



# The Prize

*By Julie Garwood*

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In the resplendence of William the Conqueror's London court, the lovely Saxon captive, Nicholaa was forced to choose a husband from the assembled Norman nobles. She chose Royce, a baron warrior whose fierce demeanor could not conceal his chivalrous and tender heart. Resourceful, rebellious and utterly naive, Nicholaa vowed to bend Royce to her will, despite the whirlwind of feelings he aroused in her. Ferocious in battle, seasoned in passion, Royce was surprised by the depth of his emotion whenever he caressed his charming bride.

In a climate of utmost treachery, where Saxons still intrigued against their Norman invaders, Royce and Nicholaa revelled in their precious new love...a fervent bond soon to be disrupted by the call of blood, kin and country!

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From the Back Cover**

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### **About the Author**

Julie Garwood is the author of numerous New York Times bestsellers, including *Sizzle*, *Fire and Ice*, *Shadow Music*, *Shadow Dance*, and *Slow Burn*. She lives near Kansas City.

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### **From Chapter One**

Baron Royce had left his mount to pull one of his soldiers out of the moat surrounding the holding. The foolish soldier had lost his footing and fallen head first into the deep water. Because of his heavy armor, he couldn't catch his balance and was sinking to the bottom. Royce reached down with one hand, caught hold of a booted foot, and lifted the young soldier out of the murky depths. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the vassal onto the grassy bank. The racking coughs coming from the lad had told Royce he didn't need further assistance. The boy was still breathing. Royce had paused to remove his own helmet, and was just wiping the sweat from his brow when the stone had found its mark.

Royce was thrown backwards. He landed a fair distance away from his stallion. He didn't sleep long. Dust still clouded the air around him when he opened his eyes. His soldiers were running toward him to offer assistance.

He declined their help. He sat up, shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of the pain and fog that confused him. For a minute or two, he couldn't even remember where the hell he was. Blood trickled from a cut high on his forehead, above his right eye. He prodded around the edges of the injury and only then realized a fair chunk of flesh had been torn away.

He still didn't understand what had hit him. From the size of the jagged wound, he knew an arrow couldn't have done the damage. But damn it all, his head seemed to be on fire.

Royce pushed his pain aside and concentrated on standing up. Fury came to his aid. By God, he would find the bastard who'd done this to him and give him equal measure.

That thought cheered him considerably.

His squire stood holding the reins of his mount. Royce swung himself up into the saddle and turned his attention to the top of the wall that surrounded the holding. Had his enemy aimed at him from that spot? The

distance was too great for him to see even a glimpse of a threat.

He put his helmet back on.

Looking around, he saw that in the ten or fifteen minutes that had passed since he'd taken the blow, his soldiers had seemingly forgotten everything he'd taught them.

Ingelram, his temporary second-in-command, had the full contingent of men fighting in a unit near the south side of the fortress. Arrows rained down on them from the top of the wall, making advance impossible.

Royce was appalled by their ineptness. The soldiers held their shields up above their heads to ward off the arrows, and they were fighting a defensive battle again. They were in the exact position he'd found them in when he'd joined them for this nuisance duty this morning.

Royce let out a long sigh, then took command again.

He immediately changed tactics to prevent them from losing the ground they'd already secured. He pulled ten of his most reliable soldiers away from the wall and went with them to the small rise above the holding. With one of his own arrows he killed a Saxon soldier who was standing on top of the wall before his men had even had time to secure their own sightings. Then he allowed them to take over the task. In little time at all, the Saxon walls were once again unprotected.

Five of Royce's men climbed the walls and cut the ropes to the bridge, lowering it. God help him, he'd actually had to remind one of the eager volunteers to take his sword with him.

Royce rode first across the wooden planks of the drawbridge, his sword drawn, though there really wasn't any need. Both the lower bailey and the upper one were completely deserted.

They made a thorough search of the huts and outer buildings and discovered not a single Saxon soldier. It became clear to Royce that the enemy had left their holding by a secret passage. Royce ordered half his men to search the walls for such an opening. He would seal it the minute they located it.

The Normans secured the holding in William's name a few minutes later when they hoisted the duke of Normandy's banner, displaying his magnificent colors, onto the pole atop the wall. The castle now belonged to the Normans.

Yet Royce had completed only half of his duties. He still had to collect the prize and take her to London.

Aye, it was time to capture Lady Nicholaa.

A search of the living quarters of the keep produced a handful of servants, who were dragged outside and pushed into a tight circle in the courtyard.

Ingelram, as tall as Royce was, though he lacked the bulk and battle scars, held one Saxon servant by the back of his tunic. The servant was an elderly man with thin, graying hair and puckered skin.

Royce hadn't had time to dismount before Ingelram blurted out, "This one's the steward, Baron. His name's Hacon. He's the one who told Gregory all about the family."

"I didn't talk to any Normans," Hacon protested. "I don't even know anyone named Gregory. God strike me dead if that ain't the truth," he added boldly.

The "faithful" servant was lying, and he was feeling quite proud of himself for possessing such courage in the face of dire circumstances. The old man still hadn't looked up at the Norman leader, though, but kept his attention on the overly eager blond knight who was trying to tear his tunic off his back.

"Aye, you did talk to Gregory," Ingelram countered. "He was the first knight to take on the challenge of securing this holding and capturing the prize. It won't do you any good to lie, old man."

"He be the one who left with the arrow in his backside?" Hacon asked.

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