

SNOW

By Caryn Studham Sutorus

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Oxford Castle, England

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THE Germans called me Maud. The Normans here call me Matilda. It matters little what name you use. Just know this—I am Sovereign Lady of England and rightful ruler of this land. The throne will be mine.

I recount this story exactly as I remember, because much has been made of this episode. Only I know the truth.

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That wintry night it would all come to a head. The futility, the stress, and the pall of defeat after defeat weighed on my followers like the heavy snow bent the branches of the oaks beyond the castle. In the cramped bedchamber, Hilde and I pawed through dozens of trunks, spreading gowns, mantles, and furs with frantic hands. Their musty smells permeated the room, until servants entered to light torches on the wall and stoke the fire in the large fireplace.

“How long will the snow continue?” I asked, when my host entered to check on my comfort.

“I cannot tell, Your Grace.” Robert d’Oilly walked to the narrow window and brushed aside the oiled sheepskin. From my tower room, the view of Oxford city was obscured by the falling snowflakes, larger than I had ever seen in the years I called England home.

Well, tried to call England home.

“Your Grace, will you come to the Great Hall to sup?” d’Oilly asked again.

I shook my head, the familiar well of guilt pitting my stomach. “There is so little food left. Who knows how much longer we will have to hold out against the siege?”

As we spoke, Brian FitzCount pushed into the chamber, “Your Grace, I have news.” He joined us before the window, pointing to the right, to a field strewn with enemy tents and soldiers that scurried like ants on a hill. Beyond the next tree line, a crawling snake of men, wagons, and horses streamed toward Oxford.

My heart leapt. “Is it my brother, the earl of Gloucester? Has he arrived to break the siege?” I squinted my eyes, but the banners were obscured by the falling snow.

“Yes, it is Earl Robert.” FitzCount’s face remained grim. “I do not like his chances in battle. Stephen’s army is larger by half.”

“Stephen,” I whispered. My cousin, who dared to call himself King after swearing that he would recognize my rule. His name burned in my throat, as it had for seven years since my father’s death, seven years since he stole my throne.

“My lords, I still hope it will not come to battle.” The war of sieges raged on, but pitched battles were best avoided, their outcomes too uncertain, subject to the bravery of a few knights and countless paid mercenaries.

FitzCount’s forehead creased as he eyed me. “There seems little hope of avoiding battle.” He bowed and retreated to the doorway with D’Oilly.

The door settled behind them, leaving Hilde and me alone again. She found our quarry first.

“It’s beautiful, Your Grace,” she whispered, stroking the white fur.

“It was a gift from my first husband, the Emperor.” I crouched down, lifting the cloak with deliberate hands and easing open the folds as I stood.

Its soft pelt transported me back thirty to the day a nervous twelve-year-old English princess married the Holy Roman Emperor. His wedding gift to me was the purest white ermine I had ever seen. I wore it that frigid January day and again the day I was crowned. But then it had lain, folded in a chest, for almost thirty years.

“The Emperor’s gift shall save lives.”

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I stood at the window, holding the oiled sheepskin aside, lost in the beautiful dance of falling snow. The door eased open.

“Your Grace, you sent for me?” FitzCount entered.

“Come look out the window.”

His lanky form warmed the air next to me and his face turned to me, waiting. I could scarcely draw my eyes away from the silent blizzard.

“It’s peaceful, isn’t it?” I said.

He shook his head. “It is a mirage, an appearance of peace. Many men will die tomorrow. I am uneasy.”

“As well you should be.” I stepped back from the window and took his arm, turning him toward the large bed. Spread across the pile of blankets lay the white fur, an aberration of light against the colorful quilts.

FitzCount held back, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

“Fitz, do you of all people think I’m inviting you into my bed?” The mistake had been made before, but never by someone so close to me. I had too much to occupy my mind to concern myself with matters of the flesh. I had already borne my heirs.

“Of course not, Your Grace.” His face flushed as he eyed the bed with confusion.

“This is what I want to show you.” I lifted the ermine, draping it around my shoulders and raising the hood to cover my dark braids.

His gray eyes widened, then twinkled as he cocked his head to the side, looking from me to the window. “What exactly have you planned, Your Grace?”

I smiled and spun around like a young woman, even as my knees creaked. “I will avert a battle and save many lives.”

I held out my arm, and he stepped forward, running his fingers along the soft stoat fur. “It is truly exquisite.” He looked down at me, one side of his mouth turning up. “Do you have enough for the whole company?”

I frowned. “I’m afraid I do not. It’s just me who makes the journey.”

“Absolutely not,” he began, but stopped himself bowing head. “My apologies.”

“I understand. You seek to protect me. But once Stephen learns that I have left the castle, he will call off the siege. Then we shall reassemble my army at Wallingford”

Fitz’s ashen face loomed through the twilight, his lips twisted in an expression of dismay. “I do not like it, Your Grace. How would we get you out of the castle?”

“That, dear Fitz, is your job to figure out.” I spun around, the fur lifting heavily, creating a breeze as I turned. As I dismissed my most faithful counsellor, I returned

to the window, once again transfixed by the falling snow, the snow that would save my throne.

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I lifted my head each time footsteps approached. Sleep eluded me, and I stared at the ceiling, waiting. Dawn would arrive soon, and with it, the end of my escape hopes.

Finally, a staccato knock on the door announced his coming. I sprang from the bed, already clothed, as the door creaked open.

“Your Grace,” Fitz called out softly. “All is ready.”

Heart racing, I draped the white fur over my shoulders, tying the clasp at my throat.

Fitz led me to an antechamber just off the Great Hall, where D’Oilly and one of his guards bent over a table bearing a large parchment map.

The map showed the walls of Oxford Castle, with triangles representing the encampments of the enemy drawn on three sides, the Thames occupying the fourth. The castle consisted of the tall tower we inhabited and a thick stone wall set atop a two-hundred-year-old motte. An arrow on the map pointed the way to Wallingford, where I would find safe haven and fresh troops.

D’Oilly nodded toward the window. “It’s the coldest winter in years. The Thames itself is frozen as far as the eye can see.”

I followed his gaze. My own chamber overlooked the town of Oxford, but from here I could see slight definition between the snow piling up on the land and the snow accumulating on the ice of the river.

“Our best option is this.” Fitz moved to my side, bending over the map. “We cannot raise the drawbridge and portcullis—it would draw too much attention. But, there is a South gate here.” He pointed to a small cross mark. “If you exit here and walk around to the river, you can follow it to the earl of Gloucester’s camp.” His index finger landed on a collection of circles across the river. “We have no way to send a message, but when you arrive, he can provide a horse and guards for your trip to Wallingford. At dawn, we will send a messenger to Stephen to let him know you have rejoined your army.”

I let out a deep breath, relieved to know my half-brother's army lay only a half a mile away.

Still.

I followed the men to the South gate, walking like a wraith through the silent, sleeping castle. Led only by the light of single torch, we reached the large wooden gate. I held my breath. Stephen's men camped just across the moat, I knew. How far could they see in the storm?

Huddled beneath my white fur, I suppressed the shivers that came from more than just the bitter cold night. The wet snow flakes continued to fall, dissolving on my hands as I held the cloak closed.

"Your Grace."

I turned back to Fitz, my eyes drawn to his outstretched hand. He held a dagger, its leather-bound handle turned to me.

"In case you fall under attack." His quiet voice spoke the fear we all felt.

I thrust out my arm to take the dagger, injecting my voice with bravado. "Yes, we must prepare for all scenarios."

Fitz spun around to my side before handing it over. He demonstrated a downward slice into the air in front of us. "Like that," he said. "You'll bear more force if you grip it like so."

I smiled. "My fair husband taught me its use before our first battle in Normandy. I bested a smoked venison haunch with ease."

With a chuckle, d'Oilly's guard opened the South gate door, just a crack, sticking out his head to gauge the terrain outside. From there, steep decline led to the frozen moat, which I would follow straight to the River Thames.

"It looks clear to—"

A loud whish and then thunk of an arrow stopped his words. I gasped as the guard's body fell forward into the snow beyond the gate, a dark crimson stain spreading across the white ground.

"Move her back," yelled Fitz, drawing his sword and waving to the guards.

I groaned. "There must be another gate."

D'Oilly shook his head in dismay. "Your Grace, they must have an exceptional lookout. And we have no other gates."

“That room we were just in.” I turned back to the tower, pointing. “There was a small window that overlooked the river. I could fit. You can lower me to the ground.”

D’Oilly chuckled, but his mirth ceased when he saw the set of my mouth. I was quite serious.

“White sheets.” I said. “We need white sheets to lower me. Are you certain the ice is safe?”

Fitz nodded. “I’ve seen men allowing their horses to cross it, and it’s held every time.”

“Well then.” I looked around, smiling at the shocked faces around me.

“Your Grace, if you should fall from the window...” Fitz’s voice trailed off as he gazed at the stone tower.

“If I should fall, I’ll smash to bits.” I straightened my cloak. “I trust you will not let me fall.” We could not lose any more time. I left the men trailing me as I pushed on to the tower.

As we crossed the bailey, the snow picked up, the blizzard so complete that I could barely see the top of tower through the blinding whiteout.

Good. It would be better for me that way. As long as I stayed on route.

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Wind whistled around my head as I sat on the edge of the window. If the ground lay far below, I could not discern it. The snow piled so thick, my depth perception faltered from the layers of white upon white. “I am ready.”

Fitz tightened the sheet around my waist for the fourth time and bowed over my hand, gripping it between his for a moment longer than usual. “May God and all his angels go with you.”

I always forgot to thank people. My ‘arrogance’ would be my downfall, so said the Londoners when they ran me out last year. I would not forget thanks this time. I swallowed and presented an encouraging smile. “Thank you all for your help in this endeavor.”

He lowered me from the deep window as I gripped the sheet with one hand and secured my hood with the other. Forcing my eyes open, I searched the white below for signs of earth.

The sheet creaked as Fitz led it over the window above my head. I dropped, gasping, as he suddenly let out a few yards. Fitz stared down at me with wide eyes, his straining arms just out of my reach. I hung in midair, my legs dangling as my shoulders burned with effort. Reaching out one arm, I trailed it down the side of the tower, seeking an anchor as I dropped foot by foot toward the snow. Prayers I thought long forgotten sprang to my lips.

The earth startled me with its nearness. It came out of nowhere, a wet white cushion that swallowed my feet and calves. I yanked the sheet from around my waist and pulled it, waving at the tiny dot that was Fitz, and wishing I could yell. Elation pumped through me, clarifying my eyesight and heightening my other sense. I saw no one across the river. The air remained mercifully clear of flying arrows.

Emboldened, I stepped carefully down the slope, leaning back and easing my weight onto the river's crust. A tiny cracking noise radiated from my boot as the ice settled. Bitter cold, numbing and oppressive, assaulted my face, bowed as it was into the hood of my ermine cloak. Wet snow seeped into my leather boot, freezing my toes through the layers of stockings. There was nothing to do about that now.

I headed south.

The silence of the blizzard was absolute. Even as piles and piles of snow accumulated, the only sound heard was the occasional howl of a wind gust. The silence magnified the foreign noises—the snickering of the horse that sounded like it was merely feet away. I shuffled past, holding my breath. The muffled snores of sleeping enemy soldiers seemed close enough that I could touch their tents, but still I walked forward, trying to slow my racing heart as gray tents loomed on the riverbank, cutting through the snow to guide my way south.

The ice crackled again, and I swallowed a cry, stuffing my gloved fist into my mouth to suppress the urge to scream. I stayed still for a moment until the cracking sound faded. The heavy breathing of the soldiers continued to my left, so I stepped forward, one step after another until no more tents rose up on the side of the river.

The snorting of horses died down, and I looked back, seeing only the shadow of the castle looming out of the white expanse.

There were no landmarks now. The enemy camp lay behind me, and in front of me, just yards away should have been the camp of my half-brother, Earl Robert, where God-willing, a lookout would hear me out before letting loose an arrow.

My numbed feet shuffled along, only distantly controlled by my body. The intense cold sent my body into a clenched, hunched position, and I fought to remain upright. Silent prayers flooded into my mind, entreating the saints to guide my steps.

Where was the camp?

Gritting my jaw closed to prevent the loud chattering of my teeth, I trudged along, in a straight line as far as I could tell. A pink glow crested the horizon to my right, piercing the dark sky as the snowfall lightened. I forced my legs to move faster, panic rising in my throat at the thought of sunrise.

Whizzzz.

An arrow brushed my shoulder and landed in the snowbank beside me with a muted thud. I jumped back, the air shooting out of my lungs as I reached for my dagger, its cold handle bulky in my numb fingers.

“That was a warning shot.” A gruff voice rang out from the left bank. “Announce yourself.”

Raising my empty hand, I turned to the burly soldier who held his bow at the ready.

“Lower your weapon soldier, though your vigilance is to be praised. I am Matilda, Sovereign Lady of England. I seek the earl of Gloucester.” Years of war had imprinted the sound of authority into my once-girlish voice. I impressed even myself at the tone.

The soldier regarded me. His eyes grew wide and his bow drooped as I approached and pulled my hood to my shoulders.

He dropped to one knee. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

With shaking legs, I stumbled across the width of the river, scrambling over a snow bank to reach the side of the burly soldier. I gazed back to the north, still anxious. Behind me the enemy camp lay silent, the only movement the falling snow, pink now in the glow of sunrise.

“My brother,” I whispered, the authoritative voice lost in the relief of giddiness that swept over me. “Take me to my brother.”

I dropped the dagger in the snow and leaned against the tree, gasping for breath. I had made it. Alone.

Surely God was on my side.

Author’s note: It was a temporary victory, but a celebrated one. She would never sit on the English throne. But her son took on the fight for his birthright when he came of age. His success went beyond the borders of England, as he roared through the latter half of the twelfth century, founding the Plantagenet dynasty as King Henry II.

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Caryn Studham Sutorus writes historical and contemporary fiction. This story, along with most of her writing, is inspired by the piles of research from her Master of Arts in History from Appalachian State University. Her short stories appear in literary journals like *Rose Red Review* and *The Common Oddities Sideshow*, and have been published in several small press anthologies. Caryn lives in Charlotte, NC, where she enjoys creating, editing, and discussing both fiction and nonfiction. She is a mother of two and produces communication materials for financial companies when she isn’t spinning historical tales. Visit her website carynwriteshistory.com.