



## Crusade d'Amour

### Prologue - France 1251

Thwip!

A cold drop of water fell off the brim of Alyna Caperun's cap, pulled low over her forehead to protect her as much as possible from the drenching that Mother Nature had mustered. It landed on her neck and snaked its way down her back to join the pool of others that had gathered between her shoulder blades where the coarse woolen tunic touched her skin.

It was unseasonably cold, gray, a gray that hugged the earth and almost obscured the tiny group of mourners that were gathered together as the shrouded body of her twin brother, David, was lowered into the shallow grave by the side of the road. A bleak, joyless scene, it matched Alyna's mood perfectly.

Stoic, she watched as the first shovels of dirt were thrown in. Panic battled with hunger within her. And overall, anger. Anger at David for dying, anger at her foolishness that had brought her here, even anger at the incessant rain that chilled her and turned the road into a quagmire.

A rough cross fashioned from two branches lashed together was pounded into the loose dirt at the head of the grave. The priest waved his hand over in one last benediction and the group dispersed.

Only Alyna remained to stand vigil, head bowed, over her brother. Tears streamed down her cheeks but by now it was raining so hard that it was difficult to tell where the rain stopped and the tears began.

She stood there for some time, lost in sorrow and introspection, lost in dejection, but more than that, just lost.

And alone.

### Chapter I

#### England - A few months earlier

The bailey at Caperun Keep was oddly subdued. Odd in that today, it should have been fraught with commotion for David Caperun was off to join his father Hugh in France for the long and perilous journey to the Holy Land. The crowd of well wishers numbered but a few, a far cry from the many that had filled the yard on previous happy occasions.

Alyna, trying to keep a brave face, ignored the dismal sight of vegetation growing in the once prosperous bailey where proud knights had practiced their craft and castle tradesmen had busily plied their business. She focused

instead on the great adventure that David and Hugh were about to commence and the honor and riches that would befall on the Caperun family upon their successful return.

Accordingly, she forced a smile to her lips and waved gaily from the landing of the entrance turret as her brother turned and raised a hand in salute.

"Mind yourself well, little sister," he shouted over his shoulder as the entourage slowly passed through the outer gate. "Farewell, farewell." They all joined in, a chorus of brave voices, hearty nonetheless for all the diminutive size of the group gathered there. "Farewell, farewell," she echoed his words, and then cried out "Dieu li volt! God wills it!" He must have heard her, for he turned around in his saddle and raised his hand to her again, a broad smile creasing the familiar, cherished features.

They could be heard splashing through the shallow puddles that filled the road after last night's rainfall, a brief thud of hoofs, and then nothing, only the chirrup of the thrushes as they staked their territories. Alyna, hoping to catch another glimpse, hurried down the stairs and stopped when she was able to peer through the opened gate in the outer walls to the road beyond.

"He is away?"

With her preoccupation of David's departure, Alyna hadn't heard her aunt Philippa arrive. The hated voice beside her gave her a bit of a start.

"Aye," she replied tartly, perhaps too much so for her aunt's eyes narrowed suddenly and a malicious look briefly flashed across the elegant features. Oh, how she detested her aunt and would like nothing better than to snub her but manners prevailed and she hastened to make amends.

"Aye," she said again, this time in a tone designed to pacify the other woman. "They just left the keep – if we hurry, we could still catch sight of them before they enter the forest."

"Nay, oh nay," Philippa shuddered. "'Twould be unseemly to be seen clambering about the turrets like some common wench." She turned and began to climb back up the stairs towards the entrance turret, picking up her skirts so that the rich deep blue velvet did not drag on the muddy steps.

Alyna stood for a moment, watching her aunt as she ascended, then with a heavy sigh, picked up her own skirts and trailed after her. Pretending not to notice as her aunt headed towards the chapel, obviously expecting Alyna to follow for morning devotions, she instead continued through the great hall and solar and up the spiral staircase until at last she stood on the turret roof that overlooked the main entrance gate.

She had arrived just in time, for she could still see David's assemblage as they trotted briskly through the fields, just now

beginning to sprout pale green.

She waved, shouting, "Fare thee well, and God speed!" as loud as she could, but the early spring breeze took her words and flung them about capriciously so she didn't really expect David to hear her.

"Fare thee well," she whispered, dejected as the fringe of trees swallowed the riders and the brightly colored fluttering flags they carried.

She continued to stand there for a few minutes more, and, on a whim pulled off her headscarf. Not having had the time nor the inclination to put it in its customary braids this morning due to the excitement of her brother's impending journey, her hair floated freely about her shoulders and down her back.

The breeze blew the tawny blonde tresses around and about and Alyna relished the cool freshness as the strands were lifted away from her scalp. She continued to stare towards the spot where her brother had disappeared, imagining that she could see him still, although in truth, there was naught to be seen.

She closed her eyes, lifting her face to the fragile rays of spring sunlight, drawing one last deep breath before beginning the descent back towards the great hall.

By the time Alyna arrived, her aunt was already seated at the main trestle table. Philippa frowned in vexation when she spied her errant niece, still attempting to fasten the scarf around wind tousled curls. "I missed you at morning devotions," admonished her aunt, the voice severe with disapproval. "I expect that you shall make up for it at evening vespers."

"Aye, madame," came the meek reply as Alyna slid onto the stool beside her. She noticed that Philippa watched her yet, eyes narrowed in disgust at the lock of hair that Alyna had not been able to catch and thus it hung askew over one cheek. Feeling self-conscious now that Philippa's disapproval was so evident, she tried to smooth it back, and, failing that, sat with head bowed miserably, waiting for the tirade that was sure to come.

Fie upon you, came the uncharitable thought, as sure enough, the words came tumbling out of that elegant mouth in a vile torrent. "Alyna, you wound me sorely, for I would expect that you would be much more aware of the proper comportment that I have striven to impart to you in absence of your mother. You forget, you are a grown woman of eighteen years and cavorting about the towers is no longer an acceptable practice."

There came a pause as the serving girl put down the trenchers of bread with cold venison on the scarred wooden planks and then she continued, waving off the girl with an imperious hand.

"May I remind you that you are sorely lacking in decency if you cannot find it within yourself to keep your head covered as

befits one of your station. Any suitor would be appalled at your waywardness.”

“Aye, madame.” The meek little voice came out again, although inside Alyna was fuming. Wayward, was she, since when was it wayward to but wish one’s brother fare thee well and God speed in light of the journey he was about to undertake?

“In penance, I expect you to spend extra time carding wool.” Alyna groaned inwardly. Carding wool – ‘twas a tedious task that dirtied the hands.

“Aye, madame.” Alyna schooled her features, seemingly the penitent young woman. In reality, however, inside she was a seething mass of rebellion and now, out of long practice, not listening to a word Philippa had to say. Her thoughts drifted.

How she rued the day her aunt had come to live with them, taken in only by the goodness of her brother Hugh, for in truth, Philippa had nowhere to go after the untimely death of her husband in a melee on the tournament field. Seizing on the opportunity that had presented itself, she had quickly insinuated herself as lady of the manor, filling in for the sister-in-law that had died in childbirth with Alyna a few years prior.

In all fairness, she made an excellent chatelaine, for the larders were always full, the floor rushes changed out regularly, and mending and sewing always done.

But she sorely lacked compassion and patience of any kind, particularly when it came to young children. Many was the time that Alyna had had her ears boxed over sloppy needlework or improper behavior, particularly when tagging about after David.

“Alyna, have you lost your wits? Get you to the solar and oversee the cleaning of the bed linens.” Philippa’s shrewish voice penetrated Alyna’s conscious and she came back to the present with a jolt. Carefully masking her expression, she raised her face to her aunt and nodded her head.

“Aye, madame, I will tend to that immediately.” Her aunt turned and glided away smoothly and Alyna stuck her tongue out at the receding back. For one so fair of face to be such a crone was a constant source of puzzlement to her. Truthfully, her aunt was a fine looking woman, with lustrous black locks and porcelain skin and even white teeth, all of which she still had, but she nowhere near matched the even temperament of Hugh. Alyna had often wondered whether Philippa had been a changeling, so different in looks and personality she was from Hugh.

Still pondering on the subject of familial resemblance, Alyna then considered herself and her brother. David resembled Hugh, short and stocky and strong, with sandy brown hair and gray eyes in an average face made handsome when sporting a smile, as it so often was.

Alyna, on the other hand, took after her mother, Laura, with blonde hair and blue green eyes and a slender frame. She knew it was vain, but she often scrutinized herself in the tiny polished metal mirror that she kept in the chest at the foot of the bed she shared with Philippa.

She had been told that she was fair of face as well, although she personally thought her nose a little too large and her smile a little too wide. Thankfully, she too had all her teeth so perhaps she should be grateful that the smile, although wide, was not marred by black gaps.

She did, however, concede to one vanity - her hair, a rich tawny blonde that fell down her back in thick, verdant waves that she wore parted in the middle and braided. Even in braids it still fell past her hips and therefore she had no need to cover the ends with stuffed socks to give the illusion of length as some ladies were wont to do. Heaving a sigh, Alyna arose from the stool and started across the hall. The scraps from the meal had been thrown to the floor and several dogs fought among themselves for the morsels. She detoured around them and climbed the stairs to the solar.

"I'm here," Alyna smiled at Emma as she entered. Emma, the oldest daughter of the head groom, fulfilled many duties, including serving at the table, and it was she who had brought the trenchers for this morning's meal. A bit on the plump side, Emma was tall and strong which made her indispensable for the everyday household chores. "Thank you, maid Alyna." Emma bobbed her head, busy removing the bed curtains before throwing them in a big pile on the floor. Next the bed was stripped. Off came the linen sheets and woolen cover lined with fur and finally, the feather mattress. The bed frame was left exposed and Alyna checked the leather thongs that supported the mattress.

"Good, 'tis still sound," she said. She wrinkled her nose at the odor that drifted from the mattress and bedclothes. "The mattress needs airing."

"Aye." Emma nodded and took one end of it.

Alyna grasped the other end and between the two of them, they wrestled it to the roof of the keep. After giving it a few good whacks with the stout branches left up there for just that purpose, they left it outside to air and returned to the solar.

The coverlet and curtains were shaken out and left folded on the window bench. The shutters were swung wide open to catch the freshening spring air, a welcome change from the dank, musty odor that permeated the keep during the winter months.

Each taking an armful, the bed linens were carried down to the wash tubs in the kitchen. It was situated on the back edge of the great hall so not only did they have to tread cautiously down the dimly lit spiral stairs, but they also had to watch their step over the now sleeping dogs and gnawed bones that littered the floor of the great hall.

The load was heavy and Alyna paused to warm her backside by the fireplace in the great hall. Emma threw her an inquiring glance. "Don't wait, Emma. I'll be along soon." Emma nodded and trudged away.

Alyna dropped the linens and admired the tapestries and rugs that adorned the walls, including her own recent handiwork, a rendition of the Caperun coat of arms. A white cross on a green background, it hung proudly on the opposite wall above the entrance to the solar. She loved this room. Hugh had been able to procure glass for the window slits and although the air was chill, the glow as the sun shone through the windows gave an illusion of warmth. That, plus the wall hangings and brass wall sconces, made the hall cozy and welcoming. Her heart swelled with pride. This was home, where family and friends gathered, and meals were shared. Even Philippa's unpleasantness could not spoil the ambience.

She picked up the linens and continued to the kitchen. There she found Emma standing beside the washtub, arms crossed, hands tucked under her armpits, shivering slightly as she waited patiently for her mistress.

Alyna dumped her armload unceremoniously into the tub. "Emma, fill the tub," instructed Alyna as she added lye soap from the shelf on the wall beside her. Emma poured in pitchers of water from the heated copper cauldron hanging off to one side of the fireplace,

"Who accompanies David?" Emma asked as she poured. "Simon and Baldric," Alyna replied. She began to stir the linens with a wooden paddle. "Good men both, for both are skilled in weaponry and horsemanship. David is fortunate to have them at his side." She gave the linens a final stir. "And they are fortunate for the opportunity to go on Crusade for 'tis common knowledge of the riches to be gained."

"Aye," Emma nodded. "And the promise of eternal salvation. But would a pious, simple life not lead to salvation too?" She crossed herself quickly.

"I think so," Alyna said, frowning her brow. "But Father Gilbert knows better than I. Ask him."

Leaving the linens to soak for a while, Alyna and Emma drew more water from the well to refill the cauldron.

"You should have seen them ride away, Emma," Alyna puffed as she turned the crank that raised and lowered the bucket at the end of the rope. "So handsome in their armor and so excited, like young boys they were."

"Aye," Emma nodded wisely. "Knights are made for battle. And to battle the infidels in the Holy Land - there is no higher honor." She carried the filled buckets two at a time back and forth until the

cauldron was full.

"Time to rinse," Alyna said, eyeing the dirty wash water.

"Aye," Emma agreed. She ducked her hands into the tub and transferred the washed linens to a large basket. "Where do they meet Lord Hugh?"

"Vezelay, in France." Alyna grunted, trying to drag the tub to the drain. "Aiee, Emma, this tub is heavy."

"Wait." Emma wiped her hands dry on her skirt and grabbed the other side. "Now pull."

The tub screeched in protest as the two scraped it across the floor to the drain. With a final heave, they tipped it over and dumped the water.

Alyna straightened her back and wiped her brow. "Emma, it would be much easier to leave the empty tub here and fill the rinse water by bucket."

Emma nodded. "And from Vezelay to the Holy Land?" She started towards the cauldron, buckets in hand. "How do they go?"

"By ship from France to Palestine to join forces with King Louis IX in Acre." Alyna waved Emma towards the well. "Use fresh water from the well, Emma, hot water is a luxury not necessary for rinsing." Alyna was careful to do exactly as instructed by her aunt. Philippa was prone to surprise inspection and she had no desire to have her ears boxed for a task deemed improperly done. Sometimes yes, but today she was unwilling to suffer the wrath of her aunt for she could not deny the melancholy that nudged at her over the departure of David.

"Oh, the adventure," sighed Emma. "And the respect that they bring to the Caperun name."

"And the riches," Alyna raised her voice as Emma disappeared around the fireplace towards the well. She waited for Emma to reappear before continuing. "The keep has suffered over the past year. David did his best but with the coffers almost emptied to send father on Crusade, naught was left to keep the tradesmen."

"Aye," Emma agreed, back with the first buckets. "David tried but he lacks the firm hand needed in running the keep." She dumped the water into the tub and went for more.

Alyna bristled at Emma's comment against her beloved brother. "He is proud that he was called upon to join the Christian forces. It is his chance to help restore the keep. And he will."

"Of course he will," Emma said. At Alyna's signal, she put down the empty buckets and transferred the sopping cloths back into the tub for rinsing. "Maid Alyna, I meant no offense," Emma said in a conciliatory tone. "David is young and will doubtless grow into his

role as lord of the manor. Do not forget, Hugh called him back early from his service to Lord Anselm.

"Aye, he was sore disappointed for he enjoyed his training there."  
"And his training was cut short by your father's command that he return immediately to Caperun Keep," Emma said. "He did not reach full knighthood."

"He suffered a double blow," Alyna mused. "That of leaving his training early and that of being left behind to act as ward when father left a year ago. But now he has his chance and as sad as I am to see him go, I am pleased for him."

"And now you will act as ward."

"Think you that Philippa will allow that to happen?" Alyna said scornfully. "She seeks only to grasp what is not hers."

One by one, they wrung out the dripping bed linens over the tub before dumping the coiled masses back into the basket.

This time, it was just a matter of tipping the tub over to empty the water. Too late, Alyna remembered that the rinse water was to be left for the few articles of clothing that needed washing today, and she watched with dismay as the last soapy traces of water disappeared down the drain.

"By the Virgin Mary," she began, vexed at herself for forgetting about the rinse water. Emma looked at her in surprise, for rare it was that curse words ever passed the lips of her mistress.

"The rinse water was meant for another task," she explained. "At once, throw a few pitchers of water back into the tub." That should be enough to mislead Philippa if she should choose to check on their progress.

Luck was with her and her aunt was nowhere to be seen. A satisfactory amount of water was replaced into the wash tub and in a short while, the two young women carted the unwieldy basket of wet linens outside.

It was as they were crossing the bailey towards the drying lines that disaster struck.

Emma, eyes glued to Odo, one of the men at arms, tripped over an exposed stone. Arms flailing widely, down she went in a disheveled heap, leaving Alyna to manage the heavy basket of wash on her own. Taken by surprise, the basket slipped out of Alyna's fingers and the clean linens ended up in the mud that had been churned up only this morning by the hooves of David, Simon and Baldric's horses.

"What nonsense is this?" Philippa's voice rang out from the entrance landing.

What bad timing, Alyna thought in dismay, that her aunt should spy their mishap just as it had occurred? She swiveled around in time to watch Philippa descend upon them, an ugly scowl marring her face and hands clenched into fists.

"I beg your pardon, madame, 'twas but an accident." Alyna hoped her quick apology would appease the hag that was so rapidly advancing towards them.

"Aye, my lady, it was an accident and purely my fault," echoed Emma, bobbing a quick curtsy. She too, hoped to avoid the fists and harangue that was sure to come, for she had also been on the receiving end of Philippa's caustic words on more than one occasion. "Bah, you two are useless canker blossoms, unable to accomplish naught. What manner of maiden is not even capable of washing bed linens? 'Tis no wonder, Alyna, that you are unmarried, for what suitable gentleman would consider holy matrimony with you?" Philippa sneered at her niece, kicking at the now mud splattered bed linens. "For proof, one need only look at this mischance. You are surely sentenced to a barren life, one without the joys of husband and family and home."

It was a barb, straight and true, aimed to wound. And it did. Rage, pure and potent and powerful, bubbled through Alyna's breast. Drawing herself up to her full height, she retorted, "Aye, unmarried I may be, yet my husband did not find the need to see himself killed in tournament in order to escape my shrewish ways." Two spots of color appeared high on Philippa's cheeks, and she was momentarily rendered speechless with anger over Alyna's impertinence. "You speak of that which you know naught," she hissed.

"Yea?" challenged Alyna. "Give me audience, madame, for only the intolerant do not accept that misfortune happens. Perchance you do not attend to the lessons of patience and forgiveness taught by Father Gilbert." This was an intended insult to Philippa, for her aunt fancied herself a most pious and obedient woman.

"I assure you," continued Alyna before her aunt could interrupt, "it was not the intent of Emma to lose her footing, but she did, and now we stand here arguing when in truth, the time would be much better spent with re-washing the linens."

"Misfortune? Aye, misfortune it may be, but it was the result of the wench not paying heed to the task at hand, a fault I lay solely at your feet for not being stern." The color remained high on Philippa's face and she clenched and unclenched her fists repeatedly as if she would like nothing better than to strike both young women before her.

"Has compassion so lost you, then, that a stern hand is the only manner of accomplishing a chore? What of human kindness?"

"Human kindness is a weakness, for to display too much is only sure

to lead to being taken advantage of." Philippa was haughty in her assessment.

"Nay, you err, madame, but it is not up to me to point out the injustice of that which you believe. Instead, I leave that to our Lord in heaven, for it will be He who judges you on the final day, not I". Smug in her rebuttal, Alyna excused herself, effectively ending the argument. "By your leave, madame, I have chores to do." As regally as she could, she motioned to Emma and grabbed one of the handles, ready to carry the basket back inside.

Emma, in the meantime had gathered up the soiled linens and righted the basket. She had stood by to one side, head cocked, listening intently to the conversation that swirled around her. Relieved that it appeared as if she was to avoid Philippa's censure on this day, she had instead cast her eyes about surreptitiously, wondering if anyone else was privy to the argument between the two ladies of the manor. She caught the gaze of Odo, and with a wry expression on her face, shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes upward. That caused the man at arms to smile at the comic gesture, which caught the attention of Philippa, diverting her attack from Alyna to him.

"You there," she screeched. "Return to your duties and tarry not with the wench or you shall find yourself without a post." Odo insolently sketched a salute in Philippa's general direction and winked at Emma before returning to his patrol along the outer wall. Once the two had made their way back to the kitchen, Alyna bade Emma begin the washing process again and excused herself. She made her way up the spiral stairs to her favorite spot, the roof of the turret that overlooked the main gate, where she had stood this morning to catch that one last glimpse of David.

Her head drooped against the crenellated battlements and her tears fell, for she could no longer hold back the hurt of Philippa's attack. "David," she sobbed. "Father. Why did you not take me with you? Why am I left here with that, that - ." Words escaped her as she tried to describe the woman who now commanded Caperun Keep. " - witch."

She grasped at the word triumphantly and repeated it again. "Witch." The insult was a gesture of defiance, small but satisfying and she felt better for it.

"To be sure, Philippa paints a pretty picture of herself to my father, but can he not see her vileness?" Alyna continued her one-sided conversation with the crows that floated above her. "Nay, he sees only a woman to tend to the household. And he sees not that I am a woman grown but pictures me yet a young girl."

She fell silent, watching the crows swoop and circle, playing on the invisible air currents that only the winged creatures could catch. Her thoughts swooped and circled in concert, at length coming to rest

on one horrible, inescapable fact.

"Philippa is correct," she whispered finally, dejectedly, laying her cheek against the cool stone wall. "In the eyes of many, I am too old and undesirable to marry. Am I doomed to be a burden on my father's household forever?"