

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Templar Prize

Deanna Ashford

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'There is no need to be afraid,' he said in a deep voice that sounded as smooth as silk. For a second she had not realised that he had spoken to her in fluent French tinged with just the faintest of accents. Part of her was curious to see this man - after all she was expected to couple with him - yet a voice was nothing to judge someone by and she feared she might find him repulsive. 'Will you not look at me?' he asked as a firm hand took hold of her chin and turned her face towards him.

Very reluctantly, she opened her eyes and found herself staring at a young, surprisingly attractive man, probably about the same age as Stephen. Of course he looked like a Saracen, with dark olive skin, black hair and dark eyes, and like all Moslem men he wore a beard, but it was small and neatly trimmed. Edwina had not expected him to be this good-looking and, although his face was square jawed and his features inherently masculine, there was a gentleness in his expression that made her feel just a little less terrified. Nevertheless she knew that, like voices, looks could be deceiving.

By the same author:

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Wild Kingdom

Doctor's Orders

Barbarian Prize

TEMPLAR PRIZE

Deanna Ashford



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1191 - Sicily

The candles lighting the small chamber flickered and spluttered as if they might expire at any moment. Edwina shuddered, not wanting to be trapped here in virtual darkness. With the heavy shutters tightly closed not even a small amount of light could creep in through the narrow window and the room was becoming steadily hotter. The stifling air was now tainted by a sweet sickly odour and the terrible smell drifted into her nostrils and slid insidiously down her throat, making her stomach churn. She swallowed anxiously, praying that she would not retch as she tried not to look at the corpulent form of Hugh de Moreville lying on the narrow bed covered by a white linen sheet.

Yet she could not ignore the corpse of the man she had been married to for almost three and a half years; somehow it managed to draw her eyes towards it time and time again. Determinedly she tried to pray for his eternal soul and ask that he rest in peace but however hard she struggled she could not find anything appropriate to say. If she were honest with herself, at present she felt nothing: not pain, regret, joy or even relief. It was as if her mind were totally numb and devoid of any emotions. Yet, as her thoughts became more and more clouded, she became acutely conscious of every part of her body. She was used to kneeling in prayer as her husband had not been a particularly religious man and, during their marriage, the chapel in their castle had become a refuge for her on numerous occasions. She had often spent extended periods of time on her knees praying to God to help her endure her loveless union to a man she loathed.

Despite those previous endless hours of devotion, kneeling here on this hard floor was now becoming acutely uncomfortable. Edwina could feel every nuance of the rough paving stones of the floor beneath her pain-wracked knees, while her back and shoulders ached with the strain of being in one position for a prolonged time. Even her arms felt amazingly heavy from being held in front of her as she kept her hands clasped together in an attitude of prayer, unable to relax her pose for even a moment. She had to remain where she was and retain the posture of a pious grieving widow.

Edwina tensed as the candles flickered again and a number of them died, leaving dark menacing shadows in every corner of the small room. She thought she detected a movement out of the corner of her eye and she feared, quite foolishly, that her husband would rise from his bed like some evil spectre and lurch frighteningly towards her. It appeared that she was not bereft of all emotion, she considered, as she told herself not to be so weak-minded. Tiredness had overtaken her senses and was making her imagine things that were not there. She could not even remember when she had last slept as she had spent the last few days nursing Hugh through his unexpected illness.

Once again, she forced herself to look at the corpse. His hard-featured face looked kinder in repose and she felt a sudden elation as she realised that he could no longer hurt her any more; her tribulations had at last come to an end.

There was a sudden scraping sound, followed by the creak of an unoiled hinge as the door of the chamber was pushed open. Remaining on her knees, she peeked through her lowered lashes and saw four Knights Templar enter the chamber. Edwina had always found something rather unsettling about the sight of these devout knights with their white surcoats, emblazoned on the front with large blood-red crosses. They had not come for her, of course, they had come to pay their respects to her husband. Hugh had often

told her that he wanted to die in battle so it was ironic that he had instead died quite ignominiously from quartan fever, most probably contracted, so the Hospitaller who had first attended him claimed, by drinking water drawn from a contaminated well.

Totally ignoring her presence, the knights stood at the four corners of the bed. Edwina heard a rasping sound as they drew their swords, then a clatter as they positioned their weapons, holding them with the blades pointing downwards so that the tips rested on the stone floor. Bending their heads they stood in silent contemplation as they paid their respects to Hugh de Moreville.

Edwina wondered what she should do now, unsure whether she was expected to remain where she was or slip silently from the room. I am free now, but for how long, she wondered, very aware that her fate now lay in the hands of her sovereign lord King Richard the Lionheart.

Still all too concerned with her own physical discomfort, she wasn't even aware that someone was standing beside her until she felt a gentle hand touch her shoulder.

'My lady,' William de Preaux, one of the king's loyal retainers, said softly. 'It is time for you to leave now.'

'Leave?'

'Yes. You look exhausted,' he continued in a low voice. 'Come. I'll escort you to your chamber.'

'I am obliged to you, my lord,' she said wearily, as he took hold of her arm and helped her to her feet.

Edwina winced as the blood flowed freely into her cramped limbs and she was forced to lean heavily on William as he escorted her from the room. The narrow corridor was empty and she was relieved because she knew that she must look a terrible mess in her crumpled gown, her long hair untidily escaping its plait, with not even a veil to cover her head at present.

They had only walked a short distance when they came upon an open window that overlooked the garden. She

glanced pleadingly at her escort. 'A moment, if you would allow it, my lord.'

'Of course.' William de Preaux stopped and smiled understandingly at her. 'Judging by the atmosphere in that damnable chamber, I can now understand why the Sicilians insist on such swift burials,' he muttered, almost as if he were talking to himself rather than her.

Appreciating his kindness, she took a deep breath of fresh air, trying to ignore the sudden rush of emotions that unexpectedly filled her mind. It was as if a door had been opened to all the memories and feelings she had tried to ignore for so long. The experience left her feeling weak and helpless, while unbidden tears suddenly filled her eyes. 'I am sorry,' she murmured, keeping her face averted from her escort.

'I quite understand,' he said in a gentle voice. 'It is a terrible time for you, is it not? You look pale and drawn. I fear you have made yourself sick, my lady. You should not have nursed your husband for so long without any help.'

'He ordered it,' she said flatly, so wanting to tell William de Preaux that even during his illness Hugh had continued to make her life a misery. She knew full well that it was a wife's duty to care for her husband. Did not the marriage vows say both in sickness and in health? Even so, he could have allowed her to bring in some help and not bear the burden of his care alone. King Richard had offered Hugh the services of his own personal physicians but he had refused even that and, perhaps because of that very stubbornness, he had died of what was sometimes a recoverable illness.

'I am aware, my lady, that you have no servants of your own to care for you now.'

She blinked back the tears, which she knew were prompted by the sudden turbulence of her emotions and had nothing really to do with the loss of her husband. 'Hugh claimed that we could not afford such luxuries. Holy quests are expensive undertakings are they not, my lord?'

‘Indeed they are.’ He tenderly touched her hand and the brief gesture made her tremble. It was so long since a man had touched her with gentleness in his heart.

‘Forgive me for delaying you, my lord,’ she said, struggling to compose herself. ‘I do appreciate your kindness.’

‘Come,’ he urged her. ‘I have not much time. I have to meet with His Majesty as soon as I’ve conducted you to your chamber. Plans are already underway to at last set sail for the Holy Land.’

As he escorted her further up the corridor, Edwina wondered what would happen to her now: would she be expected to travel onwards with the king or would he provide her with an escort to return to her family home in France, or Hugh’s gloomy castle in northern England?

They entered the large hall which presently served as the royal audience chamber where the king held court. It was fuller than usual and she could sense a strange mood of anticipation in the air as she glanced briefly at the eager faces of the courtiers.

‘Is something amiss?’ she asked curiously.

‘You have not heard, then? The Dowager Queen Eleanor has arrived and she has brought the king’s betrothed, Princess Berengaria, with her.’

‘I was not aware of that. I have heard tell that the daughter of the King of Navarre is comely and sweet-natured.’

They had almost reached the far side of the hall, to her relief, as she was embarrassed at being seen in such a state of disarray.

‘She is indeed. I am sure that Princess Berengaria will be eager to get to know you and the other ladies as soon as possible,’ William said with a warm smile. ‘She has been resting since she arrived but it is expected that the king will present her to the senior members of his court today. Hence the crowd.’

'I see.' Edwina suddenly stiffened and she felt the blood drain from her face as for a brief second she thought she saw a tall dark-haired man who looked uncannily like Stephen. Then he disappeared behind a crowd of courtiers. Her heartbeat quickened and she feared for a moment that she might fall to the floor in a swoon.

'My lady?' William said as she clung even more tightly onto his arm.

'It is nothing,' she insisted, shaking her head. 'I thought for a moment that I saw someone I knew. Someone I did not expect to see here of all places.' She made a determined effort to recover her shaky composure. 'No doubt I was mistaken. He couldn't possibly be here.'

'You are exhausted,' he pointed out. 'The mind easily plays tricks,' he added, guiding her out of the crowded hall and up the wide staircase to the second floor of the palace.

Edwina's limbs felt leaden and she was all but exhausted by the time they reached the door to the room she had so recently shared with her husband. 'I'm obliged to you for your kindness, my lord.'

'Just promise me that you will rest for as long as you need to. His Majesty does not expect you to attend the interment. As the climate necessitates, it will be carried out swiftly with little ceremony. I'm certain that your husband would have wished that.'

Edwina doubted that were true. Hugh had a high opinion of himself and would have expected a ceremony befitting his status as one of the premier knights of the realm. 'I will do so willingly,' she assured him with a weary smile.

He lifted her hand to his lips and then took a step back. 'If there is anything you need, Lady Edwina, you have but to ask.'

'Thank you, my lord,' she acknowledged, and she watched him walk away.

Pleased to be alone with her confused thoughts, she stepped into her chamber, shut the door behind her and sat

down shakily on the bed as her shattered emotions threatened to overwhelm her again.

It was only relief, she told herself; relief that she no longer had to bear the burden of a husband who had not cared one jot for her and had been uncommonly cruel and brutal to her at times. It was that emotion that had somehow made her believe for a second that she had caught sight of the one and only man she had ever truly cared for. She had thought that she'd seen Stephen because she had secretly wanted him to be here. Nevertheless, she knew full well that he'd not accompanied his king to Sicily and she had never dared to ask Hugh why. So she must have been mistaken. After all she had only caught a fleeting glimpse of the man and he had been some distance away from her. She knew from past experience that sometimes one saw precisely what one wanted to see. When she had been forced into marrying Hugh she had been convinced that she had caught sight of Stephen's strained features among the crowd of people waiting outside the chapel where the wedding had taken place.

Edwina sniffed and wrinkled her nose; she stank of the sickroom. Once again she was reminded of the strange, sweet and yet noxious odour that had filled the small chamber. Not wanting to dwell on such morbid thoughts, she unfastened her girdle and removed her crumpled linen gown, which was stiff with perspiration and soiled with all manner of unpleasant effluents. She did not have many clothes; her husband had never been generous with her. After their hasty marriage, he had even taken away many of the fine garments her brother had provided for her trousseau and she suspected, but had never been able to prove, that he had given them to one of his many mistresses. Nevertheless, this was one garment she would never wear again, she thought, as she threw it in a corner. There had been no time to wash, let alone bother about her own appearance while caring for her demanding, ill-

tempered patient and she was too weary to do so now. She just wanted to rest.

It was odd, she thought. Now that she looked back on all that had happened in the last few days it had never crossed her mind that Hugh would actually perish from his fever and she would be left a widow.

She slipped off her soft leather shoes and undid the loose plait, letting her blonde hair spill around her shoulders. Then she lay down on the bed clad only in her sleeveless shift. Wearily, Edwina closed her eyes but she could not sleep; her mind was suddenly filled with memories of far happier times in her life, memories she had suppressed for so long.

The canopy of green in the forest protected them from the searing heat of summer as she and Stephen rode side by side along a little-used path. Edwina couldn't resist glancing at the handsome features of the tall dark-haired man she adored. Her family was influential and as she was an heiress many young men had courted her, but she had only ever had eyes for Stephen.

'I fear that I shall never be *this* happy again,' she shyly confessed.

When she had first come to the Duke of Aquitaine's court in Poitiers in the spring of the year of our Lord 1187 she had never expected to fall in love; such emotions rarely figured in unions between noble men and women. She had believed that her marriage would be one of convenience, arranged by her older brother, Fulk. Now, just five months later, she had been given this most precious of gifts and sometimes she felt her heart would explode with the strength of her happiness.

'Of course you will.' Stephen smiled lovingly at her and Edwina felt a tingle of pleasure fill her stomach and slide delightfully down to the tips of her toes.

'I shall miss you desperately,' she said with a sad smile. Stephen had to depart in a couple of days. Richard, the

Duke of Aquitaine, had charged him with a special task that was so secret that he could not even tell her where he was going.

'I'll return as soon as I am able. Even so I trust that on our wedding day you will be even happier than you are right now,' he teased as he smiled lovingly at her.

'Of course I will.' She gave a soft laugh. 'I still cannot believe that life has been so good to me.'

'When we are wed you will have to become accustomed to such partings. Richard is my liege lord and he expects me to be at his side in all his campaigns,' he said as they rode through the entrance gates of what appeared to be a small estate. 'When he becomes king no doubt he will have many other knights to also carry out his bidding and we can perhaps spend more time together. In the meantime you will have my sister Blanche to keep you company and, if God wills it, strong sons and daughters as well in the future.'

'For the time being then our reunions will have to be all the more precious.' She wrinkled her nose. 'I do hope that when he becomes king, he does not expect you to reside in England. I hear that it is cold and it rains there most of the time.'

Stephen gave a soft laugh. 'Do not believe all that others tell you, my love. In many ways England is just as beautiful as Aquitaine.'

'Why are we here?' she asked, as they approached a small, quite exquisite, manor house.

'Why indeed.' Stephen smiled wickedly and then dismounted. Stepping forwards, he helped her down from her palfrey. 'Just be patient, Edwina,' he said, his green eyes twinkling as he handed the reins to a groom. 'This is one of the homes of my friend Gilbert de Fevre. He thought I might be able to make use of it while he is away in England.' Stephen led her through the arched doorway into a small entrance hall. 'We are never alone at court, whilst here . . .'

Edwina knew full well that they were breaking all acceptable conventions by being alone like this when they were not yet wed. Yet she made no protest as Stephen led her into an elegantly furnished chamber. When she saw that it contained a large four-poster bed, her heart began to beat faster and the blood pounded excitedly through her veins. This was so wrong, she knew that, but she could deny Stephen nothing. At court they had occasionally been able to steal a few moments alone together and the brief but passionate kisses they had shared had left her breathless and wanting far more. More of what she wasn't entirely sure, but the touch of his lips had made her entire body grow weak and her stomach churn with a strange wild excitement.

'Stephen . . . ' she said questioningly.

'Don't look so fearful, Edwina.' He removed her light cloak and flung it onto a nearby carved chest. 'I'll not hurt you, my love, you know that,' he said softly as he pulled her into his arms.

'We should not,' she protested, all too briefly, before his lips covered hers. Stephen kissed her far more passionately than he had ever done before and she thought she would swoon from the sheer bliss as his tongue unexpectedly eased its way into her mouth. She clung onto him like a drowning woman as the pleasure overwhelmed her, making a soft entreating sound as he pulled her even closer, crushing her breasts against his muscular chest.

One of his hands moved to the back lacing of her gown and she felt his fingers plucking at the knot. 'Edwina, my love, you know full well that fortunes change in the wind these days. Especially because of the constant conflict between the King Henry and his sons. Women are used as pawns and I would not have you used so. I may well be away for some months and in the meantime I fear for your safety. We are betrothed but promises such as that can easily be broken. Your brother agreed to our union but he

displays more loyalty to King Henry than he does to his liege lord Richard. So if I take your virginity, then our betrothal is sealed by our conjoined flesh. I could not bear it if you were forced to wed another because your brother suddenly thought it more advantageous.'

'You do not trust Fulk's intentions?' She felt him pull the lacing apart, then start to ease her gown slowly from her shoulders.

'Do you?'

'No,' she admitted. She loved her brother but like most men he would always choose what was right for him and would never take account of her feelings on the matter. She shivered with anticipation as she felt Stephen slide the dress down to her waist, then he eased it lower until it was heaped around her feet. Edwina felt rather embarrassed as beneath it she was wearing only a thin chemise which concealed little. She glanced nervously down, fearing that Stephen could see her nipples distorting the fine fabric.

She was here in front of Stephen clad in just this thin undergarment; only her maid and her friend Blanche had seen her so unclothed. Was it right to feel exposed yet also so liberated as she stood scantily dressed in front of the man she loved? She looked up at him, seeing his desire for her reflected on his handsome face, and at this moment in time she knew it was right to give him the thing most precious to her, her own virginity. Holding her protectively in his arms, Stephen brushed his mouth tenderly against hers. His lips sensuously caressed the pale skin of her cheeks, the side of her neck and the exposed column of her throat.

The sudden overwhelming desire she felt excised any lingering doubts that this might somehow be wrong as he removed the silver fillet encircling her brow and the short veil that covered her hair. Since she had become a woman, no man apart from her late father and her brother had ever seen her with her hair uncovered like this.

'Your hair is so beautiful,' he said softly as he removed the pins that held it coiled around her head, pulling them out one by one until her long, heavy, wheat-coloured locks cascaded down her back. 'You must wear it unbound at our wedding ceremony,' he added, then kissed her again with passionate longing.

She tasted the sweetness of his mouth and felt his tongue touching hers as he held her close to his muscular chest. She was desperate now to see him unclothed and feel his warm skin pressed close to hers; to lose herself in the pleasures of his flesh and to let him take anything he wanted from her. If this was absolute submission, the strange need for a woman to be conquered by a man, then this was what she wanted. It felt as if she had waited all her life for this one precious moment.

There was an unfamiliar warmth in her belly and tingling tremors of pleasure slid across her skin as Stephen held her close and kissed her, until all sense and reason deserted her. Before she knew what was happening, he'd lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He lay her down on the soft mattress and then bent to slip off her shoes. Then he rolled the thin woollen hose down her legs and eased them from her feet. Edwina tensed in surprise as he kissed her toes one by one, sucking on them gently until she gave a gasp of delight, never having realised that something so simple could be so unbelievably titillating.

'Will you not remove your clothes also?' she asked shyly. 'I want to see all of you.'

'Aye, my love.' Stephen gave a soft chuckle as he immediately straightened and began to remove his garments, one by one.

Soon he had cast them aside and he stood before Edwina in all his naked glory. He showed no embarrassment as a maiden might, but appeared proud of his strong body. But then he was a man and had most likely been with many other women before her. However, like most young

noblewomen, she had been kept blissfully ignorant about matters of the flesh. Her priest had told her on numerous occasions that it was a sin for a woman to enjoy coupling with any man, even her husband. Surely God would not have designed it so that only men enjoyed the pleasures of sex?

She stared curiously at Stephen; he was beautiful, more beautiful than the wickedly decadent statues of naked Greek and Roman gods that the duke kept in his private quarters. Blanche had heard tell of them and when the duke was out hunting they had bribed a servant to let them into Richard's chambers, merely to satisfy their girlish curiosity, of course. They had giggled over the marble statues of naked muscular men and stared in awe at the carved renditions of male anatomy, wondering what it would be like to see a living breathing man unclothed. Now she could do so and Stephen was even more perfect than every one of them.

The muscles of his chest and arms were firm and well developed, his waist was narrow, his belly flat and his legs made hard and strong by riding and swordplay. She looked at little nervously at his manly parts and her heart beat a rapid tattoo in her chest. They looked much like those on the statues but considerably larger and that was troubling. Her mother had died when she was only seven, so she knew little of what happened between a man and a woman in bed.

'I'll not hurt you,' Stephen promised as he lay down beside her and pulled her close.

Gently, he eased the loose neck of her chemise downwards until her breasts were exposed. Lovingly he caressed the soft globes and she felt her nipples harden. Did all women feel like this? she wondered, as a jolt of pleasure travelled down to her loins, almost as if her breasts and her womanly parts were conjoined.

He stroked her breasts, cupping them in his large sword-roughened hands, and she found his caresses intensely pleasurable. Edwina shivered, almost overcome with the wild delight he aroused in her, as his fingers focused on her nipples, pulling at them gently as he rolled the hard nubs between finger and thumb. There was an accompanying ache between her thighs and to her consternation her sex became hotter and somehow surprisingly moist all at the same time.

‘I want you,’ she said haltingly, still unsure what the act of copulation ultimately entailed. ‘But I do not know . . .’

‘Hush, my sweet,’ Stephen said as he tried to ease the chemise further down her body, but the soft folds caught beneath her hips. With a muttered oath of frustration, he pulled on it hard, and when that did not free the fabric he ripped the garment from neck to hem. As the material fell away, her entire nakedness was exposed to his gaze. She shuddered, filled with a strange heady mixture of excitement and embarrassment. The hungry way his green eyes were raking her body sent a surge of fire through her veins.

Edwina’s lids closed and her dark lashes fanned against her pale cheeks, where two small spots of red were starting to form. She was half afraid of his powerful need for her, certain now that his gaze had slid down over her belly and was directed towards the small triangle of hair covering her womanly parts. Now that she was unable to see, all her senses were focused on the feel of his fingertips as they brushed the soft skin of her stomach, then trailed tantalisingly down to her mons. She shivered as they slipped between her thighs, parting her full lips to explore the complex folds of her sex. Her pleasure began to increase exponentially as they brushed against a small soft nub of flesh that sent a dart of exquisite fire through every inch of her body. Then they reached the entrance to the ultimate essence of her femaleness and she stiffened nervously.

Stephen kissed her passionately as his fingers continued on their magical journey, sliding into her moist sheath. Edwina's eyes fluttered open in surprise as she felt the sweet indescribably wonderful sensations – a pleasure the like of which she had never experienced before.

His fingers edged slowly deeper, into the very core of her body. She held her breath, entirely overcome by the intoxicating sensations that invaded every part of her being.

Unconsciously, her hands reached for him. She caressed the hard curve of his hip and his firm belly, while his fingers continued to work their enchantment inside her. Cautiously, she brushed her fingers against his sex, feeling the organ leap at her touch, and she was filled with a sudden trepidation. It was no longer soft and malleable, as it had appeared when he'd been standing in front of her; now it was hard and impossibly huge, massive in comparison to the male organs of the statues that she and Blanche had examined so curiously not long ago.

'Do you know what happens between a man and a woman?' Stephen asked her as he continued to slide his fingers seductively in and out of her vagina. It felt so good and yet it also made her feel as if she were striving for something which was just tantalisingly out of reach.

'How they come together to make children?' she said shyly, then she bit her lips trying not to reveal just how much pleasure the gentle thrusting movements of his fingers were giving her. She was so very tempted to beg him to move harder and faster and venture deeper, but she was too shy to voice such thoughts aloud. 'I've seen animals . . .'

'We are all part of nature, my love. Yet this is so much more perfect. Do not believe what the priests say, this is a God-given pleasure to be shared between a man and a woman,' he said with feeling. 'Now let me show you how blissful this union can be.'

Stephen withdrew his fingers and gently edged her legs apart. Moving onto his knees, he crouched between her

open thighs, staring down at her. His green eyes were dark with desire as he gently eased the tip of his hard cock between her swollen sex lips and pressed it gently and very cautiously against the mouth of her vagina.

Very carefully and evidently all too conscious of the fact that she was still a virgin, he slowly eased his engorged shaft inside her. To her amazement, her body easily expanded to accommodate him. Yet, when he had only penetrated her partway, he paused.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked in a trembling voice. ‘Does my body displease you in some way?’

‘It pleases me exceedingly, but you are a maiden, there is one last barrier before we can complete our union. Be warned, my love, when your maidenhead breaks it will hurt a little.’

He drew back slightly and she tried not to tense, yet she still clenched her fists nervously, not knowing what measure of discomfort to expect. With a firm jerk of his hips, he thrust his cock deep inside her. Edwina felt something give way and, for a brief second, she experienced a sharp tearing pain, but to her relief it was gone in an instant and was replaced by a multitude of wonderful sensations which she had never experienced before.

He had paused and was looking down at her with concern, his green eyes still reflecting the love he felt for her. ‘It only hurt a little,’ she gasped as she experienced the absolute intimacy of being conjoined with the man she loved and savoured the perfectly exquisite feeling of his body buried deep inside hers.

She wanted to clasp him close and hold him tight, just enjoy this strange bliss. However, female instinct told her that there was more to this act of union and even more incredible pleasures to come. Very cautiously, Stephen began to move his hips, sliding his engorged shaft partially out and then back inside her again. Surprisingly, the moisture inside her seemed to increase. The movements

were fluid, while the friction and the feeling of fullness were amazingly pleasurable and she unconsciously lifted her hips. 'Please,' she gasped. He responded, quickening his pace and the sensations she was experiencing increased exponentially.

Her hands reached for his muscular arms and she dug onto them as he thrust harder, his hips pounding against hers. The feelings were so powerful that they astounded her, making the muscles of her legs tighten and her toes curl as he thrust harder and deeper. Suddenly, there was a strange overwhelming bliss growing deep inside her, blossoming and expanding. It was followed by a violent explosion of intense pleasure as Edwina experienced an orgasm for the very first time in her life.

As her body shuddered beneath his, the desire Stephen had been holding onto by little more than a thread exploded. He gave one last powerful thrust, followed by a deep groan of gratification as he lost all sense and reason in the depth and power of his own climax. Gently he rolled her onto her side, his shaft still buried inside her body, then he held Edwina close and murmured tender words of love in her ear.