



CHAPTER ONE

*March, Year of Our Lord 1216 A.D.
Ramsbury Castle, Wiltshire*

It was an explosion of puppies.

Someone left the door open to the shelter where two big hunting dogs, bred by knights of Ramsbury, were nursing their young pups, and suddenly there were puppies running all over the kitchen yard in the rain and having a marvelous time.

Belladonna de Vaston suspected it was a planned move, because when she ran outside after hearing the cook's cries, she saw several children belonging to the servants rushing about with the puppies, all of them getting muddy and wet.

Puppies were wagging and licking, the children were giggling and playing, and it all seemed like great fun except for the fact that the army had been sighted on the horizon not a half-hour earlier and were quickly approaching. The knights wouldn't like to see their valuable puppies rushing all about in a crazed bit of fun.

"Hurry!" Belladonna was rushing about, trying to corral both the puppies and the children. "Put the pups back with their mothers! The army is approaching and we do not want them to see that we have released the hounds!"

Servant children were picking the puppies up, who were actually quite large, and carrying the licking, squirming beasts back to their home. Belladonna stood at the door to the shelter, preparing to shut it as soon as all of the puppies were returned, hurrying the children along.

All of Ramsbury was in an uproar with the returning army. It was a bright winter's day, with blue sky and scattered clouds overhead, and mud and filth and a dead-cold earth beneath.

Ramsbury Castle rose in the midst of this dead land, like a beacon of gray stones and grace and honor. It sat in the middle of a plain, with forests all around it in the distance. There was a small village nearby, the small wooden structures of the village seemingly cowering in the shadow of the massive castle walls.

There was an equally enormous bailey within those walls, with an array of outbuildings including the great hall, stables, and troop houses. And then a nasty moat in the center of the bailey with an island in it. A massive keep rose forth on the island.

The keep was unique in every way. Shaped like a four-leafed clover, it had three stories rising out of the island, with an open courtyard in the center of the structure, the heart of the clover. It had several large rooms on all floors, plus a myriad of smaller chambers, alcoves, and hidden stairwells to get from one floor to the next. The first Duke of Savernake had the place designed by Savoy artisans and built from local stone. He'd had a large family and valued his privacy, so his logic was to build more rooms to keep his children away from him.

But his massive keep had lasted into its second century, and now it was filled with the current duke and his family, including Belladonna. It was her home, but it was also a place of routine and traditions. It had the odd feeling of being both a revered family structure and military fortress.

At the moment, Belladonna was focused on the latest tradition, something her father had come to expect since he'd awoken one morning and declared that he was Paul the Apostle. Since then, everything had to be a certain way, especially when he was returning home from battle.

Once, the old duke had read in the bible about palms and Palm Sunday, when Christ was welcomed back to Jerusalem. He'd wanted palms to welcome him home, but there were no trees with palm fronds in England, so he had to settle for rushes.

Now, with the army approaching, every man, woman, and child was turning out to see the return of the army with boughs of leaves in their hands. If Jesus was given a hero's welcome those centuries ago, then surely Paul the Apostle was deserving of one, too.

But nothing could happen until the puppies were put away. When the last mutt was put into the shelter, Belladonna closed the door and bolted it, breathing a sigh of relief. She could hear the soldiers on the battlements taking up the cry and she knew that the portcullis must be lifting. Everyone seemed to be running in that direction.

"Bella!" A woman in fine clothing suddenly appeared in the kitchen yard, her pale face alight with excitement. "Papa is home! You must hurry!"

Belladonna rushed towards the woman, pulling off the apron she was wearing and smoothing at the expensive dress underneath. She tossed the apron into the open kitchen door, knowing the cook or another servant would pick it up.

"I am ready," she said, smoothing her reddish-blond hair off her face, trying to straighten up the heavy braid that hung over one shoulder. "How do I look?"

Acacia de Vaston eyed her younger sister; how did she look? Beautiful, like she always did. But Acacia was so jealous of the woman's beauty that she would never tell her that. Besides... beauty was pure vanity, and Acacia didn't indulge vanity. As a woman preparing to enter the cloister, vanity had no place in her life.

At least, she pretended it didn't.

"Like any other woman," she said, annoyed, as she grabbed her sister by the hand and the two of them began to run. "If you are not there when Papa enters the bailey, then he will become angry. Hurry!"

She was tugging on Belladonna enough to pull the woman's arm from her socket. Belladonna finally had to pull free from her sister's grip simply to save the wear and tear on her arm.

Passing through the kitchen yard's fortified wall, they ended up in the main bailey of Ramsbury, a vast stretch of property that contained outbuildings, trades and other various structures. It was full of people now that the soldiers at the gatehouse were starting to lift the dual portcullises, and the front line of the army was entering.

There was excitement all around, as the army had been gone for almost three months. Wives, lovers, children, and servants had turned out to welcome the army home, waving rushes because that was what the duke demanded. Paul the Apostle always returned to a hero's welcome, and that was what he was given.

As Acacia and Belladonna rushed across the compound, another young woman joined them. The Lady Lily de Vaston le Cairon, the eldest of the three sisters, had a handful of rushes, extending them to her sisters. Acacia took a branch, followed by Belladonna. As Acacia rushed forward to make sure she was the first of the sisters to be seen by their father, Lily and Belladonna hung back. In fact, Lily hung back so much that Belladonna turned to the woman curiously.

"Lily?" she asked, reaching her hand out to the woman. "Come along, sweetling. Your husband is returning home."

Lily wasn't the least bit excited or impressed by that. "I know," she said, eyeing the gatehouse as the army began to come through. "We received no word that he had been killed in battle, so I suppose that means I must face the man."

Belladonna stopped trying to pull her sister along. She came to a halt, holding Lily's hand, feeling the impact of her words.

She knew Lily didn't love her husband. Everyone knew, including her husband. Lily was a lovely, curvy woman, much-accomplished, and she'd been forced to marry a man whose only ambition in life was wealth and title. Lily had no desire to marry Clayton le Cairon because her first, and only love, was Bentley of Ashbourne.

She'd fallen in love with the knight when he'd come to Ramsbury, but the duke's senility had been taking hold at the time and Clayton's father had been able to convince the duke to marry his unworthy son to the heiress of Savernake.

It made for a horrible situation, even worse three years later. Lily and Clayton hated one another, while Lily and Bentley's love remained strong. But they never acted upon it, mostly because Bentley was an honorable knight and would never demonstrate his feelings to another man's wife.

Belladonna had watched her sister go from a lovely, vivacious woman to an embittered, miserable creature in those three years. She knew that Lily didn't want to greet the incoming army because she didn't want to see Bentley and she most certainly didn't want to see Clayton.

There was misery all around.

"Be brave." Belladonna squeezed her sister's hand. "Mayhap Clayton will not even care that he has come home. Mayhap... he will leave you alone this night and seek his comfort elsewhere."

Lily snorted. "I could only be so fortunate," she said. "He wants a son, you know. He will not pass up any opportunity to get me with child."

Belladonna could hear the desolation in her sister's voice. "He still does not know about the pessaries you use?"

Lily shook her head at her dark little secret. "Nor will he," she said. "As long as I use the pessaries, the apothecary promised I would not conceive a child. My only hope is that I remain barren and Clayton annuls the marriage. But, alas, that would be too much to ask. He wants the Savernake dukedom too much."

Belladonna simply squeezed her sister's hand again. She didn't know what to say, as this was a topic of conversation they'd been having for three years. Clayton wanted a son and forced himself upon his reluctant wife whenever he could. But Lily had gone to an apothecary in Marlborough and obtained pessaries, small pebbles of ingredients, guaranteed to prevent her from conceiving. That was her rebellion against the marriage Clayton had forced upon her. But she was quite certain that if he ever found out about the pessaries, he would beat her soundly.

It was, therefore, a secret to be held fast, by both sisters. Belladonna continued holding Lily's hand as she turned to the gatehouse, noting that the bulk of the army was now entering, including their father. He rode a tiny palfrey because he was convinced that Paul the Apostle would ride such a thing and not a fine horse, so the little palfrey was moving its legs furiously to keep up with the big warhorses that surrounded it.

The moment the duke came through the gatehouse, he pulled his palfrey to a stop and climbed off. Everyone greeting the incoming army began to cheer wildly and wave their rushes about, and the duke lifted his hands in a gesture to bless the crowd. The roar was nearly deafening as people cheered him on, and he walked past them, blessing them, receiving kisses to his hands, and generally accepting their accolades.

Lily wasn't watching any of it; she kept her gaze averted, unwilling to see her husband in that crowd and not wanting to see Bentley, who had dismounted his horse and was walking along behind the duke. But Belladonna was watching everything closely.

It was difficult for her to see what her father had become. The madness that gripped his mind had come on very quickly around the time that Clayton's father came to seek Lily's hand in marriage for his son. It was as if one moment her father was completely sane and in the next, he believed himself to be Paul the Apostle. There were moments that Belladonna swore she saw her father as he used to be, the calm and loving man she adored. But those moments were far and few between. Lately, it seemed as if they were gone completely.

So, she was left with a father who believed he was an apostle and a family in turmoil. Lily hated her husband, Acacia was a bitter shrew who was determined to join the cloister because she did not wish to marry at all, and then there was her...

"I see Dash, Bella," Lily said. "See him? He is handing off the horses to the stable servants."

Belladonna's heart jumped at the mention of the man's name. *Dash*. Straining, she caught a glimpse of him as he moved through the crowd, heading towards the duke, who was blessing an ill child held aloft by a servant. As he stood next to the duke and pulled off his helm revealing his cropped auburn hair, Belladonna simply stared at him from afar.

It seemed that all she ever did was stare at him from afar.

"Bella?" Lily said softly, now squeezing her sister's hand. "It is good to see Dash, is it not? He looks healthy and whole after battle."

Belladonna didn't dare look at her sister, the one who knew all of her secrets. What was the use of rehashing what they both knew? Belladonna harbored a secret love for a knight who was unattainable, the heir to the earldom of East Anglia and a man who had been with Savernake for twelve years. Literally, half of Belladonna's life. What good was it to discuss the man she'd been in love with since the moment she saw him, a twelve-year-old girl who was awestruck by the big, handsome knight who had come to her father through an alliance with the Stewards of Rochester?

A knight who still viewed her as a twelve-year-old child.

"I see him," Belladonna sighed, a resigned gesture. "He does look healthy."

Lily placed her head on her sister's slender shoulder. "Mayhap, you should go and greet him," she suggested gently. "I am sure he would be happy to see you."

Belladonna pulled her hand from her sister's grip. "As Bentley would be glad to see you," she said in a cruel jab, which she was immediately sorry for. "I am sorry, Lil. I did not mean it. It is simply that there is no use in greeting him. It only makes me... hurt."

With that, she turned and walked away, heading towards their father but trying to steer clear of Dashiell, which was difficult considering he was following the duke. Belladonna simply wanted her father to see her and then she would go anywhere that Dashiell wasn't.

It wasn't as if she hadn't thought about the man, every moment of every day since he'd been gone, because she had. It was more that it was becoming increasingly painful to see a man who had no interest in her. It wasn't that he ignored her, because he didn't. He was as kind and attentive and polite as Dashiell was capable of. To everyone else, he was the gruff, hardened commander who ruled the Savernake army with an iron fist. But to Belladonna, he was the handsome, slightly awkward knight who always went out of his way to be polite to her.

Perhaps that was why she loved him so.

Even now, she stole a glimpse of him as he stood behind her father, protective of the duke as he always was. Dashiell was a tall man, but she'd seen taller. He was, quite simply, a very big man. He had enormous shoulders and arms, and big hands that were scarred from fighting. His auburn hair was stiff, with a natural curl to it, and he kept it closely shorn against his scalp. He was usually clean-shaven except for a big mustache he kept neatly groomed, and he told her once it was because he had a scar on his upper lip that he covered up.

Belladonna had never seen the scar, but she couldn't imagine it would make the man any less attractive. He may have been older, and sporting a face with some lines in it but, to her, he was the most handsome man in the entire world.

She was so caught up in her daydreams that she didn't really notice when her father turned in her direction. Suddenly, he was moving in her direction, his hands lifted to greet her. But all Belladonna saw was Dashiell turning towards her. He was coming in her direction, too, and she very nearly bolted until she heard her father's voice calling out to her.

"My darling!" he called happily, arms extended. "My darling lass!"

It was too late to run. Deeply embarrassed that she'd been caught staring at Dashiell, who had more than likely seen her, Belladonna smiled wanly at her father as the man put his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

"Papa," she said, hugging him in return. "Praise God that you have returned to us."

Edward kissed his daughter on both cheeks before pulling back to look at her. "Grace," he murmured, touching her face. "You grow more beautiful by the day."

Grace. That was Belladonna's mother, long dead these past eight years. "Papa, it is Belladonna," she said, firmly and loudly, because sometimes he had a difficult time hearing. "It is not Grace, Papa – it is Bella."

Edward started at her for a moment or two before recognition dawned. "My baby," he said, touching her face again. "My beautiful Bella."

Belladonna forced a smile as he moved past her, heading towards Acacia, who was standing several feet away. Belladonna watched him go, the smile fading from her lips, feeling sad that her father couldn't even recognize her. Every day seemed to show his worsening madness. As she stood there, she heard someone clear his throat, softly.

"Greetings, my lady," Dashiell said politely. "I hope you have been well during our time away."

Startled, Belladonna turned to him, her gaze drinking in his handsome face. She always found it fascinating that the man had eyes so blue they were nearly lavender. He had the most beautiful eyes, at least to her. It was a struggle not to react giddily at the sight of him, a man she didn't want to see, but now a man she was very glad to see.

It did her heart good.

"I have been well, thank you," she said. "And you look as if you have come through unscathed."

"I have."

"And my father?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from Dashiell to watch her father hug Acacia. "Did he fare well?"

Dashiell glanced at Edward also. "Well enough," he said. "But, in the future, I believe it would be better to leave him here at Ramsbury. You and I will have to insist upon this to le Cairon the next time he wants the duke to ride at the head of the army. The battlefield is no place for your father these days."

Belladonna turned to him, studying him for a moment. "Did he wander out onto the battlefield again to bless the dying and the wounded?"

Dashiell sighed heavily as he nodded. "Aye," he said. "I am genuinely fearful for his safety these days, my lady. It would be far better if he remained here the next time the army moves out."

Belladonna's gaze drifted over Dashiell. "You are concerned for him."

"Verily."

Belladonna smiled faintly. "You have always been concerned for him," she said. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am for it. My father would be far worse off were it not for you, Dash. You care for the man as if he were your very own father. In fact, I believe you are the son he always hoped to have."

Dashiell returned her smile; he couldn't help himself. But in that gesture, he could feel all of the walls of self-protection go down. That always happened with Belladonna, his feelings for the woman razing whatever attempts he made at putting up a wall around his fragile heart. It *was* fragile when it came to her.

"You know how I feel about your father," he said simply. "Next to my own father, the duke has been the greatest influence on me. I will protect him until my death."

Before Belladonna could reply, there was a great commotion near the gatehouse. People were screaming and trying to move swiftly out of the way as a knight on a big, brown warhorse came charging through them. He knocked over a man, who had to scramble out of the way to avoid being trampled.

Sir Clayton le Cairon had made an appearance.

Belladonna's features darkened at the sight of him. Clayton was tall and lanky, with protruding teeth, a receding hairline, and eyes that seemed to hold a perpetually surprised expression. He was a very sharp man but transparent in his wants and desires. There wasn't much he hid, so everyone knew him for what he was, which could be both a blessing and a curse. It was those attributes that singlehandedly made him the most hated man at Ramsbury.

"So," Belladonna muttered. "He has returned. A pity."

Dashiell looked at her, hearing the loathing in her voice. But, as always, Dashiell remained emotionless about Clayton, one way or the other. He had to fight with the man and he didn't want to be watching his back any more than he already was if le Cairon suspected his open hatred.

Even now, things with the man were dicey at best. Clayton saw him as direct competition, especially since he commanded the duke's armies, and the man was crafty. The only real saving grace was that the army and the knights were fiercely loyal to Dashiell, while Clayton had very little support. Dashiell did his best to keep the balance of power in that mode because once Clayton gained in strength, it would mean trouble for them all.

"Aye, he has returned," he said, shifting the subject because he wouldn't waste his breath on Clayton le Cairon. "Your father's army was victorious against the king. It was a fine showing, my lady. Your father should be proud."

Belladonna's gaze moved from Clayton back to Dashiell, which was much more pleasant viewing in her opinion. As the duke began to head towards the keep, Dashiell and Belladonna followed.

"I am sure he would be, if he realized it," she said. "But, of course, you lead the armies, Dash. To you goes the credit."

Modestly, he shook his head. "Not this time," he said. "There were many armies involved. You know that we headed north because the king's army was laying siege to some of the northern barons. North of Lincoln, we met up with the de Winter army out of Norfolk and my father's army from Thunderbey Castle and traveled with them all the way to Scarborough. It was a massive show of force."

"Oh?" Belladonna said with interest. "Did you see your father, then?"

Dashiell shook his head. "Nay," he said. "My father's health prevents him from traveling with the armies these days, unfortunately. I thought that I would like to see him after this particular campaign. I've not seen him in several months."

“You should go,” Belladonna agreed. “I am sure your father would love to see you.”

Dashiell’s gaze moved to Clayton, who was several feet away, dismounting his frothing steed as he moved to greet his wife.

“Mayhap, I will see him at some point,” he said, his gaze lingering on Clayton. “But now is not the time. There is much happening with the king and his barons. I cannot take a leisure trip to Suffolk to visit my father, not with so much happening.”

Belladonna could see who he was looking at. She knew, as they all knew, that Dashiell would never leave Ramsbury with Clayton on the prowl. It wasn’t merely the tension between the king and his barons, but the tension at Ramsbury with Clayton’s disruptive presence.

As she and Dashiell watched, Clayton couldn’t have said more than two words to Lily before coldly brushing her off. Ignoring the family completely, the man headed for the keep, alone.

He behaved as if he didn’t want to be part of the de Vaston family. There was always a palpable relief when Clayton was out of sight. Once he was gone, Belladonna turned to Dashiell.

“Did he lead my father out onto the field of battle this time?” she asked quietly.

Dashiell came to a halt, looking at her with a furrowed brow. “Why should you ask such a thing?”

Belladonna sighed impatiently. “You need not pretend, Dash,” she said. “I know you believe you have been protecting my sisters and me from the truth, but you do not need to do that any longer. The rumors fly fast around here; we have heard that Clayton is trying to kill my father. We have been hearing that for a while.”

Dashiell simply looked at her, with no particular emotion on his face. It was true that he’d been trying to protect the daughters of the duke from Clayton and his motives, but he knew, at some point, others would speak of the man’s behavior. Rumors had already started, whispers he couldn’t control. He couldn’t protect Belladonna and her sisters forever, as much as he wanted to.

“You will let me worry about that,” he said quietly. “You need not be troubled, my lady. I will always protect your father. And you. And your sisters, of course.”

He said the last few words quickly, as if realizing what he’d said sounded a bit too personal. Even so, there was something in his voice when he spoke to her, something soft that Belladonna didn’t hear when he spoke to anyone else. Only her. It was enough to give her giddy heart hope that, perhaps, the softness in his tone indicated his feelings towards her. But she knew that was too much to ask.

“You used to call me Bella,” she said after a moment. “Why is it that you have become so formal with me, Dash? I can remember all through my younger years, you would call me Bella. I can even remember you calling me ‘lamb’ from time to time. What has happened that you no longer address me so? Have I done something to anger you?”

Something flickered in his eyes, something liquid and warm that was just as quickly gone. “Of course not,” he scoffed quietly. “You could never anger me.”

“Then why...”

“Because you are a maiden of marriageable age now, and it is not right that I should address you informally,” he said, interrupting her. “You are an adult, as am I. As an unmarried man, it is greatly frowned upon that I should have any familiarity when addressing you. Some might even view it as bold and lewd. Therefore, I will not risk that with you. I have been addressing you formally for the past year or two, at the very least.”

“I know.”

“And you are only just asking me this now?”

Belladonna suddenly felt very embarrassed. It was almost as if he were scolding her, explaining to her that, clearly, he had no intention of ever being informal with her again. She had seen twenty years and two now, and was quite old for an unmarried woman. Dashiell would never do anything unseemly towards her, the honorable man that he was.

But, sometimes, she wished he would be bold and lewd. God, she wished it with all her heart.

“Then you will forgive me for asking,” she said, feeling her cheeks flame as she turned away. “I would not wish for you to do anything improper or against your wishes. You will excuse me, my lord. I must tend to my father.”

She rushed off before Dashiell could stop her. His heart sank as he heard anger in her words, anger directed at him. He hadn’t meant to offend her, but it was the truth. He didn’t want to be viewed as taking liberties with an unmarried daughter of a duke, no matter how much he wanted to.

And he wanted very badly to.

With a heavy heart, Dashiell watched her approach her father and take him gently by the arm, directing him into the keep where she would help tend to his every need. She was a good daughter that way. Dashiell only wished she understood that what he did, he did to protect her and her reputation. Given the choice, he would not only be informal with the woman, but he might even tell her how he felt about her.

Dashiell came to a halt just before entering the keep, watching the rest of the family and a few servants go inside. He didn’t go with them because he had an army to disband. So with the duke safely indoors, Dashiell headed back into the bailey where men were already underway in moving the provisions wagons back to the stables and the army over to the troop house. As he moved into the dust and noise of the dissolving army, that was when the gruff, no-nonsense knight came out.

“What are you doing?” he boomed to one of the wagon drivers, who drove his horses right into the back of another wagon. “You slop-eyed fool! Pull back on those beasts and let the other wagon pass!”

Dashiell du Reims commanded presence and the insults that went with it were legendary. He’d been known to insult his army into hysterics at times, but the men moved more swiftly because of it. Long ago, they’d learned that du Reims only insulted as a way of motivation. If he insulted you, then he liked you. Woe betide the man he did not insult, for that was a man quickly on his way out of Savernake’s army.

Therefore, the insults were normal in their world and it made the men want to work harder and faster when he did so. It was the odd way Dashiell du Reims had earned the respect of his men, at least for the most part, but he’d mostly earned it for his skill and strength. He was a giant among the powerful knights of England.

But that powerful knight had one weakness, and she was currently tending her father inside the keep of Ramsbury. Dashiell tried not to think about Belladonna’s unhappy face as he went about his tasks, hoping that her anger against him would cool by the time the evening meal came. And then, he might – but only *might* – try to explain to her that he didn’t address her formally not because he wanted to, but because he had to. Perhaps, she would understand.

Perhaps not.

God’s Blood, it was dangerous for him to try and explain his position on anything personal when it came to Belladonna. But having not seen her in two months, the last thing he wanted was for her to be angry at him his first night returned. But more and more, he was coming to realize something – the more time passed, and the more his feelings deepened, the more difficult it would be for him to refrain from telling her.

And that would be a disaster for all concerned.

Dashiell remembered Christopher's offer for him to serve at Lioncross Abbey with the de Lohr army. It had been an offer Christopher had given him many times but, at this moment, it was the first time he'd actually considered it.

Truth was, he wasn't entirely sure now much longer he could remain with Belladonna and not tell her what he was feeling. Christopher had asked him how he would feel if the woman married another man – it would be the worst day of his life.

Unfortunately, it was a very real possibility unless he did something about it.