

CHAPTER 1

1st May 1330

Joan de Conteigh twirled, the soft folds of pale blue fabric rippling around her ankles. She preferred pale yellow, her favourite colour, but her mother insisted her wedding kirtle be blue for purity. She held out an arm, admiring the close-fitting sleeves, and ran her hands along the seams hugging her waist. It had been worth the wait whilst the maid tied the laces down her back. It was the finest dress she had worn, and now she felt like a lady. But why couldn't she be beautiful like Mama, who was tall and elegant with skin the colour of milk, instead of short with freckles?

Would Sir John like her? Pray God he would, but she'd never met him.

'You look beautiful,' said her mother, Edith. 'Fifteen birth dates and ready to be a Lady of the Manor. Are you nervous?'

The butterflies were still dancing in her stomach. Was that nerves or excitement? 'A little.'

'I have something for you.' Edith carefully opened the purse on her belt. Her face glowing with pride, she reverently held out her hands. A small gold cross set with a sparkling red jewel nestled in her palms. 'It belonged to my mother.'

Her first piece of real jewellery. 'It's beautiful,' Joan said, her eyes as bright as the jewel. 'Can I wear it today?'

'Of course, as I did on my wedding day. And as your daughter will on hers.'

Joan blushed. She knew her duty as a wife but didn't like to think about it. She touched the cross at her throat. 'I shall treasure it always. Thank you, Mama.'

'Now, how do I look?' Edith stood back. Her dress was similar but in a darker shade of blue to deceive bad spirits and keep the newly married couple safe.

'Comely, Mama, most comely. Give me a twirl. How I wish I had one of those new looking glasses, then I could see myself. Just imagine! Do you think they work?'

'I'm sure I don't know, nor do I like the idea of such trickery —'

'Are you two ready?' Her father's short stocky frame filled the doorway. He ran a finger inside the collar of his new jupon jacket and pushed a long sleeve up his arm. 'It's five miles to Ashetyne, and we must be there by the midday bell.'

Ready? Joan's stomach lurched. She'd been looking forward to this moment for so long, but now it was here, she wasn't so sure. Her maid stepped forward, the surcoat draped over her arms.

This was it, then. There was no going back. Joan clipped her maiden's veil in place. Strange to think she'd never wear it again, for once she was married, she would have the married woman's linen wimple.

Before stepping outside, she took a last glance around the hall; at the sheepskins on the floor, the battered old stool she'd always loved and her Pa's favourite chair. She breathed in her last smell of candle wax and rushes.

It was a comforting old room and the only home she had known.

‘Joan! Come on, we've a long way to go and we'll be late.’

With a lump in her throat, she lifted her skirts and closed the door softly behind her.

Edith was already seated in the wagon, tapping her fingers on the rail. Usually pulled by an ox, the cart was crudely made of wood with two solid timber wheels. Joan hoped Sir John wouldn't think it too poor. Her cousin's wedding wagon had been very grand, but Papa had said that he was just a farmer and couldn't afford one like that. He had made a canopy, though, and covered it with goat skins in case it rained. And she supposed the bunches of flowers adorning the poles and sides added something. She smiled thinly. Papa had tried, and although it wasn't exactly fit for Queen Phillippa, it was fine enough.

Sitting opposite her mother, Joan gripped the bench as the wagon jolted forward. She hated goodbyes and promised herself that she wouldn't cry or look back, but her home called to her as they left the yard, and she had to have just one last look. She stared at the little stone farmhouse as it blurred and diminished to a speck in the distance. Her knuckles white, she swallowed.

The track stretched ahead. Her mouth was dry as a bone, but there was nothing to drink. Thank the Lord she hadn't been able to eat, for now she felt sick to her stomach.

Lady Joan de Chiddleigh of Court Barton Manor. She ran the title around in her head a few times. It sounded very grand.

The cart dropped into a deep rut, almost bumping her off the bench. She gripped harder. The horse strained,

the wheels lurched clear and rolled on, clicking on each rotation. Click, click, click.

When were they going to get there? She counted the clicks but soon got bored. The Forest of Dartmoor loomed high to her left, mysteriously dark and forbidding. She shivered. It didn't look as friendly as the green rolling fields of home.

They passed an untidy scattering of cruck houses, sitting squat like a row of upturned boats with tiny doorways and a mop of thatch reeds for the roof. A boy and a girl ran out and stood barefoot, in thin ragged tunics and stared with open mouths. Presumably, they belonged to the Chiddleigh estate and would soon be her peasants. The small girl waved and smiled. Joan lifted her hand to wave back but hesitated. The Lady of the Manor wouldn't acknowledge her peasants, would she? She tucked her hand under her and turned her eyes to the front. There was so much to remember.

They stopped at the top of a steep hill. She looked up to the sun. It was directly overhead. On cue, the church bell rang. It was midday, and the journey had gone too fast. She needed more time; time to compose herself, time to give her mother one last hug. She fought to clear her thoughts, and her hands felt clammy.

'We're nearly there. I'm walking with the horse to help him down the hill. We don't want the wagon running away with us. That would make an entrance!'

Papa was trying to lighten the mood, but he sounded false, and fumbled as he took hold of the bridle. Mama was straightening her sleeves and fiddling with the amethyst pendant at her throat. They were as nervous as she was.

They made it safely to the bottom, turned a bend, and splashed through the ford. Joan could see the square grey tower of the church above the high hedges and leaned forward to get a better view. Crowds of people lined the way, spilling on to the track in front of them. As she passed, the men removed their caps and the women curtsied. She'd had no idea it was going to be like this. What was it Mama said? Hold your head high, stand tall, walk slowly and don't forget to smile. How could she smile, when all she wanted to do was run away and hide? And the wretched butterflies refused to stop dancing in her stomach.

She ran her fingers through her long chestnut hair. She should have listened to Mama and worn it in sensible braids looped neatly behind her ears. But her hair was her best feature and it was the last time she could wear it loose in public. Once she was a married woman, her hair would have to be coiled or braided under a wimple.

As they approached the centre of the village, the buzz of excitement fell silent and the crowd inched forward. Never again would she mock the poor caged wretches in the market freak shows. The wagon stopped in front of the church. Every eye was boring into her, and somewhere amongst all those people was Sir John.

Her mother stepped daintily from the wagon and nodded to her. She was waiting to see her daughter make her first grand entrance. Everyone was waiting.

Her legs trembling, Joan took a deep breath. Slowly, pretend they're not there. Carefully, she lifted her skirts and turned to take the steps. Holding on to the sides, she felt with her foot for the first step. Breathing again, she went to take the next.

She heard fabric rip and froze, mortified. Her sigh fell from her heart to her feet. It was only a little tear; maybe no one would notice.

Below her, Mama coughed discretely. Joan knew they were watching, she didn't need reminding. Grabbing her skirts in her fist she took the final step and with a wriggle of her hips, straightened her gown.

She didn't dare turn around. Rubbing her hands together and avoiding the reproach that was sure to be in her mother's eyes, she kept her back turned from the crowd and stared at the ground as Mama fastened a ring of apple blossom on her head, the sweet scent filling the air around her. Her mother stepped back and nodded as if to say, go on, what are you waiting for?

Joan tilted her chin, forced the corners of her mouth into a smile, and with her heart thumping through the fabric of her dress, turned and faced her people.

A young man stepped forward. 'Good morrow, I am Sir John de Chiddleigh.' He inclined his head. 'I pray you had a good journey.'

Many times, she had tried to imagine what he looked like, and now he was here and she daren't look at him. If he repulsed her, she'd never keep it from her face and everyone would see, but he was looking at her. His eyes slowly took in every inch of her from the top of her head to her toes. It was an uncomfortable moment and she dare not move. Dear God, let him like what he sees.

She dipped a curtsey and felt the colour flood to her cheeks.

'The priest is waiting,' Sir John said.

As Joan felt the touch of his hand on her elbow, she focused on the rich fabric of his cote-hardie, hanging in luxurious folds to his knees. Out of the corner of her

eye, she caught a glint from a large gold buckle on his shoulder.

He steered her the few steps to their positions in front of the old oak church door. Standing on his left, she only came to his shoulder. His very proximity made her feel more like a little girl than his new lady. She'd give anything for a goblet of wine.

He was looking at her again, she could feel it. She kept her eyes focused on the punch-holed pattern on her new shoes.

The priest cleared his throat and began the service, but his words floated over her. With every word, her childhood was slipping away and taking her closer to womanhood, an exciting but frightening place she didn't understand.

'Sir John de Chiddleigh, wilt thou take Joan de Conteigh, here present, for thy lawful wife, according to the rite of our Holy Mother the Church?'

'I will,' Sir John replied in a loud confident manner.

There was a slight pause. Reluctantly, she lifted her gaze.

The priest nodded and continued. 'Joan de Conteigh, wilt thou take Sir John de Chiddleigh, here present, for thy lawful husband, according to the rite of our Holy Mother the Church?'

'I will.' Hoping the quiver in her voice didn't show, she stole a glance across to her mother for reassurance, but Mama was dabbing her eyes with a kerchief and didn't notice.

Joan desperately wanted to steal a glance at her husband but didn't have the courage. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that he had fair, straight hair cut in the latest fashion to the shoulder, but that was all she could make out without staring at his face, and she daren't do that.

She felt his touch for the first time as he joined her right hand with his. His fingers were long, slender and cool to the touch. It was her first contact with her husband, and a hot flush spread from her neck to her cheeks. Mortified, and praying no one noticed, she stumbled through the rest of her pledge.

The priest sprinkled them with holy water before blessing the bride's ring.

'Let us pray. Bless, O Lord, this ring, which we bless in Thy name, that she who shall wear it, keeping the faith unto her spouse, may abide in Thy peace and in obedience to Thy will, and ever live in mutual love. Through Christ our Lord.'

The priest sprinkled the ring with holy water in the form of a cross and passed it to Sir John. She held out her hand and tried to stop the trembling as he placed the ring on her finger. Forcing herself not to look at it, she bit her lip and focused on the black shape of the priest in front of her.

'With this ring, I thee wed and I plight unto thee my troth,' Sir John promised.

It was her turn. She placed a matching ring on his finger and repeated the oath in a quiet voice.

She was now Lady de Chiddleigh, and she didn't feel any different.

The priest opened the church door. Sir John led her forward into the church for the nuptial mass. Before she crossed the threshold, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her parents. Turning back, she raised her head and walked forward to begin the next chapter of her life.