

A Tournament Knight

By

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For my father, Ray Chenery, who passed on his love of writing
to me.

My husband, Ray Martin and my kids Dylan, Troy, Shane and Roxanne
who are always there for me.

And to the real Jacqueline, Jackie Kitchen, who wouldn't let
me give up on my dream.

Chapter One

Isle of Wight

Carisbrooke Castle

July 1389

"Give me one good reason why I cannot go. That is all I ask."

"You know very well I have my reasons why. I will speak of this with you no further, Jacqueline."

Jacqueline Montacute repressed the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. Her mother was being stubborn, but Jacqueline could be just as stubborn when pushed.

"I know why it is you do not want me to go, mother. He is going to be there, is he not?"

Elizabeth Montacute, Countess of Salisbury and Lady of Isle of Wight, sighed deeply. She knew how frustrated her daughter was with the restrictions placed upon her. But they had been made to protect her. The 'he', Jacqueline spoke of was her father, William Montacute, Earl of Salisbury and the absent Lord of Isle of Wight.

William was seven and ten years older than herself, and Elizabeth was not his first choice of a bride. His first marriage had been to Lady Joan Plantagenet, who was also known as the Fair Maid of Kent.

In 1349, William had married Elizabeth, eldest daughter of John, Lord Mohun of Dunster. After impregnating her, William had left her on the Isle and never returned, which suited Elizabeth very well. Theirs was no love match by any means.

"Aye, your father will be at Windsor. That is the main reason I forbid you to go to the tournament with your brother."

Jacqueline felt nothing but disgust at the mere thought of her father. The stunt he had pulled two years before still left a bitter taste on her tongue.

Thinking to further himself, he had contracted marriages for both his children. With her brother, William and herself being twins, their father decided at age nine and ten, they were both of an age to wed. William's marriage had ended up being a blessing. Her brother loved his young wife dearly. And Beth FitzAllen was devoted to William.

The earl had contracted the marriage of his only son with Beth's father, Richard, Earl of Arundel, without the knowledge of his wife. He had also done the same for his daughter. The match had not been to her liking, nor had Jacqueline's mother been prepared to meekly accept what her husband had done.

Her chosen bridegroom had been thirty years older than her nine and ten. He was Forwin De La Mare, Earl of Somerset. Besides being older, Forwin was obese and known for his cruelty to his past wives. All four of them.

Jacqueline was exactly what he preferred in a wife, beautiful and in the peak of health. With her waist-length wavy auburn hair, vivid turquoise blue eyes, and a perfect face to match, Forwin had found her ripe for the picking. He had practically licked his lips in anticipation when he came to look her over before signing the marriage contract. That Jacqueline at five feet nine inches towered over him by three inches had not concerned him at all.

She had felt physically sick when Forwin had presented himself at the castle. She had known in that instant, that she would never bind herself to such a man.

So her mother had come up with the ruse to foil her husband's plans. It had been drastic, but it assured Jacqueline would never be bothered by any such goings on again.

They had faked her death, even going so far as to place a headstone in the family cemetery with her supposed date of death inscribed upon it. It was assumed by all concerned that Forwin would want proof, and they were correct in their thinking. A week after receiving word of Jacqueline's supposed demise he arrived at the Isle to see for himself. It had not taken much effort on her part to avoid him. The man had taken one look at the headstone and then promptly left.

Now, to the rest of the world off the Isle, Jacqueline Montacute was no more.

"But mother, I can do what I have done in the past when I have been to other tournaments with William and Beth. No one has ever questioned whether I was Beth's maid or not." She had never been to Windsor and was

determined not to miss out on experiencing it.

Lady Elizabeth felt for her daughter. Jacqueline was forced to miss so much of life outside of the safety of the Isle. But what was done, was done, and could not be undone.

Reaching out, Elizabeth tucked a wayward curl back behind her daughter's ear and looked into her eyes, hoping to convey that her mind could not be changed. No matter how much she was to be pushed to do just that.

Jacqueline was so much like herself at that age in appearance. To be truthful, both of her children took after her. William and Jacqueline looked so much alike that, when they were really young, they had tried switching clothes to see if anyone noticed. Which no one did, to the twins' delight.

"Jacqueline, no more of this. The discussion is pointless. The other tournaments were different. Your father was not present and they were only small affairs compared to what Windsor will be like. Now go and leave me in peace for a while."

Leaving her mother in the hall, Jacqueline went in search of her brother and his wife. If they could be swayed to her side, maybe the three of them could change her mother's mind.

* * * *

Carisbrooke Castle was the only home Jacqueline knew. The castle itself was seven acres including the earthworks surrounding it and had been built atop earlier Roman and Saxon defenses.

Inside the walls were a keep, chapel and a one hundred and sixty foot deep well, situated in the middle of the bailey.

Jacqueline now skirted past the well and, knowing where her brother and his wife were, she headed straight to the tilting grounds. Sure enough, as she drew closer, she could make out Beth's form standing on the sidelines.

Moving to stand next to her sister by marriage, Jacqueline watched William take a run at the quintain. He hit the target with his outstretched lance. He must have hit it squarely. If not the weighted arm would have swung around with enough velocity to unseat him. William went past still firmly seated in his saddle as the arm swung harmlessly aside.

Both women cheered for him as he turned about and rode to where they stood watching. Dismounting, William pulled off his helmet. Finding his sister next to his wife, he began to chuckle.

"No luck with mother I see."

Jacqueline huffed and shook her head in response. "She will not be moved by any of my reasons for going with you."

William flashed her a brilliant smile. "I wonder why not. Maybe it is because she knows you never think far enough ahead to see the trouble you get yourself in to."

Balling up her fist, Jacqueline punched her brother in the arm. She instantly regretted it when she made contact with the steel plating of his armor. Shaking her bruised knuckles, she glared at him when he chuckled once more.

"Are you saying you agree with her, William? I thought you, of all people, would take my side in this."

Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, William pulled her to his side. "Jacqueline, mother is right. Windsor is

too risky. There will be too many people there. All it would take would be one of them to see how closely my wife's maid and I look alike."

Jacqueline could not argue with that. Though he was male, William only stood an inch taller than she. They both had the same turquoise blue eyes and slightly wavy auburn hair. Jacqueline wore hers to her waist. Her brother kept his trimmed to the nape of his neck.

Being twins, they were very close. When younger, they were inseparable. Whatever the one did, the other had to try, as well, with Jacqueline being the more adventurous of the two.

At one and ten, she thought nothing of putting on William's clothes and taking part in lessons in swordplay.. Such activities had come to an end the year before. Lady Elizabeth could no longer abide her only daughter dressing as a man or acting as a knight would.

"And you Beth, do you agree with William and mother?"

Beth, only ten and seven, could make Jacqueline feel much younger than she was. All it took was a certain look Beth used when she thought Jacqueline was being unreasonable, a look most mothers seemed to develop in their dealings with their offspring. Since Beth and William had no children, Jacqueline could only guess how her sister by marriage came by it. Standing at only five feet four inches, Beth seemed not to care that she had to look up at Jacqueline to give her such a look either.

"Jacqueline, there will be other tournaments. Think of how your mother would feel if anything happened to you."

"Must you do that, play upon my emotions like I am some thoughtless child?"

Beth's tinkling laughter filled the air. "If not me, then who else?"

Jacqueline could not help but join in Beth's laughter. She could never bring herself to be annoyed with William's wife. She was one of those people who were just as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. Jacqueline loved her as a true sister and had from their first meeting. Just as William had. He had not been able to stop staring at her beautiful heart shaped face, small pert nose and ruby red lips. Massive amounts of long light blonde hair and pure green eyes made up the rest of Beth.

In exasperation, Jacqueline threw up her arms. "Fine, you all win. I will stay on the Isle with mother. But I will miss you both terribly."

William once more pulled his sister to his side and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "It is not as if we will be gone forever. It is only for a fortnight."

"Just promise me William, you will be careful. I have a feeling not all will be as it should. If anything happens to you"

Placing a finger on Jacqueline's lips, William silenced her before she could complete the sentence. "I am coming back, Jacqueline. I promise you."

"You swear?"

William kissed the tip of her nose. "I swear."

* * * *

She knew something was wrong. It was just a gut feeling she had, but it would not go away. Jacqueline had felt on edge ever since the day William and Beth left the Isle. In the beginning, she had come to the conclusion this feeling was caused by the separation from her twin. But now, almost two weeks into her brother's absence, it was even stronger.

Trying to quell the foreboding feelings, she climbed up to the castle walls. William was to have returned home two days ago. Hoping to catch a glimpse of his return, she walked the walls for hours at a time.

Pacing in a gown was not a particularly easy thing to do either. Jacqueline missed the freedom of the male clothes she wore during arms training. Every time she turned she had to push the skirt of her gown out of the way, or she would become entangled in its length. Besides, a gown was too stifling to wear in early August, with too many layers. Bad enough the gown had tight fitting long sleeves, which helped to keep her body heat in but to have to don an under gown beneath it made it all that much worse. If given the choice, Jacqueline would gladly never wear a gown again, ever. She much preferred the tunic and hose in which William, and every other man, garbed themselves.

After completing her first circuit of the walls, she stopped at one of the twin towers attached to the gatehouse. She searched for any sign of travelers approaching the castle. Squinting against the sun's bright rays, Jacqueline focused intently on what were slowly becoming discernable shapes in the distance.

Realizing her eyes were indeed not playing tricks on her, Jacqueline raced down the steps to the bailey below.

Setting off at a run, she crossed the bailey and went to find her mother, who was inside the hall. Seeing her daughter enter the large room out of breath, Lady Elizabeth smiled.

"William has returned?"

Jacqueline took a few deep breaths, trying to still her rapidly beating heart. "I did not see for sure, but who else can it be? We are not expecting visitors."

Lady Elizabeth took her daughter's hand. "Now you will see all your worrying was for naught. William was more than likely delayed for a very good reason."

"I suppose you are right, mother."

"I know I am right."

Releasing Jacqueline's hand, both women left the hall and went to stand in the middle of the bailey.

They did not have long to wait. A few minutes later, the men-at-arms who had accompanied William to Windsor, passed through the raised portcullises. Following behind was Beth. William was nowhere to be seen.

Grabbing the bridle of Beth's horse, Jacqueline pulled it to a halt. "Where is William? Is he back with the baggage cart again? Making sure his precious armor is not getting scratched."

Her sister-in-law did not respond, causing Jacqueline to look up into the other girl's face. It was then she noticed the trail of tears streaming down Beth's face.

Jacqueline felt her gut clench. Her feelings had not been so unfounded after all. Something had happened to William. "Where is William, Beth?" When the girl still remained silent, she released the bridle and took hold of Beth's leg and squeezed it. "Answer me! Where is William?" she shouted up at her.

At the rumbling sound of the baggage cart entering the bailey, Jacqueline released Beth and rushed over to it.

The closer she came, the more intensified the feeling of having lost a part of herself became.

Her whole being centered on the covered form lying in the middle of the cart. It felt like the world had fallen away, with only herself and the cart in existence. Jacqueline did not notice her mother come to help Beth to dismount, then pull the girl into her arms. She did not hear her mother softly crying. All that mattered was what lay in the cart.

With a shaking hand, Jacqueline pulled back the blanket which completely covered what the cart carried. As William's face was revealed, she knew he was dead. His face was too pale. It showed none of the laughter he was always so quick to share. Feeling as if her heart was being ripped from her body, Jacqueline slowly backed away from the cart. She could not accept this. That could not be William.

"Nay.....nay, William cannot be gone. He promised to come home to me. He has never broken his word to me, ever."

Her mother tried to take her into her arms, to offer comfort. Jacqueline roughly shrugged out of her embrace. Seeing Beth standing on her own, she grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Tell me, tell me how this happened!" When Beth did not answer promptly, she shook her again.

Her mother stopped her from shaking the girl again. "Enough, Jacqueline! Can you not see she is distraught? She just lost her husband. She grieves as much as we do."

"I need to know, mother." Lady Elizabeth could see her daughter was very close to falling completely apart.

"Beth, I think it best you tell Jacqueline." Holding back her own tears, Lady Elizabeth once more held her daughter by marriage in her arms, hoping it would be enough to give the girl strength to tell what had to be said.

Beth wiped her tears away, only to have more flow. This would be the most painful thing she had ever done, but Jacqueline needed to know. Even through her tears, she could see William's twin was perched on a very precarious precipice emotionally. Knowing, if she did not get some answers soon she would quite possibly shatter was the only reason Beth found the strength to tell the tale.

"William was unseated when his competitor's lance shattered. A large piece of it managed to enter his neck, just where his helm and collar of his breastplate meet." Beth swallowed back the urge to dissolve into a fit of weeping. The images her telling brought to mind of what had happened to William was almost too much to bear.

"A physician removed the piece of broken lance. He even said William would recover, but wound fever soon set in. When William's condition began to deteriorate even more, I had him placed in the baggage cart. I thought if I could just get him home to the Isle all would be well again." Beth could say no more as her grief overtook her. Turning in her mother-in-law's arms, she buried her face in Lady Elizabeth's shoulder and started to weep in earnest.

Jacqueline had stood dry-eyed as Beth related the details of William's death. She still could not shed a tear. If she did now, she knew she would never be able to stop. Someone had to be the strong one. Someone had to keep their head. Even though it seemed Beth had told the whole tale, she had neglected to tell the most relevant piece of information. Against whom had William tilted with and paid with his life?

"Beth, who did my brother tilt with?" she asked in a monotone.

The girl brought her weeping back under control once more. She did not want Lady Elizabeth or Jacqueline to know, but she could not keep it from them. They had a right to know.

Looking into Jacqueline's eyes, Beth hoped this would not push her over the edge. "William tilted against the earl, your father."

Lady Elizabeth gasped and felt all the blood drain from her face. The earl had to have known who William was. How could he have jousted with his son, his heir? She could understand William wanting to meet the earl in the list, wanting to prove to his father he was a man, but the earl was another story. He had nothing to prove. He already held sway over William.

Watching her daughter, Lady Elizabeth could see Jacqueline's face harden. She did not weep as William's wife did. If anything she seemed to be totally lacking any emotion at all. It was like looking at a mask which someone wore to hide from the world.

With no inflections in her speech, Jacqueline finally spoke in a low voice. "He will pay for this. By God, I will make him pay."

Feeling a chill creep over her at the sound of her daughter's words, Lady Elizabeth shook her head in denial. "Jacqueline, let it go. There is nothing you can do. No matter what you may plan to do to the earl, William will still be gone from us. It will not bring him back. You must accept this."

"I know that, mother. But I will still have my revenge."

"And just how do you expect to do that? To your father, you are dead and buried." Her daughter's attitude was engendering no small amount of worry in her.

"It is quite simple, mother. I am going to meet father in the lists myself."

Lady Elizabeth adamantly shook her head once more. "It is not possible. How could you survive going up against a seasoned knight? You have never jousted with a mounted man. Besides, they would never allow a woman to compete."

"Oh I will compete. From what Beth has said William was still alive when they left Windsor. No one knows of his death as of yet. So I will become William. As for jousting against a seasoned knight, training for the next tournament the earl participates in will be my life now. There is nothing else that matters anymore. The earl killed a part of me when he took William's life. My only reason for living now is making the earl pay for what he has done."

Both Lady Elizabeth and William's widow found themselves shocked beyond words. Neither had any idea what to say in response to Jacqueline's words. Lady Elizabeth only hoped her daughter was not becoming unbalanced emotionally, suffering from the loss of her twin.

When Jacqueline received no response from either woman, she turned her back on them and headed back to the hall. There were plans to be made, and there was no time like the present to begin.

Two days later, William's funeral service was held. Only those who dwelled in the castle were in attendance. Both her mother and Beth had tried to steer her from her course of revenge. She had to do this. Standing at the open grave as William's body was lowered into it firmed her resolve even more.

The priest said the final words in the service, and those in attendance slowly began to walk away. Soon the three women of the Montacute family were left standing as mourners.

Lady Elizabeth gave her daughter by marriage a reassuring hug and motioned for her to head back to the keep

without her. Jacqueline watched as William's grave was slowly covered with dirt by two of the castle's men-at-arms. She did not look up when her mother came to stand next to her.

"Is there nothing I can do or say to make you not do this? I fear I will lose my daughter. I have just lost my son. Must I go through this pain again?"

Meeting Lady Elizabeth's eyes, Jacqueline found them red and puffy from crying. Her own showed no such marks of mourning. She could not, would not let such weakness have reign with her. It would assuredly defeat her.

"You know my answer to both those questions. I will not be put off. I would save you from the pain you feel now, mother. I cannot think of how my taking William's place might affect you should I fail. Please understand, I will do this."

Sighing, Lady Elizabeth knew she was wasting her breath with Jacqueline. Her daughter would not be swayed. So that left her with only one course of action. She had to support her offspring in any way she could. She would keep William's death a secret from the mainland, from his father.

"Fine, Jacqueline. I will bother you no further about this matter. You are no longer a child. I have to respect your decision. Even though it kills me to think what can happen to you. I only ask you do not attempt to go up against your father until you are deemed ready by Sir Guy. He will oversee your training."

"I will gladly have Sir Guy train me, but I will decide when I am ready."

Lady Elizabeth's voice was tinged with anger. "If you do not allow Sir Guy to decide, I will stop you any way possible. All it will take is a missive sent to your father informing him of William's death."

"How could you do that knowing how I feel?"

"Quite easily, my girl. I will not stand by and let my remaining child knowingly go and commit suicide, because that is what it would be. Now, do I have your word, Jacqueline?"

Not liking it one bit, Jacqueline allowed her mother this small victory. It would not change anything. She would go and no one would stop her. "You have my word. Sir Guy will have the final say when I go."

* * * *

The next day found Jacqueline on the castle's tilting grounds. Once more she donned a man's clothing. Today was her first day of training with Sir Guy, the castle's castellan. He had trained William in the knightly arts. He had even trained Jacqueline in the limited amount she had been allowed to learn.

Sir Guy was fifty but was built as sturdy as any oak tree. At just slightly over six feet, he was formidable looking even without his armor. He possessed piercing hazel eyes, which did not miss very much. His midnight black hair was slightly peppered with gray, making him look distinguished. Not that Jacqueline would ever tell him. He was also more of a father to William and herself than the earl ever could be. Jacqueline loved Sir Guy. His gruff exterior hid a soft hearted man, one who had taken pity on the fatherless twins and treated them as his own children.

At this precise moment, he was very much playing the role of father figure, pacing back and forth before Jacqueline, a deep scowl upon his face. He was making her edgy and he well knew it.

"Stop looking at me like that. You can give me menacing looks all day if you wish, but I am not going to go away."

Sir Guy stopped his pacing and, clasping his hands behind his back, rocked up and down on his toes. "I am just trying to see if you are as mad as I think you are. Planning to pull this stunt would qualify you as exactly that."

Jacqueline could not help but roll her eyes at him. "You know I am not mad. You of all people should know what I am capable of."

"I will give you that. You excel at riding at the rings. But catching a suspended ring on the tip of your lance is nowhere the same as hitting a fully armored and mounted knight."

"I am not exactly some weak, pathetic female."

"No, you are not, Jacqueline." Sir Guy's words were spoken with affection. He had been proud of what she had accomplished in the previous training sessions. If she had been born a man, he could have easily completed her training and her when she reached the age of twenty.

Falling silent once more, Sir Guy studied Jacqueline intently. "Come, I have your armor for you. Some is from what we used in the past and some pieces were William's." Turning on his heels, he headed to the quintain. Under it sat a pile of armor.

Jacqueline cleared her throat, pushing back her emotions. Raw pain had shot through her with the knowledge she would be using parts of William's armor. Swallowing back the lump in her throat, she ran to catch up to Sir Guy. How could she possibly fail now? She would have something of William with her when she faced her father. Hopefully William would be with her in spirit.

Chapter Two

Every bone in his body ached. He felt like there was no part of him not bruised and battered. Sir Terric Aubrey felt older than his six and twenty years. But what else did he expect with the type of life he had chosen? A landless knight, who made his living following and competing in the tournament circuit picked a hard road. At times, a painful one at that.

Terric released a groan when his squire, Edwin, rubbed his bruised left shoulder. As Edwin began to attack the area in earnest, Terric groaned in protest. "Easy boy. Are you trying to maim me?"

The squire relented and stepped away from Terric's prone body. They were in Terric's pavilion, the only home both had known for the last three years, the length of time Terric had been on the road.

"You need to get off the circuit for awhile before you kill yourself. Today was too close for my liking."

Edwin was correct. Today had been a very close call indeed. During his last run in the list, his competitor's lance had hit him in the helm, missing blinding him by a scant half inch. The mark of the blow was still on his helm, making it easy to see how close the lance had come.

Standing, Terric stretched his six foot four inch frame. Rolling his left shoulder a few times, he heard it pop and settle back into place. A dislocated shoulder was quite common on the circuit. Terric had had first hand experience on how painful one could be. As a result, his shoulder popped and cracked after each tournament.

"Do not remind me how close I came to ending my career as a tournament knight. Luck was on my side today."

Edwin scoffed. "I should say it was more your great skill than luck."

Terric smiled. "Well thank you, squire. I gladly accept your compliment."

A wet cloth hit Terric squarely in the face. Edwin laughed. "There will be no more compliments from me. I would not want you to get a big head. We would never be able to get your helm on."

Wisely, Edwin ducked out of the pavilion after issuing those words, leaving Terric alone. Shaking his head in amusement, Terric could not suppress a chuckle. Edwin was always good for such comments.

Their relationship was not solely based as a knight and his squire. Edwin was as much his companion as he was squire. At aged eight and ten, Edwin had seen, and done, more than he should have at his young age. But being a child alone in London's streets had a tendency to do that. To that day, Edwin still claimed a guardian angel had been watching over him when he had encountered Terric.

It could have been an angel who led Terric to him, or he had just happened to be in the right place at the right time. No matter how he had happened to stumble across the badly beaten ten and two year old Edwin, he was thankful he had been the one to be there when the boy needed help.

When he was dumped in an alleyway behind the alehouse Terric was about to enter, the commotion had drawn his attention. If not found, Edwin would have surely died in the filth of the alley. And Edwin still had no memory of who had beaten him or why.

Terric rubbed the wet cloth across his chest. He had to make himself presentable for the feasting which would begin shortly.. This could be a hard, lonely life, but the feasting sometimes helped to make up for a few short comings. Particularly the ladies, who would be in attendance.

A little flirtation with the ones who tried to gain his attention was one of Terric's favorite ways to unwind after a battering in the list. He was not ugly, far from it. And so in knowing what his face did to the ladies, he used it to his advantage.

His eyes were an unusual color. They were violet. Hair the color of wheat worn shoulder length, a strong chin, straight nose, and sculpted lips, were what drew women to him.

Edwin took full advantage of Terric's luck with the women. He had no problems finding a woman for himself amongst his master's admirers. The boy was no slouch himself in the looks department with his shaggy dark blonde hair and green eyes.

Though women flocked to Terric, he did not take up what they were offering, most times. He did not want or need a woman to be a part of his life, not while he was in the circuit. Spending just one night with one was not something he made a habit of. Flirting was more his forte.

Once dressed in a tight fitting dark blue tunic, which came to mid-thigh in length, and black hose, he pulled on his boots and exited his pavilion. The feast was being held at the castle. This tournament was in Devon, held by a minor lord. To be perfectly honest, Terric could not remember the name of the castle, or the lord's name for that matter. After attending so many tournaments, they tended to blur one into another. Especially smaller

tournaments, which category this one fell into.

Though small it was, Terric had managed to take enough ransoms this day to make it profitable. And that was all that really mattered at the end of the day.

* * * *

"Come on girl, give me your hand. Let's give it another go."

Reaching up, Jacqueline clasped Sir Guy by the hand and allowed him to pull her up onto her feet. Landing flat on your back and not being able to get up, she found to be a humiliating experience. Being encased in full armor, helm and all, she was too weighted down to gain her feet on her own.

The quintain was proving harder than it looked. After a week's worth of training behind her, Jacqueline was still being knocked off her steed, but she was not going to give up. She was not going to let a damn sandbag get the better of her.

"Up you go." Sir Guy cupped his hand for Jacqueline to step into so he could help her back into the saddle. "Remember, get your lance aimed for the center of the quintain. Any deviation from that point and the sandbag will get you."

"Thanks for the reminder, but I have found that out myself already, a number of times." Accepting her lance once more, Jacqueline set it in place, then prepared to run at the quintain one last time before ending the training session.

Taking a couple of deep breaths to help clear her mind, she focused all her attention on the quintain. Satisfied with her grip on the lance, she shoved her heels into her horse's sides, and barreled toward her target.

When her lance hit the quintain, Jacqueline braced for the inevitable feel of the sandbag whacking her from behind. It never came. Looking back over her shoulder, she found herself now past it, and miraculously, she was still in her saddle.

Letting out a loud whoop, she turned her steed back around and headed back to where Sir Guy stood watching her.

Yanking off her helm, she waited for him to speak. When he was not readily forthcoming, she dismounted and stood before him. "Well, are you at least going to say something?"

To her complete surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and, holding her in a bear hug, Sir Guy lifted her off her feet. When he set her back down, there was a large grin upon his face.

"Well done, my girl, well done. I knew you had it in you."

Basking in the older man's approval, Jacqueline quickly kissed his cheek. "I had a good teacher, don't you know."

Feeling light of heart, more than she had been feeling for the last few days, she spun on her heels and walked in the direction of the hall. Now that she had managed to best the quintain, her mother could finally stop worrying about her so much.

Chapter Three

Having completed six months of intense training, Jacqueline was now ready to test her new found skills. With winter now drawing to a close, the tournament circuit would resume the following month. A smaller tournament would be the ideal opportunity to see how she could handle herself in the list. The only foreseeable problem would be her mother.

Lady Elizabeth had been supportive of her daughter during her training, but it was not hard to see she did not totally approve either. Jacqueline would have a small battle on her hands. Not so much because her mother did not think she would do well, but that she would be taking the final step in assuming William's identity.

Much to Lady Elizabeth's chagrin, her daughter had already taken to wearing a man's short tunic and hose all the time. Jacqueline had put aside her gowns when she had started her training, not once donning one since. But she had yet to take the final step, cutting her hair. To participate in a tournament, cutting her hair was what she must do.

Heading to her mother's solar, she hoped she could try and convince Lady Elizabeth to allow her to go. Sir Guy seemed to think she was ready, though he had not said as much. But

Jacqueline knew he would stand by her. He had given his word. He could not back out, not when she had mastered the quintain. She could beat it now with every run she made at it.

Lady Elizabeth's solar was full of bright sunlight, which shone through the large windows running the length of the chamber. The windows overlooked her mother's walled garden. Both Beth and her mother were present in the solar, sewing. Beth sat before a tapestry frame stitching, while her mother worked on a tunic. Clearing her throat, Jacqueline announced her presence to both women.

Her mother looked up and smiled at her. "Have you come to join us, Jacqueline?"

Jacqueline shook her head in response. "Nay, mother. You know I prefer the lance to a needle these days."

Frowning, her mother sniffed and said, "It did not hurt to ask. I have missed your company these past months."

Groaning to herself, Jacqueline pushed on. This was not a good sign. Getting her mother to agree to her wishes was not going to go without a fight it would seem. "You know why I have not had the time to sit with you like this."

Lady Elizabeth sighed. "Aye, I do know. I am reminded of it every day, seeing you dressed like that."

Jacqueline self-consciously pulled on the hem of her tunic, then abruptly stopped herself. She had nothing to be ashamed of. "Be that as it may, I need to discuss something with you. Something of importance."

Putting aside the tunic, her mother motioned her to come sit in the empty chair next to her. "Sit, tell me what is on your mind."

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Jacqueline decided it was best to get right down to the point, not drag this

out any longer than it had to be.

"The tournament circuit starts soon. I want to attend one of the smaller tournaments, one which the earl will not be at."

"You mean to observe it only, am I correct?"

"Nay, mother. I mean to participate. It is time I see how I handle myself in the list."
Lady Elizabeth quickly glanced over at William's young widow.

Beth guiltily looked down at her tapestry. "Jacqueline has hinted such to me. That she was planning to do this."

"And you did not think to mention it to me?"

"I had no idea she was going to want to go so soon."

"Do not worry, Beth. I will not hold this against you. You are not responsible for Jacqueline's ideas." Once more focusing her full attention back to her daughter, she spoke again.

"Jacqueline, I do not think you are ready. You have only been training for six months."

"Ask Sir Guy. He thinks I am. I think it is you who is not ready, mother."

Lady Elizabeth gave her daughter a frosty glare. Jacqueline was correct. She was not ready. She was not ready to maybe lose her last child. "Why must you persist in this? It is a mad scheme which will only end badly."

Jacqueline cringed at her mother's words. She had known Lady Elizabeth was not a great supporter of what she was doing, but she had not known she looked upon it with such misgiving.

"Mother, try to understand. I will not be put off. I am going to this tournament with or without your consent."

Picking up the tunic she had been stitching, Lady Elizabeth let her daughter know she would not speak further. Eyes downcast, her needle flashed in and out of the material she worked.

Turning to Beth, Jacqueline looked at her beseechingly. "Do you feel the same? If I am to really do this properly, I need you by my side. As William's wife, you will make it more believable."

The younger woman quickly looked at her mother-in-law, seeming to mentally apologize for what she was about to say. "I will help you, Jacqueline. A part of me wants to see William revenged as much as you do."

* * * *

The tournament chosen to be Jacqueline's final test before facing the earl was being held at Portchester Castle on the mainland. The castle was situated near Portsmouth's harbor, one of the more used landing spots when leaving the Isle. It was a royal castle, but neither King Richard nor his queen would be in attendance. The castle constable would be presiding over the tournament.

Now, with the day of the event here, Jacqueline was second guessing herself. Was she capable of really doing this? It had not helped her nerves any when her mother had refused to see them off. A blatant show of her disapproval. Getting Beth to cut her hair close to how William wore his had been the last straw for her mother. She now chose to ignore Jacqueline as if she was not even in the same room.

Reaching up, Jacqueline pulled at her hair, which now just brushed the top of her shoulders. Only to herself would she admit she did in some small way regret having to cut it, but it would grow back. After she completed what she set out to do.

The ferry transporting them across the water to Portsmouth, bumped against the landing. Waiting for the rest of her company to disembark, Jacqueline took a deep breath to steady herself, then followed.

She was not alone, including the two men-at-arms as protection, Beth and Sir Guy traveled with her. Having Sir Guy accompany her had been an unexpected surprise. She just hoped her mother would not make it hard for him upon their return. He seemed not at all worried about what Lady Elizabeth's reaction would be. He simply stated that he would not allow Jacqueline to compete in her first tournament without him at her side. William had had no squire. So Sir Guy decided to fulfill some of the duties a squire would be expected to perform, not trusting the men-at-arms to do a proper job of it.

Upon reaching Portchester Castle, their small party slowly converged on the area set up where the tournament was to be held. Picking an empty space amongst the already pitched pavilions, the men-at-arms started to unload the baggage cart. After their pavilion was taken from the cart, Sir Guy began directing the two men as to where it should be erected.

With not much to do but stand by and wait, Jacqueline scanned the other pavilions. Each one had a standard with the knight's coat of arms standing before it showing who presided within. She did not recognize any who were close by, which was understandable. She had only been to a couple of tournaments in the past before this one.

Beth quietly came to stand beside her. "I am here for you. If a knight William was acquainted with confronts you, I will make sure to be by your side. But at present, it should be no real concern. William did not know any who are camped near us."

"If you had not agreed to come, I am sure I would have made a complete fool of myself."

Looping her arm through Jacqueline's, Beth felt her start in surprise. "Remember, you are William and I am your wife. You cannot jump at a mere touch from me."

Jacqueline smiled down at Beth. "You caught me off guard. I have not yet started to think that far ahead."

"Well start acting the part of William, now. You are about to go through your first test."

Beth was correct. A squire from the pavilion across from where they stood was heading in their direction. He was smiling, and seemed not able to take his eyes from Beth.

"Good day to you." The squire bowed. "Might I have your name, sir. My master may wish to engage you in the list."

Clearing her throat, Jacqueline tried to make her voice as deep as possible. "I am Sir William Montacute. And might I inquire who your master is?"

"My master is Sir Terric Aubrey, and I am Edwin." Grabbing Beth's hand, he placed a kiss on the back of it. Beth quickly yanked it back.

Settling into her role, Jacqueline warned the squire away. "I would appreciate it if you would keep your hands off my lady wife."

To give him credit, Edwin blushed while he backed away, only to be brought up short as he backed into the

knight standing behind him. Grabbing the boy's shoulders to steady him, the knight gently moved Edwin aside.

"I see my squire has introduced himself. I hope Edwin was not bothering you too much." Sir Terric sent his squire a meaningful look.

Jacqueline felt her jaw drop open. She could not tear her eyes away from Sir Terric. The man was too handsome for his own good. His blonde hair and unusual colored eyes, a beautiful shade of violet, she found appealing. But it was his height which drew her the most. Being taller than most men, finding one she actually had to look up at was a novelty. Even though she was supposed to be acting a part, Jacqueline could not help but rake Sir Terric's body with her eyes. The man was all muscle. Jacqueline had to stop herself before she reached out to see if his body was as hard as it looked.

Realizing Terric was watching her, waiting for some kind of response, Jacqueline mentally gave herself a shake. "No harm done, Sir Terric."

Flashing her a smile, which caused her to take complete leave of her senses, he said, "Good. I could not help but overhear your name. I am glad to see you have recovered from your wound. I was at Windsor and watched when your father unseated you."

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Chapter Four

She froze, her mind drawing an absolute blank. Jacqueline had not expected to face this particular question so early on in her deception. Luckily, Beth sensed her dilemma and took control of the conversation, drawing Terric's attention to herself.

"My husband's recovery was faster than we had anticipated. This is his first tournament since receiving his wound in Windsor."

"I must say, Sir William has made a speedy recovery. I had thought a wound to the neck would have laid him up much longer. But I am happy to see he is well enough to grace the list once again. If you will excuse me, I will leave you to finish your camp preparations."

With a nod of his head, Terric motioned for Edwin to follow him, then left the two women alone.

Jacqueline let the breath she had been holding out in a rush. "He is going to be a problem."

"He can easily be avoided. Just carry on as you have planned. If you let Sir Terric get to you, you will fail. Ignore the man."

"If only it were that simple."

Beth looked at her, finding her watching Sir Terric's retreating back. "Jacqueline, you are attracted to him, are

you not?"

Feeling her face turn red, Jacqueline tore her gaze away from Sir Terric and looked at Beth. If only her friend knew what was running through her head concerning that particular knight. With a shrug of her shoulders, she replied, "It is of no import if I am. It is not like I can do anything about it, now can I?"

"Just remember that. We do not need you losing your head over that one. I remember Sir Terric from Windsor, though I did not know his name at the time. He flirts with anything in a gown."

Jacqueline chuckled, then acting the part of a husband, offered Beth her arm. "Have no fear, dear wife. There are bigger stakes here. Much more important than any passing fancy I might have. Let us see how the men-at-arms are doing setting up the camp."

* * * *

A pavilion was quite an easy thing to erect. All it consisted of really was a heavy waterproof canvas, which made up the outer walls, and the inner wooden supports. The supports themselves were a sturdy center post that a wooden circular shaped wheel with inner spokes, sat upon. It looked much like a cart wheel, only much larger. The canvas fitted over the whole thing, spreading to the ground where it was firmly pegged down. So it happened the men-at-arms had completed setting up their camp when Beth and Jacqueline returned.

Sir Guy awaited them inside the pavilion. When they arrived, he rapidly fired questions at them. "Who was the knight? Did he ask to challenge you? Did he accept you as a man?"

Jacqueline held up her hand and shook her head, halting his barrage of questions. She could not help but find humor in his query. "If you would let me answer one question before asking the next, I will tell you all that passed between us."

Crossing his arms in front of his chest, Sir Guy said, "I was just curious, lass. It is no test run here. If you do not pull this off, at this tournament, there will be no other tournament for you."

"Will you stop your worrying? As you can see, no alarm was raised. And the answer to your questions, the knight is Sir Terric Aubrey, he did not mention anything about a challenge, and he believes I am William."

"But Jacqueline has neglected to tell you one other small thing about her meeting with Sir Terric." Beth said oh so casually. Having gained Sir Guy's attention, she grinned. "She forgot to tell you she is smitten with him."

Sir Guy rolled his eyes in disgust. "Besides that utterly useless piece of information, do you have anything else to say about him?"

Beth grew serious. "Aye, there is. Sir Terric remembers William was wounded at Windsor. He was there and saw it all."

"Then we will all have to be cautious around him. It may be best to keep our distance from him entirely."

Knowing she would be questioned if she did not agree, Jacqueline nodded. But if opportunity did arise to get to know Sir Terric better, she would not openly shun him. Just the mere sight of him caused her body to ache and wetness to form at her very core. She had finally met a man that she wanted in the most intimate of ways, and as fate would have it, she had to make him believe she was just as male as he.

* * * *

The next day the tournament began. Jacqueline had not gone to the castle the previous evening. It had

seemed prudent, after the questions Sir Terric had posed to her.

The list was set up just outside the castle walls. Bleachers had been erected on the sidelines for the ladies and men of rank who were not participating in the tournament. There, they could watch the competitors make runs at each other. Beth was seated amongst them.

Jacqueline had to admit her nerves were getting the better of her. Standing in the middle of her pavilion as Sir Guy helped her don her armor, she could hear the roar of the crowd outside. She resisted the urge to wipe her sweating palms on her thighs, which were already encased in iron.

After he finished fastening her breastplate and backplate, Sir Guy attached the plate armor worn on her arms. Jacqueline accepted the metal gauntlets from the older man. She tried her best to hide her nervousness from him when he placed her helm upon her head. But she of course failed miserably. He put his hand under chin, forcing her to look at him. It was hard to see him clearly through the eye slits of her helm.

"You will be fine, Jacqueline. Just remember what I taught you. Ignore the crowd, and focus on your opponent."

"I will remember. I just have to get through my first run. It is the unknown which is making me feel this way. I have never jousting against a real knight. I know naught of what will happen."

"It is not all that much different from the quintain. Only with this, the object you are aiming for is moving, as well."

"I beg to differ." Jacqueline said gruffly.

Laughing, Sir Guy passed her shield to her. "You are correct. I am only trying to make you feel better." Growing serious again, he strapped her sword around her waist. "You will get through this, my girl."

She smiled weakly at him, adjusting her shield, which had her brother's, the Montacute coat of arms painted upon it. Painted completely white, it had three large red diamonds in the center. Three black circles, above the first and third diamond and the third just below the second diamond, made up the coat of arms. The sword strapped around her hips was her own, having been made especially for her a few years before.

Taking a deep breath for courage, Jacqueline stepped out of her pavilion. Her steed, also armored, stood patiently nearby. The man-at-arms who held the animal's reins walked it to where she stood. Sir Guy helped her mount then, passing the reins up to her, he took hold of the horse's bridle and started to lead it to the lists.

Her first competitor was Sir Hugh Blakely. All Jacqueline could see was an armored knight who sat upon his horse opposite her, with lance in his hand. Allowing her mind to go blank, she accepted her lance from Sir Guy. Everything fell away, the roar of the crowd, the jingle of her horse's harness.

Once the flag was lowered that signaled the start of the charge, Jacqueline shoved her spurs into her steed's flanks and barreled toward her opponent. When they met, her lance shattered as it came into contact with Sir Hugh's shield. She hit it squarely in the center. His lance grazed her shield, but remained intact. The first point was awarded to Jacqueline.

She turned her horse about and returned to her end of the field. Accepting another lance, she prepared for her second charge.

This time both lances shattered, but her hit was hard enough to fling Sir Hugh backwards over his horse's rump. He landed with a loud clang when his armor clad body hit the ground.

Hearing the crowd calling her name, William's name, Jacqueline slowly became aware of her surroundings. Turning her horse about, she walked past her fallen opponent. His squire had come to his aid and was helping Sir Hugh to regain his feet. He appeared not to be injured, most likely only having had the wind knocked out of him.

Seeing Jacqueline, Sir Hugh spoke as she went past. "I will have the usual ransom money sent to your pavilion at the end of the tournament."

Turning in her saddle, she replied, "That is acceptable."

Once she reached Sir Guy, he led her horse back to her pavilion, then followed her in after she dismounted. "How do you feel?"

Pulling her shield, helm, and gauntlets off, Jacqueline wiped the sweat from her face. The armor was hot, as well as heavy. She would be happy to have it removed.

"My left shoulder feels a bit numb after that last charge. Other than that, I am fine."

"Get used to it. There is more to come. I must say you have acquitted yourself quite admirably, my girl. You would have made William proud."

Beaming from the older man's words, she smiled. "Thank you, kind sir. One down and only four more to go."

"Did Sir Hugh make arrangements for paying the ransom? If he had not, his armor, sword, and horse are yours."

Taking a swallow of water from a skin, she nodded. "Aye, he did. I do not want his armor, nor his horse. That is not the reason why I am here. Not to make money."

"I know. But it would look strange if you did not accept the ransom. You did win the match, and it is customary to take such."

"I know that. How long till I face my next opponent?"

Unbuckling her armor, Sir Guy answered, "You have a half hour. Rest. By the time you face your last opponent, you will feel bruised from head to toe."

* * * *

Sir Guy had not stretched the truth when he had said she would feel so bruised. Her whole body ached. Her left shoulder was already a beautiful array of colors. Just getting herself dressed for the feast taking place this evening was proving to be a challenge.

Watching Jacqueline's stiff movements, Beth took pity on her and helped to pull her tunic over her head. After taking a step back, she checked her handy work. Jacqueline would do, if no one really looked too hard at her. With her short hair and bound chest, she could pass for a young William. But there was no disguising the feminine curve of her hips. At least a cloak shielded them from behind.

"What do you think, Beth? Do I look enough like William?"

The more Beth looked at her, the more the resemblance became. She had to blink back tears. She still felt the loss of William greatly. "Aye, you will do. Too much really."

Jacqueline, sensing the other woman's sadness, moved closer to her and put her arm around Beth's shoulders.

"If this is going to be too much for you to bear, we can bow out of the feast."

Beth shook her head in denial. "Nay, you have to go. You need the practice. I will be fine."

Not wishing to upset her any further, Jacqueline offered her arm to Beth. "Then let us go face the lions together."

The great hall in Portchester Castle was just about filled to capacity by the time they arrived. Sir Guy had arrived earlier. Upon seeing Jacqueline enter the hall with Beth on her arm, he motioned them over to where he sat. He had managed to save them each a seat.

Squeezing onto the bench, both women accepted a trencher from a passing pageboy. Filling them with food, they then settled down to the business of enjoying the food that had been prepared for the feast. Before they could finish eating a voice, coming from further down their table, interrupted them.

"I am glad to see you could attend the feast, Sir William. This is the best part of a tournament."

Leaning slightly forward to look down the table, Jacqueline found Sir Terric staring back at her. Silently groaning to herself, she replied, "How could I pass up such good food? After a day in the list, it is much welcomed."

Taking her reply as an invitation, Sir Terric stood up. With trencher and goblet in hand, he came over to where Jacqueline sat. Smiling politely at Sir Guy who sat to one side of her, he squeezed in between them, which in turn caused everyone else on the bench to shift down, filling the empty space Terric had created by leaving his other seat.

Placing the trencher and goblet on the table in front of him, he motioned a pageboy to refill his goblet with wine. "Hope you do not mind my intrusion, but I would rather be in your company."

Not sure how to respond, Jacqueline nodded and did her best to keep her eyes on her food. Sitting so close to Terric, having her thigh and hip plastered to his, was doing funny things to her insides. Her heart began to beat erratically, while her stomach felt so jumpy her food was sitting like an uncomfortable lump. The scent of sandalwood and man was something she found she could not ignore. For the first time in her life she felt a longing a woman had for a man. The kind of longing that would only be satisfied in the arms of that man. Much to her shame, Jacqueline found it hard not to stare at Terric's handsome face.

Oblivious to how she was reacting to his presence, Terric continued to make idle conversation. "You did well in the list today, Sir William. Though only able to unseat two of your opponents, you made a fair profit."

Taking a sip of wine, Jacqueline tried to still her rapidly beating heart. "I am not here to make a profit. I compete because I enjoy the sport."

"Well some of us do not have such luxury. This is my livelihood."

Meeting Sir Terric's eyes, Jacqueline noticed a touch of regret in their violet depths. She could imagine it not being an easy life. Having to depend on how well you did in a tournament determining how well you lived. "I did not know you had to be here."

Terric laughed. He could see the younger man was feeling a small amount of pity for him. "It is not that bad of a life. There is always lots of good food to eat, well most of the time. And the ladies can be very accommodating when they wish to grant you their favors."

As if to prove the truth of his words, a lady, who Jacqueline very much doubted was such a thing, came and

plunked herself down onto Terric's lap. Much to her disgust, he did nothing to remove the woman.

Terric smiled up at the woman warmly. "My Lady Rose. I see you managed to escape your husband yet again."

The woman laughed at his words gaily. "Not at all hard to do, especially when he is so far gone in drink. You know I would take you over him any day."

"Your words bring joy to my heart, my lady."

Turning to Beth, who sat on her other side, Jacqueline rolled her eyes at Sir Terric's words. Beth quietly chuckled. Since the couple seemed to be more involved in each other than those around them, she continued to make Beth laugh. She batted her eyelashes, much in the same manner as Lady Rose had been doing to Terric. Getting into her role playing, Jacqueline added some of her own faces, making Beth laugh all the more. Placing the back of her hand to her forehead, she sighed deeply, pretending to feel faint.

"I hope I have entertained you enough this evening."

Feeling her face turn a bright shade of red, Jacqueline turned to look at Terric. The Lady Rose was nowhere to be seen. And from the look upon his face, he had been watching her antics for some time.

"I do apologize, Sir Terric. It was not my intent to make jest of you."

Terric tried his best to keep a straight face, but could not stop the smile that turned into a full fledged laugh. At the sound of his laughter both women added their own to his.

Bringing himself back under control, Terric clapped Jacqueline on the shoulder. In reaction to his touch she stiffened. It felt very much like being touched by fire. All the laughter left her as she stared into his eyes. Her mouth went suddenly dry, and her breath caught in her throat. She had thought only silly headed girls acted so foolishly around a man they found appealing. But Jacqueline could not tear her gaze from his face. Peering at his firm lips, she unconsciously licked her own.

Shifting uncomfortably on the bench, Terric was the first to break the spell. He quickly snatched back his hand and cleared his throat. "Apology accepted, Sir William."

Lifting his goblet to his lips, Terric drained it in one large gulp. He felt slightly unnerved by what had just passed between himself and the younger knight. When he had touched William, it felt similar to touching a burning log. He knew he was not alone in feeling that sensation. What bothered him the most though, was William's reaction. It was a look Terric had received many a time from a woman. That he had responded to it, made the exchange even more unsettling.

Feeling disgusted with herself, Jacqueline attempted to get Terric to overlook what had just taken place and started a new conversation, something on a less stressful subject.

"So, Sir Terric, where is the next tournament you go to from here?"

Silently thanking William for not commenting on what had passed between them, he gladly answered his question. "The next tournament is to be held in Lymington. Are you going to be attending, as well?"

Jacqueline shook her head in response. "Nay, I had not planned to."

"Why not? You claim to love the sport. Why not attend? Lymington is not too far from here. And it is to be held in a week's time. Plenty of time to travel at a leisurely pace."

"I had not thought that far ahead as of yet."

"You should attend. If anything, it will be a good place to practice for the tournament the king has planned in May. It is going to be a grand tournament, with many knights competing. Not just English knights either. They are to come from all over."

Terric had Jacqueline's full attention now. The king's grand tournament could be what she had been waiting for. "I have not heard of this tournament."

It was a bit of a surprise, William not having heard of it before now. Most knights on the circuit had known before the start of the season.

"King Richard heard news that Queen Isabella is to make a public entry into Paris. You know how our monarchy does not like to be outdone by the French. And so, the grand tournament to be held in London. It is to take place on the Sunday after Michaelmas day. On the following Monday, the knights will compete, as well. But I am sure it will last longer than two days. Anyone who is anyone will be there."

Jacqueline held herself stiff in anticipation. "My father, the earl, should be in attendance?"

"I would be very much surprised if he was not." Terric found it odd, William not knowing his own father's plans.

"Perfect. It will work out perfectly." Jacqueline said distractedly. Plans were already swirling inside her head.

"I guess you could say that." Now William had him intrigued. Especially when he saw the younger man's wife elbow him in the ribs.

She chose to ignore Beth's reaction to the news of the tournament. It might be a bigger tournament than one where she had planned to face down the earl, but it was an ideal situation. She could not have planned it better herself.

Terric could almost see the plans bouncing around in William's head as he pondered his words. "So, do you plan to go to Lymington now, my friend?"

Shifting her foot under the table, so Beth could no longer stomp on it in agitation, Jacqueline smiled at Terric. "I think I have changed my mind. We shall meet again at Lymington, my friend."

* * * *

The following day they made the short trip back to the Isle. As the ferry took her party across the water, Jacqueline used the time to think of what to say to her mother. That her mother would be greatly distressed with her decision to participate in another tournament was a given. She had not been at all pleased with this one.

Neither Sir Guy nor Beth were at all happy with her decision either. They both felt she would be taking too much of a risk. Each tournament Jacqueline participated in, the greater the chances a knight acquainted with her father could tell him what she was up to. Not that they would recognize her as a woman, but the number of tournaments she attended. William never went to more than one or two at the most in any given year.

When they reached the landing, Jacqueline still had not planned exactly what she would say to her mother. The only merit she could push on her mother would be the opportunity to perfect her performance in the list. Which was what Jacqueline had to keep reminding herself. There was no other reason, really.

But Jacqueline knew she was only fooling herself. It was one reason, a very good one at that, but not the main one. It was the chance to see Terric again that drew her to make this choice.

Mounting her horse, she steered it onto the road leading up to Carisbrooke. She hoped this homecoming would find her mother in good humor. If she was not, Jacqueline could find herself with an argument on her hands.

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Chapter Five

Lymington did not have a castle, but it did have a fairground. It was not a large port, though it was well known for its salt making. It also imported French wine and exported cloth, which was woven in Salisbury.

Jacqueline led her small party down High Street to the fairground. The tournament was to be one of the events of the fair. Lymington had two fairs a year instead of the one most places held. The lord of the manor would be presiding over both the tournament and the fair.

Upon reaching the fairground, Jacqueline casually searched the multicolored pavilions already erected. Spotting a standard, which sported Sir Terric's coat of arms, a white falcon in flight on a dark blue background, she motioned to her men-at-arms to set up her pavilion right beside his.

Her party was one person smaller than she had at her first tournament. Sir Guy was absent. The Lady Elizabeth had been greatly distressed with her daughter's decision to attend another tournament. In a fit of pique, at the last moment, she forbade Sir Guy to leave the Isle. But she had not been able to stop Beth from going along, for which Jacqueline was grateful.

Once she was all settled, Terric came calling. Even though only a week had passed since they parted company, Jacqueline had not been able to stop thinking about the man who stood before her. He even haunted her dreams, dreams that left her restless once awake, ones that left her aching for his touch on the most intimate of places on her body. She knew she was being a fool, but she could not ignore the attraction she felt for him.

Beth, giving Jacqueline a sly grin, nodded to Sir Terric and then left the two of them alone.

"I hope I did not make your wife feel as though she had to leave. I know you have just arrived. I wanted to renew our acquaintance."

"Nay, you did nothing to bother my lady wife. She more than likely has gone to see what items are for sale at the fair."

"Ah, a past time many a woman enjoys." Terric started to chuckle at his quip. But when he did not get the same response from Sir William, he slowly let it die away.

Hoping to change the subject, he decided to take the conversation on a different tract. "I see you lost Sir Guy. Who will act the part of your squire while you are here?"

"He could not join me this time. He has his duties to attend to at Carisbrooke. I will have one of my men-at-arms attend me."

Terric shook his head. "That will not do."

Jacqueline felt a little taken aback by his denial. Was there some rule she had not heard about? One which said who was allowed to act as squire? "Why will it not do?"

Seeing the worried expression William wore, Terric could not hold back his laughter. "Have no fear William. You do no wrong by having a lowly man-at-arms attend you. But I will personally not hear of it. Edwin will be happy to squire for you, along with myself. We are not going to be tilting against each other, so he should be able to keep up."

She opened her mouth to refuse his offer, then shut it again. He would think it strange for her to say nay. He was doing her a great favor by offering her the use of his squire. There were some draw backs though. For her. There would be no problem with Edwin helping her at the tilting ground. But assisting her to don her armor was a completely different story.

She could see Terric was waiting for her answer. Feeling decidedly unsure about the whole thing, Jacqueline did what she had to do. She accepted his offer. "I would be happy to have your squire assist me."

"I will inform Edwin of his additional duties then. I ride first, so he can come to you after."

With that decision made, they both fell silent. It was then Jacqueline noticed how close Terric had come to stand in front of her. As at Portchester Castle, her body responded to his nearness. There was no denying it. She was very attracted to this man. She could not seem to tear her eyes off his mouth. He was so close. All it would take was for her to lean slightly forward, take his face in both her hands, and pull his lips down to meet hers. She felt her body stir with desire just thinking about it.

She did not realize she was acting out what she thought, until Terric took a step back before she could reach for him. He stared at her, more than a bit strangely. Feeling flustered by what she had just about done, Jacqueline stepped back even further from him.

Really not knowing how to respond to William's strange behavior, Terric loudly cleared his throat. "Ah....well, I will leave you now. I will make sure Edwin assists you."

"I thank you, Sir Terric."

* * * *

Needing time to mull over what had taken place, Terric returned to his pavilion. Edwin was already there, busily polishing his armor. He looked up from his work at Terric's arrival.

"Did you speak to Sir William?"

Absentmindedly, Terric said, "Aye, I did."

When he did not go into any further details of the meeting, Edwin put down the armor and confronted Terric. "You have the most peculiar look upon your face. Just what took place at Sir William's pavilion?"

"That is what I am trying to figure out myself. I have offered your services to him for this day, by the way. When you attend him, I want you to watch very carefully what goes on there."

Edwin, thinking his master was but jesting with him, started to laugh, only to stop after the serious look Terric flashed his way. "You are serious? You want me to spy on Sir William?"

"Aye, I do. There is something not quite right with Sir William. It is a gut feeling I have and usually my gut feelings prove to be correct."

Even though he still was not sure why Terric wanted him to do this, Edwin agreed. "All right. I will see what I can come up with."

"Good."

Plunking himself down in a camp chair, Terric watched Edwin once more go back to the business of polishing his armor. What happened in William's pavilion would not leave his mind.

He had not missed the flush of desire on William's face. Nor the way the younger man had stared at his mouth. At first he had found it unnerving, but to his disgust, he had felt himself drawn to William and the more William stared at him, the more he had responded. The response he felt was very much like how he would feel when he found a woman attractive. The most manly part of himself had started to stir to life before he got a hold on himself and tapped it down. That did not sit well with him at all.

There was nothing for it, though, except to hope Edwin found the clues he needed. An answer to why he felt this attraction to another man, to William in particular, was forming in his mind. All he needed was the proof.

* * * *

Surprisingly, Jacqueline found Edwin's help not so trying as she had first expected. Donning her armor with his assistance went smoothly. Mostly because he spent a great deal of time looking at every item in her pavilion. If Jacqueline did not know the squire, she would have thought he was searching for what he could easily steal.

Now, facing her opponent, she prepared herself for her first run. She sent up a silent prayer, then set off. She was able to make the first hit. Accepting a new lance from Edwin, she started on her second run.

Jacqueline knew as soon as her opponent hit her shield, she was not going to leave the field completely unscathed. The hit she received had enough power behind it to throw her back onto the rump of her steed. She was able to keep her seat, but unable to get out of her prone position. Mostly the weight of her armor held her back, but it was the pain that left her weak. She had taken the full force of the strike on her left shoulder.

Unable to see, nor control her horse, she was thankful Edwin was there to grab her steed's reins and halt its movements. Groaning in agony, she allowed the squire to help her slide off the horse.

Edwin, being of the same height as herself, took her good arm and put it around his shoulders. "Let me get you back to your pavilion, Sir William. Then I will see to your shoulder."

Jacqueline furiously blinked back the tears of pain which threatened to fall. She could not give way to them. No knight would put on such a womanly display. Luckily for her, she still wore her helm, hiding her features from all those she passed by.

Upon reaching her pavilion, Edwin helped her onto a stool and carefully began to disarm her. Once free of her breast and backplate, he removed her armoring doublet that she wore beneath. Sitting with her upper body

free of all armor, the squire examined her shoulder.

"Looks like it is dislocated, Sir William. I will have to pop it back into place for you. Then most of the pain will leave you. I will have to ask you to remove your tunic."

As Edwin reached out to lift the hem of her tunic, Jacqueline shot to her feet. "Can you not fix my shoulder with my tunic still on?"

A little perplexed by Sir William's reaction to the removal of his tunic, Edwin shook his head. "It must come off. It will be easier to move the shoulder back into place with it removed."

When the squire advanced on her again, Jacqueline retreated, only to back into something which felt much like a solid wall.

Hearing the commotion coming from the pavilion next to his own, Terric had come to investigate. "What goes on here?"

Edwin let out an audible sigh of relief upon seeing his master. "Sir William refuses to remove his tunic. His shoulder is dislocated and I need to fix it for him."

Not allowing Jacqueline time to realize his intent, Terric knocked her feet out from under her and lowered her to the ground. Holding, and then lifting her left arm, he put his foot into her under arm. Thus, rendering her virtually helpless. She was already in enough pain, and the hold he had on her arm, was making it worse.

"All right, Edwin, I want you to put your hands on William's chest and hold him down. This may take a couple of tries to get the shoulder into place."

Beginning to feel frantic at this point, Jacqueline tried to avoid Edwin's hands. But her movements caused a sharp, shooting pain to race up her left arm all the way up to her shoulder. When she finally ceased moving, he placed his hands where he had been instructed.

Terric, waiting for Edwin to give the signal he was prepared to hold William down, found his squire frozen in place with a shocked look upon his face. "Well? Can we get on with this or not?"

Closing her eyes, Jacqueline waited for all hell to break loose. Though her chest was bound, she did not bind it as tightly when she was wearing armor. It was too constricting. And not being able to take proper deep breaths, made her feel faint while wearing full armor. Besides, it really was not necessary with plate armor.

Edwin's mouth opened and closed a few times, making him appear much like a gasping fish on dry land. "I cannot do this."

Feeling a bit exasperated, Terric rolled his eyes. "Why ever not?"

"Because Sir William is no man. The proof is there." Edwin had removed his hands and now pointed toward her chest.

Releasing Jacqueline's arm, Terric squatted down beside her and placed one of his hands where his squire indicated. He smiled. Here was the proof he had been looking for. The proof was the soft mound of her breast beneath his hand. "I think you have some explaining to do."

Letting her eyes drift open, Jacqueline found Terric's face a few scant inches from her own. "I...I know. Fix my shoulder, then I will tell you all."

"Anything to please a lady."

Signaling Edwin to once more hold her down, Terric again took his place at her shoulder, giving a firm twist and a hard pull to her left arm. The shoulder audibly popped back into its proper position. Jacqueline yelped at the pain of it. But as Edwin had predicted, with her shoulder now back in place, the pain was slowly receding.

Helping her up onto her feet, Terric made Jacqueline sit on the stool. No sooner had she sat down than Beth rushed into the pavilion. Upon seeing both Terric and Edwin present, she searched Jacqueline's face for any sign of trouble.

"Is everything all right, William?"

Before Jacqueline could respond, Terric took Beth by the arm, secured the pavilion opening, and then led her to stand beside her supposed husband. "There is no need to continue with your ruse with us, Lady Beth. We know 'William' is of the fairer sex."

At Jacqueline's nod, she confronted the knight, knowing her friend was not in any condition to do so. "What do you plan to do with this knowledge, Sir Terric?"

He smiled politely at her. "It entirely depends on what I am told."

"And if we feel we need not make any explanations? What then?"

"Then I have no qualms about revealing who 'Sir William' really is. Now, I want to hear what your 'husband' has to say about the matter."

Jacqueline stood up. She would not defend her actions to Terric while having to crane her neck to look up at him. She made sure their eyes met. "Even though I feel I do not owe you any explanation, I will give you one. William was my brother, my twin to be exact."

"Therefore, the great resemblance between your brother and yourself."

"Aye. William died from the wound he received at Windsor. Though Beth did all she could to bring him home to us alive, he succumbed while on the road. Now I take his place."

"But why? Does your family need the money won at tournaments?"

She shook her head vehemently in denial. "Nay, not at all. You were present at Windsor. You know who delivered the killing blow. I want revenge. The earl took away the one person who made me whole. He did not have to accept William's challenge. He could have refused, but he did not stay his hand. Now I intend to strike back at him. I want to ride against my father. My hatred of him knows no bounds. I despise the man."

Terric was shocked by the open bitterness the woman before him displayed toward her father. There had to be more to it than the earl killing her brother. "What is your real name?"

Blinking at how fast Terric changed the subject, she answered, "I am Jacqueline. What does knowing my name have to do with your decision?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to know what to call you. Other than a mad woman."

After all that she had already gone through this day, Jacqueline did not let Terric's insult lightly go by. She raised her right hand to deliver a slap to his face, only to have him grab it before she could make contact.

Growling in fury, she jerked her hand free.

"Jacqueline, that will do nothing to sway me to your side. But I do beg your forgiveness for the slight I gave you. It was unfair of me. But you are no match for your father. You have obviously never seen the earl in the list. Very few can defeat him."

"I do not care. I will face him."

Seeing that the conversation was going nowhere, Beth interrupted them. "Sir Terric, can I speak with you privately in your pavilion?"

Noticing the concerned expression on Beth's face, he agreed. Leaving Edwin to keep an eye on Jacqueline, they returned to his pavilion next door.

It was not hard to tell that Sir Terric had some concerns about Jacqueline, so Beth strived to make him understand why it was so important to her sister-in-law that she do this. "You have to understand how William's death affected Jacqueline. It is like a part of her died with him. The only thing which has kept her going has been her burning need for revenge. Until she faces the earl, she will not let herself accept the loss of her brother. Jacqueline has not shed one tear in all this time. She will not grieve."

Terric agitatedly ran his fingers through his hair. "Before I make my decision on what to do, I need you to truthfully answer one question."

"I will try to answer you as well as I can."

"Jacqueline has so much hatred for her father, I have seen it in her eyes. I know what happened to William was just the catalyst which pushed her to this point. What has the earl done to her in the past?"

Beth laughed, but it held no humor. It was a bitter laugh. "You are correct in your thinking. William was the last of many wrong doings by the earl. The only difficulty will be knowing where to start. The list is many and varies greatly. The earl basically abandoned his pregnant wife on the Isle and never had any interest in his children once they were born. Nor his wife for that matter. He already had his heir. There was no need. But what really made Jacqueline despise him was the marriage he arranged for her. Without her consent or her mother's."

"I take it the bridegroom was not to her liking?"

"Hardly. I think you have heard of the man the earl chose for her. The Earl of Somerset."

Letting loose a low whistle, Terric shook his head. "I would not even contract a marriage with that devil Forwin to my bitch hound. The bitch being too good for him. Obviously Jacqueline somehow stopped the marriage."

"Not so much Jacqueline as her mother. Lady Elizabeth was dead set against the marriage so she took matters into her own hands. To make a long story short, she faked Jacqueline's death. Therefore, the marriage contract became void."

"Lady Elizabeth sounds like a very intelligent woman. One well able to look after her children on her own."

Beth agreed with Terric's assumption. "That she is. She is not at all happy with what Jacqueline is doing, but she has kept her promise to keep William's death a secret from the earl." Taking both of his hands in her own, she looked up at him beseechingly. "I have told you enough, Sir Terric, of what goes on. I implore you not to reveal Jacqueline as an impostor. She has worked so hard to reach this point. If she cannot proceed, I am very

much afraid it will break the fragile thread she desperately holds onto."

After taking a few minutes to silently deliberate, Terric came to his decision. "Jacqueline and you win. I will say nothing." When Beth started to thank him, he stopped her. "I am not finished yet. I have some conditions. Firstly, Jacqueline competes in no more tournaments until the time she faces her father. Secondly, she goes home to the Isle, where I will accompany her."

"Why do you want to come home with us?"

"If she plans on facing the earl and survive the experience, she needs me. I am one of few who have won a ransom from him. I will train her. She is nowhere near ready to go up against her father. Do not ask me why, but I do not relish the idea of Jacqueline doing this without me by her side."

Chapter Six

Jacqueline had not bargained on having Terric and his squire go back to the Isle. She was thankful he had held his tongue about her, but she was not all that certain she liked his being in such close proximity.

Dismounting in the bailey, Jacqueline braced herself for her mother's reaction to unexpected guests. As predicted, when Lady Elizabeth noticed the strangers in their midst, she headed directly to confront her daughter.

"What goes on here, Jacqueline? Who are these men?" Lady Elizabeth whispered her questions. Jacqueline was pleased her mother remembered to keep her real identity a secret.

"Sir Terric is my friend. The other man is his squire, Edwin. There is no need to whisper either. Both know who I really am."

"You told them who you are?" her mother gasped.

"Nay, mother. When I was injured at the tournament, they helped me and found out for themselves."

"You were injured?!" Lady Elizabeth's words were spoken so loudly, all present in the bailey heard them, causing them to turn and look in their direction.

"Calm down. I am fine. I just had a dislocated shoulder. Terric fixed it for me. You know it happens more than not in the list. William sustained the same injury at one time."

"That may be so, but you are not your brother. I cannot fathom why you persist in this foolishness."

Unable to deal with her mother any further, Jacqueline stalked away.

Terric raised his brow in question when she approached. "Is everything all right with you?"

Jacqueline nodded, trying to rein in her temper. "Aye. Do not worry yourself. My mother was just expressing her disapproval is all."

Hearing her mother's steps behind her, she made the introductions. "Mother, this is Sir Terric Aubrey. Terric, this is Lady Elizabeth Montacute, my mother."

Playing the gallant, Terric took Lady Elizabeth's hand and kissed the back of it. As he did so, he took the time to take a better look at the older woman. She was a woman in her forties who took good care of herself. Her body was as slim as her daughter's. Terric could not help but notice who Jacqueline and William took after. The daughter very much looked like the mother.

"I bid you welcome, Sir Terric."

"Thank you for your warm welcome, my lady."

"May I ask how long you plan to stay on the Isle?"

"As long as it takes to train Jacqueline. Since she is determined to challenge her father, I plan to make sure she learns enough to survive the encounter."

Terric could not ignore Lady Elizabeth's worried expression. He could see she felt deeply for her daughter. The gruffness she showed Jacqueline was primarily caused by her great concern. Hoping to alleviate some of her worries, he leaned in closer and whispered, "Have no fear, my lady. I will not let anything happen to Jacqueline. I promise you this."

Looking Terric in the eye, Lady Elizabeth replied dryly, "Do not think I will release you from that promise, Sir Terric, for I will not."

Knowing she would hold him to the promise he had just made to her, Terric inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"Now if you will excuse me, I will see about having a chamber prepared for you and your squire. Jacqueline will show you around."

After Lady Elizabeth departed, Jacqueline motioned for Terric to follow her. The main hall was well kept and inviting. Terric knew he would have no trouble calling it home, if it were his. The rushes upon the stone floor were fresh and the trestle table was polished to a high gloss.

After a servant had brought Jacqueline and him some ale to quench their thirst, Terric noticed she would occasionally look toward the stairs which led to the floor above.

"I hope our coming here has not caused too much upset for your mother."

Jacqueline dismissed his concerns away with a wave of her hand. "Nay. My mother is more upset with me. And it will upset her more when I tell her where I intend to confront the earl."

"You have not told her about the grand tournament yet?"

"Nay, I have not. I have been delaying that particular battle."

Terric smiled in understanding. "Your mother does not seem to be a woman who misses anything that concerns her family."

"You are quite right. Mother does not like being ignorant about any goings on."

Just then, Lady Elizabeth appeared at the top of the stairs. Once she reached the bottom, she joined Jacqueline and Terric at the table. "Your chamber is ready now, Sir Terric. If you wish to see yourself settled, you may do so at anytime."

Taking that as a polite way of asking him to give her a private moment with her daughter, Terric said, "I think I will do so right now. I will go and collect Edwin from the bailey."

After Terric disappeared through the hall doorway, Lady Elizabeth started to speak. "I heard what you and Sir Terric were talking about. He is a very astute man. He was correct. I already know about the grand tournament, Jacqueline."

"How did you find out?" she asked softly.

Lady Elizabeth reached out and gently brushed a lock of hair from her daughter's brow. "It was not so much my finding out, as being told. You see, I have a secret I have been keeping from you, as well. One I now feel I am ready to tell."

"What is it?" Jacqueline knew it would be something serious to cause her mother to keep it to herself. Lady Elizabeth was not the type of parent who kept her children ignorant for their own good.

"I received a missive a fortnight ago from your father. In his letter he requests both William and I attend the grand tournament to be held in London. It was worded as a command really. So you see if we do not go, your father will more than likely come to the Isle and personally make sure we do not disobey him."

Jacqueline's face showed the shock she felt. When her father sent missives, it usually portended a change to their everyday lives on the Isle. And they were never good. "Did he give a reason why he had demanded our presence in London?"

"Nay, but I like it not. He is up to something, no question about it. We will go, you along with Beth and myself. There will be no thwarting him. We will have to be very careful, Jacqueline. If your father uncovers our ruse, he will not be pleased to say the least."

Picking up her mother's hand, Jacqueline gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I will not let that happen. Having both you and Beth standing by me will make it more believable. With Sir Terric now training me, I will be better prepared to face the earl in the list. What could possibly go wrong?"

* * * *

The following morning, Terric started Jacqueline's training. He had to admit she was very skilled at the quintain, but it was only a poor substitute for facing another man on horseback.

Deciding it was best to start the training minus the quintain, Terric motioned for her to come over to him. She had just completed a successful pass.

"I think your skill cannot be any furthered with the quintain, Jacqueline. For now, I will be your target. To begin with, I will not ride at you. I want you to hit me with your lance only. That way I will be better able to see just where you hit with each pass."

"I do not think that is a good idea, Terric. You are going to be getting hit full force. I do not want to hurt you."

Terric flashed her one of his bone melting smiles. She felt the full affect of it run through her body. "I had no idea you cared so much for my welfare, my lady." Accompanied by the clanking of his armor, he bowed to her.

"I am not playing games, Terric. I would feel dreadful if I injured you."

Even though Terric could not see Jacqueline's face with her helm shielding it from view, he could tell from the tone of her voice she would not let this pass easily. Becoming serious, he tried to lay her mind to rest. "There is no need to worry, Jacqueline. My armor will protect me. I know how much it can handle."

"Fine, I will do as you say. You are more knowledgeable about this sport than I. So I will acquiesce to your greater experience," she said sassily.

"Enough of this. Go to the other end of the field and I will signal you when I am ready."

Once in place, Edwin, who had been recruited to assist both Terric and Jacqueline at these training sessions, handed her a lance. Having taken possession of it from him, he quickly ran across the field to Terric.

Helping the knight mount his horse, Edwin quietly whispered, "Do you think it wise what you do here? I am not like yonder lady over there. I am not quite so beguiled by your charms that I lose my senses."

Busily adjusting his shield upon his left arm, Terric absently replied, "I did not ask your opinion on the matter, Edwin. Jacqueline's aim is very erratic. This is the best way for me to see what she does when she runs the list."

Knowing Terric would not be swayed, Edwin shook his head. "Suit yourself. Just do not come to me to have your shoulder fixed. I hope the lady knocks you on your ass."

"Such kind words, squire."

Still shaking his head, Edwin moved out of harms way. "Be a fool then."

Seeing she was ready, Terric motioned for Jacqueline to come at him. She kicked her heels into her steed's sides and brought her lance up and into position. He had a split second of misgiving about this mode of training. It was an eerie feeling sitting still while a fully armored rider raced toward you, lance at the ready. When said lance hit his shield at full speed, he seriously thought he had lost his mind to have ever come up with this suggestion. The impact was twice as hard. Harder than when he was in motion and able to ride past the other rider. Keeping his voice even, he told Jacqueline to take another run.

After she had completed three more such runs, Terric had reached his limit. Having found out what she was consistently doing wrong, he signaled the end of it. His shoulder could stand no more such abuse.

With her last run completed, Jacqueline returned to Terric's side. "No more, Terric. I refuse to do it again."

"There is no need. I found what I was looking for. On the morrow we will focus on correcting it."

Relieved this part of her training was finished, she removed her helm. Using his right arm, Terric did the same. Noticing no appearance of pain upon his face, Jacqueline let herself relax. Each time she had hit his shield, she could see it took all of his strength to remain in the saddle.

"What am I doing wrong then?"

"You are over compensating your aim. You start off fine, but halfway down the list, you think you have to correct it. If you just held steady, you would have hit the center of my shield each time."

"All right, I will work on not over correcting. Now let us go back to the hall. I have worked up an appetite with all of this." Setting her horse into motion, she slowly started to make her way to the stables. When she

did not hear Terric moving to follow, she pulled her horse to a halt. Turning in the saddle, she could still see he had not moved from where she had left him.

"Are you coming, Terric, or do you plan on sitting there for the rest of the day?"

"Go on ahead. I will be along shortly."

When he made no further response, she shrugged her shoulders and then continued on to the stables by herself.

* * * *

Sweat was pouring off of him profusely by the time he entered his chamber. It was not caused from wearing heavy armor on a hot spring day either. It was from the strain of ignoring the painful mass his left shoulder had become.

Not wanting to give Edwin the pleasure of knowing he was right, Terric had dismissed him once Jacqueline left the field. So now, for the sake of his pride, he suffered.

Luck must have been on his side, because the hall had been virtually empty when he entered it. Only a few servants were about, setting the trestle table for the evening meal. They had paid him no notice as he slowly, painfully, ascended the stairs to his chamber above.

Having shut the door behind him, Terric leaned heavily against it, trying to catch his breath. Though it had been hard getting this far, the most painful part was still to come. He had to divest himself of his armor without Edwin's assistance.

After what felt like hours, he managed to unbuckle his breast and backplates. A knock sounded on his chamber door, just as he was about to reach up and start working on removing his chain mail. He stilled, waiting to see if whoever was there would go away.

The knock came once more and this time the person on the other side of the door spoke. "Terric, are you in there?"

The one person he did not want to see him like this, of course had to be the one knocking. Realizing Jacqueline would not leave him to suffer in peace, he answered her. "Aye, I am."

"The evening meal is going to be served in a few minutes. Are you coming down to the hall?"

"I will be along shortly. I have not finished changing."

"Fine, but do not be long." Thinking he sounded a bit strange, she decided to leave him be and went down to the hall.

Both Beth and her mother were seated at the trestle table. Sir Guy stood beside Lady Elizabeth, quietly talking with her. They both looked up at Jacqueline expectantly. She shook her head.

"He is changing. He should not be much longer."

Lady Elizabeth frowned. "What is keeping the man? He has been up there for over an hour. The servants saw him when he returned to the hall after your training. We can hold off on serving the food for a short time, but I will not have it ruined by his lateness."

"Have no fear, mother. Terric will be down in good time."

Moving to take a seat beside Beth, Jacqueline let her eyes drift toward the stairs. The uneasy feeling of all not being right with Terric, just would not leave her. Beth noticed her agitation.

"What is taking him so long? From past conversations, he said a good meal was a favorable way to pass an evening."

Jacqueline thoughtfully tapped her finger on her chin. "That is what I have been thinking. He would not be absent unless something was wrong."

"Did the training not go well today?"

"It did go well. At least Terric thought so. But he has a very unorthodox way of going about it. Let's just say he wanted me to treat him like a quintain."

"Please tell me you did not agree to do it." At Jacqueline's sheepish look, Beth groaned. "Oh, Jacqueline, you could have refused."

"Do not look at me like that. He is the one who has the most experience in this. I just did what he asked of me."

"Well, I think he got more than he bargained for. Why else would he still be upstairs in his chamber, alone.

It was Jacqueline's turn to look surprised. "Where is Edwin? I thought he was with Terric."

"He is at the barracks, taking his meal with the men-at-arms."

The uneasiness she was feeling, increased tenfold. Hearing her mother tapping her finger tips upon the table in impatience was enough to help her make up her mind. Decision made, Jacqueline stood and headed for the stairs.

* * * *

Standing before Terric's chamber door, she raised her fist and pounded loudly upon it. "Terric, open this door!"

Hearing Jacqueline had returned, he sat up. He had been lying on top of the bed. Removing his chain mail had sapped the last of his energy. "I will be down momentarily."

"No more, Terric. Either you open this door right now, or I will get the key from my mother. Which will it be?"

Terric cursed under his breath. Plague the woman. She just could not leave well enough alone. She would not leave him in peace. Having no alternative, he slid off the bed and opened the door.

Having Terric open the door only clothed in his hose, Jacqueline had not counted on. The sight of all that bare male flesh left her speechless. She had never seen a man without his tunic on before. Not even William. Although she had had a relatively isolated upbringing on the Isle, her mother had made especially sure Jacqueline was kept ignorant of men. As any respectable unwed daughter should be.

Right now, the large expanse of bared chest was enough to keep her fascinated. He was solidly built, well padded with muscle. There was a light sprinkling of hair on his chest, as well. Seeing that the hair was not only on his chest, but also arched down and seemed to disappear past the top of his hose, caused Jacqueline to gulp. That tiny line of hair made her think wicked thoughts about what could be found beyond that point,

what that particular part of Terric looked like. She might be ignorant when it came to a man's body, but that did not mean she was not curious. Quickly, she raised her eyes back up to his chest. It was then she saw his left shoulder.

Chapter Seven

"Did you plan to sit up here all night and suffer?"

Stepping away from the door, Terric returned to the bed. He sat down heavily and looked up at Jacqueline. "That was not entirely how I saw my evening developing."

Closing the door behind her, Jacqueline walked over to him. There was no missing that colorful array of bruises on his shoulder. Nor the way he was holding his left arm close to his body. "It is dislocated. Correct?"

Terric casually tried to shrug his shoulders, which caused him to hiss in pain. He kept his eyes averted from her face. "It is nothing. Once you have had it happen at one time, it can happen again quite easily."

Jacqueline shook her head at him, much as if he were a naughty child. "And you call me the fool."

Her words caused him to look up at her. "Are you going to scold me like a child, or are you going to help me?"

Taking advantage of having him at her mercy, she decided to toy with Terric a bit. Pretending to think over his question, she said, "I do not know. After all, it was your idea for me to pummel you today on the training field. Maybe you should suffer the consequences for your stupidity?"

Before she knew what he intended, Terric grabbed Jacqueline around her waist, threw her on the bed, and laid his full weight atop her. Seeing her shocked expression at having her advantage so quickly taken from her, he smiled down at her. "Now, what were you saying, saucy wench?"

Squirming a little, she managed to free her hands and place them on his chest. She gave a shove, but he did not budge an inch. Intending to plead for her release, she lifted her eyes up to his face. The look of teasing, which had been there a minute before, was gone. What Jacqueline saw made her shiver in response.

It was not from fright, but something else entirely different. He looked as if he wanted to devour her, and she had to admit she found it exciting. Watching the vein in his neck pulsing quickly, a match for his rapidly beating heart, Jacqueline licked her lips. With a groan, Terric lowered his mouth and claimed her lips.

To Jacqueline, nothing existed but Terric and herself. The sensations his kiss was causing within her, she found both thrilling and a tad bit scary all at the same time. She had never kissed like this before. It was like being consumed by fire. Her whole being became focused on the joining of their lips. Terric licked her bottom lip. Gasping at the mere touch of his tongue, she unwittingly allowed him access to her mouth.

The feel of his tongue gently sweeping hers made the delicious sensations swirling in her body, intensify. She

moaned. Her body was craving something, something she knew only Terric could provide. She ached, for what she had no idea, but she felt it prominently at the apex of her thighs.

Trying to relieve some of the aching, she instinctively moved, pressing herself up against Terric's strong body. This only intensified the ache as she felt something large and hard come in contact with her mound. In a natural response, Jacqueline rubbed herself against the hard ridge of Terric's sex. Pleasure shot through her body, causing wetness to pool between her legs.

Her small movement was enough to bring Terric back to reality. Twisting his head away, he broke the contact with her lips. Looking down at her, he saw Jacqueline still had her eyes closed. Her face was flushed with desire and her lips were bruised looking from his kisses. It proved to take all of his willpower not to claim her lips once more and not take what she was so freely offering. All he had to do was pull down both their hose and sink his cock into her hot, wet opening. But sanity won the day as he pushed those thoughts away and gained control over himself.

Sensing his withdrawal, Jacqueline slowly opened her eyes. She looked up at him questioningly.

"We cannot do this, Jacqueline. I am sorry. I let things get out of hand."

Blinking, she finally became aware of where she was. The feel of having him lying flush atop her, settled between her legs, still sent ripples of pleasure through her body. Now that he no longer kissed her, her commonsense took over. Realizing her hands were still pressed to his chest, she gave Terric a push. This time he released her by rolling onto his side. Jacqueline quickly slid off the bed and turned to face him.

"I know we cannot. Do not take all the blame for this. I could have stopped you if I chose to."

Terric, having moved onto his back on the bed, groaned and stared up at the ceiling. "Are you trying to torture me, Jacqueline? Do not say such things to me or you may very well find yourself back under me on this bed."

She felt her face grow hot and a shiver of pleasure run up her back. "Then I had best say no more." Feeling flustered, she started to walk toward the chamber door. Terric stopped her before she could reach it.

"Jacqueline, wait. You have to help me with my shoulder."

Turning, she nodded and returned to the bed. "Would it not be better for me to just get Edwin?"

"Nay. I am in no mood for him to berate me. I will hear more than enough from him on the morrow as is. You can do it, just as I did for you."

Taking a deep breath, Jacqueline removed her boots and climbed up onto the bed. Taking hold of Terric's left arm, she placed her foot in his underarm.

When he had done this to her, it had only taken him a couple of tugs. But for her, she found it no easy task to perform. She knew she was hurting him because he groaned with each attempt she made to right the shoulder. After a half dozen tries, they were both sweating from the effort.

"Terric, I do not think I am strong enough to do this."

"Do not give up now, Jacqueline. It is just about back into place. One more good yank should be all it needs."

Wiping her sweating palms on her tunic, Jacqueline adjusted her grip, then pulled for all she was worth. At that instant, two events happened. The chamber door was thrown open by her mother, and Terric's shoulder

loudly popped back into place.

Both Jacqueline and Terric froze when Lady Elizabeth barreled into the chamber. Looking from one to the other, she demanded loudly, "What goes on here, Jacqueline?!"

Feeling much like she did when as a small child she was caught doing something her mother disapproved of, she dropped Terric's arm and jumped off the bed. Noticing how stiff her mother stood, Jacqueline could see she was furious.

"I was only helping Terric."

"Helping him to do what exactly? I expected better from you, Jacqueline." Lady Elizabeth snapped back.

Knowing what her mother would be thinking had happened between Terric and herself, Jacqueline quickly defended herself. "It was nothing inappropriate, mother. Sir Terric had dislocated his shoulder during our training. So I was only returning the favor he did me. I simply fixed his shoulder."

Her mother did not appear to be at all happy with her explanation. Her eyes still seemed to be shooting sparks with anger. "This will not do, Jacqueline. Do you think I am a fool? What I heard being said behind this closed door did not sound in any way appropriate."

Recalling what she and Terric had been doing before, Jacqueline could not stop the guilty flush which rose to her cheeks.

Seeing how Lady Elizabeth held her lips in a harsh line with displeasure, Terric rose up off the bed to stand next to Jacqueline. "Please do not be angry with Jacqueline. It is entirely my fault for her being here. I convinced her to stay, even though it went against her better judgment. I can assure you, it will not happen again."

"It will not Sir Terric. For if I find my daughter in your chamber, while you are only half dressed again, you will no longer be welcome here. I suggest the next time you injure yourself, have your squire attend you, not my daughter."

Terric bowed to Lady Elizabeth. "You have my word, my lady. I will not put Jacqueline in such a position again."

"I am glad we have reached an understanding, Sir Terric. Now, I am having the evening meal served. Come Jacqueline. Let us leave Sir Terric alone, so he can garb himself decently."

Not giving Jacqueline any chance to refuse, her mother took hold of her arm and pulled her from the room. Jacqueline had just enough time to throw an apologetic look over shoulder at Terric before her mother roughly yanked her through the chamber door.

* * * *

The meal was a very strained affair. At least that was how Jacqueline found it to be. Her gaze was drawn to Terric time and again. She could still feel the sensation of his lips claiming hers, his powerful body surrounding her. Terric seemed not to notice her watching him. But Jacqueline knew he was not totally oblivious. For each time she averted her eyes, she felt the sensation of being watched.

Beth, who sat next to Jacqueline, caught the furtive looks the two kept sending to each other. There was no mistaking the change which had taken place in their relationship. Beth smiled to herself. Jacqueline needed a man like Terric at her side, a man who would accept her for what she was, and would not try to change her.

And Terric was that man. Maybe a little nudging on her part could help steer Jacqueline in the right direction.

* * * *

They ganged up on him. Much to his disgust, he had had to give ground.

After the slight injury to his shoulder the day before, Jacqueline and Edwin decided training had to be put off for a few days. Terric had told them his shoulder was all right, but they would not listen to him. A few days of rest would do him good, or so they told him.

He would rather be out on the training field. The idleness gave him too much time to think, too much time to remember. The incident that had taken place in his chamber the evening before still haunted him. So much so, he found he could not be in the same room as Jacqueline for long stretches at a time without his body betraying what he was feeling. His cock would grow hard the instant Jacqueline entered his thoughts. So he had escaped to walk the castle walls.

But even up here, the memories would not leave him. Just closing his eyes brought the taste of her lips flooding back to him and the feel of her body pressed flush up against him. As if to bewitch him more, Terric spotted the object of his desire crossing the bailey below.

Jacqueline was conversing with Edwin as they walked toward the stables together. He did not bother to hail them.

How he could have believed her to be a man was beyond him. Jacqueline was every inch a woman. Even with her cropped hair, it did not detract from that overall perception of her. If anything, it enhanced her features. Soft auburn curls framed her face. Terric would have loved to see Jacqueline with long hair, falling to her waist.

Both Jacqueline and Edwin disappeared into the interior of the stable. A few moments later, Jacqueline stepped back out into the bailey. She appeared to be searching for something. She scanned the bailey, turning her head to look in every corner.

Terric knew when Jacqueline finally spotted him standing atop the walls staring down at her. A radiant smile broke across her face. She waved, then came up to join him.

"So this is where you have been hiding yourself."

"I am not hiding. I am only enjoying the sunshine." Terric replied.

Jacqueline laughed and shook her head at him. "If that is what you want to call it. I get the distinct feeling you are trying your best to avoid me." To prove her point, she moved to stand right next to Terric. Standing with her arms resting on top of the walls, the same as he, their bodies almost touched. Terric moved farther down the wall, increasing the space between them.

"What is it, Terric? Have I done something to upset you?"

"Nay, you have not. It is I. I am the problem."

Jacqueline took a deep breath. "If you are worried about what happened the other night, do not. I know how you feel about that. It was a moment of weakness, for the both of us. We will just have to put it behind us."

When Terric did no more than nod his head, she decided it would be best to leave him alone. Before taking her leave, she impulsively grabbed Terric's hand and squeezed it.

Once Jacqueline was gone, Terric released the tight grip he held on himself. Just the simple touch of her hand on his had almost been too much for him to bear. It had taken all, everything he possessed, to not pull her into his arms. If he had given in to his impulse, he would not have let her go. It mattered not that they were atop the castle walls. He would have taken her, then and there. He would have pulled her down onto the rough, cold stones and sunk his throbbing cock into her moist depths.

Bringing himself back under control, Terric knew he would not be able to put the kiss they had shared so easily behind him. For better or worse, Jacqueline was in his blood now.

* * * *

Having left Terric to his brooding, Jacqueline decided to seek out Beth. She needed some advice.

As luck would have it, she found Beth alone in the solar, sitting before her embroidery frame. She looked up when Jacqueline entered the chamber. "If you are looking for mother, she is with Sir Guy."

Jacqueline shook her head and then pulled up a chair to sit next to Beth. "Nay, I am not. I came looking for you."

Placing her needle down, Beth turned to face Jacqueline. It was not hard to see that she was deeply agitated about something. "Well you have found me."

Unsure of exactly how to broach the subject, Jacqueline spoke hesitantly. "All right. I was wondering if you could give me some advice."

Beth smiled. She had a feeling she knew what this was all about. Jacqueline was nervously digging the toe of her boot into the rushes upon the floor, with her eyes downcast. "You want some advice about Terric. Correct?"

Jacqueline looked up at Beth, and smiled sheepishly. "How did you know?"

"I had my suspicions. It was not hard to miss the longing glances the both of you were giving each other, when the other was not looking."

Jacqueline groaned. "Is it that obvious?"

"Nay. Only to me."

"Since you have noticed, then tell me what I should do? Terric is avoiding me. No matter what he says otherwise. He thinks the kiss we shared was a grave mistake."

"And you do not agree with that assumption?"

Unable to sit any longer, Jacqueline stood up and started to pace the floor. "Of course I do not."

Patting the chair beside her, Beth indicated for Jacqueline to sit down again. Once her friend complied, she nodded her approval. "Now, if you want to win Terric, do what I say. Let him think you feel the same as he. That nothing has changed between you both."

"And how is that going to win me Terric?"

Shaking her head, Beth continued. "There is more to it. Along with acting as if it was nothing, do your best to never let him forget it either."

"What do you suggest I do?" Jacqueline leaned in closer to Beth, not wanting to miss anything she said.

Beth smiled conspiringly at her. "Take every opportunity you can get to touch him. A simple brush of your hand will suffice. And make sure to put the least amount of distance between you. Closer the better. Do not give him any chance to ignore you."

"It sounds like you are suggesting I seduce Terric."

"Of course I am. If left to him, he will avoid you like the plague. Use what you have. Women through the ages have. No man can resist the lure of a woman he desires. Use his weakness to your advantage."

Standing once more, Jacqueline absentmindedly nodded her head while she mulled over Beth's words. It could work. "Thank you. I will do as you say. Starting right now."

Having renewed purpose, Jacqueline left the solar. Terric was not going to know what hit him.

* * * *

He was going out of his mind. Everywhere he went, Jacqueline was there. And she was driving him mad.

Terric had noticed the change in her during the meal the evening before. Having sent her away after she had spoken to him on the walls, he had assumed she understood how he felt. But now he seriously doubted she did.

She had seated herself beside him at the table. As they ate, he had not been able to ignore her closeness to him, especially when she kept touching him all the time. Her thigh would brush up against his as she shifted in her seat. Once she stretched and her hand seemingly caressed the back of his neck. She was not overly pointed about it. But the slightest touch still affected him.

Terric was unable to tell if Jacqueline had known what she did. She had spent a large part of the meal acting as if he was not there. Much to his chagrin.

By the time the meal was over, Terric found himself wanting Jacqueline all the more, which resulted in his spending half the night tossing and turning, aching for her. When sleep did claim him, she filled his dreams.

Waking to a sun drenched chamber, Terric groaned. From lack of sleep, his head pounded like a battering ram within. He had also slept longer than was his usual want.

Dragging himself from the bed, he pulled on a plain tunic and hose. After slipping his feet into his boots, he strapped his sword around his waist and left his chamber.

Having slept so late, Terric knew he had missed the morning meal. Everyone would already be about their daily business. Hopefully, Lady Elizabeth had arranged to have a meal set aside for him.

Reaching the hall, he was surprised to find Jacqueline still seated at the trestle table. If he did not know any better, he would swear she was sitting there purposely waiting for him to show up. Terric was not too sure how he felt about that.

She had her back to him. Not wanting her to think he was sneaking up on her, Terric loudly clumped down the last remaining steps. "Jacqueline, what do you here? I thought I was the only slug-a-bed this morn."

Turning in her chair, she smiled brightly at him. "It is about time you came down. And no I did not laze about in bed all morning like you. Did you not sleep well?"

How innocently she asks, Terric mused. Jacqueline's turquoise eyes seemed to sparkle with amusement. "I slept well enough."

"You missed eating your morning meal, but I made sure there would be something for you to partake of."

Standing, Jacqueline indicated that he should take her chair. He could see a platter of bread and cheese sitting on the table. Thankful for this small courtesy, he moved to do as she suggested.

Jacqueline remained standing by the chair. Expecting her to step back, he made to slide into the chair from the side where she now stood. But she did not move aside for him. Almost intentionally, she turned to face him at the last moment, causing him to literally walk into her. Her breasts lightly pressed up against his chest.

His body instantly stiffened as their two bodies met. Jacqueline felt the shudder that ripped through Terric a second later. There was no question about it. She was getting to him, badly. Beth's advice was working better than she had anticipated. All that was left to see would be how long it would take Terric to admit defeat and do what they both wanted.

Deciding to make him squirm all the more, Jacqueline tilted her head up. This brought her lips a hair breath away from his. Terric sucked in a sharp breath through his clenched teeth in response. Knowing full well what she was doing to him, she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. His violet eyes darkened with desire.

Jacqueline did not notice when she too began to fall under the same spell she wove around Terric. They stood, bodies pressed together, silently staring into each other's eyes, neither one cognizant of their surroundings.

It was the slight movement of Terric's head as he began to lower his lips to hers which brought Jacqueline back to reality. She quickly jumped away from him. "I will leave you to finish your meal. I have dawdled enough in the hall." Before he could respond, Jacqueline beat a hasty retreat.

* * * *

Bright and early the following morning, Jacqueline once more faced Terric on the training field. He had assured her his shoulder was not the worse for wear from their training two days before. He did not appear to be favoring his left arm, so she made no further comments.

At least this day Terric had no out of the ordinary training techniques planned, which suited Jacqueline just fine. Today he still would not break lances with her, but he would be going through the motions as if he were. When they met, it would only be her carrying a lance.

At his signal, she set her steed into motion. Terric did the same. Keeping in mind what he had told her not to do, not to correct her aim once she was on her way down the list, Jacqueline barreled towards him. Meeting in the center of the field, her lance hit his shield dead center. Her lance shattered on impact.

Turning her mount back around, Jacqueline made her way to Terric, who had halted his steed beside Edwin. The squire had another lance ready to hand up to her when she reached them. Terric spoke first.

"You did well, Jacqueline. I see you remembered what I said. You did not change your aim. Now let me see you do it again."

The next hour was spent having her breaking lance after lance upon Terric's shield. Not once did she miss her mark. When Terric suggested they take a break, she could not keep the foolish grin from her lips, even after she removed her helm. Moving to help her dismount, he noticed her expression and smiled back at her.

"Now do not get too smug, Jacqueline. This is just the start."

"You must admit Terric, I have proven myself this day."

"I admit you are a fast learner." He was quite happy with the progress she had made.

"Thanks for your kind words, sir." Jacqueline replied. Buoyed by her success, she stepped closer to him. "I have found myself a good teacher."

Terric did not miss how Jacqueline's face glowed. Nor how her cheeks were flushed with excitement. The smile slowly left his lips the more he stared at the woman before him. He was lost, whether he liked it or not. Her inexperienced kiss that night had stirred him more than any other woman's had. And he had known a great many. Just looking at her, as he did now, Terric could feel the hold she had over him.

Sensing the change that came over Terric, Jacqueline let her smile fade into nothingness. The way he stared at her so intently, all the new sensations he had awakened in her came rushing back. She leaned closer to him unable to stop herself, as if an invisible string pulled her ever closer. Terric slowly bent his head toward her.

When their lips were a mere breath apart, Jacqueline let her eyes drift shut. As his lips softly brushed hers, she sighed. Reaching up, she wove her fingers through the hair at the nap of his neck, pulling him closer still. He obligingly increased the pressure of his lips.

Having been completely forgotten about, Edwin very loudly cleared his throat. When that did not gain their attention, he did it again. This time he added a barking cough, which seemed to do the trick.

Both Terric and Jacqueline jumped apart, guilty looks upon their faces. Jacqueline, embarrassed about having lost her head so completely, grabbed her horse's reins and swiftly left the training field.

Watching her retreating back, Terric struggled to bring himself back under control. He thrice damned himself for a fool. He had always prided himself for having control over any given situation in which he found himself. But his so called control had utterly deserted him when Jacqueline had leaned nearer. She had looked so kissable at that precise moment. He had to taste her lips once more.

Moving to Terric's side, Edwin cleared his throat again. "Just what are you playing at? Trifling with the Lady Jacqueline is likely to have us booted out of Cairsbroke Castle faster than you can spit. Lady Elizabeth is not the type of woman to allow her daughter to be toyed with."

Terric snorted. "You think I do not know that?"

"You could not have been too worried a moment ago. That was quite a display you two put on."

"Shut your mouth, Edwin. I am well aware of what occurred between us. It was not very well done of me, again. When it comes to Jacqueline, I have no control. I just cannot stop myself."

"Then you have a bit of a dilemma on your hands."

Running his fingers through his sweat dampened locks, Terric nodded. "You are indeed correct, Edwin. So there is only one option left to me. I will have to leave."

"What?"

Terric turned to stare at Edwin, and said, "We leave on the morrow. I will inform the Lady Elizabeth at the evening meal."

"But what of your promise to Lady Jacqueline? The grand tournament is still a couple of months away."

"Sir Guy can take over her training. She now knows what she is doing wrong. Besides, I did not plan to stay here until the grand tournament took place. Each tournament I miss, the less chance I have of earning coin. We leave come first light."

Seeing Terric had made up his mind, Edwin shook his head. "I will see that everything is ready. I just hope you do not break Lady Jacqueline's heart with this decision."

Under his breath, Terric said to himself, "So do I. So do I."

Chapter Eight

Slamming her chamber door closed behind her, Jacqueline angrily threw herself onto her bed. Balling her hands into fists, she pounded the mattress. It helped some, venting her anger, but not much. She would have had more satisfaction if it was Terric she pummeled so. The wretch deserved it.

Rolling onto her back, she slowly felt her anger replaced by hurt. Terric's announcement of his departure on the following day was completely unexpected. Jacqueline knew he would not be spending all the days leading up to the grand tournament at Carisbrooke, but she had not thought he would leave after only a few days. The training had just started. Plus she had thought he was beginning to feel something for her.

That was what hurt the most. She thought the kisses they had shared meant as much to him as they did to her. Obviously, she was a fool to think so.

Without knocking first, Beth opened the chamber door. Seeing Jacqueline lying upon her bed looking dejected, she shut the door and walked across the room to the bed. Since Jacqueline refused to acknowledge her presence by pointedly staring up at the ceiling, she calmly sat down on the edge of the bed. She then smoothed the skirts of her gown around her.

"You can act as if I am not here if you want, but I am not leaving, Jacqueline. You are upset about Terric going. I can see that. But I have only one question for you. Are you just going to stand by and let the man you are coming to love walk away without a fight?"

Jacqueline quickly sat up on the bed and looked at Beth. "What choice do I have? It is not as if I expected Terric to pledge his undying love to me."

Beth shook her head at her friend's naïveté. "Jacqueline, the man is running scared. I am sure his feelings are a lot stronger for you than what he is showing. He has probably never felt this way about another woman. So like the man he is, he is running away."

Rolling her eyes at Beth's assumptions, Jacqueline snorted. "I think not. You are making Terric out to be a better man than he is."

"Is that so? All right then, prove me wrong."

Inching across the bed, Jacqueline moved to sit beside Beth. "What do you mean? Prove what?"

Letting a small smile play upon her lips, she replied, "How else? Confront Terric. Tonight, before he leaves."

Jacqueline shook her head in denial. "Are you mad? Mother would have my head for pulling such a stunt."

"So then you are willing to let him walk out of your life, possibly forever. Because I can guarantee you, if he leaves without your making him face his feelings, he will not come near you again."

Standing, Jacqueline began to pace back and forth, mulling over the other girl's words in her head. There were some very good points in what she had said, admittedly. But how to arrange such a meeting would be the tricky part. Terric's chamber was right beside her mother's.

Having reached a decision, Jacqueline ceased her pacing and came to stand before Beth. "Fine, I will do as you say, but I need your help. Terric has to come to my chamber. His is too close to mother's for my liking."

Gaining her feet, Beth shook out the skirts of her gown. "Leave that to me. Once your mother has retired for the night, I will devise a way to have Terric come to your chamber. That is the easy part. Your part, Jacqueline, will be the harder."

"What do you have in mind then?"

Giving Jacqueline a sly smile, Beth stepped to the chamber door. "Do not fret, he will come. Just be prepared....for his arrival."

After passing on that cryptic remark, she swept out the door, softly shutting it behind her.

* * * *

Terric was in a deep sleep when a hand roughly shook him awake. Thinking it was Edwin who disturbed his rest, he brushed the offending hand away and rolled onto his side. The hand shook him once again. He rolled onto his back, ready to give Edwin a stern rebuke. Much to his surprise, it was Lady Beth who woke him from his slumber.

Propping himself up on one elbow, he reached for the covers making sure he was sufficiently covered. He slept every night naked. "Lady Beth, what do you here? Is something amiss?"

"Oh, Sir Terric, I am so sorry to disturb you. But I need you to assist me. Something is wrong with Jacqueline."

Seeing concern on her face, Terric sat up straighter. "Cannot her mother help her?"

Beth shook her head in denial. "I am afraid not. Please will you come with me?"

Glancing over to where Edwin lay asleep on his pallet, Terric nodded. "Of course. Just give me a moment to get dressed."

"I appreciate this, Sir Terric. I will await you in the hallway."

Once Beth softly closed the door behind herself, he quickly donned hose and a tunic. Not bothering to awaken Edwin to tell him where he would be, he quietly left the chamber. Beth motioned him to follow her as she headed toward Jacqueline's chamber, which was at the far end of the hallway.

Opening the door, Beth stood aside so Terric could enter the chamber before her. Thinking she had followed him in, he turned to ask her what exactly was wrong with Jacqueline, only to find her shutting the chamber door behind him. Before he could move to grasp the handle and try to open it, he could hear Beth locking it from the other side.

"Sorry, Terric. I could not let you leave without speaking to you privately."

Spinning around at the sound of Jacqueline's voice, he found her standing in the middle of the chamber. "You did not have to go to such lengths, Jacqueline. All you had to do was ask."

Stepping closer to Terric, she asked, "Would you have come to me?" When he did not answer right away, she smirked. "I thought not."

"Be that as it may, I am here now. What do you wish to say to me?"

Seeing the way Terric avoided looking at her, even when she moved closer, Jacqueline sensed he was not going to make this easy on her. "I want to know why. Why you have decided you must leave on the morrow."

When Jacqueline positioned herself so a few inches only separated them, Terric desperately fixed his eyes on the wall at the farthest end of the chamber. "It is time for me to go. Tournaments are how I make my living. You know that. I must follow the circuit."

Jacqueline looked him up and down. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, trying to act as if her closeness had no affect on him. But she knew she did stir him. He could not hide how stiffly he was standing.

"Is that so. If I were to offer to pay you to stay and complete my training, would you still leave?"

At first, Terric could not think of what to say in regards to her offer. So in the end, he simply said, "Nay, I would not."

Watching Terric squirm so, Jacqueline had to admit Beth was correct in her thinking. He was a man running scared after all. Wanting him to squirm even more, she took another step nearer. Now she was toe to toe with him.

"If I were to pay you for your services, there should be no need for you to leave in such a great hurry. Unless there is another reason. One you have not mentioned."

She knew she had him now. He groaned and brought his eyes down to focus on her face.

"Jacqueline, please do not do this. It is better for the both of us if I leave on the morrow."

"How so, Terric?"

"Because of this." Cupping her face in both of his hands, Terric lowered his lips to hers. Unable to stop himself, he claimed her lips in an all consuming kiss. Jacqueline wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him closer to her.

Trying one last time to make Jacqueline understand where the path they now tread would lead them, Terric lifted his lips from hers. "If we continue, I cannot promise you I will be able to end this before it is too late."

Running her hands up and down his back, she smiled up at him. "What if I do not want you to stop?"

Her answer elicited another groan from him. "I have no right to touch you in this way. You deserve better than a landless knight."

"The choice is mine to make."

"I cannot promise you more than one night. This does not change my decision to leave either."

"Then make this night memorable for me. I choose no other."

Picking Jacqueline up in his arms, Terric carried her to the bed. "God help me, but I am not strong enough to refuse you. I promise you will not regret this."

Laying her on top of the bed, he slowly followed her down. Claiming her lips again, he gave his passion free rein. Increasing the pressure of his lips, he urged her to open her own.

The feel of his tongue gently entwining with hers brought a moan from deep down inside her to the surface. Jacqueline could not hold it back. When his hands began to run all over her body so knowingly, she let the sensations he was causing take her over.

Knowing Jacqueline was an innocent, he tried to go slow. Each moan and gasp which escaped her lips, brought his passion to a fevered pitch. Inexperienced she might be, but her touch excited him more than any other he had known.

Gently cupping Jacqueline's breast, Terric took her pebbled nipple between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it between his fingers. Jacqueline moaned in response. Leaving her mouth, he let his lips caress the soft skin under her ear. With his teeth he nipped that sensitive area then licked it. He moved lower down her body so he could take her breast into his mouth. Through the material of her tunic he suckled her hard until Jacqueline started to squirm beneath him.

Finding her clothes too much of a barrier, Terric divested them both of the offending garments they wore. The contact of bare skin meeting bare skin almost sent him over the edge.

Jacqueline gasped as their skin touched. She felt her senses becoming overwhelmed. Not wanting to lay still any longer, she tentatively ran her hands down Terric's strong back. Much to her satisfaction his muscles quivered beneath her touch. Growing bolder, she moved her hands so she could caress his chest. Running her fingers through his chest hair, she relished in the feel of the thick padding of muscle to be found there. When her fingers met Terric's flat male nipple she pinched it between her fingers as he had done to hers. Terric's harsh intake of breath was all she needed to hear to know he felt the same pleasure as she had.

Taking back control, Terric caught Jacqueline's lips in a demanding kiss. Sucking her tongue into his mouth, he battered her senses until she began to rock her hips into his, demanding more. Brushing a trail of kisses, Terric kissed and licked his way down her body until he reached her core. Settling between her thighs, he forced her legs farther apart.

Coming out of the sensual fog Terric had wrapped around her, Jacqueline looked down at him, beginning to feel subconscious. "Terric, I do not think you should...." Her words trailed off into a moan when Terric showed her exactly what he was going to do.

Letting his tongue sweep Jacqueline's sex, Terric smiled to himself when she fell back onto the bed in total surrender. He swirled his tongue around the nubbin of hard flesh, the very center of her pleasure, then sucked it into his mouth. Jacqueline buried her fingers into his hair, holding him in place as she arched her back. Still

wanting more from her, he gave her clit one last sweep, then pressed his tongue into her opening. She tasted as sweet as she smelled. Giving her no quarter, Terric continued to stab her with his tongue, mimicking the act yet to come. He brought her to the very edge of release before backing off.

Sliding back up Jacqueline's body, Terric could hold back no longer. His body was screaming at him to be inside her. Knowing she was more than ready for him, he slowly pushed himself into her body. He groaned at the feel of her tight, warm opening embracing him.

The feel of Terric entering her made Jacqueline gasp in pleasure. When he pushed past the barrier of her maidenhead, she could not stifle a small cry of pain. He stilled, allowing her body time to adjust to his intrusion. The pain, though sharp, did not last long. The feel of his filling her so completely made her want something more, something she had no idea how to obtain. Instinctively, she shifted her hips, sending shockwaves of pleasure radiating throughout her whole body.

Unable to hold back any longer, Terric began to move inside her. With each thrust of his hips, Jacqueline felt the pleasure build ever higher. It was like nothing she had felt before.

Keeping up a steady rhythm as he pumped in and out of her, Terric drove Jacqueline ever higher. He wanted to prolong the pleasure for her, but he knew that this time, their first joining, he could not last much longer. He could tell she was close to climaxing. Jacqueline had her legs wrapped around his waist and she tightly clutched him to her. To push her over the edge, Terric reached down between their joined bodies, found her clit, stroked hard enough to make her climax. The feel of her inner walls squeezing his shaft brought him to instant climax. Throwing back his head, Terric groaned as his release washed through him and he planted his seed deep within Jacqueline's body.

When he collapsed atop her, Jacqueline wrapped her arms around him, welcoming the feel of his greater weight. Their breathing slowly returned to normal.

Knowing he had to be too heavy for her to bear for long, he rolled onto his back and pulled her up against his side. Jacqueline placed her head on his chest and closed her eyes contentedly. She had just given him the best climax he had ever experienced.

* * * *

They slept, but not long. He knew he was digging himself even deeper, but Terric still wanted Jacqueline, which was something new for him. Usually having had a woman he desired, the once was enough. With Jacqueline, it was not the case. If anything, he wanted her even more. Once would never be enough. And with that knowledge in mind, he reached for her, to make her his one more time.

Jacqueline smiled lazily when Terric pulled her closer to his body. The position they were lying in, both on their sides, spoon fashion, she could feel his hard shaft nestled between the globes of her bottom. "Again, Terric?"

"Yes. I cannot get enough of you."

Placing hot, moist kisses on the nape of her neck, Terric let his hand travel down her hip to her still wet opening. Probing first with one finger, then two, he worked them in and out of her till she was moaning his name. Lifting her one leg so it rested atop his, he rubbed his cock against her slick opening, coating himself with her juices. Once thoroughly bathed in her wetness, he surged upward and entered her in one stroke.

Jacqueline gasped at the sensation of having Terric enter her from behind. She pushed back on him as he pumped his body into her. The sensations she was feeling were different from when he had taken her the first time. And when he reached down and gently squeezed her clit between his fingers she felt her clench as her

climax swept through her.

Feeling her body convulse around him, Terric knew there would be no turning away. She was his. There would be no man but him. And with that thought in his head, surged into her one last time and pumped his seed into her.

Just before dawn broke over the horizon, Terric carefully slipped from the bed. Jacqueline still slept on. Gathering his clothes together, which had become strewn around on various parts of the floor, he put them on.

Rolling over and not finding his warm body lying next to her, Jacqueline opened her eyes. Lifting her head up from her pillow, she found him dressed and about to open the chamber door.

"Did you plan to leave without saying good-bye?"

Seeing her awake, he came to sit on the edge of the bed next to her. "I told you this would not stop me from leaving."

"So that was it then?"

Terric reached out and gently brushed her sleep tousled hair away from her face. "Hardly. What we shared this night, Jacqueline, has changed everything. I will not give you up so easily."

Confused, Jacqueline sat up, holding the sheet up against her chest. "Then why go?"

"Because if I do not, you will not be leaving this bed for quite some time."

Knowing exactly what he meant by his words, she blushed. "Oh."

"Aye, oh. I do not think your mother would be too understanding either."

"Nay, I think you are right there."

"Then you know I must leave, but it will not be forever. I will be by your side when you face your father at the grand tournament. After that, then, if you will still have me, I will speak to your mother."

Shocked, Jacqueline could only stare at Terric. This, she had not been expecting. She thought this night would have to last her for many years to come. After what they had shared, she could not possibly think of letting another man touch her in that way.

When she did not comment on what he had just told her, Terric felt a wave of uneasiness wash over him. Could she reject him now? "Say something. I cannot offer you much, Jacqueline. But I will make you happy. You have my vow."

Feeling his uncertainty, she quickly moved to throw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You have surprised me is all. I accept your offer, Terric. I know what you are, and I do not care whether you have lands or not. I accept you for yourself, nothing more."

Moved by her words, he pulled Jacqueline closer and kissed her thoroughly. Heedless of her nakedness, she pressed her body against his, willingly returning his kiss. Although wanting nothing more than to press her back down onto the mattress and make love to her one last time, Terric resisted it. Releasing her, he quickly stood up, putting much needed distance between them. It was impossible for him to think straight with her so near.

"I must return to my chamber before your mother awakens. I do not want you to suffer for my weakness."

Pressing her hand to her lips, Jacqueline kissed her open palm and then blew it in Terric's direction. "Then until the morn, my knight."

Returning her token in kind, Terric quietly then stepped through the chamber door.

Chapter Nine

Watching Terric ride away from her was not an easy thing for Jacqueline to accept. But she had to agree with his motive for leaving Cairsbroke. It would have been close to impossible for the both of them to act as if nothing had happened between them. It was just too risky for Terric to stay.

No sooner had he and Edwin disappeared from sight than Beth grabbed Jacqueline by her arm and towed her up to her chamber. After shutting the door firmly behind them, Beth smiled knowingly at Jacqueline.

"Well, tell me. What did you and Terric talk about last night? Or should I say do?"

Blushing to the very roots of her hair, Jacqueline said, "I think you know very well what happened."

Beth laughed merrily. "Aye, I do. But I want to hear you say how it was. I can see you are no longer angry with Terric for leaving you. So it could not have been all bad."

"Nay, it was not. It was wonderful to be exact."

"I hope you have not let him get away too easily then."

"Nay. He will meet me at the grand tournament. Once that is over, he wants to talk to mother."

Happy for her friend, Beth embraced Jacqueline. "I knew Terric was the one for you. He just needed a little convincing."

"And a little trickery on your part."

"Aye, and that too," Beth said laughingly. "I hope you did not mind my locking your chamber door. I figured Terric would have beat a hasty retreat if he could have managed it."

Jacqueline shook her head. "Nay, I applaud you for your forethought in doing it." Growing serious, she then asked, "How do you manage, Beth?"

"How do I manage what?"

"The loss of William. Until now, I really did not know what it must be like for you. I have only been able to think of how it has affected me, the not having him here for me."

The cheerfulness, that had showed on Beth's face a moment before was now replaced with sorrow.

"Sometimes I feel like I cannot live another day without him. It is getting easier, not by much, but I can bear it now."

"I am so sorry that I have not helped you more. I love you as a sister. It was not well done of me."

Wiping away a tear, Beth gave her a small smile. "As I love you, Jacqueline. But you have helped me. You and your plan to face the earl has given me something to center my attention upon. I look forward to the day you give the earl the comeuppance he so richly deserves. That day will give me the greatest pleasure."

"That day is near at hand, Beth. I will do it for all of us. Most especially for William."

* * * *

After two days of rain, Lady Elizabeth decided to enjoy the now bright sunny day. Donning her cloak, she then stepped outside. She took a deep breath of fresh clean air. It was nice to be able to leave the hall without getting wet.

There was another reason for her stroll, as well. One she had been putting off for some time.

She could hear the pounding of hooves along with the sound of a breaking lance before the training ground came into view. Stopping a short distance from the activity taking place there, Lady Elizabeth silently watched her daughter.

Instead of going up against a quintain, Jacqueline was taking runs at a shield which had been mounted onto a thick wooden post. Even though she was not riding against a live target, she still wore full armor.

Watching Jacqueline take another pass, Lady Elizabeth could not find it at all hard to believe it was her son she was observing. Her daughter rode with all the confidence of any true knight.

There was no hesitation, or faltering, in Jacqueline as her lance struck the shield. Lady Elizabeth felt a grudging pride in her daughter's ability. She had not expected to find Jacqueline quite so skilled with a lance.

Sir Guy had been keeping her informed of Jacqueline's progress over the months. But she had presumed the praise he lavished upon her daughter was slightly biased. He loved Jacqueline as if she were truly his child. As he had William. Obviously his words had been spoken in truth.

Seeing that Jacqueline was preparing to make another run, her lips formed into a smile. Her daughter was training as if the grand tournament was only days away instead of the weeks which separated them from it. Terric's leaving had precipitated these intense training sessions. She knew Jacqueline was trying to distract herself, trying to make the separation from Terric more bearable.

It was after this run that Jacqueline spotted her mother standing on the edge of the training ground, watching. Lady Elizabeth waved as Jacqueline rode her horse toward her.

"I see you are trying to make up for the two days you lost to the rain."

Unlacing her helm, Jacqueline pulled it from her head. Tucking it under her right arm, she smiled down at her mother. "You are the last person I expected to find here. I assumed you were keeping your distance from all this."

"So I decided to see how you are doing with my own eyes. What of it? I am your mother. It is my job to look out for you."

"And? What is your verdict?"

"Though I am reluctant to say it, I am impressed with your skill." In all actuality, she was more than just mildly impressed. But she was not ready to give that much praise to Jacqueline as of yet.

Bowing in the saddle, Jacqueline saluted her mother. "I will take that as an encouraging thought."

Lady Elizabeth snorted. "I still do not approve. So do not get full of yourself."

Jacqueline smiled. "Whatever you say, mother."

"There is one thing I wish to say to you before I return to the hall."

"And that would be?"

"Relax a bit. Do not try so hard. It will not make the days go any faster. Just two short months, then you will be with him again."

Trying not to give anything away, Jacqueline asked offhandedly, "Whom do you mean, mother?"

Starting to back away, Lady Elizabeth smiled knowingly up at her daughter. "Terric, of course."

Speechless, Jacqueline silently watched as her mother blithely walked away.

* * * *

The two remaining months before the grand tournament Jacqueline spent training, improving her skill. She would be more than able to go against the earl now. It also helped to keep her mind off Terric.

She missed him and looked forward to when they would be reunited in London. Even with her days filled with training, her nights were filled with dreams of him. Now that he had fully awakened her body to passion, it craved his touch. She woke with her body wet and aching for his.

When all the long months of training were complete, the true test would come. The day of the grand tournament was quickly approaching. The time had come for Jacqueline, her mother, and Beth to travel to London.

* * * *

With the long, tiring days of travel behind her, Jacqueline was happy to finally see the city gates looming before her. She had only been to London once before when she had been a small child. Her mother had decided William and she had needed to experience the large city.

Once they had made their way through the crowded city streets and they had reached their destination, Jacqueline, playing the part of William, directed the men-at-arms to set up her pavilion.

The place set aside for the contestants was almost filled to capacity. It very much seemed like a small city had been erected within the larger city of London. The positions of the pavilions created a maze of pathways running throughout.

Hoping to see Terric's standard present among the pavilions closest to where she was situated, Jacqueline

scanned those within sight, but, not surprisingly, she did not find it. Spotting his standard would be nigh impossible without knowing exactly where he was camped. There were just too many.

When her mother called to her, she gave up on her search. She stepped into the pavilion to find out what her mother wanted.

"Now, Jacqueline, I am going to your father. He requested I seek him out upon our arrival. You and Beth may stay here. I do not think it wise for the earl to see you up close."

"I agree. I intend to avoid him as much as I possibly can. But what excuse will you give him should he ask why William does not accompany you?"

Lady Elizabeth casually waved away her concerns. "He will not ask. At least not as of yet. Besides, I know how to handle the earl."

"If you do not return before the feast, Beth and I will make our own way there."

With a nod, Lady Elizabeth motioned for the two men-at-arms to follow her as she walked out of the pavilion. Jacqueline and Beth were now left on their own.

"Well, Jacqueline, how do you feel? Now after all the months of training, the day you have been striving for is finally upon you."

"I am ready, but I just want to have it over with. William has waited long enough for retribution.

* * * *

Her mother did not return before the feast that was taking place in the evening. So Jacqueline and Beth went on their own, as planned if such an occurrence should come about. The feast was being held at a hall nearby.

Having waited for as long as they could, they found the hall was filled with all the knights and those in their retinue when they arrived. It was with great difficulty that Jacqueline found two empty spaces at one of the many trestle tables. Having seated Beth, she took the opportunity to search the hall for Terric. But again, it was futile.

Taking her seat, she accepted the food Beth passed to her. She knew she was being silly, but having not seen Terric since her arrival was making her concerned. Had he changed his mind over the intervening months? It was a possibility. She really had no hold over him. No betrothal to bind him to her.

An hour after their arrival, Jacqueline watched as her mother and the earl entered the hall. At the sight of her father, all the anger and resentment she felt towards him rose up inside her. She watched him as he led her mother to the raised dais where the higher nobles were seated. Her disgust in seeing him increased.

At the age of two and sixty, the earl still had the bearing of a much younger man. His shoulders were not stooped by age. His light brown hair, which he wore closely cropped to his head, was well sprinkled with gray. Jacqueline could see what had drawn her mother to him in the beginning. Even at his age, he still retained his fair face. And he was charming. Even now, he wielded his charm like a weapon, impressing all the nobles with whom he paused to speak.

Leaning in closer, Beth whispered into Jacqueline's ear. "I wonder if the earls realize how your father is manipulating them? They all seem so thrilled to be in his presence."

Jacqueline snorted in disgust. "It is very doubtful they do. The earl is cunning. He could charm a priest out of

his robes if it would further him."

Another hour passed and Jacqueline began to feel a great need to leave the hall. If she did not, she would make a fool of herself in front of all present. The more she watched her father the more she wanted to ram her fist into his face. His arrogance knew no limits. And the way he was treating her mother was inexcusable. He had reduced a strong willed woman to a submissive possession. It was all too clear to Jacqueline that the earl had only demanded his wife's presence to further his position amongst the other earls. How he gained such control over her mother was a mystery to her. Seeing her sitting beside him, only speaking when he spoke to her, made Jacqueline feel physically ill.

Turning to Beth she said, "I cannot take anymore. Let us leave."

Having watched how Jacqueline had scowled in the direction of the earl since his arrival, she agreed. "I do not think we will be missing much. The main entertainment here seems to be how much wine one can down."

Taking a closer look at those seated around them, Jacqueline could see Beth was correct. How some of the knights would be in any condition to joust the following day was beyond her.

Making their way to the hall doors, Jacqueline had the distinct feeling she was being watched. Turning her head to look over her shoulder, she found the earl staring directly at her. He in no way acknowledged that he knew she was staring back at him. He just sat there, staring, with no expression upon his face. Turning back around once more, Jacqueline hurriedly ushered Beth through the doors. She was relieved to be able to close them behind her, separating herself from her father's unsettling regard.

All the tension she had been feeling left her in a rush once back inside her pavilion. She then let loose a string of curses.

Beth, who had come in a step behind her, asked, "What is the matter?"

"Mother's trunk, it is gone. I do not think she will be returning at all."

"I had a feeling she would not be. The earl must have some need of her."

Jacqueline grumbled, "First I cannot find Terric, now this."

Having poured them each a goblet of wine from the pitcher sitting on a small table in the center of the pavilion, Beth passed one to Jacqueline. "What is wrong? You do not think Terric would go against his word, do you?"

Accepting the proffered goblet, Jacqueline swallowed a large gulp from it. "Of course I do. It has been two months since I last saw him. Anything could have happened to make him change his mind. Including another woman."

"Oh, Jacqueline, Terric would not do that to you."

"How can you be so sure? I really have not known him all that long. He could have been lying, and I would not have been the wiser. He did not profess his undying love for me before he left."

Beth sighed. "He will be here for you, Jacqueline. Terric is not the type of man to make false promises."

"You are quite right, Beth. I do not make false promises."

At the sound of Terric's voice, Jacqueline whirled around, causing some of the wine in the goblet she held to

slosh over the rim and onto her hand. The first thought that came to her mind was, he came, he actually came.

Terric moved to stand before her. He took the goblet from her hand and sipped from it. Then picking up her hand, he licked the wine from her skin. She uttered a small surprised gasp of pleasure in response.

Seeing how her presence had been forgotten, Beth discreetly coughed. "I am pleased to see you again, Terric. Jacqueline was most worried."

Blinking, as if coming out of a trance, Terric turned to look at Beth. "I heard you trying to reassure her. My thanks for having such confidence in me."

"Do not think badly of Jacqueline. She has been under a lot of strain since our arrival."

"Well, I am here now. So she has one less thing to worry about." Releasing Jacqueline's hand, Terric reached for Beth's. After she placed her hand in his, he spoke once more. "If you agree, I would like some time alone with Jacqueline. Edwin is waiting just outside to escort you to my pavilion."

"I will leave you both alone, but I suggest you do not take very long. Who knows who may come to call. When you least expect it." Looking pointedly at Jacqueline, she received a curt nod in understanding.

Satisfied they would heed her warning Beth released Terric's hand and then stepped outside to where Edwin awaited her.

Seeing Terric again made Jacqueline realize how much she had missed him. So, with no hesitation, she welcomed his embrace when he pulled her into his arms.

The meeting of their lips was like a catalyst. It was an explosion of flames which engulfed them both.

Terric knew their joining would be quick. The two long months of being separated from Jacqueline had forced him to realize how much she really meant to him. He loved her. It was that simple. It struck him as kind of funny in a way. He, who was not searching for a wife, had found one. One who would also be a friend, as well as a lover.

He picked Jacqueline up in his arms and carried her to the cot in the corner of the pavilion. Knowing it would not hold their combined weight, he dragged the furs from it and placed them on the ground. Laying her gently down on them, he then fell atop her.

Having dreamed for so many nights of being like this with Terric, Jacqueline once more relished the feel of him pressed so close. His kisses were not gentle, but demanding. Almost as if he wanted to devour her. Knowing she had such an effect upon him increased her desire. Wanting to be closer to him, she pulled at his tunic.

Terric leaned back and quickly shed his tunic. As soon as his bared chest was exposed, Jacqueline rained it with kisses. He growled in the back of his throat. When she shoved him onto his back, she climbed on top of him. Straddling his hips, Jacqueline untied the laces on his hose. Terric silently watched as she pulled the garment down, exposing his full erect member. He hissed with pleasure when she softly touched the tip of him.

Jacqueline circled the very tip of Terric's shaft with her finger. Finding a drop of fluid on the very end of it, she rubbed it on the soft skin. The first time they had made love she had not had a chance to get a good look at this part of Terric. This time she full intended to satisfy her curiosity.

Glancing down at Terric, she found his eyes dark with desire. He made no move to stop her as she ran a finger

down the length of him. Growing bolder, she let her hand roam further downwards and cupped his sac. Hearing Terric groan, she wondered if he would like what he had done to her while back at Carisbrooke.

She was torturing him. Jacqueline's tentative explorations of his body were more potent than any aphrodisiac. But what she did next to him was almost too much. Before he could stop her, she shifted lower down his body, took his cock in her hand and licked him from base to tip. His body jerked as a wave of intense pleasure hit him. When she took him into her mouth and gently sucked, he thought his head would come off. He let her have her way with him for a few seconds more before reaching the limit. If she continued what she was doing this would be over even before it had begun.

With a growl, Terric grabbed her and flipped her onto her back. Having no more finesse than a boy with his first woman, he undid her hose, roughly pulled her boots and hose off. Once she was exposed he pushed her legs apart with his knee and rammed himself home. They both moaned. Hoping he was not hurting her but unable to stop himself, Terric pounded himself into Jacqueline's body. But when she gasped, and her inner walls began to spasm, he knew she was with him. Grasping her by the hips, he pounded into her once, then twice and then his release ripped through him. Out of breath he collapsed on top of Jacqueline.

When he was able to form a coherent thought, Terric looked down at Jacqueline. She was nestled up against his side with her head on his chest. Her eyes were closed, but he knew she did not sleep. She only wore her tunic and his hose were pooled at his ankles. He still had his boots on.

"We have to get up, Jacqueline. Beth is right. We could have uninvited guests at any moment." He felt her lips form a grin where they touched his skin.

"I wish we did not have to. This feels too good. I could get used to having you as my pillow."

Terric chuckled. "I would not mind being used as one in the slightest. But your pillow is going to do what is best for you and get dressed."

When he slipped out from under her, Jacqueline groaned and put her face in the pile of furs. Having pulled his hose up and fastened the laces, Terric picked up her hose and threw it at her head.

"Come now, get up. Think of poor Beth. I am sure she wants to sleep soon. And she only has Edwin for company. I doubt she will be able to stomach his lovesick looks for long."

Pulling the hose from her head, she smiled at the thought of Beth having to fend off Edwin's admiring glances. "Then we had best rescue her. She is likely to smack him silly."

Fully dressed, Terric felt it now relatively safe to kneel down beside Jacqueline. "Sounds more likely that I will be rescuing my squire from her. Not the other way around."

Brushing a light kiss across her soft lips, he quickly stood up. She was all too alluring, lying half naked beneath those furs. He could already feel himself going hard at the mere sight of her. He took a few steps back, lengthening the distance between them.

Finally accepting the fact he would not stay any longer with her, she hurriedly donned her hose. Jacqueline could tell he was not totally unaffected by her. The evidence was there to see by the bugle in his hose. "Are you sure you have to leave, Terric?"

Giving himself a shake to clear his head, he nodded. "I must. There will be other nights."

"You promise?"

Letting the full force of his desire for her show in his eyes, Terric replied, "I promise, Jacqueline. You will not be rid of me so easily."

"Nor you, of me."

"Till the morrow, my love."

Jacqueline watched Terric walk out of the pavilion. Had she heard him correctly? Had he just called her his love? Sighing deeply, she let herself fall back down upon the furs. Looking up at the roof of the pavilion, she could not take the idiotic grin from her face.

That was how Beth found her upon her return. Lying on her back, looking like a woman who had been thoroughly loved. She was happy for her friend, but a little part of her was jealous. Jacqueline had found love, where she had lost hers. Life could be so unfair at times.

"I see Terric and you had an enjoyable ... talk."

Turning her head in Beth's direction, Jacqueline giggled. She knew she was acting like a fool, but she seemed unable to help herself. She was just so happy. "Very. I hope Edwin did not bother you overly much."

Pushing back her dark thoughts, Beth could not help but laugh. Recalling Edwin's worshipping looks helped her heaviness of heart to dissipate. "Nay, he was vastly amusing. I must admit I found his attention flattering. Even though he is only a boy."

"That boy, as you call him, is the same age as yourself. Eight and ten."

"Really?" Edwin being the same age as her, surprised her. She felt so much older. Losing William had aged her beyond her years.

Seeing the perplexed look on Beth's face, Jacqueline shook her head in amusement. Maybe having her friend spend more time with Edwin would not be such a bad thing after all. If he could help Beth handle the loss of William, he would be a blessing. Beth had suffered enough. And she was too young to act the widow for the rest of her days. Edwin could be that man who could make Beth put away her mourning for good.

Chapter Ten

The following day, Sunday to be exact, King Richard's grand tournament began. This day, the first day of the tilting, was called the Feast of the Challengers. It was to be the prelude to the real tournament.

Around three o'clock, a parade through London's streets marked the start of the entertainment. The Tower of London was the starting point and it would end at Smithfield.

The procession was a spectacle the commoners of London would talk of for years to come. And they would try to claim a small amount of fame by having witnessed such an event. King Richard had spared no expense.

He wanted to outdo the French in the tournament they had held not so long before.

Sixty squires, atop barded coursers ornamented for the tournament, were the beginning of the parade. Behind them, sixty ladies of rank rode mounted on palfreys. Each lady led a knight, fully armored, by a silver chain. A number of minstrels followed in their wake. The whole group wound its way through the streets, down Cheapside, to the large square in Smithfield.

Neither Jacqueline nor Terric took part in the parade. They chose to stand and watch from the sidelines. Beth and Edwin both joined them. Already at Smithfield, they only saw the procession as it ended.

Jacqueline found herself in awe of those who participated, as were the rest of the spectators. The elegance of the richly dressed ladies and the beautifully barded horses took her breath away. She had never seen anything of the like before. As she watched each of the sixty ladies and knights enter the square, she noticed some wore matching livery.

Curious as to the reason why, she posed that question to Terric. "Why do some have livery and others not?"

Taking a closer look, Terric recognized the livery as being that of the king. "They must be the lords and ladies of the Garter. It is the king's livery they wear. I have seen it before."

When one of the ladies rode close by them, Jacqueline caught a better view of the badge she wore upon her gown. The king's livery was a hart with a golden crown that hung low on its body. Along with the crown, the hart also wore a golden chain which encircled its neck. The livery appeared to be worn on coats, armor, shields, and even on the horses' trappings.

Once all the ladies had arrived in the square, their servants rushed to assist them in dismounting from their palfreys. They were then led away to apartments that had been prepared for them earlier. Both the king and queen, along with her ladies, were already present, placed in handsomely decorated chambers.

The knights remained in the square, awaiting their squires, who had also dismounted and were now leading their coursers to them. Thus, they were then ready for the tilt.

After much discussion that morning, Terric had convinced Jacqueline not to compete in this day's event. His reasoning behind it was that her father would not be participating so why risk injury-an injury that could prevent her from joining in the jousting the following day? Reluctantly, she had agreed.

Now that the knights were ready to begin, Terric, Jacqueline, Beth and Edwin slowly made their way over to the bleachers which had been erected specifically for the tournament. Since they were not the only spectators headed in that direction, it took much pushing and elbowing, mostly on Edwin's part, to obtain prime seating closest to the list.

As each knight thundered down the list to meet his opponents with a resounding crash, Terric pointed out each weakness they had to Jacqueline. She had to admit there was an advantage in just watching after all. With Terric's help, she would be better prepared to face her adversaries on the morrow.

Just like the evening before, Jacqueline could feel eyes watching her now that the competition had begun. It gave her an eerie feeling, being watched so intently. It felt much like someone was physically touching her. Casually as possible, she searched the bleachers, hoping to see who it was who watched her so.

When her eyes fell on the part of the bleachers where the king and queen sat, she found her father sitting very close to the royal couple. It was he who stared at her.

This time, the expression upon his face made her quickly jerk back around. His face was full of malice.

Almost as if he hated her. Almost as if he knew it was she, not William sitting watching the tilting.

It was not hard to notice how Jacqueline's demeanor had changed from sitting enjoying the competition to sitting ramrod stiff. She seemed ready to run at any noise. Terric began to feel uneasy. What was causing her to be so edgy? He could not readily see.

Leaning closer to her, he whispered, "What is wrong? You are so tense I could bounce a pebble off you."

Speaking from the side of her mouth, Jacqueline replied, "My father. He is sitting near the king." When Terric moved to turn and look back at the earl, she kicked his ankle. "Do not look at him. He is watching me."

Reaching down to rub his abused ankle, he did as she ordered. "All right, I will not turn to look at him. You could have found a less painful way to get my attention you know."

The crowd roared as another pair of knights rushed toward each other. Using the noise to her advantage, Jacqueline spoke more loudly. "You will get over it. I have bigger problems than worrying about hurting your feelings. For some reason I have earned my father's ire. He does not look at all pleased with me."

"Then I suggest when the tilting is through, you return to your pavilion. Both you and Beth."

"I agree. It will not be much longer. The day already grows late."

She was right, Terric realized. Once it became too dark to see, the tilting would cease.

The next hour stretched Jacqueline's nerves tighter and tighter. When at last darkness fell and the tilting was drawn to a close, she was up on her feet leading Beth away. She knew there was to be another feast this night, at the bishop of London's palace near St. Paul's church. But she felt it prudent not to attend. Her father would definitely be present. The king and queen were lodged at the bishop's palace, and he would not want to miss any opportunity to gain their favor.

* * * *

Standing at the entrance to her pavilion, Jacqueline looked up at the bright, twinkling stars studding the night sky above. She took a deep breath then sighed. Her nerves were getting the better of her. On the morrow, she could very well be meeting her father in the list, but sleep was the furthest thing from her mind.

Glancing behind her, Jacqueline could see Beth sleeping peacefully on her cot. At least one of them would be well rested.

Sighing again, she pulled the pavilion's flap closed once more. There was no help for it, she might as well accept that sleep would not come easily for her. And since she was going to be up half the night, she only wished she could be spending it with Terric.

He had gone to the feast at the Bishop's palace. He had offered to stay with her and Beth, but she could not begrudge him that. He so enjoyed them. There was really no reason for him to be absent from it.

Crawling back onto her cot, she decided to try and sleep once again.

* * * *

The hall at the Bishop's place was packed full of people. Terric barely had enough room to eat his meal comfortably. As if he needed a reminder of the cramped conditions, the person next to him elbowed him in the ribs.

Rubbing the area that took the hit, Terric turned his attention to the upper table. Jacqueline's mother and father were numbered among the exalted company who sat there. The earl, as was his want, was trying to ingratiate himself to the king. Lady Elizabeth, taking advantage of her husband's inattention, seemed to be more relaxed. She even conversed with the young queen from time to time.

After all had eaten their fill, the food was cleared away and the dancing began.

It was during that time that Lady Elizabeth discreetly caught his attention with a slight nod of her head. She then stepped out of the hall. Figuring she wished him to follow her, Terric waited a few minutes then made his own way from the hall, as well.

She stood just outside the doors waiting for him. "I do not have much time. The earl is ever watchful of me. Why, I have no idea."

Terric took hold of Lady Elizabeth's elbow and led her farther away from the hall doors. "How have you been treated?"

Seeing the younger man's concern written upon his face, she casually waved it away. "With all the courtesy due me. My husband would never mistreat me in that way, most especially here. He would not want his name besmirched. Enough about me. How are they?"

Terric knew who she referred to. "They are both fine." Quickly making sure no one was nearby, he then continued, "Jacqueline is a bit nervous, which is to be expected."

"Aye, it is. I must return before the earl misses me and comes looking. Just promise to watch out for her on the morrow. I will be in the stands."

Bowing, Terric then nodded. "I will."

"I wish you luck in the tournament as well, Sir Terric." Lady Elizabeth, now satisfied that her daughter would be well looked after in her absence, returned to the hall.

* * * *

"You missed a splendid feast last night, Jacqueline. You and Beth would have enjoyed it."

"It seems as if you enjoyed yourself anyway."

Terric was lounging in one of her camp chairs, lazily sipping wine from a goblet. Even though he tried to hide the smile he wore by holding the rim of the goblet against his lips, Jacqueline could still see the mirth lurking in his violet eyes. She scowled back at him.

Seeing the look she gave him, he said, "Are you worried I met another woman to while away my night?"

"Should I be?"

"Nay, I was true to you. But that did not stop them from seeking my attention. Poor Edwin had to sacrifice himself by offering his meager services."

Jacqueline laughed. "I am sure he was groveling at their feet more like."

"That is better, I made you laugh. Even if it was at poor Edwin's expense."

"Aye, you did. Now tell me what else happened at the feast. Besides your being swarmed by almost every

female who attended."

"Fine, I will tell you, since you insist. During the feast they announced the winners of the tilting. The French count, Count de Saint Pol, was named the best knight of the tournament. The Earl of Huntingdon, for the tenants. There was a last minute arrival, as well."

"Who?"

"Count d'Ostrevant, William de Hainault, King Richard's cousin. He also brought a large group of knights and squires with him. So there will be more competitors in today's tilting."

"I have no interest in the count. My main concern is my father."

Sitting up straighter, Terric asked, "Did you submit your challenge to him?"

Sighing, Jacqueline nodded. "I did. I have yet to hear if he has accepted it or not."

Then as if on cue, scratching, coming from the other side of the pavilion flap, could be heard. Opening it, Jacqueline found her father's squire standing there.

Sketching a quick bow in her direction, he passed her the missive he held and then left. Her hand shook as she broke her father's seal and read what was written on the parchment.

Noticing how her hands were shaking, Terric came to stand behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "What does it say?"

She had to clear her throat before she could answer him. If she had not, her voice would have come out in a croak. "He has accepted my challenge."

"Congratulations, you now will be able to accomplish what you have worked so hard for."

Jacqueline nodded, unable to force a word past her lips. Terric was right. She had finally gotten what she had striven so hard for. But instead of feeling elated, an overwhelming sense of sadness washed over her. The longer she looked at her father's missive the more intense the feeling became. Soon the words began to blur. When a tear fell on the parchment, smearing the ink, she could no longer hold back her sorrow.

As her gut wrenching sobs began, Terric turned her so she faced him, then he wrapped her tightly in his embrace. Each sob wracked her body, causing him to feel it equally through his own. He knew she had not grieved over the loss of her brother before. Holding her as close as he could, he waited for her to get her emotions back under control. She had bottled up her sorrow inside her for far too long.

Gradually, Jacqueline's sobs eased. She hiccupped a few times and then fell silent. Terric loosened his embrace and, placing a hand under her chin, he tilted her head up. Her turquoise eyes were red and swollen from crying, but she seemed more at peace. He brushed a gentle kiss upon her lips.

"Do you feel better?"

She nodded and said hoarsely, "Aye."

"Now you can face your father with a clear mind."

Breaking his embrace, she stepped back. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her tunic. He was correct. Now having released the pent up sorrow inside herself, she felt remarkably calm within.

Pulling herself up straighter, she said, "I am ready to go up against the earl now. Nothing will stop me."

* * * *

That afternoon the tournament truly began. King Richard entered Smithfield accompanied by dukes, lords, and knights. The king was to be the Chief of the Tenants of the list. Count d'Ostrevant arrived next, along with a large company of knights and squires, fully armed for the tilting. Count de Saint Pol, accompanied by the knights from France, followed.

Sitting in her pavilion, waiting for her turn in the list, Jacqueline could hear the roar of the crowd. They equally cheered or booed, depending on which opponent they favored. There also was no mistaking the sound of a knight being unhorsed. The resulting crash of armor impacting with solid ground was resounding.

Surprisingly, she still retained the calmness she had gained earlier. Even when Edwin came to help finish arming her, she felt no nervousness, no second thoughts. When the squire led her to the list, she felt as if she was moving in a dream world, not the reality she knew. The people around her seemed to be moving in slow motion, as if they were submerged in a heavy substance, which limited their movements. Even their voices sounded muffled to her.

Once she arrived at the list, the roar of the crowd fell away to nothingness. Her whole being focused on the knight at the opposite end. He held a shield, which bore the same coat of arms hers depicted, the Montacute coat of arms.

Grasping the lance Edwin held out to her, Jacqueline placed it at the ready. Knowing what was to come, her steed stamped impatiently. The signal given, she set her courser into motion. Before she let her full attention be taken over by what she was doing, she silently said to herself, for William. I do this for you.

Her steed reached a full gallop and she flew down the list, just as her father did. Bracing herself, she hit the earl's shield with her lance. It splintered into a thousand pieces. Her father's lance hit her shield with enough force to jar her almost out of her saddle, but tenaciously she held on. His lance also shattered on impact.

The second pass, Jacqueline's lance only skidded across the earl's shield giving him the point. His lance hit her shield dead center, once again shattering.

Returning to her end of the list, she accepted a new lance from Edwin and prepared for the final run. Her father was good, very good. After the two previous passes, she came to the conclusion she would not be able to unhorse him. She would be proving herself by just trying to keep her seat with each run.

Waiting for the signal, she looked down the list at her father. She could not see anything of his face with his helm on, but he must have noticed she was watching him. He tipped his lance down toward the ground in a salute. Jacqueline returned it in kind.

Once the signal was given for the final pass, both steeds barreled down the list at top speed. They met with a crash. Jacqueline felt the impact through her whole body. With both lances shattered, it marked the end of the jousting between herself and her father.

Turning her steed back around for the last time, she passed the earl as he headed back to his squire.

A moment before he passed by her, he stopped. "Well done, William. I see your skill has improved since we last met in the list."

Making her voice go as deep as she could make it, Jacqueline replied, "Thank you, father. I have been training for this day."

"I must say, your ability is better than I expected. We will speak later, William." Kicking his heels into his steed's flanks he then moved on his way, leaving her to continue back to the waiting Edwin.

Beth and Terric were both at her pavilion, waiting for her return. When she stepped through the entrance, they enthusiastically greeted her. Beth welcomed her first.

"Oh, Jacqueline, you were spectacular! William would have been so proud of you." Beth seemed to be crying and smiling both at the same time.

Almost frantically, Jacqueline unlaced and then ripped off her helm. She took in great gulps of air into her lungs when she was free of it. Looking at Terric and Beth she said, "He knows."

"Who knows?" It was Terric who spoke.

"My father."

Beth gasped. "How could he know?"

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Jacqueline shook her head. "I know not. All I do know for certain is that he has seen through me."

Terric pulled her closer, then he began to unbuckle her armor. "What makes you think he knows? Both you and Beth have been careful not to be too close to your father."

She could still feel the chill which had run up her back when the earl had spoken to her. "He talked to me after the final run. He said I surprised him."

"Jacqueline, that does not mean he knows. He could have just been surprised by your skill. Nothing more."

She shook her head once more in denial. "Nay, Terric, you are wrong. He knows. He also said we would speak again later. Nothing good can come of that."

Having divested Jacqueline of her armor as they spoke, Terric rubbed her back reassuringly. "Do not fret so. I am sure it is nothing. Who knows, he may not even send for you."

Letting herself lean back against Terric's comforting warmth, she felt a shudder run through her. "I wish I could be so positive, but I cannot. The earl will not so easily forget. He knows."

* * * *

The earl roughly shoved his helm into his young squire's hands. He then stepped into the shaded confines of his pavilion. After being divested of his armor, he impatiently waved his squire away.

Left alone, he picked up the goblet of wine placed on the table for him to quench his thirst.

Sitting down in one of the camp chairs, the earl slowly sipped his drink. His brows furrowed in irritation as he replayed his meeting with his son in the list. It seemed William's skill had improved vastly. But what bothered him the most was how quickly his son had recovered from his injury. The intervening months since their last meeting, William should have spent healing. Not improving his skill in handling a lance. William's armor seemed to be a smaller fit, as well, though that could be easily explained. Being injured, William could have lost some weight.

He had thought of another explanation, as well, for all the changes in William. But he found it too ludicrous to give it credence. The girl was dead and buried. Besides, no female would dare what he was thinking.

When his wife entered the pavilion, the earl broke off his musings about his son. Now would be the perfect opportunity to have his wife answer a few pointed questions in regards to William.

Motioning for his wife to sit on the other camp chair across from him, the earl stared intently at her. Under his close scrutiny, she eventually lowered her head to look at her clasped hands on her lap. The earl smiled. He did enjoy seeing her cowed.

"Tell me about William. Did he recover from his injury without any complications?"

Keeping her eyes downcast, Lady Elizabeth squeezed her hands together so tightly her knuckles turned white. "Nay, there were no problems. Though it was months before he regained his strength fully."

The earl nodded. "I noticed he has bettered his skill in the list."

"William has trained hard for this day." she replied dryly.

"Raise your head when you speak to me, woman." the earl snapped. "Now, why would our son train so hard, especially after receiving a grievous injury, just to meet me here in the list?"

Biting back a caustic remark, Lady Elizabeth lifted her head to look at her husband. Oh how she would love to give him the set down he deserved. Instead, she answered his query. "He only wished to please you. William wanted you to be proud of him. So when he recovered, he dedicated himself to improve his abilities."

Not wanting to pursue the topic any further, the earl stood. It was obvious his wife would only say what she thought he would want to hear. "You may leave me now."

Quite happy to do as she was bid, Lady Elizabeth quickly quit the earl's pavilion. She had been afraid, at first, that he had found out about the ruse they played on him. But luckily, he seemed to have accepted what she told him.

Now that Jacqueline had done what she wanted, she could avoid the earl, if possible, until the end of the tournament. Nothing would please her more than to be back on the Isle and put her husband behind her.

Chapter Eleven

Once again in the evening, another feast was to be held. Since she had participated in the day's tournament, Jacqueline attended. She did not want to give her father any more reasons to become suspicious of her.

Terric accompanied both her and Beth. He knew Jacqueline was shaken by her confrontation with the earl. He still thought she had nothing to worry about. If her father knew her secret, Terric was almost positive the earl would have already acted against her. Hoping to lay her fears to rest, he planned to pay closer attention to the earl to see if he acted differently towards her.

Both the king and queen were present and seated at the table on the raised dais. King Richard was a young

king, at the age of three and twenty. But the crown of England had been his since the age of ten. In his early years as king, John of Gaunt had acted as regent until Richard reached the age of majority. The regent had not been a favorite of the people. The animosity he engendered in them had been caused by his oppressive government policies. They had been so intolerable, the peasants had revolted in 1381.

But that was all in the past. Richard now had full control over his throne. He was no longer king in just name, and he had chosen his queen. Queen Anne was the daughter of Charles IV, the Holy Roman Emperor who was also the King of Bohemia.

Before the feast commenced, the winners from the day's tournament were announced. This time the ladies, lords, and heralds had been the judges. The winner of the tilting was the Count d'Ostrevant, the king's foreign cousin. The tenants were given to an English knight, Sir Hugh Spenser.

Jacqueline was not particularly interested in who the winners of the tournament were. She had not been in the running for either prize having only challenged her father in the end. But she had accomplished what she had set out to do and that was all that truly mattered.

As the evening progressed, Jacqueline began to let herself relax. Her father acted as if she were not in the hall. He did not look her way. Not even once. She came to think maybe Terric was right after all. No longer worrying about being summoned by the earl, she let herself enjoy the feast to its fullest. She ate and drank her fill, all the while talking and laughing with her companions.

So, she was quite startled to find her mother standing behind her seat when the feast was drawing to a close. Her first response was to quickly search for her father. He was no longer in the hall, much to her consternation. That did not bode well.

Shifting her attention back to her mother, Jacqueline searched her face for any clues as to why she had come to speak with her. Lady Elizabeth's expression was passively bland. Her eyes, so much like those her daughter shared, showed the strain she had been under since her arrival in London. There were prominent dark smudges under each of them. Jacqueline could only guess at what the earl had put her through.

"Is everything all right, mother?"

Her mother nodded quickly. "For the moment. I must return to the earl shortly. He sent me to deliver a message to you, to William."

Jacqueline's eyes widened in panic. Was her father going to summon her to him? "What message?"

The panic her daughter was obviously feeling was easy to read upon her face. Lady Elizabeth smiled at her hoping to alleviate some of her worry. "He did not send me here for the reason you are thinking of. He has no idea." She leaned closer to her daughter and whispered for her ears only, "You did well, Jacqueline. You know how I felt about all you planned, but you have made me very proud of you."

Jacqueline had to blink back the sudden rush of tears which threatened to flow at her mother's praise. "Thank you, mother."

Still smiling, Lady Elizabeth straightened. "Now, your father has instructed me to inform you that you are to depart London after the last day of the tournament, at first light."

It was an order, Jacqueline knew, but it was one she would gladly carry out. "And you, mother? Are you to leave with us?"

"He has allowed me to depart with you and Beth."

Jacqueline smiled brightly. "You may tell the earl we will be gone on the day he wishes."

"Until then." Taking a last look at her daughter, Lady Elizabeth left the hall.

A few moments of silence passed before Terric broke it. "It seems as if we will all be departing at first light on that day."

"Truly?" Jacqueline had hoped Terric would return to the Isle with them. She did not think she could bear being separated from him again so soon.

"Of course. I have business to discuss with your lady mother. The Isle is the only place where I can do it."

If they were not in a crowded hall, where she was posing as a man, Jacqueline would have thrown her arms around Terric and shown him how happy his words made her. Instead, she settled for reaching beneath the table and squeezing his thigh. He gave her hand a quick caress before she removed her hand from his leg. Each wished they were someplace else.

Having watched what had transpired beneath the table, Beth stood. "If we are to be awake for events taking place in the early morning, I think it would be prudent to retire for the night."

Tearing her gaze from Terric's face, Jacqueline stood, as well, and offered her arm to Beth. "Quite right." Nodding to the man who still sat on the bench, she led her 'wife' from the hall.

* * * *

On the following day, it was the squires' turn to take to the list. They were to tilt in the presence of the king, queen, and all the nobles.

Since Edwin would be participating, Jacqueline and Beth joined Terric in the stands to watch him. Edwin managed to acquit himself admirably. He did not win every match, but he had at least kept his seat throughout.

When it came time for Edwin to finally face his last opponent, Jacqueline was about ready to jump up from her seat and run. As before, while being a spectator and not a participant of the tournament, she could feel her father's eyes watching her. But this time said eyes seemed to bore into her as if he were trying to see what or who she truly was.

Once Edwin left the list, she grabbed Beth by the hand and pulled her to her feet. Beth did not question why Jacqueline wished to leave before the end of the tilting. The atmosphere was decidedly icy around the stands.

Terric, noticing his companions' slow departure through the crowded stands, stood and followed. They separated company when they reached the pavilions. Terric went to see to Edwin, while Jacqueline and Beth retired to their own dwelling.

"I do not think I can last until the end of this tournament, Beth." Jacqueline sat down heavily in a camp chair.

"You do not have much choice in the matter. The earl would become very suspicious if you left suddenly. Just a few more days, Jacqueline. That is all."

"I keep telling myself that very same thing. But it is not helping any."

Taking a seat in the chair next to her friend, Beth tried to reassure her. "You are safe, Jacqueline."

"If the earl's behavior this day is any indication, I am not so sure of that. He looked at me as if he could see

right through me."

Both women let the topic they were discussing drop when Terric and Edwin entered the pavilion.

Terric headed straight for Jacqueline. He pulled her from the chair she sat in and kissed her thoroughly. Having rendered her satisfactorily weak-kneed, he released her lips. She still clung to him when he whispered into her ear, "Just a taste of what is to come later."

Jacqueline felt her breath hitch in response to his words. "I will hold you to that."

Knowing they were not alone, Terric reluctantly released her, taking a step away. And just in time. A visitor arrived unannounced.

A ripple of fear coursed through Jacqueline's body at the sight of her father standing just inside her pavilion. "Hello, father."

The earl looked her up and down. Jacqueline hoped her face did not show any signs of the kiss she had received from Terric. Clenching her hands tightly at her sides, she resisted the urge to wipe her lips with the back of her hand.

"I see you have company, William. Are you not going to introduce me?"

Needing further space between Terric and herself, Jacqueline moved to stand beside Beth. "Father, this is Sir Terric Aubrey. Along with his squire, Edwin."

Her father's gaze skipped over Edwin, having been deemed not worth his lordly interest. "Sir Terric. I believe I have seen you before. At many a tournament, if I am not mistaken."

Terric bobbed his head at the earl in acknowledgement. "Aye, you are correct. I follow the tournament circuit each season."

The earl somehow managed to look down his nose at Terric. No small feat, considering Terric stood a few inches taller than her father. The earl stood just slightly over six feet.

"How quaint, a tournament knight. I had not realized my son was acquainted with you. At past tournaments we attended together, I never noticed you in William's company, Sir Terric."

Terric did not miss the panicky look which flashed in Jacqueline's turquoise eyes before she quickly subdued it. "William and I just became acquainted a few months past. At a tournament at Portchester Castle."

"How convenient." The earl said sneeringly. He then turned his attention back to Jacqueline. "I came to make sure you attended tonight's feast, William. Your mother seems to think you would not."

Jacqueline stiffened. "I had not planned on attending."

The earl shook his head. "That will not do at all. I will not have my son hiding away in his pavilion. You and your wife will be present at the feasts. Do I make myself clear?"

"Aye, father." Jacqueline answered meekly.

"I am glad we have rectified that. Now, I must return to the tournament. I will be watching for your arrival at the bishop's palace." With that said, the earl left the pavilion as suddenly as he had arrived.

Seeing how Jacqueline trembled, Terric fetched her a goblet of wine and made sure she had a large sip from

it. He then led her to sit on one of the camp chairs.

Taking another fortifying drink from her goblet, Jacqueline then looked at the three others who hovered around her. "I have a very bad feeling about this. First his comments he spoke at the list, and now this unexpected visit. It almost seemed as if he expected to catch me doing something I did not want him to see."

Beth could not hold her tongue any longer. "Which is precisely what very nearly happened."

Terric interrupted before she could continue. "It was entirely my fault. Do not blame Jacqueline for it. I put her in that position by kissing her. I will be sure to act with more circumspection in the future."

"See that you do."

After the earl's unexpected visit, Jacqueline found she was unable to enjoy the rest of the day. She felt nothing but dread every time she thought of that evening's feast. By the time they left for the bishop's palace, her nerves were wound so tight she jumped at the slightest noise.

Now, standing before the hall doors, Jacqueline took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. Beth squeezed her arm.

"Steady now. You will be fine."

Nodding her head jerkily, Jacqueline pulled herself up straighter and opened the hall doors. Once inside, she kept her gaze away from the raised dais. Clapping eyes on Terric, who was seated at one of the many trestle tables, she led Beth over to join him.

Shifting down on the bench, Terric made room for them to sit. "About time you two showed up."

"Someone decided to take as long as she possibly could to dress," Beth stated flatly. She seated herself on the bench, leaving enough space for Jacqueline to slip in between herself and Terric.

"I am sure we did not miss all that much." Jacqueline could see the other guests were already trying to get down their gullets as much food and wine as they could manage.

"You only missed the announcement made on behalf of the king."

When Terric was not forthcoming with any more information, Jacqueline asked impatiently, "Well?"

"The king has decided to leave London on the morrow with the foreign knights and the foreign counts."

Jacqueline felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her. The earl would not expect her to follow the court. Hopefully, neither would her mother. "That is most interesting news."

"I thought you would be pleased," Terric laughingly said.

"I am more than pleased."

Now that she knew her time under father's rule would be drawing to a close, Jacqueline risked looking up at the earl. Her father was deep in conversation with one of the foreign counts. He must have sensed her watching him. He turned and looked directly at her. The smile which he had worn moments before disappeared. Jacqueline refused to back down this time. She stared back at him, her gaze never wavering. The earl dipped his head in salute towards her.

As the meal progressed, the more relaxed Jacqueline felt. Forgetting about her father, she set out to enjoy

what was to be her last night with the court.

Enjoy herself, she did. After a few goblets of wine, she was able to completely ignore the earl's presence at the high table. Terric entertained both her and Beth with the gossip that usually ran rampant wherever the court stayed. He told them everything from whose wives were having affairs behind their husbands' backs, to which of the courtiers padded their hose to create the effect of muscular legs.

In a small way, Jacqueline wished the night would not come to an end. Having Terric seated beside her, his leg plastered against her own, made her want more. After the earl's unexpected visit at her pavilion, Terric had decided not to come to her later this night. The risk to her was too great. She really could not, should not, complain about it. But she ached for Terric's touch, for the feel of him thrusting into her body. So, wistfully, she made do with what she could.

Once the dancing started, a young pageboy presented Jacqueline with a piece of parchment. After she accepted it, he bowed to her and left to continue on with his other duties.

Jacqueline broke the seal on the missive and quickly scanned what was written inside. She smiled. "This evening is just getting better and better."

Peering over Jacqueline's shoulder, Beth asked, "Is that from the earl?"

"Aye. We have been sent our packing orders. We leave at dawn on the morrow. Mother will join us, as well."

Picking up his goblet, Terric drained the rest of his wine, then stood. "If that is the case, I suggest we all retire for the night."

Following suit, Jacqueline got up from the bench and offered Beth her arm. "On the morrow then, Sir Terric." she said formally. Before quitting the hall, she once more looked at her father. Nodding her head in his direction, she made it known to him that she understood his wishes.

* * * *

They were greeted by Sir Guy when they arrived back at Carisbrooke Castle. He anxiously searched each face in their party waiting to see who would speak first. When he received no response, he took matters into his own hands.

"Well? Are you all going to leave me to guess what happened in London? Or are you going to give an old man peace of mind and tell me?"

Taking pity on him, Jacqueline linked her arm through his and started to lead him toward the hall. "You are hardly an old man, and well you know it. I am parched from our travels, so let me quench my thirst then I will be happy to tell you everything."

"Just do not keep me waiting too long."

To ensure Jacqueline would not take any longer than she needed, he hurried her through the hall doors, and sat her in one of the chairs before the fire. He then fetched her a tankard of ale himself. Lady Elizabeth and the others entered the hall at a more sedate pace.

Sipping her ale, Jacqueline could not help but notice how Sir Guy stood hovering over her impatiently tapping his foot. She said laughingly, "I can see you are not going to leave me be until I tell you."

"Nay, my girl, I will not. Now out with it." Sir Guy grumbled.

"You have not welcomed my mother properly as of yet. Should you not do that first?"

"She can wait. Talk."

"I guess I have tortured you enough. I challenged the earl at the grand tournament. As you can see I am not the worse for wear from it."

"That is it? That is all you are going to say?"

Terric came to stand behind Jacqueline's chair. "She is being modest, Sir Guy. Jacqueline did more than hold her own against her father. She managed to keep from being unhorsed and scored a point on one of the runs."

Heedless of the tankard of ale she held, Sir Guy snatched Jacqueline from her chair and squeezed her to him in a bear hug. Her ale spilled into the rushes.

The older man then placed her back onto her feet. "I wish I could have seen you in the list."

"The grand tournament will be the last time I am to enter the list. I have done what I set forth to do."

Hearing her daughter's words, Lady Elizabeth came over and sat in the chair next to Jacqueline. "Does that mean you will let your hair grow back and start wearing gowns like a proper lady?"

Jacqueline reached up and pulled on her cropped auburn locks. "I will let my hair grow back, but I will not give up wearing a man's attire."

"Not even after you are wed? Terric may not want his wife going around dressed like that."

She once again found herself speechless by her mother's statement. Jacqueline had not known her mother knew how close they had actually become. She shot a look at Terric. He shook his head to let her know he was just as surprised as she.

Watching Jacqueline's reaction to her words, Lady Elizabeth clicked her tongue at her. "Do you think I did not know what went on during Terric's previous stay? Just because I said naught of it that does not mean I was oblivious to how you felt about each other."

Jacqueline blushed furiously. "You knew all this time?"

"Of course I did."

"I thought you would be disappointed in me."

"If the circumstances were different, I might have reacted in another manner. But what you did helped to protect you from the earl. If he had discovered your ruse, he would not have been able to use you to further his gains. You are no longer a maid, therefore, not so prized as you were in the past."

She knew her mother was canny, but she had not realized how intuitive she actually was. "What would you have done if Terric had no intentions of marrying me?"

"I would not have allowed what happened to take place. But that is irrelevant now. Terric loves you. He will do all in his power to protect you."

Terric, having remained silent during the discussion between mother and daughter, was pleased to hear Lady Elizabeth thought so highly of him. He had not been entirely sure his suit for her daughter's hand would be accepted.

Acknowledging the older woman's praise, Terric bowed his head in her direction. "I am glad to hear that you find me acceptable, my lady. Then am I correct in assuming, you will allow me to take Jacqueline to wife?"

"Aye, Sir Terric. You may have Jacqueline as your wife. The sooner the better."

The elation Jacqueline felt upon hearing her mother accept Terric quickly changed to concern. "Why the hurry, mother?"

"Even though your father did not see through you, I still do not trust him. He is a sneaky, conniving man. He could be the one who fooled us all. Not the other way around. The sooner Terric puts a wedding ring on your finger, the better I will feel. Even the earl cannot break the vows spoken before a priest."

Jacqueline felt a wave of uneasiness sweep through her. She hoped her mother's fears would turn out to be unfounded. But if it would save her from any malicious plans the earl might have in store for her, she would gladly marry Terric on the morrow.

Chapter Twelve

"If you do not stand still, Jacqueline, I am likely to mortally wound you with these pins." Lady Elizabeth said exasperatedly.

"Sorry, mother, but you have had me standing here for hours. All the while you have poked and prodded me."

"It has not been hours. You exaggerate. It only seems that way because you have done nothing but fidget. Either you hold still or your wedding gown will not look at all proper."

Jacqueline gritted her teeth and sighed in defeat. Her wedding day was two days hence. Her mother along with Beth, had been frantically stitching her wedding gown since their return from London the week before. She would have gladly worn a less elaborate gown, but she did not have the heart to try and sway the two women to change their minds. They had enthusiastically started to work out the details of her gown the day after their return home.

The tight sleeved undergown was made from silk, dyed the color of a cloudless blue sky on a summer day. The looser overtunic, was a stamped velvet, two shades darker blue than the undergown. The pattern stamped on the velvet was the Montacute coat of arms. The earl had sent the velvet to be used for Jacqueline's gown when she was to have wed the Earl of Somerset. Her mother had suggested they use it now, the reason being it really was exquisite and why not use it for what it had originally been intended? Jacqueline had agreed in the end.

Along with the undergown and overtunic, there were tippets, trailing strips of cloth which was fastened just above the elbow. They were made from the same velvet. Around her hips, she would wear a girdle made from gold that had pearls set into each link. Upon her head, she would wear a sheer sky blue veil, which would be fastened to a point at the centre of her forehead.

The three women were working in the solar with the door firmly shut. Lady Elizabeth did not want Terric seeing Jacqueline in her wedding gown before they were to exchange vows. So when a knock at the door could be heard, she nodded for Beth to see who it was.

Opening the door a half inch, she peered out to find Terric standing on the other side of it. "Do not bother trying to come in because I will not let you."

Terric smiled brightly at her. "I have no intention of stepping into the solar. I have been warned off with dire threats to my person should I do so. I was just wondering if I could have a word with Lady Elizabeth."

Having heard her name spoken, Jacqueline's mother joined him at the door. "Now, Sir Terric, I hope this is not a ploy to see Jacqueline's gown."

Holding his hands up while shaking his head adamantly, Terric said, "I can assure you it is not. If I remember correctly, you told me you would drop me down that very deep well Carisbrooke is known for."

Lady Elizabeth chuckled. "And I would do it."

"There is no need for that well today, my lady. I would like to speak to you, privately. If you can spare a few moments."

Turning to look over her shoulder at Beth and Jacqueline, she asked, "Can you finish without me, Beth?"

The younger girl nodded. "Aye, of course."

"Then I am all yours, Terric."

Slipping through the partially open door, Lady Elizabeth led Terric to the chamber next to the solar. It was not quite so large, since she only used this chamber to do the castle accounts. The space inside was mostly taken up by a large desk. Walking around it, she then seated herself behind the desk and motioned for Terric to sit in the chair on the opposite side.

Once he was seated, she waited for him to speak. She had a feeling she knew what he wished to speak to her about. So, calmly, she waited while he collected his thoughts.

Terric had run through what he planned to say to Jacqueline's mother in his head a dozen times before asking to meet with her. But now that he sat facing her, he found it hard to begin. To be honest with himself, it was not something he felt proud about doing.

Clearing his throat, he forced himself to begin. "With the wedding so close, I thought now would be appropriate to broach this subject with you, my lady. It is something I wish I did not have to ask."

Lady Elizabeth could see Terric was not feeling at all comfortable with this. He seemed on the verge of squirming in his chair. "Just spit it out, man. I do not bite you know."

Grateful for having some of the tension relieved by her words, he did what she suggested and said what was exactly on his mind.

"Since I have no lands of my own, would you approve of Jacqueline and myself living here, at Carisbrooke? I hope in a few years, while I follow the tournament circuit, to be able to purchase some land."

"I had assumed that after your marriage, you both would be staying at the castle. And it will no longer be necessary for you to follow the circuit."

Terric felt slightly taken aback at the older woman's words. "Living off your good graces for long does not sit well with me."

"Do not worry, you will be earning your keep, Terric. With William now gone, there is no Lord of the Isle here. I wish you to take his place."

Caught off guard, he had to hear it again. "Let me get this straight. You want me, a landless knight, to take over William's duties?"

She knew he was shocked by the look of confusion he wore on his face. "Aye, I do. As Jacqueline's husband, you are the only logical choice. It will not be an easy position to fill in the beginning, but I am sure you can learn all you will need to know."

"And you do not want me to do the circuit anymore?"

"Nay, I do not. You may participate in a tournament or two, one that is close to the Isle if you wish, but only for the sport of it."

Feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Terric smiled and stuck out his hand to Lady Elizabeth. "I accept your offer, my lady."

With hands clasped, they shook on the agreement they had reached. Terric stood, sketched a quick bow to her, then left Lady Elizabeth alone in the chamber.

* * * *

Taking a deep breath, Terric stared up at the clear night sky. The stars high above him flashed like so many diamonds.

He still could not believe his good fortune. He had found the woman he had been waiting for to be his wife. And along with a woman who loved him, now he had a place to call home. To be part of a family. Something he had not had for so many years.

His father, Philip Aubrey, was a minor knight with a small holding. His mother, the love of his father's life, was sadly only a peasant. Her family farmed a section of land which belonged to Philip. They paid him rent to work the land.

His father was already married when the fair Rosamond had caught his eye. At first, his intent had not been to make her his mistress. Even though his marriage was a loveless one, it was not his way. But Rosamond eventually won him over, and they became lovers.

Terric was born a year later. He only had a few short months with his mother-a time of which he had no recollection being only a small babe. His birth had been too hard for his mother. She never fully recovered and finally, in the end, succumbed.

Philip already had two sons by his wife-both much older than Terric. That being the case, it was not necessary for him to acknowledge Terric as his son, but he did. He was not able to bring his motherless son to live with him, though. Philip's wife would never have allowed it. So Terric had been raised by his grandparents.

At the age of ten, his father arranged for Terric to be fostered out. Knowing he could not offer much to the son of his love, he did what he could. He took steps to make sure her son would become a knight for which Terric was forever grateful. The life of a farmer held no appeal for him.

Having made a complete circuit of the walls, Terric descended to the bailey below. Walking toward the keep, in the direction of the hall, he caught sight of a shadowed figure moving to intercept him. When the figure became more discernible, he shook his head in disbelief.

"What are you doing out here so late?"

"I could very well ask you the same question." Jacqueline replied saucily. Before Terric could protest, she wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed a kiss across his lips. In response, he placed his hands on either side of her waist, pulling her hard up against him.

"Is it not bad luck to see me? We wed on the morrow."

"Just silly superstition. I needed to see you before I went to sleep. Come morning mother will make sure we do not meet until the ceremony."

"We did see each other at the evening meal. It has only been a few short hours since we parted. Did you miss me so soon?"

"Of course." Jacqueline smiled up at him seductively then ran her hands through his hair. "I do not think I can wait until after the ceremony."

Terric groaned. "Are you trying to seduce me, minx?"

Jacqueline rocked her hips up against his. "And if I am?"

Unwrapping her arms from around his neck, Terric set her firmly away from him. "Tempting, but nay. We are going to do this properly."

Sticking out her bottom lip in a pout, she asked, "You will not change your mind?"

"Nay. Now go to your bed. Alone." Turning Jacqueline around, he pushed her in the direction of the keep, adding a swat to her rump to keep her moving.

Terric waited until Jacqueline disappeared within the keep before he followed her. He wanted to make sure she was safely in her own chamber. He also needed the time to calm down the raging desire she had stirred up inside him just by being in his arms. If she were to accost him in the hall, he was not at all sure he could refuse her a second time.

Finally entering the hall, he found it deserted which was a great relief. On the morrow he would make it up to Jacqueline since he had refused her offer. Once she was his wife, he might never let her out of his bed.

* * * *

The day of their wedding broke in a bright wash of sunlight. Jacqueline could not have wished for a better day. If the blue cloudless sky was considered a good omen for the start of her new life with Terric, then it portended good fortune.

Having followed her mother's strict admonishment on not seeing her intended before exchanging their vows, Jacqueline had not gone to the hall to break her fast. A servant had brought her a tray instead. Now she waited for the heated water for her bath to arrive. She did not have a long wait. Her mother, ever efficient, instructed the servants to prepare the bath once Jacqueline had sent her tray back down.

With a quick knock on her daughter's door, Lady Elizabeth opened it and stood aside for the parade of

servants lined up behind her. Once the hip bath had been dragged into the room and then filled, the servants were dismissed leaving mother and daughter alone. Stripping off her robe, Jacqueline immersed herself in the bath.

Lady Elizabeth moved to stand behind her daughter and began to wash her hair. "I never thought this day would come-the day I saw my daughter marry the man she loved."

Jacqueline wiped water from her eyes. "You no more than I, mother. Especially after what we had done to stop my marriage to the Earl of Somerset."

"That odious man. With you wed to Terric, you will be safe. Our ruse will no longer be necessary."

Continuing to wash herself, Jacqueline knew her life could very well have been much different if her father had had his way. She would have been tied to a man she thoroughly detested.

Her bath finished, she stepped out of the tub and towed dry. She then donned her robe once more. All that was left to do was to dress in her wedding gown.

Jacqueline could feel her nerves getting the best of her. She did not regret her choice in marrying Terric. If anything, she felt overjoyed by it. But she needed a few minutes alone to collect herself before the ceremony.

"Mother, is there enough time for me to sit by myself for awhile?"

Lady Elizabeth smiled. "Not long, but we can work it in." Placing a kiss on Jacqueline's cheek, she then left her alone.

Sitting on the window seat with her back toward the chamber door, Jacqueline looked out the window. Watching the normal goings on down in the bailey helped to calm her. A warm breeze blew through the open shutters. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath.

At that moment her chamber door opened. Thinking her mother had returned already, she did not bother to open her eyes. So it was a shock to feel the cold blade of a dagger pressed to her throat by someone standing directly behind her. She inhaled sharply.

"Now be a good girl and turn around."

Jacqueline felt all the blood drain from her face at the sound of that voice. How could he have gotten into Carisbrooke with no one knowing? And why today, of all days? Doing as she was ordered, she turned to face her father.

He wore a hooded cloak, which partially hid his face from view. Now that she faced him, he pushed the hood back. His sharp gaze swept her from head to toe.

"So, I was correct. It was you in London and not William. I did not think you were capable of doing such a thing. Especially since you have been dead and buried these past few years."

Jacqueline raised her chin up a notch and gave the earl a defiant look. "You left me no choice."

"The choice was not yours to make. As your father, it was my right to arrange an advantageous match for you."

"You mean an advantageous match for yourself."

The earl reached out and painfully grabbed a handful of her hair. "I will not tolerate any disrespect from you,

girl. I see your mother was too lax in her duty in the raising of her daughter." He released his grip and roughly shoved her away from him. "Now I want you to put on some clothes, and then you are leaving with me."

Rubbing her aching scalp, Jacqueline did not move. "Nay, I will go nowhere with you. Today is my wedding day. I will not leave."

"But I am afraid you will. I have plans for you." Picking up her wedding gown from the bed, he threw it at her. "Put this on and if you refuse, I have no compunctions about putting it on you myself if I must."

Knowing her father would do exactly that from the steely gaze he shot her way, she turned her back on him and did what he said. Once she had donned the gown, she turned back around. He motioned her over to where he stood next to her writing desk.

The earl placed a fresh sheet of parchment on top of the desk. He then took up a quill and dipped it in the ink well. Holding it out to her, he said, "Write."

Jacqueline shook her head. "Nay."

He jabbed the quill at her again. "You will write a missive to your intended, telling him you have changed your mind and no longer wish to wed him." When she still refused to comply, her father forcibly placed the quill in her hand. "If you do not, I will have your mother removed from the Isle. I will make her a beggar on the streets with no coin and no roof over her head. Do I make myself clear?"

Meekly, she nodded her head in agreement. Her father held all the power in this situation. She could not change that, but she had one barb in which to wound him. "You have not asked about William. Are you not interested to know why he did not go to London?"

"Anything you have to say about William is irrelevant. Now sit."

Pulling out the chair, Jacqueline seated herself behind the desk. "True it may be, but it will affect you, greatly."

"Then tell me. Do not think I cannot see through this ploy to stall for time. We will be gone before anyone can stop us."

She looked up at her father, wanting to see how he would react to her news. "As you wish. You did more than wound William during the tournament at Windsor. You killed him."

The smug expression the earl wore slipped. Jacqueline watched as her father let the full meaning of her words sink in. She could see how deeply affected he was by the news of William's death. She was certain he had felt no such sorrow when informed of her 'death'. To him, she was just a useless female-only good for furthering his position through a marriage to a nobleman.

Not able to look at her father's expression of pain any longer, Jacqueline turned to the blank piece of parchment. The earl swallowed audibly, then said, "Write the missive and make it convincing. For if your lowly knight does not believe it and tries to come after you, I will gladly end his pathetic existence."

Dipping the quill in the ink well, Jacqueline placed it on the parchment. As she began to write, tears filled her eyes. Terric would never forgive her for this.

Chapter Thirteen

Terric was nervous. He could face a fully armed knight charging down the list, but the thought of standing in front of a priest, reciting his vows to the woman he loved, was downright terrifying. And having Edwin fuss over him was not making matters for the better. The boy kept pulling at his tunic, trying to make it sit just so.

Having reached the end of his patience, Terric slapped Edwin's hands away from his person. "Enough, Edwin. If you pull on my tunic anymore, you will put a hole in it."

Edwin stepped back and gave Terric a thorough inspection. "I just want you to look perfect is all. You do not get married every day."

"You have done a fine job, Edwin. Thanks to you, I will not shame Jacqueline by looking scruffy."

How he was attired on this important day was all Edwin's doing. As Lady Elizabeth and her daughter-in-law labored over Jacqueline's gown, Edwin had been busy selecting what Terric would wear. Though he had few items of clothing, he did have outfits which were appropriate for the feasts after the tournaments he attended. His squire had gone through it all and personally mended and cleaned the items he picked.

The tunic was black velvet, embroidered with gold threads along the cuffs, hem, and neck. Even though it was acceptable to have gems sewn onto the tunic, as well, Terric was never one to be so ostentatious. His hose was black, along with his boots. The belt strapped around his waist was plain black leather with a gold buckle.

Hoping it would help to steady his nerves, Terric poured himself a goblet of wine. Resisting the urge to quaff it down in one large gulp, he made himself take a small sip.

Knocking once, a very agitated Lady Elizabeth entered his chamber. The expression upon her face made Terric assume all was not well. He put his goblet down and stepped closer to her.

"What is wrong, my lady?"

"It is Jacqueline."

Having only heard Jacqueline's name, a flood of worry washed over Terric. In his anxiety, he grabbed Lady Elizabeth by the upper arms and inadvertently squeezed. "What? Is she hurt? Tell me." Noticing how the older woman cringed, he realized he was hurting her. "My apologies, I did not mean to cause you pain."

Rubbing her arms, Lady Elizabeth nodded. "I know you did not. Jacqueline is not injured. At least I hope she is not. It is just She is missing. She is not in her chamber and I cannot find her anywhere."

"How can she have disappeared? Could she have gone to the chapel on her own?"

"Nay, I checked already. She was not there."

Unable to accept Jacqueline's just having vanished into thin air, Terric brushed past Lady Elizabeth and went to his intended's chamber. Edwin and Lady Elizabeth followed.

Seeing the empty chamber gave Terric an eerie feeling. Jacqueline was supposed to be here happily preparing to pledge her love to him.

Hoping to find a clue as to her whereabouts, he began to search her empty chamber. The other two people who accompanied him joined in the search, as well.

They soon realized Jacqueline's wedding gown was missing. Presumably, she had it with her. There was no sign of a struggle either. It looked as if she had calmly walked away. Feeling frustrated, Terric sat down on the bed, leaving Edwin and Lady Elizabeth to continue in the search.

Where could she have gone? He could not see Jacqueline leaving of her own freewill. She knew how much he loved her. But now, that he thought back on it, Terric sickened as he realized he had not once spoken those very words to her. He would have to rectify that error when they found her.

Leaning back on his arms, one of his hands happened to slip under a pillow. His knuckles brushed up against what felt to him like a piece of parchment. Grasping it between his fingers, he pulled out the folded missive.

Opening the stiff paper, Terric read the words written upon it. The more he read, the more he felt his heart shatter into a million pieces.

His voice held no emotion when he asked, "My lady, is this Jacqueline's handwriting?"

Moving to the bed, Lady Elizabeth glanced down at the piece of parchment Terric held in his hand. "Aye, it is. Where did you find it?"

"Under one of her pillows."

"What does it say?"

Terric wadded up the missive in his fist, then jerked to his feet. "More fool I for believing I would be able to keep her. It seems your daughter has had a change of heart."

Throwing the balled up parchment into a corner of the chamber, Terric stomped out the door.

* * * *

Something was dreadfully wrong, she just knew it. Hoping to get some answers, Beth went in search of her mother-in-law.

She had waited at the chapel after making sure that the servants had everything under control for the meal to be served after the wedding ceremony. When Sir Guy was the only person to arrive at the appropriate time, she had started to become concerned. As the minutes ticked by and still the main participants had not arrived, she decided to see for herself what was causing the delay.

Encountering no one in the hall, the feeling that all was not well increased. It was only after she entered Jacqueline's chamber and found Lady Elizabeth standing alone, holding a very crumpled piece of parchment, did she feel the full impact of uneasiness wash over her.

"She is gone, Beth."

"Who? Jacqueline?"

Wearily, Lady Elizabeth nodded in affirmation. "Aye, she has gone. How could she do that to Terric? I never expected her to act in this way. She seemed so happy with him."

"But she was I mean is. How do you know Jacqueline no longer wants to go through with the wedding?"

The older woman held out the abused parchment for Beth to read. "She wrote this to Terric."

Beth took the missive and read:

Terric,

I cannot marry you this day. I thought I could go
through with it. But I cannot bring myself to be tied
to a lowly knight for the rest of my life. I do not love
you. I never did. You were just a means to an end.

Now I have reached that end, making you an
inconvenience. Do not look for me. I will only spurn you.

Jacqueline

Shocked, Beth read the missive once again. Even though it was written in Jacqueline's hand, the words did not sound like her own. Jacqueline loved Terric. She would never hurt him so. There had to be a very good reason why she would do this, a reason that made her act so rashly.

"Has Terric seen this?"

"Aye." Lady Elizabeth sighed deeply. "I am afraid it was he who found it. He did not take it very well at all."

The chamber door still stood open, so the sound of heavy booted feet descending the stairs could be easily heard. Beth raced out into the hallway in time to see Terric disappear down the flight of stairs.

Edwin, who was standing at his master's chamber door, looked crestfallen. Noticing Beth, he sadly shook his head. "He has ordered me to pack his belongings. We leave this day."

"Where has he gone?"

"To the stables to ready the horses."

Picking up her skirts, Beth ran down the hallway and rushed down the stairs. She did not slow her pace until she reached the stables.

Stepping into the building, she waited a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior. Frantically, she searched the stable for any sign of Terric.

She did not see him at first glance. It was not until he walked out of a stall leading his mount did she sigh with relief. He was still there.

He looked her way, but chose to ignore her as he adjusted his saddle. Not at all deterred, Beth went to stand

beside him. "She did not leave you, Terric."

He snorted in disbelief. "Funny, but I thought that was exactly what she did. What do you take me for? An idiot?"

"She loves you, Terric. You have to believe that."

Pushing past her, Terric led his horse out into the bailey. Beth followed. Grabbing his arm, she pulled him to a halt. "Do not leave. We have to find her."

None too gently, he plucked her restraining hand from his arm. "I have no intention of ever seeing Jacqueline again. She made her feelings perfectly clear in her missive. I am just abiding by her wishes."

"Forget the damn missive! Just answer one question. In any way, has she ever caused you to doubt how she feels about you?"

Terric let Beth feel the full force of his anger. "Enough!" he snarled. "I will not listen to your nonsense any longer. She has made her choice."

Swinging a leg up and over his horse's back, Terric mounted his steed. "Tell Edwin to meet me at the ferry. I can no longer tolerate being at Cairbrooke. Give Lady Elizabeth my farewell."

Adjusting his reins, Terric calmly walked his horse through the castle gates. Not once did he look back.

Chapter Fourteen

They had been traveling a few days now and Jacqueline had no inkling of their destination. Her father had stealthily taken her out of Cairbrooke and then deposited her in a covered wagon, one he had arranged to be waiting for him. The two men-at-arms who had been sitting atop the wagon were the earl's men. They each wore his livery.

Once she was safely hidden from view, the earl had mounted his horse that had been tied to the back of the wagon. He had given a signal to the two men and with a slap of the reins, the wagon had lurched into motion.

Now, alone in the wagon, Jacqueline had plenty of time to think-to think of what her father had forced her to do. She hoped Terric realized what she had written was a lie. But a small part of her knew he would not. Why would he? It was not as if she had ever said she loved him. Nor had he spoken those three simple words to her either.

The more time she dwelled on it, the more unsure she became of how Terric actually felt about her. Maybe he was happy she was gone. He could now go back to the tournament circuit. Free to flirt with all the available women who flocked to him wherever he went.

As the days went by and no one came to rescue her from the earl, Jacqueline felt her ponderings were more

than just mere thoughts, but the actual truth. Terric was not coming. He was glad to be rid of her.

Feeling as if her worst fears were confirmed, Jacqueline grew morose. Where her father was taking her was no longer important, for if Terric no longer wanted her, life was meaningless. It mattered not what became of her. So when her father told her what their destination was, Jacqueline could only feel it fitting. This would be the last humiliation. First Terric's betrayal by his not coming in search of her, and now this. The earl was bringing her to Nunney Castle, the home of Forwin De La Mare, the Earl of Somerset.

* * * *

The last night before they were to arrive at Nunney Castle, the earl led his party to an inn in a small market town. They would reach their destination on the morrow. That being the case, he of course wanted Jacqueline to look presentable, which could not be accomplished by spending the night sleeping out under the stars.

Jacqueline, so deeply sunk in her own misery, barely noticed the name of the inn into which her father escorted her. The only reason she spared it a passing glance was the name of it. The Happy Bride. She could not help but sneer up at it as she passed the inn's sign. She was anything but that.

The earl paid the innkeeper for the two rooms he requested, then the man led them above to the inn's upper floor. The room to which she was taken was sparse, but it seemed clean enough.

After the innkeeper returned below stairs, the earl finally divulged his plans to her. "As you know, we will reach Nunney on the morrow. You will be respectful to Forwin. He is to be your husband. I want him to see what an obedient wife you will make him. He has graciously overlooked what transpired before."

Only half listening to what he told her, Jacqueline went and sat down on the bed. There was no point in responding to the earl's dictates, so she remained silent.

As the silence stretched between them, her father decided to continue. "This door will be locked from the outside. I will be in the room next to this one. As well, one of my men will be standing guard just outside the door, so do not even bother to try and leave." Heading for the door, he added one last demand. "I want you ready at first light." He then left her alone.

She had no idea how long she sat on the bed, staring at nothing. It only seemed a matter of minutes from the time of the earl's departure till someone knocked on her room door. Once she bid them to enter, the door opened to admit one of her father's men carrying a tray of food. He placed it on the small table next to the bed, then promptly exited the way he had come in. Jacqueline heard the lock being turned on the other side of the door.

Lifting the cloth that covered the tray, she found a meat pie along with a couple of thick slices of cheese and a tankard of ale. Picking up the tray, she placed it on the bed before her and methodically began to eat.

The fare was simple but well prepared. Finishing every last morsel, Jacqueline returned the tray to the small side table. Stripping off her gown, so that she stood in her chemise, she looked at the state of her only garment. The gown showed the wear from days of travel. There was nothing she could do to remedy that. But she made use of the water provided in her room. She quickly washed some of the dirt from her body.

Slipping between the bed sheets, Jacqueline hoped sleep would claim her. Surprisingly, it did come easily to her. And with it came a dream.

In the dream Terric held her in his arms. He kissed her, holding nothing back. She kissed him in return with all the pent up passion which had built up inside her. She desperately clung to his muscular frame, afraid to let go of him, afraid he would disappear and she would lose him forever. The dream then shifted. One moment

Terric was kissing her passionately, then the next he stood at a very great distance away from her. Jacqueline tried to reach him but each step closer she took, the farther away he seemed. In frustration, she called out to him. Terric turned his back on her, moving further into the thickening mist which began to envelope them both. Before he disappeared completely from sight, Jacqueline heard him speak. His voice sounded muffled, but what he did say turned her dream into a nightmare. He told her he could never love her. He could never forgive her for what she had done. With tears streaming down her face, Jacqueline screamed out his name, but it was no use. He still walked away, leaving her to mourn the loss of him.

Jerking awake, Jacqueline could feel the tears on her cheeks. She roughly wiped them away, then looked about the room, trying to get her bearings. Nothing had changed. She was still in the small rented room and Terric was not there to take her away.

Noticing the faint light seeping through the curtain covered window, she realized that dawn had come. The earl would be fetching her soon. Before this day came to a close, she would be facing her real life nightmare.

* * * *

Forwin had been expecting them, which did not surprise Jacqueline in the least. Her father would have arranged this meeting prior to taking her from her home. If Forwin had not been agreeable to the idea of making a match with her, the earl would have left her alone. Until another prospect presented itself, that is. Why expend energy on a useless cause?

Standing in the hall of Nunney Castle, Jacqueline held herself stiffly while Forwin circled her. As he poked her here and there, she bit her lower lip until she tasted blood. The urge to slap his face was great. But she was no fool. Any defiance on her part would be dealt with swiftly by the earl.

Forwin, satisfied with what he saw, nodded his head. "I find her acceptable."

Smiling, the earl said, "She is yours then. I presume you have made the proper arrangements?"

"Aye, all is at the ready. The priest will perform the ceremony on the morrow."

"Excellent." The earl rubbed his hands together, apparently very pleased. "Now all that is left to do is sign the marriage contracts. If you can arrange a chamber for my daughter, we can then get down to business."

Giving Jacqueline one last licentious glance, Forwin clapped his hands together. A young servant girl entered the hall a second later.

"Alice, take the Lady Jacqueline to her chamber."

Meekly, the girl nodded. Then, not waiting to see if Jacqueline followed or not, she crossed the hall to the stairway. Quite happy to be out of Forwin's presence, Jacqueline hurried to catch up with Alice.

The chamber, she found, was sumptuously appointed. A beautifully crafted writing desk sat beneath the only window which was set high in one of the walls. The bed sat upon a raised dais. The bed hangings were a thick dusty rose velvet. A matching cover was spread across the mattress.

The mental picture of what could possibly happen in that bed caused Jacqueline to shiver. If Forwin did try to consummate their marriage, she would fight him to the bitter end.

Making a full circle around the chamber, Jacqueline walked back to the waiting Alice. The young servant girl refused to meet her eyes, keeping her gaze downcast. She was young. She seemed to be no older than three and ten, if that. Her fine brown hair was pulled back in a single braid, which fell to her waist. Her brown

serviceable gown was made from homespun, and looked as if it had been made for a much larger woman. It hung on her frame so loosely that there was no way to determine the shape of her body.

When the girl would not acknowledge her presence, Jacqueline asked, "Your name is Alice?"

Startled, the servant girl jumped at the sound of her voice, which did not go unnoticed by Jacqueline. "Aye, my lady."

"What are your duties in the castle?"

Still keeping her eyes averted, Alice answered, "I used to work in the kitchen, but now I am to be your maid. If you find me acceptable."

Jacqueline could hear the slight tremor in the girl's voice when she spoke. It was not hard to guess what would befall Alice if she was found unworthy.

Thinking it best to lay the girl's fears to rest, Jacqueline said, "I will not reject you as my maid. It will be a learning experience for the both of us. You see, I have always made do for myself."

Having been spoken to kindly, Alice raised her eyes to meet Jacqueline's own. Her eyes were hazel. "Thank you, my lady."

Jacqueline smiled at Alice and received a timid smile in return. She had an ally now, in the form of this young girl. She would not have to be totally alone after all.

* * * *

The rest of the day and night passed quietly. The only person Jacqueline saw was Alice when she brought up a tray of food for her, which she did not complain about. She did not want Forwin or her father intruding on what little privacy she had been allowed.

As dawn broke over the horizon, it heralded the end of her freedom. For after the short ceremony that would be performed in the chapel, she would no longer be her own woman. She would be classed as chattel, a possession Forwin owned and could use as he saw fit. The thought sickened her.

A soft tapping on the chamber door forced Jacqueline to come to grips with what would happen to her this day. Sitting up in the bed, she bade the person on the other side of the door to enter.

Alice walked into her chamber with the gown her mother had made for her marriage to Terric. The servant girl had taken it away the evening before. She obviously had cleaned it.

"Time to get up, my lady. Your father will come for you soon. He bade me to tell you to wear this gown again."

Jacqueline easily guessed the motive behind his request. What better way to remind her of all she had lost? He hoped to hurt her, make it a punishment, for choosing to live her life as she wanted. He failed though. It would not hurt her to wear the gown. It would be her cross to bear, her penance for writing all those hurtful words to Terric.

During the long night she had done a lot of thinking. She knew it was her words that had pushed Terric from her. He had not seen past them, had not trusted her enough to call them false. Now she had to pay the price by being locked in a loveless marriage to a man she detested.

Accepting the inevitable, Jacqueline arose and let Alice help her prepare for her wedding. There was no feeling of joy as there had been when she was to have wed Terric. If it had been possible, she would have worn mourning clothes.

After her father came to fetch her, the rest of the day's happenings seemed to blur and run together.

During the ceremony she stood beside Forwin and dutifully repeated her vows, not really paying close attention to the words. The feel of Forwin sliding his ring upon her finger caused her a moment of clarity before she receded back into herself.

The wedding feast was a very small affair. The people present were the newly wedded couple and the earl. Forwin had no living family and was the last of his line. If, at his death, he had produced no heir, his title and lands would revert back to the crown. Therefore, his need for a new wife after the death of each of the previous ones.

The meal complete, Forwin summoned Alice to escort his new bride to her chamber. Jacqueline knew what was to come. With leaden feet, she followed the younger girl up the stairs, feeling much as if she were walking to her execution.

After helping Jacqueline in the removing of her gown, Alice put her into the bed and then left, leaving Jacqueline alone to sit and await her fate. She prayed it would be over with swiftly.

Chapter Fifteen

The roar of the crowd echoed in his ears. He let the sound wash over him. With a kick of his heels, he set his steed into motion. Barreling down the list, he heard the satisfying crack of his lance hitting his opponent's shield.

Hearing a loud clang behind him, Terric peered over his shoulder to find the knight he rode against lying in the dust on his back. That would be another ransom he would collect this day. Having faced his last challenger, Terric headed back to his pavilion. Edwin had run ahead and now awaited him there.

Stepping into his pavilion, Terric gratefully unlaced his helm and pulled it free. Reaching up he wiped the sweat from his brow. It was then he noticed the cloaked figure of a woman who stood watching him. The hood of her cloak was pulled up over her head, shielding her face from view. He felt an instant of excitement, thinking it was Jacqueline who stood there, but he soon realized this woman was not tall enough for it to be her.

"Whoever you are, leave." Turning his back on the woman, he started to unbuckle his armor.

"I have no intention of leaving until you have listened to what I have to say."

Jerking back around, he watched as the woman pulled back the hood she wore and revealed her face. He

shook his head in amazement. "Why am I not surprised?"

Beth closed the short distance between them. "You never gave me a chance to speak before you left Carisbrooke. I do not give up so easily."

"Obviously. What do you want from me, Beth?"

"For you to listen to me. That is all."

Terric threw back his head and groaned, then he stared back at her. "There is nothing you can say to me which will change how I now feel about Jacqueline. She made her choice."

"In that assumption, I think you are wrong. Jacqueline loves you. She told me so herself."

Terric's violet eyes searched Beth's face intently. He could see she meant every word she spoke. "I once thought she did, but I am not so sure of that anymore."

"She does. I know it. Jacqueline looked at you the way I looked at William. And I loved him with all my heart. Do not turn away from her. You could come to regret this decision later."

"Then how do you explain the words she wrote?"

Pleadingly, Beth said, "You have to see past them, as I did. She wrote them to protect you. To keep you away from something."

"To protect me from what?"

"Not a what, but a who. I believe the earl will be found at the bottom of all this. It bears his stench."

"I thought the earl had no idea that it was Jacqueline in London."

"As far as we knew, he did not. But that does not mean we were right. He is quite capable of letting us go on with our plans, all the while knowing the truth. Then at an opportune moment, he used it against us."

It was true, Terric realized. What he had seen and heard of the earl was not very awe inspiring. The man was a snake, using all within his power to further his own gains. What Beth was suggesting could quite possibly have happened to Jacqueline. It was not too hard to believe.

If that was what really happened to her, then he had already made a grave mistake. He had abandoned the woman he loved to the clutches of a man who could make her life unbearable.

Beth easily saw when Terric accepted what she had said. His features became grim. She could tell he was silently cursing himself for not trusting Jacqueline. "Will you help us look for her then?"

Terric nodded. "Aye, you have convinced me. I can only hope when we find Jacqueline she forgives me my stupidity."

* * * *

This trip back to Carisbrooke Castle, Terric faced with mixed emotions. Besides being the place where he last had seen Jacqueline and what had happened on what was to have been their wedding day, he felt some misgivings about seeing Lady Elizabeth. She had believed in him and he had let her down.

Peering over at Lady Beth, who rode next to him, he found her watching him while a slight smile played

upon her lips.

"What?"

Beth shook her head. "I can practically hear you berating yourself. Stop it. You were hurting. You did what you felt was the correct course of action for you to take."

Terric grunted. "You mean I let my pride get the better of me and I then ran away."

"That is not what I meant."

"I only wish I had listened to you that day. Jacqueline would be back at Carisbrooke now."

"There is no point beating yourself up about it, Terric. So you made a mistake, but now you can redeem yourself."

Edwin, who rode slightly behind them, broke into the conversation. "You tell him, Lady Beth. I am sick and tired of his moping about."

Turning in his saddle, Terric shot Edwin a quelling look. "That will be enough out of you."

Choosing to ignore the warning, Edwin edged his horse between Terric and Beth. "I told him we should return to Carisbrooke, but he would not listen to me."

Having heard enough of his squire's criticisms, Terric let his horse slowly fall back from the other two. Then, with Edwin still off on his ranting, Terric gathered up his reins and slapped his squire's horse on the rump. It caused the much desired affect.

The horse shot off, as if all the demons from hell were nipping at its heels. The look on Edwin's face was quite comical. He had been in mid-sentence when his horse took off at a gallop. One moment he was conversing with Beth, then the next he was hollering as his horse shot down the road.

Moving his horse back up along side Beth, Terric smiled at her smugly. She wagged a finger at him. "Naughty, naughty, Terric."

"He had it coming to him. I did give him fair warning."

Beth laughed, then looked up the road. Edwin's horse was still in mad flight. "Should you not go and help him?"

"Nay." Terric said. "Trying to bring his mount back under control will keep him from wagging his tongue. Plus it also gives me a chance to speak to you alone."

"Well you have me all to yourself. For the moment at least."

"I just thought I would ask you whether Lady Elizabeth is upset with me. She has every right to be perturbed."

Beth reached over and reassuringly patted Terric's hand. "That is not the case at all. She will be most pleased at your return."

Terric breathed a sigh of relief. "I have much respect for that lady. I would not like to displease her."

They broke off their conversation as Edwin came pounding back down the road toward them. He seemed

completely flustered and out of sorts. When he pulled up in front of them, he shot Terric a disgusted look.

"What is wrong, Edwin? All not well with your mount?" Terric asked nonchalantly.

"As if you had nothing to do with it." Edwin replied with a sneer.

Deciding to intervene, Beth spoke up. "Edwin, why do you not ride on my other side? That way you will be safe from Terric. But I suggest you be a little more circumspect with your comments."

Properly chastised, Edwin nodded and moved to where Beth indicated. The rest of the day, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

* * * *

The following day they arrived at Carisbrooke. Terric felt as if he had come home-something he would not have expected. All the time he had spent there really did not add up to much.

Sir Guy, who had been up on the castle walls, noticed their arrival and met them in the bailey. He hurriedly moved to help Beth dismount. "I see your quest was a successful one, lass." He let his gaze rest pointedly on Terric.

"Aye, very. It did take some doing to convince him, though. But now he is calling himself three times a fool for not thinking of it on his own." Seeing that Terric and Edwin had both dismounted also, Beth continued, "See to them and I will go inform Lady Elizabeth of Terric's arrival."

The older knight nodded and then went to the new arrivals. He noticed Terric followed Beth with his eyes. Sir Guy turned to see her disappear into the keep. He answered the younger man's unspoken question. "The lass has gone to seek out Lady Elizabeth."

Taking up his mount's reins, Terric started to lead it to the stables. "So the time of reckoning has arrived."

Sir Guy chuckled. "Nay, lad, more like a time for rejoicing. My lady will be most pleased. Now let us get these horses bedded down. We should not keep the ladies waiting."

* * * *

Beth found her mother by marriage in the solar. She looked at the younger woman questioningly.

"Aye, I found him. He is with Sir Guy."

Lady Elizabeth smiled. "Excellent. Let us return to the hall, then."

Sir Guy, Terric, and Edwin were already present when the two women descended from the solar above. All three men were sipping on tankards of ale.

Coming to greet her guests, Lady Elizabeth gave Terric, and the startled Edwin, a kiss of peace on the cheeks. "I am so glad to see the both of you again."

Terric found himself deeply touched by the warm welcome shown to him. "As I am to see you once more, my lady. I just wish it was for better reasons that I returned."

"Nonsense." Lady Elizabeth said. "Your being here gives me renewed hope. You will give us the added advantage we need to find out Jacqueline's whereabouts."

"That is my hope."

"I know so. You can go where we cannot. Tournaments are always rife with court gossip. Finding out where the earl is should be our first priority. Tournaments will be the perfect place for you to ascertain where to locate him."

Terric nodded in agreement. "The next tournament is in a few days from now. I can start searching for the earl then."

While they were speaking, the servants had laid out a light midday repast. Noticing all was ready, Lady Elizabeth brought the conversation to a close. "Then I suggest you take advantage of your few days of respite from the list and rest." She then motioned them toward the trestle table. "Now let us enjoy this meal. There will be time enough later to make all the necessary plans."

Allowing Lady Elizabeth to link her arm through his, Terric let himself be led to the table.

* * * *

Nunney Castle was built in the small Somerset village of Nunney, some three miles south-west from the market town of Frome. The castle was designed in a French style rather than solely for defensive purposes. A tall four story rectangular structure with large corner turrets surrounded by a moat made up the castle form. The moat was known for being one of the deepest ever made. As such, they had deemed it unnecessary to have a portcullis.

Jacqueline had now been living at Nunney for a month. Surprisingly, she was settling into her new life. She found she had a talent for the running of such a large household. Not all of her mother's lessons had fallen on deaf ears, or so it would seem.

Since her father's departure the morning after her marriage, she had been virtually left to her own devices. Her husband had nothing to do with her.

The wedding night she had so dreaded ended up being very uneventful. Forwin had not come to her chamber that night, or any night since. For a man who had only married her so she could provide him with an heir, Forwin was set on avoiding her. He kept to his chamber, even taking all his meals there.

On this morn, Jacqueline made her way down to the ground floor where the kitchen was located. It was what she did every morn. Not wanting to take her meals alone in the hall, she ate in the kitchen.

At first the servants had been aghast that the countess would lower herself in such a way, but Jacqueline soon won them over. At Carisbrooke, she had never used her station in life to belittle those beneath her. Once the servants at Nunney realized she only wished to have their friendship, they readily welcomed her into their fold.

Reaching the kitchen, Jacqueline stood at the threshold and watched the bustling activity within. The thirteen foot fireplace was already roaring, heating the wall ovens beside it. Cook would have been awake for hours preparing the bread to be baked for the day.

Stepping into the warm room, she took a deep breath, smelling the scent of fresh baked bread. The cook, Mabel, was a large woman of middle years. She managed a well run kitchen. Today, she had all those who worked under her moving at a brisk pace-which was not usually the norm.

"Mabel, why all this flurry of activity?"

Looking up from the worktable where she was busily chopping vegetables, Mabel smiled warmly at Jacqueline. "Your lord husband sent word down this morn. He is expecting a visitor. So he wants a grand feast made for the evening meal."

Jacqueline felt a little dismayed hearing that Forwin expected a guest. He would, of course, be leaving his chamber now. "It must be someone important for him to order a feast."

Mabel snorted disgustedly. "Not likely. It is just a minstrel my lord has here to entertain him. He comes once a month. If you ask me, he is received better than a minstrel should be. But my lord will have it no other way."

Intrigued, Jacqueline asked, "How long has this minstrel been coming here?"

"Ever since my lord's last wife passed. So it must be four years now."

Pulling a stool up to the worktable, Jacqueline accepted the plate of freshly baked bread and cheese Mabel handed her. Lost in thought, she started to eat.

When a minstrel was to arrive at a castle, it was usually marked as a festive occasion. Visits could be few and far between, but to have the same one come to a castle once a month was considered far from the norm. Jacqueline had to wonder if there was more to this visit than just a minstrel coming to entertain the lord of the castle. This evening could very well prove interesting indeed.

* * * *

Forwin left his chamber shortly before his guest was due to arrive. Finding Jacqueline already present in the hall, he called to her. "Come to me, wife."

Gritting her teeth, she stepped away from the table where she had been overseeing the setting and walked over to Forwin. He stood a few paces away observing her. "My lord?"

Before he spoke again he took the time to look at her. He then nodded in approval. "The guest I am expecting, I want you to treat with the utmost respect. I will not tolerate any mistreatment of him by your hand. Do you understand me?"

"Aye, my lord."

"Good. The man I am expecting is Nicholas Talbot. He will entertain us after the feast, and then you may retire to your chamber."

"As you wish."

Having finished what he wanted to say, Forwin then waved her away. Jacqueline eagerly complied. She had no inclination to be in his company any further than she had to be.

Seeing to the last minute details before the minstrel arrived, she watched as Forwin paced the hall floor. His anticipation was palpable. She also noticed something else. He had changed in the last couple of weeks, and not for the better.

His face, usually flushed and pasty, was now sickly white. Each breath he took seemed to rasp in his chest. Occasionally, Forwin would rub his left arm as if it pained him. It was all too apparent to Jacqueline her husband was a very ill man.

Nicholas Talbot made his grand entrance a short time later. He began fawning over Forwin the instant he

clapped eyes on him. Jacqueline found it as sickening a display of currying favor as she ever had seen. He went so far as to take Forwin by the elbow and assist him in sitting at the lord's chair. What surprised her the most, though, was that Forwin allowed this.

Being ignored by both men, Jacqueline used it to her advantage and took a closer look at their guest.

The minstrel was exceptionally handsome. She had to give him that. He had blonde shoulder length hair and flashing gray eyes. He stood around six feet and had a well toned body-broad shouldered, and with enough muscles in his legs to show off the hose he wore. A well defined jaw, straight nose, and nicely sculpted lips completed the package.

Now that he was comfortably seated, Forwin motioned for Jacqueline to come over to him. "Nicholas, this is my new wife, Jacqueline Montacute. Her father is the Earl of Salisbury."

Nicholas took her hand and brushed a lingering kiss upon it. "An honor to meet you, my lady. I look forward to getting to know you better."

Jacqueline snatched her hand away and wiped it on the skirt of her gown. She did not at all like the knowing smile the minstrel wore on his lips.

Not missing what she had done, Nicholas chuckled. "I see the lady has a mind of her own." He then turned back to Forwin. "Do you think you can handle such a one as she, my lord?"

Forwin smiled. "Have no fear, my friend. I know how to control her. What do you think of her?"

Shifting his attention back to Jacqueline, Nicholas nodded. "You chose well, my lord. I find her very agreeable."

"Good, good. Now let us eat, then you can entertain us."

Not taking his eyes from Jacqueline's face, the minstrel replied, "As always, my lord. I will do my best."

In response to Nicholas's words, Jacqueline shivered. She had a very strong suspicion the minstrel was not just talking about his planned performance that evening.

Chapter Sixteen

The evening left Jacqueline feeling even more unsure of what went on between Forwin and Nicholas. That there was something going on, she felt was a given. There were double meanings in most of the words which passed between them. A few sly looks sent her way by both men, made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up on end.

It was not until after she had been dismissed did she finally begin to relax. Now, sitting on her bed dressed in a nightgown, she brushed out her hair. Even though it was only shoulder length, the strokes of her brush

helped to calm her nerves. Something was afoot, and it was only a matter of time before Forwin made his move. Jacqueline just hoped it would happen soon.

Having expected that there was something planned, it was no great surprise to her when her chamber door was thrown open by Forwin. Once he stepped inside, she could see Nicholas was following behind in his wake.

Forwin's pallor was, if anything, worse. There now was a grayish tinge to his face. "The time has come for you to do your duty, my dear. I want an heir and you are going to give me one."

Instinctively, Jacqueline inched back on the bed until her back came up against the headboard. "I will fight you. I will not allow you to lay one finger upon me."

Her husband laughed at her. "Put your fears to rest. It will not be I who touches your lovely body, but Nicholas. Do you not find him appealing?"

Jacqueline's eyes shot to Nicholas's face. He smiled at her. "What ... what do you mean?"

"If I do not produce an heir, my lands could revert to the crown. I will be damned if I let that happen. So Nicholas and I have reached an agreement. He will do what I am no longer able to. I will then claim the child he gets from you as mine."

"My father must not know of your plans. If he did, he would never have given me to you."

"Of course he does not. I am no fool. I let your father believe what he wanted. He thinks I will give my lands to him."

Shocked, Jacqueline quietly asked, "What did he ask you to do?"

"Why he had me sign a will bequeathing my lands to you. If I did not accept and do what he wanted, he would never have allowed our marriage to take place."

So this was what the earl would gain by her marriage to Forwin. The man's greed knew no bounds. "You have no intention of letting that happen, do you my lord?"

Forwin nodded his head in approval. "Smart girl. Your father will never claim my lands as his. He thinks he has me under his boot, but he does not. I have drawn up another will. In this one I leave all my lands to your child."

Jacqueline put her hand over her mouth, trying to hold back the laughter which bubbled up inside her, but she could not control it. As she started to laugh uncontrollably, the two men in the chamber stared at her as if she had lost her sanity, which made her laugh all the harder.

Taking her by the shoulders, Forwin shook her until she ceased her outburst. "What is wrong with you girl? This is no laughing matter."

Breaking free from Forwin's grasp, Jacqueline then asked, "Did my father promise you a maiden bride?"

Forwin narrowed his eyes at her. "Aye, he did."

She chuckled, the laughter once again threatening to rise to the surface. "Well he lied to you. I am no longer a maid. My father stole me away from the man I love on the day we were to wed. So you see, my lord, I could very well already be with child."

She could see Forwin had not been expecting that bit of information. He stood there speechless. Nicholas looked equally shocked. Jacqueline bet he was picturing all the wealth he was to gain turning to dust.

"I hate my father. Not only has he destroyed my only chance of happiness, he killed my brother. My twin. I feel nothing but revulsion for him. It makes me extremely happy to see he is finally going to be denied something he wants."

Forwin finally seemed to come to his senses. "What should we do about this? What if you are not with child?"

"Then I will submit to Nicholas."

Reaching out a hand to grab her by the chin, Forwin forced Jacqueline to look him in the eye. "If you are not truthful, my girl, I promise it will not go easily for you. If you prove not to be with child and try to thwart me, I will personally hold you down as Nicholas has his way with you. For however long it takes."

Delivering his final threat, Forwin motioned for Nicholas to follow him, and then he quit the chamber. When the door shut tightly behind them, Jacqueline breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

That had not been an enjoyable experience, but she had gained valuable information. Now all had been revealed to her. Her father's well laid plan was falling apart.

Crawling under the covers on her bed she started to think. She had been only trying to put Forwin off when she told him she could be with child. But now, reflecting back to the last time she had been with Terric, she realized it could very well be a great possibility. She was late, something that had never happened to her before. Feeling so despondent about what her father had done to her, she had not been paying attention to the passing of weeks.

Letting her hand drift down to her belly, Jacqueline gave it a gentle caress. She prayed Terric's child was indeed growing inside her. Then she would have a part of him to cherish. It also would be her salvation. Forwin would not be able to touch her then.

* * * *

Terric cursed the earl for his ability to cover his tracks so well. Each time he left the Isle in search of the man, he came up against a dead end. The earl was not at any of his residences, nor had he made an appearance at any of the tournaments in which Terric had participated.

Lady Elizabeth was not happy with Terric's decision to still go to every tournament in the circuit. She had felt he was wasting precious time that could be better used in searching for Jacqueline. Terric did not agree with that. Tournaments were the ideal place to hear the latest gossip, as they had agreed upon before. Since the earl was a powerful man, he definitely garnered more attention from the gossip mongers. They had to find the earl first and foremost to be absolutely sure he was the one who had indeed taken Jacqueline. And Terric could not think of another way that would provide that information faster.

Though he was now convinced the earl was responsible, he still had some nagging doubts, but he kept them from the Lady Elizabeth. She would be very disappointed in him if she ever found out.

He had yet again returned from a tournament with no leads whatsoever. Not relishing the idea of telling Lady Elizabeth of his failure once again, Terric slowly pushed open the hall doors. To his surprise the hall was empty.

Walking over to the stairs, he detected the faint sound of voices coming from above. Figuring it was best to face the music now rather than later, he climbed the stairs.

The voices were coming from the solar. Lady Elizabeth and Sir Guy seemed to be having a much heated argument about something. When Terric entered the solar, they both fell silent.

"I am sorry, my lady, but my luck has run out once more. I found nothing."

Lady Elizabeth sadly shook her head. "Sit down, Terric. We have had some news during your absence."

And it was not good news, Terric surmised. Hoping to allay some of his fears, he turned to look at Sir Guy. The older man jerkily shook his head in denial.

Bracing himself for the worst possible news, Terric focused his attention upon Lady Elizabeth. "I think I will keep standing, if you do not mind. Now tell me what you know."

"The earl has sent us a missive, informing us where Jacqueline is."

"And?"

"It seems my husband was not fooled by Jacqueline's performance in London after all. As such, he took her and married her off to Forwin, the Earl of Somerset."

An acute wave of pain washed over him. This, Terric felt he should have expected. But even if he had been expecting the pain he was now feeling it would not be any less now that he knew. "Then it is over."

Rising to her feet, Lady Elizabeth adamantly shook her head in denial as a reaction to his simple statement. "I refuse to let this go. I want you to go to Nunney Castle and find out if what my husband says is true."

"Nay, send Sir Guy in my place."

Her voice rising in anger, Lady Elizabeth shot back, "For a brave man such as yourself Terric, you seem to run away when life is not to your liking. Are you going to leave Jacqueline alone again? I can only assume your feelings for my daughter were never true."

Terric was quick to defend himself. "What would you have me do? Is it not enough that I am already suffering from the loss of Jacqueline? Must you increase my pain by making me see her as the wife of another?"

Hoping to alleviate some of the tension between Lady Elizabeth and Terric, Sir Guy decided to speak now that they had fallen silent. "I think my lady is thinking more of what the lass must be going through, lad. If it is at all possible, I know Jacqueline would rather have you ride to her rescue than my old self."

Rubbing his hands over his face, Terric sighed. "All right, I will go to Nunney. But I have a feeling I will not like what I find there."

"You may not, lad. But you can at least say you tried."

Much to Jacqueline's relief, her suspicions were correct. She was indeed carrying Terric's baby. The village midwife had confirmed it. Even though Forwin's plan did not go as he had exactly pictured, he was still quite pleased with the end result. Especially since he was running out of time.

Forwin was extremely ill and it seemed unlikely that he would live to see her child born and that made Jacqueline fear greatly for the child growing inside her. But her husband apparently had thought of every possible contention.

Now that she was already with child, there was no need of Nicholas, or so Jacqueline had thought. Much to her dismay though, her husband did not send the minstrel on his way.

The child she carried also gave her a small measure of control over her life once more. She was left alone, Forwin only demanding she come to his chamber each afternoon. Perhaps to make sure she had not run during the night, she assumed. There really was no other reason for her to be there.

She dreaded each sojourn she had to make to Forwin's chamber. Even though he was ill, she still disliked the man. They had reached an even accord, which was something more than they had before.

One day, like every other day, Nicholas was with Forwin. Her husband was now unable to leave his bed and the minstrel had taken on the role as nursemaid. He was never far away from his charge.

Pulling a chair up close to the bed, Jacqueline watched as Nicholas propped Forwin up with some pillows. "How are you this day, my lord?"

"How do you think, you silly fool? I am dying." Forwin answered grumpily.

Thinking the rest of her stay would progress the same way as all the other of her visits, Jacqueline did not expect Forwin to actually want to speak with her alone. He usually ignored her most days.

Forwin motioned Nicholas away from his bedside. "Leave us. I wish to speak to my wife." When Nicholas stood his ground, Forwin snapped, "Do as I say. Leave."

Knowing he had better do as bidden or lose Forwin's generous gratuity, Nicholas prudently made his exit from the chamber. Once alone, her husband enlightened her to the new plan he had come up with. "I have been thinking about what steps can be taken to keep your child safe from your father. And more importantly, my lands."

Jacqueline braced herself, having a feeling it would not be at all to her liking. "What have you decided to do?"

"When I am gone, you will marry Nicholas. He will protect my lands, especially with you offered as the prize."

"I refuse."

Forwin's face turned an alarming shade of purplish red. "How dare How dare you go against me! You will do as I order you to do."

Nonchalantly, Jacqueline shook her head. "Nay, I will not."

Her words worsened his condition. He began to wheeze and clutch at his chest. "I suggest you calm down, my lord. If not, you will expire this very moment." After Forwin brought himself back under control, Jacqueline

continued to speak.

"The day I will allow myself to be coerced into another marriage I want no part of is over. There is nothing you can do to me. Now or after you are gone. The only reason I stay is because it will hurt my father. If I need protection, I can easily attain it, in the form of the father of my baby."

Able to speak now without wheezing, Forwin asked, "Who is this man?"

"That, my lord, is none of your business. Let me just say he is a much better man than Nicholas."

Frowin scowled at her. "Nicholas will not be pleased. I have already given him my word."

Jacqueline laughed at his complaint. "I cannot see such a powerful man as yourself letting a mere minstrel dictate to you."

His voiced laced with indignation, Forwin said vehemently, "He does not!" He then spoke in a more thoughtful tone. "But he does need to be rewarded for his loyalty to me."

"Then give him a large amount of gold and send him on his way."

He seemed to take some time to consider what she suggested. "I can see you are not some insipid miss. You will only do what you wish. I will give Nicholas the gold you have suggested, but he stays here until I am gone. Though he plays the part of being loyal to me, I still do not trust him fully."

She had to admit she was a little shocked by Forwin's admission. "Then you have taken an awful chance involving him in your plans."

He shrugged it away. "A man of his caliber, it is expected. He can easily be bought." Forwin eased himself back down on the bed. "Now leave me. I suggest you say not a word of this conversation to Nicholas. I would hate to see you come to harm."

Happy to be dismissed, Jacqueline left the chamber. She had much to think about.

* * * *

Nicholas was growing impatient. Forwin was not expiring fast enough for his liking. The old fool just seemed to linger on and on. And with each visit from the young chit who was his wife, he seemed to will himself to live another day. Nicholas did not like it one bit. The time had come to help matters along.

Looking down at Forwin asleep on the bed, Nicholas knew it could be so easy. If he wanted this over here and now, there was no one who could stop him. All he had to do was take one of the many pillows on the bed and place it over Forwin's face. The old man would be unable to dislodge him. But that would make the end come too quickly. It would not do to draw suspicion to himself.

Nay, that was not a possibility. But tonight, when Forwin's evening meal was brought up to him, Nicholas would make his move. He would increase the dose of the poison he was slowly feeding to Forwin.

Of course the fools had no inkling of what he was about. They were all so trusting, or his acting abilities were better than he originally thought. Even Forwin had been easily taken in by his charade. He did everything Nicholas suggested. That is before he married Jacqueline.

The woman was not so easily fooled and Forwin seemed to listen to her more than he did to him these days. So far she had changed the direction of his plans. But he would not allow her to mess them up any further. He

had invested too much to let it slip through his fingers now.

* * * *

Jacqueline had feared the worst when her father had brought her to Nunney. But this new life which was not one of her choosing, she was finding tolerable.

She had found friendship and allies among the castle staff. The kitchen became the central hub of life at Nunney, at least for herself. She avoided the part of the castle where Forwin resided as much as she possibly could. Except for her daily visits with him of course. The ever present Nicholas made her extremely uncomfortable.

He had done nothing menacing toward her, but having him watch her every move while in his presence made her skin crawl. And the man damn well knew it.

On this particular day, Jacqueline decided not to give Nicholas the upper hand. When she had to encounter him, she would just simply ignore the man. Entering the kitchen, she received a warm greeting from Mabel.

"How are you this day, my lady?"

"Very well, Mabel."

The cook smiled and shook her head. "You are lucky. When I carried all of mine, I was sick as a dog in the beginning." Mabel had four sons, all working in various positions within the castle.

"I suppose I am."

Moving to the worktable, Jacqueline took some of the bread dough Mabel was working with and began to knead it. "Has Nicholas been down yet today?"

The cook sneered in disgust. "Nay. Which pleases me. I have had enough of that one's demands. The way he struts around here, you would think he was master of Nunney."

Jacqueline could not agree more. Mabel was right. Nicholas already acted as if Nunney were his. So much he knew. "Aye, he does. But for now he is harmless."

Mabel shot her a questioning look. "And what exactly do you mean by that? We all know there is more than one reason why that knave is still here. He cannot be looking after our lordship out of the goodness of his heart. That minstrel does not own one."

Punching the dough down with more force than it necessitated for the task, Jacqueline remained silent. She hoped Mabel would let the subject be, but the cook was not quite ready to give up just yet.

"My lady ... Jacqueline, all of us that work in the castle knows there is more going on. More than Nicholas's scheming, and you are all mixed up in it." Mabel placed her hands atop Jacqueline's, stilling her movements. "We know your baby is not your husband's, as well."

Clenching her hands into fists, Jacqueline brought her eyes up to look at Mabel. She could see the worry etched on the cook's face. "No fear, Mabel. The baby is not Nicholas's. I was already pregnant when I first came to Nunney."

"What happened?"

Brushing the flour off her hands, Jacqueline seated herself on a stool. "It is a long story. To put it simply, my

father stole me away on the very day I was to wed another."

"Oh, child." Mabel wrapped Jacqueline in a motherly embrace. "Men and their schemes. Well, once Forwin is gone, you can get your man back."

"Mabel!" Jacqueline said laughingly.

"I only speak the truth. As a widow, you will gain your independence. You can wed whomever you wish."

Watching as Mabel returned to the task of bread making, Jacqueline mulled over what the cook had said. It was possible. She could marry Terric once Forwin left this earth. But there was only one hurdle which she would have to face first. Would Terric believe her when she told him how she had been forced to write that missive? The chances were slim indeed.

* * * *

Riding through the village of Nunney, Terric made his way toward the castle. He studied his adversary's home as he drew nearer.

The basic plan of the castle was one of four equal sized large drum towers, set at the corners of a rectangle. The south-west and north-east pair of towers had a short connecting wall between them. While the north-west and south-east pair had a much longer one. Terric noticed the castle walls were finished in ashlar masonry of high quality. A wealthy man indeed!

Approaching the causeway, he could see the high conical roofs atop each of the towers, as well as the rampart walks just beneath them. The walk extended all the way around to the top story of the castle and was made of wood. Crossing the wooden drawbridge, Terric passed through the castle gate unchallenged. Apparently Forwin did not expect any trouble, which marked him a fool. A man who left his castle open to attacks, usually got one.

No one took any notice of his arrival until a servant came to the well, the well being situated near the north-east tower. Once he was spotted calmly sitting atop his horse in the bailey, the girl hesitated for a moment then she did an abrupt about face and went back inside the main building. Knowing Forwin would be notified of his presence, Terric dismounted.

Jacqueline was in the kitchen when the young servant girl came rushing in looking for her. "My lady, you must go to the bailey. A strange knight sits out there on his horse."

Her heart skipped a beat. Could it be Terric whom the girl saw? Brushing flour from her hands, she then headed for the bailey. She prayed it was not Terric. With everything she was embroiled in, he needed to stay as far away as possible from her. At least until Forwin made his exit from this world anyway. Terric could all too easily fall prey to either her husband's or the earl's conniving plans.

Stepping outside into the bailey, Jacqueline sharply sucked in a breath through her clenched teeth. It was Terric who stood waiting by his horse. He had his back turned to her and had not seen her.

Seeing him standing there, as large as life, made all the feelings she had for him resurface with a vengeance. She wished she could rush over to him, hold him in her arms, and beg him to take her away from all this. The need was so great within her, it almost became an unbearable ache. But of course she would do no such thing. She loved him too much to risk losing him. Taking a deep breath for courage, Jacqueline walked over to Terric and did what had to be done.

Hearing the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel behind him, Terric turned to see who had finally

decided to come and greet him. His mouth went suddenly dry at the sight of Jacqueline purposely striding toward him.

She appeared to be well. At least there were no outward signs of her being mistreated physically. She looked every inch the chatelaine of the castle. She even wore the keys of the castle at her waist, hung from the girdle around her slim hips.

Jacqueline stopped a short distance away from where he stood. "What do you want, Terric?"

Her unemotional display made him carefully choose his words. "When your father sent word of where you were to your mother, she wanted me to check and see if it were true. We have been searching for you, Jacqueline."

"You have found me."

This was not going as he had expected. She seemed almost indifferent toward him. "What has happened to you?"

"All my father said is true. I am now Forwin's wife."

Terric was having a hard time accepting how calm and accepting she appeared to be. "Why, Jacqueline? You could have refused. No woman can be forced into marriage. It is church law."

Jacqueline shook her head at what he said. "That law means nothing and you know it. My father does what he wishes. He can be very persuasive when he wants to be."

"Could you have not held him off for a time? You are a very capable woman, Jacqueline. You could have thought of something to delay the marriage from taking place."

"What good would that have done?"

Feeling frustrated, Terric spoke a bit too sharply. "I do not know. You had to have known I would come looking for you."

Swallowing down the painful lump that had formed in her throat, Jacqueline sadly shook her head once more. "Did you ride out searching when you found me missing that day?" His silence spoke volumes to her. She blinked back the tears which threatened to rise to the surface.

"You did not, did you Terric? You believed every word I wrote."

Terric could see the hurt in her gleaming turquoise eyes. He tried to take a step closer to her, but she would not allow it. She held out her hand to stop him. Still wanting Jacqueline to understand, he tried to explain with the only option she left him-words. "Your missive hurt and I was a fool to take it to heart."

"But you must have known how I felt about you."

"I thought I did. The missive made me think you never really cared for me at all. You never said the words." Terric watched as a single tear fell down her cheek. He reached out and gently brushed it away. Jacqueline roughly shoved his hand from her face.

"Just as you never spoke those same words to me. Now it is too late. The damage is done."

Not knowing exactly what he planned on doing, Terric grabbed Jacqueline by the arm and began to pull her toward his waiting horse. But before he was able to take more than two steps, a man exited the main building

and hailed them.

Catching sight of Nicholas heading in their direction with a smile upon his face, Jacqueline silently groaned to herself. The man had perfect timing. Wiping her eyes with a quick swipe of her sleeve, she pulled herself together. She did not want to give Nicholas any indication of how she felt about Terric.

Terric watched the other man as he came out to meet them. Even though they had yet to make the acquaintance of each other, he readily recognized the other man's type. He was a charmer. An ass kisser, to put it bluntly. The smile that graced his lips did not reach his eyes.

"Jacqueline, are you not going to invite our guest into the hall?"

She scowled at Nicholas. "He is not staying."

Nicholas' sharp gaze did not miss the exchange of looks that passed between Forwin's young wife and the knight. Though she might try to act with nonchalance, he could see the two were well known to each other. It was easy to see the longing in their eyes for one another.

"From the way you were conversing, I thought you were well acquainted with each other."

Catching Terric's gaze, Jacqueline stared intently into his violet eyes, hoping he would keep silent. Either he did not understand what she was wanting him to do, or he ignored her entreaty. He spoke to Nicholas.

"Lady Jacqueline and I are ... were very close at one time. When I heard of her marriage, I came to pay my respects."

Nicholas smiled slyly. "I can see you two were very ... close indeed. If that is the case, Jacqueline must have told you the good news."

Cringing, Jacqueline closed her eyes and swore under her breath, calling Nicholas every bad name she could think of. If she had a knife in her hand, she would have happily stuck it in his gullet.

"What would that be?" Terric asked quietly.

"Why, Lady Jacqueline is carrying the next Earl of Somerset. Forwin's heir."

Terric's stomach lurched. Had this been what Jacqueline meant when she said the damage was already done? "Is this true, Jacqueline? Are you with child?"

Sadly, she nodded. "Aye, I am."

It was most assuredly over then. He had lost her for good. Feeling as if his world had come crashing down all around him, Terric silently turned and retrieved his horse. Mounting up, he turned his steed around and left the bailey. Not once did he look behind him.

After watching Terric disappear from sight, Nicholas said sarcastically, "He must not have been happy with your good fortune."

Whipping around, Jacqueline slapped Nicholas across the face, leaving her handprint on his cheek. "How dare you? What right do you have to be involved in my affairs?"

Taking her roughly by the arm, Nicholas pulled it painfully up and behind her back, forcing her up against him. Anger flashed in his eyes, making them turn a stormy gray. "You will not strike me like that ever again. I see you have a lot to learn about being an obedient wife. I will take great pleasure in educating you once

Forwin is gone. As my wife, you will show me the proper respect I am due."

Thrusting Jacqueline away, Nicholas then returned back to the hall. Rubbing her arm, a shiver of true fear caused her body to shake uncontrollably. She needed help. Nicholas was a much bigger threat than she had realized. When Forwin was gone, there would be no one to keep the minstrel in check. It was time to enlist the help of her mother.

* * * *

Now that she had made the decision to enlist the help of her mother, Jacqueline needed a way to sneak a missive out of Nunney. She was no fool. She knew Nicholas watched her every move. She also knew she needed help from those within the castle. They were allowed the freedom she herself was not permitted.

Reading over what she had written to her mother, Jacqueline could not help but feel homesick. The Isle had been the only home she had known. What bothered her the most was not being able to have her mother with her. Her mother was the one steadying constant in her life. She was always there to help her through any troubled times.

Satisfied with the missive, she sanded it, then sealed it closed. Hastily shoving it into the bodice of her gown, Jacqueline left her chamber to seek out Mabel in the kitchen.

As she walked past Forwin's chamber, the door opened and Nicholas stepped into the hallway. He effectively blocked her way. "Is there something you want, Nicholas?"

He smiled and then blatantly looked her up and down. "What I want is not yet mine to take. So instead, you can give me some information I seek."

Jacqueline narrowed her eyes at him. "What information?"

He bestowed her with one of his most charming smiles. If she were easily turned by a man's good looks, she would have fallen under the spell he tried to weave around her. Luckily, she knew what Nicholas truly was. Nothing but a snake in the grass.

"That knight, the one who came to visit you. Who is he?"

"Just someone I know. If you will excuse me, I have other things to attend to." Jacqueline tried to step around him, but he blocked her path.

"Come now, Jacqueline. You can tell me. He is the father of your baby. It was not hard to miss how you both were panting over each other."

She glared at him, feeling her disgust for him deepen. "Even if I admitted that he was, it is still none of your business, Nicholas. I do not have to answer to you."

Nicholas's charming facade dropped. Taking her by the shoulders, he forced her up against the wall. "Oh, but you will. Very soon."

To show her what was to come, he roughly grabbed Jacqueline by her chin and roughly kissed her. Managing to bring her hands up to his chest, she forcibly shoved him away. Nicholas sniggered when she scrubbed the back of her hand across her mouth, trying to remove all traces of his kiss. Giving her a mocking bow, he then returned to Forwin's chamber.

Patting the missive still concealed within her bodice, Jacqueline hurried to reach the kitchen. How her future

would turn out now hinged on this single missive reaching her mother.

She safely arrived at the kitchen, her face still red with indignation. Mabel, ever observant, placed her hands on her ample hips and looked at Jacqueline questioningly.

"What has the snake done now?"

"He cornered me outside my husband's chamber."

Picking up the meat cleaver she had been using before Jacqueline's arrival, Mabel began to mutter angrily under her breath. When she moved toward the door, cleaver still in hand, Jacqueline realized Mabel intended to confront Nicholas.

"Oh no, you cannot, Mabel." Taking hold of the cook's arm, she steered her back inside the kitchen. She tried to stare sternly at Mabel, but found herself unable to do so. The very idea of the older woman chasing after Nicholas with her meat cleaver was highly amusing. Laughter bubbled up inside her.

The more she conjured up the image of Mabel chasing a screaming Nicholas around the bailey, with cleaver held high, the harder she laughed. Seeing the perplexed look upon the older woman's face, Jacqueline managed to splutter, "The meat cleaver. Really now, Mabel. That would be a sight to see. You taking Nicholas to task with it."

Almost as if she had forgotten what she held, Mabel seemed mildly surprised to see the cleaver. Then she, too, started to laugh at the absurdity of it. "I guess you are right, my lady. That would be something, though."

Once their laughter dissipated, Jacqueline reached inside her bodice and withdrew the missive. "Mabel, do you recall the discussion we had pertaining to Nicholas? About how he is here for another purpose?"

"Aye." Mabel eyed the missive clutched in Jacqueline's hand.

"Well, you were right. I had thought I could handle him myself, but I know now that is no longer the case. I need your help."

"You know I would do anything for you, Jacqueline. Now tell me what has you so worried."

Taking a moment to collect her thoughts, Jacqueline then launched into the story of her life. She trusted Mabel implicitly. So, to better help the other woman understand her situation, she started her tale with the first betrothal arranged by her father to Forwin. From there, the rest just poured out of her.

She left nothing out-the loss of her brother at the hands of her father, how she had assumed William's identity to meet the earl in the list. And she finally spoke of Terric.

When Jacqueline reached the end, Mabel dabbed her eyes with the corner of her apron. "The knight who came here, it was Terric?"

Jacqueline nodded her head sadly. "Aye."

"Does he know you carry his babe?"

"Nay. Nicholas broke that particular piece of information to Terric before I could tell him."

"Just another strike against the rat." Mabel grumbled. "Well if it is help you need, help you will get. What do you plan to do?"

Jacqueline placed the missive on the worktable. "It is time I call in the reinforcements. I need you to get this missive out of the castle and arrange to have it delivered to my mother."

"Consider it done, my lady." Snatching up the missive, Mabel placed it in one of the deep pockets of apron.

Chapter Eighteen

Months passed and Jacqueline's pregnancy progressed. Forwin, though still extremely ill, seemed to be clinging onto life. He seemed determined to see her baby born into the world.

She had not told Forwin about the incident that had taken place in the bailey on the day of Terric's visit. But she was much more guarded while in Nicholas's presence. Forwin was not a stupid man, though. He quickly noticed the change in her behavior.

It was during one of her daily visits with him, when Nicholas had left them alone briefly. Something that he very rarely did. Nicholas seemed to want to keep Forwin and her from ever being alone together.

So, now alone, Forwin gave her a simple warning. "We must tread carefully."

Making sure the chamber door was shut tight, Jacqueline quickly glanced toward it before she spoke in turn. "More than you know, my lord. Nicholas is not what he wants you to believe. I think he is capable of doing anything."

Forwin nodded his head gravely. "You have confirmed my suspicions, Jacqueline. I think I have invited a viper into our midst."

"Then why keep him here? When he finds out you are not going to keep your end of the bargain, he could retaliate."

"It is very simple really, my dear. Better to have Nicholas here, where he can be watched and contained."

Jacqueline still felt uneasy about that reasoning. "And after you are gone? What then?"

Giving her a wink, Forwin slyly said, "You, my dear wife, are quite capable of looking after yourself. I know from first hand experience just what lengths you will take to save yourself. I have all confidence that you can protect your child from Nicholas."

She could see from his expression, Forwin meant every word he said. And he was right, she would use all within her means to keep her child safe. She had already taken the first step. With the help of Mabel, a missive was even now on its way to her mother.

Nicholas reappeared a short while later. Where he had been, he did not care to share with them. But the way his glance kept shifting between Forwin and herself, made Jacqueline feel extremely uneasy under his scrutiny. She stood and then left the chamber while Nicholas watched her depart.

* * * *

Lady Elizabeth read the missive she held in her hands once again. Jacqueline really had herself immersed in a fine mess. And most of it was not her own doing. Damn the earl and his scheming ways. If only he could have just left them alone. Jacqueline and Terric would now be happily wed and eagerly awaiting the birth of their first child.

Sighing deeply, Lady Elizabeth shook her head sadly. Her daughter had already suffered enough at the hands of her father. The greatest being the death of William. Now she had to suffer losing Terric as well.

But Jacqueline was not going to have to go through this all alone. Her family would stand by her. And when Forwin left this world, she would personally make sure Terric got his due-her daughter as his wife.

* * * *

"So you have given up. Just like that."

Terric scowled over at Edwin who sat next to him. "What would you have me do? She is wed to another and expecting a child."

Edwin shook his head. "I thought you were smarter than that."

"And just what pray tell, do you mean by that crack?"

"I mean, how sure are you the child Jacqueline is carrying is not yours?"

Letting his eyes roam over the other patrons of the inn where they now sat, Terric thought about the question Edwin asked. He had thought of that. But Jacqueline had had plenty of opportunity to tell him before that Nicholas had shown up.

"Nay, the babe is not mine."

"But you have to admit there is a chance it could be."

"A very slim chance at that."

Draining his tankard of ale, Terric thumped it down on the table. Catching the eye of the buxom serving wench, he signaled her to bring another round.

The woman sauntered over, seductively swinging her hips, carrying a pitcher of ale. Standing behind Terric, she reached around him to pour more ale into his tankard. She purposely pressed her amply breasts against his back while she poured his drink.

"Anything else you would like, sir?"

It was blatantly obvious to Terric what the wench was offering him. He looked up at her. She would be considered pretty by some, but he could see a coarseness about her. At one time he would have seriously considered her offer, but now he found her not the least bit alluring.

Terric shook his head negatively. "Nay, the ale is all I want."

The wench stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. "Well, if you change your mind, just ask for Lucy. I would be happy to ... oblige such a one as you."

"Many thanks for the offer, Lucy. But I do not think I will change my mind."

Once the serving wench left their table, Edwin began to chuckle. "You have it bad."

"What do I have bad?"

"Love. The Lady Jacqueline still holds your heart. There was a day when yonder wench would have found herself in your bed."

"Since when is my bed sport any concern of yours?"

Ignoring him, Edwin continued, "You love her. I know you do. So you should not give up hope. While you were at the castle visiting Lady Jacqueline, some of the villagers shared an interesting bit of information. More than one bit actually."

Terric could see Edwin was itching for him to ask what he had heard. Picking up his tankard, he took a sip from it. He decided to see how long it would take for Edwin to break down and tell him without being asked. It only took a few seconds before the squire broke.

"Fine, do not ask. I will tell you anyway. They said Forwin is ill and near death. It is said he may not even live long enough to see his heir born."

It seemed Jacqueline felt it was unnecessary to relay that information to him, as well. "So Jacqueline will be a widow soon."

Edwin continued. "But you see, there is more. Apparently Forwin fell ill right after his marriage and has been practically bedridden ever since. So I feel Lady Jacqueline's babe is yours. How could a deathly ill man father a child?"

Having heard enough of Edwin's assumptions, Terric stopped him from speaking further. "Shut your mouth, Edwin. The subject of Jacqueline is closed. I do not want to hear another word about it from you." he snapped.

Thoroughly chastised, Edwin decided Terric could drown in his own remorse.

* * * *

The small party of travelers entered the bailey of Nunney Castle. A man and a young woman, along with four men-at-arms, made up the small group.

Dismounting, Sir Guy stepped over to Beth and helped her down from her palfrey. He then put the bailey and castle walls under close scrutiny. Finding them both lacking, he snorted in contempt.

"This castle is just begging to be taken. No portcullis, only a simple wooden drawbridge operated by a manual crank."

Beth had to agree with what the older man said. The lack of defenses was appalling to say the least. But allowing a party of strangers to enter the castle unchallenged, made it even worse. "We must find Jacqueline."

"Aye, and quickly. The sooner we establish ourselves in the household the better."

Nodding in agreement, Beth picked up her skirts and headed in the direction of the hall. "Remember now, Sir Guy, what Lady Elizabeth wants us to do. We must not give our true reason for being here away."

"Fear not, my lady. I know exactly what has to be done. I will not put the lass in anymore danger."

Pushing the hall doors open, Beth added, "Good. Now let us see what we are up against, shall we?"

The hall was just as empty as the bailey outside had been. Beth looked at Sir Guy. He shrugged his shoulders in response. It was midday. Usually the hall would be filled with the occupants of the castle eating their first large meal of the day.

This was ridiculous. They could be left standing here all day before someone would notice their presence, or so Beth assumed. Thoroughly disgusted, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She went in search of the kitchen.

Finding the stairs leading down to the bowels of the castle, she and Sir Guy descended to the kitchen below. The sound of voices talking animatedly drifted up to them the farther down they went. Beth recognized one of the voices amongst the others. Jacqueline was indeed down there. Entering the kitchen, they found her sitting at the worktable happily conversing with the kitchen help.

Clearing his throat loudly, Sir Guy made their presence known. "Is this any way to welcome guests, lass? By hiding in the kitchen?"

Finding the two familiar faces from home standing at the kitchen entrance, Jacqueline let out a squeal of surprise. Slipping off the stool she had been sitting on, she then went to greet the newcomers.

"I was not expecting you. Why did you not send word of your coming? I would have been better prepared."

Beth gave Jacqueline a quick embrace then took a step back to take a closer look at her friend. "I must say you have widened a bit since our last meeting."

Happy and greatly relieved to see Beth and Sir Guy once more, Jacqueline did not know whether to laugh or cry. "I am so glad you are here, Beth. You, too, Sir Guy."

The older man smiled warmly at her. "Do you think your mother would leave you to face your time of trial alone? She sent us here to be of service to you." Staring intently into her eyes, he then said pointedly, "To serve you in all matters, to the very end."

Feeling tears of relief fill her eyes, Jacqueline gave Sir Guy a quivering smile. "I will gladly accept your help. Your presence brings me much comfort. You have no idea how much."

* * * *

Why did those two have to come? Nicholas silently gnashed his teeth in rage. He could feel all he had worked so hard to obtain starting to slip through his fingers like so many grains of sand.

The arrival of Lady Beth and Sir Guy marked the beginning of subtle changes within Nunney's walls. He could not prove either one was the cause of these changes that were taking place, but he just knew they were.

All meals, which he was expected to attend, were now served in the hall. It seemed they were trying to keep him away from Forwin. But what he found most disturbing was the now manned walls.

Sir Guy had been very unobtrusive about what he was doing. At first the four men-at-arms that had accompanied him there started taking shifts patrolling the walls. Now, five more men had been added to their ranks. Where they had come from, Nicholas did not know and could not find out either. These men were very closed mouthed and could not be easily drawn out in conversation. One thing that was true about all of them

was that to a man they were all very well trained. Sir Guy held daily training sessions out in the bailey. He had watched one such session and observed how well these men handled their swords.

Having planned for the last few years to be the next owner of Nunney Castle, he was not prepared to just walk away from it. He would silently bide his time. Once Jacqueline bore her brat, then things would change. No one was going to stop him from getting what he had striven so hard for. Not the twit Lady Beth and not that old knight. He would show them all in the end.

Chapter Nineteen

The day of Jacqueline's lying-in finally arrived during a cold and blustery winter night.

It had been decided beforehand amongst the three of them to keep Nicholas ignorant as long as they could of what was taking place, at the very least, until after Jacqueline had safely been delivered. She and the babe would be too vulnerable as she labored.

So it was with great stealth on Sir Guy's part that he secretly brought the village midwife up to Jacqueline's chamber when the time came. The older woman understood the motive behind it and was quick to reassure them. She would not draw attention to herself in any way.

The general opinion down in the village was one of hatred toward Nicholas. To see the back of him leaving Nunney would be a blessing to them. The minstrel would be a harsh master in their minds.

As Jacqueline's labor progressed, Sir Guy left his post at her chamber door. He had only been tolerated in what was usually classed as a woman's work because the women could not protect themselves against an attack. But now, he had to put into motion the next step in his plans-the plans made to keep Jacqueline safe. And to be quite frank, he was glad to escape the chamber. At each grunt of pain Jacqueline made, he felt his stomach tie in knots. A birthing chamber really was no place for a man. At least not for this one.

Jacqueline clenched her teeth together as another wave of pain hit her. The pains were coming faster, not giving her much time to rest before the next one took her over. Knowing it meant her baby was close to being born, she silently wished it to come quickly. Much to her relief it did just that. A short time later she began the job of pushing her baby into the world.

With Beth holding her hand for support, Jacqueline gave one last push and felt the child slip free of her body, out into the waiting arms of the midwife. Hearing the muffled cries of her infant, she propped herself up on one elbow and looked at the midwife expectantly. "Tell me. What is it?"

Smiling, the older woman came to Jacqueline's side, then passed her the well wrapped bundle of her child. "You have a fine, healthy son, my lady."

Seeing her child's face for the very first time was the most beautiful thing she had ever experienced. Jacqueline blinked back the tears of happiness which threatened to come. Pulling the blanket away from her

son, she checked every inch of him. He was perfect.

The peach fuzz upon his head was auburn in color. When the baby opened his eyes and looked at her for the first time, Jacqueline found herself staring at a copy of Terric's own. They were a lovely shade of violet.

Hearing someone sniff, Jacqueline glanced up at Beth. She stood beside the bed looking down at the baby while silent tears dripped down her cheeks.

Realizing her friend was watching her, Beth gave her a watery smile. "Oh, Jacqueline. He looks so much like William."

Beth was right. Her son was a male version of herself. Exactly what William had looked like. Wrapping the baby back up again, Jacqueline passed the infant up to Beth. At first she refused, but when Jacqueline would not give in, she held the baby close to her.

"What are you going to call him, Jacqueline?"

She had names picked out long before this day came, both a boy's and a girl's. "He will be Jordan William." She almost added Aubrey to the end of her son's name, but that was not to be. Jordan would have Forwin's name, De La Mare.

Though her labor had not been very long, Jacqueline felt tiredness slowly seeping through her. She needed to rest for on the morrow the greatest challenge would begin. The challenge of ousting Nicholas and then securing Jordan's future as the next Earl of Somerset.

* * * *

Jacqueline had no idea why she awoke from her slumber. Maybe because she was now a mother and had come to possess that extra sense all mothers have when it comes to their children, the one which allows them to know when their child needed them without being told. But whatever it was, she sensed something wrong.

There was someone in her chamber. She knew that even before she came fully awake. Reaching under her pillow, Jacqueline grabbed the hilt of the dagger she kept at the ready. In one swift movement, she jumped out of the bed, then held the dagger against Nicholas's throat who was bent over her son's cradle.

"Move any closer to my child, and I will cut a nice hole in your throat."

Nicholas slowly straightened, all the while Jacqueline kept the sharp edge of the blade against his throat. "Now, now, Jacqueline. Is this any way to treat your future husband?"

"The day I wed you, will be the day hell freezes over. Besides, I still have a husband."

"I am sorry to give you grievous news, but Forwin is no more."

After imparting those words, Nicholas laughed at her, a sinister laugh. "What do you mean?"

"Why you are a widow. And once I dispatch your brat, you will be my wife."

Jacqueline tightened her grip on the dagger. Her top lip curled into a snarl. "Touch my son and you will die."

Nicholas laughed once more. "Really, Jacqueline. You just gave birth. I can feel you shaking. Do you honestly believe you can overpower me in such a weakened state?"

He was right. Her hand was beginning to tremble. "I do not think it is wise of you to celebrate a victory you

have not won yet."

Jordan began to whimper, which caused Jacqueline to nick his throat with the dagger. Nicholas hissed in anger. "You will pay for that."

"I think not." Sir Guy said behind them.

At the sound of a new voice, Jacqueline turned to find Sir Guy standing just inside her chamber, along with two men-at-arms who flanked him on either side.

The baby started to cry in earnest. Jacqueline was finding it hard to resist the urge to go and pick Jordan up. Controlling that urge, she waited until both men-at-arms took hold of Nicholas by each of his arms. With him now safely in custody and no longer a threat, she put down her dagger so she could comfort her son.

Before Nicholas could be led from her chamber, Jacqueline spoke to him. "This will be the last time I see you. So I am going to get right to the point. Whatever Forwin first promised you, forget it. Nunney is now my son's and no man will take it from him."

Nicholas's handsome face shifted into a mask of pure rage. "You may have won this time, but it will not be the end."

Having heard all he wanted to, Sir Guy stepped in between them. "That is enough out of you. It is over. You will be escorted from Nunney and you will not come back. On your way out, look to the walls. There are more men manning them, men sworn to serve Lady Jacqueline."

Coming to stand nose to nose with Nicholas, he then said coldly, "If you decide to try and claim Nunney Castle, which was never yours in the first place, it will be the end of you. Literally." Giving a swift jerk of his head, he signaled the men-at-arms, who then led the minstrel away.

The encounter left Jacqueline completely drained. Still cradling Jordan close, she sat down on her bed before her trembling legs gave out on her.

"Nicholas said Forwin is dead."

Sir Guy sighed. "He is. With no small help from the minstrel."

Jacqueline gasped in shock. "Are you saying he killed Forwin?"

"Afraid so, lass. I would not be surprised to find out he had been at it for years. There are poisons which mimic symptoms of a serious illness. It would also explain Forwin's inability to sire a child."

She had to agree with that assumption. Nicholas would have had no qualms about ridding himself of the man who stood in his way of gaining all he wanted. "We have removed the thorn from our side. Now what do we do to keep what we have gained?"

With all seriousness, Sir Guy said, "You must wed again, and quickly. Before your father finds out Forwin is dead and buried, ideally."

Kissing the top of her son's silky head, she nodded. "Terric. I will only have Terric. He deserves to be a part of Jordan's life. And more importantly, this time I will only marry for love. I refuse to be used as a pawn to further a man's fortune again."

Brushing a finger across the baby's soft cheek, Sir Guy then bent down to place a kiss on Jacqueline's

forehead. "We knew that, lass. Your lady mother and I that is. All the details will be taken care of for you. Have no fear. You will get your man."

"How long do I have?"

"A month to a month and a half. Then you will have what you want."

"And Nicholas? He knows about my father and what he hoped to gain. Will he not go to the earl and tell him what we have done?"

Sir Guy smiled a knowing smile. "I expect him to do just that. But he will have to find the earl first, then try and gain an audience with him. Nicholas is going to find out how a nobleman can really treat a lowly minstrel."

Jacqueline laughed. For once her father's disregard of anyone in the lower classes would work to their benefit. "Poor Nicholas. He will be shunned."

"Maybe not forever, but he will give you time to gain your strength back so you can confront Terric. And you are going to need as much strength as you can get."

Confused, she looked at the older man and asked, "Confront? How?"

Smiling, Sir Guy moved to leave the chamber. "Why you are going to face Terric in the list. What better way to gain his attention? After all, he is a tournament knight. So make your play for him in his territory. He can hardly ignore you then."

* * * *

It was not fair. All the years wasted catering to that fool Forwin, and for nothing. He knew he should not have listened to him. Forwin's wife could have easily found herself rid of her child in the beginning. There were herbs that could have been slipped to Jacqueline without her knowing. But Forwin had not allowed it.

Now he had lost it all and had been outsmarted by a woman. But the bitch would pay. He was going to make sure of that. Looking over his shoulder, Nicholas found the two men-at-arms closely watching him. Snatching up his belongings, he roughly shoved them into his saddle bags. Once he finished, he brushed past the two waiting men. They followed closely behind him.

Reaching the bailey, Nicholas found Sir Guy waiting for him. "I will give you one warning, and one warning only. Should you ever return to Nunney, for any reason at all, I will be sure to cause you to regret it." Receiving no response from the minstrel, he then pushed on. "Your horse is saddled and awaits you at the stable. I suggest you leave, now."

Nicholas walked past the older knight, then turned back around. "She may have won this time, but she has messed with the wrong man. I will make sure she gets her own."

"I would expect no less from you. Try if you wish, but you are finished."

Giving one last snarl of rage, Nicholas stomped away. He was far from finished with them.

Chapter Twenty

Pulling the hood of her cloak closer around her face, Beth shifted from one foot and then to the other. Would he never leave?

Peering around the corner of the pavilion she stood behind, she checked to see if Terric had left his. Seeing his horse still picketed out in front of the pavilion, she groaned to herself. A quick second later, she shot back out of sight when the flap of Terric's pavilion opened. After counting to ten, she then moved out into the open. Terric was just disappearing from view.

Picking up her skirts, Beth crossed the space between the two pavilions. Not bothering to announce her presence, she pulled open the flap, stepped inside, and then pulled the flap back closed.

Edwin could not hide the shock he felt. Beth was the last person he expected to see at this tournament. "What do you here, my lady?"

Beth shook off her hood. She could feel Edwin watching her every move. Not really sure why she did it, she reached up and pulled her unbound hair from beneath her cloak. The long light blonde tresses tumbled down her back. She heard Edwin's breath hitch in response.

"I need your help, Edwin."

"I thought" Hearing how his voice cracked, Edwin cleared his throat and tried again. "I thought you were with Lady Jacqueline."

"I am." She watched as Edwin thought that one through. Looking at him, really looking at him this time, she realized he was quite handsome. All the other times she had been in his company, she really had never noticed his good looks. Grief had overshadowed a lot of her senses.

"You mean Lady Jacqueline is here? At this tournament?"

"Aye, she is here. That is why we need your help."

He could not tear his eyes away from Beth. She was everything he found attractive in a woman. But he knew she could never be his. It was not just their differences in rank, but also the ghost of her dead husband which separated them.

Pushing back the emotions he was unable to act upon, Edwin asked, "What exactly would you have me do?"

Beth smiled brightly. "Jacqueline is going to challenge Terric in the list. All you have to do is make sure he accepts it."

"She what?" He began to furiously shake his head. "There is no way I can accomplish that. Terric will recognize William's name when he receives the challenge."

"She will not be using her brother's name. She will be keeping her name unknown."

"All right, then I can manage what you are asking of me." Then suddenly he remembered something else. "I thought Lady Jacqueline was with child. How can she ride in the list in that condition?"

Beth shook her head. "Jacqueline is no longer with child."

"She lost the child?"

"Nay, do not be ridiculous. Jacqueline bore a healthy son, a month past." Beth paused to make sure she had Edwin's full attention. "Terric has a son."

Edwin let out a whoop. "I knew it. I knew the babe was his."

Picking up Beth's hand, he placed a lingering kiss upon it. With his lips hovering above her hand, he then looked deeply into her eyes. "I am your servant."

* * * *

The start of the tournament circuit did not bring Terric much feeling of excitement this time around. Not like previous years. It felt as if he was only going through the motions. The anticipation of meeting opponents in the list was gone. Nothing felt the same since he had lost her.

He had come full circle now. He was now back at Portchester Castle in Portsmouth where he had first met Jacqueline posing as William. He had not realized then that she would change what he wanted out of life. The dream of earning enough coin through tournament ransoms so he could buy land was not so pressing anymore. What good would the land be without Jacqueline? She was the one and only woman he wanted as his wife. Without a wife, land held no interest for him.

Edwin quietly began to help him don his armor. Terric blandly accepted his assistance. "Who is my first opponent?"

Standing behind Terric, Edwin let a secretive smile play upon his lips briefly before he answered. "I am not sure. This knight has chosen to keep his identity hidden."

Terric turned to look over his shoulder at his squire. "Who else did this unknown knight challenge?"

"Only you."

"Just me?" Terric found that surprising. Why him?

Edwin nodded. "Aye, just you."

Now Terric was curious as to who this knight could be. And more importantly, why he had been singled out.

Slapping Terric on the shoulder, Edwin signaled that he was done arming him. When they arrived at the list, the unknown knight was already waiting for him. Terric saw the white blank shield sitting on the knight's left arm. With his helm in place, there was no way to tell who he was. Even the knight's young squire was unfamiliar to Terric.

Taking to his end of the list, Terric accepted his first lance from Edwin. At the first pass, both lances shattered as they impacted against the hard surface of the shields. After the second pass, he found something vaguely familiar about his opponent's form. Why he did, he could not put his finger on.

Taking up his third and final lance, he closely watched as the unknown knight readied for the final pass. The sense of familiarity grew. Kicking his horse in its sides, Terric started down the list. His opponent followed suit.

A quarter of the way down, Terric watched as the knight who barreled toward him, adjusted the aim of his

lance. He cursed under his breath.

With only a moment to spare before they met, Terric threw his lance away, forfeiting the match. Quickly turning his horse back around, he watched his opponent leaving the list with some hurry.

Edwin met Terric as he returned to his end of the list. He gave his master a timid smile. In response, Terric leaned down and grabbed him by an ear. Edwin began to dance on his toes, trying to escape his grasp.

"You knew all along. Did you not, Edwin?"

The squire started to nod his head, but thought better of it when it caused the pain in his ear to increase. "Aye, I knew."

"And why did you not see fit to inform me?"

"Well, you see, I figured no harm would come of it. They were so desperate, and I so much wanted to help them, and"

"Enough!" Terric bellowed at him. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he tried to keep his temper under control. "I believe you have stated your case, or should I say, buried yourself deeply enough. All I want to know is one thing. Where are they?"

Swallowing audibly, Edwin pointed in the direction of the pavilions. "At the very far end. Out of sight."

Even before Edwin had his last word spoken, Terric released him and set off in the direction he had indicated.

Just as Edwin had said, Terric found the lone pavilion not far from the main group of tents. It sat behind a small copse of trees that created a natural screen.

Picketing his horse next to the one already standing out in front of the pavilion, Terric began to roughly unlace his helm. As he stepped through the entrance, he pulled it completely free from his head.

She only had enough time to remove her own helm, when Terric rushed into the pavilion. Jacqueline could see he was angry, barely keeping himself restrained. His still gauntleted hands were clenched into fists at his sides. Even though he was not at all pleased with her, she was happy. She had accomplished what she had set out to do. She had Terric's undivided attention.

Terric stared at Jacqueline. Seeing her still dressed in her armor made his temper simmer all the more. Trying not to give it free rein, he punched out each word he spoke through his clenched teeth. "Just what in hell were you doing out there today?"

Jacqueline closed the distance between them. Pulling off one of her gauntlets, she placed her palm on his cheek. "Getting your attention."

Grabbing her wrist in a vice like grip, Terric pulled her hand from his face. "Why could you not seek it in the usual way?" He released Jacqueline's wrist and took a step away from her.

"I need your help, Terric. I could not afford to take the chance of your refusing to see me."

"You need my help." he said blandly. "What about your husband? Can he not do it?"

"Nay." Jacqueline moved closer to Terric again. After so many months of being separated from him, she felt the need to be close to him. "Nay, he cannot. Forwin is dead."

All at once, Terric felt his world right itself. Jacqueline was free, but there still was something that caused him to tread carefully. "What of the child? Forwin's heir."

"You left Nunney before I could explain."

"So you could explain how you came to sleep with another man and bore his child?"

Jacqueline shook her head and smiled. "Terric, do you actually think I would give myself to Forwin? Well I did not."

He wanted so much to believe her, but the child could not be so easily dismissed. "You have not answered my question, Jacqueline. I did not ask about our meeting at Nunney. Changing the subject will not deter me."

"As you wish." Wanting to keep clear headed, Jacqueline put some space between herself and Terric. "I gave birth to a son, a month ago. Your son."

Terric shook his head in denial. "That is not possible."

"Why not? I was only married to Forwin for seven months. He died on the same day our son was born." She could see he was still not completely ready to accept what she was telling him. "Terric, add up the months."

"If what you say is true, then you were already with child when"

"We were to wed. Aye. It was the night at the grand tournament I think."

Removing his gauntlets, Terric set them on the ground next to Jacqueline's own. "All right, I believe you. Now what? You are a wealthy widow, able to be independent. You do not need me."

Taking two steps forward, Jacqueline moved to stand before Terric. Reaching up, she laced her fingers through his hair at the back of his head. "How can you say that with all seriousness? My feelings for you have not changed. I love you, Terric. I always will."

With a clang when their armor met, Terric pulled Jacqueline into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. Waves of intense pleasure swept throughout her whole entire body. Jacqueline had craved his touch for months. Groaning, she gripped the edges of his armor, hating the barrier it created between their bodies.

The sound of her son crying caused Jacqueline to quickly pull away from Terric. Looking over his shoulder, she found Beth standing inside the entrance while Jordan made his displeasure known to all. Beth appeared to be completely frazzled from the baby's fretting.

"Sorry Jacqueline, but he will not stop crying. I have tried everything. You are going to have to nurse him, or he will not settle."

Jacqueline could not help but smile at her small son's lusty cries. "What the little lord wants, he gets. I just have to remove my armor, then I can feed him."

Before Terric could go to Jacqueline's side to assist her, Beth stepped around to face him and held out the crying bundle of baby. His first inclination was to back away, but curiosity to see what his son looked like won out in the end. Tentatively, he held out his arms to accept the baby. Beth gently passed him the small bundle, then went to help Jacqueline in the removal of her armor.

Careful of the steel encasing his arms and chest, Terric pulled the blanket back to have his first glance at his son. The baby's face was bright red, while his eyes were tightly screwed shut with tears streaming down his

soft cheeks. With hands fisted, he waved them in the air in indignation. Terric chuckled at the baby's display of displeasure.

"Come now little man. It cannot be as bad as all that." At the sound of a new voice, the baby stopped crying and opened his eyes. Terric found himself looking into eyes the same color as his own. Though their child had taken after Jacqueline in looks, the boy's eyes matched his father's. Terric felt a sense of connection with this small being he held in his arms and a strong feeling of protectiveness.

The baby began to whimper, unhappy that Terric was not giving him what he wanted. Filling his lungs with air, he then began to wail once more.

Jacqueline touched Terric's hand. "This is your son, Jordan. Now, before he brings too much unwanted attention to us, I had better feed him."

With great reluctance, Terric allowed Jacqueline to take Jordan from his arms.

Once she was comfortably seated in a camp chair, Jacqueline put the baby to her breast. His cries instantly ceased. Enthralled, Terric could not pry his gaze from his son as he suckled.

"Now tell me what could be so dire that you must enter the list to gain my attention, Jacqueline."

Chapter Twenty One

Jacqueline took a moment to collect her thoughts, then she began to tell Terric all that had happened since her father had stolen her from Carisbrooke. She did not leave out any details. Even explaining why Forwin had brought Nicholas to Nunney. She also told him the lie she had given about already being pregnant only to find out later it was the truth.

Now replete, Jordan stopped sucking and fell asleep. Switching him to her shoulder, Jacqueline patted his back. She then continued with her tale. "With Forwin gone and Nicholas on the loose, my father will find out how he was tricked."

Terric was aghast at what Jacqueline had endured. If only he had stayed at Nunney long enough to have found out what was really happening to her, she would not be so vulnerable now. "I was a fool to leave you with those two."

"Do not blame yourself. You did not know. But you are here now, and you can still save me."

"I will not abandon you like that again, I promise. Whatever it takes, I will do to keep you from your father's clutches."

"And that, Sir Terric, is exactly what we hoped you would say." Having been momentarily forgotten, Beth broke into the conversation. She then breezed passed Terric and went to the entrance of the pavilion.

Pulling the flap back, she signaled to someone who obviously had been waiting for just that. Not at all surprised, Terric watched Edwin step inside. But what he had not expected was to see a priest following closely behind his squire. Terric looked over at Beth, who smiled sweetly up at him.

"If you want to keep Jacqueline safe, marry her. Here and now."

Still holding their child in her arms, Jacqueline stood, watching his reaction, pleading with her eyes for him not to balk at this, but to accept what they had put into motion.

Terric closed the space between her and himself. Moving to her side, he put his arm around her shoulders and turned her to face the priest. "Well father, it looks as if you have a marriage to perform."

* * * *

With Beth and Edwin acting as witnesses, the ceremony became a very simple matter. Jacqueline's mother had procured a special license so that the banns could be overlooked. Beth had been given possession of it before she left Carisbrooke with Sir Guy. Lady Elizabeth had known it would be put to use.

When the priest pronounced them man and wife, Jacqueline kissed Terric. After their lips parted, she smiled lovingly into his eyes. She knew now everything would be all right. Her father could no longer touch her, she was safe. With Terric as her husband, he would hold Nunney's lands until Jordan came of age. Who better to protect her child than his own father?

His job now complete, the priest departed. Jacqueline had to give him credit. He had not blinked an eye at the bride being dressed as a man.

Terric felt a sense of euphoria wash over him. Jacqueline was his. "Now, wife, are there any other plans you have inside your pretty little head? Something I should know about?"

"Nothing too drastic, husband. We go home to Nunney. The longer we are absent, the more I worry."

"Then we leave within the hour. I can finally claim you as my own. No man will take you away from me again." Seeing he had everyone's attention, Terric continued, "Once we all are behind Nunney's walls, we can breathe a little easier."

* * * *

He had not anticipated on this taking so long. He had assumed it would be no great feat to gain the presence of the Earl of Salisbury. Who would have guessed the man traveled around so much?

After a month of just missing the earl, Nicholas had finally arrived in time to try and gain an audience at Castle Rushen on the Isle of Man, one of the earl's other holdings. Presenting himself as a traveling minstrel, he had gained entrance into the castle. But to have speech with the earl, was proving to be no easy task. The man had no tolerance for those beneath him. And also being styled the King of the Isles of Man did nothing to change the earl's attitude. He let no one forget that title.

The evening of his arrival, Nicholas had performed in the banqueting hall in the state apartments. The hall itself was the largest room in the castle measuring some thirty-six feet by twenty-one feet, with an enormous fireplace that was necessary to keep such a large room heated during the winter.

After what Nicholas had thought was a perfect performance, he tried then to speak with the earl. But when he had approached the raised dais, the earl had in no way acknowledged him. Feeling like a fool standing there, he finally gave up.

His time was running out, though. He would be permitted to stay at Rushen for only a few more days, then he would have to move on. The Earl of Salisbury was not a man one could annoy and not expect to suffer some kind of consequences.

Letting the final notes from his lute fade into nothingness, Nicholas accepted the goblet of wine one of the pageboys offered him. It was welcome after his performance to wet his dry throat and to give him the confidence needed to confront the earl. Swallowing all the wine in two large gulps, he then wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his tunic. It was time to face the dragon.

The earl as before ignored him when he stood before the dais. Not wanting a repeat of the previous evening, Nicholas loudly cleared his throat. The earl glared down at him in irritation.

Executing an elaborate bow, which he hoped would impress the earl, he began to speak. "My lord, I wonder if I can have a moment of your time?"

Saying the earl was perturbed by Nicholas's impudence in addressing him personally, was putting it mildly. He looked down at Nicholas with complete revulsion. "What could a lowly minstrel possibly have to say that I would deem of any importance?" Then with a negligent wave of his hand, he dismissed the man before him. "Be gone, before I have you thrown in my dungeon."

Nicholas felt a moment of hesitation. He had heard much about the earl's dungeon during the short time he had been at Rushen. It was situated beneath the guardroom, within the keep. Prisoners had to be lowered down by ropes to the dungeon below. Scarcely a ray of light penetrated the gloom down in that miserable place.

Willing to take his chances, Nicholas persevered. "My lord, please do not belittle what I have to impart to you. It is of grave importance."

Surging to his feet, the earl leaned upon the trestle table to stare down at Nicholas. "Have you no sense? I thought I made myself perfectly clear."

Nicholas bowed his head submissively. "Aye, you did, my lord. But what I have to say will affect you greatly." Lifting his head, he found the earl staring at him intently. "I have information in regards to your daughter and her husband."

The earl straightened, then motioned for Nicholas to follow him. Leaving the hall, he pulled the minstrel into a dark corner outside in the bailey. A full moon high above provided limited illumination to see.

"Speak minstrel, and if you are wasting my time, you will pay for disturbing me."

Nicholas adamantly shook his head in denial. "Nay, my lord. I would never trifle with you."

"Then get on with it man. My patience grows thin."

"Your daughter's husband, the Earl of Somerset, has died." Even with the limited amount of light, Nicholas was able to see the earl flinch.

"When did this happen?"

"A month ago, my lord." Nicholas began to relax. It was quite obvious to him, judging by the earl's reaction, he had not known this.

The earl was not at all pleased with the information the minstrel passed on to him. After all the machination

and wooing, was it for naught? He did not like to lose, ever. Looking at the minstrel, he recognized the sly side of the man. Something he saw in himself. Narrowing his eyes, he began to question the minstrel. It was easy to see the man knew more than what he had said so far. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

"How well do you know of my relationship with Forwin? I have the feeling you were closely acquainted with the man."

Nicholas let a knowing smile play upon his lips. "I know all, my lord. And other things you were never privy to."

When the minstrel did not continue, the earl could easily guess what he wanted to receive in return. The man expected to be rewarded for the information he would impart.

"You will be rewarded." Backing the minstrel further into the corner, he saw a flash of fear cross his face. Satisfied with his reaction, he then calmly said, "Now, tell me all. Do not leave out anything. And if you decide to ever come back once I am done with you, to seek more coin for what you know, it will only end with your being one of my guests. In my dungeon."

The earl was shrewd indeed. That thought had passed Nicholas's mind more than once before meeting with him. But being in his presence, Nicholas knew he would be risking his very life if he tried such a thing as the earl had said. "I will tell you all, my lord. I was wronged just as you were. To see you exact retribution on those who cheated you will please me to no end."

Chapter Twenty Two

Even though they felt time was of the essence, Terric was ever mindful of his small son in their midst. Whenever Jordan began to cry, needing to be fed or have his bottom changed, his father would find an appropriate place to stop.

At night, both pavilions were set up, allowing Jacqueline and Terric a modicum of privacy, a place away from Beth and Edwin. The only other person who shared their pavilion was Jordan.

Their first night on the road, Beth took Jordan to stay with Edwin and herself, giving his parents the much needed time to get reacquainted with one another for which Jacqueline was very thankful.

That night, Jacqueline felt as if everything would be all right in the world again. Being in Terric's arms did that for her. After such a long separation and almost losing each other, consummating their marriage was all the sweeter for it. The bonds they had made in the past were reaffirmed.

Falling into each other's arms once alone, lips met with a burning need. This first time was quick and desperate. Later, after they had stanchied their driving hunger, that would be the time for a long, gentle loving.

Molding Jacqueline's soft curves to his body, Terric rocked his throbbing erection against her. He had not touched another woman during their long separation. The need to be inside her overrode all else. Pulling at Jacqueline's clothes, he quickly peeled them off her body. Once she was gloriously naked before him, Terric stepped back and shucked his own.

Jacqueline skimmed Terric's body with her gaze. Finding him fully engorged and standing erect, she let her fingers trail down the length of him. His shaft jumped beneath her fingertips causing her body to ache and weep with desire.

Taking her hand off of him, Terric growled, "Enough. You do much more of that and this will end before we have even started."

Wrapping Jacqueline in his arms once more, Terric kissed her with all of the love and desire he felt for her. Sucking her tongue into his mouth, he entwined it with his. She tasted like heaven.

Terric lowered Jacqueline to the floor. Following her down, he ran his hands down her back until he cupped her bottom. He rubbed his cock against her clit. The wetness pooled at her opening, coated the very tip of him. He moaned at finding her already more than ready for him.

Nudging Jacqueline's legs further apart with his body, Terric surged into her wet canal. Jacqueline groaned and clutched at his back. The feel of her body embracing him sent Terric over the edge. Pulling out slightly, he slammed back into her.

Wrapping her legs around Terric's waist, Jacqueline held on as he pounded into her. He wasn't gentle, but she didn't want gentleness right now. She wanted him hot and hard inside her. As he pushed into her, she could feel him almost touching her womb, he was in so deep. Matching his pounding thrusts, she felt her body clench as her climax washed through her. Jacqueline moaned when Terric soon followed her, filling her with his seed.

Lying in his arms, now curled up against his naked body, Jacqueline felt that if she were to die at this very moment, she would die a happy woman. Not that she intended to do any such thing, she mused.

Propping herself up on one elbow, she looked down at her husband. Terric's eyes were closed, but she knew he was not asleep. Without opening his eyes, he smiled then asked, "Are you going to stare at me like that all night?"

"I would not find it a hardship. Just the opposite to be exact."

Terric opened his eyes and reached up to gently tuck her hair behind her ear. During the months of being apart, her hair had grown back in. It was not as long as it once was, but it now hung past her shoulders. He loved her hair, the color of auburn that turned a burnished copper in the firelight. Running his hand through the full length of it, he watched how it curled around his fingers as if it were possessively holding him close.

"Have I told you how much I love you, Jacqueline?"

Leaning down, she kissed him on the chin, feeling the stubble from the new growth of beard that was beginning to show. "Oh, just a few hundred times these past few days."

"Good. I do not want a day to go by that I do not tell you." Seeing the smile fade from Jacqueline's lips, Terric pulled her back down to his chest, holding her close. "What is bothering you?"

"I hope I have not brought you into something you will regret later. Or get you hurt."

Holding her closer, Terric shook his head. "Do not say that. Do not even think it. You have made me a very happy man being my wife. These past few months have been a living hell, not having you by my side. I never want to go through that again."

"Nor would I." Knowing she had to try to get some sleep before Jordan woke up wanting to be nursed, Jacqueline let her eyes drift closed. On the morrow they would continue their journey to Nunney. Once they reached the castle, then she could lay her fears to rest.

* * * *

The days it took to travel to Nunney were passing pleasantly. The weather was holding, and there was no rain to dampen their spirits. Having to contend with wet and mud would have made the trip extremely trying.

For the small group of travelers, the days on the road were euphoric. There were no pressing matters to deal with, no intrigues affecting their lives. Those were forgotten at least for the time being. An old bond was re-established while a new one began to form.

Each evening Terric and Jacqueline retired to one pavilion with their son, leaving Beth and Edwin to share the other. The first night had been uncomfortable for them both. Beth trusted Edwin to act appropriately, but she still felt a trifle uneasy sharing the pavilion alone with him. The emotions she felt while in his presence she was just not ready to face. Even though William's passing was over a year and half gone, Beth could not let go of him as of yet. She had a feeling she might never be ready, so the emotions Edwin engendered made her feel as if she were betraying William.

Because of that, she tried to distance herself from Edwin. He noticed the change immediately. Therefore, knowing she would want more privacy, he hung a dividing sheet from one of the spokes on the pavilion roof supports essentially creating a separate room for Beth to sleep within. The gesture was not lost on her.

With that one small kindness, Beth began to relax around Edwin. The second night she started the ritual of having a goblet of wine with him before retiring to her part of the pavilion. While they drank, they also talked about a lot of things.

Edwin spoke of his childhood on the streets of London. How his mother had been a whore and he had no idea who his father was. But what affected Beth the most was hearing how his mother had abandoned him to the streets at the tender age of five. It made her heart break for the small, lost boy Edwin had been.

Beth talked of her growing up with her three older brothers, how she had each one of them wrapped around her finger. Edwin could not help but laugh. It was not at all hard for him to picture Beth getting whatever she wanted from her brothers.

But this night, their final night on the road, they both knew their lives would be returning to normal. And so it was, they both allowed themselves to relax and enjoy the last evening. The wine flowed a little more than previous nights. Barriers were weakened.

By the end of the night, Edwin knew he was head over heels. When it came time to bid Beth a good night, he impulsively leaned toward her and kissed her. She allowed him that kiss, all too briefly, then jerked away.

"I am sorry, Beth. I should not have done that."

Beth placed her palm along his cheek and gently caressed it. "If our situations were different"

He stiffened. "Is it because of my lowly birth?"

"Nay, nay!" Beth was quick to disabuse him of that notion. "Nay, that is not what I meant. It is all to do with me. I am starting to have feelings for you, but I feel like I am doing something wrong. I feel as if I am making less of William's memory."

"I understand. I will not push you. But I want you to know one thing. If ever you need me, I am here for you."

She felt much relief. Alienating Edwin was the last thing she wanted. She valued his friendship. "Thank you, Edwin. I am here for you, as well."

After brushing a kiss across his cheek, Beth then disappeared into her sectioned off sleeping area. Edwin sighed deeply. It was in no way a grand declaration of love, but it was a start. He could settle for that.

* * * *

Taking a deep breath, Jacqueline filled her lungs with the fresh spring air. She loved this time of year. Seeing all the trees sprouting new green growth after the winter months of dullness, made her spirits lift. The air was laced with the smell of fresh vegetation.

Feeling Jordan squirm against her, she rubbed his small back to settle him. She smiled down at her son. He was strapped to her chest with a blanket that she had made into a sling, then securely tied around herself. Since it was such a nice day and they were not too far from Nunney, she had decided to ride on horseback for the last leg of their journey. It was a much more comfortable way to travel than being bounced around in the baggage cart.

Terric had not been too pleased with her decision at first, but in the end he relented. He could see Jacqueline was near her wit's end tolerating the jostling in the cart. He was not able to ignore the pleading look in her eyes.

Beth rode next to Jacqueline while Edwin and Terric rode up in front. The two men-at-arms drove the cart at the rear. What happened next would turn the lovely spring day into a nightmare.

As they approached the outskirts of Nunney village, a large party of men on horseback charged from the wooded area that ran parallel with the road they traveled. The men reached the slower moving cart first.

Realizing how much danger they were in when the armed men cut down the men-at-arms, Terric moved into action. Yanking violently on his mount's reins, the horse reared as he turned him quickly back around. With sword drawn, Terric rushed to reach Jacqueline and Beth. Before he rode past Edwin, he looked over at the squire and bellowed, "Take them! Do not leave their side, no matter what happens. Get them inside the castle."

Edwin grimly nodded his head. "With my life."

When Jacqueline made no move to follow Edwin and Beth in taking flight, Terric yelled, "Go!" To make sure she complied with his order, he used the flat of his sword to slap her horse's rump. Her mount whinnied, then took off at a gallop. Satisfied Edwin would keep the women safe, he then let loose a battle cry and raced to meet their attackers.

Terric knew he was outnumbered and he would not be able to defeat them. He only hoped to keep them busy, to give the others enough time to reach the castle and safely get behind the gates before he fell.

* * * *

They were getting closer. The sound of pounding hooves seemed to draw nearer no matter how hard she

urged her horse to go faster. Looking over her shoulder, Jacqueline found she was not too far off the mark. The two men who had broken away from the main group to give chase, were definitely gaining on them. Setting her heels into her mount's sides, she pushed it for greater speed.

Edwin and Beth flanked her on either side. They, too, kept glancing behind them. When the gates of Nunney Castle came into view, Edwin let out a whoop. They would make it. Jacqueline could see figures on the walls running to man the drawbridge. Thundering across the causeway that spanned the moat, they cleared the drawbridge before it was once again raised shut behind them.

Once in the bailey, Jacqueline swiftly dismounted and began to unwind Jordan from the blanket keeping him secured to her. He seemed not at all perturbed with their mad flight.

Sir Guy, who had been up on the walls, ran to meet them. "Is anyone hurt?"

Jacqueline shook her head. "Nay, but Terric is still out there. You have to send out some men to help him."

"We cannot, lass."

With each second that passed, the feeling of desperation grew inside her. But when Sir Guy refused to send out reinforcements to save Terric, Jacqueline began to panic. "What do you mean? We cannot just leave him out there!"

Sadly, Sir Guy looked at her. "If we lower that drawbridge again, there will be no stopping them from entering Nunney. I told you before. The castle's defenses are totally inadequate."

She would not, could not, accept that there was nothing they could do to help Terric. She would not abandon him. Not now.

Quickly shoving Jordan into Beth's arms, Jacqueline ran toward the gatehouse where the mechanism for raising and lowering the drawbridge was housed. Before she could reach it, a pair of strong arms snagged her around the waist from behind, lifting her off her feet.

Pulling Jacqueline back against his chest, Sir Guy held on to her tightly as she fought to free herself. When she started to yell at him in frustration, he spoke to her sharply. "I will not allow you to put the castle at risk for just one man. Even if that man happens to be your husband."

His words seemed to penetrate through her frenzied attempts to gain her freedom. Jacqueline ceased her struggles. Thinking she had finally come to her senses, Sir Guy placed her back down onto her feet so she stood in front of him. But Jacqueline was not done yet.

Her elbow shot back, catching him squarely in his stomach. Groaning, he tried to grab Jacqueline as she took off at a run once more. He was only able to grab a fistful of her cloak, which he held onto firmly.

Recovering his breath, he turned her around to face him. He held her firmly by each of her arms. "Now, lass, if you do not desist this behavior, I will have you locked in your chamber."

Realizing she was unable to win in this, she broke down. The thought of losing Terric now, after all they had endured, she could not accept. But it seemed that was exactly what she was going to have to do. Tears poured down her cheeks unchecked.

Seeing the wetness on her face, Sir Guy pulled Jacqueline to his chest gently, hoping to console her. "If it were only the few men who gave you chase, then maybe I would have considered it. But there are a lot more than that. Too many. We are outnumbered. If they were to breach the walls, it would be over before you

knew what was happening."

Jacqueline jerked her head up. Her cheeks were still wet from the tears she had shed. "What? How can there be so many? The men who first attacked us only numbered in the handful."

Sir Guy frowned. "They must have thought in capturing you, they would gain entry into Nunney more easily. Since that failed, they have resorted to a stronger tactic. There is a very large number of men outside the walls preparing to lay siege."

Wiping the tears roughly from her face, Jacqueline said gruffly, "Show me."

Taking her up the stairs to the castle walls, Sir Guy pointed to the wide open area situated in front of the causeway. The amount of men milling about made her realize how serious the situation really was. It was a small army setting up camp outside the castle walls.

Hoping to spot Terric in their midst, Jacqueline watched the activity below. She then cursed under breath. Sir Guy echoed her sentiment.

"Aye, lass. It is your father who is responsible for this. Those men wear his colors. I know I should have done away with that murderous minstrel."

"It matters naught now. The earl is here and we must figure out what to do next. I only hope he has kept Terric alive. If he has not, nothing will stop me from putting an end to my father's life."

With that said, she then turned her back on the troops preparing to lay siege to her castle, and returned to the bailey below.

Chapter Twenty Three

Trying to find a more comfortable position, Terric strained against the bonds which kept him restrained. With his hands tied behind him, there really was no comfort to be found either physically or mentally. Being taken as a prisoner was not the situation that he had hoped to be in at the end of the day.

He had fought them to the bitter end, but being so greatly outnumbered had stacked the odds against him. He had only been able to bring a few of the attackers down before he was dragged from his horse. Terric just hoped he had kept them occupied dealing with him, allowing Jacqueline to make it to safety.

He was now tied to the center post of the Earl of Salisbury's pavilion. Terric had not been too surprised upon learning whose men had attacked them. He only wished Jacqueline's father had not come to Nunney so quickly.

Terric silently cursed the man who had tied his bonds. They were tight, causing him to lose the feeling in his fingers. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he tried to force more blood into his hands, but it was futile. The strips of leather were too constricting.

At the sound of someone opening the pavilion's flap entrance, he ceased his struggles. The earl himself stepped through the opening. Coming to stand directly in front of where Terric sat bound, he looked down at his captive. He then put his hands behind his back and shook his head.

"Well, Sir Terric, tell me what I should do with you? I find myself in the midst of a quandary. On one hand, I should have you terminated. And on the other, I feel you are my best leverage to have Nunney opened for me."

Terric snarled his lip at the earl. "I will not allow you to use me to gain entrance to the castle."

The earl laughed. "My dear boy, in your present position, you really do not have much choice in the matter." Bending down, he grabbed a handful of Terric's hair, then painfully forced the younger man to look at him. "I am very sure my darling daughter would do just about anything to get you back." Releasing his hair, the earl then slammed his head hard against the post.

Terric tried to surge to his feet, forgetting he was bound. He growled in frustration. His hands itched to be around the earl's throat. "You can do whatever you wish to me, but leave Jacqueline alone."

Straightening up to stand at his full height, the earl smiled. "Such display of emotion. How touching. So you would be willing to endure anything in the name of love. And if it would mean your life? What then?"

"Gladly would I give it." It was now Terric's turn to smile. He could see from the disgusted look the earl wore he thought Terric a fool. "Since you love no one but yourself, you cannot possibly understand."

The backhanded slap the earl delivered caught Terric on the corner of his mouth. A rush of blood entered his mouth when his lip split. "Your devotion to my daughter may cause you to lose that very thing."

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A few hours after the earl's visit, Terric was moved to another pavilion, one which was used for storing the camp's supplies. There were crates and casks stacked haphazardly around the interior.

His guards roughly shoved him through the entrance. He barely managed to keep his balance. If he had fallen, he would not have been able to catch himself. With his hands still bound behind his back, it would have been an impossibility, and well they knew it.

After depositing Terric in his new prison, the guards left, securing the pavilion flap closed. Terric could hear them, though, softly speaking just outside the entrance where they stood guard.

Moving to the center of the pavilion, he sat down on the floor. Night was slowly creeping in and it was sure to be an uncomfortable one for him. Along with having no blanket to keep him warm, he had not been given any food or drink. His stomach rumbled, reminding him of the number of hours that had passed since he last ate. There was nothing for it. His stomach would have to do without.

He dozed off and only came awake once the pavilion flap opened again. It was not the earl this time, but one of his guards, carrying a cloth covered tray. Another man followed closely behind him. Terric did not bother to pay close attention to either man.

The tray was set down beside him. The guard then roughly took hold of his bound hands and cut them free. Terric hissed as the blood rushed back into his numb digits. Barely given enough time to have the circulation fully restored, his hands were bound once more. This time in front of him. At least he would be able to use his hands to eat, even though bound.

The guard left, leaving the other man behind. Still ignoring him, Terric lifted the cloth and began to eat the bread and cheese he had been given. When a pair of feet came into his field of vision, he finally looked up.

He found the man standing before him vaguely familiar. At first, he could not place where he had met the man, but then it hit him. He knew who it was that stood before him.

The man smiled. "Ah, I can see you finally remember me."

"Aye, I do."

"As I remember you. An 'acquaintance' of Jacqueline."

Terric tapped down the rage he felt toward this man-the minstrel, Nicholas, the one who had tried to end his son's life, the one who had been nothing but a thorn in Jacqueline's side. "What do you want?"

Nicholas did not miss the fury that briefly flared in Terric's eyes before he pushed it aside. He sneered down at the bound man. "What do I want? Nothing from you. The earl is giving me everything I want. I just came to tell you not to worry what Jacqueline's fate will be. She will be left unharmed and well taken care of. By me."

Terric shook his head at Nicholas and chuckled. "Did the earl promise you Jacqueline?"

"Aye."

"And you think he will keep his word?"

"Aye."

"Then you are a bigger idiot than Jacqueline described you." Terric then had the satisfaction of watching the minstrel turn from feeling cocky to feeling uneasy. Finally anger won out.

Spitefully, Nicholas kicked the tray of food sitting beside Terric. Knocking it over, he ground the bread and cheese into the ground with the heel of his boot. "The earl will not double cross me. I was the one who told him of Forwin's duplicity. He said he would reward me with Jacqueline as my wife."

"If I were you, I would watch my back. I have a feeling you have outlived your usefulness."

Giving Terric one last dark look, Nicholas stomped out of the pavilion. Terric shook his head once more. The man was a stupid fool. He had put his trust in the maw of a viper.

* * * *

Jacqueline found no rest that night. Not knowing how Terric fared was eating away at her. Finally after fretting half the night through, she gave up. Giving Jordan his night feeding and settling him back down to sleep, she went and sat at her chamber window. From this vantage point, she could look down below at her father's camp. There were so many of them. She was not at all confident they could withstand an attack. Sir Guy was a very good strategist, but with such weak defenses, it would not be much of an asset in this case. Strategy could only work to a certain extent.

When dawn's early light appeared over the horizon, Jacqueline watched as the activity within the camp increased. Something was definitely happening below. Quickly pulling on a tunic and hose, she then checked to make sure Jordan still slept. Peering into her son's cradle, she found him blissfully sleeping. Jacqueline gently adjusted his blanket, then quietly left the chamber.

Reaching the hall, Jacqueline found Alice preparing to light the fireplace. Once she lit it, she then turned back

to the hall. Finding herself not alone in the hall, she jumped in surprise. With her hand on her chest she said, "Oh, my lady, you gave me a scare. I did not see you come down."

"Sorry, Alice. I did not mean to give you a fright. What are you doing up so early?"

Brushing her hands on her apron, Alice shrugged her shoulders. "I could not sleep. All those men out there worry me."

"We are safe for the moment." Jacqueline hoped she sounded convincing because that was not at all how she felt. Alice did not need to know that, though. "Now that you have the fire lit, can you go and sit in my chamber with Jordan? He is still asleep."

Alice smiled. "With pleasure, my lady. I will bring him to you once he awakens."

After Alice disappeared up the stairs, Jacqueline turned to face the newly lit fire. Even though spring had arrived and the days were getting increasingly warmer, the castle still felt chilly. Extending her hands toward the flames, she let the heat soak in.

Sir Guy found her that way when he came in search of her. "I am glad to see you are awake, lass. Saves me from having to wake you."

Jacqueline let her arms fall to her sides and watched as the older man approached. "Something has happened. Has it not?"

"Aye. Your father is at the causeway, demanding to speak with you." When Jacqueline moved to leave, Sir Guy stopped her. "There is one other thing. He has Terric with him."

Her steps faltered for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure. Taking long steady strides, she quickly left the hall and climbed up to the top of the castle walls. Sir Guy followed closely behind her.

Just as Sir Guy had said, the earl stood at the end of the causeway. He was accompanied by two of his men, who acted as guards for their prisoner. Terric stood between them, bound.

Jacqueline felt anger boil up inside her. The earl stood there, looking so self-assured. Almost as if he assumed his mere presence would open Nunney up to him. But she had no intention of handing the castle over to him. She walked up to the parapet wall and stared down at her father.

"You requested to speak with me. Here I am."

The earl looked up at her. "Ah, daughter. So you have come. Do you not think it would be better if you let me in? That way we could speak more freely."

"What do you take me for, father? Without sense? If you want words with me, say them from where you stand."

Even from the great distance that separated them, Jacqueline could see the earl's face turn red with ire. All pretences were gone when he finally found his voice once more. "You stupid girl! You know why I am here. Nunney is mine and you are going to give it to me."

"Nay. I will not. Nunney is my son's birthright. It never was to be yours. It makes no difference what deal you made with Forwin. I wonder what the king would say if he found out about your underhanded ways."

"Enough!" the earl bellowed. He then snapped his fingers. His men brought Terric to the end of the causeway

in response to his summons. "Either you lower the drawbridge, or you forfeit the life of your lover."

Jacqueline gripped the edge of the stone parapet wall so tightly, her fingers turned white. Her gaze shot to Terric's face. He gave her an inconspicuous shake of his head, telling her not to give in to the earl's demands.

Growing impatient, the earl yelled up at her. "Well? What have you decided?"

Sir Guy came to stand next to Jacqueline and spoke with hushed tones into her ear. "Ask for more time before you give him your answer. We need the time to think of a way to get Terric away from him."

Jacqueline nodded her head in response, then said to the earl, "I need time before I can make my decision."

Below, Terric tried to pull free from the two men who held him. "Jacqueline! I am dead anyway. Do not let him take Nunney. It will make no difference."

Annoyed, the earl motioned to his men with a flick of his wrist. "Shut him up."

Taking the butt of his sword, one of the men slammed it down onto the back of Terric's head. He crumpled into a heap on the dusty causeway. Jacqueline cried out to him.

"I will give you until dawn on the morrow. If you do not lower the drawbridge then, you can watch your lover die."

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Chapter Twenty Four

Jacqueline felt sick as she watched her father's men drag the now unconscious Terric away. She felt so helpless, which was exactly how her father wanted her to feel.

Before returning to his encampment, the earl had one final thing to say to her. "You may be my daughter, but that will not stop me from taking Nunney down a stone at a time if I must. Or from making you pay the price for trying to take what I want."

She stood at the wall long after the earl had gone. Sir Guy stayed by her side. "Time to return to the hall, lass. Standing out here will not be any help to Terric."

Prying her stiff fingers from the wall, Jacqueline looked blankly at Sir Guy. "There is no hope for us. I cannot save him."

"There is always hope, Jacqueline. Do not give up the fight so easily. You are a fighter, girl. You cannot let him beat you. Now is the time to show that bastard he does not get whatever he wants."

She shook her head meekly in denial. "I am not strong enough. Too much is at stake here. How could I live

with myself if I retain Nunney at the cost of Terric's life? I would look at these walls day in and day out and see his blood upon them. That is too much to ask of me."

"Come down to the hall. I am sure Beth and Edwin are now awake. We have a day. The four of us should be able to put our heads together and come up with some way of getting Terric from the earl's clutches." Taking Jacqueline by the arm, Sir Guy began to lead her from the wall. "Remember, you are not alone. We will prevail."

* * * *

Surfacing to awareness, Terric groaned in pain. His head felt as if it were cracked in two. To make sure it really was still in one piece, he gingerly lifted his head off the ground. It held together, much to his surprise.

Carefully rolling to his side, Terric tried to push himself into an upright position. The movement cost him greatly. Sweat poured down his face and he felt his world spin as dizziness overtook him. Closing his eyes seemed to help somewhat.

The picture of Jacqueline standing upon the castle walls rose to play behind his closed eyes. He had felt a moment of triumph, seeing that she was indeed safe. But he had also seen the fear and the helplessness she felt facing the earl. Knowing it was he who engendered such feelings in her made Terric wish he could make this all disappear for her. Jacqueline should not have to go through a situation like this one. She had already been through enough hardship.

Around mid-day, one of the earl's men brought food and water for Terric. He silently placed the tray he carried beside him, then just as quietly left.

Grasping the jug of water with his bound hands, Terric greedily drank from it. Figuring this would be all he could expect in the way of nourishment for the day, he made sure he left half the bread and cheese for later. He did the same with the water.

Once he finished his simple meal, there was only one thing left to him-sit and wait and see what fate would deal him.

* * * *

"Can we come up with nothing?" Jacqueline asked vehemently.

Jacqueline felt the hours of frustration wearing her down. Among the four of them, they had yet to come up with a feasible plan to free Terric. Many of the problems stemmed from the castle's own defenses. The moat being their only real barrier for safety, it extended all the way to the castle walls and that made it as much of an obstacle as a defense.

At first, the only response Jacqueline received to her question was silence. Then Edwin cleared his throat and hesitantly said, "I have....have an idea."

Jacqueline immediately perked up. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well ... what if I were to have someone lower me down to the moat at the back of the castle? Then I could swim to the other side and sneak into the earl's camp to free Terric. I doubt they would expect someone like me to attempt anything like that. I know how to keep myself from being seen. I learned that lesson well before Terric found me in London." Having lived alone on some of that city's meanest streets from a very early age and survived attested to his skill.

Sir Guy seemed to take what Edwin suggested into serious consideration. But eventually he shook his head in the negative. "Nay, sorry lad, but it is too risky."

Edwin, who had been sitting by the hearth, shot to his feet and walked over to the trestle table where Jacqueline, Beth, and Sir Guy sat. "It can work. I know it can. The earl does not have any of his men watching the back of the castle. I know. I looked. He thinks he has us where he wants us. He is too sure of himself."

Beth who had sat silently listening as the others spoke decided to contribute to the discussion. "Sorry to say this Sir Guy, but I have to agree with Edwin. The earl would never expect what Edwin plans to do."

The older man threw up his hands in consternation. "I really have no right to stop you, Edwin. But I cannot help but feel you do not know what kind of danger you will be putting yourself in."

In response to the other man's concerns Edwin chuckled, but without humor. "No more dangerous than what I lived with every day in London as a child. It makes no difference to me. Terric saved my life. It is my turn to pay back the favor. I have to try. I owe him that much."

Sir Guy nodded. "Fine, lad. We will give your plan a try tonight. Time is running out and so far you are our best hope."

* * * *

Moving stealthily, Jacqueline kept to the shadows as she made her way to the back of the castle. Reaching the stairs that would take her to the top of the walls, she took the steps two at a time. She carried a long coil of rope over her one shoulder.

As Sir Guy and Edwin discussed the squire's plan to rescue Terric, she had been busily planning her own. She decided she would take Edwin's place. So as darkness began to fall, Jacqueline made her move. She would cross the moat on her own, much earlier than Edwin was to make his attempt.

Gaining the top of the stairs, she worked quickly. She tied the rope through one of the notches in the wall, then threw the length of it over. Slipping her dagger free from its sheath that hung at her waist, she placed the blade between her lips. Taking hold of the rope, she then swung her legs over the wall and began to slowly make her way down to the moat below.

Jacqueline sucked in her breath as she entered the water. The coldness of it was a shock. Setting off with smooth, even strokes, she clamped her teeth together, preventing them from chattering. Reaching the other side, she quickly scanned the edge of the moat for any movement. Luck seemed to be on her side because she appeared to be alone. Pulling herself up and onto dry ground, she shook the water from her hair. Then, stealthily, she began the task of sneaking into her father's encampment.

* * * *

Sir Guy accompanied Edwin up to the wall. The sight of a rope already tied to the wall surprised both men. Finding it hanging down to the moat below sent a chill running up their spines.

Having scanned the bank on the opposite side and finding it deserted, Sir Guy swore under his breath. He then set off at a run. Taking the steps down practically three at a time, he hurried back to the hall. Edwin followed closely behind him.

Throwing open the hall doors, both men barreled through them. Beth, who had been pacing before the hearth, let out a gasp of surprise. Seeing how Sir Guy searched every inch of the hall with his eyes, she began to get

the feeling all was not right. "What is wrong?"

Sir Guy's response was to answer her with another question. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Jacqueline. Where is she?"

"Is she not with you? She is not in her chamber. I just came from there. Alice is the only one there, watching Jordan."

Letting out a bellow of rage, the older man headed for the chambers above. Mindful of the sleeping babe within, he quietly opened Jacqueline's chamber door. Alice sat in a chair near the cradle stitching. She looked up from her work when the door swung open. At Sir Guy's signal for her to join him outside, she put aside her sewing and came over to him.

"Where is your mistress?"

Unable to look him in the face, Alice said quietly, "I know not. She just bid me to mind the little lord."

Taking the girl by the shoulders, Sir Guy gave her a little shake. "Do not play dumb with me, girl." Alice began to whimper. "You know where Jacqueline went and you are going to tell me."

Alice whimpered once more. "She made me promise not to say. But I will tell you, sir. She has gone to rescue her husband."

Sir Guy closed his eyes briefly and sent up a silent prayer, one to save him from headstrong women. "How long ago did she leave?"

"When it grew dark." Alice cringed. She knew the older knight was furious with her for not informing him of her mistress's plans, and at Lady Jacqueline for taking on such a dangerous task by herself.

Releasing the servant girl, Sir Guy returned to the hall to break the news to Beth and Edwin. Both stood near the stairs waiting expectantly. He shook his head.

"The fool of a lass has gone over the wall by herself. From the amount of time that has passed, I would say she is at this moment working her way into the camp."

Silently, Beth walked back to the trestle table and refilled her goblet of wine. She tossed it back in two large gulps. Sir Guy thought she had the way of it. They would all need some wine to fortify their spirits if they were to get through this night. He just hoped Jacqueline knew what she was doing out there.

* * * *

Nicholas savored the rich wine the earl provided to all who had been invited to his pavilion. They were celebrating the morrow's victory. The earl planned to walk through Nunney's gates and claim the castle as his own.

He had not spoken with the earl personally since their first meeting, but he expected he would soon. When he had received the invitation to join this impromptu celebration, it had said his attendance was mandatory. It was a command that had not really been necessary. It was not as if he would have turned the invitation down in the first place.

Now, sipping his wine, Nicholas casually watched the earl conversing with the captain of his men. So far, his

presence had not been acknowledged. There was nothing for it but to wait.

As the evening progressed, and still he had not been singled out by the earl, Nicholas began to wonder if he would be ignored after all. Draining his fourth goblet of wine, he felt the pressing need to relieve himself. Slipping from the pavilion, he found a secluded spot just behind it.

Loosening his hose, he did his business. Soon, he realized he was not alone. Two others were doing the same thing as he. Though he could not see them, he could hear their conversation. And what he heard sent a chill running up and down his back.

"Did you see that minstrel in there? Acting as if he had every right to be among us," said the first man.

"Aye, but the earl promised to reward him." the second man replied.

"Oh he is going to get his reward all right. The reward of meeting his maker." Both men laughed uproariously at the quip they shared.

As their laughter faded, when they headed back into the pavilion, Nicholas stood frozen. He was unable to move. Panic had seized him in its steely grip and it would not let go.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, he slowly backed up. There was no question of his returning to the earl's pavilion. He had to run. Before they realized he was gone.

Quickly as he could, he collected up his belongings and strapped them to his horse. Once more he had been cheated out of what was his due. He hoped the earl would get what he so richly deserved. His precious Nunney Castle barred against him.

* * * *

Keeping as low to the ground as she could, Jacqueline crawled around to the back of the pavilion inside her father's camp. She had donned her darkest tunic and hose before leaving the castle, and so with only a quarter moon covered by heavy clouds, she was able to move around virtually unseen. Not that there was anyone roaming about the camp to see her. The earl was indeed sure of his victory. No guards were posted and the sounds of revelry could be heard drifting from the opposite side of the encampment.

Even in the darkness, Jacqueline could easily distinguish the earl's pavilion midst the few others. His was the most lavishly adorned, with his standard boldly standing before it.

Hoping Terric was not being held in there, Jacqueline decided to check the smaller pavilions at the very edge of the camp. Reaching the first one, she used her dagger to cut a small slit in the canvas just big enough for her to peer through.

At first she could only see the bundles of supplies spread haphazardly around the interior. Her eyes then rested on the supine form of Terric. He lay off to the one side, not too far from where she had made her peep hole.

Terric had been dozing. The inactivity, coupled with the headache caused by the blow to his head, made him feel lethargic. But at the sound of the canvas being cut right next to where he lay, he came fully to his senses. Turning his head toward the pavilion wall, he watched the tip of a dagger cut a large slit in it, then disappear. He sat up suddenly when a hand was put through the hole the dagger had created.

Unsure whether it belonged to a friend or foe trying to gain entry, Terric grabbed the hand before him and yanked with all his might. The momentum caused the intruder to fall through the opening, land squarely on his

chest, and knock him flat onto his back. He groaned in pain as his head hit the ground.

* * * *

Jacqueline stifled a scream as she was roughly yanked inside the pavilion. Ending up sprawled across Terric's chest, she did what seemed the most natural thing to do in such a position. Taking his face in both her hands, she kissed him thoroughly.

At first, Terric returned her kiss enthusiastically, but he soon realized where they were. He turned his head to the side and pulled free from Jacqueline's embrace. With eyes blazing, he then looked up at her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he whispered to her.

Choosing to ignore his ire, Jacqueline broadly smiled back at him. Speaking in equally hushed tones, she said, "I have come to rescue you of course."

"Why did you not stay safely behind Nunney's walls? How could you have acted so rashly?"

Her smile slowly faded. "You cannot have expected me to idly stand by and let the earl kill you."

"If needs be, that is exactly what I wanted you to do."

Sliding from Terric's chest, Jacqueline cut the strip of leather binding his hands before him. "Well, I could not live with myself if I had. It is because of me you are here."

Pulling her back into his arms, Terric kissed her deeply once more. "I will not say I am not happy to see you, Jacqueline, but you have taken a huge risk. If anything happened to you"

Gently caressing his cheek, she gave him a half smile. "And I, too. You are a part of me now. I have already suffered greatly from the loss of William. Do not make me go through that again with you. I could not survive it this time I think."

"Then, lady wife, I suggest we get the hell out of here."

Squeezing Terric's hand, Jacqueline then slipped out of the pavilion through the hole she had made previously. Once Terric joined her, she let him lead the way out of the encampment. She really had not thought of what would happen after she had freed him. All her attention had been focused on just finding him.

Taking Jacqueline by the hand, he pulled her after him as he headed for the wooded area at the outskirts of the camp. The distance was great, but keeping to a crouched run, they reached it without being spotted. Now in the cover of the trees, they both straightened and started to push their way through the thick brush.

Hoping to find some place of concealment, Terric searched for a thicket or clump of overgrown brush. There was no question of them returning to the castle now. Once he was found missing, the alarm would be raised and being anywhere near the castle walls would be pure folly.

Fate seemed to be on their side. After walking for a quarter of an hour, what he had been searching for presented itself-a thicket surrounded by thorns. There was a small opening at the bottom of it. Squatting down, Terric peered through the opening. It seemed to be a rabbit run. On the other end, it appeared to have a clearing in the very center. It was just big enough for Jacqueline and himself.

Standing once more, he found the top of the thicket taller than his six feet four inches, which was perfect. If anyone should walk by their hiding place, they could remain undetected.

The entrance would be a very tight squeeze, particularly for himself the way it was now. But if he widened it slightly to accommodate his large frame, hopefully it would not damage it too much. Motioning Jacqueline to give him her dagger, he went down on his knees and proceeded to push his way through the thicket. Once his feet disappeared from view, Jacqueline followed.

They did not escape the thorns completely unscathed. Both ended up with scratches on their arms and hands. Terric suffered worse on his hands from having wielded the dagger.

Jacqueline breathed a sigh of relief once she cleared the thorns. The clearing was a tight fit for the two of them, but when Terric pulled her into his arms, she found it mattered not.

Terric claimed her lips in a searing kiss. The feel of having her body beneath him, felt like heaven. It was something he had not expected to experience ever again. His body demanded more, but he knew now was not the time to give his passion free rein. Danger still lurked on the outside of their hiding spot. Reluctantly, he tried to pull away. Jacqueline would not allow it.

Threading her fingers through the hair at the nape of Terric's neck, she pulled his head down to meet her lips. She was not ready yet to let him go. He seemed to understand what she was feeling, the desperation to be so very close to him. He licked her bottom lip till she allowed him access to her mouth. The taste of him heightened her arousal. Moaning, Jacqueline lifted her hips up to meet his, demanding more.

Breaking contact with her lips, Terric rested his forehead against hers. He was panting, as if he had been running a long distance. Once he got his breathing back under control, he tried to explain why they could not go any further. "I am just a man, Jacqueline. I cannot take much more of this. We, I need to keep my wits about me. You are just too distracting."

Knowing Terric was right still did not make Jacqueline feel any better. Her body clamored for his. "When all of this is over, you better finish what you started here."

Terric smiled. "Your wish is my command, my lady. But now, you should try and sleep while you can."

"What about you?"

"I will keep watch. You rest."

Jacqueline yawned. The lack of sleep the night before was starting to catch up with her. "Fine, I will do as you say. But wake me after a few hours so you can rest, as well."

Moving to his back, Terric pulled Jacqueline to his side so he could hold her to his chest. It was not long after he felt her body relax and her breathing become even in sleep. Holding her closer, he kissed the top of her head. He prayed that come the morn, they would remain unfound. He did not want to think of what might happen to them if they fell into the earl's hands once again.

* * * *

The morning was not going as he had expected. When the earl retired the night before, he knew he had won. But much had transpired during the darkness of the night.

Firstly, his association with the minstrel had not been brought to an acceptable close. The sniveling man must have gotten wind of what was in store for him. The earl shook his head. He disliked loose ends such as Nicholas running about. They tended to hold grudges. But the problem of the minstrel was minor compared with the other one.

Sitting himself down in one of his camp chairs, the earl cursed his daughter once more. He knew she was partly responsible for freeing her lover. He had once again underestimated her. But in some small way, he began to feel a growing respect for Jacqueline. She showed more backbone than her brother ever had.

The loss of William he still felt keenly, but not out of any feeling that one gets at the death of one's child. Nay, he did not feel that way. What he felt was the loss of having an heir. With William gone, all his holdings would now go to one of his cousins upon his death. If only his wife could have born twin sons instead of bearing a worthless daughter.

Hearing scratching on the side of his pavilion, the earl bid the person on the outside to enter. One of his men stepped inside.

"Well? Have you found any trace of him yet?"

The man shook his head. "Nay. We have looked all around the perimeter of the camp. There is no sign of him."

The earl leveled a steely gaze upon the man, then said very slowly, "I suggest you further your search. Did it not occur to any of you to search farther than just the camp? Like in the forest next to the camp." The man-at-arms mumbled something unintelligible. "For God sake man, speak up!"

The other man cleared his throat in nervousness. "Most of the men are afraid to go in there."

"I want that forest searched. Now!" the earl roared.

Bowing, the man-at-arms backed out of the pavilion. The earl ground his teeth in ire. He was surrounded by idiots. No wonder his best laid plans were falling apart.

* * * *

The feel of bright sunshine beating down on her, along with the birds singing to the dawning of a new day, brought Jacqueline out of her sleep. Blinking, she tried to get her bearings. Being wrapped in the still sleeping arms of Terric, helped her to recall all of the events from the previous night.

Turning her head to look up at her husband, Jacqueline smiled at the sight of him. Asleep, his face seemed softer, not held in the stern expression he had worn during their flight. Extending her hand, she softly brushed a finger across his lips. Terric's mouth opened in response, and he took a nip at her finger.

"I thought you were supposed to wake me."

Terric stretched his large frame. "I did not have the heart to disturb you. I managed to get a few hours of rest."

Sitting up, Jacqueline stretched the kinks out of her back. "Still, you should have."

"Be that as it may, we had an uneventful rest. Now we should make our way back to the castle. Though this was a good hiding spot at night, in the light of day it loses some of its merits. I think it would be prudent to leave."

Jacqueline had to agree. She would not relish the idea of being trapped within these thorny confines, unable to flee quickly. So she gladly followed Terric through the wicked barbs.

She managed to just safely get her head through the thorns, when Terric slammed a hand down on her and

pushed her back in. He was totally clear of them and stood just outside the opening.

"Stay there!" he whispered harshly. Before she could question why, he took off at a run, heading deeper into the woods.

The sound of voices moving closer to her hiding spot caused her heart to jump into her throat. It was not long before a couple of men stood directly in front of the run where she lay. Jacqueline stiffened, afraid to move even slightly, not wanting to draw their attention to where she hid. Her heart thudded in her ears so loudly she was sure it would give her away.

After what seemed an extraordinarily long time, the men moved off to carry their search elsewhere. She let her breath out in a loud gasp. She fought the urge to burst from her hiding place and go in search of Terric. Instead, she lay there for a few minutes longer, then pulled herself free.

In a quandary as to what she should do, Jacqueline fought a silent battle within herself. She could either try to find Terric here in the woods, or find her own way back out of them. She had not really been able to see in which direction he had headed. If she tried to follow, she risked the chance of meeting up with the earl's men, as well.

Hitting her fist on her thigh, Jacqueline cursed. There really was only one option. She had to work her way back to the castle without Terric.

* * * *

Edwin stretched his stiff back. He had been standing way too long. When the hours ticked by and there was no sign of Jacqueline or Terric returning to the castle, he had climbed the stairs to the walls. Sleep would be an impossible task with those two still somewhere out there near the earl's camp.

Standing on the walls, watching the camp below, made him feel a little bit better. As long as no hew and cry was raised, then Jacqueline and Terric were safe. If it did occur, then he was prepared to try something, anything to help.

At some point during the night, Sir Guy had come to share his vigil. Worry lines were etched into the older man's face. "Still no sign of them?" he calmly asked.

Edwin shook his head in response to his query. "Nay, nothing. But as long as there is no activity below, I take that for a good sign."

"I agree. I should still wring the lass's neck for pulling this stunt, though. I think she has aged me another twenty years this night."

Beneath the gruffness, Edwin could hear the deep concern Sir Guy was feeling for Jacqueline. "She can take care of herself. She will find a way to set Terric free."

Sir Guy grunted. "Aye, I know she will. I just wish she would not take such risks. She has a son to think about."

Both men fell silent. Not long after, the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs at the far end of the wall brought them out of their silent reverie. Each man turned and watched as Beth stepped onto the walkway. Sir Guy noticed how Edwin stared longingly at her.

Before Beth reached them, Sir Guy said, "I will leave you two alone." He then turned to look at Edwin. "Do not give up on her, lad. The time will come when she will be ready to accept you." Seeing the shocked

expression on the squire's face, he smiled and winked at him. "I may seem old to you, but I am not dead yet." With that said, he then left the two young people alone.

* * * *

Beth paused on the walkway to watch Sir Guy take the stairs down to the bailey. She looked questioningly at Edwin once they were alone. "Where is he off to?"

Edwin sheepishly answered, "He is giving us some privacy."

Moving to stand beside him, Beth smiled. "Sir Guy is cannier than I thought."

Even though dawn was closely approaching, the chill of the night still could be felt. Beth wrapped her arms around herself. Noticing what she did, Edwin pulled her to stand in front of him so he could hold her in his arms. He was not too sure what her reaction would be, but he felt pleasantly surprised when she allowed it.

They stood in that position, not speaking for a few minutes. Beth was the first to speak. "You are worried about him. Terric must mean a lot to you. Am I right?"

"Aye. He is like a brother to me. If not for Terric, I doubt I would be alive today. I owe him so much."

Leaning further back into his embrace, Beth realized how much she missed this, being held tenderly by a man. "Everything will be all right, Edwin."

Edwin kissed the top of her head. She fitted nicely under his chin. "I have told myself that very thing time and again."

Watching as the dawn broke over the horizon, Edwin decided not to let this moment slip between his fingers. There was no telling how this day would end. He might not have another opportunity to speak his mind for days, even months to come. Working up his courage, he then dove in feet first.

Turning Beth in his arms so she faced him, he stared down at her. She looked back at him expectantly. "I know right now, I have nothing to offer you. But Terric has promised to knight me soon. Do you think, after I am knighted, you could consider me worthy of you?"

Beth could see a wide range of emotions flitting across his face. She knew this cost him much. His feeling of uncertainty could be easily read in his eyes. And she loved those green eyes. She would always love William, but Edwin had wormed his way, slowly albeit, into her heart.

Sending up a silent pray for forgiveness if William was watching over her, Beth smiled up at Edwin. "Aye, Edwin, I would happily accept you." And to show him what she was feeling, she went up on tip toe and placed a kiss on his lips.

Crushing Beth up against his chest, Edwin kissed her back. He poured his heart and soul into the kiss. She reciprocated in kind.

As the kiss continued, the dawn's sunny rays reached the castle walls. The bright light washed over the embracing couple with its warmth, outlining them in gold.

Chapter Twenty Five

The time it was taking to return to Nunney was more than it had taken to enter the woods. Afraid to come across the men searching for Terric and her, Jacqueline stopped every few minutes to listen for sounds of movement around her. A few times she could hear a snap of a twig coming from behind her or in front. But the trees distorted the sounds, making it hard to judge the exact location they were coming from.

By the time she reached the edge of the trees, the sun was high in the sky. Sweat ran down her back and between her breasts, making Jacqueline wish she could have a bath. Her breasts ached from a build up of milk, reminding her she had to get back to Jordan very soon. It would not be at all well to have her milk dry up now.

From the corner of her eye, she spied a group of men exiting the woods about twelve feet from where she stood. Jacqueline quickly took a step back inside the tree line.

There were four of the earl's men, and they had Terric with them. She did not think, she only acted. She ran after them. They did not see her at first, so she was able to reach the last man of the group and throw her full weight against his back. Unprepared, the man fell to his knees. Using the momentary confusion, Terric slammed his fist into the jaw of the man standing at his side. He dropped like a stone.

Unarmed, Jacqueline jumped onto the back of one of the two still standing, and placed her hands over his eyes. Unable to see, he tried to shake her off. She tenaciously hung on until Terric finished taking care of the final man. She jumped off before Terric's fist met the man's face.

With three down and one still struggling to gain his feet, struggling against the weight of his armor, Terric grabbed Jacqueline's hand and began to run. They ran straight into the earl.

Her father was not alone. He had at least a handful of men with him. Terric valiantly tried to get them through, but sheer numbers won out. He was roughly subdued by the earl's men. Leaving Jacqueline to stand by herself to confront her father. The earl stared at her, trying to intimidate her. Throwing up her chin in defiance, she boldly stared back.

Taking her arm in a steely grip, the earl started to lead her away toward the castle. "I admire your boldness, daughter, but on a woman, it is an unseemly trait. It seems I have misjudged you."

Jacqueline did not respond to his words. Instead, she looked behind her to see if Terric was still with her. He was being held by a man on either side of him, with a third bringing up the rear. That man used his sword to jab into Terric's back to urge him on.

Her father did not miss her show of concern. "You love him. I can see it. Shall we test your love for him? How far will you go to save the life of a mere landless tournament knight?"

"He is more than that. He is my husband," Jacqueline said through gritted teeth.

The earl pulled her up short, almost jerking her off her feet. "Has the marriage been consummated?" When Jacqueline defiantly refused to answer, he gave her a hard shake. "Answer me, girl! Has it been consummated?"

Putting a sweet smile on her lips, she said, "Aye, well and truly."

Pulling her once more into motion, her father marched her to the castle causeway. "You just signed your husband's death warrant. Nunney is mine and nothing will stand in my way of claiming it."

In a loud roar, the earl yelled up at the castle, making their presence known to those within. A minute later, Sir Guy appeared at the top of the wall. His face fell when he saw Jacqueline standing beside her father.

"Lower the drawbridge, now, or I will be forced to take drastic measures."

When his threat engendered no response from the man above, he hissed at Jacqueline, "Order that old fool to do as I say."

She shook her head without meeting the earl's eyes. "Nay."

With a snarl, the earl ordered Terric brought to them. "I will ask you one more time. Give the order."

Terric caught Jacqueline's eye. He gave an infinitesimal shake of his head. She knew what he was asking her to do. But she did not know if she could follow through.

"I see your decision is made. So be it." Her father turned to his men. "Kill him."

* * * *

Terric kept his eyes firmly clamped on Jacqueline's face. The last thing he wanted to see was her. He knew the earl would not dare harm her. She was too valuable to him. He, on the other hand, was expendable. A sacrifice he was all too willing to make to protect his family.

The man, who had been at his back with sword drawn, moved to stand before Terric. With the point held at his chest, the earl's man waited for the order to press it home.

Jacqueline clenched her hands into fists. Her nails bit deeply into her palms. She felt ill. Watching her father raise one of his hands to give the signal, the feeling intensified. She closed her eyes, unable to watch what would happen next.

The blast of a horn reverberated throughout the encampment, causing all the participants in the grisly tableau to freeze and search for the source of the sound. Desperately, Jacqueline scanned the surrounding area, hoping their luck had changed.

At the sight of a large party of mounted riders, she felt a renewed surge of hope. Their numbers were much larger than the men her father had under his command. And there was something about one of the lead riders that she found very familiar. When the party grew nearer, it became easy to discern that there was a woman riding up in the front.

Squinting, Jacqueline peered closely at the woman. When she recognized her, she let out a loud whoop of joy. The earl flashed her a quelling look. She laughed. "It seems you have lost after all, father. If I am not mistaken, my mother leads that large party of soldiers approaching."

The utter fury that crossed the earl's features was terrible to behold. Snapping around, he grabbed the sword aimed at Terric's chest from his man. With a growl, he drew it back to thrust it through her husband's heart.

"Nay!" she yelled. Throwing herself at her father, she barreled into him, pushing him away from Terric. The instant the feel of a cold steel blade resting against the base of her throat broke into her awareness, Jacqueline

froze.

"You have made my life very burdensome of late, daughter. Once I am through dealing with your husband, I will make you regret ever crossing me."

"I think not, William." Both caught up in their own struggles, neither the earl nor Jacqueline noticed the arrival of Lady Elizabeth and her party. It was she that had spoken.

Swinging a leg over her horse's back, Lady Elizabeth dismounted and went to her husband. "Lower the sword, William. It is over." When he did not quickly comply with her order, she stepped closer to him. "I suggest you take a good look at the soldiers I have brought. They are the king's men and wear his colors."

The earl's face blanched quite white as he found his wife's words to be true. She had brought a large force of the king's men with her. He slowly let the sword fall away from Jacqueline's throat.

The knight who had moved to stand next to her mother took the earl by his arm and said, "By order of the king, you are to quit Nunney and return to London, my lord. The king commands your presence there."

Defeated, the earl allowed himself to be led back to the encampment below. His men were escorted back with him.

Jacqueline, unable to hold back any longer, threw herself into Terric's outstretched arms. She desperately clung to him. He held her equally tightly.

"Tell me. Do I have a new son-in-law?"

Releasing Terric, Jacqueline embraced her mother. She then stepped back and reached for her husband's hand. "Aye, mother, you do." Looking at the now overflowing encampment, she asked, "How did you manage all this?"

Lady Elizabeth chuckled. "I am not completely useless, though your father thinks I am. During the grand tournament, I decided to make some connections of my own. While you were off playing knight, I gained the queen's favor. Let us just say, I pulled some strings and was able to speak with the king and queen. The earl is going to have to do some quick talking to explain his actions here. The king is displeased with him at the moment."

Now that the frightening episode was at an end, all three relieved the tension by laughing at what the earl would have to endure to gain the king's favor once more.

The sound of a baby's wails drifted over the castle walls. Jacqueline cringed in response. "I think I had better get myself back to the hall. Beth must be ready to pull her hair out." As if on cue, the drawbridge lowered and there stood her friend with a very distressed Jordan in her arms.

"Do you think, Jacqueline, now that you are no longer busy, you could please feed your son? He has made his displeasure known about having to take the cow's milk we gave him."

Taking pity on her, Jacqueline laughingly shook her head, then went to retrieve her son. "Of course, Beth."

* * * *

With Jordan happily fed, Lady Elizabeth claimed her grandmotherly rights and spirited him down to the hall, leaving Terric and Jacqueline alone in the lord's chamber. Both had bathed, changed into fresh clothing, and now sat on the bed feeding each other from the tray of food Alice had brought up to them.

Jacqueline could not get the smug smile to leave her face. Everything was now as it should be. Terric was her husband, and the earl had been put in his place. On the morrow, the king's men would be taking him back to London.

Having had her fill, she sighed and then lay back on the bed. Terric removed the tray and fell into her outstretched arms. His lips covered hers greedily. After making her completely breathless, he pulled away and began to work on unbuckling the belt circled around her hips. Impatiently, Jacqueline shoved his hands away to remove it herself. Terric smiled at her eagerness.

"I hope you never tire of me, wife."

Jacqueline tossed her belt to the floor and then began working on Terric's tunic. "Never. You will not be rid of me so easily. I do not give up on things I have to fight so hard to keep."

Terric reached for the hem of her tunic and began to ease it up her body. "I am pleased. No more talk, I have waited long enough to make love to you properly. There will be time to talk later. Much later." To be sure of her silence, he claimed her lips once more.

Jacqueline groaned with pleasure. There would be more than enough time for talk. A lifetime of it. Her tournament knight was now hers. Nothing could break them apart. The last coherent thought she had before she let the pleasurable sensations take her over was to send up a prayer of thanks.

Pushing Terric onto his back, Jacqueline slowly stripped away each piece of clothing he wore. When he tried to help, she only slapped his hands away. "You will lie there and behave yourself. I want to have my way with you."

Terric groaned. "Do you not think I have had enough torture? Do you really want to send me to an early grave?"

Jacqueline smiled saucily at him. "No, I do not. I just want to give you pleasure."

Spreading his arms wide on the bed, Terric said, "Then I give my lady wife permission to pleasure me anyway she sees fit."

Straddling Terric's thighs, Jacqueline ran her hands across his hard chest and then let her fingers trail down to his engorged shaft. Grabbing it with one of her hands she gently squeezed then pulled down. She then let her hand slide back up to the tip. Terric's hips rose up off the bed, moving as she worked him.

Becoming just as aroused as Terric by what she was doing to him, Jacqueline released him and inched forward so the tip of his shaft nudged at her opening. Tipping her hips at the right angle, she pushed down, fully sheathing him inside her body. They both moaned.

Unable to not touch her any longer, Terric grabbed Jacqueline by the hips, lifted her slightly then pushed her back down onto himself, showing her how to ride him. Jacqueline moaned at the feeling of having Terric so deep inside her. Doing as he had shown her, Jacqueline slid up and down on Terric. As her climax inched ever closer, she increased the pace. When it hit her, she let her head fall back, groaning with her release. Terric pushed up, hard, once more then emptied himself into her.

* * * *

It was some hours before Terric and Jacqueline joined the others in the hall. The need to reaffirm their bond had not been something they could ignore so easily. Now with that desperate need fulfilled, at least for the moment, they emerged from their chamber.

Lady Elizabeth, who held her grandson in her arms, was the first to notice their arrival. "So you have finally come up for a breath of air, I see."

Jacqueline flushed bright red to the very roots of her hair. "Mother!"

Her mother laughed. "My marriage to your father might not be made from the stuff of dreams, but I do recognize true love. I see it in the love you and Terric have for each other. It is nothing to be ashamed of."

Kissing her mother on her cheek, Jacqueline noticed Jordan was fast asleep in his grandmother's arms. "Let me take Jordan to his cradle. Alice will not mind watching him until he wakes up."

"You will do nothing of the sort. He is perfectly fine here. He is content and so am I."

"Very well, have it your way mother. But I want to hear exactly how you managed to acquire some of the king's men."

Lady Elizabeth smiled slyly. "I used my time in London to my advantage, as I said before. Your father assumed I was properly cowed." She paused in her story as Jacqueline burst out laughing. Once she brought herself back under control, her mother continued.

"Hmm, as I was saying, the earl thought I was firmly put in my place. But as all men of his ilk forget, we women can be very resourceful when pressed. So when your father allowed me to join the queen and her ladies, I took advantage of the situation."

Jacqueline shook her head. The earl was a fool. He knew not what his wife could do. If he had taken the time to know her better at the start of their marriage, he would have realized his wife was an asset to him. She would have been able to help in furthering his status.

"However you did it mother, I applaud you. If not for your propitious arrival, I would now be a widow once more."

Terric came and wrapped his arm around his wife's waist, pulling her close. He had heard how her voice hitched on the last few words she had spoken. "I agree with Jacqueline, my lady. You could not have picked a better time."

Sir Guy broke into the conversation. "Aye, you put the earl in his place quite nicely, my lady. But there appears to be one loose end in all of this."

Lady Elizabeth arched a brow at him. "What loose end?"

"I had a little chat with one of the earl's men. As we predicted, Nicholas was the one who informed the earl of Forwin's double dealing. He also joined the earl when he marched on Nunney."

"Are you saying Nicholas is right now, down in the camp?"

"Nay, lass. But he was. Apparently the earl decided to end his association with Nicholas, permanently. Somehow, the minstrel caught wind of this and beat a hasty retreat."

"I knew Nicholas was in the earl's camp. He came to see me, but I did not know about his leave taking," Terric added.

Jacqueline looked up at her husband. "What did Nicholas want with you?"

Terric shrugged. "I think mostly to lord it over me that I was the captive and he was in the earl's good graces,

or so he thought."

The conversation then switched to the earl's departure on the following morning. Jacqueline, lost in her own thoughts, did not pay very close attention to what was being said. One part of her felt safe and secure now that her father could no longer hurt her or her family, but another small part of her felt uneasy. The others might assume Nicholas was no longer a threat, but she did not. The one thing she had learned about the minstrel during the months of his living under the same roof was that he did not give up so easily. Though the chances that he would attempt something on his own were slim, Jacqueline could not dismiss the persistent feeling that he would.

Chapter Twenty Six

Life finally began to take on some normalcy for Jacqueline. She settled into the role of chatelaine surprisingly well. But what she found most rewarding was being a wife and mother.

Lady Elizabeth stayed at Nunney with them for a month. That was as long as she wanted to be absent from Carisbrooke. It was a sad leave taking on the day of her departure. But her mother had promised to return soon. She did not want to miss too much of Jordan's growing.

The earl had definitely been put in his place. A missive arrived at Nunney shortly before her mother left. In the missive, it told how the earl had been ordered to leave Nunney alone. The king also recognized Jordan as Forwin's heir and the new Earl of Somerset.

A new love was blooming, as well. It grew more apparent as the days passed. Edwin and Beth were falling for each other, which pleased Jacqueline to no end. Beth was far too young to stay a widow for long. And Edwin was perfect for her.

Knowing what the end result would soon be, Jacqueline and Terric decided a talk with the young couple was in order. So one evening, after Jordan had been put to bed, the four of them sat in the hall and discussed the future.

Terric was the one who started on the topic. "Edwin, I would like to know what your intentions are toward Beth."

Edwin choked on the wine he was drinking, causing him to cough. "My intentions?" he asked hoarsely.

"Aye. Since Beth has no male relations present, I feel it is my place to act in their stead. So are you going to give me an answer?"

Nervously, Edwin shot a quick glance toward Beth. "Well ... umm ... you see"

Shaking his head at his squire's hesitancy, Terric interrupted. "Spit it out, Edwin, for God's sake. We know."

"All right then. I love Beth and I intend to make her my wife. Once I become a knight that is. And if she will

still have me."

Beth, who had been sitting beside Jacqueline, got up and worked her way around the trestle table until she stood next to Edwin. "Of course I will still have you. I told you I would wait, no matter how long it takes for you to get your spurs."

Jacqueline had come to stand at Terric's side while Beth was speaking. She gave her husband a nudge. When he looked at her, she cocked her head toward Edwin.

Clearing his throat to get his squire's and his lady love's attention, Terric continued, "I am glad to hear your intentions are honorable. And so being, both Jacqueline and I have discussed this at some length. Since you wish to become a married man, your waiting for your spurs is now over. Two days from now, or earlier, I will knight you."

Edwin's reaction to this news was quite comical and in keeping with the squire. His jaw dropped in surprise, but when it began to really sink in that he was to be knighted, he lost control of himself.

Jumping up from his chair, he wrapped Terric in a bone crushing bear hug. "Oh thank you, Terric. I will never forget this."

Then it was Jacqueline's turn. Edwin kissed her on both of her cheeks. Then with much enthusiasm, he took up both her hands and began to rain kisses down upon them. Finally, he picked up Beth and spun her around in circles, laughing all the while. Unable to resist, the other three joined in his merriment.

Bringing himself back under control, Edwin put Beth back down on her feet. Still holding her close, he asked, "Will you make me a happy man and accept my offer of marriage?"

Blinking back tears of happiness, Beth nodded. "Aye, I will."

As the newly betrothed couple sealed their promise to each other with a passionate kiss, Jacqueline and Terric quietly left them alone in the hall, giving the couple some much needed privacy.

* * * *

The next day was spent preparing for Edwin's knighting. Bright and early that morning, both Terric and Edwin went to the village blacksmith to have the final pieces of the squire's armor completed for this day. This left the two women alone for the most part of the day.

Using the time given to her, Jacqueline decided to have a serious talk with Elizabeth. She knew her friend was happy, but there had not been any opportunity for her to really talk with her without Edwin being around.

They were sitting in the solar. Beth was working on a tapestry while Jacqueline nursed Jordan. "Beth, may I ask you something?"

"Of course." Putting down her needle, she moved to sit next to Jacqueline. Seeing Jordan still nursed, she smiled down at him and gently brushed a finger across his silky cheek. "What is it that you want to ask me?"

"Now, do not take this the wrong way, I beg you."

"I promise not to get upset, Jacqueline. I think of you as a sister. You know that. You can say anything to me."

Feeling Jordan had released her nipple, Jacqueline looked down at him and found her son asleep, replete.

Moving him to her shoulder, she began to burp him. "You will always be a sister to me, Beth. So, keeping that in mind, I have to ask this. Are you truly happy?"

Beth smiled brightly at her. "Aye, I am."

"What of your family? Edwin is of low birth. Will they accept him?"

She did not answer right away. Her smile faded slightly. "Well ... that is another matter entirely."

"You have not told them, have you?"

"Nay," she said sadly. "I am afraid my father would never understand. They do know of William's passing, though. They assume I am still in mourning. So my father will not be arranging another marriage for me anytime soon. And when that day does come, it will be too late. I will already be married to Edwin, and hopefully have a child of my own."

Jacqueline felt sorry for Beth. She only wished there was something she could do to help her. But she knew there was nothing. "Well never mind them, Beth. We are your family now."

* * * *

Terric and Edwin returned to the keep in the late afternoon. It had been decided that the knighting would take place just prior to the evening meal. Since it would only be the four of them attending, the ceremony would be simple. But the food served afterward was not. Jacqueline had not stinted on the menu.

After preparing himself, Edwin arrived at the hall. There, Terric, Jacqueline, and Beth waited. He was dressed in his best tunic and hose. He nervously tugged at the hem of his tunic in agitation. Beth smiled reassuringly at him.

Not wanting to increase Edwin's anxiety any further, Terric motioned him over to where Beth and he stood. "Come, Edwin. Let us do this."

With a quick nod of his head, Edwin complied. Reaching them, he gave Beth a kiss and then stepped back. "I am ready."

Terric turned to Beth and took the first piece of Edwin's armor from her. Normally it would have been a male relative from Edwin's family who would help with the arming. But since that was not possible, Beth had stepped in to fulfill that role.

After placing each piece where it was to be worn, all that remained were the spurs. Motioning Edwin to kneel, Terric pulled his sword free of its scabbard. With it, he tapped the blade first on one of Edwin's shoulders, and then the other. "You may rise, Sir Edwin." Once the younger man gained his feet, Terric took the spurs from Beth. He then buckled them onto Edwin's boots.

Beth flung herself into her intended's arms. "Oh, Edwin! I am so happy for you."

Jacqueline, who had been standing off to the side, now came forward to kiss the new knight's cheek. "Congratulations, Edwin. Now, let's celebrate, shall we?"

As if on cue, the servants came from the kitchen bearing platters of food. There was roasted capon, along with a haunch of venison. Small baby potatoes, peas cooked in a cream sauce, and a salad of fresh greens rounded out the meal. The four participants partook of each dish, eating as much as they could hold.

The remnants of the meal were cleared away, leaving the wine they were drinking behind. They were all content to just sip goblets of wine and talk. Jacqueline was the one who brought up the subject of the up-coming wedding.

"Well, Beth and Edwin, when do you want to be wed? There is nothing stopping you now."

The betrothed pair looked longingly at each other. Edwin clasped Beth's hand in his and said, "If it is not too soon for Beth, I was hoping in a week's time."

Beth nodded in agreement. "Nay, that is not too soon for me. I would happily marry you on the morrow, Edwin."

Before Edwin could accept Beth's suggestion, Jacqueline interrupted. "Nay, that is too soon. Beth needs a new gown. Every bride deserves that much."

"You did not even get that, Jacqueline." It was Terric who spoke.

"Aye, but I am different. I have no need for such things." To prove her point, she stood and motioned to the tunic and hose she wore. Then looking meaningfully at Terric, she added, "All that really mattered to me in the end was my getting you."

If they had been alone, Terric would have grabbed up his wife and showed her how much he loved her. But they were not, so he settled for staring at her intently, letting her know what to expect later that night.

The air seemed to sizzle around Terric and Jacqueline as they exchanged heated looks. Feeling a trifle uncomfortable to see such blatant desire displayed for all to see, Edwin broke the spell surrounding them.

"Point taken, Jacqueline. Can a gown be made in time?"

Tearing her gaze from her husband, she replied, "Aye, Edwin. Though I am not as skilled with a needle as some, I am passable. I am sure Alice will help Beth and me, as well. All we have to do is go and buy the fabric. And the best place to go for it is Frome."

* * * *

The market town of Frome was well known for its wool. So once a year it had a fair. The name, Frome, was believed to be derived from the Celtic word ffraw, meaning fair or brisk. And it was the river which ran through it that made Frome a thriving town. There were four watermills for grinding grain into flour and five fulling mills for the processing of wool. The fleeces came from as far as Salisbury Plain and the Cotswold Hills. Once they reached Frome, they were combed, spun, and then woven.

Even though the market was held every week, the fair that took place only once a year was a major event. People would come from all over Somerset to buy and sell at the fair. As it so happened, the day the trip to Frome was planned was the day of the annual fair.

This was the first time Jacqueline had been to Frome. Even though she had now lived a year at Nunney, such a trip as this had not been allowed. So this was a thrill for her. Especially being able to attend the fair.

They arrived early in the morning, planning to make a day of it. Stabling their horses at an inn, the four headed to the fairgrounds. There were crowds of people milling about, too many to count. And the noise emanating from them could be heard even before reaching the fair itself.

"Well, ladies. What shall we do first?" Terric asked. He could see both Jacqueline and Beth were just itching

to browse the many stalls.

Settling Jordan better into her arms, Jacqueline said, "The question is what do we not want to do?"

Terric chuckled. "All right. Since you are undecided, how about we just wander around until you see something you like?"

"Agreed."

There was everything imaginable offered for sale. The proprietors of each stall loudly competed with each other, shouting their wares. Edwin was the first to stop at a stall. This one sold jewelry of all kinds.

Pulling Beth over to look, he motioned for her to pick something out. She hesitated. "I want to get you something. Choose what you like." Hopeful of a sale, the owner separated a few pieces for Beth to look at.

"I do not know, Edwin."

"Please. Think of it as a betrothal gift." He stared at her beseechingly.

Beth shook her head and laughed. "How can I say nay to those puppy dog eyes? You win." Scanning the table of goods offered, she finally settled on a simple silver link bracelet.

Happily, Edwin paid for his purchase and then placed it around Beth's slender wrist. With that purchase made, they moved on to the next stall.

This one sold bolts of material. The ladies gave them a cursory glance, finding the goods offered not what they were looking for. After the third such rejection, the men were decidedly losing interest.

Noticing how both Terric and Edwin were lagging behind, Jacqueline elbowed Beth. She then cocked her head toward the men. "Shall we give them a reprieve and let those two find something else to occupy themselves?"

"Aye." Beth said laughingly. "I think we have tortured them enough."

Once the two lag-behinds caught up with them, Jacqueline turned to face the two men. "You may both go. It is obvious you are bored to tears."

"Are you sure?" Terric asked.

"Aye, go. We can meet again later."

"All right. Edwin and I had planned to look at the horse flesh for sale. Edwin needs a better mount now that he is a knight."

"Then go. Beth and I will meet you back at the inn when we are finished our shopping."

Kissing his wife upon her cheek, Terric then motioned for Edwin to leave the ladies to their browsing.

* * * *

His life could not sink any lower than it already had. This past year had just been one disappointment after another. Nicholas had drunk deeply from the cup of despair and found it a bitter brew.

Taking a large swig from his tankard of ale, Nicholas then wiped the foam from his lip with the sleeve of his

tunic. Ideally, he should be out plying his trade. After all, market fairs were where entertainers such as himself made the most coin. And Frome's fair was no different from any other. But a lethargy had claimed him, and he had no wish to change it.

Of course all his troubles stemmed from one person and one person only. Jacqueline Montacute. He wished to God he had never set eyes on that witch. He hated the woman with every fiber of his being. Just the thought of her made his blood boil.

Sipping again from his tankard, he happened to glance out the open inn door, then froze. Unbelievably, the one woman he never wished to see again, stood out in the inn's yard. And she was not alone. Her haughty friend, Beth, stood next to her.

Unsure of exactly what he planned to do, Nicholas stood up. Cautiously moving closer to the open door, he searched the yard. The two women appeared to be alone and seemed not to be interested in entering the inn.

He could only surmise they had come because of the market fair. Beth held a cloth wrapped bundle in her arms, more than likely some purchase she had made. Jacqueline, he noticed, carried her brat in her arms. She was scandalously dressed in man's attire, much to his shock.

Inching even closer to the door, he searched again for any sign of an escort. There was none that he could see. Satisfied they were indeed alone, Nicholas pulled the hood of his cloak up and over his head. He then stepped out into the yard.

* * * *

"Do you think we should go and fetch them, Beth?"

"Let's give them a little more time. They cannot be too much longer. It has been over an hour since they left."

Jacqueline nodded. Beth was right. Besides, it would do no good to be wandering around the fair looking for Terric and Edwin. In all probability they would miss finding them and just cause much confusion.

Glancing toward the entrance to the inn's yard, she hoped to catch a glimpse of their errant men folk. And so she paid very little attention to the hooded figure coming up behind Beth. It was not until her friend gasped in surprise did she turn her attention to who it was.

The man, she could tell it was a man from his attire peaking through his half open cloak, had come up behind Beth. The blade of a knife, which he held at her throat, flashed in the bright sunlight. When Jacqueline moved to take a step closer, the man pressed the blade nearer, causing Beth to whimper in fear. Jacqueline stilled.

"If it is coin you want, I will gladly give it. Just release my friend. It is not necessary for you to use such extreme measures."

The man shook his head and laughed. There was no humor in it. "Oh, but I must disagree. There is every reason for me to use extreme measures."

That voice-Jacqueline knew it. But it could not be. No man was that stupid. "Who are you?"

Reaching up, their assailant pulled back his hood, revealing his face. "You wound me, Jacqueline. Have you forgotten me already?"

Jacqueline stiffened in reaction. "What is it you want, Nicholas."

"Nothing much really. Just to make you suffer as you have made me."

"Hurting Beth will not change anything."

"Maybe not, but it will give me some satisfaction in the doing of it."

Nicholas was a man who no longer cared what happened to him. Jacqueline could see it in his eyes. She had to do something to get Beth away from him. There was no telling when Terric and Edwin would arrive at the inn.

"Let Beth go. It is me you really want."

"Are you offering yourself in her stead?"

Seeing the desperate, pleading look in Beth's eyes, she knew there was no turning away. "Aye, I am. Let Beth go, and I will go freely with you."

Nicholas took some time to consider her offer. In way of an answer, he roughly shoved Beth from him. "I accept."

Before Nicholas could grab her arm, Jacqueline quickly placed Jordan in Beth's arms. Under her breath she quietly whispered, "Watch where he takes me. Terric will want to know."

Forcefully taking hold of her arm, Nicholas pulled her away. Shooting Beth a last glance, Jacqueline then allowed herself to be dragged from the inn yard.

* * * *

A short time later, Terric and Edwin arrived at the inn. An extremely distraught Beth pounced on them. She began talking and crying at the same time. Most of what she said was unintelligible, but Terric managed to pick out Jacqueline's name and gone.

Taking Beth by the shoulders he tried to calm her down. "Slowly now. What happened to Jacqueline?"

Swallowing back her tears, Beth took a deep steadying breath. "It was Nicholas. He was here, at the inn. He has taken Jacqueline."

Having picked up on Beth's distress, Jordan began to wail. Taking his son from her, Terric quieted him by rocking him in his arms. "Now, start from the beginning and tell me how this happened."

* * * *

Jacqueline dragged her feet as Nicholas proceeded to pull her through the fairgrounds and then through the town streets. She had a feeling he really had no idea where he was taking her. Not once, but twice now he had steered them into a dead end alley. When he did it for a third time, he pushed her up against a wall and brandished his knife. Jacqueline held her breath, expecting the worst to happen. Closing her eyes, she waited for the blow to fall. But it never came.

One minute Nicholas had her pinned up against the wall, then the next, he was gone. Cracking open one eye, Jacqueline found Terric standing over the fallen minstrel. He held the point of his sword to Nicholas's chest.

Rage was emanating off Terric in discernible waves. Jacqueline placed her hand on his arm. "He is not worth it, Terric. Let him go."

"He can always come back to hurt you again."

"Aye, but he will not. Look at him, sniveling in fear. He is too much of a coward to try again."

To prove her correct, Nicholas whimpered. Terric snarled at him. "Since my wife has asked me so nicely, I will do as she asks and let you go. But the next time, I will not be so forgiving." To push home how serious he was, Terric turned his sword and cut a shallow cut across Nicholas's chest. The minstrel whimpered again.

Realizing how lucky he was to escape with such a minor wound, Nicholas jumped to his feet and raced off. Terric then pulled Jacqueline into his arms and held her tightly to him. She allowed it for a few seconds, then began to smack him on the back, trying to get him to ease his hold upon her.

"I am fine, Terric. He did not hurt me."

"It would have gone much worse for him if he had."

"How did you find me so quickly?"

"Beth sent me in the right direction. But it was pure luck that one of the people I asked happened to see you pass by."

"However you did it, I am happy to see you."

Pulling her close again, Terric claimed her lips in a demanding kiss. All the fear he had felt, and desperation, he conveyed in his kiss. He did not care where they were. He needed this.

Once he brought his emotions back under control, Terric softened the kiss, then released her lips. "Come, we should return to the inn. Poor Beth had worked herself into a state before Edwin and I arrived. It would be cruel to keep her waiting."

"Aye. Now maybe we can have a normal life."

Accepting the arm Terric offered her, Jacqueline placed her hand atop it. Exiting the alley, she could see the sun was just beginning to set. The sky was painted in shades of blue, mauve, and pink. A beautiful ending, for a somewhat calamitous day, she mused. She truly hoped their lives could be like every other person's now. She had everything she could ask for. A husband and a child.

Looking lovingly up at her tournament knight, Jacqueline thought her life could not get much better than this. She was complete.

The End