

# The Snow Bride – historical romance by Lindsay Townsend

## Chapter 1

*England, winter, 1131*

Magnus forced his aching legs to move and dismounted stiffly from his horse. The still, freezing cold made his teeth ache, and as he tethered his mount, he wondered yet again what he was doing here. It was less than a month to Christmas, and he could have been with Peter and Alice at Castle Pleasant, preparing for feasting and singing and watching his godchildren.

And then a deep, abiding ache, bedding down in the great hall alone. He would never force a woman to lie with him—he had seen too much of that in the crusades.

He limped forward through the pristine snow. Peter had his Alice now, a clever, black-haired wench who feared nothing and no one, including him. Had his friend and fellow-crusader not known her first, he might have had a chance with Alice. She saw through the outer armor and shell of a man to what lay beneath.

*But she loves her crusader knight, Peter of the Mount, and I have no chance or right there.*

As the palfrey snorted and jangled its harness behind him, he knelt in a white heap of pitted frost and reached out with his good arm to brush snow off the small, cracked statue of a saint. This was an old wayside shrine on a track to nowhere of note, and the wooden figure huddled in its stone niche was old, its paint peeling. This battered saint would understand him, one ugly brute to another.

“Holy one, grant me my prayer.”

He stopped, aware of the chill silence around him—the bare trees, the white landscape, the empty road. He had nothing to offer the saint, no flower or trinket to sweeten his request.

As his knees began to smart, then burn, then freeze on the unyielding, icy ground, Magnus tried to marshal his thoughts. What did he want?

*A woman of my own. Someone to return to.*

Alice cared and had urged him most ardently to stay with her and Peter, but pride had made him refuse them both with a smile. He did not begrudge the handsome couple their joy, not after their many trials. But the dark of winter and Christmas especially brought his own desolation home to him most keenly, sharper than an assassin’s blade. He was nine and twenty, a grizzled warrior, battle-scarred and wounded.

*Feeling sorry for yourself, Magnus? Brace up, man! Be a Viking, as your granddad was. You have your wits and your balls, all working. The lasses in the stews make no complaint and do not charge so much. You have land, a strong house, good fellowship, and two hearty godchildren.*

“Splendor in Christendom, let me have my own family! A lass who loves me!”

His voice rang out, startling a lone magpie into taking flight from a solitary elm in a blur of wings, but the drab and well-worn saint gave no sign of hearing. Peering into the calm, carved face, Magnus wondered if the saint was smiling, and then he spotted his own reflection, clear in a frozen mirror of ice by the shrine.

He scowled, knowing very well what he looked like, and spat to the left for luck. With his knees creaking, he staggered to his feet and remounted his eager horse. When he passed this way again he would leave gold, he vowed, but for now he wished only to slink away. He needed to find the village before nightfall and speak to the council of old men—it was always old men—who had sent word to his manor of Norton Mayfield, begging for help, any help, to track and to defeat a monster.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you a witch?”

Elfrida, sewing on the sleeves to her younger sister’s best dress as they sat together on the bench outside her hut, felt fear coil in her belly like hunger pangs. Keeping her eyes fixed on her needle, she answered steadily, between stitches, “I am my own master, ’tis all, without a husband. Have any in the village been troubling you?”

“Oh no, Elfrida, but I was thinking.”

Elfrida tugged another stitch tight, her needle flashing like a small sword in the bright evening light. “Does your Walter call me so?” she asked carefully.

She glanced up. Christina was blushing very prettily, her light-blue eyes brighter than cornflowers when set against her pale-blue veil, white skin, and primrose hair. Lost in admiration, and quite still for a moment, she heard Christina admit, “We do not talk much. Well, I do not. Walter calls me kitten and we kiss.”

Christina and her betrothed could be found kissing all over the village, so that was no surprise.

“Yet still.” Christina pressed a well-bitten fingernail to her rose-petal lips. “Our dam was a witch.”

“She was a wise-woman, Christina.”

“Our father was a wizard.”

“A healer and dowser,” Elfrida patiently corrected.

“And you are all of that, of those things, I mean.”

Elfrida fastened the final stitch and knelt beside her sister, crouching back on her heels in the snow. Christina was not usually so fretful.

“Walter loves you very much,” she said after a space, “and you have a good dowry.”

A good dowry it was, of cloth she had spun and ale she had brewed, cheeses she had made, and silver pennies she had earned by her healing and dowsing. Since her earliest childhood, Christina had longed to be married, with a hearth and children of her own, and

Elfrida had striven to keep her safe and happy. She was the eldest, so it was her duty, and she had promised their parents, on their death-beds, that she would do so.

“But will the priest marry us?” Christina was biting another fingernail.

“Today is the very eve of your wedding, little one.” Elfrida tugged gently on her sister’s dress. “This is your wedding gown.”

“He has preached against redheads.”

“You are no redhead, and Father John’s sermon was on modesty for women,” Elfrida replied. Her sister was not a redhead, but she was, and redheads were rumored to be witches. “He said that for a girl to be unveiled was to be as brazen as a redhead. He took my healing ointment, too.” She tugged gently a second time on Christina’s dress. “Walter will be here to see you after sunset. Would you have him see you in your gown?”

Her sister ignored her question and pouted. “He will be late. He is coming here only after a meeting with his old men, and you know how they go on!”

“Did he say what the council was about?”

Christina shrugged. “He may have done, but I was not listening then.” She colored prettily. “Will you comb my hair again?”

Elfrida silently rose, kicking the snow from her faded red gown—one that had belonged to their mother—and eased the wooden combs from Christina’s pale, shimmering hair. As she gently teased and tugged and Christina’s breathing slowed, Elfrida thought of the council. Yester evening, when he swept into their hut and whirled Christina into his meaty arms, Walter’s shrewd gray eyes had glanced everywhere. He had asked twice if their door was well-secured and poked the roof-thatch as if seeking rats’ nests. He had promised them one of his dogs this very evening, as a gift, he claimed, then blushed when Christina clapped her hands and kissed him.

Elfrida frowned, worrying a comb over a small knot in her sister’s tresses. Walter and the rest of the village men knew something, and none of her gossips in the bakehouse or the wash rocks by the stream knew anything. Christina, dreaming of wedding flowers for her hair and of babies to come, was not concerned, but Elfrida was not satisfied. Why had Walter promised the gift of a dog—to warn and guard them from what? She had spotted no boar or wolf tracks in the nearby woods. Was a man-wolf—an outlaw—abroad and making havoc? Were disgruntled men-at-arms from a wretched Norman lord foraging close to their village? But why did the village men, her village men, not explain?

*Granted, I would not say much to Christina, who is easily wary and will not linger even in the widest paths of the forest, but I am wise-woman here! These village elders turn to me when they have lost things and for cures when their bodies pain them. They should tell me everything. When Walter comes tonight I will leave the love-birds in peace and safety together and call on the headman myself.*

\* \* \* \*

Magnus listened to the high, excited chatter of the council and watched the old men as they argued on their long bench in front of a poor, smoking fire. Their bread was moldy and their cheese worm-ridden, so under cover of the vast shadows in the great hut, he dropped both into the rushes for the rats to find. The ale was good, though. He took another drink, then asked idly, "Who brewed the ale?"

Silence greeted his question. In this council, only he and the headman understood each other as the village dialect was utterly incomprehensible to him. He waited as the old man translated his question to the group and waited again as the headman made a slow, careful reply.

"The drink was made by Elfrida, the herb-woman in the next village."

The headman, a wrinkled fellow as gnarled and stubby as the old olive trees Magnus had seen while away on crusade, muttered something else. Magnus, sitting on a low stool that made his backside go numb and his long legs ache, leaned toward him.

"She is a witch, you say, as well as a healer?" Seizing a branch, he stirred the fire and studied his huddled companions by its brighter flames. "Is she a good witch, a pious one? Can she help us?"

His questions, once translated, brought a mass shaking of heads and twitchy strokings of ragged beards. One or two elders said more, leading to a furious, whispered debate. Magnus finished his ale and thought about cutting thorns and scrub for defense and digging ditches and repairing and strengthening walls and roofs—all work which must wait until daylight.

"So you have not told your womenfolk of this threat, not even your wise-woman," he said, once the whispers had died down.

"She is not *our* wise-woman! She is good, yes, pious, but of the next village!"

"But a woman, all the same. And why do your two villages not work together? Why not bring all your young women into this hut and have them sleep by the fire, with your men sleeping in a circle round them?"

He saw a look of shame flicker across the headman's wrinkled face and added more gently, "Would that not keep them safe?"

"For how long? This month, one of our maids went missing. Last month, this monster struck in another neighbor village, snatched a maiden, and returned into the forest. No one can track him, no one. He may return tonight or tomorrow or at the next full moon, or in the next three months. He should return to the other village or our neighbors and leave ours in peace!"

"And that is your hope." Magnus nodded at the spate of words, marking that the old man was too agitated to translate for his companions. Three villages, three settlements, made this search harder, for the beast had many targets.

"We need your help," the headman continued doggedly. "Our women are not fine ladies. They work. They spin at home, or weave at home, or brew, or cook, or gather harvest or plant or weed, or wash, or make butter or cheese—all at home."

“But in the evenings, can they not come here?” Magnus prompted.

“The Forest Grendel strikes at any time, night or day. We cannot guard them all the time. We have told them nothing.”

“That is what you call the beast?” Magnus was struck by the aptness. In the old tale of Beowulf, Grendel was the creature who preyed upon the warriors, striking in the night and carrying them away from the golden hall, unopposed and unstoppable until the hero fought him.

“How else should we name the creature? He is in very truth the monster of this woodland, a Forest Grendel!”

Magnus nodded agreement. “When the girls were kidnapped from here and the other village, how was this hidden from your womenfolk?”

“The one here was only an orphan and disliked by all but her lover. It was rumored she had run off to some town. We did not tell anything of the other maiden.”

Magnus said nothing, but the headman sensed his disapproval. “What else would you have us say? They are women, after all. If they knew the danger, their wits would not stand it.”

Magnus nodded, thinking of Alice’s likely response to *that* statement as he smelled the man’s shame and frustration. In essence, however, what the fellow admitted was the stark truth. The men had to work in the fields or forest and the women at home. It was how they survived.

“Move from these villages—” he began, but the headman interrupted.

“We will not be driven from our homes!”

“Move the young women,” Magnus continued steadily. “They can come to my manor, and my people will guard them.”

“They will not go.”

You do not want them to go, Magnus translated in his mind.

The headman glowered at him across the fire. “You said you would find the beast! You are Sir Magnus, the famed warrior of the East! We had heard of your exploits in arms even here, and when we sent the messenger we could scarcely hope that you would come. I know we cannot offer much gold, but for the renown of such a chase, we thought it would be enough.”

“Renown feeds no bellies,” Magnus answered dryly, “but you need not fret. I have never yet turned away from helping a maid, be she free or bond.”

“So you will find the beast?”

“I will, but it will take me time and many of my men. You say the monster is hard to track.” Magnus stirred the fire again. He wanted more light to give these old men heart. “I will catch it,” he vowed. “The more you tell me, the better. Have you anything of the creature’s?”

A sturdy peasant, straighter and more lithe than the huddled group by the fire, stepped from the wall shadows and tossed him a bundle. Fumbling in the dark, Magnus

accidentally dropped the rough cloth parcel into the rushes and heard the peasant mutter something that the headman chose not to translate. Magnus guessed it would be about his scars and missing hand and ignored it, too. He did not have to justify his fighting skills to any low-born farmer. He scrambled for and retrieved the parcel as the old men burst into squalls of chatter, hard and urgent as showers of hail. Guessing that he was in for more long-winded exclamations, he shifted on the stool, then warned himself sternly to listen.

*I will look tonight, too. For as long as there is light, and I can see any kind of trail, I will look. But for the trouble to afflict this village and two more! It is worse than I realized.*

\* \* \* \*

Returning from the beehives at the end of her garden, Elfrida was about to walk through the village to the hut of the headman when she saw Walter stumbling toward her. His homely face was stark with horror, and as soon as he spotted her, he began to shout.

“He has her! I cannot find them! I have looked everywhere!”

He slumped to his knees in the slush and dropped further, his breath spurting in choking gasps. Elfrida reached him as he rolled onto his back, still wheezing. Her own breath stopped as she saw the claw marks on his arms and throat. She swung the lantern round but saw nothing that should not be there in the garden.

“Christina?” she croaked, her throat closing with dread.

“Alive, I swear it! I heard her crying as she was carried off.”

Elfrida found she could breathe again. “Have you roused the men?” she demanded, hearing now, too late, the wail of horns and of many voices. Already in the nearby woodland she saw the bobbing flares of torches and prayed they did not search in vain.

*Let her be alive, oh Lord. Let her be safe!*

Walter clutched her, dragging her down into the snow with him. “He came from nowhere, like a great spider. I heard nothing.”

*Why did I not hear? Christina taken, and I heard nothing!*

“Had he a horse? Was he alone?”

Walter shook his head. He had begun to shake. “He was dark as a spider...ugly... moved quicker than lightning. Had her snatched and gone.... I went after them.... He slashed at me.”

Elfrida knocked off Walter’s trembling arms and sprinted to the house, leaving him prone in the snow.

“Christina! Christina!” she shrieked, her voice higher than anyone’s, but her sister was not safe at home. Only a scrap of her blue veil remained in their hut, caught on one of the roof struts. She must have rushed out to greet Walter, as she thought, and run straight into—what?

Elfrida dashed into the yard, screaming her sister’s name. She flung the lantern into a

stack of hay and screamed again as the precious winter hay burned up in towering, crackling flames, giving much-needed light. "Christina!"

The hay blazed, and she could see the other villagers, the other houses and gardens, the paths through the hamlet and the trees beyond, but there was no sign or shape of Christina.

She was gone, as Walter said, carried off into the wilderness by a monster.

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Elfrida dropped the twigs she had been using as divining rods into the snow. This clearing was the place. Here was where she would make her stand.

After two days without sleep or food, she was drained of all feeling, dry from crying. Day and night she had sought everywhere for Christina. Walter had been constantly at her side, calling, praying, and urging the dog he had meant to give Christina, to seek her out. At sunset on the second day, the village headman had compelled Walter to go to church, to leave offerings to the local saint for Christina's safe recovery. He had tried to order Elfrida, but she had pleaded "woman's trouble" as an excuse not to enter the church and finally she was alone. Her head ached and buzzed as if filled with bees, but the thudding panic was gone.

Swiftly, as the sinking sun bled into darkness in the west, she began to search for Christina by witch ways. She had done this from the start, but now, without Walter's anxious, hovering presence, she felt her power growing. She chanted to the wood elves, promising them a year and a day of ale if she they helped her. She tossed Christina's veil high into the cold still air, calling on the old gods Gog and Magog to point out the track of the beast. She thought of her sister, her long blonde hair, blue eyes, and sweet face and whispered, *Where now, where now?*

She drew a picture in her mind of the great forest and the villages she knew: Great Yarr, Top Yarr, where she lived, Lower Yarr and Selton, the new place. She imagined the cat's cradle of paths to and fro from settlement to settlement. Christina was light to carry, but even a child was too heavy to bear away on such narrow woodland tracks, and surely smashed twigs would have marked the beast's passage?

Had he flown away, then?

"Be he a demon in flight, or be he as nimble as a squirrel in the tree tops, I will have him!" she shouted, striking an oak tree to seal her promise. She found two branches beneath the tree and took them as the oak's gift, using them to divine where in these woods Christina had been taken.

Here in this clearing lay a clear sign, a long strand of blonde hair trailing across the snow in a golden thread. Gold but no red, praise God, so she could hope her sister still lived.

Elfrida turned slowly in this small circle, glimpsing the path of the sun and the rising

new moon through a screen of holly and oak trees. About her the woods seemed deathly quiet, and yet she felt she was being watched by something with a mind—that, or something was coming. She knew it from the raised hairs on the back of her neck.

*Coming, not watching. It cannot see me yet, I vow, so I have time.*

Had she time enough? She must return to the village, to change her clothes, and to make ready.

She listened intently, reaching out with all her senses, but again her first instinct remained compelling. The beast was in this forest, and he would be drawn closer by the right inducements.

“And I know what those are,” she said aloud, turning to hurry back to the home that was not a home, now that Christina was gone.

Walter had not admitted anything to her, not directly, but from his muttered remarks and fractured exclamations as he feverishly searched alongside her for his betrothed, Elfrida had learned a great deal.

“She is the third!” Walter had cried out, beating his fists against the walls of their empty hut. “The third in her wedding garb, and the most beautiful: one black-haired, one brown and my Christina!”

He had refused to say more, even when Elfrida had threatened to curse him, but his outburst told her what he and the elders had been hiding from the village women. The brute who had carried off Christina had kidnapped other pretty young girls, also dressed in their wedding gowns. He stole brides.

*I will dress myself as a bride and return here with my own wedding feast, with food and drink in abundance. Let him think me a bridal sacrifice, his red-haired bride, left for him by the village. And, by Christ and all his saints, this time I will be ready for him!*

*It is a blessing I am a healer and have so many potions ready prepared. If I put sleeping draughts in the wine, food, and sweets, surely I can tempt the beast to take some? I can smear tinctures of poppy on my skin and clothes, so any taste will induce sleep.*

Sleep, not death, for she had to know where he had taken Christina.

*I will coax the truth from the groggy monster, and then the village men can have him.*

Part of her knew she was being wild, unreasonable, that she should talk to Walter, tell the villagers, but she did not care. Talk would waste more precious hours, and they might even try to stop her. For her sister she would do anything, risk anything. But she must hurry, she must do something, and she had little time.

It was full dark before Elfrida was finished, midnight on the day after the start of Advent, two days after Christina should have been married. She shivered in the glinting snow, her breath suspended between the frosted white ground and the black, star-clad sky.

She glanced over the long boulder she had used as an offering table for her wine and food, not allowing herself to think too closely about what she had done. She had lit a

small fire and banked it so that it would burn until morning, to stop her freezing and to keep wolves at bay, and now by its tumbling flames she saw her own small, tethered shadow writhing on the forest floor.

She would not dwell on what could go wrong, and she fought down her night terrors over Christina, lest they become real through her thoughts. She lifted up her head and stared above the webbing of tree tops to the bright stars beyond, reciting a praise chant to herself. She was a warrior of magic, ready to ensnare and defeat the beast.

“I have loosened my hair as a virgin. I am dressed in a green gown, unworn before today. My shoes are made of the softest fur, my veil and sleeves are edged with gold, and my waist is belted in silver. There is mutton for my feast, and dates and ginger, wine and mead and honey. I am a willing sacrifice. I am the forest bride, waiting for my lord—”

Her voice broke. Advent was meant to be a time of fasting, and she had no lord. None of the menfolk of Yarr would dare to take Elfrida the wise-woman and witch to be his wife. She knew the rumors—men always gossiped more than women—and all were depressing in their petty spitefulness. They called her a scold because she answered back.

“I need no man,” she said aloud, but the hurt remained. Was she not young enough, fertile enough, *pretty* enough?

*Keep to your task*, Elfrida reminded herself. *You are the forest bride, a willing virgin sacrifice.*

She had tied herself between two tall lime trees, sometimes struggling against her loose bonds as if she could not break free. She could, of course, but any approaching monster would not know that, and she wanted to bait the creature to come close—close enough to drink her drugged flask of wine and eat her drugged “wedding” cakes. Let him come near so she could prick him with her knife and tell him, in exquisite detail, how she could bewitch him. He would fear her, oh yes, he would...

She heard a blackbird caroling alarms and knew that something was coming, closing steadily, with the stealth of a hunter. She strained on her false bonds, peering into the semidarkness, aware that the fire would keep wild creatures away. Her back chilled as she sensed an approach from down-wind, behind her, and as she listened to a tumble of snow from a nearby birch tree, she heard a second shutter of snow from a pine closer by. Whoever, whatever, was creeping up was somehow shaking the trees, using the snow falls as cover to disguise its own movement.

A cunning brute, then, but she was bold. In one hand she clutched her small dagger, ready. In her other, she had the tiny packet of inflammables that she now hurled into the fire.

“Come, husband!” she challenged, as the fire erupted into white-hot dragon tongues of leaping flame, illuminating half the clearing like a noonday sun. “Come now!”

She thrust her breasts and then her hips forward, aping the actions that wives had sometimes described to her when they visited her to ask for a love philter. She shook her long red hair and kissed the sooty, icy air. “Come to me!”

She saw it at the very edge of her sight—black, huge, a shadow against the flames, off to her side, and now a real form, swooping around from the tree line to her left to face her directly. She stared across the crackling fire at the shape and bit down on the shriek rising up her throat.

The beast stepped through the fire, and she saw its claw reaching for her. She heard a click, off to her right, but still kept watching the claw, even as the fire was suddenly gutted and dead, all light extinguished.

Darkness, absolute and terrifying, smothered her, and she was lost.

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