

1428



A.V. Arms



## Chapter 11

### **August 7, 1428, Janville, France**

Earl Thomas Kirkham gazed over the walls of Janville, not far from Paris, the heart of France. His mind was on what was to come in the morning. Tomorrow they would take the town. Thomas felt restless. Though a knight for the seven-year-old King Henry, the sixth king of England to be thus named, at heart, Thomas was not a fighter. He did what he had to, whether for the regency council while Henry was in his minority or for a grown king. When those who could take his properties away with a snap of their fingers told him to go to war, Thomas always went to fight, but it was always with fear and loathing for what was to come and who he would have to be.

A breeze blew across him. It was gentle, only strong enough to lift Thomas's shoulder-length dirty blonde hair to tangle in the beard he wanted badly to shave. But for the last week, there had been no time for that. Too much was at stake. He had too much on his mind with his army of two hundred and forty-two men depending on him. The weather was different here than in his childhood home deep on the isolated border with Scotland. It had been a long time since he had been there. A long time since his father died, and Thomas moved from Ravenshill to take on the earldom of Stokesley. It lay more than a day's ride from Ravenshill. One day his son would hold the Ravenshill barony and inherit Stokesley when Thomas died. But as of yet, he had no son, his wife waiting for him at Stokesley. He only got to bed his wife once. After a rushed wedding ceremony following his father's funeral, Thomas had to return to France the day after his nuptials.

He was among the few lucky men of his station who married for love. He ached for his sweet Anne. He would give anything to see her smile, hear her laugh, and feel her arms and legs wrapped around him as they had been that one night. He would have taken her time and again, but he was a young man exhausted from war and death both in France and at home. He fell into an exhausted sleep almost immediately after he and Anne consummated their marriage. He was not awakened until just before dawn the following day, with men waiting for him to lead them back to war. That had been nearly four years ago.

A lull in battles and sieges eased the army's burdens. But Thomas Montagu, Earl of Salisbury, returned to France as England's lieutenant general for the field. Under Montagu's command, the movement of the army increased. Battles and sieges were exhausting his men and shattering Thomas's hope that the war would end.

Thomas respected Montagu a great deal. He was a strong commander and capable leader. The commander returned to England for an extended period to petition the now-deceased King Henry and then his son's council for reinforcements and the money to do so. Parliament granted his request and gave Montagu money for the war compensation so they could continue to send men to France.

The money, as of yet, had not trickled down to Thomas or his best friend, Earl Hagan de Ros. Both men funded their armies on behalf of England. For years the war drained the coffers of Thomas's two properties and Hagan's Helmsley. However, Hagan was in a better position than Thomas because Thomas's father, Jasper Kirkham, had already spent a great deal funding troops in France before his death. Exacerbated by Jasper's disinterest in his properties, Thomas's inheritance teetered on the brink of ruin. His father's need for violence and superiority won him the earldom of Stokesley. But his vices of drink and whores nearly ruined them.

It was Thomas who begged Montagu to petition Parliament for the money Thomas had thus far given to the crown for the damned war that would never end. It would not be much longer, and there would be nothing left for him to feed his wife or his people. But when Montagu made the request, they had been unaware of how much Jasper Kirkham was despised. Thomas was well acquainted with his father's personality and could blame none of them for that. But he did blame them for the continuous delays he knew was fictitious, just so his father's legacy would be destroyed. So, relief did not come to Thomas or his second-in-command, Hagan. Guilt by association, Thomas supposed, for him and Hagan both.

Since returning to France only a month before, Montagu led them to take control of Rambouillet, Nogent-le-Roi, Le Puiset, and the area around Chartres. Thomas's financial dilemma was not forgotten by Montagu, so when the army took Janville the following day, Thomas would be left in charge of the garrison. Once Janville was theirs, the wealthy lord and his family would be ransomed, and Thomas would receive the money. After that, Thomas could walk away from the war.

A war that was thick in his blood. At eighteen, Thomas spent much of his life in France at his father's side. Thomas knew war intimately before he ever took up arms in it. He was hardened and honed as a good war blade would be, though he never got a taste for blood. He was tired of fighting, France, and the army, but he missed his wife and home most of all.

Years of waiting and wanting stacking upon him here in this place. Only to have his hopes dashed again and again. Wealth was supposed to be in abundance in France for the taking. Thomas's father had been a strong advocate of pillaging and plundering whores, drinking, and gambling. The riches he stole were never sent to his properties but went toward his father's debauchery. Thomas was unsure, but it seemed the English army had been in France long enough that nothing was left to pillage. That was what Thomas was after now, an end to the fighting and a chance to return home with enough money to feed himself until he could set Ravenshill and Stokesley to rights again. If Thomas could read, he knew things might not have become so dire for the Kirkhams if he understood the numbers sent to him from his steward. Anne discovered the man had been stealing from the Kirkhams for years. But a boy raised in an army did not waste time learning to read. Instead, he spent his time learning to fight.

Come morning, when the walls of Janville fell, and the lord here was within his clutches, it would soon be over, and he could return home.

"It will not be as easy as the others," Lincoln spoke beside him.

Thomas looked down at the man, whittling a block of wood. It was a favorite pastime of Lincoln Victors. But, at age seventeen, perhaps Lincoln knew war the most. So Thomas had to wonder if the mercenary that had come to them would remain in France when Thomas took his army home.

"What are you making now?" Thomas asked, ignoring the comment. Thomas did not think it would be as easy as the last towns they had taken. There was no way it would. The odds were stacked against such a thing. He settled onto the ground next to his friend.

"A bowl."

"What for?" Thomas asked. Lincoln was skilled at wood carving. He could make anything requested of him, adding much detail.

"Why not?" Lincoln asked in return. "What else do I have to do? Sleep?" Lincoln asked with a bit of sarcasm mixed in.

Thomas had no answer to that. He suspected the carving helped keep Lincoln calm. Of all the soldiers Thomas knew, Lincoln was one of the best, with a calm decisiveness that would launch him into higher ranks as the war continued.

The men sat in silence for a time. Thomas's focus was on the walls and what the morning might bring. The constant scrape of Lincoln's knife told him he did not stare at the walls thinking of tomorrow. Focused on the wood and creating something the night before they destroyed Janville.

"I'm going to try to find rest," Thomas said after more than an hour passed between them in silence. Thomas stood on stiff legs, using Lincoln's broad shoulder to support him.

"Do you think you will be successful?"

"No more than usual," Thomas said with a heavy heart. His sleep, on any given night, was not good. Not a night went by that he did not have a nightmare. Some of those were figments of his imagination, others reliving his past traumas. Before tomorrow's battle, with his nerves spiked, he did not think he would find a moment of sleep, but he was wrong as he lay down on the warm ground. It did not take long before his past filled his restless mind.



*"Now, boys," Thomas's father, Jasper, said with his famed level of cockiness. "Now comes the spoils of war. We'll begin with her." Jasper's hand raised and pointed to a girl struggling to pull one of her fellow villagers from a burning building among the shops in the center of the town.*

*Thomas and his best friend Hagan followed eagerly. They already knew the wealth that could come from the defeated after a battle. The spoils of war. It was what Thomas's father and many other men had lived on during the more than a generation-old war with France. But, this was the first time the young boys participated in the heart of the battle. Thus far, and most of their short lives, they spent from the sidelines, watching the fight,*

sometimes from afar, sometimes close enough to hear an individual blade strike. After the battle, it was the boys' duty to scavenge the battlefield. Their priority was always weapons first. Armies were always in need of extra weapons. The boys also stripped the dead's armor and killed those still breathing. In the beginning, Thomas was foolish to keep count of those men, but it became too frightening, too fast, so he stopped. But, Hagan could say how many he killed, with pride, because he was a boy born with a passion for war.

Thomas tried to ascertain what kind of treasure a peasant would possess. Indeed her simple and worn dress did not boast of any worth. Both boys came to a sudden halt, with gasps a few paces behind. Jasper reached the girl, grabbed the back of her dress, and slammed her head into the side of the building. She fell heavily onto the ground.

Hagan's arm came out to stop Thomas from moving forward. Thomas didn't want his father to hurt her if he did not need to. She was of an age close to Thomas and Hagan. Surely his father did not have to scare the girl to get what he wanted. Thomas looked down at Hagan's arm, to Hagan, who had an expression on his face Thomas had never seen before. It was brutal, but sadness lurked in the other boy's eyes.

The girl screaming pulled Thomas's eyes back to his father. He was on her now. The girl was thrashing beneath him, screaming, biting, and scratching to free herself. But his father was far stronger than the girl. Jasper's big hand struck the girl on the cheek. Thomas drew in a quick breath, nearly as stunned by his father's fist as was the girl. This was no soldier or son. She was a child.

His father didn't give her time to recover. Instead, he wrenched up her skirt, yanked her legs roughly apart, and slid between them. The girl tried to squirm again, but his hand closed around her throat and squeezed her voice to gasps far quieter than the blood-curdling screams. His other hand slipped between them, and suddenly the girl was crying. By the time Thomas realized in his naïve mind what his father was doing, the damage was done.

Hagan's arm was pushing Thomas backward, and Thomas allowed it. Then, a few steps away, they turned and saw the battlefield before them. What lay there was less horrific than what was happening behind them. Men joined in war, whether forced or voluntary, but they had some chance of survival. But the girl was innocent, at least before his father touched her.



## Chapter 2

The blade struck Hagan hard on the blackened steel armor plate protecting his shoulder. Nonetheless, the strength behind the blow nearly dropped him to a knee. As Hagan staggered, his opponent moved fast, drawing his sword back again and placing two hands on it. The force with which the blade tip was coming at him would drive the sword to the hilt if it found an opening in his armor. But the blade never struck. Instead, sword and man hit the ground, blood spraying from the hole in his neck Thomas's sword had made.

Hagan's heart thumped wildly. He had been at this game long enough to know when Death reached for him, and he had just a moment ago. Hagan read Thomas's face immediately and allowed his heart to slow and match the steady breaths he was trained to take when fighting. Remembering to breathe was nearly as important as remembering not to die. Gripped in the urgency of battle, a man's focus could be so absolute he would forget to breathe until his body reminded him. But, of course, by then, that man would be panting, weaker, and not so focused.

The battle was over. Small pockets of resistance remained scattered about, but Janville was now under English control for all intents and purposes. There would be no innocent lives taken here. Only those who resisted from this point would be killed. No woman or child would be raped if the offender did not want his testicles removed in front of the entire army by Hagan. Thomas's order against such atrocities usually only went as far as his own men. But Montagu had given the mandate, which gave Thomas respect in his position in Janville.

"Find the family," Thomas said. Hagan turned, passing the order as he moved toward the small castle.

Hagan knew Thomas would be disappointed when he discovered the lord and lady were the only people here that would gain any ransom. Hagan watched while these useless people were marched into the courtyard. Each person that entered echoed Hagan's unease. There was not the wealth to be had here as they had thought. But all was not lost because they still had the earl of Janville and his countess wife.

Hagan watched the progress of four of his men down the corridor toward him. Their pace was slow, and it took a moment for the child to be seen at their center. Hagan had felt relief standing in the castle of Janville, close to pulling themselves from the poverty they both faced. They now only needed the lord and lady to send the request to their family for the money to release them.

Hagan was unsure why they were bringing him a child. The earl had no children, so his men wasted his time with the girl. No child here was worth a coin.

"Leave the child and find the earl and countess," Hagan snapped as they made it halfway to him.

"Thomas has Earl Remon Toussaint, and we have Countess Angeline of Le Mans," Lincoln told him.

Hagan took a second look at the child and realized the guards were moving her so slowly because the girl who could not have seen her fifteenth year was very pregnant. She walked holding the mountain that was her stomach, looking as if the babe's weight threw her small frame off balance.

"You are just a child," Hagan declared as they all stopped before him.

Angeline's eyes had not risen from the floor at his feet until he spoke. His words made her head of full dark brown hair snap up, and her green eyes blazed with contempt. Hagan felt his own hatred for the girl's husband. Child marriages were not abnormal, but most husbands waited for their wives to mature enough that their bodies could handle the pregnancy. Looking at this girl, he felt he already knew the pain and suffering she would have before dying on her birthing bed.

"I am Countess of Janville," she spat between clenched teeth. "I stopped being a child the night I married."

Hagan stared down at her tiny figure. "And how old were you?"

"I was twelve."

"And now you are...?" Hagan asked.

"I am fourteen."

"Holy Christ," Hagan muttered under his breath.

Angeline looked up at him, and her eyes changed the slightest. The anger ebbed a little at his sympathy.

Hagan gave a deep bow to her. He felt guilty for being a man. He felt guilty because he had seen children raped. He was once given a girl about Angeline's age for the sole purpose of him to rape. He had not. He could not. That girl had left his tent still intact as a virgin. He did not understand why Earl Remon had touched such a young wife. Looking at her now, he didn't even see that her breasts had developed enough to nourish a child. She was thin, her hips narrow, her arms like toothpicks beneath her sleeves. Did Remon not care that by lying with his wife, he ultimately killed her in a most agonizing way.

"This is Lincoln," Hagan said. "He will remain at your side. Any requests he will see to as well as your safety."

"I was perfectly safe before you English arrived," she spat with malice.

Hagan's eyes strayed to her stomach and remained there. "It does not look as if you were."

When his eyes raised back to her green ones, she was staring at him with a look that said clearly she was not used to sympathy and just might appreciate or hate him for it.

Hagan cleared his throat. "Countess," he said, bowing again. He felt he should show this girl, a woman he corrected in his head, deference for what she had suffered and was yet to. Then Hagan turned to Lincoln, "Keep her at your side and do not let her husband near her."

As Hagan turned away, Angeline drew him back around. “You do not have the power to keep him away,” Angeline said.

“I assure you, I do.” He turned from her again. His boots echoed down the stairway as he descended to find Thomas and his prisoner, Angeline’s husband, the man Hagan wanted to beat to death.



## Chapter 3

It had been five hours since Hagan gave him the order to be Angeline's shadow, and she had not stopped. Despite her round belly, she played her part as the lady of the keep. She ensured the injured were cared for, and the household knew there was no choice but to obey the Englishmen who now occupied her small castle. Her eyes were taking on dark circles around them, seeming to grow starker by the minute as her face paled.

She was on her knees, next to one of the injured guards, trying to protect the gates. Lincoln had seen enough war wounds to know he would not survive. He wanted to ask Angeline if he should end the man's suffering. Lincoln had given enough aid to know the signs that the man's bowels were leaking into his body, filling him and killing him. But he could tell this older man meant something to her.

"I think it is time for you to rest," Lincoln tried to encourage her off her feet.

But Angeline said nothing, as she had done for the past five hours. Hagan had told him to stay at her side, not to prevent her from doing as she wished or needed. He had to admit the household needed a lady at the moment to guide them, but Angeline was just a child. Though she had the moxie to reign as a queen, her body appeared to be giving out.

After a few moments, she began to rock to her feet. Lincoln reached for her, taking one thin arm in his hand, placing his hand's palm beneath her elbow, and helping pull her to her feet. As Lincoln began to draw away, she sagged. Lincoln grabbed her, but she recovered as his hands fell on her again. With irritation, she jerked from him.

"You should rest," Lincoln tried again.

Sunken eyes glared out at him with a banked fury. For a moment, Lincoln felt he should cross himself and say a prayer. For that brief moment, he was convinced she could burn him to ashes with their fiery embers.

She said nothing and turned away from him, moving deeper into the hall. Helpless, Lincoln followed her until she came to a stop next to a woman. Her leg was broken. Lincoln had helped set the bones back into place. Angeline awkwardly sank to her knees, holding her rounded stomach as she fell onto them heavily. She had to rest, Lincoln told himself. But he did not know if that was something he could insist upon.

Lincoln had only joined Hagan's forces in the last year. Lincoln was raised by his uncle, an influential mercenary army leader. The man had become wealthy by bidding out his sword. Since it was the way Lincoln saw growing up, he saw no problem with loyalties going to the highest bidder. At seventeen, Lincoln was done after a lifetime of

carnage. He could not remember a moment when his uncle was not fighting or looking for a fight. Lincoln wanted to join the church. Learn what it was to be a man of faith. But he should have known his uncle's name and reputation for fighting would haunt him. Lincoln wanted to know there was something more than what he had thus far witnessed in life. He knew there was a gentler side to human nature. But not even the Church could give him peace.

Lincoln was guided to the Teutonic Knights. The order, placed in Marienburg, Prussia, aided and provided care for those in need on their way to Jerusalem. But that piece of his life had ended nearly as quickly as it began. So he found himself at seventeen, a knight despite his tender years. With little more than a year as a knight of the church, he became a mercenary again. He went to the English army and offered his services to many of the lords. But he had no army behind him, only himself. No one gave him consideration until Hagan allowed him to show his skills. Lincoln immediately became Hagan's man, and despite knowing Lincoln's past and questionable loyalty, Lincoln became his confidant. Next to Thomas, Lincoln was Hagan's closest friend.

But with a past that had no connection to court, he was unsure if a knight could order a countess. One thing he was sure of, the pregnant girl would fight him if he tried to force her. He had seen that in her eyes. Any fight might very well kill her.

Lincoln motioned one of the pages to his side. "Find Lord Hagan and tell him the countess will not rest, and I think she should. Ask him what I am to do."

The boy gave a slight bow, but by his expression, Lincoln had to wonder if the solution was so simple even the boy knew. Lincoln hurried to Angeline's side as she tried to stagger to her feet. He lifted her and sat her on them. He followed her around the room, helping her to kneel and rise. He ordered anyone near to bring everything she requested so she did not have to do so herself. He barked his order, becoming more agitated with his concern this woman would collapse.

Finally, he heard the heavy footsteps of Hagan as Angeline knelt by the guard again. "You need to come with me," Hagan said without preamble.

"I must see to Sir Reginald."

Hagan bent to pull Angeline to her feet, then paused and looked at the knight whose side the countess returned to again and again. "He will not live."

"You cannot say...." Angeline began with anger clouding her judgment.

"I do say."

"It is the truth," Lincoln replied.

Angeline looked from Lincoln to Hagan, then to the man who was now too weak to cry over the pain tearing through him. Hagan dropped to his knees next to Angeline.

"He is suffering, and his end will be the same." Hagan reached for the knife sheathed in his belt. When he pulled it free, Angeline's pale hand fell on Hagan's big tanned one. Hagan stopped. He did not know the girl's power, but she made Hagan pause. He turned his head and looked at her. Long seconds passed as they knelt beside each other.

"I would not take your man's life if there was hope. But his pain could last days." Lincoln had never heard Hagan's voice come so gently from his lips.

With reluctance, Angeline slipped her hand from Hagan's. Then, quickly, Hagan leaned forward and slid the knife's point into the side of the man's neck. The battle was

finally over for him. Then Hagan sheathed his blade and stood. He reached for Angeline, crying silently, and scooped her into his arms.

Lincoln felt a warning explode within his breast. He looked around for the danger, but the hall was the same. His eyes returned to Hagan, turning with Angeline to carry her away. Angeline allowed Hagan's arms around her without protest. Her eyes did not blaze but closed as she leaned her head against his chest. He recalled Hagan's gentle voice. Then he knew they were the ones that would bring danger.

The title 'Chapter 4' is written in a black, elegant, serif font. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud. The roses are positioned above the letters of the title, with the stems and leaves appearing to wrap around the text.

## Chapter 4

Thomas swung his sword in an arc. Back and forth, it flowed like a river, sure and steady.

“I have a much better sword than that rusty piece of iron,” Remon commented as he watched Thomas in his daily exercise. The exercise strengthened his arms and back, keeping the weight and pull of the sword familiar. Thomas may have never wanted to use it on anyone as much as he wanted to drive it into the pompous ass of Lord Remon.

Thomas ignored him.

“Set with jewels it is. Cost me a fortune. What’s yours worth?” the man scoffed at his own question. “You are weak, Englishman. The fact you have not stolen a Frenchman’s sword tells me you are not a very good soldier.”

Thomas’s swings ceased, and he fought not to turn toward Remon, raise the sword, and plunge it deep. Instead, he ignored the man and left the yard. Thomas thought he was prepared for the responsibility of keeping Janville secure. That was easy enough, but a burden he wanted nothing to do with was laid at his feet.

He was tasked with protecting a fortune in gold left at Janville. The gold, raised and stolen by King Henry’s uncle, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, was snuck into the baggage wagons. How long this gold was hidden, Thomas did not know. Nor did he care. But Humphrey revealed the gold when it was unloaded and stored at Janville. Their commander Montagu knew nothing of the gold hidden in some of the trunks in the baggage wagons. Thomas did not want to keep this information from his commander. But Humphrey was much more dangerous than Montagu. So Thomas told no one at Humphrey’s order. As far as Thomas knew, only he and Humphrey were aware of the fortune he now guarded. A witness was a weak link he was sure Humphrey would want to rid himself of as soon as the gold was back in Humphrey’s hands. That alone had him on edge.

As Thomas’s agitated strides carried him quickly toward the manor house, he heard Hagan fall into step. “We received word from Louvre,” he said.

Thomas stopped abruptly and turned to him. “From Louvre. What of Laurent?”

“It seems as if Remon’s father is not in residence there and will not return for months.”

Thomas felt himself deflating. That was far too long. He had put all his eggs in Janville’s basket. The army had moved on and was taking riches, powerful men and women to ransom, gold and silver, jewels and coin. Money flowed outside the gates of Janville but inside, hope was dying with the news.

“Where is he now?”

“I am not sure,” Hagan replied with reluctance. “He is not in France. We do know that.”

Thomas exploded with a curse and asked, “Is there another relative?” He tried to calm his racing heart so his brain could slow enough to think. It would take months to broker a deal with Remon’s father.

“I do not know,” Hagan said.

“What of Lady Angeline?”

Hagan shook his head which annoyed Thomas all the more. They all knew it was Remon whose family had the wealth. The ransom of Lady Angeline would only be a fraction of what her husband would bring. Hagan should have been spending his time finding out more about their target. Not wasting time on the child.

It was all Thomas could do to rein back his anger before he unleashed it on his second. “Find out more about Remon’s relatives and quickly,” Thomas managed with only a small level of bite in his tone.

Hagan turned to leave him but stopped mid-step, freezing as his eyes found Angeline crossing the bailey slowly. “Hagan, watch yourself,” Thomas declared. “Keep focused, and we’ll be out of here sooner than later.”

Hagan did not hesitate to nod and move forward with his duty. Find a new loved one that might pay a high price to see Remon back with them. Thomas feared no one but the man’s father would care if he was returned.

Thomas’s eyes fell on Angeline. He could see what Hagan saw in her, a girl needing protection. He did not think Hagan’s interest went beyond that. It was a fair enough assessment of a man who was as tired as he of all the fighting. He saw why Hagan would want to protect instead of kill. They were both hoping their place in the war was winding down. But at the moment, they were stuck idle here. Idle enough Thomas hoped Hagan would not fancy his interest in Angeline for more than what it was.

Angeline had already turned and was shuffling her way back toward the house. She was definitely the epitome of a child in need of protection. Thomas hoped they would be able to leave this place soon.

The title 'Chapter 5' is centered on the page. It is flanked by two decorative roses. The rose on the left is red with green leaves, and the rose on the right is light purple with green leaves. The word 'Chapter' is in a large, black, serif font, and the number '5' is in a smaller, black, serif font.

## Chapter 5

The screams echoed through the castle walls. It seemed Hagan could do nothing to escape those terrified and pain-filled screams. He had to go all the way to the animal enclosures to silence the horror of what Angeline was going through. But even out of earshot, her labor still rang in his head, pounding relentlessly.

The labor began two days before. Angeline walked with servants across the upper bailey, where Hagan stood with several of his men. Then, halfway across the expanse, a scream suddenly ripped from Angeline's mouth, and she dropped to her knees. Hagan was instantly at her side, saw the blood, scooped her into his arms, and carried her to the chamber where he was directed. He had not seen her since. But occasionally, when her screams ended, Hagan found himself outside her chamber door, waiting for the news she had finally died. But inside the room, the screams had quieted to sobs and grew more desperate with each hour.

"Where have you been?" Thomas asked from behind him.

Hagan started, realizing he had been facing the structure and the window that was Angeline's. All Hagan could do was shrug. He couldn't say where he had been. At least not to Thomas because Hagan had just been wandering the corridors and grounds when he wasn't outside her door holding his breath. He soon discovered he was the only one. Remon had no concern for his wife, as one would expect of a man who would rape a child. He did not wait anxiously for his child to arrive, nor did he care if the woman who labored with it might live or die.

"You have to pull back, Hagan," Thomas said in a voice absolute in its command. "You know you cannot have her. You can never have her."

"Remon is an asshole," Hagan mumbled under his breath.

"I would say Remon is more than an asshole," Thomas replied, and he stepped forward to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Hagan. "But he is her husband."

"I am well aware of that fact," Hagan said with strong enough bitterness to be foul in his mouth.

"Then why do you walk these walls as if it was your wife and child who lay dying?"

"I cannot say," Hagan nearly whispered.

"It's because she is the girl's age," Thomas said gently.

"She is. Remon has killed her just as your father killed the girl."

"But Remon has a right to his wife. My father was a foul, immoral man," Thomas said with great bitterness.

Commented [AA1]: Amoral or imoral

Hagan felt his own bitterness, but it all centered on Remon for placing her in such pain. Hagan knew what she faced when he first saw her. Hagan did not doubt Remon knew precisely what he was doing when he stuck his dick in his young wife. But, like now, he did not care.

"I know my father is burning in eternal hell for the man he was. Rest assured, Remon will do the same," Thomas attempted to reassure him.

"It's not soon enough to save her," Hagan replied.

"You know by the sounds. Death stands next to her. He is going to take her."

"And if he does not, she will face this again. She told me the best part of her marriage was when she became pregnant. Remon stopped coming to her bed every night. He will return to it if she survives this."

"As is his right. You have no right to her, friend."

"I would think we are more than friends," Hagan said, his eyes traveling over Thomas before returning to the window. "I know," Hagan said. "I know I have no claim to her. I keep telling myself this. But I cannot stop myself from hoping more for her."

"Perhaps this," Thomas said, gesturing toward the walls behind which Death was taking Angeline into his arms. "Is God's mercy, so she does not have to live a lifetime with Remon."

"Perhaps," Hagan mumbled, but he did not believe God was concerned with showing Angeline mercy at that moment. Indeed, if that was his goal, she would have long since died. Instead, what was happening behind those walls was torture.

"I think you should rejoin Montagu's army. I can hold Janville with my men. You know you can trust me to split the ransom."

"I do not doubt either of those things," Hagan replied. "But there is no point. She will die soon." Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Thomas nod. "But be patient with me until then?"

Thomas slapped Hagan affectionately on the back. "Take the time you need, brother. Wait for her to die and then mourn her death. After that, there is nothing more to do."

Thomas walked away from Hagan, who stood staring at the window, waiting.

The title 'Chapter 6' is written in a black, elegant, serif font. It is flanked by two decorative roses. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is purple with green leaves and a small bud. The roses appear to be part of a vine that curves around the text.

## Chapter 6

The hall lay silent as Lincoln entered with Hagan. Upon the dais, Thomas sat with Remon. Remon was the only voice that rose in the hall. It echoed in the silence, and it immediately grated Lincoln's nerves.

They were halfway to the table when they both heard his words. "I can only hope she will have better sense than to carry on as she did when you first came. That is why she lost my child."

He was talking about Angeline caring for injured people and running the household after they were invaded. Hagan tensed beside him.

"I will tie her to her bed when next she becomes pregnant. Then, perhaps when I mount her even," Remon said as if contemplating the idea. "She does like to bite and claw."

Lincoln could feel the heat of Hagan's rage burn him. "He is a cold-hearted devil. You will not be able to change that," he whispered.

"But I can beat his snarky face to a pulp and cut his dick off so he never puts it in his wife again."

Lincoln stopped and grabbed Hagan's arm. For a moment, Hagan did not bend to Lincoln's will. The muscles in the big man's arms were tense, ready to jerk free, but he didn't. Instead, he turned and looked at Lincoln. "You have to get over this," Lincoln warned.

Hagan's face reddened, his eyes widened at Lincoln's words, then he shook his head slowly. "Angeline almost died."

"The countess," Lincoln said, stressing the title, "is not yours."

"I know this. I know she never will be. But how can you turn your back on what is happening here?"

Lincoln shrugged. "It is sometimes the way of things. She is his property, and that is all she is to him. It does not matter if you think she is more to you." Then, to drive his words home, he offered, "Just because you are more fond of my horse than yours does not mean you can take him." Lincoln studied Hagan for a moment before concluding, "It is no different. Property is property, whether land, animal or wife."

"I am not so hungry now," Hagan said. He turned and stalked from the room.



## Chapter 7

Thomas stood in the doorway. The portal had opened silently, so Hagan and Angeline were unaware they were discovered. Hagan held the girl in his loose embrace. His head was bent over Angeline, and he was kissing her. Thomas was shocked into silence for a moment. This was what Hagan had been raging about since first meeting Angeline. She was too young for intimacy. When Hagan's eyes rose from her and met Thomas's, he straightened quickly, dropping his hand that cupped Angeline's face.

"Is this how you keep your distance?" Thomas snapped at him.

Hagan looked from Thomas to Angeline and then back. "It is my fault," Angeline said, stepping forward. She placed a hand on Thomas's arm in a placating gesture. It made Thomas bristle more. "I only wanted to know what it was like to be kissed."

Thomas continued to silently stare at the hand that rested on him. It was small and pale, and he wondered how any man could do horrific things to her. He wondered how Hagan could do such things to her.

For all her bravado, Angeline drew her hand back from beneath his stare.

At that point, Hagan stepped around Angeline and easily guided Thomas from the room.

"It is not what you think," Hagan began after looking behind him to see that Angeline did not follow.

"What do I think?" Thomas asked.

"I was only sharing a kiss with her."

"She is a child," Thomas hissed.

"She is a woman who nearly died in childbirth. You cannot be a child after that."

"So now it is okay to turn her into a whore?"

Hagan stopped in his tracks. Thomas stopped and turned back to him. "It was only a kiss."

Thomas took the two steps back to him. "Only a kiss? You are aware she has a husband?"

"She had never been kissed before," Hagan said. It was his only defense, one that made no sense to Thomas.

"When she was laboring, she said she thought how sad it was that she was dying in childbirth but had never been kissed."

"So, she came to you?"

"Yes, she did."

"Why?" Thomas asked, staring at his friend. He feared Hagan would take their entire plan down if he did not step carefully.

"Because I am kind to her."

"Why are you even near her? Did we not decide being around her was not a good idea for you?"

"I cannot help it. It is as you speak of Anne. I miss her when I am not with her."

"That is different. I have known Anne for a lifetime. I would not be away from her if not for this cursed war. I do miss her. It drives me mad to have gone this long without laying eyes on her. What you have is guilt because we did not stop my father."

"It was too late for that girl, and none of that has anything to do with Angeline."

"Then why are you dallying with her?"

Hagan shook his head, "I do not know. I'm drawn to her."

"You will bring more pain to her and to yourself."

"But I can give her now, while I am here, what her husband will never give her."

"What are you talking about, Hagan? Are you talking about love?" Thomas felt anger flaring. This was not what they were here for. "She is married," Thomas said, enunciating every word as if Hagan was daft. His friend had to be.

"I am talking about just a moment in a lifetime. What we share here will only be a blink in my life when I die."

Thomas could not help but laugh. "You are what, sixteen? You are still too young to worry about such things."

"And how many women have you been with?" Hagan asked.

"Only my wife."

"So, what do you know of such things?" Hagan's voice filled with malice. "You still believe you will return home, impregnate your wife, and live forever happy. Life does not work so easily. How long have we been here, away from Anne?"

"Nearly four years," Thomas said with guilt and loneliness.

"When I saw you marry Anne and take her away for the wedding night, I was filled with such envy for you. It is not because your wife is beautiful, the kindest and most caring woman I have ever known. But it was because of your smile and how you two looked at each other. And I thought that it was fantastic what you shared. You are fortunate you could choose your wife. You are fortunate you may one day have a son to carry on your name."

Thomas frowned. He knew Hagan feared he would never be able to father a child. A battle injury left many questioning if he could. None more than Hagan, who still suffered the effects of that injury.

Then Hagan shrugged. "It does not matter. I may not survive this place. I may not be alive long enough to have a wife to love as you do yours."

"Soon, we will go home, wealthy men," Thomas declared.

"Soon, we will go home and leave Angeline here with Remon," Hagan began sadly. "I know, I know," Hagan said before Thomas could remind him again he was her husband.

"And she is still a child, no matter if you convince yourself otherwise. For that matter, so are you. Allow me to find you a woman."

"I am drawn to no woman as I am to Angeline."

Thomas grabbed Hagan by the arm, squeezing tightly, so he had no choice but to pay attention to Thomas. "You stop this. It cannot and will not end well, you know this. Find someone else to put your dick into, but leave that girl alone. We ransom her and that ass of a husband of hers. Without them, we will never get home. Remember that and forget her," Thomas said, releasing him and walking away.

Thomas's feet thundered with each angry step down the corridor. His heart pounded, and his pulse drummed in his ears. If Hagan was any other man, he would send him away or at least have him punished to the point he would never look at Angeline again. But Hagan was his brother, if not by blood, then by war. Perhaps it created a bond stronger than blood. A part of Thomas wished Angeline had died with her child. That part of Thomas made him hate himself because Angeline deserved none of this. Angeline deserved a man like Hagan, but it was far too late for her.

Thomas crossed the hall, deciding to punish Hagan severely if he defied his order and was seen with Angeline again. This weighed heavily on Thomas. Punishments were dealt with quickly under Thomas. His men who wielded the whip to punish those who erred were not brutish. Thomas had seen too many men ripped to shreds by other commanders to want to take his punishments to such extremes. But they were struck hard enough to leave marks and terrorize his men into toeing the line for the good of the army. He did not want to do that to Hagan, a man who had his back and followed his every command. At least, all except this one.

Time was running out. Soon Humphrey would return for the gold, and Thomas hoped to leave the garrison under someone else's control as soon as he received the ransom. He could go without telling anyone of the gold, as it was hidden far behind barrels of food supplies in the back of the cellar. It could be months before anyone bothered to look in them. But Thomas knew it did not matter if he was in France or Stokesley. Humphrey would kill him if he wanted to. It all depended on whether the council of the juvenile king knew of the gold or if the king's uncle was betraying them. Thomas did not want the answer to that.

The chapter title 'Chapter 8' is written in a black, elegant, serif font. It is flanked by two decorative roses. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud. The roses are positioned above the letters of the chapter title.

## Chapter 8

Remon's dark eyes met Hagan's and narrowed on the corners. Remon had noticed Hagan's interest in his wife. A surprise since the man seemed to not care about her at all. Now he took sick pleasure in demonstrating Angeline was his wife and always would be. But he did not display his wife as Hagan would, with pride and reverence. Instead, Remon constantly had a hand on her. Whether it was her shoulder, hand, waist, or thigh beneath the table. His touch made her shudder and brought a light of amusement to Remon's eyes for his wife's discomfort and Hagan's jealousy.

Remon and Angeline moved closer, and as they reached Hagan, who glared openly at Remon, he turned to his wife and said, "I will be to your bed in a moment," Remon told her.

Her green eyes flicked to Hagan before her head dropped, and she moved obediently away. When Hagan could drag his eyes from her, he saw Remon smirking.

"I reclaim my husbandly rights tonight."

Hagan felt himself seethe. "It has not been a week."

"That does not matter. What matters is that you know she is mine, and I will show you both that when she is carrying my next child."

Hagan grabbed Remon's arm. "I told you I would kill you if you hurt her."

It was a cool, calculated gaze that met Hagan's. "I don't think Thomas would appreciate that. If I die, all talks of getting a ransom will die with me. Angeline has no family. Mine would rather see her impoverished than carrying the Toussaint name. With that in mind, you and I both know there is nothing you can do to stop me."

Hagan could not let his fingers release Remon's arm.

"I grow impatient with my delay. I would hate to take it out on my wife." Remon stressed the words "my wife" as Hagan released him. Remon smirked at him before he turned and followed in Angeline's wake.

Hagan stared after him. Thomas at his shoulder startled him. "What were those glares about?" Thomas asked, handing Hagan a glass of wine.

Hagan looked down into it as he responded, "he is joining her tonight."

"I thought he would give her a little more time to recover."

"I would think," Hagan began dryly, "he would have waited so as not to get a child pregnant. Yet, he is doing it again. It will kill her next time."

"With God's good grace, we will be long gone from this place when that happens." Thomas left him with the words weighing him down as if the earth sat on his shoulders.

Hagan's steps carried him up the staircase, and he found his feet planted on the floor outside Angeline's door. He pressed his ear to the wooden barrier. He could hear Remon with her, grunting his satisfaction to be intimate with his wife again. With a child. It sickened Hagan, and he forced his fists to unclench. He could rush in and yank Remon off her, but what then? He couldn't kill the man. He was far too vital to Thomas, to both of them.

Hagan pressed a palm against the door. He willed his strength to enter the chamber and inhabit Angeline.



# Chapter 9

Hagan stared at the ground. His mind was a million miles away.

“Hagan,” Lincoln said again, louder.

Whatever thought Hagan was absorbed in, he snapped away from. “Do you want to take up the sword with me?” Lincoln asked.

Hagan stood patiently as he looked over Lincoln and the two blunted practice swords in his hands. Even with his mind distracted, the corner of his lip quirked up. He held his hand out, and Lincoln passed him the sword. They stepped out onto the field that rang with the steel swords crashing into one another, the thump of striking staffs, and the grunt of men.

Hagan took a defensive stance, and Lincoln lunged toward him. The battle was fierce at first, but Lincoln knew it did not take long for Hagan’s mind to begin to wonder again. He was always a formidable opponent. The battles with him were intense from beginning to end. But now, Hagan’s efforts were diminishing. Lincoln eased his strikes to prolong the practice, but Hagan suddenly stopped, letting the tip of the sword rest in the dirt.

“I am going to Duke Phillip of Burgundy for his support in taking Angeline away from here.”

“Why would he care?”

“He does not care whether he supports the English or the French. It is what he can do for himself and his lands. He would like a chance to purchase the loyalty of a man such as I.”

“What of Thomas?” Lincoln asked, stepping closer. He did not want any ears catching their words.

Hagan shrugged. “He will not like it. But he will deal with it. He can still ransom Remon. He can still get his money and return to his wife. What of Angeline? What chance does she have here? Perhaps she will be better suited for carrying a child in a year. Girls bloom at her age, but she will not get that chance because Remon will kill her first.”

“It is not right.”

Again Hagan shrugged. “Many things are not right. Many of those things we have done. I do not know why this would be different.”

“Because it affects us all. I don’t think Thomas will forgive you if you take her.”

“He will,” Hagan replied with foolish confidence. “He knows what it is like to love a woman. He will understand one day.” Hagan studied Lincoln for a minute before saying, “I have to go.” He handed the sword to Lincoln and left the field.

Lincoln watched him go, knowing he would send a messenger Burgundy before the day ended. Lincoln wondered if he should catch that messenger. But he knew it would not matter. If he did catch this one, there would be another. Or worse, Hagan and Angeline would flee on their own. If he was going to get away with another man's wife without being hung, he needed help. Few people were powerful enough to sweep such a thing under the rug. But Burgundy could, and Lincoln decided not to stop the messenger. Instead, he would let the cards fall where they may and ride out the consequences.

But his gut clenched and churned, warning him it would not be that simple. It was never that simple.



## Chapter 10

“Remon!” Thomas called as he opened the door into the lord’s chamber. “Hagan was supposed to bring you—.” His words died in his throat.

Remon and the hope for fortune lay upon the stone floor. Blood was pooled around Remon, spreading on the cold stonework from his prone body. Though tightly pieced together, the blood still seeped between the stones, melding with the mortar for all time.

Thomas rushed forward, squatting next to Remon. He stared at his back, which did not rise and fall. He rolled the man’s still-warm body onto his back. Thomas had no doubt that the deep chest wound was made by a sword. For a brief instant in time, before Thomas’s brain could bring the pieces together, he wondered what kept Hagan from coming to Remon. Thomas stood. His legs shook now. The thing that penetrated the most was the poverty Thomas would be returning to Stokesley. Not only had he been away from his beloved wife for five years, but he also had nothing to show for it. Whoever did this set forth a chain reaction that would be far-reaching all the way to England and the land Thomas could no longer afford. This was what he got for being patient, doing his duty, and being an honest man. He had been passed over time and again by those unscrupulous and greedy.

Thomas would go to Stokesley and remain if he could scrape together the taxes expected of him. The king would not take notice of his failings as an earl. But Anne would know as well as their future children. All his villages depended on him to provide his army for their protection. He would not have one and would have to depend upon the untrained farmers and artisans to protect the villages and his keeps. An untrained army was weak, making him sick at the thought.

Thomas ran a hand through his hair and then froze. His mind flitted to Angeline and then to Hagan. It pieced together in his head in a collision of disbelief and rage. Hagan had come here, and he killed Remon. Thomas knew this instinctively and without a doubt. Thomas turned and fled the room, heading toward Hagan’s. Thomas was not surprised to see the chamber empty, even empty of the bags that contained Hagan’s possessions. Thomas turned and raced toward Lincoln’s chamber. When he flung the door open, Lincoln’s head snapped up. He stood at his bed, bag in hand, and stuffed his items into it.

“Where’s Hagan?”

“He has left.”

“Left?” Thomas thundered. Had he not known? “Where?” then, a more urgent question invaded. “When?”

Lincoln only shook his head slightly. Thomas turned, fleeing toward the stable as a curse echoed into the corridor behind him. As Thomas reached the outer courtyard and turned to take the steps leading to the stables, he nearly tumbled down them in haste.

He would kill Hagan. Thomas knew even in his rage that it would change nothing. But Hagan had betrayed him. His friend, his brother, the man Thomas had put all his trust into, had thrown it away when he drove his sword into Remon. He reached the stable and slung the door open.



## Chapter III

“What are you doing, Hagan?” Thomas’s sharp voice came with his entrance into the stable.

Hagan turned his head only a moment before returning his attention to the task of packing the horse. He scowled. He hoped Remon’s body wouldn’t be found before he was clear of Janville’s gates. His worst-case scenario was that a servant would find Remon and begin to raise the alarm. It would take more time before anyone came to the stable. He hoped he would be long gone by that time.

“Hagan, you can’t do this,” Thomas said, coming closer.

At his shoulder, Hagan sensed Angeline holding her breath. “It is done, Thomas,” Hagan replied with no regret.

“It is not done. Not by far. Someone has to answer for Remon’s death.”

“I will, but not until I arrive safely on English soil with Angeline.”

“What am I to do Hagan? Do you not know the significance of your actions?”

“I know, Thomas,” Hagan replied. His voice came out with a bitter note. Hagan knew what he had done. He knew the consequences to himself and to Thomas. But he knew what would become of Angeline if he had not taken action. He and Thomas would find a way to survive, but he was Angeline’s only hope for an opportunity to do the same.

“Thomas,” Lincoln said, plunging breathlessly into the stable. He drew up short, startled that Hagan was still there.

“Do you know what you have done?” Thomas screamed at Hagan. His face was twisted in a shroud of rage Hagan did not think possible on the man’s face. Thomas had every right, but Hagan hoped one day Thomas would forgive him and come to understand.

Finished with the bags and tightening the girth, he turned to Thomas. “What would you do if you went home and found a man in control of Anne? A man who had been abusing her and threatening her life with his actions? What would you do, Thomas?”

“But she is another man’s wife,” Thomas declared between his clenched teeth.

“And I love her as you love Anne.”

“My love is why I’m here and not by my warm hearth and my beautiful wife in my arms. That is why I have slept in the dirt, rain, and heat. I have lived smelling like myself, my horse, and every foul thing we had to suffer through.” Thomas’s voice rose to a scream by the time he finished.

Hagan scowled as he turned his horse and attempted to lead him from the stable. Thomas stood in his path, stopping Hagan, but on some level, Thomas knew he would not be stopped.

"I will not let you leave with her," Thomas said. "You will not leave me standing alone with this mess. I told you this is what would happen. But, for the love of God, I cannot explain this," he heard the desperation in his friend's voice.

Hagan knew Thomas would be unable to explain how he allowed Hagan to get to the point where he killed Remon and ran with Angeline. Hagan was under Thomas's command, making Thomas responsible for Hagan's actions. Not only did Thomas face the continuation of his diminishing estates, but he faced punishment from Montagu. Hagan knew Thomas would not escape his actions unscathed, but he would never be able to leave Angeline behind. Perhaps, with Burgundy's help, Hagan would not see complete ruin, even if he took responsibility for Remon's death. He could never leave Angeline to face what he had done alone because she was why he had done it. It would not matter that she was a tiny, desperate creature making a last effort at defense. She could be executed.

"Get out of my path," Hagan grumbled to him.

"I should kill you for this."

Hagan's eyes roved over Thomas. Thomas had not come here to kill him, or he would have his sword strapped to his hip. Then Hagan's eyes flicked to Lincoln, still standing behind Thomas.

Thomas swung toward Lincoln. "You will guard him in his cowardly exit?" Thomas demanded.

Slowly Lincoln's hand moved to the sword on his belt, coming to rest on the pommel. "You plan to kill me?" Thomas asked incredulously.

"We will not kill you, Thomas. No matter what you think of me, I still hold you in the highest regard and respect. But I will not let you stop me." Hagan took two steps forward before Thomas rushed at him with a growl of rage.

The man was considerably smaller than Hagan, but he was like a stone wall slamming into him, nearly knocking him off balance as he drove Hagan backward. Hagan made a decision in that instant. He would not lay a hand on his friend. He recognized he had done enough without leaving physical marks too. Thomas had a forearm against Hagan's throat, pushing him back so his body slammed against a stall, making the horse inside expel a note of alarm. The hand planted on Hagan's chest rose into the air, and his fist landed on the side of Hagan's face with the power of a sledgehammer.

Hagan was aware Lincoln already stood behind Thomas before the blow came. That Lincoln didn't stop Thomas before he could land his punch spoke volumes on how Lincoln felt about Hagan's decision. Because Lincoln had an inexplicable sense of loyalty, where Hagan was concerned, that did not waver, he would never speak his mind if it went against Hagan's. He would kill Thomas if Hagan gave him the order. Before Thomas could get another blow in, Lincoln wrapped his arms around Thomas, pinning his arms firmly while using his bull strength to pull him back.

Hagan pushed away from the stall and retook his horse's reins. He took a step, then turned and looked at Lincoln, holding firmly to Thomas, whose face was nearly crimson in its outrage.

“Damn you, Hagan. Don’t do this!” Thomas raged, trying to lunge from Lincoln’s grip. Thomas was a formidable opponent, but his strength was little against men like Hagan and Lincoln. Hagan was thankful Thomas had not put on his sword, or things would end differently between them.

“I hope one day you will understand,” Hagan said softly.

Thomas’s eyes changed then. The rage fled, giving way to the desperation of all his fears. “Please, don’t do this.”

Hagan paused. He could say nothing that would make his decision any easier for Thomas. “I’m sorry, truly.” Then Hagan turned, bidding Angeline follow.



## Chapter 12

Thomas writhed and screamed as Hagan disappeared out the door. Thomas was a wiry man, but he was not without his strengths. One of those was his ability to fight and his bullheadedness in not knowing when to give up. He fought until Lincoln's arms ached from the effort of holding him. By then, Hagan was somewhere outside the castle gates. Soon he would be too far ahead for Thomas to catch him.

Lincoln loosened his grip and thrust Thomas out of arm's reach. Thomas panted and paused a moment. But it was only a moment before he moved toward the tack room.

"You can saddle any horse here, and I will cut it down before you make it from this barn," Lincoln warned.

Thomas froze, his back rigid. Slowly he turned around to face Lincoln. The earl's face was set in stone, but something different in his blue eyes lurked.

"Why are you letting him go?" Thomas asked.

"Why wouldn't I. He is right. Angeline deserves better than that bastard. Anyone deserves better than that."

"One woman," Thomas's voice rose in fury as he held up a finger. "That is all it has taken for my two most trusted men to turn on me."

What Lincoln saw in those eyes, now full of fury, was the knowledge that Hagan and Lincoln were betraying him.

"A child," Lincoln mumbled. For him, that made the difference in all this.

"A child is no better when it comes to brothers and that sword that is now in my back. You know this will fell me."

"I cannot change that now," Lincoln said. He hoped his calm voice might help calm Thomas. But the Earl had no reason to calm. For his part in the betrayal, Thomas should take Lincoln's head. But Lincoln knew his friend would not.

"What about before? Could you have stopped it before Hagan walked into this barn? Did you not know soon enough to warn me?"

Thomas's body straightened in indignation when Lincoln did not answer. His eyes darkened, and the intense hate there made Lincoln shudder. Thomas stared at Lincoln for a minute and then moved forward. His angry stride carried him to Lincoln. His hands came up and slammed into Lincoln's chest, shoving him. The blow took his breath and staggered Lincoln backward. Thomas had walked out of the barn as Lincoln drew in a breath, and he let him go.

Lincoln returned to his chamber. His bags still lay unpacked, and he paused in the doorway, staring at them. He felt a loss that made his chest ache more than

Thomas's fist. This was the first home he had ever known. Not at Janville, but with Hagan and Thomas. They were brothers. They had laughed together, fought together, celebrated together, and mourned together. Guilt for ending that for Thomas washed over him. There was betrayal, but this betrayal cut deep for them all.

Hagan would not have stopped in his attempt to free Angeline from Remon. He could not have done such a thing because Hagan was a better person than he or even Thomas. Loyalty drove Hagan to keep his banner beneath Thomas's. He needed neither the glory nor the treasures from this war. He was brought to France with an obligation to the king and a friendship with Thomas. What Thomas, Hagan, and Lincoln had was far beyond friendship. And that was gone.

Lincoln thought for a moment about leaving Thomas. But Thomas had to answer for Hagan, and he did not envy the man for that. He felt his betrayal run as deep as Hagan's. A great commander, Thomas drove his men beyond capacity out of loyalty, not fear. All his men fought beneath the Ravenshill banner, knowing they may not survive. But they had cried for victory and faith in the lord and their commander. How could Lincoln do any differently? He would give Thomas time to cool before he went and asked for his forgiveness. For what he had done, Lincoln would even beg for it. He had never begged a man before.



## Chapter 13

Thomas sat at the trestle table, unmindful of the castle's people and his men casting anxious glances his way. He swirled the wine in his glass, staring into the dark liquid. He raised it to his lips and paused before swallowing it in one great gulp. He banged it back onto the table, and the servant girl refilled his cup. His plate sat untouched at his elbow. He lifted the cup to his lips and drank it dry before lowering it again.

Lincoln stood not far from the table, staring at him as the girl quickly refilled his wine again. Thomas grabbed it from the table and stood. He kicked his chair away and balanced a hand on the table, his head swimming.

"I have come to ask your forgiveness for my part in what transpired this day."

Lincoln knelt before him to emphasize his words as Thomas rounded the table. He advanced aggressively, his intent evident to all those who watched. Lincoln's head bowed, but Thomas could see his lowered eyes following his advance.

As Thomas reached him, Lincoln raised his head, making Thomas pause for a heartbeat. Then, "Forgive me," Lincoln said again.

Lincoln's voice sparked his rage anew, and Thomas raised his cup and brought it crashing down against Lincoln's head. The copper vessel swung it sideways, dousing him in the wine.

Thomas stepped back, slinging the cup with fury across the hall.

"How dare you come before me and ask my forgiveness," Thomas spat. "I should kill you where you kneel." Thomas felt his heart pounding. His hands shook as the rage ran through him in a frenzy.

"You will not do that. You would not even kill Hagan now."

Lincoln's words slammed into him like a fist. It infuriated him. Lincoln was right. He wanted to draw blood, but if he ended either of their lives in the process, he would regret it for the rest of his days.

"I may not kill you, but I sure as hell am going to beat the shit out of you."

Thomas moved fast. He had spent his life fighting men much larger and stronger than himself. He compensated with speed and accuracy. Lincoln moved, but Thomas anticipated it and slammed into him, knocking him off balance as he tried to gain his feet. Lincoln went down and rolled, and Thomas followed. Thomas's fist greeted Lincoln as he tried to rise from the floor. It caught him on the cheek and rocked his head sideways. Lincoln reached for him, and Thomas landed a quick punch to the ribs.

Lincoln lurched to his feet and charged at him, but Thomas sprang away, narrowly missing Lincoln's grasp. It infuriated him further that Lincoln was giving little effort to fight Thomas off. Thomas brought a fist up, but Lincoln blocked it. Thomas's fast fist caught him in the ribs again while driving a knee into his gut. Finally, Lincoln's grip loosened, and Thomas spun, landing a blow with his elbow to Lincoln's face as he jumped away.

Blood flowed from Lincoln's nose and smeared across his face.

"Fight me, you fucking coward," Thomas roared at him.

"Thomas." Lincoln began.

Thomas charged him again with a scream of rage. He went into his arms, and beyond, his weight staggered Lincoln. Immediately Thomas thrust a fist into Lincoln's chin, knocking him further off balance. The big man tumbled, and Thomas let himself fall with him. He landed on Lincoln, and straddling him, he began to rain blow after blow down on his head. Lincoln tried to fight from beneath him, but Thomas struck so fast he was unable to avoid his fists.

Thomas felt the yield in Lincoln's body, and he paused. Lincoln's head was a pulp, a bloody mess from his nose and several opened cuts. The big man was barely conscious, with his eyes rolling back and forth in his head. Thomas leaned over him. "You will leave here now. Wherever you go, know that I will kill you if I see you again. That is a promise I will keep regardless of what you once were to me."

Thomas staggered up from Lincoln and stood on unsteady feet, staring down at the man once his brother.

"Bring me wine," Thomas snapped at the serving girl clutching her pitcher. Then, he turned toward his chamber, leaving Lincoln groaning on the floor.



## Chapter 14

Hagan slipped into the small room behind Angeline. Their clothes dripped from the rain clinging to them, weighing them down. Angeline moved to the center of the room and the small brazier that heated it. She held her hands over it, shivering and dripping. Hagan latched the door behind them. It took some doing in a little place like this, but a tub would soon be brought with warmed water so Angeline could bathe.

Hagan waited, the cold had seeped into him too, and he fought the shivering that threatened. He had felt it necessary throughout the journey to remain strong for Angeline. He did not mirror her fear on his face, but he felt it to his core. Tomorrow they would arrive in Dijon and the Duke, where Angeline might witness his execution. But at least she was free of Remon.

He heard her teeth chattering, and he went to her. Her cloak did nothing to warm her, trapping the chill of the rain against her skin. He turned her and unfastened the loops that held it in place across her chest. He peeled it from her and let it drop to the floor with a splatter. Beneath the cloak, she wore a red tunic and black shift. He began to work them from her body. He stepped away when he freed her of her final clothing, leaving only her shift. She protested none of it, only looking up at him with big eyes that drove their way into his soul. They made him nervous. They made him fear he was not worthy of the trust he saw there.

Then his fear fled as she slipped the shift off. Hagan thought she would be a child beneath her layers of clothing. Even when he lifted her into his arms and held her, he had not felt curves. But the child was gone, replaced by a woman with budding breasts. Her waist was as trim as he would imagine it to be but flared out to hips that fit a small woman like her. Between her thighs were the dark ringlets hiding her sex.

His eyes shot back to her face, watching him. She was not ashamed to have his eyes on her naked form. She had bared it for him and left him time to study it. He turned away and grabbed a blanket from the bed. As he approached her, his heart stopped beating. He wondered if this woman would be his or if she was only here until he could get her to safety. But her eyes did not look at him as if she was prepared to toss him to the side. Instead, they watched him with a tranquil expression of peace and a mixture of anticipation.

He brought the blanket across her shoulders and pulled it together at the nape of her neck. Her hands were there, resting on top of his. Her fingers caressed his skin, smiling at him. His heart jumped back to life with a force he thought would surely make it explode.

A knock sounded, heralding the servants dragging the oak tub with them. The tub was filled with steaming water in a short time, leaving two buckets behind. Angeline dropped the blanket and stepped into the tub as soon as the door closed behind the servants. Latching the door, Hagan froze his hand on the lock, staring at the wooden door, fearing to turn when he heard the splash of water.

He heard her sigh and wondered if he should quietly exit. Maybe he should clear his throat. She might assume he left with the servants if her back had been to the door. Or he could turn around. He was still struggling to make a decision when her voice carried to him. "I want you, Hagan," Angeline said.

Hagan spun around and saw Angeline watching him. Her arms draped over the tub's sides unabashed, and her bare chest was displayed above the water. She appeared bold, and some of him wanted to smile at it.

"I don't think..." Hagan's words trailed away because he could not think.

"But I have been," she assured him. "Come wash my back and hair, and I will tell you what I have been thinking."

His legs were leaden as he moved to do her bidding, as she knew he would. His hands were in her hair, lathering it, massaging her scalp. He froze when a soft moan escaped her. "Don't stop," she told him, so he went back to rubbing her scalp. Then, he moved to her back after a moment, feeling himself harden despite his will. He trailed the cloth up her back, ready to drop it over her shoulder and put distance between them. But her hand seized his.

"You are the kindest and gentlest man to ever grace my life," she said, nuzzling her cheek against his hand. She was so small compared to him. How could he be anything but gentle with her? "I know you could probably marry better than me, someone less tainted." She paused a moment, and the silence of their breathing stretched between them. "My marriage with Remon was my uncle's doing. I do not wish another to make this decision for me. I wish to marry you and have your children."

Hagan sat back on his heels. He would have agreed without a second thought if she did not mention the children. "I may not be able to." Hagan stared at the back of her dark hair, slickened to her scalp.

"Why do you believe this?" Her voice was soft as she turned to him.

"I was injured, and though the wound has healed, I cannot..." Hagan had spoken to Thomas about his affliction but never considered how he would talk to a woman of it. But Angeline had been married and was not a blushing maiden. "I cannot keep myself erect for long."

Hagan recalled the carnage that had been his genitals when a broken lance struck him in the groin. The splintered and ragged edges pierced him in several places. He never knew the terror such a thing would be. But it ate at him the entire time he healed. He had yet to be with a woman, yet to marry and have children. He still had to prove himself, but he feared his manhood was lost to him.

"That does not matter," Angeline said. "I would be happy if you just kissed me for the rest of our lives. What do you think of my proposal?"

"Well," he began. "I think it is not often the bride negotiates her own marriage."

"Quite unseemly, I wager." Angeline twisted to rest her arms on the side of the tub as she looked at him.

Angeline grinned at him in a wicked way that made his groin tighten. He smiled back as he rolled to his feet. How she rolled her eyes up to look at him made him jerk in response, It was a deliberately coy look. He laughed at her and backed away. "You are a vixen Lady Angeline."

"What is your answer?"

"Angeline." Hagan's voice held a level of frustration. Not long ago, Hagan saw her as a child victimized by the man who was supposed to protect her. Though he was quickly growing to see her otherwise, he might be the only man who had ever been kind to her. "How do you know it is me you want? Other men are better men than I."

Angeline chuckled at him. "You know very little for an earl." She turned, giving him her back as she settled into the warm water. "Turmoil creates wisdom, and I am very wise. I can see hate in someone's eyes. I can see the second a storm is about to brew. I have seen enough disgust directed at me to feel and see it. I can see evil because I was forced to look at it up close. I see none of that in your eyes. I see how you cared for me and hated betraying your friends for me. I don't want you just because you are my hero. I think I loved you the moment I lay eyes on you down that corridor. From that moment, something has pulled me to you. I want to be with you, not because I fear what is out there. I want to be with you for no reason other than to be with you. If our days are filled with sitting before a warm hearth together or fleeing one catastrophe after another, I will be happy."

Hagan couldn't swallow. He couldn't breathe. When finally he drew in a ragged breath, it shook. "I could never dream of an honor greater than having you as a wife."

Her head bobbed. It was the only affirmation he received. That, too, made him smile. "I will see if we can get some food." He fled the room, aware he had a ridiculous smile on his face that he could not seem to wipe off.

The title 'Chapter 15' is written in a black, elegant, serif font. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a stem. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a stem. The roses are positioned above the letters of the chapter title.

## Chapter 15

Lincoln lay stretched on the bed, propped on the pillows, his hands behind his head. He watched the whore put her clothes on. She was a pleasant enough woman to look at. Her breasts had been more than one of his hands could hold alone. Her hips were round, and she knew how to ride a man like he was a crazed bull. Between her legs was as good as any other whore. Any woman, for that matter. That was what made his debauchery so appealing.

He wanted to take her again, but that would cost him more money. There was no reason to spend it all on one woman. He had far to travel, no matter which path he chose. Any course would have plenty of whores along the way. Lincoln was not above luring women who were not whores to act as his with the right amount of money. He knew he crossed many of God's edicts when he found pleasure in buying women who never had intentions of being purchased. He especially liked buying other men's wives. He found himself well-equipped to please a woman, and nothing made him harder than showing a woman what her husband did not give. He bought a virgin once but had not enjoyed it as many men did. She had been too scared and inexperienced to lay there and let him have his way.

The whore walked to the dresser and moved to take the coin she had just earned with Lincoln. "One more thing before you go," Lincoln said.

He flipped the blanket back to reveal his nakedness. He slid to the edge of the bed and sat up. Reaching into his coin pouch, he drew out another coin. Laying it on the bed, he used his finger to slide it toward her. She smiled, and he spread his legs, positioning himself so she could sink to her knees in front of him.

As she pleased him again, he thought of his destination. He had once contemplated his destiny. But destinies changed in ways Lincoln had not known they could. He did not know if Satan or God made things turn topsy-turvy or if it was the constant battle between one's evil and the other's good.

Lincoln's fingers sank into the woman's hair. The question he had to answer was if he would strike out on his own again. He was sure he could find an army or a band of mercenaries to take him on. He was not done with battle yet. Battle made him strong, it made him virile, and it made this sin of the flesh nothing in comparison. Hagan would take him in. But Lincoln had never been to Helmsley. He had been to England rarely, but he was raised among the English and knew the language better than his native Polish.

Hagan's home was there, and Lincoln would also be assured a home. He would have a bed and a roof over his head. So perhaps it would be good to stop fighting for a while.

The tempo of the woman's bobbing head increased, and he pressed her head down firmly as his hips rose and fell. He would not have the chance to find whores along a path he no longer traveled. Would he be satisfied with just one woman? He did not see how he could be. But a man need not content himself with just one mistress. But a man had to have money to keep one mistress and a fortune to have more than one.

Helmsley was not small from what Hagan had said. It had a large population which meant there would be many women that could be bought. What else would he have to spend his coin on? Many women would be grateful to lay with him in exchange for a better chance at feeding their children. Some women, however, could not be bought. Lincoln supposed he was a man who wanted what he could not have. And those women who did not accept his money drove him insane with the need to know what treasure they possessed more valuable than the coin that bought others. Those were rare. Hagan was aware the hardships of life for peasants gave the women little choice in the matter. But it was a choice all the same.

Lincoln felt himself climax. He thrust deep, forcing her head down before his release. When his hand relieved the pressure, she jerked her head from him and drew in a long breath. Her face was red. "You should give me more coin for that," she declared when she could speak again.

"You should learn to breathe through your nose, and I would not suffocate you."

Lincoln challenged her to say more as she dragged her arm across her mouth. If she demanded it, he would give her more. Instead, she turned and huffed from the room.

Lincoln leaned back on his elbows, thinking what a fantastic way to start another day. His mood was light. Not only from the whore but because he had decided he would go after Hagan and see what a home was like. At least for a while.



## Chapter 16

Thomas closed the door quietly behind himself. He walked to the vanity with the mirror hanging over the small table. He raised his shaking hands and studied them in the dim light coming through his chamber window as the day broke outside. Mud covered them, caking beneath his nails. It soiled the cuff of his doublet and marred his trousers where he had knelt on the ground.

He sunk his hands down into the water sitting in the basin, then raised his eyes to look at himself in the mirror. There was enough light striking his face to see the terror in his eyes. His face was streaked with dirt, and his hair was matted to his head with sweat from his exertions. There was no way he would not hang when his deception was discovered. But he would face that then. Now he had to do what he felt best. And the best thing he could think to do before everything crashed down around him was secure the gold for himself.

There would be no money from the ransom coming to Thomas. There would only be retribution coming his way. So he spent the night carrying the gold from within the walls of Janville and burying it. He would come back for it. He did not know how or when, but it was well hidden beneath earth and rock. Humphrey might kill him for it because who else besides Thomas would know of the gold's location? But if that came to pass, at least the gold would not be for Humphrey to wage war against the king if that was his intent. Regardless, when the existence of the gold was discovered, Humphrey would claim the gold was meant for Henry and his crown.

He scrubbed his hands with the water, then used the cloth he wetted in drying his hands to clean the dirt from his face. He still shook, and the longer he stared at himself in the mirror, the closer he felt to panic. He could see his own guilt in his eyes. How could everyone who would sweep through the gates any day now not see his guilt and fear?

He not only had Humphrey to face but all of England and France for the death of a man as wealthy and with such ties as Earl Remon Toussaint. Of course, there would be outrage over Angeline's abduction, but that would be because no one would want to seem callous, not mentioning the girl. Thomas had not wielded any weapon against Hagan. Not even the words he had wanted to lash him with. He had struggled to keep the peace at Janville while they waited. But no one would believe that.

Thomas changed his clothes and would have the women wash them today. Not that he could hide the evidence. That there was no gold was the evidence. He went to bed and lay upon it. He wanted it to envelope him, bring forth the wonder he had missed

out on for years sleeping on cold hard ground. But peace would not come to him. He rose and crossed back to the mirror. His hands had ceased shaking, and his face looked less guilty.

He reassured himself he could do this. He would deny everything. There were no witnesses that Thomas stood before Hagan and did not kill him for Remon's murder. Most importantly, he would claim there was no gold. If Humphrey wanted to push it, Thomas was sure a trail would take someone investigating to the truth. They would learn where the gold came from and what it was to be used for. The disappearance of the gold ensured Thomas would not be killed, at least. Humphrey would not kill him because he would know where the gold was. But it would not stop Humphrey from trying to get the answer from Thomas.

Thomas hoped Montagu, or anyone else but Humphrey would come for him. Humphrey would have little concern for Remon and Thomas's guilt or innocence. For Humphrey, it would be the gold and the torture he would use to get Thomas to speak.

Thomas wanted to grab his meager belongings, spring upon his horse, and ride for home. But running from this like a coward would only take his pursuers to Stokesley and Anne. Whatever he was to face, he would face it soon. To avoid it would bring more suffering.



# Chapter 17

## **June 17, 1429, Dijon, France**

Hagan and Angeline stood in the center of the great hall in the Duke of Burgundy's palace. Before them stood Burgundy, cousin to Charles VI, the French king whose crown Hagan and his kind had been fighting to seize control of for generations. Angeline stood at his side. Burgundy's face was twisted in what Hagan guessed correctly was anger.

"You made quick travel here. But the messenger from Humphrey was faster. I should have your head for this."

"I regret I had to kill Remon—"

"Out," Burgundy barked, cutting off Hagan's words. The man waited until the hall had cleared before his attention fell back to Hagan.

"I don't give a shit about that asshole," Burgundy said. "If you knew what you did, you would not question being responsible for your own beheading."

Hagan swallowed, feeling it stick in his throat. He felt like gagging, "What have I done?"

Burgundy hesitated before beginning to pace. His face twisted in deep thought.

"So this was all Kirkham," Burgundy said, taking a step back.

Hagan felt danger surrounding him. He wanted nothing more than to shove Angeline behind his back to better protect her. But she wouldn't understand, and here, among men who would be his enemy at the snap of Burgundy's finger, he could not defend her if he had to.

"I don't understand." Hagan was nervous. Something had happened, and he was still trying to grasp it.

Burgundy closed the distance between them again. His eyes fell on Angeline with a scowl and then back to Hagan.

"Humphrey was doing me a favor, and Lord Kirkham is supposed to protect it. I do not think he was doing his duty if he allowed you to kill that lord and leave without gutting you. Now not only is Montagu involved in this but the regency council. They have the power of the king." At the age of seven, King Henry VI had not reached his majority and could not rule. So the Regency Council was formed to speak and lead for the young king. Humphrey played a crucial role in this council and was not well-liked for his recklessness. Hagan trusted neither the council nor Humphrey to stay steady on their paths and loyalties.

Hagan swallowed again, barely breathing. He would not ask Burgundy what that favor was. He did not want to know and sink deeper into this quagmire he found them in.

“Now everyone is asking questions, and someone has to answer for them before a horde descends on Janville. For that to happen, we need a sacrifice. You or Kirkham.”

Hagan paled. “I only want Angeline safe,” Hagan said. His voice sounded as desperate as a child’s and threw Hagan further from his resolve. “Allow me to marry her and get her safely to Helmsley under my family’s protection. Then I will lay my head upon your chopping block and answer for my crime.”

Burgundy shook his head. “I cannot wait,” the duke replied with great indignation. Hagan swallowed and felt fear slide up his spine. “Do not worry, Hagan,” Burgundy said with a light laugh. “You do not have to face the block. You can see Lady Angeline safely home where you can live happily ever after with her. But you must cooperate first.”

Hagan did not want any part of what had happened and what was going to happen. But he had killed Remon and taken Angeline. He could cooperate, or he could lose his head. Honor fought a battle with wisdom inside his head.

“What do you want of me?” Hagan asked. Despite himself, his voice did not rise above a wary whisper.

“It’s simple. I will claim you and your lady were here when Remon was killed. You will testify to an animosity between Thomas Kirkham and Remon. You will say that animosity led to Thomas killing Remon.”

“I can’t do that,” Hagan said.

Burgundy scowled. “Then it must be your head that his murder is placed upon. Is that the choice you want?”

Hagan’s eyes slid to Angeline. He wished with all his being she did not stand at his shoulder. She was about to see that the man she trusted with her life was nothing but a coward.

“It is as you say,” Hagan whispered, looking back at Burgundy. “We were here.” Angeline clutched at his arm but remained silent.

Burgundy beamed. “Very well. We will get this resolved soon enough.”

The duke turned and strolled a few paces away before he turned and looked back to Hagan. “You still have plenty to answer for,” Burgundy informed him. “But that will be discussed after I cover this bloody trail you left behind.”

The title 'Chapter 18' is centered on the page. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a stem. The rose on the right is purple with green leaves and a stem. The text 'Chapter 18' is written in a black, elegant, serif font.

## Chapter 18

Lincoln smirked at the man standing before him.

“What do you think you can do, little man?” Lincoln asked. He felt a little unsteady on his feet.

The man confronting him was no soldier. Instead, he was an old, weak man with frail arms and a hint of fear behind his drooping eyelids. “You have to pay my whores.”

“I paid her,” Lincoln said, shoving past the man.

“Not what you owed her,” the man protested.

“I paid her what she was worth,” Lincoln replied, strolling from the tavern.

In Lincoln’s opinion, a whore that lay beneath a man like a dead fish was not worth the price of a quality whore. But it was a quality whore she tried to charge him for. It wasn’t likely to matter. He would never come this way again.

He was a free man, going wherever the wind took him. But it was a battering wind. Always driving him forward, forcing him out of comfort, and thrusting him into the unknown. Each time he was hurled away, the unknown became more foreboding. Where would he go now? He could easily join any other regiment in the king’s army. Any king, for that matter. Lincoln did not care who wore the crown. He could stay or go. But he had not wanted to leave the first two people he had ever cared for.

Lincoln found himself in a tavern, paying for drink after drink until he felt he could not get up from his table. He staggered to the livery where he left his horse. He sank to the ground outside the structure and quickly slipped into the relief of unconsciousness.

He awoke stiff as dawn cast its light across the sky. His head pounded, and his stomach twirled like some craven troubadour. He hurled the contents of his stomach onto the ground beside where he sat. When the wave of nausea passed, he staggered to his feet. He held to the wall, steadying the world that still undulated beneath his feet for a moment.

Drawing in a long breath, he turned and leaned his back against the stable. The shadows of the night fled, and the light pierced his skull. He dry heaved once, then rested his head against the wood. He had to develop a plan, figure out some direction, some destination. He could not keep wondering. Without a purpose, his soul strayed far from his path he had forged to God. He did not want that again. Drinking, whoring, and fighting no longer gave him the satisfaction they once had. He had walked a strict path. Minus his time as a soldier, he sat out as a Teutonic Knight. He even took his vow of celibacy with great seriousness. But that had all changed, but Hagan and Thomas had

kept him from tumbling. But now that they were gone from his life, he was in free fall. At the bottom, he knew he would plunge into darkness he could never find his way out of again.

He drew in a long breath. He wished he and the men he had come to know as brothers could reside peacefully together. But that was shattered, and he might never see Thomas again. One thing Lincoln was sure of, he could not continue toward England at such a slow pace. He was giving himself too much time to fall. Lincoln had to get to Helmsley and offer his sword to Hagan's garrison. There he would have a home he never had before. At Helmsley, he could gather himself again and shed the cloak of sin he had been covered with his entire life. Just being welcomed with a smile would be worth the journey. With his plan in mind, he stumbled to the water trough and dunked his head. He held his breath until his chest ached and the cool water cleared his head.

He rose and flung the water off his head with a shake. It dripped down his face and neck, soaking his collar as he went to saddle his horse.



## Chapter 19

In his chair, Thomas sat alone. He positioned it, so he faced down the open aisle that led to the giant oak doors at the opposite end of the hall. Thomas did not hide behind the table. At least he had the wherewithal to determine the table between he and Humphrey would peg him as a coward. It would also do no good. Better to meet him head up, with the confidence he did not feel.

He fairly quaked at the vengeance Humphrey could heap on him. The retribution would torture the rest of his days, whether it be few or many. Humphrey was a prince and unquestionable in his actions against one impoverished earl. Clear the hall and not show fear. That was all his sharp military brain could decide upon.

The door opened, and Humphrey stood in its arch. He paused, surveying Thomas, and even at the distance of the long hall, Thomas could see his position gave the man pause. Then Humphrey was moving forward, and five massive knights flanked him. Thomas felt he should rise in respect for the prince, but he knew that respect would be spit upon. Whether he sat or stood, he was confident his fate would be the same. So he remained seated. Outwardly he appeared calm, unconcerned with Humphrey's power. While inside, he fought to not piss himself with the fear that flowed through him like a torrential river. By the time Humphrey stopped in front of him, it was apparent Thomas's disrespect infuriated Humphrey. But Thomas took no pleasure in it, knowing he would pay the price later.

"I demand you surrender to me."

Thomas managed a smirk and did not rise. "Do I surrender to you or to Montagu?"

"To me."

"I see," Thomas leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him, only tight enough to still their shaking

"But he is supreme commander, respected by your father. An issue of this magnitude demands an audience with Montagu."

"No, Thomas, that is not how this will work."

Thomas leaned back again in the chair, crossing his legs. He pressed the ankle down on the knee, forcing his foot to remain still upon the ground. He had the nervous energy that called for his leg to bounce, for him to fidget. Thomas realized he was on a path he did not know how to get off. He assumed Humphrey would show up, Thomas would show some level of defiance, what man of the sword wouldn't, Humphrey would

bluster, and Thomas would be seized. He expected to be beaten, but at the same time, he hoped to lay eyes upon Montagu afterward.

“How do you think this will work?” Thomas asked. He noticed a level of hesitancy in the men behind Humphrey, thrown off by Thomas’s boldness in the face of a king’s son.

“I know,” Humphrey began, stressing the words. “You will surrender to me, or my men will beat you unconscious and put you in chains. Then you will give me the answer to a question not asked, but you know damn well what it is.”

Thomas allowed his eyes to roll across each man before calmly returning his attention to Humphrey. “I feel that is a bit extreme for this happenstance that found Remon dead and Hagan on the run.” Humphrey spoke of his gold, but for all intents and purposes, his punishment would come because of Remon’s death.”

“How is murder happenstance?” Humphrey asked.

“I daresay my part in this is only that I did not make Hagan listen when I warned him to stay away from Angeline. I, too, am put out by Remon’s death.”

Humphrey smirked at him. “Hagan told Burgundy it was you.”

Thomas could not help the surprise that flitted across his face. Humphrey saw, and his thin flat lips rose in a smile.

“It’s amazing the friendships that can be lost because of money.” Humphrey stepped closer and dropped his voice. “And I will pay a lot more to see you drawn and quartered. Take him.” Humphrey whirled away as the men converged. Still stunned and closer to wetting himself than ever, Thomas did not think to rise to meet the knights. They yanked him from his seat and slammed him onto the floor. Giant feet and fists slammed into him until he knew nothing.



He awoke to water, lots of water, and it filled his nose. His body lay upon the hard stones. He could feel them digging into the bruises left by the men. He tried to roll, but a groan escaped him. His hands were lashed tightly, painfully behind his back. Finally, he gained enough presence to realize he lay in the courtyard in a torrential downpour. He cracked a swollen eye open, lifting his head that shook under the strain.

He heard the feet approach behind him, and he wanted to roll and see who looked down on him when those steps stopped at his back. An interminable amount of time passed before the toe of a boot drove into his back. Thomas arched, and a small yelping groan flew from his lips. Then Humphrey was in front of him, the rain sliding off his oiled cloak.

“Where is it?”

Thomas wanted to insult the man or bravely avoid the question, but he could not speak with the ache in his jaw and the aftermath of being strangled. He did not remember that part of the beating. He shivered, but it did not come from the rain. It did not matter the abuse that came his way. Thomas could not tell him where he hid all the gold. As soon as he did that, he would be dead.

That gold, hidden away, was his only chance for himself and Anne. He would have to remember that in the days to follow because Humphrey would do his best to find it.

Humphrey reached for Thomas's face, taking him by the chin and yanking his head around so he was forced to look up at him. The rain poured down on his face, but when he tried to close his eyes against it, Humphrey's fingers tightened with excruciating pain.

"Prepare yourself, Thomas," Humphrey warned. "Your day of reckoning is coming."

Thomas was prepared. He had no choice. If Humphrey knew where he hid the gold, he would kill him. In the back of his mind, he suspected this would be his fate from the beginning. Humphrey would not want a witness to the gold when Humphrey moved it from Janville to its next secure location. And eventually, it would be used against King Henry and his council, freeing the throne for himself or another. Thomas did not know, nor did he care.

The title 'Chapter 20' is centered on the page. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud. The text 'Chapter 20' is written in a black, elegant, serif font.

## Chapter 20

Hagan did not realize he shook until Angeline placed her hand over his. They had made it to the privacy of his chamber and sank onto the bench by the window together. He put his other hand on top of hers.

“You will be okay, darling,” he assured her, but his voice quaked. He knew one day he would die. He thought it would likely be on a battlefield until he met Angeline.

“I’m not concerned for myself. You could hang.”

Hagan nodded. Of course, he knew he could hang or be beheaded by an executioner. He wondered which way would be best. If the cut was clean, beheading was the most merciful death. But Hagan witnessed many executioners with lousy aim and dull blades. Some executioners needed more than two strikes to end a life. It could be horrific. He shuddered at the thought.

“I think we need to prepare for the possibility I will face the executioner.”

Her hand gripped his tightly. They sat in silence, fear eating at them for what tomorrow faced when he went before Burgundy again.

Later Hagan stood on stiff legs and moved across the room. He began to remove his boots.

“Will we not eat in the hall?” Angeline asked.

Hagan turned away from her and slipped his doublet from his shoulders. “I am not hungry. You go, and I will rest.”

“I have not known you long, but I know you will not rest. I also know my place is at your side—always.”

Hagan turned back to her, drinking her up with his eyes. He didn’t know how much longer he would have such pleasure. “There is no doubt why I love you, my darling.”

Angeline went to his open arms and snuggled her head against his linen undershirt. He gripped her waist firmly and prayed he would have more time with her. Would Burgundy at least grant his request to marry her? He placed his hand over her head, holding her there.

She looked up at him when he slipped his fingers from her silky hair, and he lost himself in her eyes. They pulled him down to her lips, and he drank her like a glass of sweet wine. She was a gentle creature in his arms. One he would give anything to protect and anything that would allow him to hold her in his arms a little longer.

A decorative header for Chapter 21. It features two roses: a red one on the left and a purple one on the right, both with green leaves and stems. The roses are positioned above the text 'Chapter 21', which is written in a black, elegant, serif font. The number '21' is slightly larger and more prominent than the word 'Chapter'.

## Chapter 21

The long dusty road had stretched for days that seemed like weeks. Lincoln had seen every manner of human along that road. From the pompous rich who demanded he yields to them and the poor who yielded to Lincoln while begging for coin. He fought a knight two days before for his insults as his retinue passed. Lincoln knew it would not end with the one knight, and it hadn't. Soon he had the entire garrison upon him, but he had left his mark on the asshole.

He saw another group coming in his direction from his position upon the knoll. It was small. The carriage and matching livery of the retinue spoke volumes of wealth. The wealth that would roll past and expect him to move to the side for the better of society to claim the road like everything else they wished.

But chaos suddenly broke from the forest along the path. Men swarmed the group, and the carriage broke loose from its handler as the shouts and on-slot spooked them. The carriage came on as the battle raged behind it. Lincoln moved his horse aside, the animal snorting, smelling the fear of the oncoming team. As it flew past, he saw the terrified face of a woman behind the flapping curtains. The horses took the curve at full speed, but the carriage could not stay on its wheels. It rocked and flipped. The shaft broke, and it rolled twice more before coming to rest.

Lincoln waited. It would be best for him to ride away. But what treasure lay within that carriage? There was sure to be some coin on the passenger. He kicked his horse to move toward it when the woman he had glimpsed through the curtain rose from the wreckage. Lincoln rode nearer and saw a hand steady itself on the overturned vehicle.

Lincoln dropped to the ground in front of her, and she started. Her mind had not had time to register the horse standing near. The fear he smelled on her filled her green eyes. It was intoxicating. He licked his lips and looked behind him. Both groups seemed evenly matched, with little skill, judging that bodies had not yet littered the ground.

"Are you alright, madame?" Lincoln asked, coming closer.

The woman reached a hand to her forehead and touched the trickle of blood that seeped from a cut. She looked at her fingers. "I seem to be," she said.

"What do you want?" the woman asked as he continued to stare at her.

Lincoln moved closer to her, his nostrils flaring. This woman was beautiful and small enough that he could quickly subdue her. He had been a boy who thought he was a man the last time he forced a woman's legs apart. He had not minded her screams or her nails that bit into him in defense. He was told it was his right as the victor. He was taught it was the most enjoyable prize at the end of a well-won battle. None of those

women could compare to this woman's quality. All the others had been peasants, some older, some younger than himself. He began before growing hair on his balls, basking in his own glory.

What more could a boy want but the power of an army behind him to do whatever he wanted to do? He chased men down with a cry on his lips and drove his axe into their backs with exhilaration. He took their women and daughters with the same fight in his veins, the same thrill that he was God.

The woman stared at him now in terror as his mind worked out the turmoil of what he did want. He wanted her. He wanted to force her back against her carriage and rip her clothes from her. He wanted to feel the rake of her nails down his chest, across his face. He could grow hard hearing her curse at him. He imagined she would have a foul mouth and a fighting soul. He reached a hand toward her face, and she drew back. He seized the back of it, forcing her retreat and chance of escape to an end. His fingers itched to tighten in her hair to force her head back with his brute strength. The harder she fought, the more brutal he could become. He would win. There was never any doubt.

A small gasp escaped her. Lincoln nearly shook with his craving. With strength he did not possess, his other hand rose to touch the corner of her cut gently. "It is only a scratch."

"What do you want?" the woman asked again.

Lincoln shook his head and quirked her a smile, "Nothing, only to see to your safety. I was sitting there when you were set upon."

"I thought I saw a figure on the side of the road when the horses were running."

Their attention went to the dwindling battle. One of the woman's knights broke from the fray and raced toward them. "It is Garren. He is my troop's commander."

When the man slipped to the ground, the knight was not so large as Lincoln. Lincoln instinctively took a step toward him. He still had a chance. Lincoln could make mincemeat out of the man with a quick pull of his sword. Without their commander, their confidence would be broken. He could have the woman here or ride off with her. Once he finished, he would not care. She could find her way home or be taken by the wolves.

But Lincoln had learned he was not God, only a foolish boy weak in the flesh. God allowed horrific things to happen, even to the innocent like this woman. Sadly, God had no more control over the world than Lincoln. But He resided in his heart, which was a good and strong heart. If all men held that power within, there would no longer be a need for war. But war and violence drove the weak, and brutality revealed their corruption. Even now, Lincoln felt that weakness trying to overtake him. The familiar pleasure of that weakness fought him for a choice that would see him with no treasure found and no woman to force onto the ground.

"Your brigands are fleeing," the man identified as Garrn said. He held his sword in his hand. Lincoln pegged this man immediately as one who found his confidence and knightly prowess on a jousting field instead of a battlefield. Lincoln could have him on his knees in seconds.

"I have only stopped to offer assistance if it is needed."

"We are most appreciative," the woman said.

At his lady's acceptance, Garren nodded. "We do have many injured and one dead. We could use the extra sword to see us through."

And so Lincoln made his choice. Releasing his bloody exhilaration never left him full. But the help he gave the group to safety filled him with pride and accomplishment. His heart remained strong, his God guiding his soul to something better down the road.



## Chapter 22

Thomas stood before Montagu. He prayed he appeared brave while inwardly, he shook to his core. Thomas could thank one of his men for riding to Montagu's camp and alerting him to Thomas's fate. He requested Humphrey turn Thomas over to him. Despite Montagu's standing, he was still not high enough to demand anything of Humphrey. But Humphrey relented regardless. The duke's threat to slice Anne from throat to navel if he spoke of the gold rang persistently in Thomas's mind.

He felt the sweat forming on his upper lip, threatening to start a path down his spine. His eyes skittered over faces, faces he probably knew but could not see before landing on the post. His steps almost faltered so he could run, but he was not a coward. He would not show himself as a coward even in the final moments of his death. Obviously, Montagu had already decided on a punishment for Thomas.

Thomas peeled his eyes from the post to land on the man next to it. He did not hold an axe in his hand but a whip. The wooden handle was gripped in the executioner's hand, and one leather strap extended from it. At the end of that strap was a metal ring. Another strap of leather extended from that ring to yet another ring. Several short straps of leather extended from the last ring. That almost made his steps cease. He would not die by the axe but by the whip. He had seen it used. Some survived, and some only survived a few strokes. It depended on the wielder and where his strikes landed. Then Thomas was coming to a stop with the men guiding him.

"This war is a gentleman's war," Montagu began. Thomas wanted to argue. There was nothing gentle about war, any war. It did not matter that Henry's men did not storm castles to slay every man, woman, and child but instead demanded money for their release. It was still war, and it was the innocent, the weak, who suffered in the face of the games those with power played. But that was something that kings could not understand. They could run to other places to other people. They did not have to stay in devastated towns and villages, trying to pick up the pieces and survive from harvests laid to waste and homes destroyed.

"The death of Earl Remon is inexcusable." One of those faces he had not seen in the first scan of his surroundings was that of Humphrey. Thomas felt like a steel trap was closing around him when Humphrey spoke. Humphrey wanted Thomas silenced, and Hagan left the door open for it. The man who rode for Montagu gave him the only chance he had. "I think it is borderline, if not outright tyranny, to undermine my nephew's crown."

Thomas schooled his features. He wanted to lay his side upon the table. He wanted to tell of Humphrey's deception and of the gold. Thomas guessed it was enough gold that could buy a crown with the death of his young nephew.

Thomas was a fighting man. He knew nothing about the king and his nobles' politics. Especially an infant king. It did not matter to Thomas who held power. His only concern was that the power was utilized wisely. But Humphrey would use his power to destroy Thomas. Thomas could say nothing because he knew the people he faced would never believe him over Humphrey. Who was Earl Thomas of Stokesley, Baron of Ravenshill, to survive a standoff with a prince?

The wisdom of his reasoning was brought home to him in Humphrey's following words. "When I was at Janville, I witnessed your dislike of the man. Hagan expressed his concern to me then. Perhaps it is I who should also receive a punishment since I failed to intervene."

None of what Humphrey said was true. Humphrey had no contact with Remon while at Janville, so he could not have witnessed Thomas's dislike for the man. Nor would Hagan discuss his concerns behind Thomas's back. Humphrey wanted his gold, and that was all the prince wanted.

"But I am not guilty of cold-blooded murder."

Humphrey held a satisfied smirk painted on his lips. "Murder is what you did to Remon."

"I did not touch Remon. Hagan killed him so he could run with his wife."

Humphrey shook his head slowly, planting a sardonic look on his face before a bark of derision passed through his lips. "Hagan presented his case, and he and Countess Angeline were under my care before you murdered the woman's husband."

"No," Thomas began but clamped his lips closed. It was another lie. Another lie to go with every other lie that would get Humphrey what he wanted. Ultimately that desire was control of the crown of England. Humphrey played the supportive role as best any man could, who plotted behind a king's back. Anything Thomas would say would be undermined by Humphrey, forcing Thomas further down into the hole he knew he could not crawl out of with the truth. Any words could only make this ordeal so much worse when he did not know how bad it would get.

Humphrey paused then. His eyes seared Thomas's flesh and chilled his soul as he waited for the words he was dreading. "On behalf of the Regency Council and King Henry, you are hereby stripped of your title of Earl of Stokesley, and that property rescinded to the king."

Thomas stared at Humphrey and witnessed the man shoot a scathing look toward Montagu. Thomas thanked God his commander had come because he would see his punishment was just and nothing more. But a niggling feeling began on the back of Thomas's neck. Thomas knew Humphrey was angry over the gold, and with Montagu present, he could not torture him to find out where the gold was. But it wasn't just that fact that made the prince cast such a scathing look at the commander.

The earth fell from under Thomas's feet. Humphrey had chosen Thomas to hide his gold, not the commander who oversaw the Janville garrison, but the Baron of Ravenshill. What, in addition to gold, did a prince need to march an army? A path in and a path out. Ravenshill was strategically placed on the Scottish border. It set off the more traveled roads, few as they were. It was not a strong keep, but it was a hidden

keep. Had it not been for war and the need for men, Ravenshill would have been forgotten. It was the perfect place to hide an army that moved back and forth across the border.

Thomas was sure Humphrey had requested Thomas be stripped of Ravenshill, but Montagu would never abide such a thing. Generation after generation of Kirkhams was buried in the ground around Ravenshill. The Kirkham blood grew the harvests and resided on that land long before Henry, Richard, or any Norman king stepped foot upon English soil. Montagu respected the House of Ravenshill for the tenacity he saw as bravery in the generations of the Kirkhams that held the title.

Bitterness edged Montagu's voice, and Thomas realized even princes had to answer to someone. Because the prince Thomas looked at would love nothing more than to run him through. Thomas had become a significant roadblock for Humphrey. With no gold and no Ravenshill, Humphrey watched his plan go up in smoke. "You will be banished to Ravenshill, where you will remain baron." A gleam entered Humphrey's eyes, making Thomas even more uneasy than he thought possible. "Men are at this moment evacuating your wife from the Stokesley property."

Bile leaped to Thomas's throat. What were they doing to Anne? What had they already done to her? How would she get to Ravenshill?"

"On behalf of this army and the men who have followed you foolishly, Montagu will retain your men. You will return to England with only the clothes on your back. There is also a punishment of physical pain required. That was my choice, as long as it would not kill you."

Thomas stared at Humphrey. Everything that was happening to him on behalf of the army was happening to him on behalf of Humphrey. No one inside the ranks of Montagu's army couldn't care less about Remon and his wife. Humphrey's vengeance for what Thomas wouldn't give him was to strip him of his horse, all his fighting supplies, and his men he had scraped coin together to keep at his side. But Humphrey was not satisfied because he was not getting what he wanted. Humphrey could send him home a pauper with scars upon his back, but the gold would remain out of his reach.

Thomas was pushed forward. His head swiveled back and forth as the faces of those gathered flowed one into another with no defining features. Then he was standing before the post. A hand touched him on his arm, prepared to lift his arms. Thomas jerked away from him, glaring at the man. He placed his hands on the post, and his mind begged him to fight as his hands were tied. His reason fled from that to Anne and the vision of an army invading Stokesley, abusing her, hurting her. He swallowed when he heard the jangle of the two rings together as the wielder whipped it back. He could still fight for his innocence, but Stokesley was already gone, and he needed to find Anne. Fighting this now could take days or weeks. That was days and weeks of not knowing if his wife was safe or injured and frightened. Was she even now left to starve to death? He had to get to her.

Thomas closed his eyes and sent a prayer for his wife. Thomas had never felt bones crushed. He broke his wrist once, but it had healed to full use. But he knew those rings could destroy bones, spines, and organs. He felt himself shaking and was thankful for the mercy of his bound wrists keeping him on his feet.

Humphrey whispered to Thomas when the men tying his hands finished and stepped back. "This is not just about the gold. It's about so much more than that. I had

hoped you would be hanged, but Montagu seems fond of you. So with no evidence, I cannot send you to the gallows without someone questioning my motives. But know this is not over. You can crawl from here, and I will give you time to make it to Ravenshill. That way, I can be sure you are there when I come to take it. And then you will tell me where my gold is.”

Thomas’s fear echoed so violently in his head that he did not hear the first strike coming through the air for him. He felt the bite of the leather and then the rings. The strike of the rings made his legs want to buckle.

He heard it coming the next time, and as it filed and marked his back, he arched against the pain as it was pulled from his body again. Thomas was not told how many lashes he would receive and did not know how many blows rained down on him before Montagu stepped forward to stop it. By this time, Thomas could not draw a breath. He knew he bled but could not feel such a small thing against the pain of the rings.

Thomas felt someone fumbling for the rope around his hands. Thomas sobbed when his hands were released and fell to his knees. He remained there, his forehead resting against the post, his arms still falling around the wooden base as he sat on his haunches and fought to keep from passing out.

“I will ruin you if you do not give back what is mine,” Humphrey whispered.

Thomas wanted to kill this man who hovered over his shoulder and hissed in his ear. This was his doing. It was because of him that Thomas knew of the gold. If Humphrey had just quietly passed Janville, he would not be here now. But he could not raise his head off the wood. He could not breathe, at least not in a way that led him to believe his lungs weren’t damaged. He had to have broken at least two ribs if they weren’t shattered. His back ached, and he could thank God one of the rings had not cracked his spine.



Awareness returned to him, and he was alone. He used his forehead, leveraging against the post to get himself moving. He struggled with groans and a quiet sob as he pulled himself to his feet. Pain shot through his body. He held the post tightly, his body wanting nothing more than to be back in the dirt. He needed to be still, heal from the damage, or die from it.

He blinked, willing the haze of pain to clear from his mind. Thomas did not doubt Humphrey had already taken everything of Thomas's out of his reach. But that was little. Here his most valuable possession was his horse. His plate armor was mismatched and needed the expertise of an armorer. Thomas had planned to buy a new suit of armor when they received the ransom. There was no reason Humphrey would want Thomas's armor other than spite.

But none of that mattered now. He just had to make it to Anne.



## Chapter 23

“I have decided to give you a chance to prove your loyalty to me and my cause. Without this assurance, you will remain loyal and not leave this place. To betray one’s lord for gold is one thing. To do it for a whore is inexcusable.”

Hagan had the urge to fly at Burgundy and show him what he thought of him calling Angeline a whore. But the ground he stood on was very treacherous, not just for him but for Angeline.

“What is it you ask of me?” Hagan asked. His voice was deep and unafraid, but Hagan was unsure what held his legs beneath him.

“I want you to give me your whore or your hand.”

“What?” Hagan asked.

“You heard correctly, Lord Hagan. I want to taste the woman who made a man like you betray his friends. Or I want your fighting hand so I can trust you will not raise a sword against me.”

“And then I can be on my way, and you will make Remon’s death inconsequential to me?”

Burgundy nodded.

Hagan’s eyes remained riveted to the floor. The thought of letting Burgundy take Angeline and do whatever he pleased with her enraged him. He did not think he would give her up once he touched Angeline. But a woman like Angeline was not meant for a man like Burgundy. She was not meant for men like him. “My hand,” Hagan declared.

A look of disappointment flitted in Burgundy’s eyes. “What do you think the woman would say to this?” the duke asked. He motioned behind Hagan, knowing they had Angeline waiting outside the door, and soon she was standing next to him.

“I have given your man a choice,” Burgundy proclaimed. “I will take you to my bed, or he can lose a hand.”

“It is not her decision,” Hagan ground out. He knew the choice Angeline would make. It was a choice most women would make for the men they loved.

Angeline looked from Burgundy to Hagan. “Angeline,” Hagan roared at her. “If this man touches you, I will kill him. I will not only lose my hand but my life.”

Tears were instantly in her eyes. “You must not,” she insisted. “It is just a small thing, Hagan.” Her voice was so small it only persuaded him further not to send Angeline to Burgundy’s bed.

Hagan wrapped his hands around Angeline's shoulders and gripped them tightly. "It might not matter to anyone else. But I have risked my life to keep you from the hands of another man. I will risk it again if that is what it will take."

"Hagan," she begged him

His face darkened and turned to granite. "Let us do it," Hagan said. If it was to be done, it needed to be done now before he thought of all the implications. He looked down at Angeline and offered her a smile, albeit a weak one. "Do not interfere, my love," Hagan said, drawing her forward to kiss her on the forehead. "Once it is done, I will take you home. You can nurse me on the way," he said with a wink.

She was not fooled by his bravado as he swept from her, ready to take his punishment.

It was not as he thought. He had little hope when he saw the hammer beside the block, not a man with a sword. The hammer was large, used for driving spikes into rocks and busting stones. He wanted to have hope he would retain the use of his hand even if it was crushed. If it was severed, there was no hope.

Once the hammer fell, he knew he would never use his right hand again. He would survive the blow, but the infection of the crushed bones, and busted vessels, could kill him in the end. If that was to be his destiny, he prayed God would look over Helmsley, to forget him and be with Angeline.

Hagan knelt next to the block, and a man moved forward, lifting Hagan's shaking hand onto it. Two men pinned him to suppress the fight they expected when the hammer began to fall.

Hagan saw the hammer dropping. His eyes began to raise upward, but the hammer flashed quickly down. Hagan did not know what registered in his head. First, the sound of the hammer striking, his bones snapping and crushing, or the pain. It seemed like they came in a disjointed order, making no sense.

He pushed against the men, but the pain weakened him. His hand remained on the block, and the hammer fell again. Hagan screamed, and mercifully, the men holding him let him go.

He clenched his right forearm with his left hand. He tried to brace it, hoping the stillness would ease the pain that left him breathless. He gripped his arm tightly, hoping to stop the blood flow and, eventually, the pain. But that pain rolled on and on before Hagan's stomach contents exploded from him. He was on his knees, cradling his arm, folded over at the waist. He began to cry. Whether it was the pain or the realization he would never hold a sword again, Hagan could not say. Then Angeline's hands were on his quaking shoulders. She found him on the ground, and her hands helped lift him. He knew he had made the right decision. His hand was only a minor thing when he looked at her.



# Chapter 24

If Angeline had not called to him, he would not have recognized the knight hunched over, looking bedraggled and pale. Lincoln had not expected to meet Hagan and Angeline at the port of Dieppe. He knew Hagan was traveling from Dieppe to Brighton, then to Helmsley. He assumed they had had ample time to make it to his castle.

Lincoln hurried forward. His eyes went from Angeline to Hagan. Lincoln knew pain, and Hagan's face was filled with a fever that sunk his eyes and dulled them.

"What has happened," Lincoln asked Angeline. When Hagan moved, he stumbled slightly. Lincoln reached out a hand and steadied him.

"It has been terrible, Lincoln," she said. "It is his hand. Burgundy crushed it to punish him, and now I think the infection will kill him."

Lincoln took hold of Hagan's right forearm. He could feel the heat through his shirt radiating from beneath the bandage wrapped around his hand. He unwrapped the hand, and the sight made him nearly vomit despite his knowledge. The hand was no longer a hand. Instead, bones protruded through his skin, out the back of his hand. Fingers mutilated, bent up, sideways, or hanging as if by the flesh alone.

"Come," Lincoln said with urgency. "Let us get on board, and I will take his hand."

"No," Hagan said. His voice held none of the bold strength it once had.

"If it needs to be removed, I will remove it," Lincoln declared.

"Only if you must," Hagan ordered.

Lincoln quieted with his urgent pull and looked at his friend. "Only if I must. But that hand will never be of use to you."

"But it is a hand where a hand is supposed to be."

Lincoln could not argue with that simple logic. Angeline already had their passage on the ship, ready to sail across the channel. Lincoln helped Hagan onto the quarterdeck. He looked at Hagan's hand again. "There will be far less pain if I remove the hand," Lincoln said.

"I do not care about the pain or my hand's use. But I do not want a stump unless that is the only way I can live. The pain will go away. I will not grow my hand back."

Lincoln left the pair to search for the items he would need. The most important thing he hoped to purchase was opium to dull the pain, but he did not have time to leave the port to search for it. As the ship's anchor rose to the surface, Lincoln set to work to save Hagan's hand.

To keep Hagan from thrashing, Lincoln placed his body on Hagan's, nearly lying prone on him. He brought his hand up, pulling it beneath one of Lincoln's arms and securing it. As Lincoln pulled the first bone protruding from the back of his hand, the big man screamed and thrashed, nearly dislodging Lincoln.

Lincoln fought against Hagan's strength each time he pulled a bone out or pushed a bone back into place. Lincoln wanted to let Hagan know this was not something he wanted to do. He would prefer to take his sword and sever the hand cleanly and quickly. They would wrap the stump, and life would continue. But this was excruciating for not only Hagan but Lincoln as well. He could not imagine the pain Hagan suffered as he did his best to place bones back together and remove those shards that would be of no use.

By the time he finished, Hagan was limp beneath him. In the end, the bones in the hand that attached to the pinky and the finger itself were removed. The tattered skin had been cut away and sewn together. Stitches lay in a mishappen pattern across the back of his hand. This was where he did his best to place the bones back with their own pieces, not a fragment from another finger. The only bones not broken were that of his index finger and thumb. But the index finger had to be broken to place it back in line. Though not shattered as the rest, the thumb would likely never be of use with all the damage between the thumb and wrist. But there was a small chance he might one day be able to hold something in that hand.

Lincoln bandaged the hand securely and stood as Angeline began clearing away the mess of tools, cloth, blood, and bone. Lincoln crossed to the rail and looked across the dark water. He marveled that his hands no longer shook when piecing men back together. It was sometimes a horrendous thing. But it was a thing he was once interested in. But it was hard to want to save lives when taking lives. He was not God to say who lived and who died because of what colors they wore upon their coats. His learned skills were not something he lent to the army, never offered. Few knew he was capable of some surgical procedures. Stitching and setting bones were ones he was well skilled at.

But Hagan had drained him. It was not the strength both men used against one another but the fact he cared greatly for Hagan. He had brought great pain to his brother and tortured him with the task Hagan had ordered. Hagan was too weak to have fought anything Lincoln wanted to do. But Lincoln reasoned there would still be time to take the hand if the infection did not subside now that the hand had been set and cleaned.

"What happened?" Lincoln asked as Angeline joined him at the rail.

Angeline shook her head. "Burgundy did it to punish him for his betrayal. He gave him a choice of punishment."

"What could be worse than that?" Lincoln asked with a nod in Hagan's direction.

"For him, it was letting Burgundy have me."

Lincoln's eyes trailed over the girl. Burgundy probably thought, despite her marriage, she was an innocent soul. Looking at her, Burgundy would not know of the fire Angeline possessed. He saw that spark now that she was away from Remon.

Lincoln turned back to the water. "It is okay. The hand will be saved, or it will be cut away. Either way, he made the right decision."

"How can you say that?"

"Because he loves you. Allowing that to happen would change him because he would know you could never look at him the same. So he made a decision to protect you

by killing Remon. He knew the price could be far worse than his hand. I am sure he is relieved in the end that is all he has lost.”

“I know,” Angeline said. He heard the gratitude for the man’s sacrifice in her soft voice. She turned and went back to Hagan’s side. Lincoln watched her position Hagan’s head, trying to make him more comfortable on the deck.

Lincoln pushed himself from the rail and moved toward the group of people laughing and dancing in the moonlight at the other end of the ship. By the time he approached them, he knew the woman he would proposition. She did not hesitate, and he wondered if she would have been as willing even without the offer of his coin.



## Chapter 25

Thomas felt the rock of the ship beneath him. It was a sudden disconcerting realization, startling with its confusion. It came back to him in flashes of memory. Disjointed moments, including the searing pain when someone treated the slices on his back. Now he heard the groan of the ship like a shrill scream hammering in his head. The explosion of agony inside his skull rolled relentlessly. He willed his eyes to peel open. The lids were weighted by giant anchors capable of holding the ship. First, one eye successfully opened, then the second, as he stared at the rope bed hanging just above his face. He felt the sway of his own rope bed beneath him. He tried to swallow his parched throat, and he nearly choked on the dryness of it.

Thomas lifted a hand, feeling first his chest, then moving upward, assessing himself. When he felt the length of his beard, he paused. He wasn't unconscious for only a few days, as he initially thought. He did not know how many days or weeks it would take to grow his beard to that length.

Was the ship still on the water, Thomas wondered. It should have made it across the channel and been docked in the time it took him to grow his beard. He rolled out of the ropes, and his legs folded beneath his weight. He grabbed for the ropes above his head, steadying himself before he hit the floor. His legs shook for a moment as the blood began to flow to portions long unused.

He started shuffling forward with the light of day filtering through the portholes and from the hole where the ladder disappeared upward onto the deck. As he stared up at the ladder, long smoothed by the hands and feet that climbed and descended it, he thought he might not have the strength to make the ascent. Trepidation filled Thomas forcing his arms to pull while his legs pushed him upward. Finally, he gained the deck full of panic and did not take a moment to celebrate or even catch his breath and steady his body that now quaked.

The sun's intensity was blinding, sending knife blades sinking deep into his eyes and skull. His head swiveled to the left and right, his heart sinking. They were not docked or anchored near a shore, for no land could be seen on either horizon. There was no land, not even a far outline. Thomas looked up at a sky so intensely blue to be disorienting. No cloud marred its perfection. The sails beneath the blue sky lay flat against the white pine masts. He ran now, his legs instantly exhausted as he gained the forecandle, but there was nothing to see but an empty ocean. He turned, nearly stumbling, reaching out to steady himself on the rail before his legs propelled him toward the back of the ship.

His flight ended on the quarterdeck. He stared in disbelief at another empty horizon of a sea that lay as still as the sky it met. The atmosphere provided no wind and a sea that gave no current to move the vessel. Thomas turned to one of the men standing to the side, staring at Thomas as if he had lost his mind. Then, with panic Thomas was not used to, driving him forward, he grabbed the man by his filthy shirt.

“Where are we?”

The man was stunned for a moment, taken aback by the suddenness of the attack.

“Where?” Thomas demanded, making a pathetic attempt to shake him in his urgency.

“We sail to Africa.”

Thomas’s fingers unclamped from the man, and he staggered backward, coming up against the rail.

“What is going on?” another man asked. He was older, tall, and thin. He had an air of authority about him. His dark brown eyes fell on Thomas. “I am the captain. Why do you disturb my ship?”

“Why am I here?” Thomas demanded.

“Because you owe a debt to me for your life. I need every man to sail. You will be returned to England when this ship returns.”

“No,” Thomas said, shaking his head and taking a step forward.

“It seems as if you have no choice,” the captain replied in a dry tone.

“I will leave at the next port.”

The man smirked at Thomas. “No, I don’t think you will. Antoni!” he barked, and another man materialized beside the captain. “Show this man how to swab this deck and clean the hold below.”

“I will not do your work while you hold me prisoner.”

The captain, who had dismissed him, slowly turned back around. “You think yourself a prisoner,” the captain replied, a note of sympathy in his voice. “You’re not a prisoner. I could have let you die. Instead, I had my men save your life and care for you. In return, you will pay off your debt which will be fully atoned by the time we reach England again.”

“How long?” Thomas asked before the captain could dismiss him again.

The tall man shrugged. “It’s hard to say. A great deal depends on when the wind returns. We average four to six months.”

Thomas let the man turn away then. He could be out here for half a year. Already he should have been at Anne’s side. But instead, he looked out across the ocean and screamed his frustration for gods, new and old, to hear. He screamed because he wanted Anne to know he would come for her, that he wanted to be with her, protecting her. But this was where he was and where he would be for an interminable amount of time.

The title 'Chapter 26' is written in a black, elegant, cursive-style font. Above the word 'Chapter' is a red rose with green leaves and a stem. Above the number '26' is a purple rose with green leaves and a stem. The roses are positioned as if they are framing the title.

## Chapter 26

Hagan jerked awake with a gasp. He rolled off his mangled hand and onto Angeline. It was not the first time he woke all who slept on the quarter-deck while they sailed across the channel.

“Shhh,” Angeline soothed. She wiggled her way from beneath his back, allowing him to stretch out. She slipped her head onto his chest, and he delicately laid his bandaged hand on her back. The pain began to settle, leaving behind the throbbing that had not stopped since his bones had been placed back together and his skin stitched over them as best Lincoln could.

The rocking of the ship beneath them soothed him. The night sky above hosted gentle clouds that warned of rain. But it filled the sails and slipped them through the water for home. Hagan was concerned the situation he created would not go away as easily as Burgundy claimed. But Angeline was at his side, and Remon was dead. If nothing else, he hoped his sacrifice was enough to keep Angeline safe.

“Hagan.”

Hagan grunted in response.

“I have been thinking about our first night together.”

Hagan stared at the sky and tried to remember what happened that night that would bring such melancholy to Angeline now.

“I never thought it anything but a blessing that I lost Remon’s child. I thought I never wanted to go through such an ordeal again. But now, with you, I do want to have a child. I had always wanted to be a mother, at least before I was married to Remon. He changed my mind even before I knew I was with child.”

Hagan remained quiet but felt as if he did not draw breath or his heart beat. This was what he feared. He was not good enough for Angeline because he could never give her what she wanted. He swallowed and felt a tear escape the corner of his eye. He looked into the infinite darkness beyond the hanging clouds and the stars and moon peeping from behind them. He felt among them but was jerked back to the ship when her hand joined her head on his chest. Even now, how could she make him feel so strong when he could not do the one thing that would make him a man.

“I love you, Hagan de Ros, and I would want nothing more than to carry your child. Look into the eyes of a newborn boy and see your strength. Or into a girl’s eyes and see your gentleness.”

Hagan felt another tear slip from the corner of his eye.

"I am so sorry that cannot happen. I am confident I can carry another child, and I have grown. My mother was a small woman, but she birthed many children. I know I will be successful with my next. That is what saddens me. Whatever child I carry and labor with will not be yours. I am sorry I cannot give that to you in your blood. But I thought I could still give you a son or daughter in your name. No one has to know it is not truly yours."

Hagan's good arm jerked and pulled her against his side. She looked at his face, still directing his focus toward the sky. He felt her stare at him for a moment before settling her head back on his chest.

"But even if you disagree, that will not matter. I will be at your side. You can get me a dog or something."

Hagan envisioned Angeline with a dog she treated as a child. He knew a dog would not be an excellent replacement for a child. But he envisioned her with another man. One who could fulfill her great desire. Hagan felt his hand throb. It was a small price considering what he had suffered for her. She suffered so much more trying to deliver a child she never wanted and was willing to repeat that horror. He knew that would make her a great mother. Even if it wasn't his child, he could make it so.

"How long..." Hagan stopped and cleared his throat. "Would it just have to be one time with another man?"

Angeline gave it some consideration. "I do not know. It did not take long to become pregnant after I married Remon. If I can find someone more knowledgeable than I, I will know when it is most likely in my monthly cycle."

"Okay," Hagan said. His voice sounded strangled, and the tears fell silently. Some were shed with relief that Angeline was not leaving him. But some were shed because he knew one day he would have to share Angeline with another man. He would make another sacrifice for her so she could return the favor, and he could have a child he did not think possible.

The title 'Chapter 27' is centered on the page. It is flanked by two decorative rose illustrations. The rose on the left is red with green leaves and a small bud. The rose on the right is light purple with green leaves and a small bud. The text 'Chapter 27' is written in a black, elegant, serif font.

## Chapter 27

Lincoln stood outside Helmsley. He wondered if he was making the right decision. He could not keep from mulling it repeatedly in his mind. What had Thomas ever done to them to warrant his and Hagan's betrayal? Even now, Lincoln could ride away. He felt the leather reins in his hand as he stood in front of his horse, perhaps waiting for some divine sign he was not making the worst mistake he ever could. But he was only a mercenary. He followed, he did not command, and nothing could be laid on him.

Lincoln's feet carried him forward. He had chosen his side as soon as he learned of Hagan's plan and did not take it to Thomas. The damage had been done, and he could not abandon Hagan too. His feet faltered again. He had been willing to give his life in the service of one being—God, who was far mightier than Earl Hagan. Never had he committed himself to a man. He passed from battle to battle, seeking nothing else. Was something changing inside him?

He would admit to a growing desire to be something more than a man who could kill proficiently. Lincoln was landless. Though his fighting skills were well compensated, he had little to show for it. What else did he have to spend money on, always on the move but drinking, gambling, and whoring? Lincoln's stride began to return to its confident path. He tore from Helmsley this morning with indecision fueling him, and now, hours later, he had returned.

If Hagan survived this and Burgundy was true to his word, Lincoln would have a home. Walking in and standing at Hagan's side would guarantee him a place to live. They had already been through some of the most challenging times two men could experience together. Perhaps it was time to find a place to rest his feet. Maybe it was time to find a way back to the god that had once been his guide in everything.

It could not happen if he was among men who laughed in Satan's face and survived. Though, despite what they thought, they never walked away unscathed.

Hagan's days of fighting were over. He would have men to send, but Hagan would not be there to lead them. If Lincoln wanted to, he knew Hagan would let him lead his army wherever Lincoln wanted to take them. But that was not what Lincoln wanted. As he looked at the tall walls, he wanted to be able to call this place home.

Lincoln walked beneath the portcullis, and the expanse of the castle spread out before him. This place was far more than he ever thought belonged to Hagan. The man had never been boastful of the wealth of his inheritance. He did not speak of his home with two baileys, two motes, and plentiful buildings and people. It was a well-cared-for and well-run estate. One could see that at first glance.

“What do you think of your new home?” Hagan asked in greeting. He was pale and weak, but he stood on his own feet and fought the infection that added to the agony of his shattered hand.

“It is a grand castle and beautiful property,” Lincoln replied.

“Do you think you will be happy here?” Hagan asked.

“What does that matter?” Lincoln asked. He looked around himself, studying everything except Hagan.

“It matters because I thought you would be staying here. I want you to stay here. We can leave everything out there behind and build something here. I would like you at my side.”

Lincoln nodded before looking at Hagan. “I would be very proud to call Helmsley home and you, my lord.”

Hagan shook his head. “I am not your lord, but your brother, nothing less.”

Lincoln nodded, and together they walked deeper into the castle.



## Chapter 28

Thomas ran with a speed that surprised him after all his time on the ship. He had decided to run, but the captain spotted him as he ran down the gangplank. Thomas heard the command to stop, but he would not heed it. He was no man's slave. Then, a body slammed into him, taking him off his feet. Three men subdued him with feet and fists before dragging him back to the ship to stand before the captain. It was not the first port the ship had stopped at, but each one pulled him farther from Anne. He had to do something. This was the first port where he gathered his strength and courage.

Thomas was well beyond the kid that stood trembling in front of Humphrey and the post he was lashed to. Too much pain, suffering, and life had catapulted him to the courage of a man refusing to show he was weak and full of fear. But to say he did not fear, would be a lie.

"Kirkham," the captain spat at him. "You will not leave this ship until I say you can do so. You owe me a debt, and there is not a port you will be able to escape me at. Be thankful those men returned you. They likely would have gutted you if they knew you were trying to run from a debt owed."

"Just let me go." Thomas was aware his voice did not sound like a man's but held the pleading quality of a child's.

"No," the man said. "I need you. When I return to England, I will replace you with another, and you can be on your way."

Thomas saw the captain's eyes shift over his shoulder, and before Thomas could turn, his arms were secured. He was driven forward until his body slammed into the main mast. His breath was knocked from him, and he struggled against the men holding him. He screamed his outrage and bucked against the men, but he was lashed to the pole.

"There are far harsher punishments than a flogging for a deserter. But I will do this so you can still hoist my sails."

Thomas held back a sob. His fingers and thumbs dug into the mast. His nails bit into the wood, threatening to snap. But, despite his Herculean grip, it was not enough to stop the scream of pain as the rope sailed at him. The knot at the end bit deep into his flesh and banged against his bones. It was as if a hammer had landed on his body repeatedly. The rope possessed the same brutal strength of the whip that had nearly killed him and left him trapped here.

Thomas panted and sweated as the sympathetic faces of the rest of the crew blurred and joined together until they were a wall. It had been a fortifying mass in the

beginning. Then the faces became indiscernible. Although none of them could be called friends because they did not have the time to make such connections on the ship, they still offered a certain level of comfort. They could all face the torture he was enduring.

Thomas's fear intensified the pain, and his bravado fled, leaving a whimpering child in its wake. The captain followed each strike across his back and torso with a count. It was a count he lost track of. A count that had neared twenty before the first sob was drawn from him. He did not know how many had fallen since, dozens? The captain's voice was not loud enough to carry through the agony of pain. Then, mercifully, the rope with the wicked knot stopped falling on him. Only after the captain turned away did hands come out to take his weight from the mast.

As he was half carried to his hammock, he found it difficult to draw breath through the pain radiating in his ribs. Then, as he collapsed onto the ropes, his last waking thought was of Anne and how his mistakes had made the time it would take to reach home even more substantial.



## Chapter 29

Hagan missed the home he had left so many years ago. It was a home he had never appreciated until now, with the sizeable sprawling castle that symbolized all the wealth held by the de Ros family. He was proud when Angeline stared in surprise at her new home. It was larger and more prosperous than the life Remon had given her. But the most prosperous thing would be their love and their family. By the time they arrived, Hagan was at ease with his decision. He looked forward to holding Angeline's child in his arms. He still grew angry when he thought of what Angeline would have to do to make it happen.

The castle was made of gray stone. Its walls were high, with two great towers and four smaller towers on each corner of the curtain wall. The castle and its walls were accessed by crossing two motes and passing through two gates in the two walls. It was a secure castle. One Hagan was very proud to bring Angeline to.

Two days after arriving home, the messenger came from Burgundy. The man was fed and sent on his way with the seal of the Duke of Burgundy intact. No response was necessary, the messenger said. Hagan dreaded what news the missive held. Surely if it contained the acceptance from the king for Hagan to marry Angeline, he would want a response. A chance for Hagan to kiss his ass once again.

Angeline walked with Hagan and Lincoln to their solar after the day's last meal. Together they stared down at the envelope on the table, positioned against one of the stone walls.

"Do you wish me to open it?" Angeline asked after some time.

Hagan picked up the letter and turned it over and over in his hand. He passed it quickly to Angeline as his hands threatened to shake.

Carefully Angeline broke the seal with a small knife. The wait was agonizing. He had the urge to snatch it from her hand and rip it open. Angeline unfolded the paper, and her eyes scanned it.

"Oh, Hagan," Angeline whispered. Her hand went to her face, and her fingertips pressed her lips together to hold back the words on the page. Hagan had the urge to sweep her into his arms and tell her everything would be okay. Before he even knew what was not.

Lincoln's eyes darted from one to another. He could not read and depended on the two to tell him.

"Thomas was stripped of Stokesley, and the Regency Council granted Stokesley to you."

Hagan felt himself grow pale. If Thomas did not hate Hagan before, losing his property to him would surely sever any friendly ties. However, there was a force far greater than Hagan or Thomas. Something far more foreboding than their plan had been to ransom Remon. Someone was out for Thomas, and they used the title of Stokesley going to Hagan as vengeance.

“Is there more?”

Angeline nodded, and he watched her swallow. “He was sent from France in humiliation after he was whipped and stripped of all his possessions.”

Hagan felt sorrow for his friend wash over him. His eyes remained on Angeline. She was the reminder he had no other choice. Even if it destroyed Thomas, Angeline was not destroyed. Lincoln stood stiffly. His face was a hard mask. Though he looked cold as stone, Hagan could see he was beginning to boil inside. Hagan was prepared for an attack from Lincoln because he knew Hagan was the cause of Thomas’s demise.

“Anne Kirkham was immediately forced to vacate Stokesley so you can take command at your leisure.”

Lincoln’s feet were moving. His long stride made the trek across the large chamber floor fast.

“Where are you going?” Hagan asked.

“To Lady Anne and by God’s blessing Thomas.”

“Wait,” Hagan called as he was halfway out the door.

Lincoln’s back froze, and he turned to Hagan. It was obvious if Hagan delayed him too long, Lincoln would explode with all the turmoil he was feeling.

“Will you send word?”

Lincoln’s eyes roved over Hagan, measuring his sincerity in concern. Then he nodded and was gone.

Hagan turned his attention back to Angeline. “The council has granted their approval of our union.” That was news that should have sent both into great happiness, but the thought of Thomas lingered. The price Thomas paid was a harsh one for an innocent man.

“I spoke to your physician and will know when I will be most fertile.”

Hagan watched her search his face, hoping the subject would distract from the rest of the letter and Lincoln’s departure. He would grant this woman her every desire if it was within his reach.

“I have chosen the man.”

Angeline’s news jolted Hagan, perhaps more than the news of Thomas’s punishment. Hagan continued to stare at her.

“It is Lincoln,” she said. Her voice sounded small and afraid.

“Why?” Hagan asked. Had she already done something with Lincoln? But he knew it was not true as soon as the thought lodged itself. Lincoln would never do such a thing. No matter what, Lincoln would not betray him in such a base way.

“He is kind and will not hurt me.”

Hagan gave one nod of his head. In his selfishness, he had not considered a man chosen could hurt her or abuse her. She was taking all the risk, and he was merely feeling sorry for himself.

“He is also good blood for our child. He or she will be strong, loyal, and fierce like the child’s true father. Like you.”

She moved closer to his side and rested a hand on his chest. He took it in his good one and pressed it there.

“I will not if you do not wish it. Not with him or anyone if that is what will be best for you.”

“You are willing to risk so much to have this child. How can I tell you who or who not you must lay with? Lincoln is all those things you said. I trust no other man with you as I trust him.” Hagan kissed the top of Angeline's dark head. “When we get news from him, we will plan.”

“I love you, Hagan.”

“I, of course, love you, and soon you will be my wife and grow round with our child.”

She slipped her arms around him, and he pressed her head against his chest.



## Chapter 30

Lincoln returned with the news Thomas had never made it to Ravenshill in all the time since he was purported to be traveling home. Instead, Anne had made her way to Ravenshill, where Lincoln found her. She was safe, and Lincoln planned to remain until further news of Thomas, but Hagan called him back to Helmsley for the wedding. Hagan and Angeline were married in a small ceremony a day after Lincoln returned.

But Lincoln learned it was not just for the wedding that Hagan called him back to Helmsley. When Hagan first asked him to lay with his wife, Lincoln was angry after all his declarations she was a child. After a few hours, he approached Hagan again, and the man told him of his certainty he would never father children. He offered Lincoln anything within his power to grant him. He guessed that made Lincoln the whore in such a situation. He offered a delay until Angeline reached a riper age. But when asked, Lincoln could not provide a number for that riper age. More than a year had passed, and she was fifteen. In the eyes of most, she was of the age to marry and bear children.

A week after the wedding, the time had come, the decision made, and Lincoln had agreed. It seemed as if Hagan struggled the most after Lincoln made his decision. As he went about his day, his face was set in a sad frown. Everyone noticed his melancholy, but when he looked at Angeline, his face always brightened, and the sadness fled.

Lincoln watched Hagan's back as he rode through Helmsley's gates. A week. That was how long he would have to try to impregnate a woman he had argued not too long ago was only a child. But she had blossomed since then. It was apparent she would always be slight. Her hips would never grow full or her breasts large. But she was of an age now that women successfully bred and delivered. At least at a standard rate compared to those younger.

Lincoln had never denied any woman that offered herself. Not since his position with the Order became clearly not one of a religious bent as he had searched for. He had to admit he preferred debauchery to celibacy though he had given his oath to God. But he took other oaths that meant nothing if the Teutonic Order so ordained. So why would the fact his dick remained dry matter to God when he broke a vow Lincoln would think was far more sacred? The sins stacked one onto the other, perhaps no more than when he tried to walk the path to God. But it was not God's doing. It was further sins perpetrated by men with the lord's name on their lips.

Angeline was at his side, and her tiny hand slipped into his. Lincoln could not look down on her. He would chase the man down and tell him he had changed his mind.

But in the end, he remained rooted to the spot. He had spent time giving significant thought to the situation. He had no doubt he would leave Helmsley when Angeline became pregnant. He could let Hagan raise his child, but he did not think he could bear to watch it.

Was she still a girl? Hardly, his brain told him. She had wed and lost a child after labor Lincoln admired her for surviving. Now she wanted another chance at motherhood.

"If we had not asked you, we would ask another," Angeline said next to him as if she read his thoughts. "I would keep asking until I found whatever man was willing. I love Hagan, and I wish to stay with him for a lifetime. But I also want to be a mother. So you are the man I trust will not hurt me."

Lincoln's eyes snapped down to her. She was right. He would never hurt her.

"This will be okay, Lincoln. I admit to an attraction to you, so this will not be the ordeal I see you fear it will be for me. Instead, I will depend upon you to teach me how to find pleasure in a man's bed. Can you do this?"

Her question jolted Lincoln, and he fought the smile that wanted to broaden his face. He feared it might be a lecherous one. "I will do my best, my lady."



The first time they were together, Angeline led the way. Lincoln did not make a move without her encouraging him. In the days and nights after, Lincoln felt guilt for spending so much time with Angeline. They became close in that short time in both friendship and intimacy. For a week each month, it seemed as if Lincoln had a wife and keep. Hagan would abandon Helmsley, leaving both to Lincoln. Despite the decision he made five months ago, Lincoln had to admit, as he rode beneath the portcullis, he was sad to go. But his task was done, and soon Angeline would grow round with Lincoln's child.

Lincoln saw Hagan sitting some distance away, watching for Lincoln to leave. Lincoln wondered how long his friend waited. He was not surprised Hagan had not come to see him off. Despite the agreement, Hagan found it challenging to look at Lincoln and not fume. Especially as the months ticked by. He noticed the easy relationship Lincoln and Angeline were developing, which bothered Hagan far more than he would ever admit. For that, he knew Angeline felt guilty because she had come between Hagan and another close friend. But Lincoln assured her time would heal the wounds opened not only between him and Hagan but Hagan and Thomas as well.

Lincoln could feel Hagan's eyes follow him out of sight. Relief relaxed Lincoln's shoulders. He was bound for Ravenshill, running from another sin. That of coveting another man's wife.



## Chapter 31

Thomas sat on the steps that led up to the quarterdeck. He had spent his life training to become a knight. He had fought in many battles, weighted down in full armor. The heat inside such a suit of metal was draining in a run across an open field. But never had Thomas been as exhausted as he was now.

There was no escaping the sun. The constant exposure blistered his skin. That was exhausting enough, but the continuous work was far worse. Not a moment was spared on leisure. Instead, he was always in a constant flurry of labor.

“Man, the sails! Starboard! Starboard!” the captain yelled

The call came from behind him. The captain's voice rang across the ship, carrying to the ears of every crew member who always tuned to his calls. Thomas jumped to his feet as men scrambled. Thomas looked over the rail and saw the black clouds in the distance. It seemed as if they rolled quickly toward them with a terrifying madness in the seconds Thomas stared.

Thomas rushed to the mizzen. The sail at the stern of the ship had been catching little wind. Now it strained with the main sail and the foresails against the rising wind. Hands took hold of the rope with Thomas, steadying the boom as first the foresail was repositioned, catching the wind that began turning the ship toward the right. The giant main sail was wrestled, the boom lurching into position as Thomas and the other men brought the final sail around to catch the wind.

The wind struck the ship's left side, and the sails caught the wind, straining against the booms and ropes the men worked. Thomas looked up to the captain, but his attention was not on his men's progress but on the storm's. Thomas turned in that direction, and suddenly an evil presence was on the ocean with them. What boiled across the horizon was unlike anything Thomas had ever witnessed. It was alive, and over the groan of the ship, the flap of the sails, and the call of the men, Thomas heard it growling. It swallowed the sky and turned the world evil as it churned toward them.

“Trim the sails!” the captain called. Heads turned up, and ropes were heaved as the crewmen caught the wind on the leading edge of the sails. Thomas felt the movement of the ship pick up. Thomas did not know how long they raced the storm, fighting the sails to keep them positioned just so in the wind. Any error created a luffing in the sails, making the canvas slacken and slowing the ship. Each time Thomas glanced at the captain, he watched the progress of the storm, his eyes not on the sails. He left that to his crew as they watched the fluttering strips of the tell-tales attached to the sails. The crew fought to keep them flowing behind the sails evenly. When one of the three on each

sail shifted to one side or began to flop, the ropes were hauled to keep the ship at an even keel.

A giant gust of wind struck Thomas in the face. He felt the force of it move the ship, threatening to move it in a different direction. His hands tightened, and the ropes dug into them. At any other time, the pain could be excruciating, but now, it did not register through the fear beginning to climb in his chest. Thomas immediately tightened the sail against the onslaught, willing the rising wind to carry them out of the storm before it struck them. Thomas had already heard all the other crewmembers' tales of weathering storms. This would be Thomas's first, and it was terrifying with its approach as it closed off the light of hope as it circled them.

It seemed as if all on the ship paused and held a collective breath for a moment. Even the ship held its breath waiting, hoping the escape was not lost. Menacing darkness crept across the deck. Thomas looked to see the sun swallowed by the churning hell from above. The rope was yanked hard in his hand, and he and the other men on the rope held tight.

"Port! Port!" the captain called.

Another flurry ensued as sails were turned again. This time the crew aimed the ship into the wind.

"Furl the sails! Furl! Now, now!" The captain's voice, though not panicked, did have the sound of urgency. The warning was that they might die if the crew did not immediately follow his orders and lower the sails.

By the time the ship was angled into the wind so the sails could be lowered, the sea beneath them churned with every demon from bibles and fairytales. Thomas panted, clambering to take down the rear sail. The captain barked orders to the men on the foresail.

The ship rose and fell, picking up as it rocked and groaned. Once two of the sails were down, the foresail was turned, allowing it to catch the wind and turning the ship back to a forty-five-degree angle with the storm.

"Drop the ropes!" the captain called.

The men rushed toward the giant ropes stretching the length of the deck. They were as round as Thomas's arm and so much heavier. He had seen them and tripped over them numerous times against the rails. But each time he enquired of their use, he was only told he would see. And now he did, following the other men as they wrestled them to the ship's edge and dropped them over the side. Attached to the stern, the ship began to drag the ropes in an effort to slow the vessel. If the ship was allowed too much speed, rising and falling in the waves, it could plunge down and never resurface.

As if on cue, as the ropes hit the water with splashes, the waves began rising, lifting, and dropping the vessel beneath Thomas's feet. He planted his feet on the wooden planks and braced his legs to ride the rise and fall.

The storm surrounded them, blocking out the sun, and darkening the menacing water churning and spilling over the deck. A hawk called from above. Thomas lifted his head and felt the bird caught in the storm was a bad omen. It was not unheard of for birds of prey to get caught in a storm as they attempted to find the trailing edge to fly out of. Thomas did not know how far from shore they were, but until now, it had been too far to see a bird in the sky.

And then before him rose a giant beast. The ship's bow began climbing, and Thomas's stomach flipped in conjunction with the fear of what lay on the other side of the wave that rose higher and higher. The dark water churned with demons from the darkest pits of hell. Thomas could feel the water beneath the ship sucking from under it, feeding the wave that growled in fury. As the ship's bow reached the top, the wave began to break, pushing the ship backward, and suspending it.

Thomas's grip tightened on the rail. He wanted to move away. He did not want to see where they would go, down backward or down forward. He knew they could not stay suspended for long. Then the bow tipped down as if a giant sigh expelled from the crew. Then the ship tipped and plunged. Down it traveled, racing at a speed Thomas thought surely would drive them into the ocean floor. The bow dipped beneath the surface, and the subsequent rising wave broke across the deck. Men screamed. Thomas watched two men wash overboard. He clung terrified to the rail, wondering fleetingly how some of these men still raced back and forth. These were the men who were full of ocean tales. These were the men who laughed when they began tearing down the wave. They whooped as if it was a great tournament triumph when the waves broke across the decks, and the ship remained upright.

Thomas learned every man had battles to fight. Here on the water, they battled the ocean, both a friend and foe. For the crew, it was a constant battle. The ship had to remain close-hauled to the wind, keeping it at a forty-five-degree angle. More would send the ship running too fast, and any less might keep them trapped within the storm until they or it died. By the time the storm ceased, Thomas was shaking from exhaustion and the pressure of his frayed nerves. One thing was for sure as he heard the rest of the crew murmuring. They had been thrown off course. The journey to Anne was now even longer.



## Chapter 32

Hagan stared unseeing at the milling people below. He did not feel like joining the revelry of the fair. The screams of joy, surprise, and the drumming of the minstrels echoed into Helmsley's lower bailey from the open gate. He looked across the vast expanse to unknown lands and wondered what had happened to Thomas. The man had disappeared from the face of the earth a year ago. It saddened Hagan that he might have died alone and thrown in some grave no one would ever know about. It was all Hagan's fault, and the guilt ate at him throughout the day and at night as he prowled the halls.

Not only did he have this guilt, but he spent a lot of time feeling sorry for himself. His hand was mending. The pain was gone, but it would remain a useless pulp of mangled flesh. He looked down at it, resting on the wall. Beneath his left hand, he felt the cold stone, but there might as well be nothing under his right.

Hagan could wield a sword with his left hand. A man couldn't come out of battle if he could not wield weapons with both hands. But he had not picked his sword up since returning home. It remained propped against his chamber wall, near his bed. It would catch the moonlight and cast an eerie glow that beckoned and taunted him. He spent much of his days and nights staring at it and wondering how he could feel so empty, knowing he would never carry it into battle again. After all, a man needed to wield weapons in both hands to survive such fields.

His gaze found Angeline talking to one of the merchant's wives below him. She had become friends with the woman whose name Hagan could not recall despite sitting at the same meal table with her on more than one occasion. The only thing he remembered about her was her laugh. A high-pitched sound prompted others to join in with her laughter. It grated on Hagan's nerves. Angeline looked up at him standing on the wall. How long she had been standing so, he could not say. Finally, she said farewell to her friend and then moved toward the castle gate.

Hagan turned away and moved quickly toward the steps. His long legs carried him across the baileys and to the manor house. He plunged into the corridor, nearly running. Angeline was coming to try to cheer him again. He hated himself for avoiding her, not that he could dodge the persistent woman for long. It was the pitying looks she gave him. Looks and words telling him she understood when he knew she could not possibly understand his turmoil.

He reached his chamber, swept into it, and slammed the door. It did not bang into the doorframe but remained silent behind him. He turned, and his heart sank seeing Angeline holding onto the door, making him want to cry. He only wanted to feel

joy when he saw her. His feelings were no less for her than when they left France. But she could not cheer him, and it annoyed him she tried so hard.

She closed the door quietly as he turned away. His eyes fell on his sword as the silence echoed around the room.

“What?” Hagan finally asked. He snapped at her when it was not his intent to do so.

“I came to sit with you, lay with you, walk with you, stand with you. I do not care what it is. I just want to do it with you.”

“Go away, Angeline.”

Hagan heard her sigh behind him, “Hagan.”

“Angeline,” Hagan said, holding his good hand up as if that would ward her off.

“Do you want me to leave Helmsley? Leave you to your solitude?”

Hagan wanted to say yes because she could not follow after him if she wasn't at Helmsley. “No,” he said. “But could you leave me alone? Just for a little while?”

“How long? It was a month ago I told you I was pregnant. You were joyous for a couple days, but you have sought solitude since. Why?”

Hagan drew in a long-exasperated breath. Why did everything annoy him? Because more than anything, he wanted to scream and destroy things like a petulant child. More than anything, he wanted to crawl into bed and pull the blankets over his head. He wanted his past, and he wanted his future.

Angeline came to stand before him, but he deftly avoided her gaze. “Is it this?” she asked, picking up his sword. It was heavy and cumbersome for her small stature. She ran a finger across the flat of the blade. He wanted to snatch it from her. Only he knew how many men his sword had bled.

“Do you think there is nothing left for you without a sword in your hand?” Her face flashed from serene to fury. Then, with the strength Hagan did not expect, she slung the sword across the room, so it clattered against the wall. The ferocity of the act and her face twisted with rage made Hagan take a step backward. Then, like his most skilled opponent, she advanced, and he retreated.

“Have you turned into some kind of fool? That sword does not make you a man. Your dick does not make you a man. What makes you a man is that you did what you had to do to protect me. You sacrificed so much for me, for us. And yet you slink around here like all is lost. When nothing is lost. It is what you bravely set in motion. It is your victory.”

Hagan stared at his wife, marveling at how frightening she was in her anger. He half expected her to retrieve his sword and slice his head off. But she loved him, which was why she was screaming at him. She never raised her voice to Remon, barely even looking her previous husband in the eyes. She knew his love for her was strong enough that Hagan would not retaliate with fists or words that bruised and maimed. She was standing in his bed-chamber, his wife carrying a child that would be theirs. She was his victory.

“I'm sorry,” Hagan whispered to her.

Her face transformed back to its gently calm expression that had long since replaced the fearful one. Her small hand came up and feathered across his face. “There is nothing to be sorry for. It is hard. But I miss you.”

“I'm sorry,” he said again because he did not know what else he could say.

She gave him a light pat on the cheek before she turned away. "I will leave you alone now." She moved to the door but stopped before she opened it. "Will I see you at the evening meal?"

Hagan nodded, and she beamed before leaving him alone.



## Chapter 33

The road stretched out before him. He wanted to turn his horse and ride back through time to just a few months before. He would make sure Hagan never got a chance to be near Angeline. But time never turned around. It trudged forward through triumph, disgrace, joy, and misery. Lincoln paused on the thought of joy. He mulled it over in his mind. When had the three of them known joy? They found satisfaction when they rampaged across a battlefield. Though that satisfaction faded in the aftermath to be replaced with the relief they survived. They laughed and had fun in camp, but where did joy come in.

Joy was great pleasure and happiness. He could say he felt none of these things with greatness. But Hagan had. He had found it in that little girl. Come what may, for the both of them, Hagan would protect her and be joyful that he could do so.

Lincoln brought his horse to a stop. He sat in the roadway thinking of joy and found himself envious of Hagan. He was willing to fight for his happiness. But Hagan was not the only one. Thomas had remained in France, away from his joy which was Anne, so he could secure them a future. By helping his one friend find joy, he had ripped it from the other.

He would ensure Thomas's joy was waiting for him when he extracted himself from the mess Lincoln and Hagan left him in. He would make amends, whatever it took, no matter the threat of pain and sacrifices.

Lincoln felt peace enter him when he came from the copse of trees within sight of the river. Thomas may have moved his household to Stokesley, it was necessary to govern that populated and prosperous land, but Ravenshill was his home. He spoke of it often and how it was a beacon on those rare occasions as a child that he and his father returned to.

The hills rolled and peaked, climbing higher as England reached for Scotland. The land here still lay wild, wooded, with only tiny villages scattered over miles. Around those small populated areas were small fields, and Lincoln guessed the rest of England saw little come from this far northern district. The big pull of the place would lay in its game. He saw their trails leading deep into the forests, stretching far into the north.

The village of Kielder was positioned on either side of the road. He saw the signs of a declining population at a glance. Structures stood abandoned, rotting, others

stripped to be used elsewhere. Few people went about their work, and it was apparent the village hung by a thread. Fields that had once been cleaned were now returning to the wilds of the forest. Thomas had said nothing of the village, but Lincoln doubted he knew anything about it since he spent little time here.

The road continued north through fields without enough hands to work them. Finally, a fork appeared in the road. One path led further north, its tracks disappearing into the Scottish mountains. If Lincoln was to run, he would run that way. It would be easy to hide from anyone pursuing him. He turned his horse to the right and the bridge. He paused here. The bridge stretched across the river, laying docile at the moment, but Thomas told a tale about how the river raged like a beast when it rose and ripped through the valley. When the storms rolled from the north, the river had time to gather and rise ahead of torrential rains quickly. In those times, the bridge threatened to wash away, and the fields flooded. A part of the village had been destroyed in Thomas's lifetime. But he admitted he had not been there to witness it.

The keep was just as Thomas described in his memories of home. The river flowed around a bend created by a knoll that rose from the limestone. The keep of Ravenshill sat atop the hill, watching over land and river stretching for miles. A speck of a bird flew from the crenulated wall of the three-story tower. Lincoln recalled the marvel of the stones on his first visit, how they glowed like fire in the sunrises and sunsets.

Those stones were nearly black with the storm clouds threatening overhead. They were a contradiction, welcoming and menacing. With the dark stones, the black sky, and perhaps its age, it appeared as if terrifying things had happened around those walls. Two more birds flew from the tower and circled for a moment before settling again.

Lincoln kicked the horse beneath him, urging it onto the bridge. Its hoofs clomped steadily across the thick boards to reach the other side of the river. The worn and narrow road had become little more than a path. It was only wide enough for single wagons to traverse. The road climbed steadily until it neared the bare knoll the keep sat atop. The trees were not allowed to grow close to the walls, and the scenes stretching to either side were breathtaking. The hills undulated below, slowly tracking to the north, climbing higher and higher until the mountains of Scotland took over.

With the scope of its view, it would be impossible to approach without being seen long before reaching the bridge. As he neared, he saw the gates were closed as he had advised Anne to keep them. He stopped several paces away so he could look up at the walls. The alarm was what might save this place from an attack. Though walls surrounded the one tower, they were shorter by the day's standards. The climb to the top could be gained faster, making it easier for a rush of men to attain the walls against an artillery attack from above. If an army the size of Montagu's came here as enemies, they would breach the walls with little effort. This keep could never withstand despite its survival through the centuries. Its walls already crumbled in places. Little money and attention went into the property for more than a generation as a war was fought far away.

It was old, Lincoln thought as he looked up, seeing two ravens staring down at him. They cocked their heads from side to side as if he were an oddity. This place was of Norman design. The walls had once been made of wood, and some generations since, they had been replaced with magnificent stone. The tower likely had also stood as wood

once upon a time. But the outer walls had been stoned around the wooden skeleton of the tower.

He took a moment to marvel at the stones. Up close, he could see the lines created by the different rock layers melded together. It was an act of nature far finer than any blacksmith could accomplish in a forge. The various minerals created several spectrums of grays and tans, from nearly black to blonde, as they shifted back and forth with their composition. But what made the walls shimmer in the shifting light were the fine crystals enhancing the colors in the stone, drawing out or driving back various colors with the light shift.

The birds took to the sky, and a face appeared. The man on the wall called down to another, and the heavy wooden gates opened.

The bailey floor was bare, and the dirt would turn to mud in the rain. His eyes skipped across the wall surrounding him, up the tower, searching for the guards. One man, the one who had called down to him, was the only one. Next to the tower was a woman, and next to her was a large man that dwarfed her. The man was a mountain whose bearing was not that of an ordinary man. Sir Shane was a quiet man whose eyes constantly moved with mistrust.

Anne's hair flamed red with tight curls she tried to tame in a tight braid. But they escaped, framing her face, tickling her neck. She looked, as Thomas described, like a fairy. She had a spark, a light in her green eyes that spread through her and from her. Lincoln had liked her immediately.

The pair stood at the edge of a narrow bridge. A ditch dug deep surrounded the tower, and the little wooden bridge that crossed it could be drawn up. It was the last defense Ravenshill could offer. But it would barely slow down an attack. Like the walls, the tower could not withstand a large army. So Lincoln knew the knight was prepared to stand and die in front of that bridge.

Lincoln swung a leg over his horse's neck and slid from the saddle.

"Do you bring news of Thomas?" Her voice was hopeful as her green eyes looked up at him. They slanted at the corners. Her nose was small and pert set in her heart-shaped face. Her lips were full and twisted up slightly at the corners appearing as if she had a perpetual smile. Lincoln shook his head, "No, my lady. I am afraid I do not. But I have returned to be of service to you."

Sadness suffocated the hope in her eyes.

"I would be happy to give you shelter and accept your gracious offer of service."

"I have traveled far and could use some food and drink if I might impose upon you further."

Anne laughed a soft sound. "Everyone must travel far to come here."

Lincoln returned her warm smile.

"Someone will see to your horse while we have some ale."



## Chapter 34

Thomas felt as if he pulled himself along by prayer alone. He never knew God before Lincoln came into his life and taught him of a force greater than an army. Of course, Thomas had heard commanders declare God was on their side. They were not always victorious, so he never understood why it was supposed to matter.

The journey home to his beloved Anne fortified Lincoln's teachings. Teachings he had never understood before. God existed in souls not tainted by a battlefield. Why would He possibly concern himself with the slaughter of humans against one another? Lincoln was sure He had already given up the soul of every man who fought in battle. Perhaps they would be forgiven once they walked away. But he didn't think they would ever feel forgiven.

Thomas felt God was with him throughout his journey. He was not hung by Humphrey in France. The ship did not sink to the depths of the ocean. And he had finally made it back to English soil. He would never deny to anyone he cried when an ocean no longer stood between him and Anne. But his journey had not ended upon his arrival in England. Miles and miles, he trekked north. He tried to get a horse, but he had no coin, was in rags, and looked like a beggar. He almost stole one but thought the repercussions could delay or even end his journey home.

Thomas went to Stokesley, where he left his wife. He hoped Humphrey had been unable or, in the end, unwilling to ruin Thomas. At least it was a prayer he prayed many times. Whether there was real hope, he could not say. It was not until the end of his father's life that he was granted the title Earl of Stokesley. Wouldn't his father be furious if he knew Thomas lost it faster than his father had gained it?

Stokesley came into Thomas's sight, and his journey stopped cold. He was very familiar with the colors flying over his castle's walls. The background was red, making it stand out from many other banners. White water bougets on this red background represented the water skins carried on yolks to soldiers in battle. It had flown beneath Thomas's yellow raven on its black background for years. This property, Thomas's property, now belonged to Hagan de Ros.

Hagan was not likely in residence. Stokesley was a far cry from the opulence of Helmsley. But Hagan would have his own man there now. Running the castle and its surrounding land. Eating at Thomas's table, sleeping in his bed, and bringing in taxes

and supplies that would be a paltry amount for a man like Hagan. But it would mean survival for Thomas. He wanted to barge through the open gates and gut the man, whoever he might be. But he was here for Anne and only Anne. Stokesley was nothing without her in it. But as Thomas was to learn, she had left before Hagan was granted the property. How Hagan came to own Thomas's property, he could not begin to guess and did not want to waste time finding someone to explain it. Somehow, Thomas found the strength to continue his journey.

Thomas had little to sustain him from the southern tip of England to Helmsley. But after learning of his wife's departure, he did not take the time to hunt for food or steal it. Instead, his feet kept him shuffling forward, stumbling but determined to find her.

When he reached the bridge, he gripped the rail and nearly fell to the wooden boards. Across the river and upon the hill sat Ravenshill. Its lone stone tower soared to the sky. The setting sun's light washed the stones of the tower and surrounding curtain wall in a red glow. He was home. Despite his pride in Stokesley and the small castle built by the earl before his father, Ravenshill still resided in his heart as home. He would have been more devastated to learn he had lost Ravenshill than the more profitable property at Stokesley. Had he not been concerned for Anne's safety, the punishment of losing Stokesley would have been a minor blow.

He got his feet moving. Crossing the bridge, his eyes never strayed from the old Norman tower. Generation after generation, the keep had protected his family. He saw a man upon the wall as he stepped foot on solid ground. He heard him shout an alert.

On tired legs, Thomas climbed the well-worn path to the gates of Ravenshill. He paused as he reached the summit and bowed his head to offer a quick prayer to God. He begged Him to allow him to find Anne behind the flaming walls and vowed he would ask nothing more.

"Who goes there?" the man called down.

Thomas hoped the closed gate was a good sign they protected his wife. Would they be closed this far north in the day if nothing was precious inside to protect?

"Earl..." Thomas's voice trailed before he picked it back up. "Baron Thomas Kirkham," he shouted up. Relief flooded him when the gates opened. He was still lord here.

When the gates came to rest, he stepped forward. His steps were slow in the drizzle as they crossed the bailey turning to mud beneath his worn boots. He proceeded slowly. The bailey was quiet as he crossed it. He stopped when he reached the center, with no one coming to greet him in the downpour. His eyes traveled upward to the top floor of the tower. Three stories up, it held the only plate glass window on the property. Behind its glass, he saw a figure staring down at him. The setting sun obscured the figure before it disappeared. A woman barrelled from the tower within a moment and ran across the small drawbridge. Fear for the woman filled him. That bridge was dangerously slick sometimes when it rained. But she did not falter.

"Thomas!"

Six years it took him to make it back to his wife. She was no child now, and neither was he. But he could never mistake her wild red hair and soft green eyes as she flew at him. She was in his arms so quickly the force of it nearly stumbled him backward.

He caught her, then caught himself, wrapping his arms around her. They clung to each other, shedding tears of relief that their paths had finally led them back together.

Thomas did not know how long he held his wife, but a throat cleared behind her and Thomas's eyes rose.

“Hello, Thomas,” Lincoln said.

For the moment, Thomas did not care how or why Lincoln had come to Ravenshill. What he held in his arms was the only thing that mattered and would ever matter.

The title 'Chapter 35' is centered on the page. The word 'Chapter' is written in a black, elegant serif font. The number '35' is written in a larger, stylized black font. To the left of the 'C' in 'Chapter' is a red rose with green leaves. To the right of the '5' is a purple rose with green leaves. The roses are stylized and appear to be part of the chapter's decorative elements.

## Chapter 35

“Hagan.” His wife’s voice was hesitant as she approached him. He turned from the horsemen, some mounted, some not, all young and craving the victory in the rings. Nothing made a squire prouder than winning with a lance and rings other than becoming a knight. As it always did when he looked at Angeline, his breath hitched a little, and he felt the warmth of joy run through his veins.

“Yes, darling?” he asked, wanting to touch her shoulder, hair, or hand. It did not matter. He liked to touch her and feel her skin’s softness, warmth, and kindness.

“I think it is time.”

Hagan stared at the woman he loved, wondering what she was speaking of. Then the spark of knowledge grew into a flame. A trace of sadness threatened because Angeline carried Lincoln’s child, not his. But that was quickly replaced with increasing joy. He would have a son or daughter. Only three people in the world would ever know the truth. A piece of his mind niggled at him, and he wondered if Angeline would be content with only one child. Would he be satisfied with a daughter and not a son?

“Truly?” Hagan asked.

When she nodded, he became awash with pleasure. Forgotten was Lincoln and his seed. Hagan was to be a father, and it was a miracle.



## Chapter 36

Anne's labor was not as intense as Angeline's had been at Janville. Within a few hours of her contractions beginning, the Kirkhams welcomed the child born within the walls of Ravenshill. A new generation had begun.

"Lincoln," Thomas's voice turned him. Thomas held his daughter bundled against his chest. "I wanted you to meet someone," he said, moving forward.

Lincoln tensed, and for a moment, he thought he might be more frightened than he ever was facing an enemy. He had never held a baby. He had never been around a child who was not a page or a squire.

Thomas was holding the baby toward him, and instinctively Lincoln reached for her. He held her stiffly, holding her in his outstretched hands, but he knew not what to do with her. "She won't break."

Thomas repositioned the baby in Lincoln's big hands, so he cradled her. The baron pulled the blanket away from the baby's face.

"Meet Lady Elisabeth Kirkham," Thomas said softly.

Soft blue eyes looked up at Lincoln. They were wide and assessing as they studied Lincoln's face. Finally, she burred and cooed, speaking to Lincoln for the first time. Then Elisabeth smiled, and Lincoln lost his heart. Tears filled his eyes at the overwhelming feeling. All the answers of the unknown Lincoln had sought with a madness had finally brought him here, to Ravenshill, and home.