

She was promised
to another, but
her heart belonged
to him alone...

A romantic couple in a close embrace, with a castle in the background. The man is shirtless and the woman is wearing a light-colored dress. They are looking at each other with affection. The background shows a large stone castle with multiple towers and battlements, set against a soft, hazy sky. The overall tone is romantic and historical.

WHITE LION'S
LADY

LARA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ADRIAN

WRITING AS

TINA ST. JOHN

WHITE LION'S LADY

by

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~ ~ ~

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~ **White Lion's Lady** ~

Abducted on the way to her wedding, heiress Isabel de Lamere is unaware that the scoundrel planning to use her for his own gain is the cherished champion on her childhood: Griffin, the White Lion. Yet even as she discovers his treachery, Isabel cannot deny that Griffin lingers in her dream, awakening the passion in her steadfast heart.

Then a twist of fate puts a price on both their heads, embroiling them in a life-and-death challenge that will force Griffin to choose between his own freedom and his fierce desire for the woman who would redeem his noble spirit. But to reclaim his lost honor, the White Lion could lose Isabel forever.

~ ~ ~

Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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[A note from the author](#)

[Midnight Breed Series](#)

[Dragon Chalice Series](#)

[Historical Romances](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Prologue

England, 1179

Mocking laughter rang in Isabel de Lamere's head as she fled the enormous outdoor gathering, trying to escape the scene of her humiliation. To think she had actually been excited to attend the summer feast at Droghallow, a demesne held by a friend of her father's. Eight-year-old Izzy had looked forward to the event for weeks, eager for the chance to don her finest kirtle and make new friends of the children from surrounding shires.

It might have been a fine day indeed, if not for Droghallow's odious young heir. Sent reluctantly by his father to see that Izzy enjoyed herself, instead the lad had made mean sport of her, ridiculing her awkwardness in front of the other children. Before long, they were all making fun, finding fault in everything about her: her pudgy limbs, her plain face and freckled cheeks, her unruly red hair. Izzy had fled the group before her tears could further condemn her.

Sucking in great gulps of air, she ran down the motte and across the wide plain in no particular direction, stopping only when she found herself utterly breathless, waist-high in the tall grass of the outlying gully. She collapsed to her knees in the cool, shifting reeds, fighting to choke back the sob that stung her throat and trying to focus on anything else but the knot of hurt the children's jibes had left in her heart.

Her search for diversion led her teary gaze to a patch of blossoming weeds but a few paces before her. There, a butterfly had paused, its pretty yellow wings beating as it drank from a wild daisy. Perhaps she could capture it for a pet, she thought, watching as the pretty insect lit softly on another of the sunny flowers. She got up and crept toward it, but as if it sensed her stalking dangerously near, the butterfly took flight, fluttering off on a zigzagging path toward the edge of the woods.

It took little coaxing for Izzy to follow. She chased after without so much as a backward glance or a thought for her previous troubles, single-minded now in her determination to catch her prize.

The shade of the forest cooled her skin as she stepped into the dense glade, the great oaks and towering conifers sealing her off from the bright light of midday at her back. The rich scents of moss and moist sweet earth surrounded her. Birds rustled in the treetops high above, their trilling chatter drowning out the din of celebration taking place on the castle hill. A woodland creature scurried unseen in the bramble near Izzy's feet, fleeing from the intruder's path.

As if being led to another world, Izzy followed her butterfly guide deeper into the thicket, her eyes trained to the tiny beacon of color dancing amid the shadowy gloom of the forest. It hesitated some distance in, alighting on a tall orange flower, drinking in the nectar while Izzy stole up from behind. She sunk her teeth into her lip in utter concentration, looming overhead, so close she could smell the pungent perfume of the bell-shaped bloom. Very slowly, she brought her hands up from her

sides, cupping her palms as she homed in on the feasting insect, eager to hold the iridescent beauty only for a moment. Alas, it flitted off once more.

Izzy gave chase in earnest now, following after on a mad trail that led her first in one direction then another, but ever deeper into the cool dark woods. Determination made her reckless, made her oblivious of the scrapes her bare ankles took as she lifted her skirts and crashed through the thickening underbrush. She ducked under spindly outstretched branches and waded into large patches of dew-kissed ferns, pursuing relentlessly until, at last, she lost sight of her quarry.

But it was far worse than that, Izzy realized suddenly. She had completely lost track of where she was.

She stood there for a moment, pivoting her head in search of a path out or some means of getting her bearings. Nothing looked familiar in these woods. The dense foliage swallowed up both sound and light from outside, making it impossible to discern the direction of Droghallow's castle. Izzy's heart, which was still pounding hard from the chase, now picked up an urgent beat.

Heaven help her, she was lost.

I am not afraid, she told herself. She would simply follow her tracks out of the woods and head back safely to home. Turning, full of new resolve, Izzy took the first step.

It was then that she heard a rustle in the bramble a few paces ahead of her. Twigs snapped under a heavy gait, followed by an animal grunt and a deep snort. Izzy knew she was in danger even before she saw the boar's wild-eyed gaze and sharp ivory tusks. The bullish, hairy beast blocked her path, sniffing at the air. Evidently deciding she was foe more than friend, the boar curled its lips back and let out a throaty squeal of warning.

Izzy swallowed hard. She had nowhere to go. The trees were thick and many here, knitting her in from both sides; behind her was a sea of tangled underbrush that would surely slow her flight.

The boar advanced, head low, eyes trained on her.

Izzy stood unmoving, staring wide-eyed as the boar inched closer. It sniffed at the ground growling and snorting. Some subtle movement nearby caught the beast's attention and for an instant looked away. Her body tensed, every fiber urging her to flee regardless of her dubious chances of escape.

It might well be her only hope . . .

"Don't move."

The firm command seemed to whisper from out of the very trees themselves, instantly rooting Izzy's feet to the ground. "Stand very still," the voice instructed her. "The slightest motion could make him charge."

Izzy stood frozen, scarcely able to breathe. She watched the boar's snout twitch, its beady eyes searching for signs of this newest intruder. She tried not to let her gaze linger on the sight of those awful tusks: curved, lethal slashes of gleaming white against the beast's swarthiness.

"That's it. You're doing very well." The gentling voice sounded again, closer this time. "Tell me your name."

"Iz-Izzy," she stammered, little more than a tremulous whisper.

"I am coming up behind you now, Izzy. Be still. Don't be frightened."

But Izzy was terrified. The boar bared its teeth, tossing its head and shrieking in a deafening, murderous pitch. The horrible noise chased a shiver up Izzy's spine, leaving her entire body trembling. "Oh, please," she sobbed quietly. "Please, help me."

There was a crunch of movement behind her. Did her rescuer near, or was he instead deciding instead to make his retreat and save his own hide? Izzy could not be sure. In front of her, the boar pawed the mossy ground with a cloven hoof, snout down, the hairs on its back standing up like a bristly, coal-black fin. It gave a quick snort.

Then it charged.

~~Izzy screamed. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting to feel the certain, savage impact of the boar's tusks at any moment. She waited, but death did not come. Instead, she heard the sharp grate of a blade being unsheathed from its scabbard. She felt a rush of cool air as someone leaped in front of her, sweeping her out of harm's way with a strong, sure arm.~~

Twigs snapped under the boar's enraged attack. A cry rang out then cut short suddenly. The ground beneath her feet reverberated with a heavy thump, the sound of solid weight hitting soft, moist earth.

Then all went utterly still in the forest.

It took several moments before Izzy dared open her eyes. When she did, she saw the beast that might have killed her lying lifeless on the ground. Standing over it in silent contemplation, bloodied sword in hand, was a golden-haired, lanky boy. He glanced over his shoulder as Izzy approached. Striking green-gold eyes met her astonished gaze.

"You saved my life." Izzy came up beside him, finding it difficult to keep from staring at the felled beast, which was frightful even in death. "That was the bravest deed I've ever seen," she whispered. "You might have been killed in my place."

"A man must be willing to face danger," he told her as he cleaned and resheathed his sword. He turned a solemn gaze on her. "'Tis a knight's duty to protect a lady in need, whatever the risk."

Izzy blinked up into his youthful, sun-burnished face and felt herself warm from within. She had never been called a lady before. Nor had she ever seen such chivalry demonstrated outside the realm of her imagination. Awestruck and utterly speechless, Izzy took in her champion's features from his mane of shoulder-length, wheat-colored hair and leonine green eyes, to his blunt nose and proud, finely cut chin. He was still a youth, perhaps a half-dozen years her senior, but to Izzy's way of thinking, he possessed all the courage and honor of ten grown men.

He was wholly magnificent, this golden stranger who had just saved her life, and Izzy fell just a tiny bit in love with him.

"Come," he said, holding out his hand to her. "The woods are a dangerous place for a young maiden alone. I will see you safely out of here and back to the gathering." He guided her along an obscure path through the bracken, his warm hand engulfing her fingers, his every step as sure and capable as his strong, steadying arm. "What possessed you to venture so far into the forest unescorted?" he asked her when they had gone some distance. "'Tis one thing for a lad to prefer running wild in a dark glade over the stuffiness of a noble gathering, but quite another for a maiden to feel likewise."

Izzy did not want to admit to him the shameful cause of her flight from the celebration. "I was chasing a butterfly," she said, a half-truth, and a foolish-sounding one at that. "Before I knew it, I had lost my way."

"Be thankful you did not lose any more than your way," he scolded dryly, though Izzy could see a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. They reached a spot where the growth was thick and tangled, clawing branches blocking their way. Gallantly he swept it aside, allowing her to pass freely beneath. "After you, my lady."

Beaming, she ducked beneath the mass of briars, then bobbed a quick curtsy to him. "Whom do I thank you, Sir . . . ?"

"Griffin." He returned to her side, smiling, then offered her a courtly bow. "Griffin of Droghallow, at your service."

"Droghallow?" Izzy paused, feeling a sudden tug of disappointment. "Surely you cannot be known to Dominic of Droghallow?"

The lad gave her a quizzical look. "Do you know him?"

Instantly the jeering image of her chief tormentor's face sprang into Izzy's mind. "His father and mine are acquainted, but I assure you, I have no wish to know Master Dominic. Just this afternoon he was making terrible fun of--" Izzy frowned, unwilling to finish the thought. "I think he's an awful bully," she amended.

"Aye, Dom can be unfairly cruel," Griffin said, almost apologetically. Then he leaned forward, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "If he troubles you again, just tell him how you have heard he is deathly afraid of the dark. Remind him that he cannot sleep a wink unless a torch burns beside his bed all night long. Once he knows you have his secret, I doubt he'll be eager to bother you anymore."

Izzy grinned up at him, grateful for this further kindness. It seemed the boar was not the only beast her golden champion would slay for her this day.

"Dom and I are not blood kin," Griffin added as they continued walking, following the light that marked the edge of the woods. "His father and stepmother took me in when I was a baby, orphaned and abandoned at Droghallow's gates some five-and-ten years ago. To my knowledge, I have no living relations."

"None at all?" Izzy whispered in frank sympathy. Her parents were so dear to her, it was impossible to imagine not having them in her life. "Do you know nothing of your family?"

"Only this," Griffin said. He paused to withdraw a pendant from beneath his tunic and held it out to her. It was a small half-circle of enameled bronze--a medallion, embossed with the image of a white lion rampant in its center. "Lady Alys, Dom's stepmother, found it in my swaddling the day she brought me in. It's all I have of my true parents . . . whoever they were."

"I'm sure they were great people," Izzy told him, hearing the note of sadness in his voice and feeling a sudden need to fix it. "They would be very proud of you today, Griffin."

He glanced at her, then let the medallion fall back against his chest with a shrug and started walking once more. "Sir Robert--Dom's father--says I have the makings of a fine knight. He is training me as his squire, and one day I shall be made a member of the garrison here at Droghallow."

"You'll be his best, I have no doubt," Izzy declared, trotting along to keep pace with his long strides.

Griffin chuckled. "I mean to be better than that," he said, staring distantly ahead at the path, his brows drawn together in thought. "I mean to be a great knight one day. A man of my own means. A man of honor."

Her head turned toward him, Izzy blinked up at her champion in total admiration. "Then so you shall," she said, matching his declaration with the instant, inexplicable faith that he could do anything he set his mind to. "You shall be the greatest, most noble knight in all the realm, Griffin of Droghallow!"

"Do you think so?" he asked, pausing to regard her with that intense stare of his.

She smiled, fully confident. "I have never believed anything more."

Her fervent avowal hung between them for several long moments, filling the silence of the glade. Then Griffin smiled too, his slow, spreading grin dimpling his cheeks. "You are an odd girl, Izzy. An odd girl, indeed, given to chasing butterflies and believing in a stranger's dreams." She glanced away from his green-gold gaze, frowning down at her slippers, suddenly embarrassed. When he reached for her hand, she did not know what to do. She could only stare, astonished, as he lifted his fingers to his lips and pressed a chaste kiss to her palm. "It has been my great pleasure to meet you, my lady."

Grinning, he started to back away from her, edging deeper into the woods. Izzy watched him, too dazed to ask him where he was going. Her pulse was beating so fast and loud in her temples, she scarcely heard the angry shout that sounded from some distance behind her in the field. It sounded

again, closer now.

—“Isabel de Lamere! Where have you been?”

It was her nurse, come to fetch her. Izzy knew without looking that the large old hen of a man was huffing her way across the plain and not at all pleased to have been dispatched from the celebration on her present errand. But despite the threat thundering up behind her, Izzy could not tear her gaze from her golden champion's handsome face.

“Sir Griffin,” she whispered, but then he was gone, turned on his heel and vanished into the shadows of the trees. She looked down at her palm, to where her champion's lips had touched her, and as her gaze fell, she noticed something glittered in the loamy ground at her feet. His white lion medallion. The chain was severed, evidently lost to him by a break in one of the links. “Griffin, wait,” she called as she picked up the pendant and scanned the forest for any sign of him.

A moment later, her nurse was upon her, seizing her by the wrist and dragging her in tow away from the forest and farther afield, to rejoin the gathering. Izzy trotted along, clutching the medallion in her fist, happy if only for the chance she might have to see Griffin again, to return his pendant and thank him once more. Griffin of Droghallow had saved her life today. He had called her a lady, kissed her hand . . . and stolen her heart.

Izzy felt the fires of a thousand romantic musings stir to life within her when she thought of him. Never would there be a man more noble nor more honorable than her brave hero, her chivalrous White Lion, Griffin of Droghallow. She believed it with all her heart.

Chapter 1

Autumn, ten years later

“Have ye no heart, Griffin of Droghallow? 'Tis death ye deliver upon us today!”

Of the score of grubby-faced peasants assembled in the village for the surrender of the rents, only the miller's wife dared to speak out. Heavy with child and another clinging to her skirts, the matron waddled forward bearing murder in her eyes. It was a look Griff had seen often enough in his line of work as captain of the Droghallow guard that he scarcely bothered to pause as the woman approached the place he stood, securing the straps on a cart laden with grain sacks and wool. Several livestock had been tethered to the wagon as well, the bleating complaints of sheep and lowing of cattle doing little for Griff's patience in his present task.

This was only the first of a half-dozen villages he and his men would see today in their duty securing the month's rents for Droghallow's coffers. It had been a hard year for the country, made worse with the new king's relentless demands of his vassals and allies to show their loyalty by sending funds to support the burgeoning war in the Holy Land. Everything of value in England now had its price. Royal manor houses went up for bid; noble titles inherited through generations had to be further secured by huge tariffs to the crown; and in courts across the land, lawsuits were settled in favor of the party offering the largest bribe.

Richard Plantagenet had just been crowned, but already he was preparing to leave London. His army and his army were soon to be away, fighting to win back the Holy Sepulcher for Christendom. It was a noble mission, but some wondered if England's price would prove too steep. Some wondered if the king's brother, Prince John, would show more interest in England's welfare were he in power instead.

Granted a fair share of English titles and properties upon his brother's coronation, John kept a close watch over the country he was certain would soon be his. And while some noble vassals collected funds to support a Holy War, others collected in secret for war of a vastly different kind: a royal war that might well pit brother against brother.

With England's fiefs pressed from all sides, it was the villagers who suffered most. Droghallow's among them. They were overworked and tired, in an uproar over the news that in the lord's greed to purchase more lands and titles, Dominic, Earl of Droghallow, was seeking higher rents than ever before. Most of the holdings would be unable to pay. Foodstuffs and animals would be taken for trade instead, dooming the peasants to a long, cruel winter.

But their suffering was not his cross to bear, Griff told himself as the miller's wife drew up two paces before him, angry tears in her eyes.

“What manner of beast are ye, Griffin of Droghallow, that ye would take food from our children's mouths and wool that would warm the little ones in the cold months to come?”

The woman's daughter, a waif-like creature, stringy-haired and impossibly thin, came out

hiding behind her mother's skirts. "Don't cry, Mama," she said in a small voice, hugging her close. "Please, don't cry."

Griff glanced away quickly and yanked on one of the wagon straps, pulling it tighter than needed, concentrating on the burn of braided rope against his palm rather than looking for one moment longer at a child who would likely be dead by springtime.

"Does a serf's life mean so little to a knight? Can ye not see that we need every cow and fleece and sack of grain that can be had? Do ye not care--"

"Tis not my place to care, madam." Griff harshly tied off the strap and turned to stare down at the miller's wife. "I've been sent to collect what is due Droghallow's lord. Now stand aside and let me finish."

"Animal!" she railed at him, her round jaw quivering. "Soulless beasts, ye are! May the lot of ye rot in hell!"

Griff felt moisture hit his face and he paused, momentarily stunned. The woman had spit at him. The gathered crowd, which had been watching the entire exchange in rapt attention, now stood wholly mute and unmoving. Silence reigned in that next moment, as if no one dared even to breathe. The miller's wife held Griff's stare, but her entire body shook with terror and she clutched her daughter a little tighter.

"P-please," the woman stammered. "M-my lord, I beg pardon."

Griff said nothing. With the back of his hand he wiped the spittle away, too surprised to be angry, too indifferent to be offended.

The focus of his attention was now drawn past the circle of peasants to the mill, from where his men were emerging. Treading along before the pack of knights was the miller, head bowed, hands tied at his back like a criminal.

Odo, Griff's lieutenant, led the group, grinning proudly. "Just like a miller, skimming a bit off the top of everything he grinds. Swore up and down that he was keeping nothing from us, but we found three more sacks hidden behind a false board in the store room."

"Add them to the wagons and let's be on to the next village," Griff ordered, eager to be done with the day already.

Seeing the rents collected and delivered was only the first part of his mission for Dom. There was another task awaiting him at Droghallow, a task that had occupied his thoughts continually since Dom first discussed it with him a few days ago.

During a trip to the royal court, Droghallow's enterprising earl had come into the knowledge that a young heiress, recently inherited and since betrothed at the king's order, was soon to be en route from a London convent to her new home some leagues north of Droghallow. She was to wed in one month, to Sebastian of Montborne, one of King Richard's most powerful--and wealthy--vassals. That this man also happened to be one of Dom's most hated political rivals only made the opportunity for treachery all the more tempting. Dominic wanted the lady captured and brought to him, promising Griffin his pick of Droghallow knights to aid him in the task and a handsome reward upon her successful return.

Griff mentally added the crime of kidnap to his long list of past sins and skullduggery performed at Dom's behest. He had never considered himself the bride stealing sort, but the lure of so much silver was potent bait. And Griff did not mind dirtying his hands as long as it was worth his while.

Buoyed by the thought of a rich boon soon to be his, Griffin walked around to his waiting mount and stepped into the stirrup.

"What about him, Griff?"

Odo gestured toward the miller who now stood huddled together with his wife and daughter

From where he sat, high atop his destrier's back, Griff stared down at the couple who waited in dread for his decision. The man would surely see severe punishment at Droghallow, too severe, when his crime had been done in part with the intent to help feed a hungry village. Still, the transgression demanded some manner of recompense.

“There are no more bags of grain or flour left in the mill?” he asked Odo.

“Not a one. The place is empty, I made sure myself.”

Griffin nodded. With the harvest taken some weeks past, the mill would remain unused throughout the rest of the fall and coming winter. Looking past the dozens of watchful faces gaping up at him in fear and smoldering contempt, Griffin considered the idle wooden outbuilding. He slid a glance at Odo, then coolly jerked his chin in the direction of the mill.

“Burn it.”

Chapter 2

The old Roman road leading away from London was crowded that morning and filled with the unmistakable sounds of despair. A nobleman was being laid to rest that day; his funeral procession had slowed travel to little better than a crawl as those making their way out of the city paused to let pass the group of mourners.

Streamers of smoke from the burning candles and oil lamps carried at the front of the cortege trailed on the breeze, floating over the sober, bowed heads of the attending nuns and clergy and the dead man's bier, which was draped in black silk and borne on wooden slats suspended between two poles. The nobleman's family followed directly behind, two proud sons each holding onto the wailing mother's arm, helping her remain upright when grief seemed determined to collapse her in the street.

From within her own conveyance, a well-appointed litter flanked by half a dozen armed escorts now halted at the side of the road, Isabel de Lamere parted the silk curtains that canopied her from the sun's glare and watched in sympathy as the sorrowful parade passed.

Behind the widow and her sons walked a little girl. Garbed in black, her cheeks tear-stained and red, the child clutched a small bouquet of flowers in her fist. Her quivering jaw and trembling hands brought a flood of sadness to Isabel's eyes, for in a way, she knew that little girl. Indeed, she had once been her, deprived of a father at an early age and all but forgotten by a mother who could not shoulder the loss of her husband.

Isabel offered the child a gentle smile as she passed the silk-veiled litter, communicating her sympathy in a warm glance and a hopeful, silent prayer that in time, the hurt would heal and everything would be all right. The little girl seemed to cling to Isabel's gaze, blinking through her tears and finally returning a wobbly half-smile as she continued on up the road toward the churchyard. Isabel watched the child's retreating back until the trailing crowd of mourners swallowed her up.

"What an irritating inconvenience," groused Isabel's traveling companion, a maiden of similar age who was also on her way from London to be wed to a nobleman of the king's choosing.

Cloistered at the abbey of St. Winifred for nearly as long as Isabel had been there, at ten-and-eight, Lady Felice had suffered the dissolution of two previous betrothals and was clearly impatient to see her present arrangement through to fruition. She seemed to be of the mind that if she did not make it to her betrothed's estate with all due haste, the man would suddenly have a change of heart and be released from his obligation.

Isabel wondered if he might be more inclined to do so once he finally met his bride-to-be. While the petite blond was fair enough of face and respectably dowered, at her best Lady Felice was a charming conniver; at her worst, she possessed the disposition of a shrew. Isabel would be only too glad to see the end of their journey and bid farewell to the spoiled, complaining young woman.

"For pity's sake! How long must we delay here?" Felice huffed, leaning forward to peer around

Isabel at the crowded street. "Who is dead?" she demanded of a passerby. "I do hope it was someone of import to warrant all of this bother."

"Hush, Felice!" Isabel chided, appalled by her insensitivity. "A father and husband has died. He was of import to his family; show them some respect."

Felice rolled her eyes. She sat back against her cushioned seat with a petulant pout. "You're fine one to talk about respect," she snipped acidly. "Or do you forget your own father died a branded traitor to the Crown?"

Isabel kept her face turned away so Felice would not see her pained wince. No, she had not forgotten the sad fact of her father's dishonor. Far from it. His shame haunted her every day of her life ever since that morning six years ago that he was hauled away from Lamere Castle in chains, convicted of a years-old treason against the previous king of England, Henry II.

Isabel's beloved father, along with a score of other barons, was found guilty of participation in a rebellion against the king and executed. He had not even tried to deny the wrongdoing, claiming with his last breath that he did only what he felt was best for his country at the time, and, given the chance, he would do so again.

As a result of his betrayal, everything he owned was deemed forfeit to the Crown: his lands and titles, his wealth, even his marriage to Isabel's mother was annulled, illegitimizing Isabel and her infant sister. She and little Maura were declared bastards and sent to live in separate convents in the wards of the king while their mother, a distant relative of the royal family, was allowed to retain the rights to her dower lands but was returned to her homeland of France in supreme disgrace. Six years had passed without a word from her, but rumors circulated that the noble lady had gone quite mad with grief and humiliation. Then, less than a month ago, a missive arrived conveying the regretful news that Isabel's mother had taken ill and succumbed.

Isabel was now inherited of the chateau in France and several small estates that bordered the northern kingdom of Wales. She was a landed heiress, and, King Richard decided, she was also prime for marriage. He had matched her with the Earl of Montborne, a man Isabel had never met and knew only by reports of his sterling reputation.

It had been some years since she had trusted in the honor of men--trusting her father's honor had taught her that bitter lesson--but Isabel hoped she would be able to convince her new husband to allow her to send for Maura once they were wed. If she could do nothing else in this life, she prayed for the chance to be reunited with her sister and the opportunity to look after her until she was old enough to start her own life.

"I vow I cannot credit why the king saw fit to betroth you, of all people, to Sebastian Montborne," Felice continued once the funeral procession had gone ahead and the horses were guided back onto the road to resume the trek north out of London.

The lurching of the litter as it moved forward upset the beads in Felice's elaborate hairstyle, the plaited and coiled crown of flaxen locks veiled in pink silk and held in place with a circlet of twisted gold. She reached up to make certain nothing was amiss on her head, then brushed irritably at the wrinkles in her traveling gown, a stunning kirtle the color of a maiden's blush that fit her slender form to perfection. The fashionable garment with its long, pointed sleeves draping nearly to the bottom of her skirts and its intricately beaded bodice, easily outshone the pretty pale green gown and veil Isabel wore for the journey. Indeed, not even the fine dress Isabel had packed for her wedding could rival Felice's rich attire.

"Imagine," the young woman continued, shaking her head, "a traitor's bastard wedding one of the king's most favored vassals while I, grand-niece to the royal chancellor, am relegated to becoming the wife of a mere baron. It hardly seems fair."

Isabel bit back the urge to remind Felice that until he was appointed chancellor by King

Richard, her uncle, William de Longchamp was a veritable unknown in noble circles, a commoner. To those left with no choice but to abide him in his present role for the crown, Longchamp was no longer considered no better than a commissioned thief, liar, and cheat. Isabel had the distinct impression that the Longchamp fruit did not fall far from the tree.

"Don't despair of your situation too soon," she advised Felice with a reassuring pat of her hand. "After all, you're not yet wed. Perhaps this betrothal will fall through just as the other two have."

Felice sighed heavily and gave a little nod before she registered the subtle barb in Isabel's comment. Her belatedly insulted gaze snapped up to Isabel who had since returned her attention to the passing countryside.

The forest grew thick not far out of the city and continued to hug the sides of the road for some long hours into the journey. Chin propped in her hand to hold her head upright, Felice dozed in the seat opposite while Isabel remained awake and far too pensive for sleep. She watched as fellow travelers and pilgrims passed on the narrow road, headed as she was, to points north. She listened to the songs some of them sang to pass the time, wondering at the people's various futures and destinations almost as curiously as she wondered at her own.

With her past falling away by leagues, what lay ahead of her?

Isabel tried to picture Montborne, a place she had never been but had heard of often, the place that was soon to be her home. She closed her eyes and easily imagined its vast rolling meadows and fertile fields, the thriving villages and glorious stone castle that presided over it all. She pictured the joy on her little sister's face when Maura would arrive at Montborne, delivered from life at the convent and brought to live with Isabel and her husband as a family.

As she had tried numerous times since first hearing of her betrothal, Isabel tried to picture Sebastian, the Earl of Montborne, her fiancé. She tried to envision herself meeting him, marrying him . . . and here is where she failed. For although she had heard many accounts of the youthful earl's handsome good looks, somehow, whenever Isabel tried to imagine the man who would be her husband, her mind conjured the image of a brave, handsome knight with tawny hair and flashing green-gold eyes.

She pictured Griffin of Droghallow.

In truth, she had never forgotten about her childhood hero, the boy who had rescued her from certain doom a decade past and left her with a token of his courage and honor--the white lion medallion that Isabel carried with her every moment of every day. She had drawn on it for strength the day her father was arrested and she had relied on its power to see her through each painful night that she spent at the abbey, frightened and alone, separated from her family and all she loved.

With a glance at Felice to make certain the woman still slept, Isabel withdrew the medallion from within the bodice of her gown and held it into the light coming in through the litter's curtains. Lovingly, she smoothed the pad of her thumb over the enameled metal, knowing the careful embossment by heart: fashioned out of a disc of bronze that had been cut in half vertically, the medallion contained the heraldic representation of a fierce white lion rampant, a majestic creature of great courage that Isabel had always likened to Griffin of Droghallow himself.

Not a day passed when Isabel did not think about Griffin, wondering what had become of him and if she might ever see him again. She included him in her prayers without fail, asking God to keep him safe and happy. Isabel dreamed more frequently than was seemly that she would see Griffin again, that somehow their paths would cross and she could return his medallion and thank him personally for all he had given her with his kindness those ten years ago. She had dreamed of other encounters with him as well, encounters vivid enough to bring a blush to her cheeks just to think of them in the bald light of day.

Isabel shook her head as if to sweep her sinful thoughts away, the same way she must learn to sweep aside her girlish fascination with a man who was little more than pleasant memory to her now.

She was to wed Sebastian of Montborne. She would honor that vow in all ways starting from the very moment, she decided as she put away the medallion and shifted in her seat, closing her eyes and settling back against the cushions with a sigh.

She must have nodded off for a while, for she woke with a start when she heard one of her escorts shout an impatient hail to someone ahead on the road.

Felice roused with the sudden bark of command as well. "What is it? Are we finally arrived?" she asked through a groggy yawn.

"We have stopped for some reason," Isabel answered, peeking out of the curtains.

It was nearly dusk outside, though the encroaching forest made their surroundings seem darker than twilight. The road this far north would be more accurately described as a path, the narrow way ambling through the woods now deserted save for the ladies and their convoy of attending guards. And a shepherd with his flock, Isabel noted upon closer look. The old man stood about a furlong up the road, directly in the way of the traveling party, his sheep seeming to be hemmed in from the front and back, unwilling or unable to vacate the road.

"Get those beasts out of the road, graybeard, and let us pass," ordered one of the armed escorts.

The shepherd merely stared, wide-eyed, unspeaking and uncooperative. Isabel wondered if he was deaf, for she could plainly hear the impatience in the knight's voice. She could also hear the jingling of arms and gear; she could sense the nervous anticipation of the horses as their riders waited in wary silence.

Something felt queer about this delay. Something was frightfully wrong here. Isabel tried to lean farther out to get a better look at the situation up ahead.

"Back inside now, my lady," advised one of the guards in a low, even voice. "There is no cause for concern."

But there was, Isabel knew it by the schooled calmness in the man's tone. She swallowed hard and sat back as she was told, praying she was only letting her imagination get the best of her. "That's nothing, I'm sure," she told Felice, who was scowling across from her. "A shepherd and his flock have blocked the road. We'll be off as soon as they've gone."

"I will tell you only once more," said the leader of the guards to the shepherd. "Clear the road and let us pass."

"Oh, for pity's sake," Felice grumbled, loud enough for all to hear. "Trample the imbecile if he won't make way!"

The toe of Isabel's slipper connected sharply with Felice's shin, silencing the woman at the very moment that the true cause of their delay became horrifyingly clear to all. From out of the surrounding trees, an arrow flew. It hit its mark with lethal accuracy, claiming one of the guards and plunging the rest of the traveling party into chaos.

Over the bleating of frightened sheep and the surprised shouts of the guards, Isabel and Felice could only listen in terror as an ambush ensued outside. There was the whoosh of more arrows, the pained cries of the men and horses, and, soon thereafter, the metallic clash of blades. The horses carrying the litter shifted nervously amid the skirmish, making the veiled conveyance sway and lurch frightfully.

"We're being attacked!" Felice wailed, bursting into tears. "Dear God, we're going to die!"

Isabel wanted to calm the woman but there was nothing she could say. Fear robbed her of her own voice. She braced her outflung hands against the framework sides of the shifting litter, struggling to keep a grip on her surroundings as well as her sense of reason. She did not have to see the battle taking place outside to know that unless they took action, all too soon, she and Felice would find themselves thrust into the fray.

"Felice," she hissed to the screaming young woman. "We can't stay in here and wait for the

brigands to find us. We will have to try to escape.”

“Escape?” Felice hiccupped, her eyes wide and filled with tears. “But I’m afraid!”

“So am I. Take my hand and let’s jump out the back of the litter.”

Outside on the road, there was a clash of metal on metal, then a man cried out in agony. A horse gave a shrill whinny and sidled into the side of the litter, nearly tipping it.

“Felice,” Isabel whispered fiercely. “We must go now.”

She reached out with one hand, but the sobbing girl would not take it.

“We’ll be caught!” she croaked in protest. “We’ll never make it!”

“It’s our only hope,” Isabel argued, scarcely harnessing the urge to shake Felice out of her mounting hysteria. “We have a good enough chance of escape, but we must go now.”

Felice shook her head and sobbed. “No! I can’t go out there, Isabel! Please don’t make--”

Stones crunched under heavy boots drawing up beside the litter and cutting short Felice further whining. Too late to escape their attackers’ notice, the sheltering curtain was ripped away like the flimsiest spider’s web. It fell to the ground, laying open the litter and revealing the leering, grizzled face of a huge bear of a knight. “Good eve, ladies. Lovely night for a kidnapping, ain’t it?”

They both screamed. Holding onto each other and trembling with panic, the two women shrunk back as far as they could from the hulking brigand whose grasping, beefy arms reached easily more than halfway inside the narrow conveyance. He swept the small space and caught Felice by the ankle.

“Nooo!” she shrieked, eyes wide with terror as he started to pull her toward him. Felice’s dainty hands scrabbled for purchase in the litter, to no avail. “Oh, Isabel, please! Help me!”

Isabel held on to her and tugged with all she had while Felice worked to kick and squirm and twist her way out of the man’s clutches. He lost his hold and Felice was suddenly, miraculously, free. Then, without the slightest warning, she latched onto Isabel’s arm and jerked her forward, shoving her at the man.

“Take her, you stinking beast, not me!” she cried, slipping behind a stunned Isabel to make her escape out the other side of the conveyance. Felice tumbled out onto the ground and ran off screaming into the woods.

“Felice!” Isabel cried in horror and stark disbelief. Abandoned and terrified, she struggled against her attacker. Thrust into his arms by Felice’s betrayal, Isabel now found herself seized about the shoulders, unable to put up much of a fight as the man began to pull her forward.

“Behave now,” he told her. “We mean ye no harm.”

He dragged her out of the litter and set her feet on the ground, retaining his iron grip on her arms. Isabel stood there and took in the calamity of her traveling party with one quick glance. Her stomach threatened to revolt. Four of the guards and two of their horses were dead, lying where they had fallen in the road, bodies gashed from combat, arrows protruding from blood-soaked points of impact. The remaining two escorts must have taken to the woods, either in pursuit of their attacker or, as Felice had done, out of fear for their lives. Isabel could only guess, and at the moment she did not much care.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the rest of their attackers, armed with swords and crossbows, stepping out onto the road. Some yards away, Isabel spied a hooded figure on horseback dressed all in black. He came out of the woods and paused in the road, staring at the carnage.

Isabel’s captor saw him, too. He turned his head and chuckled, hailing the man with a jerk of his chin. “Look here what I found!” he called jovially.

It was all the opportunity Isabel needed.

She stepped forward and brought her knee up as swiftly and as hard as she could. It was a useful tactic she had learned in Lamere’s bailey and had all but forgotten in her eight years at the

abbey. If her skill was rusty, she was relieved to find that it had lost none of its effect. Her assailant immediately released his grasp on her, clutching instead a part of his own wounded anatomy and dropped to his knees with a curse and a strangled groan.

The leader of the band of rogues, the grim knight in black, saw what happened--indeed, he had attempted to warn his man but Isabel's knee had proven faster. Now he gave his horse his spur and barreling toward her and his sputtering accomplice. "Don't let her get away!" he shouted to the other as his deep voice booming against the silence of the forest.

Heart fluttering with panic, Isabel ducked down and scrambled under the horses and the little things they carried, making her escape in the same direction Felice had fled. She hitched up her skirts and tore off into the woods, panting and breathless with terror, her legs fueled by sheer determination to survive.

Behind her, she could hear the brigands give chase, crashing into the thicket. She could hear their curses and the metallic jangle of their armor, knew they were now equally determined to find her. It was nearly dark. If she could find a hiding place deep enough within the woods, perhaps she could wait them out. Perhaps they would tire of pursuing her and give up.

Or perhaps they would find Felice first and take her instead, she thought with a decidedly un-Christian brand of hope.

Skidding down into a leaf-strewn ravine, Isabel ran along the bottom of the deep gully searching for anything--a cave, a large rock, a hollow old tree--anything that might serve to conceal her for a while. When nothing availed itself, she simply kept running, plunging deeper and deeper into the ever-darkening forest.

At least she no longer heard evidence that she was being pursued. In fact, the woods had grown quite still with the rising of the moon. Isabel slowed her pace as the ground began to slope upward. She was tired and thirsty; a stitch in her side made it hard to draw more than shallow breaths. She had to rest, she decided, leaning her back against the black trunk of an ancient gnarled oak.

How wise was her plan to flee into the woods? She wondered now. She had no food, no water, no blanket to ward off the night's chill. And if she escaped capture by the men who attacked her on the road, how long could she expect to remain safe from the outlaws and vagabonds who people England's dense forests? Would she survive at all? How could she look after little Maura's welfare if she never made it to Montborne?

It was that thought more than any other that spurred Isabel on when exhaustion sought to consume her. Squaring her shoulders with renewed resolve, she pushed away from the tree, prepared to crawl to Montborne if she had to. She took a determined step forward then paused, shocked to find that another large tree now blocked her way.

Except it was not a tree, a fact she realized too late.

It was a man. The leader of her attackers, the knight she had seen in the road, garbed from head to toe in black. Gloved hands fisted on his hips, legs spread shoulder-width apart, he stared down at her from within the deep hood of his mantle. Isabel had to tip her head all the way back just to find his face; all she could make out of his features was the hint of sandy colored hair falling in a wild mane about his shoulders, and his smile, a cruel slash of white in the darkness.

He was a menacing presence, unmoving and grinning like the devil himself.

"Going somewhere, my lady?"

Chapter 3

Griffin had followed the young woman personally from the road, tracking her progress into the wood with the same stealth and patience that a wolf would employ to stalk a hare. Now as she blinked up at him, panting and effectively ensnared, he watched as first fright, then flight, registered in her flashing eyes. Barely a scant heartbeat passed before she freed herself of his gaze to pivot on her heel intent to bolt in the opposite direction. Griff seized the woman around the waist before she could take the first step.

“Unhand me!” she gasped, the breath whooshing out of her as Griff easily lifted her off her feet.

With her hands pinned at her sides, he dragged the lady to him and proceeded to carry her under his arm like a sack of grain. A rather disagreeable sack of grain, for she made every effort to squirm and buck her way loose. She managed to work one arm free and began pummeling his thigh, a bit too aimlessly for his peace of mind.

“Have a care with that flailing hand of yours, my lady, unless you mean to lose it. You may have left my man wheezing in the road, but I warn you, deliver like to me and you'll find that I will recover much faster and my wrath will be severe.”

Evidently she did not think it prudent to test his threat, all but giving up her fight as he brought her to his waiting mount and pushed her up onto the steed's back. Griff followed quickly behind settling her into the saddle before him. With one arm wrapped around her slim waist, he then guided his mount back out to the road.

Griff's company of men were working with haste to clear the path of bodies and any other evidence of struggle. All that remained of the caravan now was the tattered litter, its delicate canopied frame smashed, torn pale curtains wafting like ghosts on the night breeze.

“Unhitch the wreck and toss it in the ravine,” Griff instructed the knights. “The horses are fine enough flesh; round them up and we'll take them with us.”

“Ignoble thieves,” hissed Griff's hostage under her breath.

A nearby female shriek punctuated the lady's cool epithet, drawing Griff's attention over her left shoulder. The second of the women, a disheveled blond in a dirt-stained pink silk gown, was being led none too happily out of the woods by one of Droghallow's soldiers. Her hair, which had no doubt enjoyed a rather impressive coif at the start of her day, now hung limply in her face, a jumbled mess of unraveled braids and dripping beads. She swore an oath as the man pushed her into the road, her unladylike curse so vivid it raised even Griff's brows.

“Take your filthy paws off of me, cur!” she railed, struggling against her captor. “Who do you beasts think you are? By my vow, I shall see you hang for this--all of you!”

Griffin had not been expecting to find two women in the caravan from London. Was the spitting viper the Montborne bride, he wondered? She was bedecked as a princess, with the haughtiness

demeanor to match. A sharp contrast to the quiet beauty seated ramrod straight in the saddle before him.

Of the pair, Griff figured that she, and not her foul-tempered companion, would prove the more cunning quarry. Even now he could feel the coiled tenacity in the lady's slender form, the silent contemplation of her situation, the calculating calm. She had felled Odo easily enough, a man three times her size. Griff did not trust for one moment that her apparent lack of resistance meant anything less than a measured wait for an ideal opportunity to gain her freedom from him.

To let her know she would not be getting that chance, Griff tightened his arm around her waist, pulling her toward him until her spine pressed flush against his chest. She gasped at the contact and tried to arch away, an unwitting move that settled her pert breasts quite nicely on his forearm while her fingers dug into his muscled flesh as if to test the strength of her bonds.

Enjoying the squirming warmth of her body a little more than he likely should be, Griff called a curt order over the top of her veiled head. "Mount up, men. We'll ride for a couple of hours, then make camp for the night before continuing on to our destination."

They were careful not to use each other's names or mention Droghallow specifically, understanding that the less their captives knew of their abductors, the better. If there was any trouble along the way, Dom had made it clear that he wanted there to be no possibility of linking him to the crime.

Riding to the front of his assembling company of soldiers, Griffin paused beside Odo. The brave knight was recovered of his galling injury, even if the glare he slanted his petite assailant belied that his pride still sorely pained him.

"Take the other woman with you on your horse," Griff instructed, marshaling a chuckle when the guard looked less than eager to mount up with the venomous lady. "Bind her if you like, lieutenant, but don't take your eyes off her for a moment. And beware her fangs, lest you feel the bite."

They set up camp roughly a league away from the scene of the skirmish, in a forest glen about a half day's ride from Droghallow. They could have pressed on and made the rest of the journey that night, but the men were tired, as were their fatigued horses. And as for their two hostages, the women had been through quite an ordeal; it seemed of little harm to afford them a few hours' rest.

A fire was built out of fallen timber and dried leaves, providing ample warmth from the autumn chill that permeated the night air. Griffin instructed the women to gather close to the flames, he and Odo taking up a seat next to them, well within reach should either lady think to flee. The blonde's mind seemed more fixed on finding blame for her circumstances and imagining what might befall her than it was attuned to thoughts of escape.

"I cannot believe this is happening to me," she complained, sniffing as she brushed at the dirt that soiled the torn sleeve of her gown. "This was supposed to be a pleasant journey for me--I was on my way to be wed, for pity's sake!"

"Twill be all right," soothed her companion in a discreet but firm tone of voice. "Upsetting yourself will do no good and likely will only serve to amuse these men. Try to be calm."

"Calm?" choked the blonde. "How can I be calm when I am sitting here alone and helpless, certain to be ravished at any moment by this band of common thieves and rapists!" She turned her ire on Griffin. "You won't get away with this, I promise you! I am very well connected, and fully capable of seeing that you and your men pay for this--with every one of your miserable lives!"

"Is that so?" Griff asked in mild challenge, curious what Dom might be getting him involved in with this scheme. "And how do you aim to do that?"

The shrew's friend shook her head as if to silence her from divulging any useful information that would-be ransomers, but the attempted warning went wholly unheeded.

"I'll have you know," declared the noble brat, blowing an errant tangle from out of her eyes. ~~"that I am Felice of Rathburn, grand-niece to William de Longchamp, King Richard's royal~~ chancellor! When he hears what you have done to me, he'll have your churlish head skewered on a pike at the White Tower! When he finds out that I have been abused by the basest of criminals, ruining my chances to wed, he'll scatter your entrails to the vultures and feed your heart to the palace hounds!"

She went on, colorfully describing the various penalties he was certain to suffer at her uncle's hands, but Griffin was not listening to a word of it. His attention was fixed on the auburn-haired beauty who stared at him through the wavering glow of the small campfire. She was stunning in her quiet scorn, regarding him with a level stare, her delicate chin held proud.

"That must make you the Montborne bride," he said, registering her slight flinch of surprise when he mentioned the name of her betrothed.

"What do you want with us?" she demanded softly. "You did not attack us on the road for the purposes of ravishment or you would have likely done so by now."

Griffin acknowledged her logic with a slight curl of his lip.

"You have been hired to take us somewhere," she surmised rather astutely. "Someone has paid you to abduct us? Who--and why? Was it worth the lives of our escorts? Is it worth yours?"

"You ask a great deal of questions, my lady. Perhaps you should first consider whether or not you are prepared to have the answers."

She stared at him in haughty disdain, but Griff could see the flicker of uncertainty in her amber-brown eyes. An unwed innocent cloistered past the marrying age of most girls, per Dom's description, the Montborne bride was not the plain, overripe plum Griffin had been imagining. Na, this lady was a rare peach, fresh-faced and tart, with the fiery coloring to match.

Beneath her gossamer veil of pale green silk, Griff could see that her hair was the burnished hue of rich copper, thick strands of silk that rebelled against the plaits and covering that held them in place. The lady was noble born and gentle bred, that much was clear, from her delicate brow and creamy skin to the aristocratic line of her nose and the slim, slightly mutinous, curve of her jaw. There was a cool, reserved quality about her features that seemed to clash with the spark of fire in her eyes with the lush sensuality of her mouth. He found himself staring at her rose-colored lips far longer than was seemly, wondering what other delicious contrasts he was obliged to leave undiscovered.

"I am prepared for any answer, so long as it is the truth."

Her quiet statement jolted him out of a rather wicked musing. He glanced up and met her steady gaze. "Is that so, my lady?"

"Yes."

That her reply was little more than a whisper was proof enough of her trepidation despite her efforts at this show of bravery. Griff saw no point in frightening her further with the details of his abduction or his suppositions over what Dom might plan to do with her once she was delivered to him. She would have those answers soon enough.

"It's late," he said, dismissing her questions as he rose to his feet and motioned for Odo to come. "Untether the reins from the spare horses and bring them to me. I wager they'll make sufficient binding for these fair ladies. We can secure them to that tree over there."

"Oh, God! No!" wailed the blonde in a renewed fit of hysterics. "Oh, please, help me! Anyone, please! Help! Help me!"

Her shrill cries shot through Griff like the sharp pain of a raw nerve. It was enough to wake the dead, not to mention any forest outlaws lurking within a league of her senseless caterwauling. Griffin had no intention of listening to her for a moment longer. He drew a dagger from a sheath on his belt and then walked over to her. He knelt down at her level, weapon gleaming beside her face.

"No, please! I don't want to die!" she sobbed, her plea cutting off as Griff took hold of her diaphanous veil and freed it from her head with one efficient swipe of his blade. He wadded the fabric into a ball, then stuffed it in her mouth.

"Be quiet," he said pleasantly.

She obeyed. Within moments, he and Odo had secured her to the base of a sturdy oak. Ne Griffin turned to the Montborne woman. She faced him with dignity and a good amount of stubborn determination, as if daring him to show her the same humiliation. He did not see the need. Nor did he think it wise to afford her even a meager distance from him while he tried to rest for a few hours. She would find a way to escape him, he could see it in her eyes.

He tied one end of the leather reins to her wrist, knotting it so securely it would likely need to be cut from her arm upon their arrival at Droghallow. Then he grabbed the other end and fastened it around his own wrist.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, staring in wide-eyed confusion at the tether that now bound them together.

"You will stay at my side for the night, my lady. I won't have you and your friend plotting an escape while I sleep."

"Why, you arrogant--" Her eyes narrowed on him as if incensed that he had voiced her very intention. She tugged against the offending cord, huffing in frustration when the knot held firm.

While his men prepared their own sleeping arrangements around the waning fire, Griffin led her away from her sniffing but now considerably more docile companion to a mossy spot of ground he thought would suit well enough as a makeshift pallet. He unfastened his mantle with his free hand and let it fall like a blanket on the forest floor. He sat himself on the warm swatch of wool, giving the lady a persuasive tug when she seemed reluctant to join him.

"Relax," he instructed her as she scrambled to extricate herself from where she had sprawled practically atop him. "We'll be leaving before dawn. You'd do well to get some rest while you can."

"Not so long as you are breathing beside me," she scoffed.

Griff chuckled at her tenacious spirit. "Then do as you please, my lady. But be warned, I am a light sleeper. If you so much as jostle this tether, I will know it."

* * *

Stubbornly, Isabel remained sitting for some hours longer, even after her captor had settled onto his side facing her, his eyes closed, breathing slowed in sleep. She stared at him, scowling and wondering what sort of mercenary rogue was attached to the other end of the slim leather line that held her prisoner. More to the point, where did he mean to take her, and for what purpose?

Whatever it was, Isabel did not intend to sit there, waiting until the morn when she would find out. She had to get away. She had to find her way to Montborne. But how? She wondered, staring down at the thick, tight knot at her wrist. She would never get it untied.

Through the canopy of oak and pine trees over her head, the slimmest shave of moon glow provided an answer. The milky ray of light poured down from the night sky to wink against the hammered steel grip of her chief abductor's dagger--the very same weapon he had drawn to her silence Felice's blathering.

It was sheathed on his belt, scarcely an arm's length away. Closer, if she could dare to pry herself beside him. That short distance was all that separated her from freedom. Could it be so simple? Her conscience hastened to remind her of his warning: He did not sleep heavily. Could she even hope to steal his blade and cut loose her bond without his notice?

It was a fool's gamble, to be sure. But she had to try.

Slowly, without a sound, Isabel eased herself down, stretching her limbs out as if in sleep. She ~~hardly drew breath, heedful of the silence and praying not to wake him as she got into position at his~~ side, facing him. This close, waiting some long moments to make certain he still slept and watching his face in repose, it was difficult not to take into full measure the harsh attractiveness of his features.

His wide brow was nearly hidden beneath a forelock of sandy hair. The mane of long silky waves framed the striking lines of his tanned chiseled cheeks and square, stern jaw, giving him an air of wildness even in slumber. A silvery scar cut into his chin, a vicious arc of colorless skin that should not have added to his rugged appeal, yet somehow did. His eyes, thankfully still closed, concealed their color but were fringed with thick dark lashes that any lady would envy. His nose was prominent and bold, its straight line marred only by a faint jag that bespoke of his violent living. If his sculpted sensual mouth bespoke of anything, Isabel had to guess that it would whisper of wicked, sinful encounters and pretty, seductive lies meant to charm a maiden out of her senses.

He looked like heaven in the moonlight, a fallen angel, heartbreakingly handsome yet undeniably dangerous--and oddly familiar to Isabel in some shadowy, inexplicable way.

She weathered a queer chill that had little to do with the autumn air and focused her attention back on the task at hand. Holding her breath, she slowly inched her fingers forward on the mantle, pausing halfway between their parallel torsos. Nervously, keeping her eyes trained on his, she crept her hand a little farther. His chest and abdomen expanded as he drew each long breath, brushing the tips of her fingers.

She was almost there.

Biting her lip in concentration, she reached down to touch the belt at his waist. Only a few finger lengths and she would have the handle of the dagger. She could almost taste freedom.

Not much farther now.

She stretched her arm, rolling not even a hair's breadth closer to him--and nearly jumped out of her skin when he stirred. Her hand flew back to her breast. She froze, staring at him in mute terror. He sighed and shifted slightly on the mantle.

But he did not wake.

Heart pounding in her throat, Isabel waited until her fear passed and she could breathe again, then started her quest anew. This time, she was bolder, knowing time was of the essence and that the real test would lie in pulling the dagger from its sheath without rousing the dragon. Praying for stealth and courage in equal measure, she reached out and went straight for her prize. She followed the smooth line of her captor's sword belt, pausing only when her fingers encountered the cool grip of the dagger. Swallowing past her trepidation, she seized the blade and began to slide it carefully out of its sheath.

The next thing she knew, her arm was pinned beneath a firm, unyielding weight.

She cried out in surprise, a small yelp of shock that she could do nothing to bite back. Even worse was the shock of glancing up and finding her captor's eyes open and fully alert, staring at her. His face nearly nose-to-nose with hers, his mouth quirked in a lazy, sardonic grin.

"You'll find nothing but trouble there, my lady."

"Get off of me!" she cried in desperation, scandalized by the position in which she suddenly found her hand.

Hard-hewn muscle and the ridge of his slim hipbone pressed her arm to the earth while his palm--dear Lord, her palm lay open beneath him, her fingers splayed across something that she could only pray was the hard outline of his sheathed dagger. Heaven help her, but she had never been so familiar with the area of a man's groin and she had no desire to be so now, particularly not when the scoundrel pinning her so awkwardly beneath him seemed to be so devilishly enjoying it. "Get off," she sputtered. "I beg you, get off!"

He eased up only enough to avail her the retrieval of her hand, but neatly hemmed her in with one arm braced on either side of her. Imprisoned by the presence of his powerful body, Isabel could only blink up at him, uncertain what he would do with her now. She had blatantly defied him. Felicia had merely annoyed him and she now sat bound and gagged. What degradation would she herself suffer for her brash actions? She mustered a cool expression despite the fact that inside she was quaking, terrified to think on what her brazenness might have earned her from this man.

"I warned you to give up any thoughts you had of escape. What was your plan, lady? To kill me while I slept?"

"No!"

His eyes narrowed on her. "For a lady who professes to relish the truth, I would think you'd be disinclined to stretch it so thin."

"I would have done you no harm," she swore, surprised--and somewhat disappointed--that the idea had not even occurred to her. "I only wanted to free myself. I simply meant to cut my bonds and be away."

"To Montborne?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Please, you must let me go! I have to get to Montborne!"

"Your passion overwhelms me, demoiselle." He stared at her for a long moment; she prayed that in his prolonged silence, he considered her plea. Prayed that he would show her some speck of mercy and let her loose. His lazy, spreading smile seemed to indicate otherwise. "Am I to understand that yours is a love match, my lady?"

"I don't expect you to understand anything, least of all my reasons for wanting to marry."

His gaze bore into her. "Do you love this fiancé of yours?"

"Would it make a difference to you if I did?"

He exhaled a slight laugh. "Alas, no. I find I am merely . . . curious."

"Well, then, speculate on it all you wish," she hissed up at him. "My feelings are none of your affair." She tried to pry his arm loose from its position beside her, growing increasingly desperate to put space between her and this overbearing rogue. He did not budge, indeed, he only seemed all the more intense.

"Nay, you scarcely know him," he said as if he could read the truth in her eyes. He seemed to take some brand of wicked delight in the notion, his rakish grin deepening, setting off twin dimples on his beard-grizzled cheeks. "I would wager you've never so much as met the man. Have you?"

She refused to answer, for all the good it did her.

"You've never met your bridegroom and yet you would risk your life and limb to go to him? Why is that, my lady?"

"It is my duty, sirrah," she told him in an imperious tone. "The king himself has decreed that I wed."

"Somehow, you do not strike me as the sort to blindly follow orders, no matter who they might come from." His head dipped a bit closer to hers, so close their breath mingled, their faces almost nose to nose, sharing the same air. "Try again, demoiselle. The truth this time."

She thought about the many reasons she had for marrying Sebastian of Montborne--Maurice's welfare, the restoration of her family's name, a good match to reestablish some of her house's former honor--each one compelling enough in its own right to make her risk the fires of Hell itself to see through. She thought of all the deeply personal reasons she had for wanting the arranged union with the Earl of Montborne, but in the end she settled on the one that would expose the least of her pain to this coldhearted stranger.

"I made a vow before God," she said, her voice sounding very small, her chest rising and falling between the too-close press of their bodies. "I made a vow, and I am bound by my oath."

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