

## Chapter One

*A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps.*

Proverbs 16:9

*England, June 1194*

The thick roots ran deep beneath the stump, but Hugh just smiled. This wasn't the first challenge he had ever encountered in his life and it wouldn't be the last. He shoved the spade deep into the earth and glanced at the young lad making, short jabs into the soft dirt on the other side of the trunk. The sun had not reached its zenith, and if they were at all lucky, their work would be finished before the sun hit its peak. Still, the boy was sweating profusely and was far from merry.

"Come now, James. You didn't think this would be as easy as cleaning out the stalls, did you?"

A frown settled onto James' face. "Nay, but I had hoped you would have brought Isaiah with us. 'Tis a big task."

A root snapped with another dig. "Your brother was needed elsewhere. You know we all have our daily appointed duties."

The boy gave a half-hearted sigh. Then looked up at the sky as if contemplating how much time they had already been toiling. "Aye, sir."

Hugh couldn't blame James for his lack of enthusiasm. They had begun their task well before dawn and had but a little bread and goat's milk to break their fast. Still it couldn't be helped. This had to be finished before midday. Another root cracked and the stump let loose. Good. One side out. 'Twould not be long now. Mayhap they would be done ahead of time. Perfect.

Well not quite. Hugh wrinkled his brow. His day would still be disrupted. Instead of inspecting the fields after noon meal, he would be waiting for his new visitor. 'Twas the last thing he needed, but nonetheless, he had no choice. King Richard had decreed it, and so the lady would come to Thornwood. Still Hugh had no desire in having his late wife's cousin lurking about his keep.

James gave out another grown. "My Lord, could we not rest for a moment? My hands feel as if they are about to fall off."

Indeed the peasant boy, a twin, resembled his brother in looks only. Where Isaiah would put his back into any chore given without complaint, James would begin voicing his woes about the task before they even started. He needed discipline. The sooner he learned, the happier he would be.

"We are almost finished. The roots are starting to give way. Put your mind and strength into it."

"Aye, sir."

The defeat in boy's voice was even more pathetic than before. It almost reminded Hugh of his own son. He too never had much eagerness for physical labor. In fact, Simon had no love for anything that Hugh could think of. There wasn't a lad, peasant or noble, who didn't dream of being a knight someday. Even James' eyes would light up when asked to help polish the weaponry.

But that would never happen with Simon.

Seeing James slowing down on his task, Hugh moved to the boy's side. "Let's switch places. You can chop at the remaining roots while I dig where they have not given way."

The boy readily gave up the harder task for the easier one. Hugh had not jammed the spade into the hard ground again when his steward, Sylvester, came running toward them.

Panting like a dog, Sylvester placed his hands on his knees. "My lord, the lady has arrived. Her entourage has neared the village and will be here before we know it."

With a curse, Hugh dropped the tool and wiped his hands on his tunic. "I told Theo that he should make certain they did not arrive until most of the day's work was done. He knows we have a schedule to keep. By the cross, must I take care of everything myself? Carry on without me, James."

The boy gave Hugh a baleful look. "Aye, my lord," he said sluggishly. 'Twould take the lad all day now to finish the chore, which meant they couldn't start on the new hedgerow until tomorrow. What an infernal mess, a waste of good day light.

"Are you sure it is them?" Hugh asked as he followed his steward back to the keep.

"Aye, Sir Theodore is in the lead."

Hugh shook his head. He'd given his men the order to take their good-natured time and to make sure their arrival would not be until the sun was about to set. With King Richard's return to the throne, Hugh thought whatever favor Prince John wanted fulfilled, went with him to France. But alas, Richard discovered his brother's plan and decided to carry it out anyway. Royals. Who could understand them?

Even though King Richard had given strict orders to see to the lady's comforts, Hugh would refuse to let a woman interfere in the daily dealings of his holding. It had taken him years to clean, rebuild, and expand his lands and he wasn't about to let a relative of Jane's change a thing.

Luckily they had made it back to the great hall before the party arrived. The place was swept, and clean rushes were strewn about the floor. A fire blazed in the hearth and the trestle tables were already in place for the noon meal. Sylvester was worth every coin he earned. Efficient, tidy, and meticulous, his only flaw, he worried overly much.

Hugh pulled off his soiled tunic as he made his way to his solar. "Their early arrival is most unfortunate."

"I have sent out a few guards and have given them strict orders to tell Sir Theodore to stall a bit."

Mayhap Sylvester was worth even more than what he was paid. Hugh entered his solar, headed to a small basin, and quickly splashed water over his face and upper body. He dried himself with a cloth, grabbed the fresh tunic offered by his steward, and looked down at his breeches. They were covered in dirt and should be changed, but before he could initiate the task, a loud commotion echoed from the baily.

By the cross, they are already here. "I thought you told them to stall," Hugh thundered as he exited his room and headed toward the great hall entry.

Sylvester followed behind. "I-I did. I cannot fathom why they would not comply."

Why indeed? Perhaps his men would need some extra duties to remind them what was expected at Thornwood Keep. Hugh had not crossed the threshold to the baily when he was met by Theo, rushing up the great hall steps.

He bowed his head and placed a hand on his chest. "I'm sorry, my liege. But I-I... Things were--"

"Finally. We are here. Bless be our Virgin Mother, I was beginning to think we would never make it. I have never seen a bunch of men dawdle so."

With a sharp intake of breath, Hugh steadied his stance. The lady met his stare with the same doe-colored eyes of his late wife. Those eyes had been his down fall, but not this time. He wasn't a naïve youth who believed such eyes belonged to a fragile, innocent maid. No he knew that a viper could reside within.

He cleared his throat and bowed slightly. "Lady Eleanor de Tanie, I presume."

"Sir Hugh de Maury, I take it."

Her straight forwardness did not take him aback. His wife had been the same way. Yet she never showed her boldness until whatever evil plan she had weaved had come to pass.

Hugh took a closer look at Lady Eleanor. Aye, her eyes were of the same color and structured - large and arresting. Yet that is where the similarity ended. Jane had always been sullen, whereas Lady Eleanor's smile was wide, though slightly lopsided. Where Jane had been tall and willowy, Eleanor was short and a little buxom. Where Jane had been comely, Eleanor was...plain.

Nay, she was nothing like his deceased wife. Still, without a doubt, Hugh knew things would never run smoothly at Thornwood with her about. Best he find her a husband right away as King Richard commanded. For deep within he knew the sooner Lady Eleanor left Thornwood Keep the better for him. She gave him another robust smile. Indeed, the better for all of them.

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Eleanor straightened her veil and brushed off her mauve gown. A journey that should have taken less than a sennight had taken twice as long. Truly she had never seen a more incompetent escort than the one sent by Hugh de Maury. Based on her experience with his guards and Sir Theodore, she expected to

find Thornwood a shamble. However, she was pleasantly surprised to see the keep orderly and running smoothly. Perhaps it would be a nice change from her uncle's manor house where nothing was ever right, and most of the duties had fallen upon her.

"My lady, you are early. I did not expect you until eventide. Nonetheless you are here and we shall deal with it accordingly," Sir Hugh said, showing a set of even white teeth.

Eleanor ran her tongue over her own jagged set and almost sighed. He had not changed. In fact, he was more handsome than she remembered. Though clearly from his formidable frown he did not remember her. He had come to Uncle Leonard's manor house only once. Hugh's arrival was etched into her mind forever. He rode in on a black stallion that matched his dark looks and strong body. Everything had been striking about him - his broad chest, his strong shoulders, and chiseled chin. He would have been terrifying, except his eyes were the most stunning blue she had ever seen. The famous de Maury eyes. The color was almost indescribable, somewhere between the brightest sky and the darkest storm. Hugh must have known their draw for he had smiled at her and he won her heart on the spot.

She had been twelve summers then, and her fantasy was that of a child. Unfortunately, gazing upon him now, she found those old childish emotion coming back.

Nonsense! She was a woman of twenty summers. Some would say she was long in the tooth. She had been shuffled about enough to know the romantic tales bards told did not really happen. Nevertheless, she could enjoy feasting on Lord Thornwood's devastating features.

When she did not immediately respond to his frown by cowering, he widened his stance, crossed his arms, and wrinkled his beautiful brow. Eleanor took a step back just to have a better look at the man. A feast indeed. Oh how she hoped he would give her this look more often.

A smile spread far and wide across her face. She should contain her amusement but she couldn't, especially when her new lord was trying to terrify her. But the tug at her lips would not stop.

Wrinkles creased his forehead.

Quickly she dropped her gaze, fearing she would raise her hand to his brow. "In truth, my lord, I thought you would be expecting me a week ago."

Sir Hugh cleared his throat, and she lifted her eyes to look directly into his. A mistake. Her knees became weak.

Nay she could not swoon. That would be awful--or would it? He then would have to break her fall with those large hands and massive arms, drawing her to his muscular chest.

Stop! She wasn't a child. Such silly thoughts would not help her cause. She must remember why King Richard wanted her to come here. She was just a pawn in a royal's game, and she better remember her place. Yet...

"Well, you are here now," Lord Thornwood said again. "I am sure you wish to rest before the noonday meal. I shall have my steward, Master Sylvester, see to your needs." Sir Hugh turned to a short balding man. "Is the lady's chamber in order?"

The steward began to rub and twist his hands. "A-A-lmost, my lord."

The frown on Hugh de Maury's face deepened. She must remember he was the man that had killed her cousin, even though all knew Jane was not of right mind and almost killed Sir Hugh's brother's wife. Still, that did not give a husband the permission to get rid of his wife.

All this made Eleanor's circumstance dire. Handsome or not, Hugh could have a cruel bent. The less she provoked him the better.

"Do not worry yourself over the matter. I will sit by the fire until the chamber or noontday meal is ready." Eleanor turned, planning to make her way to a bench by the hearth when Lord Thornwood stepped in front of her.

"Your presence in the hall may slow the work of my servants."

At first she thought he jested, and a laugh bubbled from her throat. When he did not share in her revelry and his blue eyes turned devilishly dark, her laughter stuck in her throat like a piece of rotting mutton. Unintentionally, a sigh escaped her lips. Once again she would have to learn a whole new set of rules. Would that never end?

"Where would you like me to stay in the meantime, my lord?"

This time he looked startled as if he had never given the matter a thought. "Why I-I..." He looked about, then back at her, then around the hall again. Sir Hugh lifted his chin and a hardness swept over him that truly did frighten her. "Wherever you wish."

Without another word, he turned and strode from the hall without offering her a drink or a cloth to wipe away the dust from her long journey. Eleanor's heart sank. No, he did not remember her.

His steward shrugged and gestured to the same bench she had thought to occupy earlier. "My lady, 'twill only be a little while. I'll get you a cool drink while you wait."

Thankfully the ever devastatingly handsome, but rude Hugh de Maury, Lord of Thornwood Keep had a very kind and charming steward. "My thanks. I hope I have not upset his lordship overly much?"

Again the steward shrugged. "Anything out of the ordinary upsets him."

Eleanor didn't know what to say. For there was no one more ordinary than she.