

HONOR
& ROSES

ALSO BY ELIZABETH COLE

A Heartless Design

A Reckless Soul

A Shameless Angel

The Lady Dauntless

Beneath Sleepless Stars

Regency Rhapsody: The Complete Collection

Love on the Run

HONOR
& ROSES
ELIZABETH
COLE

SKYSPARK BOOKS

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

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Prologue



England, 1136

AT DAWN, A DAMP, CLINGING mist rose above the manor, obscuring the clear blue sky above. Sensible people would be huddling in their beds, or near a fireplace.

Instead, a crowd gathered in the courtyard as soldiers and squires and servants prepared to ride out on the chilly January morning.

Cecily de Vere watched from her window on the upper story of the manor, her light gold hair still loose and blowing across her face. She did not care for the scene at all. She was fourteen years of age, and therefore a young lady, but at the moment she wanted to howl like a little babe.

“*Must* they go?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“They must,” said her nurse Agnes, quickly putting Cecily’s hair into a tidier arrangement. “It is their duty to go to war. Some are born to command and others to obey. This is the order of things, both in heaven and on earth.”

“Then it’s a stupid order,” Cecily muttered, though under her breath, so no one would chastise her for blasphemy.

“Come, child. Let us go down.”

Cecily turned on hearing the voice of Pavia. The older lady was her companion and chaperone. Though three times Cecily’s age, she seemed much younger due to her frequent laughter. Today, though, her expression was serious.

“If you hurry, you’ll have a little time to speak with your friends,” Pavia went on. “You would not want them to ride off with no word of farewell from their lady, would you?”

Cecily nodded and hurried out of the bedchamber ahead of Pavia, her long woolen skirts trailing behind her like a green mist. She wanted to say goodbye to nearly a dozen people she knew well, but most especially Alric, one of her dearest friends.

She’d known him for years, ever since he’d come to foster with her family’s household, just as many noble boys did. Though older than she was by several years, and in training to be a knight, Alric always found time for her. Cecily couldn’t count the number of games they played, or the afternoons spent exploring the manor and grounds, the picnics, the chess matches, the

endless pranks on grown-ups. She couldn't imagine life without him nearby.

When Cecily reached the courtyard, she saw Alric beside his horse, making final preparations, checking buckles and straps, making sure his armor and weapons were absolutely secure. The heavy chain mail was folded tidily in a thick canvas bag. Alric didn't even need to see it, since he could smell the pungent oil used to keep rust away. He did examine his sword, though. The blade flashed morning sunlight at his face, still looking as sharp and deadly as on the day he'd received it from his family.

Then he straightened up, standing tall among the crowd of people. He was dressed for travel in a new traveling outfit that made him look every one of his nineteen years, she thought. He always looked grown up to her, though—and handsome, especially when he smiled, making his eyes crinkle at the corners. She stared for a moment, feeling an odd little flip in her belly when she looked at him.

She was spotted then. Alric called out, beckoning her to join him.

Cecily pushed away her sadness and advanced, waving as cheerfully as she could.

Alric was flanked by his constant companions, Luc and Rafe. They all were fostered here together, brothers in spirit if not blood, and were thick as thieves. She knew them all well, and tears threatened to fall as she watched them joke around.

They all acted like it was a lark, naturally. Boys al-

ways pretended fighting was a game. These boys were now young men, in truth, but their mood still seemed to be childish, as if they were going on a grand adventure.

“This is exactly what I’ve been waiting for,” said Rafe, when she reached them. He was the most excited for war, because he believed himself to be a consummate knight, skilled at riding and swordplay and stealing kisses—what else was there in life? “A little skirmish to show the king what I’m capable of, and it will be over this summer! I bet he’ll grant me lands in recognition of my deeds. Perhaps some of the very lands we recapture!”

“You dream,” said the other young man, his bright blue eyes sparkling. Luc was the son of a powerful baron, and was aware of his place. “It takes years to prove yourself. This isn’t a tournament where you unseat your opponent while the ladies watch.”

“How would you know, Luc?” Rafe snapped, pushing hair away from his undeniably attractive features. “You’ve fought in no more wars than I have.”

“True, but I listen to our instructors, and I listened to my father’s stories. I know what to expect.”

“All very well for you,” Rafe muttered, looking away. Unlike the well-born Luc, or even Alric, who was the son of a knight, Rafe’s parentage was uncertain. The issue of his birth had always been a sore point with him. “Some of us will have to take what we want. We can’t simply wait for it.”

“You’ll get your chance for glory,” Alric said, his

own voice mild. He was used to cooling Rafe's temper, and to reminding Luc that not everyone appreciated his lectures. "We simply have to watch out for each other."

"And if your luck holds," Cecily said. "As I pray it will."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Rafe said, leaning toward Cecily and puckering up his mouth. "Kiss for luck?"

"Ooh, no, get away!" Cecily made a face and darted to the left, putting Alric between her and Rafe. "Eww!"

The boys all laughed, Rafe included.

Cecily made a show of disliking kisses, but in truth she was just old enough that the idea had become intriguing rather than nasty. She knew some girls tried to get as many kisses as they could. Cecily had been kissed by a few of the manor boys, but as she was the heiress of Cleobury, they knew better than to press too much attention on her.

"Seems you'll have to do without Lady Cecily's luck!" Luc said.

"I've got enough," Rafe admitted with a smirk.

Alric shook his head. "Yes, we heard."

Then he turned to look at Cecily. "You can come out now. Rafe won't try anything while we're here to defend you."

"Aye!" Luc grinned and tapped the hilt of his sword. "Though Rafe's my sworn brother, I'll knock him flat on the ground if you ask, my lady."

"Or even if you don't!" Alric added.

Rafe put his hands up to indicate defeat. “Look at us! No different from the day we all came here!”

“No,” Alric corrected. “We began our training at Aldgate. Don’t you remember?”

Though unintentional, his words cast a pall over them.

Cecily remembered all too well. Aldgate was the manor where she’d been born. Until she was seven years old, it was the only place she’d ever known, and the place where the three boys had come to be trained as knights. But then a massive fire broke out and destroyed Aldgate. The fire also took her father’s life.

When her uncle assumed the title and acquired all the lands in her father’s name, he moved all the survivors to Cleobury. A fresh start, he’d said. He didn’t want to rebuild Aldgate—and he didn’t want to live in his older brother’s shadow.

Thus, Cecily and Alric and the other boys spent the past several years at Cleobury. The boys continued their knightly training here, while Cecily learned how to be a lady.

Rafe glanced guiltily at Cecily. Perhaps he was sorry he’d brought the topic up, however inadvertently. “Of course I remember. We all do. I just meant...well, one day we all stood in a courtyard, greeting each other. And now we’re doing the same, but saying farewell.”

“Not for long,” Luc said quickly. “After all, it’s just a little war.”

“If it’s so little, I still don’t see why you *all* have to leave,” Cecily said.

“Because King Stephen decrees it.” Alric smiled at her. “Should I send a letter to the king?” He mimed writing a letter, and read out the imaginary words, “My apologies, sire. I can’t obey you because the lady Cecily de Vere, daughter of Rainald de Vere, will be bored without all her playmates. Good luck on the battlefield, my liege!”

“Don’t tease me,” Cecily chided, though with an answering smile. “I know you can’t disobey a king.”

“We’ll be back in a few months,” Alric assured her. “The king has summoned nearly all the fighters he can. David of Scotland is threatening the northern border, but with a large show of force, the scoundrel will back off quickly. David can’t hold the cities he’s already taken.”

“He thought Stephen would be distracted because he’s new on the throne,” Luc added. Luc prided himself on knowing the political details of a situation. “But Stephen will move swiftly and put down the rebellion.”

“You mean *we* will.” That last comment came from Rafe, who emphasized his point with a swing of his sword. “We knights will do the fighting. The king will be back behind the lines.”

“I heard King Stephen is a very brave warrior,” Cecily ventured. There had been many stories about the new king. Since the death of King Henry the previous year, the matter of who would ascend to the throne had been a topic on everyone’s lips. Even in the west of England, with the Welsh border so close, peo-

ple were concerned about such things. It meant the difference between peace and war.

“I’ve heard the same. We’ll see what he does in the north,” Luc said. “We all owe him our allegiance. Bishop Henry said he was the old king’s choice.”

There was some dispute about that, Cecily knew. Maud, the daughter of the old King Henry, had also claimed the throne. But it seemed her claim was ignored. If she remained in France with her husband, perhaps she had accepted the decision.

Alric suddenly interrupted her musings. “I must have left my poniard in the stable. Too much to think about this morning. I bet it’s fallen into the hay in the stall and got lost already.”

“I’ll help you find it,” Cecily offered.

The pair walked to the stables. Cecily was glad for the extra moment with Alric—anything to put off the inevitable.

The stables were still dim, but it didn’t take long to spot what Alric was looking for. His poniard lay near the back of the horse stall, safely in its scabbard.

“That’s a good sign,” Alric said in relief. “This was my father’s. I’d hate to lose it.”

He turned to lead them back outside, but Cecily put her hand on his arm.

“Wait, please. I have a gift for you.”

He stopped and turned, looking surprised. “For me?”

“Yes.” She presented him with a ribbon. The fabric itself was deep blue, covered with embroidery in white

thread. The images included a simple sword, a hawk in profile, a few little flowers, and the phrase *Lord Protect Me* written in Latin. “I made it last night. Burned an extra candle to finish it in time.”

Alric took it, handling the ribbon gently in his hand. “Thank you.”

“Will you carry it with you? For protection.”

“I will. I promise.” He paused. “You only made the one?”

She looked down at the ground. “I had no time for more. Besides, you need it most. Luc has three squires about him all the time. They’ll watch out for their master.”

“And Rafe?” he asked.

“Rafe can take care of himself!” Cecily said, sniffing. “Or the devil will look after his own.” Rafe was one of the most daring, impudent boys she’d ever known. Not like Alric, who was much more steady and dependable.

“Well,” he said, putting the ribbon away in his tunic. “I feel safer already.”

“Alric?” she asked nervously.

“What?”

“Do...do you want a kiss too? For luck?”

Without waiting for his answer, for fear she’d lose her nerve, Cecily reached up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “Good luck, my dear friend,” she whispered. “May God keep you safe.”

She pulled away abruptly, suffering a rush of unfamiliar feelings. They were alone, and he was leaving,

and her heart had never ached so before. Her cheeks grew hot all of a sudden, and she hoped he wouldn't laugh at her.

He didn't. Instead, he reached out to take her hand. "I'll...we'll...be back before you notice we're gone."

"Just be careful. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you. Send word when you can."

"I promise." He stared at her for a moment, as if memorizing her face. "Cecily, if ever..." he began to say.

A shout from the courtyard interrupted him. "They're ready to leave," he said.

"I'll miss you," she blurted out.

"And I you. Be careful while we're gone. When I come back, I want to see you safe and sound."

"Yes, Alric."

She followed him back outside to the courtyard, wishing she could stop time.

Her uncle Theobald, the lord of Cleobury, stood by the massive doors to the manor house, surveying the whole party. Alric murmured for her to go join her uncle, then he walked to his horse.

Theobald gave a brief speech to the gathered men. She scarcely heard it. She assumed everyone was waving farewell, but her eyes were blurry with tears.

Come back to me, she prayed. *Come back to me, Alric.*

Chapter 1



England, 1141

THE AFTERNOON SUN BLAZED DOWN, pitiless and unyielding. It glinted off chain mail and polished blades. The once green fields outside the town were trampled to dust under the weight of so much violence. Bodies lay in heaps. The still air carried no breeze, only the yells of warriors and, beneath that, the moans of the injured.

Alric of Hawksmere swung his sword up to block an attack from yet another nameless opponent. Steel clashed on steel, and Alric pressed his advantage against the other soldier. He parried, thrust, shoved, and feinted, until he saw an opening. Then he sliced the man's neck, just where his armor and his helmet failed to meet.

The man's eyes widened behind his battered hel-

met. Alric saw the life leave those eyes a moment later.

Kill or be killed. There was no other way. At least it had been quick.

“Watch your back, Hawk!”

Alric spun around at the sound of Luc’s warning.

A huge man barreled down on Alric, his face contorted with rage. Even as Alric readied himself in a defensive stance, he knew he’d be unable to stop the man’s charge. Still, Alric centered his sword in front of his body.

He’d be knocked down, laid flat on his back. Luc was already injured and many paces away, unable to do more than watch. Alric would face this fight alone. If he was lucky, he’d be able to roll out of range of the man’s first blow. But he knew pure fury when he saw it.

Is this the moment I die? he thought. Was the calm he felt a gift? Or a trick to stop him from fighting to the last?

He didn’t know. It didn’t matter. Alric felt the ground shake under the charge of his opponent.

The man howled something incoherent just as he raised his broadsword above his head. He intended to strike Alric down with one blow. Alric had to deflect that first strike. He bunched up his shoulders, preparing for the impact, knowing it wouldn’t be enough.

But just as his opponent began his strike—a huge sweeping circle of steel—the man halted, his sword arm jerking to a stop.

Then he fell to his knees, the blade clattering to the

ground.

“What...” the man said, looking down at his legs in complete confusion.

Behind him, Alric saw another knight clad in chain mail, his surcoat dyed black, with the emblem of a raven on the chest.

“Some men never learn to protect their legs,” Rafe said cheerfully, then brought the pommel of his sword bashing down on the kneeling man’s head. He collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

“Well done,” Alric said. The other knight doubtless saved his life.

“You’ve done the same for me,” Rafe said, then glanced around, gauging the tides of the battle. “We’d best pull back to the others.”

They retreated to the low hill they’d been ordered to defend. The company of knights and foot soldiers had done exactly that, holding back countless sallies. The cost was high. Several of their number were wounded, including their leader, Luc of Braecon. Several more had died.

But they held their ground.

As Alric and Rafe rejoined the company, they automatically looked to Luc, who leaned against the low wall of a hastily constructed earthworks.

“I thought I warned you too late!” Luc said to them, concern still tight in his voice.

“Almost, but Rafe had other plans.” Alric smiled at his friend, though he wasn’t happy at the sight he saw. Luc was pale from pain and blood loss, clutching a

hand to his side where he'd been wounded. But he still stood upright.

The battle continued to rage.

"Men! Form up," Luc ordered grimly, his eyes scanning the whole field.

The twenty or so remaining formed a circle, facing outward so they could see what was coming. It was a maneuver they practiced often, and it served them well over the years.

They held their ground, and slowly established a bulwark against the seemingly ceaseless assaults. Rafe suffered a minor injury to his left leg. A foot soldier fell to a stray arrow, forcing them to watch the skies more closely, which they hadn't needed to do since morning. The small rise where they stood was barely a hill, but it was enough to give advantage, and also let them see what was happening across the field.

"Who's winning?" Rafe asked once, as the sun slipped behind a cloud.

Alric shook his head. "We'll only know at the end."

"Look!" Luc used his sword to point at a figure some fifty yards away. It was a knight, his white surcoat stained with dirt and blood. He fought off another soldier using both blade and body, the scuffle looking as much like a wrestling match as a sword fight.

"Octavian's still alive," Rafe noted. It was easy to recognize the young man, even beyond his unusual fighting style learned from his upbringing in the Holy Land. His skin was several shades darker than that of most Englishmen, the result of his African parentage.

“Not for long if he fights alone,” Alric added. “I’ll be back.”

Alric broke ranks and plowed his way across the field. The battle had changed from one massive clash to a hundred small skirmishes, as the remaining soldiers on both sides fought to maintain whatever ground they could. Alric jumped over several bodies as he made his way to Octavian.

“Fall back, Tav!” he yelled as he came within striking distance. “You have cover.”

Octavian obeyed instantly, allowing Alric to step into his place and finish the fight, which he did with a minimum of fanfare. He used all his years of practice to destroy his opponent, delivering a final blow that dropped the soldier before he could utter a sound.

“Don’t spar with your enemy,” he told Octavian when he turned. “It’s not a tournament.”

“Yes, sir.” Octavian wasn’t looking at Alric, because he was scanning the field, just as he should. “Where do we go?”

Alric pointed to the rise. “There.”

When they reached safety, Octavian explained what happened. “My company was split, and I had to stand alone. But I saw a signal about ten minutes ago. We can regroup near that line of trees to the east.”

“Then we should go.” Alric knew that if Luc wasn’t tended to soon, his chances of surviving the night would be slim.

“Wait,” Rafe said, his voice hoarse from a day of yelling. “The enemy is moving.”

The enemy was indeed regrouping. Alric watched with narrowed eyes. No, not just regrouping...

"The empress's forces are retreating," he said. "Keep an eye out, but I think we're past the worst danger."

He was right. Following an unheard order, the remaining troops on the side of Empress Maud suddenly withdrew from the field. It was an orderly retreat, but a retreat nonetheless. Cheers broke out from the king's soldiers.

"The Lord blesses our cause," Rafe said dryly. "The king is now king of this sodden, muddy ground."

"So he is," said Luc, with no trace of sarcasm. "And everyone will talk of how the king maintained his hold, despite the empress's recent gains. This will hearten those whose support was wavering."

The company prepared to regroup with the main army, using planks to carry the wounded who couldn't walk. But just as they were about to march out, Octavian gave a warning, pointing to an approaching rider.

They tightened their formation. But when they saw that the rider wore the king's colors, the assembled knights relaxed.

"Stand down," the rider said, "and take heart. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed. By holding this point, you prevented a company of the empress's men from flanking us. That is why we hold the field today. Come. You are ordered to follow me."

"Follow you where?" Rafe asked.

“To the king.”

Everyone halted in a moment of honest surprise at the summons.

Then Luc, lying on a plank, broke the silence. “We serve at the pleasure of the king. I don’t suppose he’ll offer us something to drink?”

Chapter 2



THREE DAYS LATER, ON THE wide track leading west, small dust clouds whirled up and away. The dust was cast up by an entourage of men on horseback, riding at a steady pace. The riders were followed by horse-drawn carts, and then squires on foot.

“I can’t believe the king granted all of us leave,” Octavian was saying. “And in summer, when we are most needed!”

Alric glanced back at the litter that carried Luc. “Needed or not, some of us won’t be fighting for a while.”

“He’ll recover,” Octavian said with the confidence of the young. “But still, it was kind of the king to allow us to escort him home.”

“The king is a soldier himself. He knows men are not made to work ceaselessly. We need the rest—and we are owed it.”

Octavian said, more quietly, “I didn’t know Luc was so close to King Stephen. He looked truly angered when he saw Luc’s wound.”

“They share some blood,” Alric acknowledged, “though distant. And Luc’s family has supported Stephen’s claim from the very first. He values loyalty in those around him. What king does not?”

The younger knight nodded thoughtfully. Octavian was younger than Alric, barely twenty years old, but deliberate in all he did. Perhaps traveling far from home made him that way.

Absently, Alric touched the sleeve of his tunic, just below the elbow. He felt the texture of the ribbon he wore hidden underneath, and an almost overpowering sense of homesickness besieged him. He remembered with perfect clarity the day he received the ribbon, and the face of Cecily, who gave it to him.

Five long years had passed since Alric left this part of the country, but the landmarks were still familiar to him. The wide-spreading oak by the little river ford, the inn where they had watered their horses. Eagerness was gnawing at him, the result of nearing the end of his journey.

“Still hours before you see it, brother,” said a voice nearby.

Alric looked over at Luc, riding in his litter. Luc had a gift for knowing what other people were thinking, though Alric guessed a blind man would see his desire to return to the place he thought of as home.

“Don’t think yourself wise for seeing the obvious,”

he warned, riding a bit closer.

Rafe joined them. “Luc is wise?” he asked with a sly grin. “What insanity is this? Was he hit in the head as well?”

Rafe looked the healthiest of all of them, despite his minor wound. With truly black hair and a face seemingly made to drive women to distraction, it was easy to imagine him as the knight in any ballad. He would be trouble when they returned to Cleobury, Alric guessed. He wished Luc didn’t have to return to his estate, but it made sense for him to be with his family as he recovered.

The crossroads appeared all too quickly for Alric’s taste. Octavian drew off respectfully when the two older knights gathered by Luc’s litter to say their goodbyes. He knew they all trained together and shared a unique bond.

Luc seemed melancholy at parting. Rafe looked unperturbed, but then, Rafe never looked as if such matters touched him. He was equally nonchalant whether at a feast or in the middle of a battle.

“Time to part,” Rafe said, looking at the north road, and then the sky, where a few birds circled high overhead. “With luck, we’ll all reach our destinations by dark.”

“We’ve been five years together fighting. And years before that in training. Time and distance change our circumstances,” said Luc. “But we once swore an oath to treat each other as brothers, both in war and peace. That oath still holds.”

“Yes,” Alric confirmed.

“Of course,” Rafe added.

Luc smiled at them both. “Never forget it. Come to me if you have need, or tell me how to help if I can. And I will do the same.”

With an effort, Luc withdrew his sword from where it lay next to him in its scabbard. He held it hilt-up. “Swear it, just as before.”

Alric put his hand on the pommel, then looked at Rafe.

“Such ceremony,” Rafe said. “Is there not something a little unfaithful about swearing an oath twice?” Nevertheless, he put his right hand over Alric’s.

“It’s not the same oath,” Luc argued, putting his right hand over both of theirs. “The first oath was made years ago by boys the night before our first battle. We watched over each other and survived. This oath is made by men. We swear to watch over each other still. No matter what dangers or threats may come.”

“Poverty?” Rafe asked, with that sly smile. “Or a poor marriage prospect?”

“Yes,” said Luc, his expression as serious as Rafe’s was mocking. “Or sickness, or brigands, or betrayal by an ally. We will come to one another’s aid, just as brothers. Swear it on the cross made by this sword.”

“I swear it,” said Alric.

“Sworn,” said Rafe. “May I turn ugly if I break this solemn vow.” Then he laughed, his moment of seriousness over. “Can’t think of a worse fate than that!”

“Always vain,” Luc muttered to Rafe, then regained his gravity. “And I swear it. We’re brothers, till death takes us all and we meet in Paradise.”

At that moment a screech sounded above them. A hawk plunged through the air to attack a raven. The two creatures struggled in the air, attracting the attention of another bird, a falcon of some sort.

Alric looked up, disturbed by the sudden violence after the moment of calm. “He’ll kill it,” he muttered.

“Kill or be killed,” Rafe said. “That’s the order of things.”

“But must it be?” Luc shook himself, and returned the sword to its scabbard.

Alric clapped a hand to Luc’s shoulder. “Safe journey. Send word if you need anything.”

“Naturally. Haven’t I just promised to do so?” Luc laughed.

Rafe said nothing, though Alric was reassured by the look of loss he detected on Rafe’s face. Rafe so often hid his feelings behind clever comments. If he said nothing, it meant he was serious.

Luc signaled his squires to turn north.

“Farewell!” Luc gave a final wave.

They watched for just a moment, then Rafe said, “We’d best move on, too. If I’m not behind the walls of Cleobury manor by sunset, I’ll hold you responsible, *brother*.”

“We can race the last mile,” Alric replied.

Chapter 3



CECILY WAS NECK DEEP IN the scents of borage, mint, and thyme, reveling in the sweet air of the garden and the golden light all about her. Though she was in the middle of the busy manor of Cleobury, with folk hard at work all around her, the gardens were comparatively quiet. A thick evergreen hedge surrounded them, keeping the world within safe from harsh wind and dust and animals that would eat the greens.

Her personal garden always delighted her. She looked over the rows of rampant greenery, rich with the splendor of a summer day. Nodding to herself, she carefully pinched off the last few buds on the peppermint she had knelt down to deal with. Allowing mint to flower was a sign of a careless gardener, she thought. She'd come back later to harvest the richly scented leaves. Perhaps tonight, when a nearly full moon would light her way. The hot sun stole some of

the potency of the leaves, and since Cecily's goal was to dry the mint for use in winter medicines, she needed to harvest the mint when the power in the plant was strongest. A cool, moonlit night would be ideal.

"Cecily!" a voice called, interrupting her musing. "Where are you?"

Cecily stood up. To the woman calling her name, it must have seemed that the garden had sprouted a golden flower. Cecily's bright blonde hair, braided in a loose plait, hung down her back. The green dress she wore only enhanced the notion that she was part plant herself.

"What is it, Pavia?" she asked the woman.

"I've been sent here on a mission," Pavia announced. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and two dimples appeared when she smiled. It seemed impossible that Pavia was now fifty years of age. She was still companion to Lady Cecily, serving as chaperone, teacher, and confidante. For Cecily, who had never known her mother, Pavia filled that role perfectly.

She was also terribly fond of tricks. Cecily sensed one was afoot now.

"A mission?" she repeated. "From whom?"

"The head cook!" Pavia replied. "The kitchen needs more chives and thyme for supper tonight. And some onions. Small ones will do!"

"I can gather all those," Cecily said. "But why was such a trivial task entrusted to you?"

"Oh, you know I've a keen interest in all matters pertaining to food." Pavia patted her belly. She fol-

lowed Cecily, who moved to collect the requested items.

“Thyme. Chives. Onions.” Cecily worked quickly, though she harvested a bit more of each ingredient when Pavia urged her to.

“Cook also asked for sweet henry,” Pavia added, as if she’d just remembered. “Is there any in flower?”

“Well, yes. But whatever for?” Cecily asked. “We only uses sweet henry for the cup made on feast days.”

Pavia nearly bounced on her feet, now too excited to maintain her nonchalance. “As tonight will be! That is the news I bear. Our contingent is returning from the king’s service. A runner has just come to report. They’ll be here by sundown!”

“By sundown?” Cecily gasped. *Alric*. That meant *he’d* be here by sundown.

“Glad tidings, yes?” Pavia said. “You’re to hurry and prepare yourself to be hostess.”

“Indeed.” Cecily came to her feet. “The war is not over, though. We would have heard.”

Pavia sobered. “No. I fear we are still in the grip of violence.” She reached out to take the baskets from Cecily. “But the fact remains that our men are coming back tonight. Now go. Take joy in this small blessing.”

Cecily nodded, and hastened down the path to the manor proper. She crossed the courtyard of the castle and entered the great hall.

“My lady!” A maid named Runild greeted her with an eager grin. “Have you heard? Our knights are returning! And their squires—my brother John is among

them. Our men are coming home!”

“Yes, I have just received the news,” said Cecily. “Let us hope they are all coming back to us safe and whole. I will come down to the great hall just as soon as I’ve made myself presentable.”

“Oh, your uncle was asking for you, my lady,” the maid said.

“Then I shall find him first.” Cecily changed direction again, and went down a short hallway to the large solar, which her uncle used as a receiving room.

She stepped inside, still blinking as her sight adjusted from the bright day outside to this much dimmer space.

“Ah, the fair maiden Cecily,” said a voice, low and faintly raspy.

Cecily turned to see Laurence, the scribe her uncle employed for much of the business he conducted on behalf of the manor. Laurence was perhaps sixty, pale due to his indoor work, and weak-eyed from long evenings spent with only a candle to light his desk. But he was dressed impeccably, in bright clothing that would not be out of place in the king’s own court.

Despite his well-appointed look, there was something in Laurence’s eyes that chilled Cecily every time he looked at her. Yet her uncle valued the man, so she kept her thoughts to herself.

“Good day,” she greeted him civilly. “I was told my uncle is looking for me. Is he here?”

Her uncle Theobald opened the door from a small inner room.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, walking to the large wooden table where all his correspondence lay. “Come in, my dear. There is good news. Very good news indeed.”

“I hear our men are coming back,” she said.

“Yes. The king has granted them leave for some months, and it is well-deserved, from the reports I read.”

“You had reports?” she asked. “Does that mean you know how they fare?” Was Alric wounded?

“Of course I had reports,” he said. “They are my vassals. I need to know what occurs so I can manage their affairs if needed.”

“If one dies, you mean! Uncle, why did you never tell me when you received word?”

“What interest do you have in war?” asked Laurence from where he sat. “Surely it is out of your writ, which extends no further than the manor walls.”

She felt his remark was uncalled for. “They are our men, fighting to defend us. That interests me!”

“She makes a worthy point, Laurence,” Theobald said. One glance quelled the scribe.

“Indeed, my lord,” he said, as if he never disagreed.

Theobald saw Cecily’s distressed look, and softened his tone. “Do not focus on unpleasant things. I would have told you if you needed to know anything important.”

“Yes, my lord,” she murmured.

Theobald never liked it when she argued. He said

sharp words were not becoming to a lady. But lately, Cecily had come to realize just how little she agreed with her uncle about what exactly she was entitled to know. He seemed to think she should be content doing needlework or minding her garden flowers. Cecily yearned for a wider view. Still, she knew better than to confront Theobald about it.

She dipped her head, saying, "What do you wish of me, Uncle?"

He smiled at her, his temper restored. "Only what you will surely be pleased to do. I request that you make yourself look like a true lady of this manor. The men ought to know what jewel they have sworn to protect." He walked around the desk and pulled a crushed mint leaf from Cecily's hair. "Though you smell rather good, you don't look like the proper lady I know you can be."

"Of course, Uncle." She blushed, embarrassed by her unkempt appearance. "I was working in the gardens, and I was just about to go up to Agnes to prepare for tonight. Shall I wear the blue gown, from the fabric you bought for me at the last fair? With the white flowers embroidered on it?"

"That will do very well," Theobald said with an approving nod.

He dismissed her, and Cecily continued up the stairway to her own chamber, the room made prettier due to Pavia's weavings hanging from the walls and the fresh flowers Cecily always had in a bowl near the window.

Agnes was waiting for her there. “Where have you been? The water will be cold! Did no one tell you we’re to have a feast tonight?”

“Yes, I was told by Pavia, who knew from Cook, who knew from whoever! And then Runild told me just before Uncle Theobald told me! I must be the last person to hear of it.”

“Not to be wondered at, considering no one can ever find you in that forest you call a garden. You’re here now, so all’s well.”

Cecily allowed Agnes to help her undress, and then took a sponge and soaked it in a basin of lavender-scented water. The water was still stunningly hot, despite Agnes’s fears. As Cecily washed the dirt from her face and arms, she tried to picture the homecoming of the men.

All’s well, Agnes had said. But would it be?

Everyone spoke of “the men” returning. But no names were mentioned, and Cecily knew that not all the knights and men-at-arms who had gone forth in service to the king would return. News was rare and often delayed. What would she do if she looked for a face that never appeared?

She remembered the face as if it was yesterday, and not five years ago, that Alric left with the company of knights. He had told her not to worry about him. She did anyway. At first she wrote letters to be sent along with Theobald’s official missives. But Alric never wrote back, not once. Cecily was forced to acknowledge that the older boy forgot his childhood friend

once he entered the world of knightly battle.

Cecily had been hurt by his lack of communication, and it had taken a long time, far longer than she'd ever admit, for the wound to heal. As she grew up, she began to understand the cares that could weigh on an adult, especially a knight. She shouldn't have been surprised when his youthful promise to remember her was soon swept away.

But in her heart, she kept the memory of Alric close. She had lengthy, private conversations with the Alric of her dreams, and even imagined what advice he would give her and tried to act on it. She remembered his warm brown eyes and how serious he looked all the time, always concerned about the right way to do things.

She remembered a day when he sat in judgment over two boys who had gotten into a rough fight in the courtyard. Though only a squire then, he had acted with all the moral authority of a lord himself. He listened carefully to both boys' arguments and defense. He called witnesses. Then he pronounced a sober judgment on the lad who had started the fight, holding him to the code of chivalry that their elders all followed. The boy's punishment was to attend Alric and perform all the squire's own duties for a day. Such was Alric's nature that by the end of the day, the lad actually thanked Alric for the chosen punishment.

Cecily still prayed regularly for the men's safe return, and Alric's in particular, but over the last few years, she had started to doubt that the knights would

ever come home.

Now they were back. Would he remember her once he saw her? Would he speak to her? Could their friendship be renewed? Cecily fervently wished the answers to all those questions would be yes, but her belly started to knot with concern.

“Are you quite done, or are you intent on turning into a fish?” Agnes asked, breaking her reverie. “Come and sit by the window. I must make you ready for the feast.”

Cecily sighed and let the sponge splash back into the water. Her skin was now soft and smelling of lavender. She glanced down at her arms and admitted to herself that her skin was somewhat darker than became a lady, almost tawny, despite her naturally fair complexion. That’s what days of working in the gardens did though, and she’d far rather do that than embroider.

Agnes bade her sit on a stool so she could brush Cecily’s hair free of tangles.

“Uncle wants me to look presentable,” Cecily said. “I told him I’d wear the new blue gown.”

“I’ve made it ready,” Agnes clucked. “After I braid your hair, you’ll wear the gold circlet. Don’t say a word! I know how heavy it is, but if you are the lady of the manor, you must look it. And you shall wear the gold necklace and your mother’s rings.”

Cecily remained silent while Agnes dressed and groomed her. With every layer of fabric and new piece of jewelry, she felt the added weight and wondered if

this was how it felt for knights as they prepared for a battle. Though she wore soft wool while they wore chainmail, perhaps it was not so different. She often felt like she was fighting against the sheer weight of expectation her uncle put on her to be the sort of lady he thought she should be. Cecily knew she was anything but proper. Yet she was forced to play the part.

By the end, Cecily did feel as though she wore a sort of armor, protecting against anyone seeing *her*. Instead, they'd see her fine clothes and the gold at her hands and throat. They'd think her a perfect lady.

Agnes kept up a constant chatter while she worked, filling Cecily in on the doings around the castle and her expectations of how life would change with the men back.

“Weddings every month, mark my words. Some of those women have been waiting for years! And other marriages will be hasty affairs, what with the men back among lasses all too eager to please such vaunted knights and squires! Oh, but I need to mind my tongue.”

“I know very well what you mean,” Cecily said, a bit tartly. “You think I don't know what happens when couples slip away from the feasts?”

“You *think* you know, child. But there's a world of difference in knowing why a woman's belly swells after such trysts and knowing just what happens! Theobald has waited long enough to find you a husband. You're old enough.”

“I don't need a husband,” Cecily protested. “And

Uncle needs a lady here at Cleobury. He's never remarried since his wife died. I like my life here well enough."

"Sweet Cecily," Agnes bent to kiss her forehead. "You'll find that marriage suits you well. It is the natural life for a lady, and it is the way of the world."

"Let's not talk about that," she said, standing up. "Not tonight. Do I look correct?"

She held out her arms and spun about, the bottom of the dress swinging out, showing the bright white of her shift beneath the elaborate overdress. The gold-threaded ribbons at her sides and her wrists flashed in the light. Gold ornaments glinted in the dimming light of the room.

"You are a vision," Agnes said, "and you will dazzle every eye. Now go down to the hall. They'll be waiting for you!"

Chapter 4



WEARY FROM RIDING, ALRIC THOUGHT of Cleobury with both anticipation and dread, something he'd never have admitted out loud. Their pace quickened as they got closer. Rafe and Alric were still accompanied by Octavian, who'd been charged with delivering some messages in the region from the king's officers.

More than anything, Alric wanted to see Cecily. A small, secret part of him hoped that she would come running down the track through the gates as soon as the troop was sighted. He knew that was a fantasy. She'd be grown up, perhaps betrothed or even married now. The thought made him tense. What if she'd been offered to some idiot for political gain?

But he wouldn't feel as if he'd truly come home until he saw her and knew she was safe and happy. And if he found otherwise...he'd take steps, to hell with the consequences.

“Nearly there now,” Rafe said, breaking Alric’s woolgathering. “And not a moment too soon.”

“I hope they cooked enough for an army,” Alric said. “I’ll be pleased to be inside friendly walls tonight.”

“I’ll be pleased to be inside friendly thighs tonight!” Rafe quipped. He never seemed to have difficulty finding a woman to share his bed.

Alric glanced over at him, annoyed by the comment. “These are our lord’s people.”

“I’m jesting,” Rafe said.

“No, you’re not.”

“Well, is it a crime to want a woman after all this time?”

A squire riding nearby broke in. “All this time? What were you doing with that whore at the inn last night? Weaving cloth for the winter?”

Rafe laughed, conceding the point. “All the same, I’m done with battle for a little while, so why should I not look for a woman to take care of me? Perhaps the lady Cecily.”

Alric’s fists clenched, but he kept his tone mild. “She is destined for one higher than a mere knight. If you woo her, you’re as likely to end up on the shadowed side of a churchyard as in the church.”

“A dowry such as hers, though... No, you’re right,” Rafe grumbled, acknowledging the truth of the matter. “Her uncle wouldn’t like it.”

Alric calmed slightly. He should be used to Rafe’s jibes and boasts. The knight didn’t have a prayer of

ascending the ranks to marry Lord Theobald's heiress, no matter how glib or good-looking he might be. No knight did.

Octavian asked, "Who is this lady?"

"Our lord's niece," Alric explained. "Cecily is daughter of Rainald de Vere. After he died, his surviving brother Theobald took the title. He has no children, though, so it goes to Cecily next. Theobald holds it in trust for her."

"And she's forbidden, as we've just been warned," Rafe added, in a mock-serious tone. "So don't get ideas in your head."

Octavian looked shocked at the notion. "I'm just here at the request of the king."

"To deliver letters!" Rafe shook his head. "Why send you when we're already going? Even *I* can carry a letter," he added in mutter.

"He's testing me," Octavian said. "He wonders if a man born so far from here can possibly be loyal. I intend to show him that it doesn't matter where I'm from. My word is all that matters."

"Ugh. *Youth*." Rafe laughed though, his humor restored.

At that moment, the squire riding in front turned and waved his arm.

"There it is!" Alric said. "Cleobury."

The manor gate loomed ahead of them as the last shafts of sunlight struck like gold arrows through the leaves of the forest. Recent fortifications made it look more imposing than Alric remembered, but the cheers

of the folk lining the track warmed his heart, and of course, the gate was open, since they were expected. *We're coming home.*

He looked in vain for Cecily's face among the crowd.

When the knights reached the courtyard, several pages and stable boys were ready to mind the horses. Alric leapt down, and found one eager to take the reins of his warhorse. Alric said, "Treat him well, he's had a long journey. What's your name, lad?"

"Edmund, Sir Alric." The boy ducked his head in a sort of bow.

Alric's lip quirked. Should he be surprised that a lad of only ten or so years knew who he was? He couldn't decide. "Brush him down, and be sure to give him an apple or two."

"Yes, sir. What's the horse called?"

"Rolande. He's an intelligent creature, and he knows his name."

Edmund smiled, pleased to be in charge of such a fine animal. Satisfied that his horse was in good hands, Alric turned to see another boy waiting.

"Lord Theobald awaits," the page said. "He wishes to speak with you before the feast."

Alric suppressed a tiny groan. Being in charge meant these little things always fell to him. The other men would be halfway through a side of beef before he even reached the main hall.

Octavian made a gesture indicating that he would accompany him on the errand, but Alric waved him

off. "I won't be long, and you should meet the folk here."

Alric followed the page into the large stone manor house. The solar the lord Theobald used for his work was lit only by a few candles, and the man himself was half in shadow, his face lean, with dark circles under his eyes. Alric was startled by how haggard the man looked. Theobald never seemed to sleep, and ate only sparingly, as Alric remembered. But he had aged considerably in the past few years. The grey in his hair had overtaken the brown, and his shoulders stooped now, as though holding up the weight of the whole manor.

Beside Theobald and himself, there was only a single servant present, a sort of clerk who was the lord's shadow. Laurence. That was the man's name.

Alric bowed to Theobald. "My lord, I am glad to see you well. I trust our lady is also well?" Why was she not here, Alric wondered. The manor was as much hers as Theobald's, and the men served her, too.

"She is well. She readies herself for tonight," Theobald said. "We'll join the festivities when you complete your report."

"Very well," said Alric, pleased to hear Cecily still lived at Cleobury. "I can report that your men have returned and the king is satisfied with our service, granting us leave until Luc of Braecon recovers. Six men died, and three suffered injuries great enough to prevent them from entering combat again. The rest are healthy and able to continue serving you and the lady Cecily. I have the documents from the king's

clerks relating to the details of our service. They are in my personal chest. Shall I send a servant to unpack it?”

Theobald stood up, waving the suggestion away. “On the morrow. Is there anything I should know immediately about the king’s progress, anything you could not commit to paper? Tell me before we go into the feast, if needful.”

Alric considered. “There are a few things to report, my lord, but I would not say they are urgent. I will spend an hour or so tomorrow to give you all the particulars. And in turn, I shall be grateful to know how things have passed here while we have been away.”

“The usual matters,” Theobald said. “I watch the lands to the west carefully.”

Alric nodded in understanding. The princes among the Welsh were not always content with the border, and they often took advantage of distracted marcher lords, launching raiding parties into English territory.

“The new curtain wall is meant to thwart them from attempting to attack the manor?” Alric asked. “When was the last raid?”

“There were a few small forays this winter past,” Theobald said. “Not more than twenty men, roaming through the shire and seizing easy prey. Like as not, they were simply masterless men who spoke Welsh, rather than a sanctioned raid.”

Alric nodded. “Quite possible. The Long Forest and the Ardenwood to the north can shelter all too many brigands. It’s just as well to keep people safe

here.”

“But they must go sometimes,” said Theobald, looking displeased about it. “The pigs must be tended as they graze in the forest. There are mushrooms to be found, or fallen wood to gather. The women of the manor go berrying all through summer. And I often lead the hunt. The forest is almost as well peopled as the village or the manor.”

“Perhaps that keeps more brigands away,” Alric concluded.

He followed Theobald out into the corridor and to the great hall, where the laughter of the gathered folk was already growing loud.

Alric looked around the space, searching for Cecily.

The hall blazed with light. Torches were stuck into holders along the walls, and a large fire burned in the middle of the room, even though it was high summer. Alric took in the dozens of brightly gowned women and the men dressed in the finest clothes they had. The feast brought everyone together. Everyone mingled here from the lowest villeins to the knights to the parish priest to the highest nobles. But he didn't see the bright face of his childhood friend.

Then his eyes were caught by the vision of a fine lady standing at the high table. Had Lord Theobald finally married again? Who was this woman so laden with gold that she gleamed in the light?

She must be a new wife, chosen for her wealth or her bloodline. Theobald was a shrewd man who gained every advantage in a transaction, and he'd look

at a marriage no differently. This lady must be someone important.

Then she turned her head toward him, and Alric felt like he'd taken a blow to the gut. Cecily.

Those fine grey eyes were unmistakable. But Cecily the girl was gone, and here was a woman, fully grown and fully aware of her place. The deep blue gown with its elaborate stitching made it clear that *she* was the lady of this castle, and the gold circlet in her soft gold hair made it clear that she was a lady to be reckoned with.

The shift was so overwhelming, Alric didn't know how to react. He knew she'd be beautiful. Just not so unreachably beautiful. Had he truly thought there'd be a way to pick up the old threads of friendship, or the childish affection they'd shared? He was mad. Cecily was a lady, in every way. If he wanted to be near her, it would be only in the capacity of a knight and liege lady. Just as he served her father and then her uncle. Alric blinked once, in an effort to lock the new image of Cecily in his mind, erasing the girl he used to know.

Then she looked directly at him. Even across the room, her expression changed when she saw him—did she recognize him? She must. But then that aloof queenly look was back, and her eyes passed on. Had he only imagined her recognizing him? Had *he* changed that much?

“Our lord Theobald has arrived,” Cecily called out, to the general cheer of the people. “And our knights and men have returned at last!”

The cheering grew louder at that, and Alric found himself quickly surrounded by well-wishers. Rafe stepped up to him, pressing a full mug of ale into his hand. He lost sight of Cecily once more.

Everyone clamored around him, asking for news and sharing years of gossip. Alric was offered more food and more drink and wanted none of it. He thought he was coming home, but after seeing Cecily's distant face, he felt like a stranger.

Chapter 5



CECILY THOUGHT SHE MIGHT FAINT when Alric entered the great hall at her uncle's side. It took her a moment to realize it *was* Alric. When had he become so...magnificent?

She always thought him handsome. As a knight in constant training, he was slim and well-conditioned, the muscles of his arms and back made strong through daily practice with a sword. She hadn't remembered him being quite so broad-shouldered, but there he was, as perfect a man as any woman could hope for. His hair was still a rich chestnut, with not so much as a hint of silver yet. His skin had grown duski-er from summer campaigns. And his eyes were still that welcoming brown.

As she caught his gaze, she quickly turned away to speak to someone near her, giving herself a moment to compose her face.

Alric had changed. Of course he had changed! Five years had passed.

But she admitted to herself that in some ways Alric hadn't changed much at all. It was simply that she now had no veil of friendship between her eyes and her mind to obscure how she reacted to him.

Cecily chanced another look at him. The eyes were deeply brown, but welcoming? Not anymore. There was a coldness in his gaze, a new wariness. The result of so many years expecting attack? Or something deeper?

Thankfully, the rituals of feasting gave her plenty to occupy her mind. Theobald offered a toast to the health of all the returning knights and their squires, one that was heartily cheered by everyone in the hall. Then the servants brought out the first courses, and soon the tables were piled high with food.

Because the kitchen did not have much warning, the most elaborate dishes one might see at a feast were absent—the subtleties and the roast swans and such. But there was ham and mutton and beef in abundance. Meat was roasted or boiled, sauced or sliced, hot or cold. And in addition to the meats, there were all sorts of breads, both sweet and savory. Cooked puddings steamed up the room, and preserved fruits lay like jewels on silver platters.

“Quite a presentation,” said Pavia, from where she sat next to Cecily.

“One might almost think we were expecting their return,” Cecily noted dryly. She was still irked at the

late warning.

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re not happy they’ve come back!” Pavia gave a little laugh. “I’m pleased to see such knights, though they’re all too young for me! Which one was always at your side? What was his name? Hawk?”

“Alric of Hawksmere. Yes,” Cecily murmured. “He’s here. He will not have remembered the child I was.” She watched covertly as Alric spoke with Sir Rafe and an unknown knight with an uncommonly dark complexion.

“Well, they have seen much of the world in the past few years.” Pavia sighed, then nodded toward the stranger. “And now they bring back someone from the Holy Land itself. How remarkable a journey. I’d never have the strength to travel so far! He must have stories to tell.” The older lady signaled a servant to ask the newcomer over.

He obeyed the summons instantly, though he had to put aside his own meal to do so. He bowed graciously to both Cecily and Pavia, announcing himself as Octavian.

Pavia smiled impishly. “Well met, sir,” she said. “I half feared the ladies of the hall would bore you, hence your not coming over to greet us already.”

“That was not my intent,” the young knight said, looking stricken. “Forgive me if I appeared uncouth.”

Pavia laughed, and Cecily did as well. She could see that Octavian was either serious in all things, or he wasn’t quite used to the language, and thus missed

Pavia's joking tone.

"On the contrary," Pavia reassured him. "Your manners are admirable. You were raised well."

"Do not mind Pavia's jokes," Cecily added. "She takes little in this life seriously."

"But I am quite serious about learning more of you, sir," said Pavia. "Tell us a little of your home."

He nodded, used to the question. "I was born in the Kingdom of Edessa, and that is why they now call me Octavian de Levant."

"And your family?" Pavia asked.

"My father was born in a Christian kingdom of Africa, and he served as a soldier on the side of the Franks. He helped secure the city of Edessa against the incursions of the Saracens, who now seek to re-take the lands the Franks claimed during their crusade. It was there he met my mother, who was so beautiful he offered to marry her the day he saw her...so I was told. I have never met my parents."

"Oh!" Cecily said. "How did that come to be?"

"When my mother died bearing me, I was given to a monastery to be raised. I was the eighth boy to be left there that year," he added.

"Thus Octavian," said Pavia.

He nodded. "The one who brought me to the monks told them of my parents. And they told me when I was old enough to know."

"Were you meant to be an oblate?"

"No. I think I was left at a monastery only to ensure my upbringing. But the monks were of a military

order. Thus I learned to fight, and soon found my calling.”

“So you were raised as a soldier. And you must have been taught English,” Cecily concluded.

“Indeed, as well as French and Latin. And a little Greek.”

“Why leave the Holy Land at all?” Pavia asked. “Especially when so many men seek to go there?”

Octavian’s expression changed, becoming guarded. “There is strife, and disease, and famine—just as anywhere else. When the lord I was serving heard of the dispute between King Stephen and the Empress Maud, he decided to return to his ancestral lands to protect his own claims. I asked to join him, because I want to see more of the world. On his return, he declared for Stephen, and I am bound to serve my lord, so I entered the king’s army as a man-at-arms.”

“Any lord would be pleased to have your fealty,” Pavia said.

Cecily agreed, and added, “You are most welcome at Cleobury, Sir Octavian. My uncle will have said so already, but I add my welcome to his.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Octavian said solemnly.

He rejoined the table where the other men were seated.

“My goodness,” Pavia sighed. “What pretty eyes that young man has.”

Cecily hadn’t noticed. She looked over at Alric again. He was either completely absorbed in the discussion his tablemates were having, or he merely

wished to avoid looking toward Cecily, because he never even turned his head.

Cecily managed to eat a serving of juicy beef, though not before the hard bread of her trencher became thoroughly soaked through. She should eat the trencher too, but she was far too distracted to feel hungry. She sipped wine from her goblet. The taste of it tingled lightly on her tongue. She always watered her wine, at Pavia's recommendation. A wise woman should never risk drunkenness.

A footman approached Cecily. "My lady?"

"Yes, John?"

"There are beggars at the gates," he told her.

"Well, let them in," she said, surprised he would even bother to ask. Beggars were always free to enter the manor on feast days and beg what they could from the people, even in the hall itself.

He twisted his hands nervously. "But my lady, some are lepers. If we allow the beggars in, the lepers may sneak in as well. Right now they are tame enough, but they clamor for food."

Cecily said, "Those who are not marked as lepers may enter, just as always. Tell the kitchen to bring some bread outside the gates where the lepers may take it. They will not violate the rules and come inside."

"Are you certain, my lady?"

"Quite. Do as I say and have no fear, John."

Not long after, a beggar came to Cecily's feet. He seemed a little younger than Cecily, she thought. But

he was bone thin, and his skin was already tanned and wrinkled from living outside in all weather. He looked too scared to even ask for alms.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Bertram,” he said. She could barely hear the name above the noise in the hall.

Cecily smiled, and pushed her trencher toward him. “If you are hungry, take this with my blessing. I can eat no more tonight.”

The beggar reached out cautiously, then grabbed the trencher once he realized it wasn’t a trick.

“Bless you, my lady,” he mumbled, though he stared only at the trencher, the hard bread now soaked with meat juices. “They talk about you at...” he trailed off, eyes glazed. His hunger was overwhelming his ability to speak.

“Go and eat,” she said kindly. After the beggar took the offering, he darted away from such august company.

Cecily looked around and noticed that part of the hall was more lively than the rest. There was some discussion going on among the newly returned knights. No, it was more of an argument. Though she couldn’t discern words, the tension was obvious.

The tone of the argument grew, breaking through the genial atmosphere of the feast. But Cecily didn’t truly register what was happening until two figures came to their feet.

“What is going on?” Pavia asked, just as worried.

Within seconds, a circle had formed in the crowd,

as people backed away from the figures in the center of the great hall. Rafe and Alric had both drawn daggers, and were about to take their argument to a distinctly dangerous level.

Octavian, stood as well, but he only hovered uncertainly. Alric and Rafe had years of history, and whatever feud had just burst out was beyond Octavian's ability to mediate.

Still, he tried. "This isn't the time or place..." he began, putting his hands out to each knight in an attempt to bring them back to reason.

"It's as good a place as any!" Rafe snarled, pushing Octavian out of the way to focus on Alric. "I've had enough of your comments, Alric! You never granted me the honor I was due. It's time we had it out. The survivor can go his merry way."

"If I never granted you honor, it's because you never did anything with honor if you could avoid it," Alric snapped back.

"I am the best of us."

"Only at fighting! At all the rest, you're like a child."

"Well, a fight's what you seem to want. Shall we?"

"Yes, let's fight it out, *brother*. So much for your oath."

Cecily had not the slightest idea what they were talking about, but she watched anxiously as they moved toward the high table, where the floor was clearer.

Next to her, Theobald also watched this exchange,

leaning forward with an interested gaze. Both men were known to be excellent fighters in single combat. Alric had a few inches on Rafe, but the smaller man was deadly quick.

Cecily watched in horror. When she saw that her uncle had no intention of stopping it, she took a deep breath and rose from her seat so precipitously that the carved wooden stool rocked back loudly, almost falling. The sound was enough to pull most gazes toward her.

“Stop,” she warned the men. Her voice was too soft to carry, so she repeated herself in a stronger tone. “Stop at once. Do you hear me? How dare you bring violence into this hall!”

Rafe looked back at Alric, but spoke to Cecily. “He’s insulted me once too often. My apologies, Lady Cecily, but this is a matter between men.”

Alric said nothing, only watching Cecily with those dark eyes.

Cecily, seeing that her plea had no effect, crossed her arms. “As the lady of the manor, I forbid any fight or bloodshed on this night.”

Theobald sat back in his carved chair, his gaze falling on the two men, and then Cecily. “Listen to my niece, for she is higher in rank than either of you knights. And she has requested that you not duel.”

“I demand that you not duel,” Cecily corrected. “What madness could possibly lead you, who both survived a five year campaign that has taken comrades of yours to God, to come all the way back home to

spill each other's blood? And in front of women and children? We have laid a feast in your honor, to welcome our men home. This is how you would repay us?" Cecily's voice grew darker and angrier as she spoke. Her fury was as genuine as it was surprising to nearly everyone who watched her.

Rafe apparently saw a number of advantages to acceding to Cecily's demands, because he stepped back from Alric and simultaneously lowered his dagger. "If this is your wish, my lady, then so be it."

Cecily sighed in relief, her rage disappearing as quickly as it had come. She smiled at Rafe. "I thank you, sir."

"So quick to back off," Alric muttered. But Rafe only smirked.

"I would never offend a lady by forcing her to watch a scene of violence," Rafe said, bowing low to Cecily.

Cecily smiled at him, then looked over at Alric.

He scowled, but said, "I will obey. But don't think yourself absolved, Rafe."

Cecily watched anxiously until Alric sheathed his blade. The two knights glared at each other, but the immediate threat was over.

"So much for peace," Pavia noted in a voice low enough that only Cecily heard. "What has come between them, I wonder?"

"It's a pity," Theobald said casually, once the normal tone of conversation resumed. "I always wondered who the better man would be."

“And this is how you find out, Uncle?” Cecily returned. “What sort of omen would it be for our own knights to kill each other?”

“Still,” Theobald mused, watching the scene with a thoughtful, almost worried expression, “those two will someday come to mortal blows. I feel it in my bones.”

Chapter 6



CECILY EXCUSED HERSELF ONCE THE main meal was over, though the entertainment would continue long into the evening, thanks to the musicians earning their pay in the corner of the hall. The vast quantities of ale and wine consumed were starting to take effect on the guests. The noise grew to a din, laughter mixed with songs and lewd comments. Couples began to slip away into the shadows.

She was quite done with it, and yearned to get out of her finery and into more practical clothing. Just escaping the overheated, smoky hall was a relief. She hurried through the sparsely lit passageways to her chamber.

There, Agnes helped her out of the elaborate gown, and put away all the gold jewelry. But when she gestured for Cecily to remove her shift as well, Cecily said no.

“Where’s my green dress? I need to go to the gardens before I retire.”

“Again! You spent all day there.”

“There’s more work to be done, and it can’t wait till morning,” Cecily explained. “I won’t be long.”

Her companion huffed in disapproval. “You should just sleep in the gardens for as much as you’re out there.”

“But then the fair folk will come take me away,” Cecily teased her nurse.

“Aye they would!” said Agnes. “Carry you off to their hills, and we’d never see you again.”

“What would they need me for?”

“The fair folk always like a beautiful young mortal like yourself.”

Cecily only laughed. “They wouldn’t dare spirit me away from the gardens. They’re too close to the manor.”

“Don’t mock the fairies, girl,” Agnes warned. “They are not to be trusted.”

“I’ll tell Father Anselm you said so.”

Her nurse sniffed. She never respected the priest’s disregard of the supernatural realm.

Cecily felt more like herself once she was wearing her usual attire. Something about the plain wool gown—dyed with heather branches to make a pretty soft green, and always smelling faintly of herbs and soil—made her happy. Then Cecily let her hair down with a relieved sigh, loosing the braids with her fingers so that her hair fell in waves.

“Now the fairies will take you for certain,” Agnes declared.

“I’ll be back in less than an hour,” Cecily said. “You’re not rid of me so easily.”

Intent on her task, she walked briskly down the curving stairwell and through the ground floor hallway toward the courtyard. When a shape moved out from a darkened alcove, she jumped in surprise.

“Don’t fear, my lady,” a voice said. “It’s only me.” Rafe emerged into the flickering light of a sconce, his smile putting her at ease.

She had always thought Rafe was handsome. Even when he was younger, his dark, curling hair and high cheekbones were enough to send many of the local girls into fits of silliness, nearly swooning at his beauty. And those who were not impressed by his face could appreciate his body. Since he was a knight in training, he was in superb physical condition, well-muscled and athletic. He took advantage of his looks quite shamelessly, which was the one thing about him that Cecily never liked. He’d favor one girl for a sennight, then steal a kiss from another.

But surely the years had made him more thoughtful and mature. Time had made him even more attractive. And by his smile, he knew it.

“Did I scare you?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” she said. “You startled me.”

“Then I beg your forgiveness.” Rafe stepped closer and reached for her hand. “I would never deliberately cause a lovely creature such as you any distress.” The

kiss he laid on her hand was proper enough, but it also sent a heat through her body.

“It’s quite all right, Sir Rafe,” Cecily said, pulling her hand away.

“I must thank you for your good work earlier,” he went on. “You were right. We should not have brought a petty squabble to your attention, and certainly not at the feast.”

“Petty?” she asked. “You call it petty, yet you would kill a man over the issue?”

Rafe shook his head. “Alric envies me. He has for years.”

“Why should he envy you?” Cecily asked. That made no sense. Alric was not one to dislike another man for no reason. He was one of the fairest people she knew.

“How should I know?” Rafe said. “Maybe he thinks me a threat to his own military reputation. I won several battles for our company, you know.”

“I hadn’t heard,” she said.

“I would tell you all about my deeds, if you like. Some evening soon.”

The look Rafe was giving her made her hot and cold at once.

“But what has that to do with Alric?” she asked, striving to stay on the previous course. “Surely he performed such deeds too.”

“Well, perhaps he’s just jealous that ladies look at me more than him. But is it my fault I’m blessed with this appearance?”

He drew her closer with every word. By the time he finished, she was only inches away from him.

Rafe caught her chin with his free hand, and bent to kiss her directly on the mouth.

Cecily was so shocked that for a moment she didn't know what to do at all. Her body reacted on some instinctual level to the feel of his mouth on hers. He was far too close to her, his body too hot and too demanding. When his hand trailed to her chest, Cecily put her hands up.

"Please stop that! It's most improper." Cecily pulled away, but then found herself trapped between him and the stone wall. How had he turned her around so? "Let me go by."

"You're playing games, Lady Cecily. You like it—no more pretending you don't." He fingered the neckline of her gown with an intensity that made her queasy.

"Stop it. Let me go by," she repeated.

"But I don't want to let you go."

The sound of a heavy footstep made both Cecily and Rafe look over. Alric stood there, his face impassive. "She told you to let her alone."

"Stay out of this," Rafe snapped, his demeanor shifting abruptly, growing darker. "It has nothing to do with you."

"It does." The sound of Alric drawing his dagger erased any idea that he was impassive about the situation. "Cecily kept you out of a fight once this evening. If you don't leave now, she'll find all that persuasion for naught, because I'll put a hole in whatever replaced

your heart. Your behavior is not worthy of a knight... once again.”

“You exaggerate my actions. We were merely talking. Isn’t that so?” he said, turning to Cecily, who was still staring at Alric. “My lady?” he asked, aware he didn’t have her attention.

“Leave,” Alric said, before Cecily could form any words. “Now.”

Rafe’s lip curled into a sneer, but he left, conscious of Alric’s anger, and the fact that Alric still had a dagger drawn.

“By your leave, Cecily,” he said, his voice softer and more insinuating. Then he walked away.

Cecily waited until Rafe was gone before she spoke.

“I thank you,” she whispered. She was mortified Alric had seen Rafe kiss her, and dearly hoped he wouldn’t think she invited it. “He...he didn’t ask...I didn’t want...”

“May I escort you to your room, my lady?” Alric broke in, saving her from having to make an embarrassed explanation.

She took a quick breath, remembering her task. “If you don’t mind, could you escort me to the gardens?”

He frowned. “The gardens? Why?”

“It’s where I was headed when Rafe waylaid me. I have to go. There are some plants which must be harvested at night.”

Alric nodded in understanding. “Then we go to the gardens. I’ll wait while you work there, and escort you back to your chamber.”

Cecily sighed in relief. She'd been afraid to ask him to do just that, and she feared Rafe would find her again in the relative isolation of the gardens. "Again, I thank you." She then added, "You always watched over me."

His iron expression softened at her words. "I didn't think you remembered."

Cecily smiled at him, suddenly giddy with happiness. "Alric, you fool. Of course I remember."

Chapter 7



CECILY'S SIMPLE WORDS SENT A shock through him.
Of course I remember.

Alric couldn't form a good response, so he just offered his arm. "Show me the way to the gardens. It's been a while."

Cecily took his arm as trustingly as she had when she was a little girl, the warmth of her fingers seeping through the linen shirt he wore. Her gesture awakened so many memories he could hardly begin to sort through them.

They walked out into the courtyard. It was now late enough so the moon rose silver and white over the trees, and illuminated everything with an otherworldly sheen. From the great hall, golden light spilled out of the opened doorways, along with the sounds of laughter and music. People were scattered about, some walking, some sitting.

Cecily pointed the way to the gardens, marked by a

thick hedge. She led him through an opening in the hedge, and he suddenly chuckled. “I remember now. We all played hide and seek here.”

Cecily laughed, the sound as silvery as the moonlight. “The children still do. It’s the perfect place for it! I used to worm my way into the evergreens and watch all the seekers go by. No one could see me at all.”

“A confession, Cecily,” Alric said. “Your hair was so gold that no leaves could hide it. But I didn’t want to give you away, so I rounded up the others first.”

“You cheated!” she accused him.

“Hardly. I was being chivalrous by keeping your secret.”

“That’s not how the game should be played.”

He laughed at her reprimand. “I’ll keep that in mind should I ever play it again.”

Cecily shook her head. “Come. The herb garden is this way.”

She took a side path, and within moments, the smells alone told him they had reached the herb garden. Plants grew in rows, all contained within squares. The pattern was tidy and practical, allowing a gardener to reach any plant without needing to step too far from the little gravel pathways. Though Alric knew nothing of gardening, he could tell this place was well cared for.

“You’ve made the garden your domain?” he surmised. “You always liked flowers.”

“My choices are few,” she replied, looking over the silver-washed scene with pride. “By learning the uses

of plants, I can do the most good. Follow me. I need to harvest mint tonight. The weather is good, cool and clear. I'm glad I could come...after what happened." She looked away from him, hiding her expression.

"Rafe would never dare hurt you."

"I don't wish to discuss him," she said, bending down to the ground. She plucked some of the mint and began chewing it. "I love mint," she murmured. "It always tastes so clean."

She plucked a few more leaves and offered them to Alric. "Here. It is a very fine variety. I take care to not let it crossbreed with the duller wild mint. If I did, the taste would soon become muddy."

Alric tried it. The sharpness of spearmint cut through the richer taste from the feast foods he'd eaten earlier.

Cecily began harvesting the stems of mint, placing them in the basket she'd left out for that purpose. Her slim silver knife made quick work of the plants.

Alric looked about the sheltered garden. It was quiet and peaceful here. The sounds of the manor were masked, so they seemed to be the only people in the world. The moon rose above them, so bright it obscured most stars. The air was cool, the sky clear. He took a long breath. This was good, he told himself. This was exactly what he needed after so long on campaign.

After several minutes of diligent work, she stood. "That's enough for now. If you will follow me, I have to go to the hut and hang these to dry."

He carried the basket for her, not that the weight of the mint was remotely heavy.

When they reached the little hut at the far end of the garden, Cecily opened the door. “Let me go in first and light the lantern, or else you’ll stumble on something.”

A warm glow soon illuminated the tiny hut. It was about fifteen paces from end to end, and only half as wide. A large worktable dominated the space, so anyone in the hut had to maneuver around it. The peaked ceiling displayed rafters every two feet. Drying herbs hung from most of them, lending an overwhelming scent of summer to the air. And in the middle of it all was Cecily.

Alric stepped into the glow, dazzled by the vision he saw. Her hair gleamed golden in the candlelight, and her smile was even brighter. This was the real Cecily, he thought, the girl he remembered. Not the cool and distant lady in the great hall.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing. You just look so different than how you looked earlier. I was worried that you changed.”

“I’ve changed less than you think,” she said. “But my uncle needs a lady of the manor, so I play the part sometimes.”

She gestured to the large table, and Alric put the basket down upon it. “What must you do now?” he asked.

“I have to tie the stems into small bunches and then hang them over the rafters to dry. Since you’re

taller, perhaps you could hang each bunch after I make it.”

Alric was content to wait for her to hand him small bunches of fragrant mint, stretching up to hang each string on one of the many pegs driven into the rafters.

After a while, Cecily paused in her work. “May I ask you something? About Rafe?”

He sighed inwardly. Was Cecily under that spell Rafe seemed to cast on all women? But he said, “What is it?”

“Do I misremember, or was he always so...mocking?”

“Mocking?”

“The way he speaks, the way he holds himself. Even the way he kissed me. So mean and unfeeling, as if it were all a joke.”

Alric was relieved. So she wasn't enchanted by Rafe after all. And she'd put her finger on something that had been bothering him as well.

“I don't know,” he said. “Rafe always had to get the last word in an argument. But he has changed in the past few years. He's more...” Alric trailed off, not having the word at hand.

“Bitter?” she suggested. “Was it the war that did it?”

“No. Rafe loves a battle, more than any knight I know. It's something else.”

“Well, I hope he finds some peace,” she said, tying another bundle of mint stalks together. “I'll mention him in my prayers.”

“Speaking of that, may I ask *you* a question about Rafe?” he asked then. “Why did you stop the fight earlier?”

“Were you not listening? I couldn’t stand the idea that you had managed to live all those years at war only to kill yourself the first night home.”

“It would not have been me who was killed.”

“The boast of fools,” Cecily said tartly. “It only takes one mistake to make you a corpse.” She almost slapped the last bundle of mint into his hand.

Alric took it, but didn’t hang it up, too focused on Cecily’s response. “And that would have been distressing, to see a corpse on the floor of your hall. But if I had died in battle, you would have done what? Said an extra prayer for a faceless knight, before you forgot me altogether?”

Cecily’s eyes narrowed. “How *dare* you,” she said. “How you could think for one moment that I had forgotten you or our friendship! I wrote to you. I prayed for you! So help me, I would have spilled my blood on a pagan altar if I knew it would have brought you home—”

She was close enough to push her finger into his chest, which he ignored. She was also close enough to pull into his arms, which he did without thinking further.

“Alric,” she said, “what are you doing?”

He slid his hands to her waist and picked her up easily, putting her down to sit on the edge of her wide worktable.

“What are you *doing?*” she repeated, this time in a squeak.

“I need to see you,” he said. “I haven’t seen you in five years. I missed you.”

He pulled the lantern around so the light shone on Cecily’s face and form. He traced the outline of her jaw with one finger.

Cecily watched him, her grey eyes glimmering as if she were about to shed tears.

“Are you just saying that?” she whispered. “Did you ever think of me?”

“I want to show you something.” He pulled away enough to roll up his left sleeve, exposing a loop of ribbon knotted around his forearm, high up, almost to his elbow, so it wouldn’t be noticed when the sleeve was down. “Look familiar?”

Cecily’s eyes widened, and she touched the ribbon, running her fingers over the embroidery. The light pressure grazed his skin as well, sparking thoughts he shouldn’t have.

“It’s still in one piece,” she said, astonishment in her voice. “I gave this to you just before you left.”

“I wore it every day since then.”

She put her hands to her face, laughing softly in wonder. “Oh, forgive me. I should have known.”

“You are forgiven. But I will admit I wasn’t prepared to meet this”—he touched her face—“beautiful woman. I should have, but seeing you was a shock.”

“That’s why you had not even a greeting for me in the great hall?”

“I couldn’t put two words together. Seeing you...” His gut suddenly tightened as he realized exactly what feeling had been dogging him ever since he saw Cecily this day. Not childhood affection. Not at all.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I should not say.”

“Alric! Please. You look so serious.”

“I want to kiss you,” he admitted. “But I should not. Not to mention another man already has done so tonight, and without your leave.”

Her eyes were wide. “Alric. Are you asking me for a *kiss*?”

“Forget I said anything,” he muttered, looking away.

“I will not forget that! Besides, why should I not kiss you to welcome you home?” she protested, logically enough. Then she smiled. “I should warn you I’ll taste of mint.”

That sounded perfect to Alric. He leaned in and kissed her. She did taste of mint, and he wanted more of her. What he intended to only be a brief gesture lengthened into something else, something more dangerous.

Hesitantly, Cecily raised her hands to his chest, steadying herself, then she leaned into the kiss, allowing him to taste her as long as he wanted.

Her mouth was soft and warm under his, and he knew this was the only time he’d ever have alone with Cecily, making him want to touch her all the more. If forbidden fruit tasted sweetest, that would explain why

Cecily tasted sweeter than any woman he'd known.

Cecily's tiny, soft sigh of pleasure was more seductive than any bold promise. Alric reluctantly ended the kiss. To do anything more would be madness...on several fronts.

But he wanted to hold her. Other than a startled gasp, Cecily didn't make a sound as he drew her to him. He buried his face in her hair and neck.

"You smell like your garden," he murmured. "Mint and lavender and honey and summer. Like home."

Cecily put her arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you're home, so glad," she whispered, hugging him tightly. "Even though you appeared to be a stranger!"

"Did I?"

She laughed, ending her embrace so she could catalogue his alterations by touch. "Your skin has tanned, and you're bigger and stronger now than when you left. Is that a scar from battle on your cheek here?"

"Just a scratch."

"And your eyes..." she continued, looking at him.

"My eyes are the same," he said.

"No. They're darker. More guarded. Is it the war that does that? The battles? I've never even seen one."

"You never should have to," he said. "I fight because it's my duty. But don't believe that it's just like a tournament. It's bloody, and harrowing, and leaves men broken on the ground. It destroys towns and makes women into widows and children into orphans. I've fought with knights who I'd never trust alone with a maid—and yet these men swear to uphold the king's

law. But all they want is to fight. And drink themselves into oblivion afterward.”

“Alric.” Her hands were on his shoulders now, her eyes searching his face anxiously.

He realized he’d been rambling. He tried to shake off the mood. “Never mind me. Clearly, I was too long among men and war.”

“I wish I could take the pain from you.”

“There is no pain. Or if there is, it’s useful. It helps me fight.”

“You must fight again?” she asked. “But you’ve just come back!”

“I serve at the pleasure of my lord, and he at his lord. Inevitably, I’ll be called back.”

“Not soon. Please tell me not soon.”

“Not for months. Perhaps not till early next spring, barring a sudden shift in the fortunes of the king—or a sudden move on the part of the empress.”

“She is destroying this kingdom with her greed.”

“She was once declared the rightful heir,” Alric reminded her. “The Empress Maud only wants what she was told would be hers.”

Cecily frowned at him. “How can you defend her? She’s the enemy!”

“Her claim precedes Stephen’s. If all the lords who made pledges of fealty to her father actually obeyed them, there would be no war.”

“You blame your own faction?”

“I blame no one,” he said with a sigh. “It is a tangle, and there is no right or easy path out. Both king

and empress have worthy claims. Both have supporters. And both have ambition. That's the crux. Until one of them breaks or loses heart, this war will continue."

"I hate it," she said.

"Be grateful you are far from it then. Here you are quite safe."

"Especially now that you're here to protect me," she said, a smile curving her lips.

He needed to taste those lips again, just once more.

She responded with as much wonder as she had before, and soon had his blood hot with her instinctive reactions. She opened her mouth, deepening the kiss into something he never intended, something that let him taste her tongue and hear her murmur in surprise and pleasure.

When he pulled away, Cecily's expression was dazed but delighted. "You did miss me."

He swallowed, painfully aware of her innocence. "You have no idea how much. But I'll never touch you again."

Chapter 8



CECILY HAD FELT SO WARM and safe in Alric's arms, but his last words pulled her back to cold reality. "Am I not to your liking?"

"Cecily, you are far too much to my liking. And you are my lady, or have you forgotten that? I serve your uncle. I serve you."

"You are more than that. You always have been."

He shook his head. "At the end of the day, I'm just a knight. You're destined for a greater alliance."

She frowned, not liking that reminder. But she also recognized when he would not speak further on a subject.

"Oh, well," she said carelessly, hoping to restore the camaraderie between them. "I'm so grateful you're home safe, for however long it may be."

He smiled at her, not meeting her eyes. He moved to the door of the hut to separate himself from her. "Come. If your work is done, I will see you back safely."

Cecily extinguished the candle and moved to join him.

They walked slowly back through the gardens to the manor, where things were no quieter than before.

Then the clerk Laurence stepped out of the shadows of the main doorway. "Late to be about, is it not?" His gaze flickered over Cecily, then Alric. "Ah, I see you are not alone."

"No, of course I am not alone," she said. "I was most fortunate that Sir Alric was willing to escort me on my errand. I feel so much safer with a knight at my side. Good night."

She swept by Laurence, Alric close at her elbow. She instinctively leaned toward him, using him as a shield blocking Laurence's lingering regard.

"Observant little rat," Alric muttered, once they were alone again.

"I never liked him," Cecily confessed. "Always lurking, always there to make people nervous. I don't know why my uncle tolerates him."

When they reached her door on the upper floor, Cecily looked up at Alric.

"Thank you for rescuing me from Rafe," she said quietly. "And for staying with me."

Alric gave her a little bow. "My lady, I'm yours to command."

"Don't be so formal with me," Cecily told him. "Now that you're back, I insist you pretend you never left. I'll want a chess match, and a picnic or two. We can't waste a beautiful summer."

He smiled, "If I have the time. There are other obligations."

“True!” she said, thinking of the many tasks she’d set for herself. “But we’ll find time.”

“If you want, Cecily,” he said, his eyes watching her intently.

“I do. Good night, Alric.” She hurried into the bedroom and closed the door behind her before she could say anything more foolish.

Cecily lay awake for a long time. Alric’s kisses lingered on her mouth, summoning unfamiliar thoughts and feelings. She was certain the effect would fade as soon as sunlight returned to the world. It had to. No one could live with such a feeling of...joy.

She had waited so long to hear any news of Alric. Was it unnatural to respond to him when he was close by again? Their intimacy was only that of two people happy to see one another again. That’s all the kiss was. He would never kiss her again.

After all, it wasn’t as if Alric could ever seek her hand. And he would never press attention on her if his intentions weren’t completely honorable. She knew Alric. He was honor itself. He was bravery itself, too. And loyalty. Such a paragon of knightly virtues...

She found herself remembering the feel of his body beneath her fingers, and flushed in the darkness. She was hardly thinking of him as her longtime friend and ally, was she?

In fact, she was thinking of him in quite another way.

Cecily had to stop swooning over him. In the morning, good sense would reassert itself. She would

forget the few moments of madness in the night, when all she wanted was to wrap her arms around Alric and explore the tantalizing new sensation of his mouth on hers...

Cecily. Cease your nonsense. She reprimanded herself as she would another lady who was dreaming over a man. Alric would never think of *her* in such a physical way.

Or would he? Men were far more base than women. He might be dreaming of her at that moment, desiring another kiss from her...

Cecily!

She turned to her other side, careful not to disturb Agnes, who slept beside her. What was wrong with her? Alric's return should be an occasion of pure joy, just as the return of any friend would be. Once she got over the changes in his appearance and demeanor, all would settle back into the old pattern of life. His smile would merely warm her, not send waves of shivers all up and down her body. They would walk together. They would play chess through the cold months.

And in the spring, he would leave again. For battle.

Lord in heaven, she prayed silently. Keep Alric safe. And keep me sane.

* * * *

The next morning brought the measure of sanity Cecily had prayed for. She woke up early, her mind

filled with all the tasks she had to complete today. High summer meant constant work in the gardens, because so much had to be harvested and processed before the cooler weather came. Cecily hurried out to the gardens after stopping by the kitchens for some fresh bread. Steam curled up, along with the yeasty aroma that made her even hungrier. She tore into the little loaf as if last night hadn't been a feast, and soon devoured it all. Her main meal would come later in the day, when the heat drove people inside for a time.

Happily, there was so much to do that she lost herself in her work. Cecily stripped leaves off of stalks, sorted seeds, and readied more herbs for drying. She constantly went in and out of her little work hut, from sunshine to shadow and back again.

Just before noon, she entered the hut with her arms full of poppies. Cecily saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Someone was inside the hut, hoping not to be seen.

She stopped short. "Who is it? Come out, please. I wouldn't want you to break any of the pots stacked up there."

After a moment, a person moved out of the shadows.

"I beg your pardon, my lady." It was the same beggar who'd spoken to her at the feast. His posture was slumped, and his straw-colored hair hung over his face.

"Bertram, is it not?"

"Yes, my lady," he said with a clumsy bow.

“Well, before I pardon you, Bertram,” she said, “I must know why you’re here. Can I help you?”

He took another tentative step toward her. “I was told you make a syrup that mends the throat.”

“So I do,” she said. Now that she knew the young man only needed some treatment, she relaxed. “Are you in need of such?”

“I took a chill a few weeks ago, while I was still sleeping in the fields. It’s hurt since then.”

“How does your throat feel? Wet and raw? Or merely dry?”

“Dry. It hurts to swallow. I drink as much water and ale as I can, but it’s stayed.” He paused, looking about in awe at the hut and all the shades of green of the drying plants. “Broth helps, especially if it’s greasy.”

“Then you should continue to drink broth. Ask for it from the cooks—there’s always some, especially for any who work for it.”

As Cecily spoke she hunted for the syrup in its glass bottle. It was made from mint and horehound, and the sticky substance was so thick it had to be drizzled in boiling water before it could be taken. Cecily put a small pot of clean water over the brazier. “It will be ready as soon as the water heats. Tell me, then, why you have been sleeping in fields rather than in a house.”

He looked down, scuffing one foot into the dirt floor. “I slept in a house until April, my lady. I lived near Hereford. The house caught fire one night. I

alone escaped the blaze—I slept nearest the door. My parents died, along with my brother and my new baby sister.”

“Lord have mercy,” Cecily said. “You have my sympathy. I too lost my father in a fire.”

The boy’s gaze flickered up to her. “When?”

“I was eight years of age. It happened at Aldgate, to the north. I haven’t seen the place since.”

“How long did it take for you to stop dreaming of smoke?”

Cecily sighed. “I still do, sometimes.” She busied herself with the syrup, pouring it into a cup. “So you have no one to take you in?”

“No. The fire consumed all. There was nothing to recover, nothing to sell to start fresh. My neighbors did what they could, but I’m not blood. I’d be a burden if I stayed. I traveled, sleeping in fields, or sometimes working for food and shelter.”

“And that’s what you’re doing now? In town?”

“No, my lady.” Bertram’s eyes darted all around the room. “Not in town.”

“Where, then?”

“Where they told me about you, my lady. About how you come and help them.” He looked at her nervously. “That’s why I came here. There are those there who begged me to tell you that they need your help again.”

Cecily put a finger to her lips. “It is best not to mention more, Bertram. Not here.”

She took the steaming water off the brazier and

added the syrup. Then she poured it into a dish he could drink from.

“Take this, and don’t let it cool too much,” she said.

Bertram drank it obediently, though his nose wrinkled at the taste. “Medicine must be bitter, I suppose,” he said. “But I do feel better already.”

“I will give you a little to take with you. Drink some once in the morning and evening. You’ll remember how to prepare it?”

He nodded, watching as Cecily poured some syrup into a smaller bottle. He took it from her, giving a little bow. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Tell them I’ll come as soon as I can,” she reassured him. “But I’m not sure of the day.”

After she saw Bertram off, Cecily felt a rumbling in her belly. It was past time to eat, and she’d been hard at work since dawn.

While she left the gardens, she pondered what excuse she could dream up so she might slip away from the manor for a whole day. It was easy enough to invent a reason for her to go somewhere, and Theobald rarely looked for her until suppertime. But with the men back from the war, it meant more eyes and more curiosity.

She needed at least three of her women about her, not to mention horses. That would cause comment, unless something else was happening about the manor to distract Theobald and the men, a distraction that would let her own activities go unremarked.

Chapter 9



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Alric worked hard to restore his old connections at Cleobury. He needed to get used to life here once again, and he needed to get Cecily off his mind.

Fortunately, there were many people to meet and speak with, old friends and acquaintances to catch up with. At a manor the size of Cleobury, there was always work to be done, too. A strong man like Alric could make himself useful nearly anywhere.

Lord Theobald summoned him the day after his return to specifically request Alric's assistance in seeing that the manor's fortifications were as complete as possible.

"I want to be sure this place can be defended for at least seven days before help arrives."

"You fear the Welsh will be outside the gates?" Alric asked.

Theobald chuckled. “I do not fear the Welsh!” Then he said, more seriously, “The English and their allies give me pause. We’ve no way of knowing how long this succession will take to settle. Neither Stephen nor Maud will give up an inch of soil. In such times, wise men look to their own defenses.”

“Yes, my lord.” Alric couldn’t deny the truth of that statement, however calculating it sounded. Theobald was right to protect what he held, especially because he held it in trust for Cecily, who was heiress to it all. Allegiances could waver and vanish with a few turns of Fortune’s wheel. Allies could die or change sides. When everyone looked to their own interests, it was foolish to trust others too far.

So Alric surveyed the manor’s defenses. He walked around the property, looking over the landscape and the walls, as well as the people. Though impressed, he still saw room for improvement.

As he worked, he inevitably noticed Cecily and her entourage of attendants as they went about their own tasks. Cecily was consulted on many matters of the household. Alric also noticed that she spent as much time as she could in her gardens. She not only worked herself, but directed others at tasks such as weeding and turning over fallow beds. She smiled at him whenever their eyes met, but rarely had time to speak.

That was just as well, Alric told himself. He had made a mistake that first night. He never should have touched her...and he certainly should not have enjoyed it so much, or hoped to find her alone again.

To distract himself, Alric concentrated on examining the manor's defenses. By making the manor stronger, he was helping Cecily. That was all he wanted to do.

So he looked over the new curtain wall—a stockade fence, not stone. But it was sturdy and quite defensible, thanks to the towers at the four corners and the gatehouse in the middle of the front wall. Archers could keep any attacking force at bay until the manor's inhabitants could prepare a defense.

Alric evaluated the men inside the manor, and decided they could use some more training. He offered to teach a small contingent defense tactics, using his battle-tested men as the “attacking” force.

Rafe offered to help with that part, since he never passed up the chance to display his own skills with weaponry.

“Besides,” Rafe said, “I need some excitement. I'm healed now, and it's far too peaceful here!”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Alric warned.

Those sessions started small, but as the days went by, nearly all the able bodied men—along with a few young women determined to defend their manor—showed up on the field at least once or twice. Both villeins and free men joined. Theobald granted leave for anyone who could spare the time from their usual occupations.

Alric could see the eagerness in the eyes of his students. Cleobury was home to them, even more than it was for Alric. His own lands of Hawksmere were not

far away, but some of the people at Cleobury hadn't traveled so far in their whole lives. Alric also had the experience of seeing the great city of London, and of following the king for battle after battle. He'd seen something of the world.

To these people, Cleobury *was* the world. If it fell, they'd be homeless, so they threw themselves into learning how to defend it.

After one training session, Alric noticed a young lad trailing after him. He glanced back, recognizing the face. "Edmund, isn't it? What do you need from me?"

"Um, Sir Alric, I was just wondering. That is, I wondered..."

"Speak, boy," Alric urged. "Tell me so I can get on about my work."

"That's just it, sir. I want to be a squire. You're a knight, but you don't seem to have a squire for yourself. So I thought..."

"Have you got any training?"

"No," Edmund admitted. "But I can learn! I didn't have any training for defending the manor before, and now I know how to disarm a man coming over the wall."

"Do you?" Alric pulled out his dagger. "Show me."

Edmund's eyes widened. "But we practiced the move with only blunt sticks!"

"Tell that to the Welsh and see if they care. Come. Prove how well you learn."

The younger boy took a deep breath, and then darted toward Alric with surprising speed.

He didn't have much trouble deflecting Edmund, but he allowed the boy to disarm him, noting that his maneuvers were almost exactly what had been taught to everyone. The boy had a good memory.

The dagger fell to the ground, and Edmund halted, looking up at Alric with eagerness and a bit of fear.

"Well, pick it up," Alric said. "Minding a knight's weapons is one of the primary duties of a squire."

Edmund swooped to retrieve the dagger, handing it back to Alric. "Here, sir!"

"If I take you on as squire, will anyone object? You've no other tasks?"

The boy shook his head vigorously. "No one will mind! My grandmother says I'm just underfoot."

"What do your parents say?"

"They're gone, sir."

Alric suddenly saw the boy's eagerness to learn a trade in a new light. "Ah," he said. "When?"

"Last winter. February. They were traveling and there was a storm," Edmund said. "Someone found them in a ditch after the ice and snow melted. They tried to take shelter, but..."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Alric put one hand on the boy's shoulder. "If you promise me you have no other obligations, I'll teach you to squire—though I can't guarantee you'll be *my* squire. I may have to leave before you're fully trained."

"Yes, sir. Just give me a chance."

"So I will. You can begin by joining me on my way to the stables. I want to check on Rolande."

“I saw him this morning! He was pawing at the ground. He wants exercise.”

“I expect so.” Alric chuckled. “I will show you what needs to be done.”

Edmund was a quick student, and Alric believed he'd eventually make a good squire. Late in the afternoon, he left the boy in the stables so he could attend to the last item he wanted to look over: the gatehouse and the gate itself.

Everything else was for naught if the gate wasn't solid. He examined the complex mechanisms, and tested the gate several times, until he was satisfied he could either open or close it within moments. Then he made his way to the back of the manor, checking over the perimeter on the way.

He examined the lock on the much smaller wicket gate, which was a door a single person could pass through even if the main gate was closed. Then he heard a laugh behind him.

“So serious, sir knight. Are you expecting an attack?”

Alric turned back to see Cecily standing there. He had avoided talking with her for a few days, and he found that he still wasn't over the kiss of the first night.

“No, my lady,” he replied. “Merely testing everything to make sure all is in good condition. This is your manor after all, and your lands.” Though Theobald certainly seemed attached to being lord here.

“What is your judgment?” she asked, no longer

teasing.

“Cleobury is better defended than nearly any place in England that I’ve seen, save for the new Norman castles.”

“Well, Theobald is a careful man. He has ever been so, considering how he came to hold the title.”

“Cecily, what happened at Aldgate—it won’t happen again,” Alric said, remembering the fateful night when Cecily’s old manor was attacked and caught fire.

“I try not to think about it,” she muttered. “It’s like a dream now anyway. Or a nightmare. The details have all blurred.”

Seeing her troubled face, Alric forgot his previous intention to keep his distance. He took her in his arms. Cecily leaned against him, gulping a few breaths.

“I didn’t mean to summon bad memories,” he said in apology.

“Oh, Alric.” Cecily clung tighter to him, and he enjoyed every moment. Guilt rose up. He shouldn’t benefit from her distress.

He let go and took a step back, trying to smile. “Better?”

“Now that you’re here, yes,” Cecily said.

“You need not fear a repeat of the past,” Alric said. “Cleobury will not fall to any sort of attack, short of an actual siege.”

“That is reassuring.”

“My duty is to protect you, Cecily. That’s why I’m doing as Theobald asked.”

Cecily’s face clouded briefly at his words, but then

she gave him a little smile. “Ever the noble knight, Sir Alric. Just as always.”

Then she excused herself and left for the manor house, leaving Alric wishing he had a reason to make her stay.

But before he could call out to her, a servant came up to him. “Lord Theobald wishes to see you. Immediately.”

Alric obeyed the summons. Instead of the usual questions about King Stephen’s progress, this time Theobald was interested in matters much closer to home.

“Do you remember the hamlet of Meaholt?” he asked Alric.

“I was there only once or twice, my lord.” He could recall nothing specific, other than its precarious position among the rougher hills to the west. It was an assart, a place carved out of the wilderness after the better land had been claimed and built on. “I think there were three or four families living there.”

“Four,” Theobald confirmed. “But now there are none. A few years ago, a plague struck the hamlet, taking the lives of several people. Then followed a harsh winter, which harmed the flocks. The survivors abandoned their homes and took all their chattel and goods to the village of Bournham. Meaholt is no more.”

“Yet you ask me about it?”

Theobald said, “I’ve received word that bandits have taken up residence in the ruins. They could easily strike at Bournham from there, or any of half a dozen

other settlements, including here. I will not tolerate being made party to such crime.”

“Have you spoken to the lady Cecily about your concerns?”

“Whatever for?”

“Meaholt is on her lands,” Alric pointed out. “Yes, you hold them for her for now, but shouldn’t the decision be hers?”

“I speak for Cecily,” Theobald said shortly. “She is not to be bothered with such matters—they aren’t any concern to a lady. Take as many men as you deem necessary and go root these bandits out. Burn the buildings to the ground if you must. But I want whoever is there now to be gone, and Meaholt to be nothing more than a scar on the land. The forest will retake it soon enough. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my lord.” Alric excused himself. He understood both the order and the implicit warning to keep Cecily out of it. He didn’t like it, but his place wasn’t to argue, it was to obey. Somewhat troubled, he nevertheless set about gathering a force of men to join him on the excursion.

It proved more difficult than he expected. The men who came back from service along with Alric and Rafe were willing to go. But few of the men living at Cleobury would join them. As Alric moved through the ranks, he got fearful looks, excuses, and flat out refusals to accompany the force.

At last, Alric cornered William Barley, one of the tenant farmers who served the manor. “What’s the

matter with Meaholt?" he asked. "Why is everyone afraid of a few masterless men living there?"

William explained, "It's not mere bandits who reside there. It's cursed ghosts, those who died of the plague. They can kill with a glance! The wise don't go near Meaholt now."

Alric shook his head in disgust. The idea of Meaholt becoming the domain of evil was ridiculous. Fortunately, he had ten stout soldiers who would join him, and they would not believe such nonsense. If necessary, Alric would order them to not believe it, and because they were all under his command, they would have no option but to obey.

He even asked Edmund, while the boy was helping exercise Rolande. The boy had also heard of Meaholt's reputation, but he sounded excited rather than scared.

"Aye, there are ghosts there now," he told Alric. "Some of the older boys heard rumors in spring, and dared each other to go under cover of darkness. Simon did so, just after nightfall. He said he saw floating lights, ghosts in the churchyard wearing tattered shrouds, and a mournful howl that chilled him to the bone."

"So he did what?"

"He's no fool. He got up from his hiding place and made to leave. Then he heard a wordless cry. One of the ghosts had seen him and began to give chase. Simon ran for his life. He crossed the eastern brook before he slowed. Ghosts and fairies are turned aside by running water," Edmund added knowledgeably.

“Interesting,” Alric said.

“If you intend to go tomorrow, sir, you ought to bring your sword, for they fear iron. And take a priest.”

Alric chuckled. He’d definitely bring the sword. A priest he didn’t see a use for.

That evening, just as the last light was fading in the sky, Alric nodded in satisfaction when all the men appeared in the courtyard as he requested. William Fletcher and Oswin were his archers. Another experienced man-at-arms, Mark, was there with a sword at his side, and there were seven more beside him.

“Where’s Rafe?” Alric asked, looking around. “I would have thought he’d be eager to fight again.”

“He may be a bit too comfortable to leave his seat in the hall, sir,” Oswin said. “That is, if the woman who was on his lap remains there.”

“Aye, Beatrice is a difficult woman to leave,” another added jovially. “The devil knows I wouldn’t, if the choice were mine.”

“Well, perhaps he’ll wake early enough to ride out with us on the morrow,” Alric said, though with no expectation of that actually coming to pass. He resigned himself to being the only knight in the party. Fortunately, this was a only raid upon a poorly defended clutch of old houses. Whatever traps these bandits laid, Alric would find a way through them.

“Is your other companion not joining us?” one of the men asked, referring to Octavian.

“Though he offered, I refused,” Alric said. “He

carries out the king's work, and it's not his job to police the shire. We will have more than enough strength. Now listen," he went on. "As I recall, Meaholt lies several miles to the west, somewhat north of the main road. So I want to leave at dawn. Everyone should have a horse to ride to Meaholt. Once near, halt when I give the signal and we'll advance as silently as possible."

"We've got axes and torches," said one of the men. "Once we run off the bandits, we'll make short work of Meaholt. In a season or two, no one will ever know it was there."

Alric nodded. "Those are Theobald's wishes precisely. Remember, do not kill unless you must. If these men are bandits, I would have them taken alive to answer for their crimes and repay their victims."

Everyone nodded. Alric was used to exerting authority in such matters, and he trusted all these soldiers implicitly.

"Good," he said. "Meet here on the morrow to ride out. By dusk, we'll be home and Meaholt will be only a memory."

Chapter 10



LATER THAT EVENING, CECILY WAS walking toward the manor house from the garden, where she hurried through the last of her tasks by lamplight. In the courtyard, she was hailed by Octavian.

As their paths crossed, he bowed very properly to her. Octavian seemed to observe all the niceties of the court, no matter where he was.

She asked, “Are you comfortable at Cleobury?”

“Oh, yes. I wasn’t sure what to expect this far from London, but it’s as civilized here as in the city—more so, in some ways.” He smiled, looking around the manor. “Though I’d happily stay here, I still have several letters to distribute. I must go on the morrow to deliver the next few.”

Cecily watched him as he spoke. Sir Octavian was not much older than she was, and that made him young for a knight. Most men served as squires for

several more years before gaining a knightly status; some never did so. Yet Octavian already found enough favor with the king that he was trusted with important documents.

“Octavian,” she said, “how did you happen to meet our knights?”

“Providence,” he said. “During a battle two winters ago, I was overwhelmed by another force, and found myself trapped. I would have died...then Sir Rafe appeared on the field and took my attackers’ attention entirely away. He told me to follow his lead, and so I did. After Rafe, I met Luc and Alric. They all agreed I needed minding,” he added with a laugh. “I’ve learned as much from them as any tutor. The manner of fighting is very different in England than in Outremer,” he said, using the term he probably heard from his Norman lord.

“I hope they have not educated you *too* well. I’ve heard how some soldiers occupy their time outside of battle.”

He looked abashed. “I’m not one for gambling and...well.” He broke off, mindful he was speaking to a lady. “In any case, I’m glad I could join them on the journey west. I must find Alric tonight, to ask about the road.”

“Morning won’t do?”

“He’ll be off early,” he said. “Sir Alric has been given some errand, at the request of his lord Theobald. He’s gathering some men to join him.”

“Oh? He’s going somewhere?” If so, it would be

the perfect time for her to carry out her own errand.

“Yes, my lady. A day’s work, no more,” he reassured her, mistaking the reason for her question. “Cleobury will not remain undefended.”

The defense of Cleobury didn’t worry her. But the absence of several men-at-arms would be most helpful. Eager to take advantage of this news, she bid Octavian good night. She soon found Pavia in the women’s solar, where she was embroidering a length of fabric she intended to donate to the church to be used as an altar cloth.

“Sit and be easy, child,” Pavia said, patting the seat next to her on the bench. “You look over-warm. Are you thirsty?”

“So I am,” Cecily said, gesturing for a serving girl to bring her some weak wine.

When the girl left the room, she leaned toward Pavia. “The knights and some men-at-arms are going on an excursion tomorrow. They’ll be gone most of the day.”

“An excellent time for our own excursion then,” Pavia said, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I hope so, but how will we get horses out of the Cleobury stables now? The men will notice so many missing. In fact, they’ll take them all for their own use.”

Pavia took a sip of wine, then said, “I will send word to Bournham tonight. There are stables by the west road. We’ll walk that far, then pay to ride. Old Ben runs that operation, and he’ll keep his mouth

shut.”

“You’re certain?” Cecily said. “I know we’ve done it before, but I’d hate to see you get in trouble...”

“Me get in trouble?” Pavia laughed, the sound ringing out against the stone walls. Then she lowered her voice. “My heart, if we’re caught, you’re the one to fear the wrath of your uncle. I’ll merely be locked in our chamber for the rest of the year.”

“Don’t joke about that, Pavia,” Cecily warned.

“We don’t have to go.”

“No. We’re needed.”

Pavia smiled gently at her. “I knew you’d say so.”

* * * *

When Cecily woke, she peeked outside and saw the moon setting, leaving the sky a deep velvety blue. Dawn was about an hour off. She slid out of the bed and dressed silently.

Agnes continued to snore, so Cecily was careful not to wake her. She tapped lightly on Pavia’s shoulder.

“It’s time,” Cecily whispered.

Pavia opened her eyes. She rose and dressed quickly, throwing a lightweight cloak over her gown. “Ready!” she whispered.

The pair made their way to the kitchens, where two more women awaited them, baskets in hand.

“I brought the bundle you left in the hut, my lady,” the maid Runild said to Cecily.

“Good.” Cecily peeked under the cloth to see that

all her jars and bottles were safely stowed for the journey. “We’ll need it all, most likely.”

Cecily took a large piece of bread offered by Mary, the wife of the baker. It was still warm from the ovens.

“Let’s hurry,” said Pavia. “We need to reach Bournham before dawn breaks. The horses will be ready for us.”

After getting the horses from the village stable, the four women made their way to the hamlet of Meaholt. As the light strengthened, and as they got farther from Bournham, they lost their air of hushed conspiracy, giving in to giggles and chatter.

“I was worried we’d be seen this morning,” Pavia confessed. “With the knights returned, there are so many more men about the grounds! Delightful as it is to see more strong young bodies about, I thought they might get in the way.”

“Lord Theobald is sending them somewhere today,” Cecily said, for the benefit of the others. “We’ll be back long before they return, so no one will question what we’ve done.”

“I told my husband I had to gather mushrooms,” added Mary. “I’d better look for some on the way back!”

Cecily laughed, but she did feel rather duplicitous. Only she had access to the sorts of medicines and materials the people at Meaholt needed to be well, but Theobald had to be kept unaware of her activities. He wouldn’t approve. He wanted to keep Cecily safe in a

tower. He didn't understand her need to help her own people.

Meaholt lay in a little valley at the base of three hills. The valley was still in deep shadow, though the tops of the hills were golden with sunlight. From near the top of one hill, the women could see nearly everything.

They rode down into the clutch of buildings. Everything was hushed and eerily still.

They saw no one at first. Then something moved, and Cecily saw a shrouded figure standing alone in front of the cottage. It slowly raised one arm, the clinging shroud cloth flapping in a faint breeze.

"Leave here," the figure warned in a low, anguished wail.

Runild put a hand to her mouth. Pavia raised one eyebrow, though her grip on the horse's bridle tightened.

"Leave here," the moaning figure repeated.

"But we have bread and meat," Mary said.

The ghost shucked off its shroud in an instant, revealing a boy of about twelve years. He was nearly as thin as a corpse, due to sickness and malnourishment. But his eyes were quick and bright.

"Did you say meat?" he asked eagerly.

"I did indeed. Come and break your fast, o lonely spirit."

The boy dashed toward the group of women, his stride uneven due to a limp. "Were you not scared even a little?" he asked.

“You make a most impressive haunt, Hugh,” Cecily assured him, even as the women dismounted and began to pull food from their packs. “Rumors of Meaholt are spreading.”

“Good!” The boy took a piece of cold mutton with reverence. “We work to scare those who pass by. But better if they don’t come at all...except for you, ladies.”

By now, a dozen or more people had streamed out of the various houses to greet the women. Mary opened her sacks and the baskets to distribute bread and some more cold meat, all of which was eagerly devoured by the residents, some of whom had been near starvation when they came to Meaholt.

Mary asked the hungry eaters where her cousin Robert was, and was told he was on his way. Robert was the reason Cecily knew about Meaholt, since Mary came to her several months ago to ask for medicines she could take to him. Lepers, marked by the distinct blue robe they were required to wear, were forbidden from entering most places and were shunned by nearly everyone who saw them. It made it all but impossible for lepers to seek any ease for their pain.

Cecily looked around. The fields were mostly fallow, since no one had the means to work them, and there were only a few animals about. But she saw a woman washing clothes in the little stream running past the hamlet. An older man sat in front of the small chapel, looking as if he awaited nothing more frightening than Sunday. In all, it looked much like any other

village. Only the poor repair of the structures and the delicate health of the residents revealed the truth. Meaholt had become a retreat for lepers and others struck by sickness. When they were driven out of their old homes, or when they left voluntarily, fate brought them here.

She looked back, seeing Runild offer Bertram an old shirt, saying, "Take it, please. It will fit you."

Bertram thanked her, but almost forgot to take the shirt, since he was so busy looking at the pretty Runild.

Cecily smiled at the scene, but then kept searching for faces she knew.

"Where is Godric?" she asked one of the residents.

"He's not well enough to leave his bed today, my lady."

"Then I must go to him." Cecily hurried into a nearby cottage and knelt by the bedside of the older man. It was nothing more than a pallet of dried grasses and leaves, but it was clean, and his room was open to the dry summer air his beleaguered lungs needed.

"Good morning, Godric," she said.

"Is it?" he coughed. "I wasn't sure I'd see it."

She ignored his dour comment. "I've prepared some herbs that will help your lungs. I've made enough to last you a sennight. If your cough does not improve by them, I must seek a stronger remedy."

"Or a priest," her patient wheezed out.

"Do not say so," she scolded. "The desire to live must remain strong in you."

"I have not been so good a man that I feel certain

of my entrance into Paradise, my lady.” He coughed again. “I shall drink all you give me. If the angels see fit to send you here among us, there must be some hope.”

Cecily smiled at him. “Of course I am here! Who lets another suffer when it can be prevented?”

The man only sighed, not up to the task of opposing such innocent certainty. He knew all too well that many people turned away from those in need. They feared that by fraternizing with the sick, who were presumed to be punished for their sins, the diseases would spread to their own families.

After Cecily tended to Goderic, she went back out to help others. At Meaholt, the sick lived together, yet apart from the world. Those who were strong enough to go out and beg did so. A few scavenged goods from nearby towns.

The sickest remained to either recover or die in peace. One house was given to those for whom death was certain. A leper was there now, half his arm rotted off. There was also a younger man who was dying of some wasting disease he said felt like burning from the inside. They stayed in their house, and food was left for them every day.

But most moved freely about Meaholt, tending to chores if they were able, or visiting with others. In many ways, Meaholt was just like any other town.

After Mary told her of the place, Cecily came to Meaholt herself, bearing food and medicine. She returned as often as she could, always bringing some

herbal remedies or cast off clothing.

Her companions went throughout the hamlet, offering what aid they could. Mary saw to it that everyone was fed, and helped begin a meal for later in the day. She ordered those strong enough to gather wood for the fire, though she expressed fear that the wood supply might not last into autumn, let alone winter.

“And we cannot cut new wood or gather many more fallen branches,” she told Cecily. “Even through the poor have a right to glean what they can from the Long Forest, most of the sick cannot walk so far. I fear that an early winter would be devastating.”

Cecily knew she was right. “We need more help, but I’m afraid to bring more people here. Meaholt is best protected by others’ fear of it.”

Still worrying at the larger problem, she continued to care for the sick. She prepared a poultice for a young child with a sore on his arm. Then she brewed up medicine for Robert, who could no longer use his hands. Leprosy was a hideous disease that killed people slowly, taking first their sensation, then their limbs, and finally rendering them unable to perform even the simplest action or feel the slightest warmth or cold. In its latter stages, it was truly a living death.

Robert still had his fingers and hands, but he could barely grasp things because he could not feel them. He muttered angrily, unwilling to allow Cecily to serve him.

“You should not get so close, my lady,” he mumbled. “I can feed myself.”

“Not before you spill half of it,” she said reasonably.

She was just spooning the first of the medicine to Robert when Bertram appeared, followed by Runild.

“Look, my lady!” he called out. “To the east! Coming down the hill!”

She saw a group of riders advancing toward them at a terrifying pace. “What’s happening?” Cecily asked.

“Bandits, my lady. It must be,” Robert said. He stood, swaying uncertainly.

“Why come here?” Runild gasped. “There’s nothing to take!”

“There’s you,” Bertram said. “Perhaps they followed you here.”

“Stay within,” ordered Robert, sounding much stronger. “Gather all your ladies here. We’ll block the doors and defend you. If the threat of my touch does not deter them, then we will stand and fight.”

“No,” Cecily said. “It’s too dangerous!”

“We all owe our lives to you, Lady Cecily,” Robert said. “Let us repay the gift.”

Then he shut the door, leaving the women in darkness.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Cole is a romance writer with a penchant for history. Her stories draw upon her deep affection for the British Isles, action movies, medieval fantasies, and even science fiction. She now lives in a small house in a big city with a cat, a snake, and a rather charming gentleman. When not writing, she is usually curled in a corner reading...or watching costume dramas or things that explode. And yes, she believes in love at first sight.

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