

MEL
KEEGAN

White Rose
Night



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White Rose of Night

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

WHITE ROSE OF NIGHT

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Foreword

The world of a millennium ago is a thoroughly alien place. Almost every aspect of human society has changed, and while the most visibly obvious changes involve technology, the most powerful changes have taken place inside the human mind and heart.

This novel is a historical for the most part, with a twist of the fantastical; but purists are sure to tell me it's more fantasy than not, because I've 'sanitized' the Thirteenth Century. The picture I've painted in this novel is a lot cleaner, and smells a lot better than the reality would have. And I admit, I've skirted around (rather than glossing over) some of the 'difficult' areas of history. I didn't want to paint over them, because then I *would* have been dishing up fantasy in the guise of history! But, having said that, I need to make a couple of points right here.

The life-span of the average human was a great deal shorter in these days. By sheer luck one person in a thousand might live to be eighty years old, but the average man could expect to live to forty if he didn't meet with a sticky end; women seldom lived past the age of thirty, and even when people did live so long, they were pretty decrepit.

Not surprisingly, people also matured faster and started their lives a lot sooner than kids do in the world we know. When this story begins, Paul is a tad short of his sixteenth birthday, but in fact he's actually too old to be a squire. At fifteen, he'd be a soldier. I admit, I've taken a few liberties with this aspect of the story, and with good reason. I didn't want to make Paul any younger, for the same reason. Generally, in this story, and without exception in the more sensual sections, the term 'boy' should *never* be taken to imply that any of these characters are underage. They are definitely not. In their world, they are the equivalent of mid-late teens, and older. If their world had a legal age of consent (which it didn't), these characters would be way above it.

The facts of history are at odds with our understanding of coming of age. It's tough for us to imagine hardened, embittered warriors of age fourteen; people married with children at age twelve; or girls of ten years 'sold' into marriage to men of their grandfathers' age! Crafting fiction like this, you're on a sticky wicket. You can either impose our present on their era (and pretend children were not pitchforked onto battlefields — which they *were*, until the time of WWI), and squires were eighteen years old (utter nonsense), or you can

tell the unvarnished truth (which could get a little obnoxious, and would certainly stretch the limits of what's permissible in fiction. Few legitimate novelists want to tread there). Or you can seek a compromise.

I tried for the latter. My characters are *much* older than they would have been in reality; they're young by the understanding of our era, but *transpose* here. If you're going to be decrepit by age 28, you'd be a mature adult at an age when our youngsters are still in class. *All* my characters are of age. It's all relative; the numbers are deceiving.

The second area in which I hunted for a compromise was in the depiction of very real and very bloody events, such as the mass-execution of the Saracen POWs, shortly after Edward and Paul arrive at the camp of King Richard. Sad to say, this is a historical event. The historical Richard the Lionheart has little in common with the 'icon' who has become 'Hollywood mythology.' Again, sad to say, the depiction of him in this novel is pretty close to the truth.

White Rose was written around 1994, and even then it was difficult to handle, because the racism and sexism which to us are anathema, were commonplace in the novel's world. Delicacy and circumspection seemed the best policy; I hope I succeeded. This is the world of the fairly distant past ... please accept it as such. At the same time I wanted to try to show the human face of the enemy. Political tensions in the last few decades have made the subject of Islam delicate, but I focused on the purely historical, and I hope to have ducked anything remotely related to current political woes. Accept the picture of Islam painted here in the same spirit as you accept the legend of Sinbad. This was my intention.

The black-magic book belonging to the sorcerer Ibrahim was modeled on *The Book of Dead Names*, ascribed to Abdul Alhazred. In this context the whole thing is completely fictional ... on the other hand, I wouldn't suggest you try actually intoning any of these incantations in the wee small hours ...

Finally, I decided to go with the English spellings which were used in the original edition of this novel. Changing to US spellings for a story which is so very far-removed from the US looked odd. If US readers see some weird-looking spellings, trust me: that's the way they spell it on t'other side of the pond!

In the research for *White Rose* I was blown away by a book called *1066: The Year of the Conquest*, by David Howarth (William Collins, 1977). Little else was necessary for research, save to look at the 'war reports' from the front lines in Palestine and Normandy, germane to the Crusades. Get a copy of *1066* if you can. It's a wonderful read.

Please enjoy *White Rose* in this edition, which has been very marginally reedited from the 1997 GMP edition.

Mel Keegan,
Adelaide, 2004

White Rose of Night

Rievaulx Abbey 1228 A.D.

I am old now, but my mind is as keen as it was in my youth. Much of what I am about to tell may be ascribed to the wayward memory of a man of my years, but I will only smile, for I know the truth. I am asked to write of great times and great wickedness, and I have been absolved by Abbot Michael to recount the entire truth without alteration, by change or omission. I will speak of places, men and deeds my reader may scarcely believe, yet every word is truthful. I will tell of kings and sorcerers, The Lionheart and Salah-ad-Din Yusef ibn-Aiyub ... Saladin Rex.

I am urged to write of what I saw, heard, and felt; and also of my beloved. I am Paulo, who as a youth was called the Fostered Boy. But Edward called me Paul. I am of a Spanish sire and Saxon mother, which accounts for my name and looks. My parents died before I was eight years old, and I was fostered by the old knight, Ranulf of Sleaford, who was as a father to me until I entered the house of Aethelstan. I remain what I have always been, one who dreamed of being a warrior yet never fought; one who loved, and was loved, who travelled far, and saw such things as I myself hardly believe.

The strangest of these tales, being of heaven and of hell, is what fetches me to the abbey when I have grown old and my beloved is dead these five long years. Absolved, I will relate the sum of my memory and leave the reader to credit or scorn as he will. Mine is a tale of joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure past bearing, of evil, salvation and love ... my one love. I have had no other.

Edward of Aethelstan was a Saxon knight of good family but poor fortunes. He was my life and destiny, and it is to him I shall turn in

death. I feel the yearning tug of sleep, that last long sleep, from which I will surely wake in his arms.

They call me 'Brother Paul' in this place, but I do not feel part of their order. I am confessed and have done an old man's penance. The scourge still burns, no matter the years, yet hurts less than the blaze of resentment. Who are they to judge me, or Edward? He is not to be judged, not by mere men.

In this state of grace, I write without fear of retribution. If I seem blasphemous let it be understood, I recount only what I saw and heard. These were the true words and deeds of men whose banners flew beside those of Richard, Lionhearted. I beg also that the reader absolve me, for I will speak of strange magic, of darkness and despair. If I sin again with my confession of the love that drew me into this turmoil of events, so be it.

Some of my tale is puzzled together from the testimony of others. Where I did not observe the scene I place my faith in those who did, and here give their accounting. These are the sworn testimonies of men who loved Edward also, in their own ways. If I am a fool to trust, then I am a fool.

I gaze through the door of my cloister cell at the forests cloaking the hills above the monastery wall, and I remember the day our ship left Engand's shores. So long would pass before I would see again such sights as these abbey woods, yet seldom did I even think of home. My life whirled with forces beyond my control. I smell the ramson and the forest, hear the chatter of finches, the bell calling my brothers to matins, and the high, sweet voices of the little boys singing, but my thoughts are summoned by the past.

In my heart I am a youth again, a little frightened and alone as I sit listening to muted voices in the hall at Aethelstan Manor...

Chapter One

Their voices were muted by the thick stone walls of the old Aethelstan Manor. I sat in the hall outside their closed door, my hands about a cup of ale as I looked up at the great tapestry opposite me. Nuns had stitched into it the likeness of Elric, the grandfather of the young earl, and the likeness between the two was remarkable, save that where Elric was shorter, darker, thickset and hirsute, his young kinsman was tall, slender despite his skills with sword and lance, and as blond as sunlight. I sat listening, and was apprehensive. I was not quite sixteen years, and though I was well grown for my age and in no way unmanly, I was always pierced by the arrows of a terrible guilt that led me to a feeling of unworthiness.

By the age of eleven I knew the truth about myself. I would look, enraptured, at the lissome young bodies of boys my own age, watch them playing in the river, and would be filled with urgency. I thought it a dreadful sin and would often seek a wandering friar to confess and take a beating as the price of my salvation.

The muted voices rose and I tried to make out their words. Elric's face looked down from the tapestry, reminding me of the young earl, and I felt the sweet sting of passion as I thought of Edward. In the eyes of the law he owned me. The village of Sleaford was just over the hill beyond the Manor, and Ranulf's house lay well within Aethelstan's dominion. At my lord's will I lived or, if he chose, I died. I shivered and tried to concentrate on my foster father's voice.

Ranulf had grown old as I watched. When my parents died almost nine years before, I was sent to his house. People called me the fostered boy, but I was made part of the family of Ranulf's young sister, who was lately widowed. Her husband was buried somewhere in Palestine. Many young men had died in that war, as they have always died in

others. There was grief but no surprise when another wife became a widow, and her children were orphaned.

Ranulf spoke with the thick accent of Norfolk, which had been his home before he came to Sleaford for the sake of his sister. I loved him as a father, and he treated me always like a son, as he had promised my own sire. Alberto Delgado had ridden to battle with Ranulf years before, but in the end it was not a heathen lance but fevers that killed him, and my mother too.

When I entered Ranulf's home I was seven years old and the young earl was even then mourning his own father, who was killed when the Saracens overran an encampment near Edessa.

Edward was named for the beloved old King in whose hands this Saxon land was free and happy before the Normans came. He was a man of learning as well as a warrior, and I respected him for this as well as his skills with sword and lance, and for his beauty. Oh, I knew him.

I had seen him just that morning, before Ranulf brought me to the Manor. Edward had ridden out along the hill above Sleaford on his great, steel-grey warhorse, with a hawk on his wrist and the morning wind tossing his hair about his shoulders. He wore it uncut and loose, and it was the colour of silver-gold, like moonlight on the water. I knew him well! But not as well as I had yearned to for more years than might be entirely decent.

Ranulf's paternal feelings brought us to Aethelstan Manor that night. I studied the embroidered face of Elric and wondered apprehensively what would become of me. I sipped a little ale and frowned at the banner under which Elric had fought. The nuns had sewn its likeness into the tapestry but the banner itself, battered and wearing its honours proudly, stood by the door.

It was midnight blue, and onto it was embroidered the device of this house, a white rose, full open in bloom. The banner fluttered above Elric's needlework head as he trampled the Saracen underfoot. His great sword was on the wall over the fireplace — I had seen it as we entered the house.

I took a sip of ale and listened to Ranulf's voice, thick with the Norfolk accent, so familiar. Then Edward spoke, and my insides quivered. His voice was steely, taut as a bowstring yet filled with soft restraint and rich with humour.

"Come to the point, Ranulf," he said. "Tell me what you want of me!"

"What do I want?" My foster father chuckled. "I want the best for the boy, what else would you expect?"

The best, from my point of view, would be to be swept off to Ed-

ward's bedchamber, undressed and put to some useful service! But this was not what Ranulf meant at all. He meant, what was to become of the rest of my life? I was no longer a child, and I must have a situation.

"He can read and write," Ranulf offered. "Have you need of a secretary? He has a strong back and good hands, if you need a groom. Edward, consider the lad. His father was a Spanish knight, yet what is Paulo? I can do little for him, you know that. I'm paupered after the war and I have my sister's little ones to look to. Paulo must make his own way, but what's he to do in a village like Sleaford? Would you have him herd pigs? 'Tis the very labour awaiting him, dawn tomorrow, if you send him away. I had no heart to tell him."

I cringed. It was the lowest of occupations, and I would refuse it. Sooner would I put on a cassock and enter holy orders than sink so low that I dishonoured Alberto Delgado's name. Ranulf was telling the earl the truth. He had spent every shilling on his campaign. Now, when his family needed him, nothing was left.

And what of me? The fostered one came last on the list to be provided for. I chewed my lip, glared at the midnight blue banner with its white rose, and listened for the earl's steely voice. It was like a drawn sword, ready to fight for honour. Would it ever fight for mine? I mocked myself for the absurd thought, but it might have been an intuition.

"I've no need of a groom or a secretary," Edward said almost regretfully. "You saw my servants packing as you came in. You know full well, Ranulf, I'll be gone within the month and shall not return for years, perhaps many years." He paused and added softly, as if the word horrified him, "Crusade."

"I fought there in my day," Ranulf agreed. "Do you need a squire, then? Paulo is a well-grown lad, and strong, like his father. Much like his sire in body, and half as hairy!" He laughed reminiscently. "He's tall already, and boys his age shoot up a hand's span while you watch. A wager with you, Edward. He'll end taller than you! He is as heavy already, I should say."

I gave my body a critical glance. I was quite muscular even then, and as he said, tall like my father. Would I be taller than Edward, stronger? I shivered as I imagined being a hand's span higher, and holding the much more slender Edward crushed against me, with my face buried in the gold mane of his hair. A terrible wave of lust caught me unawares and I admonished myself. I promised myself confession and penance the next time I saw a friar on the road.

"He's a responsible lad," Ranulf went on. "I have never seen him shirk since he was a little one, and have often seen him go to a priest,

kneel to confess some wrong, then bear a hefty thrashing like a man. That is the guarantee of a good conscience and courage.”

If only Ranulf had known what I had confessed! Which time had he seen me? When I admitted watching other boys and lingering over their long, sun-brown limbs? Or had I confessed to the sweet pangs of lust I felt as I watched the young Earl of Aethelstan ride out falconing, with his lean, sinuous thighs widespread about the horse called Icarus. Icarus, I thought, who flew, and I pictured the great beast carrying Edward to battle in some heathen land, as if they rode the wind.

I would need a mighty penance, soon, I told myself as I imagined myself a hand’s span taller, with the slender strength of Edward crushed to me. He was perfect in his nakedness, this I knew.

The Manor lay close to my home, and I was familiar with every path through the woods. I knew the places where hare and foxes could be trapped, though shooting a deer would cost a man his hands. And I knew where the best swimming was. I followed Edward almost every day through our last season before the banner of Aethelstan once again flew in the Holy Land. I never told him how I followed him, not in all the years we shared. It would likely bruise his pride, that he should have been betrayed by spying, and by me of all people. Yet I followed him, before he even knew I was alive.

I would lie in the rushes, concealed by the willows along the riverbank, and watch him tether the warhorse. Icarus lowered his nose to graze and my lord put his foot on a rotten log as he disrobed. I would hold my breath as he folded the hose and for a moment stood in the sun to tie up his hair lest it tangle.

His uplifted arms hoisted the hem of his tunic and afforded a tantalising glimpse of bare buttock. I would beg the river gods to make him turn and show me his manhood before he dived into the water. His hair was pale in the sun, so he seemed not to have any across his breast and below his belly. I would feast my eyes on the long curve of his spine and pray for him to turn. His limbs seemed smooth as a girl’s, but between his legs he dispelled any such notion. He was big and fierce, reminding me of the haft of a spear. How I longed for that lance to sunder me!

I would find a friar, I thought grimly, kneel, take off my jerkin and tell him to lay my penance across my back with a heavy hand. What would Edward think of a squire who lusted shamefully while he polished the armour and groomed the nag? I finished my ale with a quivering feeling, sure I was destined for the pigs tomorrow, or else a cassock and holy vows.

But Edward said softly, almost below my hearing, “I’ve no wish to

take a young lad to war, Ranulf. You have seen yourself what becomes of them with the work, the heat and hardship, not to mention how they are preyed upon when the master's back is turned! You know what I mean."

Did he mean what *I* thought he did? I shivered again, realising of a sudden that my golden knight — my white rose, whom I had imagined almost a saint, so unblemished was he — was not so innocent after all. He knew the same things I knew ... he knew what boys had to offer, and what was sometimes taken from them, no matter if it was offered freely or not.

But Ranulf was laughing heartily. "Edward, have you seen the boy? He's like to break the arm of a beast who offended him!"

It might depend on the beast, and the manner of the offence! I knew of several who would not be rejected, and one in particular, who was even then speaking and whose affections would be paid for in blood if it was the only way to have them.

"I've not seen him since you brought him to Sleaford when he was a child. Where has he been?"

"At his lessons with the monks, and working in the fields with my sister's eldest. He has grown more than you might have imagined. Shall I fetch him in?"

"Oh, very well." Edward sighed. "I'd rather have him as a squire under me than see him levied for the army and chopped to tatters. Or take vows," he added soberly, as if guessing my own mind.

The door opened and Ranulf looked down the hall for me. I stood, straightened my jerkin and hurried toward him. A fire blazed in their chimney, at least twenty books were displayed on the shelves, and silver cups were on the table in the middle of the room.

Edward stood by the hearth, hands clasped behind him, gilded by the firelight and the glow of a dozen fat yellow candles. I caught my breath at the look of him and went down on one knee. It was some time before I dared lift my head, and he did not invite me to rise, as if it were easier to look me over, judge what he saw, with me trapped in this position. It did not damage my knees, and as for my pride, there was no man I would sooner have knelt before, not even the King. Save that I might have wished Edward were naked, and myself before him like this for another purpose entirely. Slowly I raised my head, and found him smiling at me.

No matter how often I had followed him as he went out to hunt or swim, I had never seen him closely. It was the first time I had seen the colour of his eyes, the fine marble texture of his skin. Even his beard was so fair that he seemed to have none, where my own cheeks were

shadowed with my youth's stubble and must grow even darker with time. Mesmerised I looked up at him, at his red robe and the fine, slender hand toying with his dirk, which he had drawn from a jewelled sheath at his girdle. His eyes were grey as a stormy sky. I imagined them dark with anger and swallowed. I imagined them dark with passion, with lust for me, and quivered.

At last he spoke. "Get up, boy."

I stood unsteadily and looked up a matter of inches into his face. Close to, his slenderness was even more obvious. Like my father, my frame was wide. Even then I had the impression that I was broader, though probably not stronger, since he was a soldier. He slid away the dirk and folded his hands into his sleeves. The Saxon-blond hair lay on his shoulders like a mane. I wanted to knot my fingers in it, and imagined holding him under me while we writhed and tossed ... being crushed under him while he rode me as he rode that warhorse. Insanely, I envied Icarus.

"You wish to be a squire?" he prompted quietly.

That was the last thought on my mind. *I wish to go with you. I would go anywhere to be with you, be anything!* He was waiting for a coherent answer, and I cleared my throat. "However I may serve my lord best, is what I wish." This at least was the truth.

"Then you will leave England," he said, amused. His eyes were like quicksilver as he laughed. His fingers played with the ends of his hair. "There will be danger. Perhaps you shall not return."

"Then I shall not return, my lord," I said softly. Nothing seemed important then. Nothing mattered, so long as he took me into his house and I could remain near him.

He chuckled. "Bed with Master Jacob tonight. I shall see you tomorrow, and till then, a good night to you."

It was a dismissal. I wanted to stay but held my tongue, bowed low and left the room with a glance at Ranulf, who was mightily pleased. He shut the door behind me and I leaned on the wall to hear Edward's voice a while longer. Not that I wished to eavesdrop, but I loved to listen to him.

Footsteps along the hall alerted me and I saw the groom, Jacob. Older than I but younger than Edward, he smelt of horses and had big, callused hands. It was he who disciplined the boys, and if I fell into disfavour it would be Jacob who would put the birch across the cheeks of my arse. Wary of him, I ducked a little bow.

"My lord told me to retire. I was wondering where to go. He said to bed with you, Master Jacob, and I'll have my duties set out in the morning." I tried to speak diffidently but I was thrilled with an absurd

sense of triumph. I would wear Aethelstan's colours in the morning. No more threadbare jerkins and patched hose. I would have the midnight blue, with the white rose over the left breast, and a blue cape. Edward's own colours.

Jacob cast a glance at the door as if he wondered if he should summon his master and make sure, but then he seemed to think better of it and led me out of the house through the back door, by the scullery where the kitchen maids were asleep. I heard light snoring, stepped over the wolfhounds, and was soon in the warm air of the summer night. Jacob scattered the drowsy chickens as he led me to the stable, and prodded my behind until I climbed the ladder to the hayloft.

Hay makes a soft but itchy bed. I knew I had insects in my clothes by midnight, and wondered how Jacob managed to sleep here all the time, to be near the horses. I did not sleep much, and scratched a great deal, but when I did sleep it was to dream wilful, wanton things. Edward came to the loft, teased me awake, and when I rolled belly-down in the hay that spear-haft pierced my loins, and he whispered that he had wanted me for as long as he had known me. Which would have been a matter of minutes, I reminded myself as I started awake.

The sun was not yet up and the cockerels boasted on the midden heap when I reeled out of my itchy bed to find Jacob standing below the loft with a tub of water, a scrubbing brush and a suit of livery for me. I hurried down the ladder and touched my forelock before him, but he curled his lip at me. He was an ugly, whoreson brute with hairy forearms and a big nose, beetling brows and gnarled fingers.

"Don't waste pretty manners upon the likes o' me, Master Spanish," he said tartly. He was never able to forget or forgive the fact I am not full Saxon blood. Being Saxon himself, and distrusting anything less, he had no love of me. "Take off yon rags and start out clean," he went on. "Thou'll start clean or I'll flay thy arse, by God, I will."

I needed to bathe after a night in the hay and would not have argued, but the water was cold and the brush he used on me was meant for horses. It nearly flayed me anyway, fetched me up in great red weals, as if I had indeed been beaten. Jacob was cursed thorough too, as if he expected me to arrive here infested.

Perhaps other youths did, and he was right to suspect. I was clean, but out of respect for the skin of my buttocks I stood still with legs apart and let him scrub me anywhere the hair grew thickest yet shortest. I was wincing and fidgeting when I heard a slight sound behind me and looked over my shoulder, over Jacob's bowed head, to see the earl. He was dressed for riding, leaning on the stable wall as he watched this performance with a mischievous expression.

“Leave a *little* skin on him, Jacob,” Edward said mockingly. Was he teasing me? His eyes roved from shoulders to feet, and as they settled on my rump I shivered. What he could not see was that my cock got up at that moment, and I seized a yard of sacking to cover myself. “Why, boy,” Edward said, much amused, “are you skinned? I should have warned you, Jacob is not known for gentleness, but it is best to leave all traces of your last employment behind, eh?”

He meant, have the ticks and lice scrubbed out of me. I squirmed, flushed and nodded, swallowing my angry words. I had never had ticks and lice to need scrubbing, any more than he had. Vengeful, Jacob thrust the brush between my begs and caught my balls a sharp rasp. I flinched and jumped clean out of his reach.

“That is enough! I am cleaner than clean,” I yelped, burning with helpless embarrassment, because under the sacking my cock was up like a poker. Edward would believe I covered myself chastely, out of modesty, but it was untrue. Had I not been aroused I would have shown him that I was more man than boy, with a good, strong prick for a lad my age, and heavy balls which made wickedness for me, sometimes four times in the night. He surveyed my breast which, like my father, was richly pelted. His eyes found my nipples, lingered first on one, then the other. When they stood erect I could do nothing to disguise it, and instead I lifted my chin and looked him levelly in the eyes.

I think he suspected then what manner of lad he had employed. My paps tingled with excitement just at his glance. Had he touched me I would have spilled my seed, and a slight crease of his brow warned me that he was wise to this. So my saint, my white rose, was not as innocent as I had dreamed.

Part of me was relieved, that after all there was the slightest chance he would look at me and see a partner for the evening. Another part was disappointed. I had dreamed I would be the first — I would take the blond head in my hands and be the first man to bruise his beautiful mouth with a kiss.

A moment later fear caught my gut in a vicious grip. He knew my heart, there was no doubt of it — but did he scorn me? If he were the kind of man who loved God before all women, and lopped the balls off men who bedded men, I could be in grave danger. Even before I entered his house I belonged to him. I was nothing, a serf on his estate. If he wanted to use me as an archery butt, I could say nothing, supposing his games killed me.

I held my breath and searched his face. Perhaps my fear showed. I was very young, frightened, very much alone since Ranulf had left last

night without even stopping at the stable to say farewell. But Edward merely lifted one brow at me and said to Jacob,

"I'll take out Icarus. He'll benefit from the exercise after his idleness of late. Soon enough he'll be cramped in a ship, which neither he nor I shall enjoy. I'll return in an hour or two."

"And the boy, my lord?" Jacob asked as I fidgeted from foot to foot with the sacking clasped to my groin, my cock throbbing hard under it and my paps tingling, wet in the morning air, sore after Jacob's ministrations with the scrubbing brush.

"Feed him and find him something to do." Edward turned away from me and paced into the stable.

He had the walk of a hunting cat, I thought, lithe and supple. He was a warrior, it was evident in every stride he took. I lusted and envied in equal measure, and waited only until Jacob's back was turned before I rushed into the clothes, pulled down the midnight-blue tunic to cover my hopeful erection.

Icarus clopped out of the yard minutes later and I watched the horse out of sight. I would never forget the way the sun shone on Edward's hair, and how he moved to the gait of the big animal. *I will have him. One day he will be mine, I must have him!* The thought fled through my head unbidden. I did not court it, nor did I deny it, though I laughed mockingly at myself as Icarus turned the corner and disappeared about the climbing roses and apple trees.

I put my palm over the little white rose on the left breast of the tunic. Beneath it my nipple tingled sharply, and deeper yet my heart thudded as if I had been running.

Hearing my laughter, Jacob barked, "What's thee laughing at, knave? Off to the kitchen and feed thy face, then I'll find thee something to occupy thy idle hands!"

I had not eaten since early afternoon and was famished. The kitchen maids gave me bread, pickled pork and cheese, which was better fare than the cabbage and lentils that were usual at home. There was never enough food or anything else in Ranulf's house. He was too proud to ask for charity and Edward was too preoccupied with the forthcoming campaign to notice the desperate want. With one less mouth to feed — mine, and a large one at that — the family must prosper. I ate until Jacob began to grumble, then left the kitchen with a muttered word of thanks, and was put to work.

The Aethelstan livery gave me a sense of identity. I felt I belonged to Edward, as much as I wished he belonged to me. My destiny was fixed even then. Where Edward went, I would go. If I had known where my passions would lead me, I might have turned back right

then, but I like to think I would not. The hardships and pain in store for me were far outweighed by the joy.

I have never been discontented, no matter what befell me, but only Edward ever gave me the gift I wanted most. The gift of love.

Chapter Two

I might have wished he would want me at first sight, and love would blossom out of lust at once, but Edward watched me almost as much as I watched him all that first day, and I was caught in a dreadful quandary, unable to guess if I was doing right or wrong.

I had my duties — to curry the horse, polish the saddle, oil his swords and feed the dogs. All this I did, conscientiously and without error. And every time I would look up, grey eyes were on me. Finding fault? I was fretted by evening, but still Edward had no word to say against me.

He entertained guests that night, men I had never seen before, but their names were great, and their manner grand. They ate venison and a swan stuffed with hazel nuts, and spoke idly of the King. They spoke also of money, and the price of armour and horses. These knights would be on the field of battle soon enough.

It fell to me to carry out the empty platters, sweep the table and keep their cups full. It was not elegant work but Ranulf had made sure I was no bumpkin. I knew my manners, which cup to put where, how to pour wine, and I was hardly likely to complain. It gave me the opportunity to be near Edward.

His teeth were very white. I saw the pink tip of his tongue flick out to catch a drop of wine, and he looked at me in the very moment I was imagining his kisses, as if he could read my mind. I flushed hotly as his eyes burned into me. Did he know what I thought? Heaven help me if he did.

Those grey eyes brooded on me a while before he returned to his guest. Sir Lionel de Quilberon was big, burly, twice Edward's weight and much taller. He was a vile swine in his manners at table but, they said, a great warrior. And he was faultlessly kind with the dogs, who sat cadging at his feet. I knew instinctively, Sir Lionel was one of those

men who cared nothing for life's refinements, could not read, nor remember a verse, but in battle he was worth ten men and in bed he would be so gentle with his lady, she would swear he was a saint though his face was almost ugly. Edward liked him greatly, and for this alone I would have pardoned his manners as he tossed scraps over both his oxen shoulders and wiped his hands on his coat. Edward was amused, and smiled as de Quilberon drank too much and began to snore at the end of the table.

I lingered as long as they might want a cup bearer, and fancied myself Ganymede, waiting upon a creature like Narcissus. Such is love, and aye, it is foolish. My lord seemed at one moment not to know I was there, and at another his gaze followed me until I blushed and was absurdly shy.

They bedded late, and so did I. My room was in the loft under the thatch. I heard starlings and pigeons squabbling above my head and mice scuttling along the wainscot. I seemed scarcely asleep, with a big full moon glaring in my face through the open shutter, before Master Jacob was shouting at me and yanking me out of bed by the ear. Smarting with indignation, I hurried down to a swift breakfast and my day's work.

There was so much to be done — preparations were for war. The whole household was making ready for the master's absence, and Jacob was a swaggering, overbearing oaf. I hated him by midmorning, when he boxed the ears of boys much younger than myself and slapped the cheeks of girls older. By afternoon I was tired, filled with resentment, and I had not set eyes on Edward since first light, when he rode out on Icarus.

He had gone to swim, I knew, and I fumed. Had I been free, as I had been two days before, I could have followed him, lain in the reeds and watched as he stripped bare and bathed in the shallows. Yet I was clad in his livery, wearing the white rose of Aethelstan, and I had not even seen his face today! My hands were sore with polishing and my shoulders ached after the stack of firewood I had axed for the kitchen hearths.

At last, thoroughly out of sorts, I made an awful mistake.

I left by the postern gate for an hour's peace and quiet in the woods by the river. I wanted to breathe the free air, forget Master Jacob existed and look forward to better days ahead, when I would answer only to Edward, aboard a ship bound for the Holy Land. The great adventure — this was what I wanted. This, and Edward's fine, strong hands on me, and his tongue between my lips. Not Jacob devising every hard, dirty job he could think of, to mock me.

I enjoyed my hour's peace and could have returned then, no one the wiser, had I not fallen asleep in the glade. I had slept little the previous night and Jacob had kept me busy since dawn. I fell sound asleep and when I yawned awake I was shocked to find shadows marching across the water meadows like soldiers in ranks. I sprang up, guilty, a little frightened, and ran.

How could I run fast enough to escape Jacob's ire? I knew I was hastening to my punishment. It was dusk as I ran into the yard. Hearth smoke curled in the still, warm air. The girls were hard at work, the lads, the old women — everyone but myself seemed occupied. And Jacob had been waiting for me, likely for an hour. I swallowed at the grim look on his face, and ducked a bow before him.

What could I say? He growled dangerously, too angry even to speak for a long time. "Thou'rt a lazy, good for nothing cur," he told me fiercely. "Thou'rt a louse, a maggot, ye half-Saxon brat. Thou'lt learn a lesson this day that thou'll never forget!"

I opened my mouth to protest but closed it again. I had been foolish enough to fall asleep — no one drugged me or lulled me. It was my mistake, and who but I should pay for it? I studied the dirt at his feet as he passed judgment and sentenced me.

"Aye, a lesson for thee, and well remembered!" Jacob barked. "Robin! Harald!"

The two youths took me by the arms. They were keen to win Jacob's favour and would do his bidding no matter what he asked. I was caught in a snare of my own making. If I fought, the earl would likely send me away, and Ranulf would be so furious that I would have the same thrashing at home! If I did not fight, but let Jacob have his way, at least I would still be wearing the Aethelstan colours on the morrow, and Ranulf would never know I had shamed him so soon. I groaned and let them fetch me to the gatepost.

Jacob took off his belt and I breathed a little easier as I thought he meant to hit me with that, which is a boy's chastisement. But the belt looped tight about my wrists, stretched me taut with my hands over my head, and buckled. I had set aside my tunic and was bare to the hips. I felt Jacob maliciously tug down my hose to bare my arse also. The others were looking on, the soot-nosed kitchen wenches too. My face flamed with humiliation as much as dread. I looked over my shoulder and saw the birch rod, an evil, whippy cane, a full yard long.

It fell across my shoulders and rump and I counted fifteen, the measure of Jacob's wrath — six or ten is a usual penance. I squirmed against the post and panted. It was not the first time I had been birched, but before this I had been struck only by an old monk whose best days

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