

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHRISTINA DODD

"TREAT
YOURSELF TO A
FABULOUS BOOK—
ANYTHING BY
CHRISTINA DODD."

—JILL BARNETT

CASTLES IN THE AIR

CASTLES IN THE AIR

CHRISTINA DODD

 HarperCollins e-books

To Arwen
My Pragmatic Daughter

Who knows the value of a dollar.

Who frequently and pointedly reminds me that the only time anyone notices our housekeeping is if we don't do it.

Who knows that her mama needs lots of love and who gives it so generously.

“I learned this, at least, by experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours....”

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundation under them.”

—Henry David Thoreau

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England, 1166

She had all her teeth.

Raymond heaved a sigh of relief. She was wrapped in too many layers of clothing to see aught else, and she fought him with all the strength in her slight body, but her teeth glimmered behind her blue lips and they made a sturdy clinking as they chattered together. That meant she was young enough to bear children, in reasonable health, capable of warming his bed.

He tried to lift her onto his horse, but she twisted in his arms, flinging herself down onto the woodland path and scrambling away with a desperation he respected. Respected, but ignored. Too much was at stake for him to pay attention to a woman's apprehensions.

She floundered in the snow that misted the ground. Catching her, he wrapped her in his cloak, bundling her so tightly that her hands and feet flailed uselessly. With a heave, he tossed her face down in front of the saddle and mounted before she regained her breath. "Steady, Lady Juliana, steady," he soothed, patting her back as he urged the horse forward.

She battled against his solace, kicking her heels and trying to slide away. He didn't understand her persistent opposition in the face of such odds, nor did he understand the impulse that drove him to try and comfort her as if she were some wild bird he could charm to his hand.

Perhaps her refusal to scream appealed to his sympathies. She'd made no sound since he'd stepped out from the trees, only fought him with determination and silence.

Then again, perhaps she couldn't say anything. Bundled as she was, with her head bobbing beside the horse's belly, he couldn't see her face, and he began to wonder if she could breathe properly. Leaning down, he groped for her face, and those same strong teeth he had admired bit deep into his fingertips. He jerked his hand back with a grunt and an oath, shocked by her violence yet not truly surprised.

Hadn't he compared her to a wild creature? His own carelessness was responsible for his pain, and he sucked the drop of blood from his skin and then tucked his hand into his armpit to warm it.

Her breath froze as she panted harshly, the sound rending the still air. Scratched from the sky by bare, ice-tipped branches, the snow sifted down relentlessly, filling the spaces between the dried leaves with a thin layer of white. Damn, it was cold, and getting colder by the moment. "We'll be there soon," he said aloud, and held her firmly as his promise brought renewed strife.

He topped the hill, and the blast of frigid air snatched his breath away. Here the threatening blizzard threatened no more. It was reality, and the world disintegrated into a narrow, white passage

that opened as they moved through and closed behind them. The woodcutter's hut stood not far ahead yet he worried about the lady, now rigid where she lay over the horse. He leaned over her to give her all his body warmth and peered ahead.

Dug into the hill, the hut had proved a godsend for him, providing a stock of fuel for warmth and a store of dried foods. Traveller's provender, he'd guessed, provided by Lady Juliana of Lofts and used by him for her abduction.

"Just a few more steps, my lady." His breath froze on the muffler before his mouth, but he thought it fair to warn her since she seemed so averse to his touch. Sliding out of the saddle, he pulled her down. She tried to stand; her legs collapsed, whether from cold or fear he didn't know. Like a bear with a haunch of venison, he dragged her along and swung wide the door. "We're here," he said unnecessarily. "I'll stable my horse close by the door. The fire's just beyond. If you'll sit on the straw until I can carry you in there..."

Her wide eyes glistened in the dim light as he dropped the bar, then she bolted into the little room beyond. Through the slats of the feeding pen, he watched as she frantically paced the length of the tiny room.

A fire burned in a pit in the middle of the woodcutter's shed. The smoke rose to a small hole in the thatch, melting the flakes as they drifted in. Drawn by the flames, she held her hands out and looked around, dazed. All the cracks in the walls had been stuffed with cloth, the window had been covered with a blanket. A rough bed laden with furs stood in one corner and his gear lay in another. But the only door lay behind him, and she couldn't reach that.

To give Juliana time to adjust to her surroundings, he took his time feeding and grooming the hardy gelding that had served him so well, but at last he could delay no more. "We'll be cozy enough, my lady, to weather the storm here."

She blinked away the snowflakes melting on her lashes and stared at him, and he wondered what she saw that made repugnance curl her lip so expressively. He was only a man, albeit a tall one. "You need to remove your damp clothes," he said.

He expected her to try and run again, but she seemed hypnotized by him, treating him with the attention one might give to a ravenous bear. She flinched when he removed his cloak from around her neck, then her cloak, heavy with snow. Working the gloves off her hands, his gaze remained fixed on her face, wondering what lay beneath the overhanging hood and the drooping muffler.

This woman he would spend the rest of his life with, and he was torn. Since the day King Henry gave her to him, Raymond had wondered what she looked like. Now he would see her, but what would a few more moments matter?

Her shivering calmed his brief cowardice. As he untied the hood and unwrapped the muffler, he realized she was more than just young and healthy.

Not a pruny widow at all. Not an invalid, not a whining witch. This Lady Juliana was smooth-skinned, tall, and fair. Not beautiful, although as low as his expectations had been, he might have thought so. Wisps of burnished copper hair escaped her hat and waved around her forehead. Her lips

were too full for her thin face, sculptured as it was by high cheekbones and square jaw. Her vividly blue eyes slanted up at the corners, but they never blinked. She didn't want him undressing her or rubbing her hands to bring the circulation back. She projected an explicit message; this hut was a prison and he the lowest of gaolers.

Unwillingly, his pity stirred. Raymond of Avraché knew the sense of imprisonment too well.

“Your face is very white,” he said. A round, purple scar marred one cheek, also, but he didn't mention that. “Are you frozen?”

She only stared, wary as a wolverine at bay.

“Your freckles float like tidbits of cinnamon on the clearest wine.” He lifted his hand to touch the fascinating specks, but she jerked her head aside. Prodded by her silence and her distaste, he queried, “You don't want me touching you?” He reached out again. “Then tell me.”

She stumbled backward. “Nay!”

“Ah.” He relaxed. “You can speak. I wondered if we would ride out this blizzard in silence. Would you like me to build up the blaze?” Carrying wood to the fire pit, he stacked it in a pile beside him and knelt. “It's going to be a bad storm, did you realize? Nay, of course not, you couldn't have realized, or you wouldn't have come out in such weather.” He glanced at her, pleased to see her creeping close. When his gaze touched her, she leaped back almost guiltily, and he turned back and fed the flames. “Surely a lady as exalted as you could send someone to the village to do your duties. You are Lady Juliana of Lofts, are you not?” She didn't answer, and he swivelled toward her. “Are you not?”

She stood off to the side, closer to his woodpile but not so far he couldn't touch her. He reached out his arm toward her, and she admitted, “Aye.”

His eyes narrowed against the smoke; he studied her tense figure and wondered what she planned. Her hands opened and closed on nothing; she stood braced for action. The brave girl looked like a squire before first battle, all nerves and anticipation. Slowly, he turned back to the flames. Listening to her every move, he chatted, “In sooth, 'tis good. You can say only 'aye' and 'nay.'”

Behind him, a chunk of wood shifted, lifted.

“If a man must be trapped with a woman, what more could he desire than to be trapped with a silent one?” He waited, the hair on the back of his neck raising. He heard the faintest of indrawn breath. He twirled around, saw the log descending toward his head, and dove into her. The log smacked his shoulder so hard his arm went numb, then flew out of her grasp. Together they stumbled backward and sprawled onto the hard-packed ground. It knocked the breath out of her, but she'd almost knocked the brains out of him.

Although he understood desperation, he couldn't help shouting, “What in the name of Saint Sebastian do you think you're doing?”

His shout echoed in her ears. She shut her eyes and cringed away from the blow that would follow.

Nothing happened.

He lay on her, a motionless weight. He sighed and asked, "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head and opened her eyes a slit. A muffler left only his eyes and mouth exposed. He was watching her intently, trying to see more than she wished to disclose. A woolen cap covered his head, black hair hanging ragged beneath it, but she knew she didn't recognize those shoulders. He was a stranger, a man, one of the creatures she dreaded most. A shudder racked her. Sympathy deepened in his gaze, and somehow that brought a measure of courage back to her cowardly soul. She didn't want his sympathy, and she rejected it even as another shudder shook her. "Get off."

The corners of his eyes crinkled, and she knew he grinned at her. "Not only can you speak, you can give orders."

"But can you obey?" she snapped.

He sobered, weighting his words with more significance than they deserved. "Indeed. I'm a well-trained monkey, didn't you know?"

His bitterness confused her. He stood and shook his arm. He lifted it, twisted it, and when he was satisfied it would work, he said, "You've a fine swing, my lady."

She stared up at him, trying to discern his features and his mood. Her gaze travelled down to his scuffed leather boots, up to the fine material of his cape, aging now, and she wondered at him. Her back against the wall, she scooted up until she had her feet under her. "What's a monkey?"

His amusement returned. He extended his hand, demanding she take it, and said, "Come close to the fire where I can watch you, and I'll explain."

"Nay."

Her lips had scarcely formed the word when in one giant step he stood next to her. She realized anew how tall he was, yet she had nowhere to move. Sensation was returning to her feet, and with it the prickles of frostbite. Her teeth created a tapping noise that embarrassed her, but she couldn't seem to stop.

"'Tis foolish to spite yourself. Come to the fire."

Her teeth chattered even more, but she came, making a large circle around the proffered hand, afraid he would touch her if she didn't obey.

As he intended. It irritated her that he knew so well how to manipulate her, like some conniving puppeteer with his doll. It irritated her more that he did it for her own protection, leaving her no room for rational objection.

"I'm betrothed to a man who'll show you the color of your gullet for this." The words burbled to her lips without thought, but she was glad when he looked alarmed.

"Get off!"

“Betrothed? To whom?”

“To Geoffroi Jean Louis Raymond, Count of Avraché.”

“Ah.” He relaxed, and knelt to unwrap the frozen wool around her ankles. “Have you been betrothed for long?”

“Aye, over a year.”

“A reluctant suitor, then?”

“Nay! That is—we were betrothed by proxy in the king’s own court.”

“Yet you’re not wed?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I was ill.”

He peered at her. “You don’t appear to be ill.”

“I was ill, then my children were ill.” He still looked politely incredulous. “Then it was winter, and ’t isn’t safe to cross the channel in the face of such gales. Then it was summer, and I couldn’t travel before the crops were in...”

She realized how ineffectual she sounded when he chuckled. “Ah, a reluctant bride. I trow the court found your hesitance most amusing.”

“Nay!” she protested in horror.

“And Henry, too, must have roared with laughter at the insult to Lord Avraché.”

“That would be most unfortunate. No insult was intended”—she said it in hopes of convincing him as well as herself—“for he’s a fierce warrior. A Crusader.”

“Crusaders are not necessarily fierce warriors, my lady. Some are snivelling cowards.” He busied himself with her shoes, lifting her feet to peel them off one by one.

She toppled and almost fell rather than grab him. At the last moment her dignity overcame her good sense, and she gripped his shoulder. Many layers of clothing lay between her fingers and his skin. Not even his body heat could penetrate the damp and cold which still enveloped him. Yet this was the first time she’d voluntarily touched a man in over three years.

This man couldn’t know that, but he’d coerced her by holding her off balance. If only he would look up, but he never removed his gaze from the toes he was unwrapping. Humble as a serf, she thought bitterly. As if this man could ever be humble. Every gesture, every tactic was planned and executed with forethought and intelligence. Aye, he’d known how much she feared his touch, and had forced her to touch him first.

Perhaps he wished to prove he was only flesh and blood, but she understood the danger of flesh-and-blood men. Oh, aye, she understood. Stroking the circular scar on her cheekbone, she protested,

~~“My betrothed is not a snivelling coward. The Saracens captured him, and he escaped by stealing one of their own merchant ships and sailing it to Normandy.”~~

His hands were warm; her feet were cold. His hands were strong, yet he massaged each muscle skillfully as a healer and brought the blood rushing back.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear, my lady.”

“It’s true!” She should have been alarmed at his easy dismissal, but his amusement robbed the words of their menace, and she found herself offended instead.

“Indeed?”

“Aye, indeed.” She hopped a little, intent on convincing him. “King Henry sent me a letter informing me of my betrothal. In it, he described my betrothed and his history.”

Unimpressed, he asked only, “How did he describe your betrothed?”

Disdainfully, she repeated the lyrical phrases. “As handsome as the night, as strong as the north wind.”

“You don’t believe it?”

Melting snow dripped off the tip of her nose. She dabbed it with her sleeve. “Am I a fool? If he were lame and half mad, still would Henry weave a web of poetry around him. The king wishes to forestall my objections until the marriage is performed.”

“Then most likely his heroism is an exaggeration, also.”

Biting her lip, she felt it crack beneath her teeth and tasted the salt of blood on her tongue. She had betrayed herself with logic, but she repeated the suspicion she both clutched as security and rejected in fear. “I don’t think so. When they can, the Welsh come to plunder the land I hold for the king. He wouldn’t give the protection of that land to a weakling. Lord Avraché is a man to be feared.”

He squeezed her toes. “Fear him not. He’s just a man.”

It struck her then. The man who knelt at her feet spoke French, as she did, as did all the nobles in England, but his accent sounded like none she’d ever heard before. He came from the court, but what had brought him here? “You know him?”

He laid one gloved hand flat against his chest. “I? The count moves in the highest circles, but his lineage, character, and reputation have been blared about by various untrustworthy sources.”

“Nay,” she answered thoughtfully. “Not everyone who’s been to court has spoken with the king, suppose.”

“Nay, indeed. I’m in no position to judge the truth of your Avraché’s character.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Nay, indeed.”

“But do you know...?”

“What?” he urged.

“Is he related to the king?”

“So they say.” His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. “But who isn’t? Henry’s related to most of noble Europe, and whoever he’s not related to, Eleanor is. The queen, I mean. Queen Eleanor.”

“You should show her more respect,” she rebuked. “So Avraché is the king’s cousin. Is he very rich?”

“The king?”

The impudent fellow’s eyes shone big with innocence above his muffler, but she didn’t believe it. “Avraché. Is he going to gobble up my lands as if they were whey?”

He looked down at her bare feet. “I have hose you can wear to keep you warm.” He reached for his bags and fumbled inside. She didn’t think he would answer, but at last he admitted, “Avraché is the only son of a wealthy family.”

Rancor welled in her. “Then Lofts and Bartonhale will account for nothing to him.”

“Not at all, my lady.” He kept his head down and smoothed the dry but ragged hose over her feet. “His parents are less than generous. To keep him on a short leash, they’ve kept him without funds.”

“But he’s Count of Avraché.”

“At birth, they granted him one of his father’s many titles, but although they promised, they have never given him the income from the lands.”

“How old is he now?”

“Five and thirty.”

A groan eased from her. “He’s getting old.”

He laughed as if he were startled. “I’ve heard he’s...well preserved. At least, you won’t have to worry about your lands. He’ll care for them as if they were his own.”

The protest burst from her, propelled by her possessiveness. “The lands aren’t his. They’re mine. I’m my father’s only heir, God rest him. When I was a child and he loved me, he insisted I walk every rood of Lofts, meet all the people, for if I did not, he said, I would be cheated out of what is rightfully mine. Now I am heir to my husband’s estate, God rest him also, and I have found that to be a hard truth. Men would take from me by stealth or treachery.”

“You are sole heir to your father’s lands and your husband’s lands?”

His words struck her with the force of a spring flood down the river. How had he lulled her so she admitted to such wealth? No doubt he knew the extent of her holdings—such adventurers always did

—but she'd confirmed it in a betrayal as unpremeditated as it was unexpected. Who was this scoundrel?

She reached for his face; he jerked back as if she would strike him. Sulky, she said, "Your scarf. This time, he remained still as she stripped the material away.

She dropped it as if it burned her hand.

His green eyes, his absurdly long, black lashes should have warned her of trouble.

The man was handsome. More than handsome: alluring, intriguing, with a calm, still demeanor that warned of deep waters, and which offered rewards for exploring them. His ebony hair swept his shoulders and invited a woman's touch. Clean-shaven, his cleft chin was broad and proud. The smooth hollow of his cheeks caught her eye and dismayed her soul. She pushed his hat off, and his hair tumbled wildly. Black as a raven's wing, with an unruly curl, it grew longer than she liked, yet her gaze lingered on the shining mass and on the barbaric gold earring that glittered in one ear.

He was, she realized, kneeling at her feet patiently waiting for her appraisal to end. Obviously, he was used to having women—hordes of women—stare at him. It made her angry, to class herself with a legion. It made her angry, too, to be so affected by his appearance.

Rude as her own ten-year-old daughter, she sneered, "You have big ears."

Startled, he blinked. A smile crept up on him, curving his sensual mouth as if he couldn't resist it.

Oh, God, his smile added to his beauty. The corners of his eyes tilted up and crinkled—he wasn't as young as she'd first supposed. Dimples creased his cheeks. His lips, chapped with the cold, begged to be soothed. She found her hand clutching the cloth over her middle to appease the churning of her stomach. She'd never thought that someday, somewhere, a man would affect her this way.

How was it possible? If all the men in the world were marching toward a cliff like lemmings into the sea, she'd throw tidbits before them to tempt them along. Her father had ranted that she was too sensitive, too easily offended when a man treated her like meat, to be sold, bartered, consumed at a lord's leisure and for his pleasure. So why could she see the comeliness of this man, this villain who had so cruelly abducted her?

He rose to his feet, and her words tumbled over each other. "My betrothed is here at this very moment."

Considering her, he asked, "Here? Where?"

"On my lands." A variety of expressions raced across his face, and none could she define. Flushed with her falsehood, she wiped her face and dislodged her hat. It fell to the hard dirt floor. She didn't like the way he stared at her, so she dove for the hat.

He restrained her with his hand, and instinctively she kicked at him. "My lady, I thought we were beyond that."

Bracing herself against her panic, she satisfied herself with a glare.

He picked her braid up in his hand, weighed it, pursed his lips. “Let us hope your betrothed is as well protected from this storm as we are.”

Did he notice how short her hair was? Did he realize that, if unbraided, it would reach only to her shoulders? And what did he surmise from that? What conclusions did he draw?

His gaze slid down her body, stuffed like a sausage into her winter dress. “How many layers of clothes do you have on?”

Embarrassed that she’d looked at him and even more embarrassed that he’d seen her, she flared. “That’s my business and none of yours.”

When she’d tried to hit him with the log, his shouting had made her cringe. Now she wished he’d shout again. His face lost all expression, like that of a man whose fortune would be foretold with one roll of the knucklebones. His eyes chilled to green icicles, his quiet voice lowered until she had to strain to hear it.

“If the lady of Lofts should freeze to death while in my care, it would soon become my business. When your men would hang me up by the neck, it would be my business. When they would tie me to four horses, one limb to each, and would whip them and tear me—”

She covered her face, too tired and cold to deal with the images he evoked, and his indignation faded.

“So. We are agreed. It is my business what you have on because you must remain alive for me to retain that blessed state. Shall we remove the outermost layer at least?” He held his hands back, palms out. “With the purest intentions.”

She doubted that, but pure intentions or no, it had to be done. Already the wet of snow seeped through the first cote to the other clothes she wore. Cautiously, she backed up and tugged at the laces, closing the long gown of rough homespun she wore for outdoor winter work. Resentful of his scrutiny, she snapped, “Are you not cold?”

“Of course.” He shrugged off his mantle, tossed it over the top of the cloaks. “But when a man’s been to hell, a blast of winter revives him.”

She stared at her fingers, inalterably tangled in the laces. “Have you been?”

“To hell? Certainly. And back.”

It was one thing to suspect she was in the hands of the devil, quite another to have it confirmed. Her teeth began that dreadful clattering again, and he observed her through narrowed eyes. “My lady, how many years do you carry?”

“Eight and twenty.”

He clicked his tongue. “Still so impressionable. You’re not a child.”

“I am not a child.”

“I know. Forgive me, but I’m cold and I’m tired.”

“And hungry, in sooth. I have only oatcakes, but—”

“I’m not hungry.” Instinctively, she denied the animal in her belly, the one who demanded sustenance regardless of her fears. Well did she understand the significance of breaking bread with the enemy.

“You’re not hungry?”

His amazement seemed forced to her, and she wondered crazily if this man knew her mind. She didn’t want the devil’s cakes, no matter how tempting. Without a doubt, she knew that if she ate them she would never return to her world again. Her fingers were still caught, her brain still muddled, but she insisted, “I have said so.”

“Sit at the table.” His hand was gentle on her arm. He led her to the bench and pushed her down. “I left wine warming.” He touched his finger to her nose. “And don’t tell me you won’t partake of that.”

Her refusal withered on her lips. When he ordered, she obeyed. Not because she doubted herself but because he displayed a natural assurance that withered defiance before it could flower. Very well she would take the wine and simply hold it, not drink it, just to appease him. Petulant about even that concession, she asked, “Who are you? Why have you taken me?”

Moving back to the fire, he lifted the lid of a pot. The scent of red wine rose through the air, and while he ladled it into a cup, he said, “You had no chance of reaching your home. Didn’t you realize that?”

He sounded inexplicably concerned, indefatigably honest, and she searched his face, seeking the truth there, knowing she’d not recognize it if she found it. She sighed, jerked her hands free of the lacing, and found her palms wrapped around a cup of mulled wine. The heat seeped through to her fingers, cramped with cold, and a painful recovery began.

“Drink.” He urged the cup toward her face.

She closed her eyes to better savor the aroma, and found the seduction greater than she had imagined. Native herbs and a savor quite unlike any other ascended on the steam. Opening her eyes, she found him before her, his face level with hers, his gaze compelling. “Drink,” he said again, and, mesmerized, she swallowed the steaming brew.

No matter how good the wine tasted, no matter how it warmed her, she had to know her fate. “Why—?”

“Drink it all.”

One look at his expression, and she gulped the wine to the dregs and thumped the cup on the plank table. The way he spoke irritated her. Slowly, as if he considered every word before it crossed his lips. Raspingly, as if the words whispered up from deep inside him, from where his thoughts resided. And that place was deeper than a wind-directed whirlpool.

~~It lured her, tried to suck her down, used her weariness against her. That deep place in him tried to communicate with her. It used the strength of his large body. Rest on me, it whispered, I will protect you. It used his eyes, green like the sea during a lightning storm. Trust me, it whispered, I won't hurt you. More than the wine or the food, he beguiled her. Her eyes pricked with tears, and her sigh wavered most awkwardly. Three years, and some stranger imagined she could trust him.~~

Before she could question him again, he asked, "Are your men-at-arms so unruly they won't escort you?"

"What? Where?" She spread the laces wide and fought her shoulders out of her brown homespun cotte, revealing another gown beneath it.

He grasped the rough wool at each of her wrists, tugging until her arms were loose. "To the village. That is where you'd been, was it not?"

"To see my old nurse. She's not expected to live through the winter, you see, and she was asking for me." Angry for justifying herself, she stood, pushing the cotte over her waist, and found his hands over hers. She jerked her hands away, glaring up at him. In his face, she could see nothing but impatience and a good measure of anger.

"Where were your men-at-arms?"

"Sir Joseph escorted me himself. He is my chief man, a crony of my father's."

"Where is he *now*?" Raymond enunciated the words clearly, wanting the explanation faster than she wanted to give it.

This man, with all his sensibility, would think her a dolt for her terror, just as Sir Joseph did, just as her father had. But they were her terrors, emotions she couldn't control, and defiantly she said, "He refused to come back with me, saying the storm was too intense and we would freeze ere we returned to the castle."

Raymond seemed to be thinking. "Did you doubt him?"

"Nay."

"Is there a reason you had to return? A sick child, perhaps, or a dying mother?"

"My children are well. My mother is dead."

He slid down the cloth, his hands too firm on her hips for her comfort, but he didn't linger and she didn't dare complain. "But regardless of his warning, you determined to go home?"

"Aye." She waited for the explosion, the rain of contempt from the logical man. Instead she heard his incredulity.

"And this Sir Joseph refused to accompany you? He let you go, knowing you would perhaps die as you made your way home? Knowing you might wander away from the path under the influence of

wind and snow? Knowing he could lose his mistress?"

"Well." She opened the lacing on her next cote. "You must understand, he's an old man."

"He's a man who has outlived his usefulness."

He pronounced judgment as if he had the right. Filling her cup again, he noticed her trepidation. Unsmiling, he said, "Don't fret. I'll tend to it."

"Tend to what?" He only handed her the cup, and in her distress, the liquid sloshed dangerously close to the edge. "Oh, please don't say anything to Sir Joseph about this. He would say I'd been complaining about him, and—" The way he watched her gave her pause.

"Pray continue."

"—and Sir Joseph can be very unpleasant," she mumbled. Not for the first time, she wished Sir Joseph roasted in hell. But that was a wicked, ungrateful thought. Once more, she touched the scar on her cheek, then her hand slid around into her hair behind her ear. Another scar puckered the skin there long and jagged.

"Climb into bed and finish your wine."

"You jest."

He lifted the covers and held them in silent command.

"I will not." He'd never told her who he was or even why he'd brought her here. His concern for her safety masked a greater goal, and she'd be a fool to forget it.

He looked impatient, but she had wine courage running in her veins. "I will not lie down for you or with you. Kidnapping an heiress is a time-honored way to win a bride and a fortune, but others have tried to force me to marry them and I refused. Just as I refuse you, you scurrilious maggot."

He suddenly loomed over her, a tall, strong, furious man, and she flung her arms up to protect her head.

But no blow struck her.

"Sit," he said in a tone that belied the fury in his eyes.

Lowering her arms slowly, suspecting a trick, she eyed him. He still looked tall and strong, but disgust had replaced anger. Her cowardice sickened him, and she shrivelled inside. Obedient now, she sat atop the musty straw pad.

A profound silence settled over them as he tucked the furs around her ankles and tight around her waist, and placed a cloth over the smooth log that served as pillow.

She didn't know what drove her, even out of the depths of her terror, to defy him still. Perhaps it was her fear of the man. Perhaps it was her fear of herself, of the care he pretended to take for her, of

this strange attraction she felt for him. Perhaps she'd just been forced to the brink of endurance. But she stared into his cold eyes and whispered, "I will not bed you. Better to fling myself on the flames than chain myself to the life of a serf."

The frost in his gaze dissolved into emerald fire. With his hands on her shoulders, he pushed her back. "Never say such a thing again. Never think it, never wish it on yourself. The chains of a serf are not for you, my lady."

"Nay, but they would fit well around the neck of the scum who dreams of bettering his station with my title."

He released her as if she had burned him. "If ever I have the good fortune to meet Geoffroi Jean Louis Raymond, Count of Avraché, I would advise him to shackle you to the marriage bed until you learn a better use for your tongue than speech."

Geoffroi Jean Louis Raymond, Count of Avraché, reflected gloomily on the debacle he'd made of one simple abduction.

Juliana was an heiress, with two attractive castles and accompanying rich demesnes. She had been given to him by King Henry, had refused, for the most specious of reasons, to come to wed, had made Raymond of Avraché a laughingstock of the court.

Why, then, had his fury abated when faced with the panic of this one disobedient woman? He'd wanted vengeance on Lady Juliana for her reluctance to be wed, yet when he saw her, so frightened, so brave, he was unable to wreak retribution. And she was only a weak woman—even if she did pack a ferocious wallop with a log.

But after he knocked her down and subdued her, he became aware of her delicacy. Although her clothes wrapped her in a disguise of pudginess, the body beneath was fine boned. He found himself awaiting the removal of every garment with the anticipation of a pasha previewing his latest concubine. The innermost cotte had been just as ugly as the outermost, but it couldn't completely conceal the slender waist, the curves at bust and hip. Her face lacked the narrow beauty popular at court, yet her sweet mouth, her shadowed eyes, tempted him to hold, to caress, to comfort until her resistance melted into passion.

Rummaging through his bags, he found the stamp bearing his family seal, and with his fingertip he caressed the crude representation of the bear etched therein. With slathering jaw and upraised paw it threatened death and dismemberment to every enemy of his clan. A mere woman had no chance against the might of the bear—so why hadn't he taken the lady who slept in such exhaustion?

Angrily he tossed his seal back into the bags. He wasn't like the legendary founder of his clan: fierce, strong, maddened in battle. He was more like a mother bear reproving a cub with a blow of one big, soft paw.

Rolling his wet hose down his legs, he hung them by the flames to dry. Would God he had another pair, but Juliana wore his extras, and he was too soft-hearted...

So some other man had tried to pressure her into marriage.

And she had refused? Refused what kind of offer? Had some suitor put that purple scar on her cheekbone with a blow of one ringed hand?

He knelt beside the fire, feeding it wood to see them through the night, and the glowing red of the coals matched the fire in his breast.

~~From now on Lady Juliana would go nowhere without a guard. His blood boiled when he~~ considered how easily any man could pluck her from her lands and force marriage on her. Any knave could have beaten her into submission, used her ill, taken her.

Raymond had not used her ill, not beaten her, nor even taken her.

'Strewth, what kind of knight was he? Gone were the days when he slashed his way through life, sword and mace his constant companions. There had been a time when jousting, fighting, killing had brought him honor and enough wealth to maintain himself. The prizes of war had slipped into his purse, and he'd never considered the grief, the ruin that followed in his footsteps. He'd been to hell, he'd told Juliana. So he had, and he'd risen from the flames with his old self burned away.

True, he had been a knight on the Crusades. He had been captured, and he had indeed stolen a ship to return to Normandy.

But Juliana didn't know about the years he'd lived with the Saracens.

Or did she? Was that the reason she'd refused to come on the king's command and wed him? Did all of Christendom know of Raymond of Avraché's frailty of will? Was she disgusted by the tales of his cowardice?

Was that why she called him scum?

He warmed his hands until steam wafted from his damp sleeves and stared at the sleeping lady, stared until his eyes burned. She would be passionate, wouldn't she? She would be giving and kind, and welcome him to her hearth and into her body. Take her, he urged himself. It wasn't too late. Impregnate her. Climb into the bed with her, be between her legs before she woke properly. Then he would have the lady in marriage without falling back on Henry's strength, on Henry's orders.

He leaned across the fire pit and draped a wool wrap over her, so if the furs shifted, she would still be protected. Then, lured by her warmth, he slid one chilly hand beneath the covers, touched the flesh he coveted. The firelight blessed her fine skin with a glow. He wanted her, and this gentle lady.

He sniffed. The odor of scorched cloth irritated his nose. Wool? He glanced at his hose, but they still hung out of reach of the flames. Then what?...Struck by an ugly suspicion, he leaped up. His drawers were smoldering, and he slapped at himself to muffle the impending—and appropriate—blaze.

Juliana sat straight up. In the dark room, the fire smoldered red. The storm moaned as it died a slow death, and the cold it brought pressed in, unfazed by the weak attempt of the embers to hold it back.

On the bench across the circle of stones, the stranger slept. His head rested on his arm, he'd pulled his knees close to his chest, a single ragged blanket covered him. Across the hut, the horse, too, wore a blanket, and a better one than his master.

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