

EXCERPT from *The Saxon Bride* by Ashley York

“You have grown into a beautiful woman.” His finger traced her cheek as he spoke quietly, her high color receding. With his lips close to her ear, he whispered, “I find you much to my liking.” He put his lips against her cheek, and his hand slid up the gown she still gripped.

She released the garment.

His body responded with anticipation. With the tip of his tongue, he traced her luscious red lips. So sweet. Her breath fell soft against his mouth. He opened his eyes slightly and was surprised to find her watching him. “Let me love you now, Rowena.”

“How do I know you speak the truth? How do I know you do not often sneak into women’s chambers?”

“Because I am here, not somewhere else. My desire is for you and you alone.” He spoke the truth but could not prove it was so.

“Not so on our wedding night.”

“I was Norman scum to you.” Her jaw dropped, clearly mortified at the reminder of her own words, true though they were. “I thought you might kill me in my sleep.”

“I had just been told that I would be shared by your men.”

John pulled back, distressed at the obvious lie. “Who told you such a thing?”

The only reason for the lie would have been to frighten her. It had worked.

“The guard who brought me into the church, John.”

It was the first time she’d said his name, and it brought him pleasure to hear it from her lips.

“I beg your forgiveness.” She stared blankly back at him as he spoke. “I had no idea you were being so cruelly treated. It was not our intent.”

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“Your intent was only to force my marrying you so that you could leave me here to rot away of old age?”

That hadn't been his intent but rather his reaction to her crazed behavior. Her point was well taken. If he had known of her mistreatment, things would have progressed quite differently.

“Clearly we have both wronged you— William in his choice of husband for you and myself in abandoning you.”

He wanted to take her and show her how repentant he really was, but her eyes flashed a warning. He had missed his golden opportunity. She was now wiser and it would be an uphill battle for him to gain her acquiescence again.

“I believe William knew what he wanted when he forced this marriage upon us. You on the other hand, I have no sympathy for.”

In all her bare splendor she stood beside him.

His breath caught in his throat. She was perfection in every sense, and he was a very blessed man. His hand itched to pull her back to him, but she continued behind the wooden screen.

“You may leave now and please send Joan to me,” she said.

Duly chastised, he grinned at her commanding tone. The screen, however, did nothing to suppress his knowledge of every detail of the beauty that stood on the other side and the longing it enflamed. John tamped down his desire. For now.

“I will get Joan for you, my lady, and thereafter you will attend me at supper.”