

THE LADY AND THE
IRON HAND

IRON HAND'S BRIDE - BOOK THREE



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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-583-3

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-611-3

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

To my boys, with all my love

A WELCOMING HOME



It was an unnaturally warm evening near the late end of March when Elena Isarnon heard the news: the Lord of the House, her husband Hugh, was coming home.

“Finally!” Elena was elated to hear the news. After dismissing the messenger, she sat up and clapped her hands. “Sybil! Sybil!” The Lady called for her maidservant, then climbed out of bed and made it to her feet with an immense effort, clenched teeth, and the assistance of a conveniently placed chair she’d propped nearby for just that reason. “Is everything ready?” She couldn’t just leave the confines of her bedchamber in naught but her nightgown, so Elena threw a thin shawl about her shoulders for decency’s sake.

“Coming, Milady, coming!” Sybil hurried in with a flurry of skirts and excitement; the woman was a bubbling torrent of energy and anticipation, like a swollen bottle whose cork was ready to pop at any second. “But you shouldn’t be up on your feet now! If milord sees you out of bed—”

“Nonsense.” Elena waved a hand in dismissal as she held out a hand for Sybil to take. “He’ll worry me into an early grave at

this rate. If I spend one more minute in that bed, I'm liable to be swallowed up by it and never be heard from again. Now, help me."

Sybil was a pretty, busty brunette, the same age but taller than plain, mouse-haired Elena. She was also the closest thing to a friend her mistress had—they'd known each other for more than a decade, ever since Elena became the unwilling wife of Lord Isarnon and Sybil was summoned to work as a maidservant. Quickly and obediently, the other woman hurried to her Lady's side and offered an arm and shoulder to grab hold of, helping Elena to stand a little taller, easing the immense strain on her lower back.

"Oh, Heavens," Elena said, sighing. "That is... a little better." She passed a hand across her distended stomach. It'd taken a good many years for her fallow belly to finally bear fruit, and now its apparent overabundance was driving her crazy—she'd never felt so big as she did then. "How on *earth* do other women do this sort of thing over and over again?" She expelled a wordless sigh of frustration as she started waddling for the bedroom door and the slow, agonizing journey to the main hall at the front of the house. "And to think that Isolda and Gerald are on their fifth youngling by now. I swear, the woman is superhuman."

"Sixth, actually, Milady," Sybil offered helpfully. Isolda was head cook in the kitchens, her man, Gerald, in charge of the Lord's stables. Of course, Sybil would be the one to know how many children they had better than anyone else in the whole house—as the Lady's head maidservant, it was her job to know such things.

"Six already? God save me from such a fate," Elena said with a moan. "I haven't even managed to survive *one* yet."

"I imagine Isolda got better at it with more practice, Milady," Sybil said, pursing her mouth into a tight bow as both women

started for the bedroom door. “Has the little Lordling been especially bad today?” she asked, rubbing her Lady’s belly in a sympathetic manner. People seemed to think doing so would provide Elena with good luck, something she had resigned herself to long ago.

“Bad, I’ll say he’s been bad,” Elena answered in a growl. “He refuses to sit still for more than a moment anymore. If I survive all of the cracked ribs he’s kicking, I might still expire if he ever tries boxing my bladder again. And I can’t remember the last time I got a full night’s rest.” She wanted to spit, but contented herself with another growl. “Next time, I may just get my Lord a dog and have done with it.”

“Mmm,” Sybil hummed in sympathy, sounding more like she hoped to satisfy her Lady than out of any real agreement.

The walk was slow and sent Elena’s feet to throbbing. She looked down and sighed, not knowing what hurt more those days—her swollen feet or her aching back.

“Slowly now,” Sybil said, “just one step at a time.”

“At this rate, I should just sleep in the hall,” Elena said. “By the time I get there, it’ll be time to go right back to that infernal bed again.”

“Come now, Milady. I would think you’d enjoy going to bed, seeing as that’s what got you into this mess in the first place.”

“Sybil!” Elena stopped and felt a hot rush in her face, and it burned twice as hot when the other woman laughed.

“Only teasing, Milady, think nothing of it.” Sybil squeezed Elena’s arm, then rubbed her back with a smile. Eventually, they walked into the proper front hall of the stone keep.

Hugh’s Hall was vast enough that half of Corfe’s citizens could easily fit inside its walls, and had done so on many previous occasions. Tomorrow would be Easter Sunday, officially marking the end of Lent, as well as the end of a traditional, four-week fasting period that barred the consumption of meat,

milk, cheese and eggs, as well as the rather offensive—in Elena’s opinion—prohibition on married couples partaking in sexual intercourse. Due to her pregnancy, Elena was excluded from any dietary restrictions, and she saw very little reason why the Almighty would even care about the intimate particulars of her relationship to her husband. While always considering herself a faithful daughter of the Church, Elena was sure that whatever fool had decided that starving one’s self brought them closer to God obviously never had to carry a baby around while doing so.

Tomorrow would also mark a celebratory feast day for the whole town, and the great kitchens of Lord Isarnon’s house were cooking up a meal of massive proportions. Hugh was known throughout all of Dorsetshire and the surrounding counties for his generosity, and while the town’s citizens were both welcomed and encouraged to bring their own dishes for the gathering in lieu of that month’s rent, the Iron Hand would pay for the lion’s share of the food out of his own pocket. Even after eating supper herself, the smells wafting through the hall still had Elena’s stomach growling again, and sent her passenger into a frenzy.

Elena hissed, clamping down hard on Sybil’s arm and standing stock-still, back straight, chin up, eyes squeezed tight.

“Milady!” Sybil leaned in close, concern swelling in her voice. “Is it time—”

“N-no, no,” Elena said, keeping a tight grip on her friend’s arm. “It shall pass. Just... wait with me. Please.” The pressure in her lower belly was immense, tight and firm and intensely uncomfortable, no matter how familiar she was with the sensation by that time. The world disappeared beyond her immediate periphery: the warm air, the heavy stone under her feet, Sybil’s arm and panicked breathing, Elena’s flared nostrils, and the tiny life pounding irritably at the walls of his fleshy prison.

It was an unwanted reminder of just how far along her pregnancy was, an admonition that eventually the happy moments

and pleasurable distractions would end. A life was growing inside of her, one that would have to come out eventually—that was a frightening thing to consider all by itself, not to mention knowing she'd have to withstand pain like what she was experiencing at that moment. She took as many deep breaths as she could, all of the smells and scents filling her up, and waited for the pain to subside, pushing thoughts of labor, pain, blood and sorrow to the back of her mind.

The moment felt endless, but in time, the pressure subsided and died away. She felt a trickling of sweat at the nape of her neck, another trickling down between her breasts. Elena took a calming breath, eased her grip on Sybil's arm and opened her eyes again, finding a pair of steel-grey ones staring back at her, intense and so very large up close.

Elena gasped and rocked backwards, almost taking a step back as well. "Lord!" As to whether it was an oath or salutation, she'd let someone else decide.

Hugh Isarnon, the Iron Hand himself, had appeared out of thin air, it seemed. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered with wide hands to match. His hair was dark, nearly black, with streaks and spots of grey as befitting a man of his age. "Are you all right, starling?" he said, looking concerned.

For an instant, Elena nearly stuck out her chin and responded with a cool, dismissive response. Old habits were, it seemed, hard to break. Instead, Elena took a calming breath and smiled. "Quite all right, my Lord, my heart is glad at your returning. Your son simply finds his confinement less and less to his liking, I think." She took his hand, callused and immense, in her own. "Just a momentary discomfort, is all." When the look on his face didn't change, she added, "I promise."

She felt the weight of his eyes, the intensity in his gaze as he watched her. There was a silent, imposing sort of beauty to him, a gentleness that warmed her heart when he was nearby. And yet, her husband could be an intimidating man—he had an air

about him, a sometimes-overwhelming sense of presence, which had frightened Elena in her younger years. Even now, some unconscious part of her wanted to step back or turn away from his hard stare, until he smiled, squeezing her fingers in gentle affirmation. “As you say,” he answered.

Elena huffed. “It is as I say, my Lord.” She looked over Hugh’s shoulder at his companion, a man even more immense and imposing than her husband. “Father Oswolf!”

The black-haired mountain of a Scot smiled, deliberately side-stepping around Hugh to embrace her. “’Tis good t’see ye, Milady.” Elena had known Oswolf since she was a child, and she gladly returned the embrace. “An’ you, Sybil, as well,” he added.

“Welcome back, Father,” Sybil said with a smile. The two looked at one another for a moment.

“Always a sight fer sore eyes y’are, Lady,” Oswolf said next, turning back to Elena.

“It’s hardly my eyes that are sore lately, Father,” Elena said, deadpan.

“Och, dinnae worry yerself t’hard over that, dearie.” He waved a hand in dismissal, the same gesture Elena herself had used just minutes ago. “The way I hear’t, that sort o’thing’ll work itself out in the right time, ye ken?”

“So Isolda—and everyone else, for that matter—keep telling me.”

“Isolda?” Oswolf said, looking askance. “Yer... cook, aye?”

“And my midwife.” Elena sniffed. “You’ll have to excuse my poor state of dress, Father,” she added, waving a hand at her garb in resignation after giving her husband a sidelong look. “I wasn’t anticipating company until the morrow.”

Oswolf pursed his lips and shook his head. “Think nothin’ o’f’t, lass.”

“Done,” she agreed, then turned her eyes back on her husband. “I’m *most* displeased with your arrival, my Lord. I didn’t expect you to arrive back so soon.”

The man blinked, his unspoken question written all over his big, beautiful face.

“Truly,” she said, as though echoing back the very question he hadn’t spoken aloud, yet one she’d heard as plainly as if he had. “I take it your early return means your investigation was successful?”

For a breath, Elena saw Hugh hesitate—it happened so fast she was sure anyone else might have missed it, but the telltale signs were there: the shift of his weight, the manner of how his eyes moved from side to side, the slightest pause before he opened his mouth to respond. There was a telling glance at Sybil, as though she was the source of his reluctance. When he did speak, his voice was low, quiet enough that only the four of them could hear it, “The Danes are starting to move again for the first time in nearly 30 years—there were attacks to the east at Rochester, Southampshire and Tanet, as far north as Chester-shire: raiding parties, possibly in preparation of something... bigger.”

Given Hugh’s cautious tone of voice and the tight line of Oswolf’s mouth, Elena felt a tremor of worry flutter somewhere beneath her heart. She said, “And if they were seen as close as Southampton—”

“Corfe could be next.” Hugh nodded, pointing at Sybil. “You’ll say nothing of this to anyone.” His tone brooked no argument.

Sybil, her eyes slightly wide, shook her head quickly. “No, Milord,” she answered, voice squeaking slightly.

The Lord nodded, satisfied, and looked back at Elena. “I think, my dear, we’ll speak more of this soon enough.”

It fell to Elena to break the awkward silence that followed. She squeezed her maidservant’s arm in a wordless attempt to soothe the woman. “And now you’ve gone and spoiled my surprise.” Knowing it was too late for such things, yet insisting on it anyway, Elena swept her free hand out to the entire hall around them.

Hugh's Hall had been decorated in shades of white, gold, green and more; long banners of dyed cloth stretched across the wooden beams overhead, bound at the corners with bluebells, yellow cowslips, and white wood blossoms with bright yellow centers. There were purple dog violets on long, green stems, cuckoo-flowers in bright pastel pinks, even woven garlands of tiny wild garlic. Elena had done much of that work herself, one of the few contributions she could make while resting in bed all day. Yet she'd insisted on going out to help oversee the picking of the flowers in person, even helping to pluck them herself when she could manage it—her back had been screaming at her ever since.

She waited a moment longer for both men to finish scanning the room and look back to her. "My Lord Husband approves, I hope," she said. Her tone was warm, if formal. In spite of his worrisome news, a tiny part of her still hoped he would be pleased, while a larger part worried he wouldn't. She looked up at him from under her raised eyebrows, steeling her heart for the disapproval that might come. Hugh was protective of her—sometimes a touch too much, in Elena's opinion, given how he insisted she stay in bed so much lately.

Hugh finished his appraisal of his Hall in studious silence, making a complete and full turn to take it all in. When he finished, he took her hand again and nodded again. "It will do, Wife." Elena felt a tightness in her chest begin to ease, gaining speed as she saw a small smile on his face. "It will do indeed," he said.

"Lovely work, t'be sure," Oswolf agreed. "An' whatever the good Isolda might b'cookin' in those kitchens o' hers, I'm a touch certain m'stomach's 'bout t'fill up jus' from the smell of't all." The humongous priest took a deep, hungry-sounding breath and sighed, patting both hands over his belly. "At least there's an end'n sight soon fer all this fastin' foolishness."

“But, Father,” Sybil countered, “isn’t the whole point of fasting to bring us nearer to God?”

“I s’pose’t might, m’dear, Sybil, but...” Oswolf paused for a moment, looking over his shoulder out of some force of habit, it seemed to Elena, before turning back and answering in a softer voice. “I’ve known many a poor soul what could use a fuller belly t’bring ‘imself closer t’God’s glory... an’ more’n a few Men o’ the Cloth what could do wit’ a few less meals fer t’same reason.”

“Well said,” Hugh answered in the same manner.

Elena looked from one man’s face to the other, then back again. There was a long history between them, secrets she could never know or even begin to guess at, a life they’d lived in friendship together before she was even born. She had near-boundless affection for the unorthodox holy man, but still had to admit he was unlike any other priest she’d ever met. In truth, that was one of the reasons she liked him. Oswolf reminded her of Hugh, and in the months since her pregnancy’s outset, Elena had come to treasure reminders of her husband more and more.

“Sybil.”

“Yes, Milady?”

Elena was watching Hugh’s face, the way his dark salt-and-pepper streaked hair caught the evening light, and she noticed his eyes looking at her, searching her face, taking measure of her. “Perhaps you and Father Oswolf might go check on Isolda and see just what she’s working on this evening? I think... I think that it might be best if I went back to bed now.” She pressed a hand on her stomach again, but the tremor in her belly had nothing to do with the unborn child sleeping fitfully within it. She still carried a lingering worry at her husband’s earlier words, but his presence and watchful eyes were having a different effect on her, and not an unwelcome one.

Hugh, to his credit, only looked at his wife. Which was good, because if he’d shared some kind of look with Oswolf, Elena would have scratched out his eyes. Instead, Hugh offered his

arm, and together they slowly turned and started towards the stairs again.

“I, ah, s’pose I’ll b’seein’ ylater, Milord?” Oswolf said. “Dinnae forget we’ve other matters t’speak of.”

Hugh didn’t look back, but nodded his head and grunted, waving a hand in some motion of affirmation as the Lord of the house led his Lady away.