet. She was smart, sassy, and unafraid to show her desire. The more he learned about her, the more he wanted to know.

Her back was to the table, and William took a step forward, so that she pressed against it. His body leaned into hers, and she could feel every inch of his hard muscles through his linen. As for William, he loved the softness of her, the feel of her body yielding to his.

She moaned softly in the back of her throat, almost the cry a kitten might make, and the sound drove William wild. He began kissing her harder, and she returned in kind. He could hear her breath hitch, then become faster and shallower. When her delightful, pink mouth opened, he loved that she allowed him the sweet access to her tongue.

When their tongues met in a riotous dance, he groaned, yearning for more. His heart beat faster and their hands began roaming over each other, exploring, feeling the symmetry of their desire. William felt as though a fire had started that he never wanted to put out.

When he talked to her, she made him feel good; when they looked at each other, he felt nothing but warmth and happiness. He always wanted to protect her, to keep her safe from any harm that may come to pass. William wanted to fulfill every need and desire she might have. He longed to be the one that she called husband one day. He imagined himself living a glorious future with her, living many long and happy years together.

The maps lay on the table, forgotten by both of them.

## Chapter 6--The Feast

The feast concluded weeks of hunts, dances, hearings, and justice tribunals. They gathered in the great hall, with banners hanging from walls, along with tapestries of scenes of hunts and jousts. The floor had been swept clean by servants and fresh rushes laid down to sweeten the air. It was a two-layered room, with the main floor, and a staircase to the side, leading to an upper level, where during mingling hours, the guests could wander from floor to floor. It was divided by a small half wall, in which guests could lean over and see below them.

As some of the king's most honored guests, Marian and William sat near Richard, higher up on the table than some of the lower, petty lords and ladies. The tables were set with the most expensive white linen, draped over the sides to the floor, beautifully adorned with lace that took hundreds of hours of labor from the most skilled craftsmen. The plates and goblets were all silver, Richard's finest, for this evening, he wanted to make an important announcement. A sweet breeze blew drifted through the windows and brought with it the smell of the summer, freshly churned earth from planting crops and a hint of rain that was to come.

Hundreds of candles were placed on the table and around the room, dripping from chandeliers and candelabra on the floor, their flames dancing in the light breeze that blew through the room. Their light illuminated the sumptuous dishes of roast venison with sauces of sage and white wine, wild boar with blackcurrant, freshly-hunted duck topped with honey and time, oysters and cockles, and a huge swan, filled with smaller birds inside. After the main courses came baked apples, plum tarts, marzipan cakes, custards, and candied hazelnuts, pistachios, and almonds.

It was by the most lavish feast yet, and Richard had spent a small fortune in gathering the spices alone. The feast displayed to the courtiers Richard's wealth, as well as any scheming mind who may have thought about stealing the crown. It showed that Richard had plenty of money in his royal coffers if it ever came to war. But no one thought about war as they gazed on the lovely dresses of the women, the perfect garments of the men, and the precious stones dripping from every wrist and throat. The cupbearer walked around the guests, impeccably dressed, making sure that everyone's cup was filled with the finest wine from France. Musicians played softly in the background, and whenever a new course was brought, they announced the change with a flourish.

Because they were placed near the king, William and Marian were surrounded by the finest cuts of meat and most pleasing side dishes.

"I do not think I could take another bite," said Marian. "It has been wonderful tonight." She looked at Will, and she smiled, the corners of her mouth upturning so they showed her dimples, the ones he was slowly falling in love with. Her eyes sparkled from the wine, and he knew that his cheeks must be ruddy from the drink.

"It has been wonderful every single night," he replied. "I do not wish to part from you to return to England." He took her hand beneath the table, so that no one saw. "I have grown rather fond of you, Marian."

Marian turned to face him, her hair piece drifting away from her face as she tilted her head. She looked so elegant in the forest green velvet, especially with the pearls laced around her graceful neck.

“Rather fond?” she asked coquettishly. “My lord William, I would expect something more than fondness after what has passed between us.”

The weeks had passed in a blur to William. He and Marian had met every chance they could, stealing kisses whenever possible. They awoke early and met on the roof of the castle, snuck out to concealed parts of the forest, or even hid behind the enormous curtains and tapestries that hung to the floor. Once they knew of their desire for each other, they had not wanted to stop. Each day became more acute, their ache for each other more severe. They had progressed from their kiss in the library to running their hands over each other’s bodies. William loved how her body responded to his caresses, and in equal measure he loved how his responded to her touch.

As he looked into her eyes, he saw love there, not just lust, not simply of the desire born out of the corporal. This, ironically, inflamed his desire more, and he wanted to sweep away the dishes and have her right there on the table. Instead, he settled for something a bit more subtle.

“My lady,” he said, moving his hand away from hers to rest on his thigh. “You should know that I am a hard man.” He slowly moved her hand to feel his stiffness straining against his clothes. “A very hard man in my emotions.” He bade her to rub up and down, slowly, so as to avoid detection by the others. Marian’s cheeks were rosy and she glanced around, making sure that they were not caught by wandering eyes. The other guests were laughing, still taking small bites of food, or drinking wine with abandon. Someone was swaying drunkenly to the music in the background.

“I do not show affection very often and fall in love even less,” he continued. He eased her hand off of himself. Ever so slowly, he moved his hand to her thigh. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “But when I do, I am very, very affectionate in my gestures,” he said, slipping his hand into the fork of her thighs. He found her sweet, tender spot and began to run gently.

He leaned back into his chair, as if he had finished speaking with her. Only the coloring of her cheeks gave away what was going on beneath the table; that, and the way her lips slightly parted, as if she wanted to speak, but was unable to do so.

“And so, my lady,” he said, beginning to press more firmly. Marian’s breathing increased, and he watched the swell of her breasts through her dress. They looked as luscious as two ripe peaches, and he wanted to bite into them. “To say that I am very fond of you--” his fingers began dancing, increasing, keeping time with the music of the minstrels. “--is one of the highest compliments I can give,” he finished.

Marian closed her eyes, wrapped in the sensation he was giving her, heightened by the excitement of the possibility of being discovered. She could feel herself building, the sensations becoming stronger. Her lower belly clenched and a wave of pleasure took her. She wanted to cry out, but held back from and the sweet ache of it engulfed her.

Until King Richard stood up from his place at the table. He made a motion toward the musicians and they stopped playing.

Marian jerked, as if released from a trance. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, trying to hide her smile. She blushed deeply, and William loved it.

“My lady, do not hide your scarlet face; the color becomes you. It reveals the deep, emerald green of your eyes,” whispered William, as Richard called for silence of the room.

"My lords and ladies," he announced, looking around the room. Silence reigned and Richard the Lionheart took his stage. He spoke French, for that was the language of the court. "I gave gathered us here for the special purpose of making an announcement: I am taking up the holy and noble cause of traveling to Jerusalem to seize it from the ignoble Saracens."

A storm of whispers suddenly broke out among the nobility, and there was a flurry of movement, as people bent toward one another to speak. Jerusalem, the holiest of cities, had fallen to the Saracens, those who worshipped Mohamed? William noticed among the furor that a figure moved along the back stairs, his face disguised in shadow. But the news of Richard snatched his attention, and he said to Marian, "Did you know of this?"

She shook her head. "This is the first I have heard," she replied.

Richard held up a hand, and immediately, the room went silent. "I shall levy a tax on all of England to build an army strong enough to reclaim what rightfully belongs in Christendom," he said. Some of the lords glanced at each other from the corner of their eyes. They always felt that their lands were taxed enough; from the way they complained, they were always one penny away from a peasant revolt.

William tried to locate the man along the wall, but he had disappeared. He turned his attention back to Richard.

Sensing the annoyance of the court, Richard spoke louder. He hoped that the good food and better wine would put the men in better spirits to be receptive to his plan. "My gentle lords and ladies, I know that it is not easy to fight off an invasion, especially one so far away," he said.

"Damn near on the edge of the world," one courtier muttered.

"However, can we truly put a price on protecting God's kingdom on earth? Is there a value of rescuing the land where Our Most Holy Christ the Lord trod with His two feet?" Richard said, looking around the room and meeting every single person's gaze. "When I reach His Heavenly Kingdom and enter into those shining gates, and Our Father asks me, 'What did you do when My city was taken by those barbarians?' What shall I respond? 'I am sorry, Father, but the price was too heavy?'" Richard asked, his voice growing into a crescendo.

*That is why he is king, thought William. He is not merely taking care of the people of England, but of God's citizenry everywhere. If only half of our nobles had half the piety he does.*

A banner along the wall fluttered in the breeze, and it caught William's eye. As his gaze drew upward, he noticed the candlelight flickering against a shadow, but the shadow seemed to have form. He looked closer, and he saw that it was a man, dressed in all black. Even his face was covered.

"That is why, in a few short weeks, I will go myself to fight against the Saracen hordes, and lead this holy fight for the holy land," said Richard, pounding his fist on the table. "To do anything less would be to deny the responsibility that God has given me."

Richard's speech was stirring, but William ignored it. He focused on the man in black. Something sparked in his mind, and he immediately a strong sense of foreboding. He looked to the king.

*No one should be up there, he thought. Not even the servants.*

The light was dim on the second floor, barely lit by the few torches above; it was almost pitch black, but in the darkness, William could see something being raised.

Richard! thought William.

"For that reason--" began the king.

And then the man in black fired the arrow from his post.

## Chapter 7--The Man in Black

Several things happened at once. William sprang out of his seat from instinct, the way a man pulls his hand away from a hot stove before he realizes that he has been burned. His chair toppled over, and Marian gasped. William leaped over to Richard, throwing his body in front of him. They fell to the ground. The impact was so great that Richard's head slammed into the ground and William lost his breath from the fall. He felt the arrow wizz by his head, so close that he could feel the air tickle his hair and hear the buzz of it passing near.

Several of the ladies screamed, and many of the men as well, as everyone ducked under tables. Goblets of wine spilled, servants ran out of the room, and several people starting shouting at once. Once William verified that Richard had not been injured, he leaped to his feet.

He pointed at one of the guards, and shouted, "Protect your king!" and ran to the stairs.

The assassin had already flown, but William could hear his footsteps pounding through the corridors. He gave chase.

There were only so many ways out of the castle. It could be a labyrinth to those not intimately familiar with its corridors. William doubled back, hoping to catch sight of the man. From the corner of his eye, William saw a movement. It was the barest of changes in the air, but it made William whip his head around.

"Guards!" he cried. "This way! To me!"

The man sprang out behind a low-hanging tapestry. He ran to the grand staircase and raced up. William ran after him. He pumped his legs, willing himself to go faster.

"Stop!" William cried, the assassin never slowing. He threw floor candelabra in William's path, and raced up the stairs, taking two and three at a time. As he climbed the stairs, William's legs burned with effort, and his heart felt as though it might explode from his chest.

William had nearly reached him. He could see the assassin had light, sand-brown hair peeking beneath the hood he wore over his head. He thought of Richard and the thought that he almost died, and anger burned in him. It made him run harder and leap at the assassin, grabbing him by the scruff of his collar.

He had only meant to subdue him, but when William yanked back, he jerked with so much force that they both tumbled down the staircase.

Each stair felt like a hammer blow, and William released the man and instinctively covered his head to cushion the fall. The steps dug excruciatingly into his sides, his bones and joints screaming in pain. They fell together in a tangle of arms and legs, and when William hit the floor, his breath escaped his lungs. Neither of them could move for an instant.

Then, staggering to his feet, like a drunkard, the assassin kicked William between the fork of his legs and dashed up the stairs again. The pain was so great that William saw stars flash against his eyes and he feared he would vomit. Rage flowed through William and he stood, shaking, still reeling from the agony of the kick. He followed the man in black up the stairs.

William saw him turn to the right, and dart down the corridor. His feet pounded against the floor, the steps echoing against the stone walls. Hearing a door slam, William ran faster. One of the doors of the corridor was shut, and William knew that he had the assassin cornered. They were on the top floor, and no one could escape.

He pushed open the door and saw...nothing. Only a curtain that fluttered in the breeze. The room was dark, lit only by the light of the full moon. William ran to the open window and looked down. There was a drop of hundreds of feet, a death fall for certain. However, there was a rope tied to the ledge, and it dangled, devoid of anyone clinging to it. William cursed and turned back to face the empty room. The pale furniture and the shadows they cast seemed to mock him, silently accusing him of failure. Kicked at a table.

He had had him!

*That miserable, cowardly bastard!* Who else would be cowardly enough to play dirty tricks and accept payment in exchange for a man's life? William had *had* him around the neck, and the vile kick to his groin had done him in.

William's blood boiled at the thought that Richard could have died, that he would have lost his best friend and closest companion to a rogue thief of souls. His mind rebelled against the idea that the succession would have passed to John in such a bloody manner.

John...

He knew instantly who was behind the execution attempt. There was no one with more motivation or money who could hire an assassin but the king's little brother. Anger pounded through William as he realised the implications of what John had tried to do. His breath became shallow and his head felt light as the ire flowed through him.

*That bastard,* thought William. I don't know what I can do, but I will do something.

His thoughts were as scrambled as his emotions; he was still inflamed from the excitement of the chase and the fear of the arrow aimed at his heart.

Storming out of the room, he walked along hallways and corridors, pushing past people who were still shocked at what had occurred in the great hall. He barely knew where he went until he found himself at the door of Prince John. He had not seen him at the feast, a conspicuous absence, since it was the last night of court.

*That little rat will regret he ever schemed against Richard,* thought William. *I cannot lay my hands on him, but I will give him a warning even a prince must listen to.*

William could not let John get away with his vile usurpation attempt. It was so obvious to anyone willing to look that John had designs for the throne. His anger drove William onward, past the welcoming room of the prince, past the sitting room, until he came to his inner chamber door.

*Why are there no guards here?* William wondered. *Lazy, foolish men! No wonder Richard was almost killed.*

He pushed open the door.

There, in the center of the room, was Prince John held at swordpoint. There was only a moment for William to be confused. The look of terror in his eyes was awful to behold, and he had wet himself in fear.

And then the man raised his sword and attacked William.