

Knights' Desire



*Elizabeth
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To Tom. Where would I be without you?

And,

To Mom, who taught me to love books.

I thank you both with all my heart.



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“For the maid is not dead, but sleepeth.”

Matthew IX.24

Chapter 1



Medieval England

Cresswell Castle

1442

In winter, Arian Goodfife's thoughts turned frequently to her mother's body, shrouded and frozen beneath the hard earth. It had been so since she was a little girl.

The occasional warmth of a hearth offered small solace even now, nine winters after her mother's death. Grief haunted her. An endless yearning for love chilled her to her soul. But love had been skillfully cut from her life.

Arian shivered and ran her fingertips over the hilt of the rusty eating knife tucked in her belt. The same dread she felt whenever her stepfather, Harold, drew near, burdened her now. Her keen ears listened for the sound of his heavy footfall, but initially caught only the moan of the wind; the far away shriek of a hawk.

Then they were there. Unmistakable. Distant hoofbeats. Harold returned.

With movements far too stiff and slow for her nineteen years, Arian pushed herself out of the lord's chair and stood. She sighed heavily and glanced at the large iron crucifix hanging on the opposite wall in the great hall. Crossing herself, she uttered a brief prayer to the Blessed Virgin for protection, knowing her petition would not be granted. It never was.

Deep, masculine voices soon drifted up the stairs. Servants materialized as if from the air. Ignoring her as they had been ordered to do, they scurried to gather food and drink for the returning hunters.

Harold would be in a generous mood if the hunt had been successful. If not....

The volume from the voices increased as the hunters approached. Terror urged her move, she had tarried too long. Escape was now impossible. Scurrying behind the high board, Arian slipped into the shadows, away from the windows, away from the blazing fire, until cold stone pressed against her back. If only she could will herself to disappear completely through the thick walls to reappear in some other, happier place.

First, the hounds bounded in, baying and panting and sniffing the air. Then, laughing like a drunken jester, Harold entered the great hall, a dead roebuck draped across his shoulders like a mantle. He

dropped his bounty onto the high table with a thud, where it lay, long dead and stiff, a useless tongue hanging out of its mouth. A blood stench permeated the air.

Servants hurried to remove the carcass and wipe up the gore spattered on the flagstones.

“Wine!” Harold roared impatiently.

Great flagons of wine were brought forth. The hunters, some twelve in number, laughed and bragged about the chase. It was a strange mixture of men, familiar and unknown. They wore trunk hose, padded wool shirts, and vests of boiled leather. Colorless masculine garb.

Harold moved among them, sharing a jest with a gouge of an elbow into a companion's side or a punch aimed at a stranger's shoulder. Arian narrowed her eyes in anger, watching from the shadows, knowing what a coarse boor Harold was.

The jesting grew boisterous. Roasted capons and pheasants, braised eels and duck breasts were hauled up from the kitchens to feed the revelers. The serving wenches suffered pinches and prods and lewd language.

Arian watched from the shadows, torn between wanting to escape or to stay and snap up scraps of food from the floor with the dogs. Her hunger and her fear of being caught were at war.

Her filthy under tunic probably smelled worse than a stable mucker's shirt. Her big toe protruded through the worn end of her soft leather boot, the

toenail cracked and sore. She ran a hand over her matted hair and silently cursed Harold. If only it were he who slowly turned and roasted on a spit in the kitchens beneath the great hall instead of the roebuck.

The rumbling in her stomach increased when the tantalizing aroma of succulent meats filled her nostrils. The few crusts she'd eaten yesterday were long since digested. She crossed her stomach with folded arms, angling slightly forward for fear the gurgling in her belly might alert someone to her presence.

The men were seated now, stuffing their mouths with their host's generosity. The hunt had been successful.

"A toast to Henry VI, may God protect him," Harold bellowed, his cup raised. "Another to Sir Judson Langley, for his prowess in the hunt. You are welcome to these lands, my friend."

Sir Judson Langley? A name unfamiliar to Arian. She had for many years hidden in the shadows, memorizing the names of every guest at the castle, hoping one day a rescuer would be among them.

She peered out at the scene. Sir Judson rose from his chair. His brawny back blotted all else from view. A long hank of gleaming black hair tied with a thin leather strap fell at his nape. The broad shoulders below made her think of the massive oak beams forming the scaffolding for

raising a building.

“Your lands teem with game, my lord,” Sir Judson said, his voice deep and commanding. “While I accept your gracious compliment, the hunting here is less than rigorous.”

Beneath the surface of Sir Judson’s courteous words was there an insult swimming? Arian wanted to smile. Harold always bragged of his prowess at the hunt, claiming a scarcity of animals on the land. Her land. Cresswell.

The scraping of chairs across the flagstones drew her attention away from Sir Judson. While the company rose to their feet, her stepfather’s second wife, Gwen, entered the hall. Elegant, beautiful; she moved gracefully. Envy slammed into Arian’s heart with each of Gwen’s gliding steps across the floor.

She took command of her surroundings so easily, Arian thought. Though unable to assume its title, a cloak of authority over the castle had settled on Gwen’s shoulders only moments after she wed Harold.

Gwen’s yellow hair gleamed. She extended her arms, palms up, symbolically welcoming the guests to her bosom by the graceful gesture.

Harold moved to her side, taking her hand in his. “Gentlemen. My beautiful wife, Gwen of Cresswell.”

A smile to soften the hardest of hearts broke out across Gwen’s face. “Good day, my lord, and

to you, good sirs.” Her voice had the lilt of music in it. “I’ll tarry no longer than to welcome you.” Her hand fluttered to her breast. “Talk of the hunt and bloodletting is most frightening to a frail woman.”

Frail? Frail as a warhorse on a mission, more’s the like.

Arian pinched her nose, wanting to sneeze from the generous dusting of pepper that seasoned the meat and filled the air surrounding her. The dull ache in her stomach felt like a knife wound. The aromas intensified.

Salivating, the dogs circled the table, impatient for a scrap. The beasts ignored her, as accustomed as they were to the scent of her. She, more often than not, slept with them for warmth.

Sometimes it seemed starvation and a martyr’s death would be easier than to beg for food one more day. Only her dreams of liberating Cresswell kept her going. Recovering her father’s lands one day was all she desired. Justice came second.

The man named Judson moved to Gwen’s side. He accepted her hand and bowed over it. “How good it is to see you again, Gwen,” he said.

At the sight of his face, Arian forgot for a moment how hungry she was. His skin was ruddy, sun kissed. His face was all angles and plains. There was a distance, a perturbing reserve in his expression. His full mouth curved into a smile

that made her quiver in several odd places. She bit her lip and listened.

“Judson,” Gwen said, a soothing coo in her voice. “Such a long time since last I saw you.” She stroked his cheek with her long, slender fingers, the touch intimate. “Was it a long journey to Cresswell?”

He buried Gwen’s fingers in his mighty hand and took them away from his expressionless face. “‘Twas not too far a journey.”

Gwen smiled. “‘Tis said we are all of us travelers on a circular journey through life. Thus we chance to meet again, sir.”

“Join us, wife,” Harold said. “Join us at table and sup with us.” He held out his arm and Gwen rested her dainty hand atop his wrist.

They took their seats. A hum of conversation hung in the air. Wheels of aromatic cheeses and crusty rounds of piping hot bread were added to the meat on the table. Arian shivered, her stomach now making even more vigorous demands.

“Pray state your business with us, Judson,” Gwen made bold to say. “When we received your request to visit more than a month ago, it was like receiving a message from the nether world. You have not been heard from in years.”

Their voices faded to murmurs. Her head spinning and tiny black-tailed fish swimming at the very limits of her vision, Arian slid down the wall and silently sank to the floor on her rump.

She licked her cracked lips, still able, but barely, to keep her eyes open to the scene.

“I am sent with my small company on a quest,” Judson explained. “I was ordered to come by Lord Jonathan’s grandmother, the dowager baroness Emily Goodfife of Trilorne. The old woman insists that the only child of the marriage between Lord Jonathan and his wife, Lady Maeve, a girl, is still alive, contrary to your report of her death some years ago.”

Harold took a bite out of the capon breast he held, then tossed the rest over his shoulder. Still chewing, he asked, “How is it the old woman continues to live as long as Methuselah?” At his back the dogs snarled and growled over the morsel. “‘Tis unnatural.”

“That it may be, my lord, but she lives on, marvel that she is. At ninety and six, she is totally blind but quite sound otherwise. She has yearned for her great-granddaughter for many years.”

The voices became a distant hum in Arian’s ears. Had he said she had a great-grandmother? Alive? It was incomprehensible. She would have to consider this news another time when she had room in her brain to deal with both hunger and clear thinking.

“‘Tis an astonishing age to attain,” Gwen said, forced mirth in her voice.

Arian lay her throbbing head against her knees. When the great gray hound, Daimon, dropped the

remains of the capon breast near her feet, she snatched it up in her dirty hands and sank her teeth into the meat. Nothing ever tasted so wonderful. She smiled at her friend, tears of gratitude stinging her eyes. Daimon gave her a sympathetic canine gaze. She forgot the conversation and ate.

Judson, aware of the impact his impending announcement would have on Harold, responded. "Aye, 'tis true what I say. Her flesh is all but transparent, but her hearing is keener than yours or mine. She hears her great-granddaughter calling for her, so she says."

Harold stared. "Calling from the grave to join her, 'tis likely," he said, grumbling. "The girl is dead, Judson. She died in the fire that swept through the stables shortly after I married Gwen. We reported her death to the old woman and there's an end of it."

"Cresswell, I am told, would belong to the girl now, had she lived," Judson said, deliberately keeping his demeanor neutral. "She was Lord Jonathan's only direct descendent. Do you not, as castellan, pay duty to Lady Emily since Cresswell is not entailed to you or your heirs?"

"Aye, we do," Harold said gruffly. "We pay her almost as much as the estate produces. There is no need for you to stay on. Return to the old woman. Pay her my respects, but assure her her great-granddaughter is long dead."

Judson sipped his wine, and regarded his hosts.

“Alas, how do you convince a woman nearing one hundred winters that her grandson’s heir, the last of the Goodfife line, is dead? Especially when she so believes otherwise. As her liege man, I must stay long enough to convince her I made a thorough search.”

“And what will be your reward upon returning to her?” Gwen asked. “I sense ‘tis not only for love of the old woman that you have come to Cresswell.”

Judson ran a hand over his jaw, forcing a smile to hide his wariness. “When I tell the dowager I have no doubts the girl is dead, I shall become heir to all her wealth and properties. The dowager’s estate, Trilorne, Cresswell, all her possessions.”

Gwen took an audible breath. “You must be her very *special* pet, Judson,” she said, her voice intimate, her eyes suspicious, “to merit such a reward.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “I am not so needy of a woman’s attentions that I would fawn over the dowager.” He laughed again. “Though at ninety and six, she still retains a great elegance about her. Nay, Gwen. Blood is the answer.”

“Blood?” Gwen’s face mirrored her curiosity.

“I am distant kin to Lord Jonathan, Harold’s first wife’s husband, though I never knew him. A thin stream of Goodfife blood flows in my veins—the last precious drops of that blood remaining on the earth. If the girl is dead, only I and the sons I

beget will continue the line.”

Arian felt the chill leave her body. Her belly felt full with the small portion of meat she had swallowed. She placed the clean-picked capon bones on the floor and rubbed her greasy hands on her skirt. Faithful Daimon remained on guard at her side. Her attention drifted back to the high table.

“How can it be that you are Lord Jonathan Goodfife’s kin?” Gwen asked.

“Because I say it is so,” Judson replied evenly.

Arian’s ears pricked at the surprising sound of her father’s name, spoken aloud. They forbade her to speak it, even to think it. In the same way they forbade her to speak or think of her mother. But how were they to know the secret thoughts of her heart, try as Harold would to humiliate or starve them out of her.

“Y-you will inherit Cresswell?” Harold’s voice wavered. “What will become of us?”

Gwen placed her hand on Harold’s arm reassuringly. “Our friend will leave things exactly as they are. Will you not, Judson?”

Uneasy with Gwen’s question, Judson drew a small dagger from his belt and feigned interest in the blade. “By virtue of my blood kinship, the dowager has decreed that Cresswell will one day be mine,” he said, “if the maiden is not alive. What I will do with it, I have not yet decided.”

Cresswell? His? Another enemy come to torment or kill her to gain sole possession of Cresswell?

What treachery is this?

Her emotions on fire, Arian swallowed the bitter taste rising in her throat. Would that she could so easily swallow the hatred she had in her heart for all of them.

“I see,” Gwen said, her voice brimming with honey. “Shall I show you the girl’s grave marker and make short work of this matter? We buried what we found of her—a few charred bones is all ‘twas left.”

Judson laughed, the sound of it hollow and humorless. “I have no need to see a name on a stone. I take you at your word.” He returned the dagger to his belt.

Smiling at her husband, Gwen said, “Then perhaps you will use the remainder of your stay here to examine the estate. Go back and assure the dowager that her grandson’s properties are in responsible hands. Assure yourself as well. She will continue to enjoy the income we send her, as will you, one day.”

Harold nodded in agreement. “Before leaving you will meet the one whom you might consider to one day govern Cresswell’s lands on your behalf. That is my only child, our son, Roland.”

Arian shuddered. They spoke of the evil child, her tormentor. *Roland, the monster.*

“What was the girl’s name?” Judson asked.

Gwen’s shoulders straightened. “Do you not know?”

Arian listened more intently. Gripping her ancient knife, she concentrated on the nape of Judson's neck.

Judson shook his head. "I was sent on this errand with her name in mind, but it has escaped me."

"Her name was Arian," Harold said. "Lady Arian Goodfife of Cresswell."

He sipped his wine, then placed the cup on the table. Judson continued to smile, nodding his recognition of the name. "Ah, just so. Now I remember. Lady Arian."

"More food, Judson?" Gwen gestured to the half-empty platters on the table.

Holding up a hand, Judson shook his head. "You'll fatten me like an ox if you give me more. Lady Emily won't know me when I return to Trilorne."

"You and your party must forgive the humble repast before you," Harold said, "but our harvest was scant."

Biting her knuckle, Arian choked back a protest. The harvest had been plentiful. Cresswell's lands were nothing if not productive. The larders bulged with excess.

"You do have a keen knack for understatement, my lord," Judson stated flatly. "I see no lack here."

Someone or something watched him from behind. Judson's warrior's instinct sensed it by the prickle of fine hairs lifting on the back of his neck. He drummed his fingertips on the grip of

his dagger, smiling. Judging from the high color on his cheeks, Harold was outraged to hear that Cresswell might one day be taken from him. But surely he would not be fool enough to set his men upon him this soon.

“Have you taken a wife, Judson?” Gwen placed her fingertips lightly on his wrist. “Or have you only left broken hearts in your wake?”

Laughing, he pushed away from the table, stood, and bowed to Gwen. “I remain, alas, unmarried, madam.”

She appeared pleased with this news. “Then you have no heirs? You’re not a young man. As I recall you are five years my elder. Twenty and five are you now?”

“Aye, next month I’ll be that—I am in a man’s prime.”

Gwen exchanged glances with Harold.

In one swift action, Judson whirled on his heel, charged at the wall, and snared the wrist of the person lurking in the shadows behind them. Jerking the captive arm upward, he had to regain his balance when the weight of the one he pulled proved to be little more than that of a feather.

“What is this?” Judson yanked the creature toward the center of the hall. “A spy? A thief?” He narrowed his eyes. A filthy urchin stared back at him. All skin and bones, the wretch trembled. Boy or girl? He couldn’t tell, but whatever gender it was, it stank.

An enormous dog lurking behind the culprit bared his teeth and snarled a warning. Judson reached for his dagger.

The unfortunate spoke with a small, yet authoritative voice. "Nay, Daimon. Lie down." And the beast obeyed.

Harold gasped. "What are you doing here? Back to the kennels with you, you fetid wench."

So, it was female. She made a feeble attempt to break free, but Judson tightened his grip on her bony wrist. Her defiant eyes, eyes so startling a color green that springtime blossomed deep within them, never left his. They captured his attention away from the dirt on her face and filth of her garment.

"Who is this creature, Harold?" Judson said.

"She's the bastard daughter of a whore from the village," Gwen said, her distaste clear in her voice. "When the slut died, Harold charitably allowed this orphaned girl to live in the kennels. And this is how she repays his kindness, by bringing her filthy person into our midst. She has been ordered to stay where she belongs."

"If I assume ownership of Cresswell, I'll be sure such a vile wretch does not reside within miles of where I eat." Judson turned back to the girl. "Why were you spying on us?"

Furious at his effrontery, but unable to find her tongue, Arian bit her lip. This Judson was no rescuer! Slowly she slid her free hand toward her

knife. Finally, her fingertips touched the cold handle. The single thought eating at her brain should have died aborning.

Sir Judson turned away, asking, "Is she mute as well as fetid?"

Gwen and Harold laughed viciously. Something cracked within Arian's breast. Was it her heart?

Without caring for the consequences, she struck out. The rusty blade, intended for Sir Judson's cold heart, snapped off when it hit the large silver cross hanging on his chest. He released one arm, snaring the other and canting it behind her back painfully. The broken hilt fell from her hand and clattered to the floor. Judson kicked it and the blade away.

"A fine welcome this is, my lord," Judson shouted, wrenching her arm higher still. "Is this the way all your guests are treated?"

"I'll have her flogged for this!" Harold said, jumping to his feet, his eyes bulging in fury. "Better still, I'll strip the flesh off her scrawny back myself." He lunged for her.

"Sweet Jesu, nay!" the girl cried, trembling fiercely, struggling to get free. "Please, sir, mercy!"

Her woeful cry sounded like that of a wounded animal and for some reason it urged Judson to take pity on her plight. "Pray, hold, my lord!" His voice echoed off the walls. "She's done me no harm. As assassinations go it was a puny attempt. The wretch possessed a flimsy blade and a weaker

thrust. She's only assaulted my medallion, not harmed me."

Harold bellowed, "Nonetheless, she'll be whipped for that treachery!"

Judson held up his hand. "At this time I have no say in the way you punish the tenants, my lord. But I do not believe a flogging fits this crime."

"What would you have us do?" Gwen asked, her voice as appealing as a warm sugar cake. "After all, the day *will* come when what is done with the tenants will be according to your wishes."

The look Gwen gave her husband contained a clear warning. Judson stared again at the wretched girl in his grasp.

"Since I traveled here without a squire to assist me, I would have her serve me during my stay," he said, unaware he'd even made the decision. "As penance she shall clean the mud from my boots, and scrub the sweat from my back."

"After she's been whipped," Harold said, insistent.

"I beg you, nay. I've forgiven her, and 'twas me she attacked. By showing her your mercy you will strengthen your image in the eyes of Cresswell's people."

Gwen spoke. "I believe you should hearken to Judson's words, dearest husband. Let us bathe the girl and give her to his care. Let him beat her or bed her at his pleasure."

Bed her? Judson looked down at the shivering

sack of bones at his side. The thought of bedding her was repugnant to him. He released her arm disdainfully. "Have no misgivings, madam. She will not share my bed."

Smiling coyly, Gwen twisted a heavily jeweled gold cuff on her wrist. "The creature will be all the sadder for lack of your attention, Judson."

It struck Judson how viper-like Gwen's gray eyes had become. A flash of foreboding speared through him.

"I am sure there's a pretty wench or two here who will see to Judson's pleasure," Harold said. "Though by searching out the bones of a dead girl, he may eat into time better spent carousing." His hollow laugh filled the hall. "I will indeed give you this miserable female as your servant."

Gwen clapped her hands. Two rotund serving wenches scurried forth to do her bidding.

"Take this wretch to the kitchens and give her a bath. Fie! She stinks. Cut her hair and scrub her scalp. Our guest must not feel the bite of a single flea or foster a nit whilst in our care, or you will suffer for it. Groom her and dress her in clean clothing and send her to abide in the south solar. You and your companion shall reside there, Judson."

Arian ceased trembling. A bath. Praise mercy—a bath! And a solar in which to lay her head. Though he would seize that which was hers, a reluctant kinship for this man Judson arose in Arian's heart.

Judson speared an apple with his knife and bit into it. "I would have her fed before you send her to me, Gwen. I do not want a skeleton doing my bidding. How else can she hoist my sword or fetch me a bath if she's too skinny to have any sinew in her arms."

"Feed her the scraps from our table, then," Gwen said sternly.

A bath, a solar, *and* something from the table to eat? Three miracles at once. This usurper had his good points. She would remember to thank him before she ran him through with her father's sword.

"What is the name of this unfortunate girl?" Judson asked. "I must call her something."

Harold glared at Arian. His eyes on her were like fire, singing her flesh. All the threats of punishment were there—unspoken—but as dire as ever in their meaning.

Harold said, "Why, 'tis J-Jane. Jane. Her name is Jane. She had an idiot for a father and her mother was a whore. She's light of reason and given to fantasies. She will work hard for you, but do not heed her ravings. Some say her father's seed was poisoned by a curse and her mother's womb was a cradle for demons."

Bile rose in Arian's throat. Her wise father had been a giant among men; her mother had been a saint. A pike up his arse would be Harold's fate one day. Fists clenched at her sides, she silently

vowed it.

“Take her away!” Gwen ordered. “Scrub her skin until it turns raw.”

The wenches gripped Arian’s upper arms in their chubby fists and hauled her out of the great hall toward the lower kitchens. A brief glance over her shoulder gave her a last glimpse of Sir Judson Langley.

The conniving bastard wanted Cresswell? Never!



“Have a care where you pour that water!” Arian squealed. The steaming deluge they showered over her head nearly scalded her.

“Fie! This hair cannot be combed,” said one servant, yanking Arian’s long tresses. “‘Tis too tangled and filthy.”

“Gwen ordered us to cut it off,” the other grumbled. “I say we cut it to the scalp.” She held up a pair of scissors and moved them near Arian’s head.

“N-nay!” Arian sputtered. “I’ll not be made bald by the likes of you!” She raised her forearm swiftly to deflect the woman’s hand. The scissors clanged against the flagstones.

“I’ll cut her hair,” a man’s voice said from the edge of the room. “I do such for the knights and will do a far better job of it than either of you two surly bitc—”

Not recognizing the voice, Arian yelled, "Be gone, you! I'm naked in this tub, sir!"

He stepped into the light. Christian! Sweet Jesu! Arian released her breath at the sight of her friend. Gwen's toy had come to rescue her.

"Rinse the girl at once and wrap her in linen so I can work on her hair. I'll turn away." He winked affectionately at Arian, then showed her his back.

Knowing that Christian was unaffected by her nakedness, Arian got to her feet, wrapped a scratchy linen sheet around her shoulders, and stepped from the tub. The fresh scent of soap on her skin made her feel euphoric. Oh, to be clean like this every day.

"You wenches may go!" he barked. As they scurried from the room, Christian faced her, making a tsking sound. "Shall we attempt to make some sense out of this unfortunate head of hair?"

After her mother died and Harold had laid claim to Cresswell, Christian was the only one who ever spoke to her or gave her something to eat when he could. She trusted him and his word with her life.

"Aye. I believe 'tis time I gave Gwen some competition." She smiled. Christian giggled.

She peered at the bottom of a shiny copper pot hanging from a hook and for the first time in many seasons really looked at herself. Not believing what she saw, she moved closer and gazed harder at the blurred reflection.

Bitter eyes set deep in sunken sockets stared back at her. To her surprise there was still a hint of sparkle buried in the depths of her eyes. Her high cheekbones accentuated shadowy indentations beneath. Her collarbones stuck out in stark relief. Her skin, though freshly scrubbed, had a sallow cast rather than the rosy glow of her memory. Unbidden, tears glittered in her eyes. She looked a thousand years old.

Christian's hand on her shoulder stirred her from her regret. "'Tis not a pretty sight, is it, my lady?" he queried sympathetically.

"Hush, Christian," she said. "You might be overheard. This visitor Judson must not know my identity. He could prove a danger to me. You must call me by the name Harold recently gave me—Jane."

"I understand." He squeezed her shoulder. "You have survived, I think, the worst of it."

"Fie! I'm turned into a crone!"

A grin curling his lips, he lifted the heavy mass of her hair. "The sooner this is gone, my la—*Jane*, the better you will look. And smell."

He raised the scissors. "This will only take a moment."

She shut her eyes, calling up images of her 'crown of glory', as her mother long ago pronounced it. Hours had been spent grooming the long, wavy tresses until her hair gleamed with deep auburn highlights. At the sound of the scissors

slicing through her hair Arian winced and swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth. A single tear meandered down her cheek.

In a while her head felt as light as a feather. She ventured to open her eyes and touch what remained of her hair. Christian tossed the bulk of her shorn tresses, along with her filthy clothes, into a basket on the floor. Then he continued to snip a little here, a bit more there.

“That was the worst of it. I believe you now look like a beautiful boy.”

Her hair felt much shorter than any page's coif. The cutting finished, she hung her head over the tub while Christian worked soap through her hair, then rinsed it with fresh, warm water.

He daubed the water away with a length of linen. Using his fingers as a comb, he curled her hair around her ears, nape, and temples. It dried in no time at all, and he fluffed it into gentle waves to frame her face.

Arian stood and again peered at the pot bottom. The bath and all the attention Christian had given her had heightened the color in her cheeks. The sparkle in her eyes had returned.

“Those women left this old rag and slippers for you to wear, my la—Jane. I'll see if I can find something more appropriate, but in the meantime, they are clean and warm. They'll have to do for now.”

He handed her a burgundy wool under tunic,

doubtless one of Gwen's old castoffs. After he turned his back, Arian pulled the garment over her head and shoved her feet into the black slippers next to her boots.

He reached for her boots, to throw them atop the hair and clothing in the basket.

"Nay, Christian," she said, touching his arm. "Those boots hold my few possessions. I'll keep them with me for now."

He pursed his lips, but kept his counsel.

A sudden, brilliant burst of lightning lit the room, followed by a tremendous crack of thunder that shook the castle. Arian and Christian grabbed for each other, steadying themselves. Water sloshed against the sides of the wooden tub and the hanging pots and pans clanged together. Confused shouts and terrified screams erupted throughout the castle and beyond on the grounds.

The violent noise reverberated through the thick walls for some time. Mercifully their ears weren't damaged. The castle was quiet now, save for the occasional metallic rattle of the utensils.

Arian released her hold of Christian's arm and smiled.

He looked aghast. "What makes you smile? A closer strike and we could have been killed!"

"'Twas only a taste of what is to come. I think what you said before was right, Christian. I *have* survived the worst of it." She straightened her slender shoulders and raised her newly shorn head

proudly high.

“Now ‘tis time for a reckoning.”

She left the room, boots clutched to her bosom,
and headed for the south solar.

Chapter 2



“Sweet Mother Mary’s mercy! What was that?” Sir Granger Mumphry, Judson’s friend jumped at the sound.

Judson, hand on his sword and his heart pounding, spun around. Had the castle walls really shook? “I know not. ‘Tis sure I’ve never heard the like.”

Granger scratched his head. “The very castle trembled... nay, shuddered ‘neath my feet.” His eyes widened. “Is God’s wrath about to end the world?”

Thunder still rumbled in the distance. “I’ve heard tales of lightning and thunder occurring in the dead of winter. But never have I experienced it! ‘Tis said they are powerful, destructive forces.”

“Perhaps we should hurry to Vespers and make confession of our sins to the priest before the end comes.” Granger glanced around.

Judson laughed. “Is there time enough left to confess them all, my friend?” He shook his head.

“‘Twas a freak of nature. Confession is not necessary.”

“‘Tis a strange place, this Cresswell.”

“More than I imagined ‘twould be.”

Regaining their legs, they followed two servants up the winding staircase to the solar at the southern end of the castle. It was a long, narrow climb. Judson admired the sturdy stairwell and the fit of the precisely cut stone steps. It was clear to see that Cresswell castle was the handiwork of master masons.

The quarters they were taken to were expansive and extremely comfortable. His companion would sleep in the common room. Leaving Granger there, Judson entered the private quarters that were, at Gwen's insistence, his alone. Elegant hangings depicting castle life graced the walls inside the solar. Exotic multi-colored woven carpets covered the floor. A bed as big as his entire room at Trilorne abutted the far wall. It was a space furnished and fit for a great lord.

And it would all be his one day, as soon as he ascertained that the girl, Arian, was dead. All indications were that she no longer existed. Dead, years ago. But he would linger here long enough to assure the dowager that he had upturned every rock on the grounds in search of her beloved granddaughter. For he did truly love and honor the dowager.

He lowered his well-worn leather bag to the

floor. It contained his meager possessions, several changes of clothing, his grooming paraphernalia, and his....

“May I turn out the things in your sack, Sir Judson?”

He glanced over his shoulder. A serving girl stood in the doorway, her hands joined, her gaze lowered.

He faced her, eyes narrowed. Was this the same girl who had tried to stab him? This girl, while too thin, was slender and willowy, not as frail appearing as the other one had been.

“Come here, wench,” he said. “Let me look at you.”

The soft wool skirt of her under tunic swayed gently when she walked to him. She paused in front of him, and raised her chin.

It was the girl—Jane, wasn’t it? Her green eyes told the tale. Had an oak leaf ever been so verdant? Or a blade of spring grass ever so vital?

Judson shook himself out of his idiotic reverie. She was a serving girl. A whore’s daughter. Not of any interest to his heart.

“You have been shorn like a sheep.” He laughed.

Her hand came up and touched the rich auburn curls on her head. “I’m pleased with it.” Her chin went higher, prideful despite her sorrowful existence. “‘Tis shorter than yours, which could use a trimming, if I might be so bold.”

He circled her with some menace. "Nay! You may not be so bold." He abhorred having his hair trimmed, hence the leather strap that tied it away from his face.

He leaned nearer to her. She smelled of a laundress's soap, clean and fresh without a trace of offending fragrance. Judson also detested perfume, feeling that efforts to cover an offensive odor with a pleasing one never accomplished the desired effect. Contrary to most opinion, abundant use of soap and water was the better solution.

"Why are you smelling me?" she asked.

He stood at her back. How did she know?

She answered his thoughts. "I heard you take a deep breath."

"I wanted to pronounce you clean."

"And am I?"

He rounded her. "You are as well scrubbed as a chapel pew on Saint Michaelmas day."

Her unexpected smile revealed amazingly clean and straight teeth. So he stared at them.

"Do my teeth intrigue you?" Arian clasped her hands together. Keeping her teeth in good condition was very important to her. Her mother had taught her to brush them with root bark and to use a length of thread in between each one from the time she had first sprouted teeth. It was a habit that remained with her in spite of life's hardships.

He kept staring. "They are not the teeth of a girl who sleeps with the dogs."

“My ancestors had good teeth, I suppose.” She bit her lower lip and stared back at him.

“That matters for something,” he said.

“Your bag?”

“What?”

“Shall I empty your bag?”

He waved his hand, backing away. “Please yourself.”

“You’re not used to issuing orders to servants, are you?” She sucked in a breath and cursed her stupidity. The words had just slipped out. She must tread cautiously. Harold’s threats always manifested into reality. Regardless, she persisted. “Have you never had a servant?”

He flinched. Aha! Pride. He was prideful.

She wasn’t stupid after all.

“Barking orders at some unfortunate servant is not what I aspire to do. You are impertinent in the extreme. I’m still *your* better.”

She lowered her eyes and joined her hands like a penitent at the cross. “Aye, sir.”

Judson was satisfied she knew her place. “How long have you resided here?”

“As long as I can remember.” Releasing a sigh, she glanced up, an odd smile on her lips.

“Does lightning and thunder such as we just experienced occur here often?”

“Often enough to be perplexing.”

He wondered at her answer but let it go. “Did you know the daughter of Lord Jonathan?”

Her green gaze clouded. "Who?"

"Arian Goodfife, only daughter of Lord Jonathan and his wife, Lady Maeve. The one who is said to have been consumed in a fire some years ago. Her great-grandmother pines for her to this day."

"H-her great-grandmother misses..." Pausing to catch her breath, Arian couldn't finish what she yearned to say. Someone alive on God's good earth missed her. Her heart sang for the joy of knowing she was missed. Should she answer Judson's question? How could Harold fault her for answering a guest's question? She would be cautious, but appear forthcoming. "I... I've heard tales told of a girl. But I'm forbidden to tell them."

"By whom?"

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Lord Harold—who is actually not lord over Cresswell at all. He's a pretender, sir. The power of the title died when Lady Maeve and the girl passed into Heaven."

A wave of relief washed over him. Then Cresswell would be his when the aged dowager went to her Maker. "So the girl *is* dead?"

"Some say she is. Others say she is not." That crooked smile appeared again. "'Tis all I can tell you. I fear for the flesh on my back."

He remembered that Harold had threatened to beat her. "What if we make a pact?"

She stared at him. "A-A pact?"

“Aye. Trust me. I’ll keep any and all secrets just between us.”

She wanted to scoff at him. Trust this usurper—this claimant of Cresswell? Surely not. “‘Tis a promise you’ll make?”

He nodded. “A promise.” He abruptly cautioned himself. This wench had somehow managed to fool him into thinking she was normal, not as described by Harold. He avowed she was ‘light of reason and given to fantasies.’ In addition, he would watch his back because of her penchant for brandishing knives.

She stepped nearer. “Why did you prevent Lord Harold from beating me?”

He snapped out of his thoughts. “It seemed prudent to do so.”

“Fie! There was more to it than that.” She eyed him suspiciously. “Is there a softness lurking beneath your brawn?”

Her gaze appraised him. He liked it when a woman admired the strength of his body. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I am not soft.”

She gave a small snort. “Liar,” she accused.

“You forget your place, Jane!” He fisted his hands on his hips. “Put my belongings away and have a bath brought to me. I am weary and need to wash. You shall scrub my back and tell me more of Arian.”

“So you *do* know how to give orders,” she said. “‘Twas spoken so forcefully I’m compelled

to do your bidding, sir.” She bobbed him a curtsy and picked up his sack.

“Hold!”

She spun around.

“Were you as well ‘compelled’ to attack me?”

She nodded. Her lower lip quivered. Judson groaned inwardly. God’s eyes! She was going to cry!

“Why?”

“Y-you called me fetid a-and vile,” she wailed. “I’ve been branded thus for longer than I can recall. Y-you pushed me near the breaking point, sir.”

A tear rolled down her cheek. Damn! She bit her lower lip, seemed trying to compose herself. A knuckle brushed beneath her eye and the waif took a deep breath.

Odd. As he watched her, his heart ached and grew tender in his chest seeing that one shining tear escape and trickle down her cheek. He was prompted to ask her forgiveness but held his tongue. Her slight frame trembled. He put out his hand to touch her arm as a small comfort.

She jerked away. “Do not touch me. Harold forbids it.” Her expression hardened. “I’m to be neither talked to nor given food.” Her lower lip still quivered.

“What is your sin, Jane?”

“I’m not sure.” She ran her fingers through her cropped hair. “Being born?” She shuddered.

At that instant, a loud knock sounded at the

door. Jane hurried to answer it, leaving his bag on the bed. She was graceful in her movements, her steps were fleet. She pulled open the heavy door. Servants, bearing trays of apples, raisins, sweet cakes, and ale, entered.

“It seems Harold is courting you,” she said from the doorway. “Next he will be picking you roses.”

He glared at her. “Spare me your sarcasm, wench. Eat an apple, then get me my bath!”

Jane smiled, lifted her skirt, and raced across the room. How quickly she darted to and fro. She selected an apple with great care, shined it on her sleeve, and bit into it with her remarkable teeth. Eyes closed, head thrown back, she chewed. Never had he seen someone take such pleasure in food. A smile broadened his lips as he watched her.

The apple was so sweet it was practically painful to taste. Whenever Arian managed to filch an apple or two from the kitchens, it was always the rotten ones the cooks threw out for the birds. She stared across at Judson. He looked smug, pleased with himself. She gnawed the few remaining bites around the core and tossed the rest into the fire.

She rubbed the juice from her hands on her hips and licked the sweetness off her lips. It was a heady feeling, this newfound full belly. It made her feel strong and powerful and, aye, slightly enchanted. How long since she'd felt thus?

“The bath?”

She glanced up. His arms were crossed over his chest, indicating his masculine impatience. She had difficulty swallowing the last bit of apple in her mouth. "Aye, Sir Judson. Your bath." The enchantment faded.



She hurried out the door, ran down the steps, and flew across the common room. Midway across the floor, a hand snaked out and caught her arm. She was yanked to an abrupt halt.

"I am Sir Judson Langley's friend, Sir Granger Mumphry."

The giant man drew her closer to him, his brows knit together in a threat.

"I am pleased to—"

"If you entertain even the most remote intention to attack my friend again," he said in a gentle, even voice, "be warned. I'll have no compunction over killing a woman to avenge him."

The steady gaze of his cool, hazel eyes unsettled her. His calm demeanor belied the threat behind the words he spoke. His grip on her arm gave her the impression he could break her bones apart as easily as separating a roasted fowl's leg from its body joint.

"I... I was in error, sir," she said, her voice strained. Her newfound feeling of power fled. "Be assured I would not ever again attempt to harm

your friend.” Her fingers crossed out of his sight.

He released her. “I wonder why he chose a whore’s daughter to serve him? He’s as fierce in battle as any I’ve seen, but I fear someday Judson’s hidden tender heart will be the death of him.”

A tender heart? Inside the chest of a beast hell-bent on stealing what belonged to her? She wished to curse this false sentiment, but remained docile.

“I’ll keep you close within my vision, Jane. Know that I will. Harm one hair on his head and you will taste my steel. *My* heart is not tender, but rather is fashioned of cold metal.” He turned and walked away.

Arian released her breath. His threat should have cautioned her, but it didn’t. “There is not a metal dug out of the ground, save gold, that cannot be corrupted.”

He stopped abruptly in his tracks. Keeping his back to her, he said coldly, “My heart is not corruptible when it comes to defending my friend, wench. Be advised and do not test me further in this. Keep your tongue still.”

She shuddered. This man was a warrior, no mistake. He would do well protecting her lands after they were restored to her. Such loyalty among men was rare. She decided she would cultivate Granger Mumphy like a field of rich loam and plant in him the seeds of loyalty to her. When the time came it would be easy for him to justify becoming her liege man.

“I shall obey you, sir,” she said in a soft voice.

He glanced over his shoulder. His eyes serious, he said, “That pleases me, Jane.”

Arian turned on her heel and ran to the kitchens. Now to convince the servants that her name was Jane and her orders were to be obeyed.



“My back needs washed,” Judson said.

“In a moment, sir,” she said, keeping her gaze cast downward. The tumultuous thudding of her heart had not slowed since he removed his vest, padded shirt, shoes, and hose right before her eyes.

What had she seen? Still astounded, she sighed. His body was a wonder, so... Nay, nay! He was her enemy. There was nothing even the slightest bit attractive about him. She steeled herself to look at him without emotion—and failed. His brawny shoulders were visible above the rim of the wooden tub. Well formed muscle and taut sinew bulged near his nape. He was magnificent.

She turned back to the leather bag on the bed. She emptied the contents, putting his meager wardrobe away. His comb and praying beads and shaving blade were placed on the table next to his bed. He was poor, as well as greedy.

Something caught her eye in the bottom of the bag. She thought it empty, but lifted forth a lock of bright yellow hair tied with a gossamer ribbon

of gold. She turned it around in her hand, feeling a strange sense of dismay.

“What have you there?” Judson knew full well what she held.

She turned to look at him. “Hair. Yellow hair.”

“Place it beneath my pillows. I would sleep with it near me.”

Why did she itch to toss the token into the fire and watch it burn? Instead, she combed her fingers through the short hair on her head and considered killing him at once.

“Under the pillows, Jane,” he said. He knew her thoughts, or did he? “Then I would have ale.”

Arian nodded tersely and moved to the bed. Turning her back to him, she muttered a curse over the hair and shoved it deep beneath the pillows.

She lifted a ewer of pungent ale and poured him a cup full. Balancing the vessel carefully with both hands so she wouldn’t spill a drop, she concentrated on the task to avoid looking at him.

He took the cup from her hands, lightly brushing her fingers when he did. Arian blushed when the heat of his touch flooded through her body. How long had it been since she’d blushed? She had been a girl then and this felt like a woman’s blush.

“My back?”

“What?”

“It needs washed.”

Arian stiffened and clenched her hands together

behind her. "I... I don't know how." If only she were strong enough to hold him beneath the water and drown the usurper. The bastard.

He sipped some ale, smiled, and handed her a wet cloth. "Take this bathing cloth, and soap it."

She did as he told her.

"Now pretend my back is a floor, and scrub it."

Jane made no movement forward.

"Do it, Jane."

She extended her arm rigidly, tentatively soaping him from a distance. The broad expanse of his back required more than her puny attempts at washing him. The thick cords at his nape were rock hard; his skin was the color of a hazelnut.

He glanced at her again, his blue eyes amused. "You must come nearer to me, woman. I will not bite."

A moment's hesitation, then she took another small step forward. Enjoying her confounded expression, Judson rotated his head on his neck and yawned. He gave her another long, perusing look. Jane, her mouth agape, gripped the bathing cloth to her small bosom, wetting the bodice of her under tunic.

"Scrub me, Jane."

"I... I don't want to hurt you, sir."

"I have four days of dirt and horse stink on me. It will take some powerful washing to penetrate the muck and stench and get to my flesh, let alone hurt me. Scrub me!"

Startled at his demand, Arian took a deep breath. A whirlwind of confusion swept her right up to the side of the tub. He was the enemy. He was a man. He was the most exciting thing she'd ever seen. And she hated him.

Somehow her dislike gave her courage. Scrub him she would. His back was pink-tinged soon after she started washing him. The harder she scrubbed, the louder he expressed his satisfaction by growling, moaning, and groaning like a hound rolling in goose droppings.

“What did Arian look like?” he asked between satisfied sighs.

“She had a memorable face, ‘tis said. One that pleased all around her.” Arian would weave him a saucy tale. “And she had a heart as pure and innocent as a virgin’s kiss. Oh, and her voice. Her voice, ‘twas said, was so sweet, she could command the birds to entertain her with their songs.”

“Really.” He glanced over his shoulder, lazily interested. “Beautiful, I suppose?”

She soaped his muscular shoulder, cursing herself for the unruly longing building deep within her body. “She was only a child, but, aye, she would have grown into a great beauty. Even as a child she had suitors vying for her hand.”

“Wash my hair, Jane. Use the soap and wash it.”

He pulled the leather cord from his hair, ducked beneath the water, and came up sputtering. Arian rubbed soap between her hands. She applied the

lather to his hair and rubbed it in.

He groaned again. A man who liked to be touched.

“Ahh. Tell me about her eyes.”

“They were a startling green, I was told, like a tree sprouting new leaves in the spring. Her eyes were as clear and knowing as those of a saint. For one so young, she had the wisdom of a sage in those eyes.” She lowered her hands and massaged his nape. If only her hands were big enough to span his neck, she might be able to choke the life out of him. She dug her fingertips deep into his hair and scrubbed his scalp.

“Ah, that’s good, Jane. What else can you tell me?”

“Another day, sir, ‘tis enough for now. I must rinse you off—’tis nearing time to sup.”

She raised a heavy wooden bucket and swung it over his head, almost cuffing his left ear in the process. Another opportunity missed. Even pouring the steaming water over his head failed to scald his scalp. She put the bucket down and crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

Judson arose, spilling water over the edge of the tub to the flagstones. He turned and said, “A cloth for drying. Hand me one.”

Arian, as startled as ever she’d been, looked from his face, to his chest, to his.... Her jaw dropped. His manly part had been small and insignificant when he entered the water. Now it

was erect, pointing to the ceiling, huge and iron bar hard. She had seen many a hound mount a bitch and knew their joining resulted in pups. But never had she seen a human male, naked and aroused this way. Her eyes bulged, her breath caught raggedly.

He stepped out of the tub, as unconcerned and unashamed as if he were fully clothed. She continued to gape at the huge bar of flesh angling upward from the nest of hair between his legs.

“Would you leave me standing here to dry in the air?” Judson feigned irritation. He could tell what had captured her interest. Her gaze was frozen on his manhood. The damp bodice of her tunic had stuck to her small breasts and her surprisingly bold nipples stood out in stark relief. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly; her generous lips were parted.

She unnerved him. God’s breath! Why was he thinking thus? It had to have been her touching him during his bath. She was skillful with her hands, though she claimed otherwise.

He could bed her here and now, Harold had as much as given him permission to do so. But she wasn’t pure, she had the taint of a whore in her blood. To bed her would mean to forget his promise to Beth. And he would never do that, on his honor.

She glanced at his face and blushed. “Y-you would have a drying cloth?” She snatched up a

length of linen and held it out to him, her hand shaking. "I... I'm sorry. Of course."

He took the cloth from her hands and wrapped it low on his hips. Shaking his head, he sent drops of water flying everywhere. She flinched when they rained on her face.

"You would lay out a fresh change of clothing for me," he said, "while I dry myself." While I compose myself, he meant.

Dumbstruck, Arian swallowed and straightened her shoulders. Her temple throbbed, but not from hunger. She dipped him a curtsy and tore from the bathing area.

In the solar, she fetched him a fresh tunic, shirt, and hose, and lay them on the bed. His garments smelled of distant fire smoke and recent winter. Her fingers lingered too long on his plain, gray tunic as if touching his clothing might allay the odd feelings she'd experienced when looking upon his nakedness.

She thought of the yellow curl snuggled beneath his pillow and frowned. Why did that hank of hair eat at her so?

At the sound of his footfall coming toward the solar, Arian slipped through the door and ran down the stairs and across the common room as if being chased by spirits.

She would certainly have to kill him now for putting such conflicting thoughts in her mind.

The bastard.

Chapter 3



Even with clouds shrouding the winter sun, Arian felt unexpectedly lighthearted. She gazed at the castle through the soft misting of cold rain. In her mind's eye she pictured Judson's powerful body, the sinew, muscle and strength of it. She didn't hear the approach behind her, so filled was she with thoughts of Judson Langley arising from the tub.

She startled when Harold said in a harsh voice near her ear, "How fitting it is that you will wipe the boots of the one who seeks to prove you living. And serve him like a slave, you will. Do not think you have gotten away with anything, Arian. Or should I say—Jane."

Her heart froze. His hot breath cut across her cheek; his claw of a hand seized her wrist.

"I didn't—"

"You listen to me, girl. I've kept you alive for one reason. To torment you! As your mother continues to torment me from the grave. Don't

think you are going to spoil my pleasure by telling Judson Langley who you really are.”

Her throat constricted in fear. “I’ll not tell—”

Harold jerked her around to face him. His face was contorted with fury. “He thinks you are a brainless wench, a whore’s child. You will tell him nothing more to change his opinion.”

“I’ll not—”

“Has your back yet healed from the last time you disobeyed me?”

Afraid to speak, she nodded.

He released her arm. “You only live by my grace, for my amusement.”

Hatred giving her courage, Arian narrowed her eyes and glared at him.

“Don’t think you will intimidate me with those eyes. I’ve long since starved and demoralized any powers you might have thought you had out of you.” He sneered. “Did you hope that bit of thunder I heard earlier would frighten me?”

She continued to stare at him, unblinking. “I had none such hope.”

“You’re so like her, your mother,” he spat.

And you are so like a whoreson, she ached to say. “I receive your complement with gratitude, Harold.” She could not call him lord. As he was not.

“‘Twas not meant as such.”

“I know.”

He shot her a disgusted look. “Though

Langley's interference kept you from the whipping post, don't think I'll not change my mind. I would as soon have you taste the lash again as not."

In spite of herself, she shuddered.

His mouth grim, he said, "I expect you to be my eyes and ears around Judson. Watch him like a hawk and report to me all he does, says, thinks."

"Does he frighten you so much that you would take such precautions?" She quirked her mouth.

"He means to take Cresswell from me," he snapped.

"How can he steal that which does not belong to either of you?"

He raised a hand as if to strike her. Arian flinched, then straightened, forcing her fear to subside. The food she'd recently eaten had strengthened more than her body. It had fed her spirit, her mind.

"What do you want to know about Sir Judson?" She clasped her hands together, suggesting obedience, and looked to him for an answer. She knew what it would be.

"As you heard, Langley will be heir to Cresswell when he assures your great-grandmother you are dead. I intend he will not inherit." He rubbed his chin, eyeing her. "You will continue to be Jane, a whore's daughter and servant, to Judson until the time he departs Cresswell to return to Trilorne. You will listen and learn from him. You will tell me everything and in return you

shall tell him exactly what I want you to say. If you enact your role well, I shall reward you."

"By giving Cresswell back to me?"

He laughed harshly. "I have, in fact, been thinking of giving you in marriage to the ale carter, Old Fulke. He remains childless, though married and a widower four times. You would bear him a son and heir and by doing so you would be beyond my caring."

Old Fulke was a toothless, aged skeleton of a man whom, as gossip had it, killed each of his four wives when they failed to bear him a male child. Or any child, for that matter.

"Fie! I would rather die than marry Old Fulke!"

"Your death could be arranged."

"I'm an heiress," she said stiffly. "Lady Arian Goodfife of Cresswell."

Harold's rude eyes traveled the length of her body. "You are nothing because I say you are nothing."

His words hit her with the intensity of a blow to the stomach. It was true. She *was* nothing—an entity without an identity. At that moment the idea struck her. Both Judson and Harold must die in order for her to regain Cresswell. If she played one against the other, perhaps...

"If I want you to marry Fulke, then wed him you will."

"Aye, Harold."

His right eyebrow shot upward. "You relent?"

She sighed. "What choice have I?"

"You'll keep your identity from Judson?"

"On my word." He could not see her crossed fingers.

"You'll keep from attempting to regain your powers?"

"I don't know what you are saying."

He huffed out a sigh. "You remain alive at my pleasure and because of the harm you brought to those who would have assassinated you. There came a time when I couldn't convince another assailant to murder you."

She glared at him through narrowed eyes. "I always wondered why you did not do the deed yourself."

Harold shuddered. "You know full well of your mother's threat."

"My mother is dead." Need she remind him? The cold breeze ruffled her short hair.

Harold looked ill. "She lies 'neath the ground, 'tis true. But she continues to have great influence over the living."

A stronger gust of wind swirled her skirt around her ankles. Arian wondered at his words. How did her mother still wield influence over him?

"I've said overly much," he mumbled. "Heed you, watch this Judson. Obey his every command, suffer his every wish. Go cheerfully to him if he demands to bed you." He cast a doubtful eye at her. "Though I doubt even Old Fulke will eagerly

bed you, as pathetic looking as you are. Even with all the dirt removed, you are still an undesirable wench. Just like your mother was.”

His insult should have stung, but there was no hurt left in her. Now his words were meaningless. “I’ll not bed with Sir Judson.” The image of Judson naked, with his manly part as hard as a pike flashed through her mind.

“Saving yourself for Fulke?” Harold’s laughter was nasty.

Her chin jutted out, fury surging through her. “I’ll keep myself virgin for the rest of my days rather than bed with the likes of Fulke or this Judson. You call yourselves men. More like greedy, land-hungry whoresons, the lot of you!”

The crack of his hand against her cheek staggered her. “More of that and I’ll send you back to the kennels. Would you like that? Another chill winter spent sleeping with the curs, gnawing on rancid bones?” His upper lip curled. “Or would you prefer the comfort of the south solar? There the fireplace is filled with fragrant wood and the flags are covered with fresh rushes scented with strew.”

Her cheek throbbed; her resolve strengthened. This was the man who had driven her mother to kill herself. Arian sent a silent thank you to the Sainted Virgin that she had been blessed with her father’s will and fortitude. While Harold’s threats were real, she would outwit him, she vowed it.

She had waited nine long years for this opportunity.

The wind picked up in intensity and pierced the thin wool of her undertunic. Her flesh grew cold and she shivered.

His eyes glittered with menace. "I demand that you be humble and obedient to me. Like your mother finally was."

Fear, indeed, had brought forth her mother's meeker traits near the end of her life. Harold had broken her spirit as surely as a knight breaks a horse. Arian lowered her eyes "I will obey, Harold," she said, nearly gagging on the words.

"I will obey, *Lord* Harold."

She gave a grim nod and stared him in the eye. "Lord Harold." The sickening look of triumph on his face made her furious. She inwardly smiled when she imagined pouring a bucket of pig's innards over his head.

He neared her face, saying harshly, "I'll hear your first report tomorrow morning." He pulled his mantle closer around his shoulders. "I expect we will be in for a *very* cold winter this year." He stalked away, his mantle flapping wildly in the brisk wind.

The wind stung the place on her cheek where he had hit her, the devil's spawn! But she made no mistake. His intent was crystal clear.



Christian caught up with her as she crossed the inner bailey to return to the castle. Pausing in their walk, he handed her a bundle.

“There are two nightshifts in here which will keep you warmer than sleeping with the dogs, Jane,” he said. “I heard that Sir Judson Langley requested a pallet be put in his solar for his servant to sleep upon.”

Arian's head snapped up. She gripped the clothing in her hands and gaped at him.

“Aye, 'tis true,” he said loftily. “He insists that his servant, Jane, be with him at all times, the swine. Mark you, have a care of him.” His expression turned serious.

She frowned. “‘Tis a lie, Christian—you but tease me. Where would you get such a notion?”

He arched a fine, blond eyebrow at her and sniffed. “I keep my ears open and have heard naught but evil tidings of Sir Judson Langley. Gwen says he has changed, that his lust for power is fearsome.”

Christian knew the internal intrigues of Cresswell castle better than any other tenant. It was his duty to report any and all happenings to Gwen. She in turn sifted through his findings and passed the most interesting tidbits along to Harold. She kept the rest of the gossip on hand should the need ever arise to use it against an unsuspecting victim.

Christian used his own devices to confuse the

issues, manipulate the facts and enhance the fiction, until the truth lay somewhere in between. The gossip he passed on to Gwen seemed to always result in her doing only good for the tenants of Cresswell. Christian was a wizard at helping others in spite of his haughtiness and his indifferent demeanor.

“You are the heart of Cresswell, Christian,” Arian said softly. “Truly you are.”

“I only want to protect you,” he said, studying her face. “I’ve also persuaded Gwen that she must dress you better in order to impress Sir Judson of her generosity. You will find two additional under tunics included with the shifts. Of a better quality than the one you are wearing, if I might add.”

She clasped the bundle to her breasts. “Thank you. You *are* a miracle worker.”

Christian slowly nodded his agreement. “Gwen told me of the situation. I gather that Sir Judson will be named heir to your property if the truth about you is not revealed?”

She sobered. “Sir Judson is a fraud. Harold would have me spy on him.”

Christian stared at her, interested. “For what dark purpose?”

“I have a living relative, Christian, did Gwen tell you?”

He shook his head. “I’ve not heard about a relative.”

“‘Tis true—a great-grandmother. She lives on an estate somewhere not far from here and refuses

to believe I'm dead. I vaguely recall my father mentioning her, but I was too young then to take much notice."

"She must be very old."

"Aye, she is." Arian sighed. "All of Cresswell's people, save you, are terrified to acknowledge who I am because of Harold's beatings and threats. What am I to do, Christian? How can I possibly be unearthed from an empty grave and be presented to the world as living without Harold killing me? Should I tell Sir Judson the truth?"

He ran his fingers through his long, golden hair. "Nay. Don't trust him with the secret. I'm uncertain how to proceed. However, I yearn for the day when a Goodfife is restored as ruler over Cresswell's lands, Lady Arian. Too long have I had to pretend loyalty to your mother's successor."

"Remember—I'm Jane."

He looked down his nose at her. "I'll not forget myself when others are near, my lady."

She knew he wouldn't.

"I think of what you must do is obey Lord Harold. Spy on Sir Judson, but only report the small, insignificant things he does. And then, twist them slightly." He smiled. "Do as I do."

"And the same when Harold makes me tell Judson something?"

"Exactly."

"There is a lock of yellow hair beneath

Judson's pillow. If I did not know better, I would say it appeared to be Gwen's hair. They knew one another in the past, I believe."

Christian clapped his hands together. "This is most interesting news. We can use that."

Arian's heart pounded with excitement. Not even a day had passed and suddenly the prison she thought she was condemned to dwell in forever was beginning to let in some light through the cracks. Perhaps the Blessed Virgin was showing her some mercy after all. She hugged the parcel tighter to her breasts, tempted to swoon with the anticipation of besting Harold and Judson.

"I must get back to Gwen," Christian said, distaste in his tone. "Her highness would have me help her select fabrics for the new surcoats she is having made. I'll tell her how becoming the deep saffron wool is next to her complexion," he snorted, "when the exact opposite is true. Do you understand now how 'tis done? Most people have such a need for praise and reassurance, even if 'tis false."

Arian nodded eagerly, wanting to begin the game at once. "I'll learn from the master." She dropped him a courtesy.

"I must hurry." He touched her bruised cheek with gentle fingers. "Be extremely watchful of Sir Judson. He's not to be trusted."

Her mouth grim, she nodded again. Then she watched Christian leave. How many times had he

come to her aid with salves and herbs to soothe and heal the evidence of Harold's wrath? How many times had he saved her from despair and near starvation?

Her stomach growled, alerting her that it was time to forage for food. Then she remembered it was no longer necessary to beg or steal scraps for her daily sustenance. All she need do was go to the south solar and eat of the bounty put there for Judson's pleasure.

The rumbling in her stomach ceased at once, only to be replaced by a strange fluttering sensation emanating from somewhere beneath her belly. She forced herself to remember Judson was her enemy.

She turned to go back to the castle and nearly ran into Roland. *Roland, the monster.*

"I saw you," he said in his nasty nasal voice. "I saw you talking to Christian. I'll tell my mother and she'll have you both beaten to a bloody pulp." He stuck out his tongue at her. "You are not to speak to me, either."

It was perfect. She suddenly found more courage. "Oh, please, Roland," she cried. "Please let me speak. If you tell your mother and she has me beaten, how will I get a message to her from Sir Judson?" She gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, I didn't mean for that to slip out!"

Roland was curious. She could see it in the glint of interest lighting his rodent-like eyes. He

fisted his hands on his well-padded hips. "Just what is this message? I don't believe you have anything at all to tell my mother about our guest."

"You're right. Sir Judson didn't tell me anything. Not a thing. However, your poor mother will have to remain forever ignorant of certain feelings Sir Judson Langley has for her. Oh, but if your father were to find out he would be so angry."

Roland's eyes shone. No mistake, he was his mother's son. Gwen indulged the eight-year-old monster without regard of how terribly she spoiled him. He was immensely fat from eating too many sweet cakes and subtleties. His father had no control over him, and if Roland could find a way to torment Harold, he'd employ it.

"Tell me what you know," he said, his lower lip curling into a pout, "so I may tell my mother."

She scraped the toe of her slipper over the damp earth. "Oh, I suppose I must. But you can't say you heard this from me. Gwen will just dismiss anything I might say as a lie. Can you be discreet?"

He grinned. "I'll not tell a soul."

"Very well, then. Tell your mother you overheard Sir Judson say he still has his heart set on her, just as it was when they knew each other in their youth."

He wrinkled his runny nose. "What does Sir Judson's heart have to do with Mother?"

"You're too young, Roland, to know about these things, but she'll understand at once. By

telling her about Sir Judson's feelings, she'll smother you with more sweet cakes than you can possibly eat." His eyes glazed over. "Cakes with so many almonds and sweet honey on them, they will make you delirious with joy for days."

Roland's tongue darted across his lips. "Almond cakes?"

She nodded. "Heaps of them. So sticky your fingers will be another treat for you when you lick them clean."

"I'll tell her about Sir Judson. This very moment." He shoved past her and waddled toward the castle as fast as his fat little legs would allow.

Arian smiled. It was delicious. She would pit Judson against Harold and place Gwen and Roland somewhere in the middle.

She took a deep breath of the crisp air and hugged her arms. It was positively delicious.



"Walk with me, Judson," Gwen said, looping her arm around his. "I insist you see the girl's grave before we sup."

He paused to look at her. Beautiful, no doubt, but there was still that viper-like quality about her that made him uneasy.

"The quest for her should end the moment you view the place where she rests," she said breezily. "A few charred bones, poor soul, is all we found

of her remaining.”

Judson glanced at her. “This is the second time you have made mention of her bones.”

She laughed, a puff of steam escaping her mouth in the cold winter air. “Am I repeating myself? Sweet Mary, I must appear to you as if I’m in my dotage.”

He inclined his head. “You were never younger.”

Gwen’s gloved hand fluttered to her breast. “How gallant you are. But I suppose I have aged. I was so young when we first met.”

“Fourteen, as I recall.”

She lowered her eyes, smiling. “You do remember.”

“Aye.”

She sighed. “Dear God, you were a knight in shining armor when I first laid my eyes upon you. How tall you sat on your warhorse at the tournaments. My heart filled to overflowing with desire for you. Other girls flocked to you with their favors, but you accepted only mine.”

He stopped walking. “‘Twas long ago.”

“‘Twas right before Harold claimed me for his own.” She stared into his eyes. “But my heart was again filled with yearning from the moment I saw you in our great hall. Is it not the way the world is, Judson? Fate has brought you here to me.”

“‘Twas not fate,” he said indifferently. “‘Twas the dowager who sent me to Cresswell.”

“Have you lost all your sense of romance? Don't tell me you weren't attracted to me once.” She took his hand.

He looked down, then pried her fingers from his. “You're a married woman, madam. I do not covet another man's property.”

She gave him a jarring glare. “Oh, horse dung! You bedded anything in a skirt then, married or not.”

Judson threw back his head and laughed. “I suppose I did, madam. But that was then.” He raised her chin with one finger and looked deeply into her eyes.

She trembled. He smiled, he hoped endearingly. Let the wench desire him all she wanted. He enjoyed the attention of women—until they turned into clinging, nagging harridans.

“You don't understand, Judson,” she said, casting her gaze downward with uncharacteristic shyness. “I'm a woman with needs.”

Aha! The cat was loosed from the bag. Harold failed to satisfy his wife. How often had Judson heard this complaint?

He leaned in as if to kiss her. She raised her chin, closed her eyes, and puckered her lips. “I would see the grave,” he whispered.

“Bastard!” Her eyes snapped open.

The curse was given with no barb in it, spoken softly, leaving room for a tearful apology.

He ran a fingertip along the curve of her jaw.

She would probably demand that Harold give her a thorough bedding this night. “Madam? The grave?”

She stabbed her finger toward the chapel block. “There. The graveyard is there!” Hiking her skirt up in her fists, she spun on her heel and strode toward the castle purposefully.

He chuckled. Gwen was as he remembered her. Haughty, prideful, selfish. And he would add dangerous to the list, as she had hardened. Her greed for power was transparent.

Cresswell was an important prize, one he would eventually wrench from their possession. Gwen’s father, though a wealthy merchant, was untitled. Judson imagined she had grow accustomed to the castle and all its trappings. Giving it up would be a difficult thing for her do.

Sobering, he walked through the gate and into the graveyard.

Here the girl was buried. Judson glanced up at the stark tree branches reaching toward a darkening sky. Wind whipped the hem of his mantle around his legs.

He made a sudden decision. Here, on this hallowed ground, is where his investigation into the affair would end and his new life as a wealthy land baron would begin.

For there was nothing left of substance of Lady Arian Goodfife save a few bones.

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“Wow. This is a great author. You know it's a good book when you stay up all night to get through it. I don't normally read medieval but this one has changed my mind. I couldn't put the book down. The wonderful study of speech and scene left me breathless. The speech was very poetic and fell off the character's tongue naturally. This is a must read by medieval fans.” *Shelley De Wayne*

Judson Langley yearns for lands of his own. Sent to Cresswell Castle by Lady Emily Goodfife to prove her great-granddaughter is alive, Judson is torn between greed and his obligation to Lady Emily, for if he proves the girl, Arian Goodfife, is dead, he stands to inherit Cresswell.

Arian Goodfife, rightful heiress of Cresswell, lives in the shadows, dirty and wretched. After her mother's suicide, her cruel stepfather spread a lie that she died in a fire. Her identity stripped away, she trusts no one. Driven to regain Cresswell, she vows to depose her stepfather.

Arian realizes the peril she would face were Judson to discover her true identity.