

# A PLACE BEYOND COURAGE

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## EXTRACT

Extract taken from the end of Chapter 1

*The court of King Henry I at Vernon sur Seine in Normandy, Autumn 1130.....*

Arriving at his lodging, John dismissed his chamberlain and squire. Most of his waking hours were spent in company, but he enjoyed moments to himself when he could snatch them. They gave him time to recoup and reflect; to be still and let him think at leisure. He draped his cloak across his coffer and hung his sword belt and scabbard on a wall hook. A flagon and a cup stood on a trestle under the shuttered window together with the pile of tallies and parchments from this morning. He poured wine, moved the lamp until he was satisfied with the fall of light upon his work area, and sat down with the sigh of a man letting go of one thing and preparing to tackle another.

He reached for a document lying to the side of the others, its lower edge tagged with Henry's seal. This one was personal business, not a routine matter of palfreys or bread for the hounds. His inner vision filled with the memory of the blushing girl he had seen at mass in the cathedral at Salisbury when he had been home attending to his father's affairs. Aline Pipard's father was recently deceased too, and John had now bought her guardianship, which gave him the right to administer her estates and eventually sell her marriage to whomsoever he chose.

Sipping his wine, he contemplated the document, wondering if she was going to be worth the fee he had paid for her. He hadn't decided what he was going to do about the guardianship - sell the marriage on, or take the girl to wife himself. His father and hers had long been acquainted. He had known Aline from a distance since she was a little girl, but his association with her amounted to no more than a few casual meetings and glances in passing. His purchase was less concerned with

family ties than with the available revenues from the Pipard lands and the knowledge that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush. His acquisition was something to fall back upon should lean times arise. Thoughtfully, he rolled up the document, tied it with a length of silk cord and having set it aside, commenced work on the routine lists and tallies waiting his attention.

John was on his second cup of wine and had just trimmed a fresh quill when a soft tap at the door interrupted him. He considered ignoring it, but the work was boring and he was in a mood for distraction – probably a female one to judge from the sound of the knock. Leaving his work, he went to open the door and was pleased to discover his assumptions correct. Without a word, he stood aside to let the woman enter the room. She moved to the hearth with fluid, deliberate grace and turned to wait for him.

He dropped the latch, fetched another cup and poured her wine. 'Mistress Damette,' he said, courteously. 'To what do I owe this pleasure?' He addressed her by her working name. Her real one was Bertha and she was the youngest of six daughters belonging to an impoverished knight from the Avrenchin. It was three years since she had left the enclave of court whores to become the concubine of an Angevin baron.

She responded with a throaty laugh and a knowing look as she accepted the wine. 'You owe it to the fact that you are the King's marshal and I am in need of employment.'

'I gathered as much.' He picked up his own half finished cup and leaned with feigned nonchalance against the trestle. 'What happened?'

She pursed her lips at him. 'Crusade. He took the cross and foreswore women. He was selling everything he could to raise the money to go and fight for Christ, so I grabbed my silks and furs and left before he had a chance to sell them too. Her voice developed a sultry edge. '...otherwise, I'd be here in nought but my shift.' She put the wine down, unfastened her cloak, and draped it across the coffer on top of his own. The tight lacing of her gown accentuated every line and curve of her figure.

John looked her up and down. She had burnished dark hair and eyes to match. Lamp and firelight glanced upon orbit and satin cheekbone. His father had originally been responsible for admitting Damette to the court enclave and she had occasionally shared the senior marshal's bed, but never his. He had been a youth learning his trade back then, and even if she was of his years, she had been a deal less innocent. 'An interesting notion,' he said, 'but you know the ways of the court and I'm afraid that "naked under the cloak" is one of the less original ploys these days.'

Her eyes gleamed. 'I think you'll find I have more to offer than that, my lord.'

'Such as?'

She stepped up to him, dipped her forefinger in his wine and slowly rimmed his lips. 'Experience.' She trailed her hand languidly down his body from breastbone to groin, her touch lighter than a breath. 'Skill.'

Lust surged through him, hot and heavy as molten lead. 'You know the rules; the dues owing.' He set his arms to her waist and pulled her against him. The supple pressure of her body was exquisite.

'Oh yes, I know them...my lord marshal,' Damette breathed. 'You will have no cause for complaint on any score...I promise you.'

Languorous in the aftermath of twice-taken release, feeling as if all sharp edges and discontents had been smoothed out, John folded his hands behind his head and studied the rafters. 'How did you know to call me 'my lord?'' he asked curiously.

'Because your deputy told me your father was dead...I am sorry for that.' Damette raised herself on one elbow. A rosy flush darkened her breasts and throat, revealing that the pleasure had not been his alone.

He said nothing. She hesitated, then leaned over and cupped his face on the side of her hand. 'I am not sorry you have his position though.'

The haze of satisfaction cleared from his eyes. 'It's no use casting your line in my direction, sweetheart, I'm not a man for taking mistresses. I know too much to be snared by such bait.'

She laughed and bent to kiss the corner of his mouth. 'You may have the face of a sinning angel and a way between the sheets, but I'm not angling beyond mutual interest. You would demand too much – and so would I.'

'That's about the measure of it - especially the last part.' He stroked her hair, to keep the moment light, then sat up and reached for his clothes.

'You shield yourself from people don't you?'

John donned his shirt, rapidly followed by braies and hose. 'Show me a courtier who doesn't.' Padding from the bed, he returned to the trestle and the pile of work still waiting. He was tired, but he had learned to cope without sleep long ago. His father had been wont to say that the time to slumber was in the grave, and John had embraced the philosophy with a whole heart. He looked across at her. 'I don't have to shield myself,' he said. 'The face I wear is the face beneath.'

She rolled onto her stomach and turned towards him, slender ankles raised and crossed, dark hair spilling around her shoulders. 'You'd be surprised.'

'At what?' He sat down and began work.

'At what does lie beneath when you are put to the test. Can I stay until morning?'

'As long as you're quiet.'

'I promise not to snore.'

'That's not what I meant.'

She made a face at him and John almost laughed, but managed to preserve an offhand demeanour.

Borrowing his comb from the coffer, she began to tidy and braid her hair, completely unselfconscious in her nudity. John occasionally glanced and admired. Firm, full breasts, long legs. Damette wouldn't stay long among the whores. She would attract another patron soon enough.

She worked at a tangle. 'I know you do not want me to interrupt you,' she said, 'but you might be interested to know I spent two nights with Geoffrey of Anjou.'

John lowered his quill and eyed her sharply.

'He's a handsome youth, the Empress's husband,' she said. 'Fast to the finish as you'd expect of his years, but a fresh bolt in the bow as soon as his first one's spent.' She gave him an eloquent smile before contemplating the ends of her gathered hair. 'He says he's thinking of going on pilgrimage to Compostella and that he won't have his wife back for all the gold in England.'

'You're certain he said that?'

'Of course I am. He's still too young to have learned discretion. If a man has finished fluttering and does not wish to sleep, then often he wants to talk...and I am a very willing listener.'

John shook his head. 'Henry won't let him go to Compostella, at least not until this impasse over the marriage has been resolved. He needs her and Geoffrey to beget heirs.'

'Then perhaps Geoffrey is forcing the King's hand, or perhaps he is teasing. I gained the impression he's the kind who likes to throw sticks in the fire for the pleasure of watching them burn.' She secured her braid with a red silk ribbon.

John gave her a speculative look. 'You didn't want to make a bid for becoming Geoffrey's mistress then?'

She wrinkled her nose and laughed. 'Oh no, he's far too fickle. For the moment he's a prickly youth who needs stroking and reassurance – although when he grows up, he might be worth it.'

John continued with his work for a while, although his mind was split between the parchments and tallies of the marshal's accounts and what Damette had said.

'I could be very useful to you,' she offered, as if sensing the periphery of his thoughts. 'Your father always considered that the things I heard and saw were a great asset to him.'

John studied a tally without focusing on it. He realised now how much his father had protected him in keeping him away from Damette when he was Geoffrey of Anjou's age. 'Then I too will be happy to consider.'

'And them fee?'

'Negotiable,' he said impassively and put his head down over his work. She plainly knew just how far to push, for she lay down with her back to him and pulling the coverlet high over her shoulder, at least feigned sleep.

John poured more wine and toasted her huddled form, his eyes lighting with dour humour. If nothing else, tonight's interlude had informed him that he was most certainly back at court.