

THE SCARLET LION

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EXTRACT

Chapter 2

Longueville, Normandy, Spring 1199.....

Isabelle sat at her embroidery with her ladies. Pulling away from winter, the light had a pale clarity that meant more intricate sewing could be undertaken. Bending an attentive ear to the chatter, she was glad to hear a lively note in the women's voices, for that too, like the return of the sun and the sight of birds building their nests, was a sure sign spring had arrived.

Jean D'Earley's young wife Sybilla was stitching an exquisite design of silver scallop shells onto a tunic band. Embroidery was her particular skill and her husband was the best dressed knight of William's mesnie. Sybilla was William's niece, and of a quiet disposition, but Isabelle believed the creativity and dedication exhibited in her sewing were indicative of a rich internal life that didn't need gossip and socialising to sustain it.

'How are you feeling now?' Isabelle asked her. The young woman had been unwell for three days running with a queasy stomach. and Isabelle had her suspicions, compounded by the way Sybilla kept looking at the cradle holding the newest addition to the Marshal family, three month old Walter.

'A little better my lady. The infusion of ginger has helped.' Sybilla looked pensive. 'I...I think I may be with child, although I am not yet certain.'

Isabelle patted her arm in reassurance 'I suspect so too. It is good news for you and Jean if it be the case.'

Sybilla looked dubious. 'He has been much absent with the Earl and we haven't bedded together often of late; it may be a false alarm.'

Isabelle sent a rueful glance towards the cradle herself. 'William only has to look at me and I quicken.'

'Aye, well you and the Earl have had plenty of practice,' teased Elizabeth Avenal, wife to one of William's knights. She was always eager to talk of matters bawdy or sexual when the bower ladies were gathered over their sewing, although in mixed company she was less bold. 'Everyone knows that unless a wife experiences the same satisfaction as her husband, her seed will not descend to mix with his and she will not conceive.' She chuckled at Sybilla. 'If you're feeling full enough for the sickness my girl, then your lord must have discovered the art of pleasuring you in bed.'

'Elizabeth!' Isabelle spluttered with a look at Sybilla who had flushed bright pink.

'Well it's true!' lady Avenal defended herself. 'Even some priests say so. The ones who don't are juiceless old prunes who've never had a good fu....'

She bit off her words as the chamber door opened and William flung into the room. He glanced swiftly at the circle of women, said 'Isabelle, a word,' and strode over to an embrasure further down the room. Sweeping aside a motley assortment of children's toys, he sat down on the cushioned chest under the window splay, two vertical frown lines etching the space between his brows.

Isabelle's mirth faded. Abandoning her sewing, she left her women and hastened to William's side. 'What's wrong?'

He breathed out hard and rubbed his neck. 'Ach, nothing out of the usual. I don't even know why I am surprised. 'Is there any wine left, or has the sewing party drunk it all?'

Something had riled him; he didn't usually make acerbic comments about her women. 'No, there is plenty left to drown your woes,' she said sweetly and fetched the cup and flagon herself, exchanging eloquent glances with her ladies as she did so.

Having taken a long drink, William rested the cup on his thigh and sighed out hard. 'I've just been talking to a messenger from Baldwin de Bethuné.

Isabelle sat down beside him, plumped a fleece-filled cushion at her back and looked at him expectantly. Baldwin de Bethuné, Count of Aumale was William's closest friend and currently with

the King. Even when William was absent from the court, such contacts kept him well informed. Whatever the news was, it had certainly put a bur in her husband's braies.

'Prince John is under suspicion of conspiracy and Richard's in a quarrelsome mood. I tell you, Isabelle, sometimes I want to knock their heads together until their brains run out of their ears - not that it would make any difference except to my own satisfaction.'

'What do you mean, under suspicion?'

He eyed her sombrely. 'Philip of France claims to have letters implicating John in treason. John's supposed to have asked Philip's aid to mount a rebellion against Richard - who is not best pleased.'

'It was only a matter of time,' she said.

His nostrils flared. 'Why is everyone prepared to believe the worst of John and not allow that he might just have learned his lesson and matured?'

'So you don't believe it is true?' She managed to school her voice to calm enquiry, avoiding the flat note that usually entered it when they spoke of Richard's brother.

'Of course it isn't,' he said impatiently. 'Philip's as wily as a fox and false rumours like this are a fine way of creating discord. John might be devious and self-seeking, but he's not mad and he would have to be insane to go conniving with Philip. The last time he dabbled in conspiracy, Richard was locked up in a German prison. John won't risk anything with Richard close enough to breath down his neck. ' He drank again, his movements swift with displeasure. 'Whatever his flaws as a man, John has been a model of loyalty to Richard these past five years.

'So what will happen now?'

'It's already happening. John's gone off in a fury at being accused and God alone knows where.'

'Perhaps to Paris,' she said with pessimism. 'Perhaps the King of France has succeeded anyway.'

William's shot her an irritated look. 'I sincerely doubt he'd turned to Philip, but he might just be sufficiently annoyed to go and plot some mischief by way of revenge.'

'Has Richard done anything about it?

'Not yet from what Baldwin says. He's decided John probably isn't guilty, but he's not entirely sure. Why would he leave court unless he had something to fear? If ever our sons start behaving like Richard and John, I will drown them, I swear I will.' He heaved a deep sigh. 'Richard is going on campaign in the Limousin to work off his anger and hunt for gold to fill his coffers. Some vassal of Aymer de Lusignan has dug up an ancient hoard on his lands and he's refusing to give it up. Richard needs funds and the idea of a spring campaign to make the sap rise appeals to him.' He picked up one of Mahelt's poupées, the one of himself as a warrior in the green and yellow surcoat and eyed it thoughtfully.

Isabelle's stomach lurched. 'You are not going with him?'

'No, I'm still due to sit on the Bench of Justices with Hubert Walter at Vaudreil. De Braose, de Burgh and Mercadier are attending on Richard. He says John can wait until his return...I'm not sure he can, but it's a decision for Richard's cup, not mine.' He put aside the poupée in the surcoat and picked up the one of himself in court garb of red twill embroidered with silver thread. 'Jesu, another tunic,' he said with a shake of his head, making it clear which of the two figures he would rather be. 'I am in danger of becoming a fop.'

Isabelle's heart lightened with relief that King Richard was not summoning him on yet another campaign. 'Sybilla made it for her. She's so quick and skilled with a needle that it takes her no time.' She lowered her voice and added, 'Sybilla thinks she may be with child.'

'So that's what you were gossiping about when I came in?'

She smiled demurely. 'More or less.'

He grunted with amusement. 'Lady Elizabeth has a loud voice,' he said. 'It is good news for them. Jean will be pleased.' He rose to his feet and stretched. Isabelle was glad to see the tension had gone out of him, glad too that he had come to her to ease and share his burden. Not all marriages were thus.

'I suppose if I am leaving for Vaudreil on the morrow I had better find my two eldest sons. I promised them a jousting lesson.' A regretful expression crossed his face. 'It doesn't seem a moment since I was their age and my father was teaching me my sword strokes at the pell.'

'While doubtless your mother looked on with her heart in her mouth.'

'Not in the least. She knew the only way I was going to make my way in the world was by learning to use the tools of my trade. Besides, she had already had her moment of anguish when I was five years old and King Stephen almost hanged me from a gibbet.'

Isabelle shuddered. Whenever William mentioned the episode from his infancy when King Stephen had taken him hostage for his father's good behaviour, she felt cold. His father had gone back on his word and Stephen had threatened to string William up in full view of the besieged garrison. 'And no surprise. If any man tried to do that to one of ours, I would bar his way with a naked sword in my hand,' she said with intensity.

He said wryly, 'I do believe you would, my love. I know she never forgave my father for telling King Stephen to go on and hang me – that he had the anvils and hammers to get more and better sons than the one he lost.'

Indignation shone in Isabelle's eyes. 'And I would use my naked sword to ensure that his boasts about hammers and anvils were short-lived indeed. If I had been wed to him, I would have killed him.'

He gave a humourless smile. 'I think my mother came close to it on occasion. He lived very close to the edge...died in his bed though, and of old age.' He kissed her cheek. 'Don't look so worried. No one is going to take our sons as hostages.' Leaning past her, he picked up the representation of Isabelle from Mahelt's collection of poupées. 'New clothes for you as well, I see.' He pursed his lips in assessment. 'I like the cloak.'

'It's Irish plaid,' Isabelle said, eyeing him.

'I noticed – even if you think I don't know anything about Ireland When Richard returns from his campaign I'll ask his leave to visit Leinster. You have waited long enough - if I am being fair too long.'

Isabelle stared at him. Her heart kicked, then soared with elation. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth. 'Thank you!' she gasped, 'thank you!'

Grinning, he squeezed her waist. 'I intend to thoroughly exploit your gratitude,' he said. 'Be warned.'

She watched him leave the room, his tread buoyant now that he had shared his burden with her, then she turned back to her women, her face flushed and her eyes alight.

Elizabeth Avenel was waiting to pounce. 'Jesu, I see what you mean about him only having to look at you and you quicken,' she quipped. 'You look like a woman who has just been thoroughly pleased.'

Isabelle laughed and clapped her hands. 'I have. 'We're going to Leinster!'

The expression on lady Elizabeth's face was priceless.