



The **LION** Eli Easton  
and the **CROW**



## Contents

Love Has No Boundaries .....	3
THE LION AND THE CROW .....	6
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	7
CHAPTER 1 .....	8
CHAPTER 2 .....	12
CHAPTER 3 .....	17
CHAPTER 4 .....	23
CHAPTER 5 .....	29
CHAPTER 6 .....	32
CHAPTER 7 .....	37
CHAPTER 8 .....	41
CHAPTER 9 .....	45
CHAPTER 10 .....	49
CHAPTER 11 .....	59
CHAPTER 12 .....	64
CHAPTER 13 .....	72
CHAPTER 14 .....	75
CHAPTER 15 .....	80
CHAPTER 16 .....	88
CHAPTER 17 .....	92
CHAPTER 18 .....	101
CHAPTER 19 .....	106
EPILOGUE .....	110
Author Bio .....	112

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE LION AND THE CROW

By Eli Easton

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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# THE LION AND THE CROW

By Eli Easton

## Photo Description

The photo is of the actor Henry Cavill from *The Tudors*, a very handsome and serious-looking young man with brown hair, a light beard and blue eyes. He's dressed like a medieval knight in a chainmail shirt and shoulder armor.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I've just won my spurs and a long, hard climb it's been. Being the youngest of seven sons gives you far too many sets of shoes to fill.*

*But there are things I haven't told my liege, things I can't tell him. These unnatural feelings must mean I harbor a demon. Yet, when I watch him on the practice field... I can't stop the yearning.*

*Sincerely,*

*Angel*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** knights, first time, slow burn/ust, abduction, abuse

**Content warnings:** graphic violence, attempted rape, domestic abuse

**Word count:** 32,524

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# THE LION AND THE CROW

By **Eli Easton**

## CHAPTER 1

The first time William saw him, he was riding onto the tournament field on a red horse. His tunic was brilliant blue with a white eagle spreading its wings on the front, identifying him as one of Lord Brandon's sons. Glinting silver armor was plated over his shoulders, his arms, and the tops of his legs. Underneath he wore black leggings and boots.

It is a warrior's habit to size up an enemy—or a rival. So William felt no shame in staring as he took the youth's measure. The armor he wore was polished but functional. It was well-used, not that of a mere peacock. A black velvet girdle was slung low on his narrow hips. His shoulders were broad for his frame, but his chest was slender and his waist slim. There was nothing of the larder on him. He rode his mount as light as a feather. William's eyes dropped to his spurs—gilded. He was a full knight. But William knew well enough that such a thing could be all but bought by the nobility.

The round was archery, and the young knight had foregone any protection or decoration for his head—neither helmet, beads, nor braids. His hair was nearly black, chopped shorter than was fashionable, and bristled on top in a barbaric style. It was a harsh warrior's cut, but on him it only made a more open frame for his face. It was the finest face that William had ever seen. It was long, narrow, and delicate, with full, quirked lips, a straight nose, a dimpled chin, and broad arched brows over large, dark eyes. His skin was as pale as a bucket of cream. There was a rosy cast on the proud bones of his cheek that any maiden would kill her own dam for. It was a battle flush perhaps, in anticipation of the contest.

William was used to forming an impression in an instant, and he rarely changed them. In his mind there were men made for battle, craggy and crude. Those were the men you wanted by your side—if their tempers were not too



odious whilst in their cups. And then there were men made for the pleasing of women, as if God had put such men here for the sole purpose of warming a woman's blood for her husband's bed, thus guaranteeing the spread of the human race. The later might well claim to be the former—as good in battle as any man. But rarely had William found it to be the case. Perhaps it was a problem of motivation. What man, given the choice, wouldn't rather be thrusting between a woman's thighs than thrusting a spear on the practice field? Beauty was most oft lazy.

This young knight was definitely a woman-pleaser. He was beautiful in a way William had never seen on a man. In truth, he'd never even seen it on a woman. That did little to inspire his trust. He registered the distinctly feminine cheers of welcome the crowd afforded the rider, aptly proving William's point. And then the young knight rode past William—and looked at him.

It wasn't a mere glance. His eyes met William's when he was still ten paces away and held them, unrelenting, as he rode in front of him. He even turned his head as he passed before letting his gaze finally slip from William's. William did not back down from the stare. He dropped his eyes for no man. But he stood stoically, nothing showing on his face. It seemed forever that the knight passed, that those eyes were locked on his. They were a rich, dark brown and full of warmth and life. Even with the knight's face placidly composed, those eyes seemed to speak volumes in a language William didn't understand. They reached inside him and made his stomach clench hard with feeling.

Confusion? Curiosity? Outrage?

What did he mean by looking at William thus? They'd never met. Was it a challenge? A welcome to a stranger? The admiration of a young warrior to an elder one? Had he heard tales of William's prowess? Or had he mistaken William for someone else?

William had stopped to watch the procession of archers on his way to the stables, where he'd been taking his tired mount after the last victorious round of jousting. Now he found himself in a crowd of the castle's laborers. One of them was a blacksmith, his beefy form wrapped in a scarred leather apron.

“D’ya know ’im?” he asked William. “The Crow?”

“No.” William frowned as the name sank in. “The *Crow*?”

The man chuckled. “Aye, poor lad. He’s the youngest of seven and his brothers took all the more favorable names.”

Another man, craggy and shrunken with age, spoke up. “Lessee, there’s a bear, a hound, a fox....”

“Badger,” a third man said brightly. “That’s Sir Peter Brandon.”

“Aye. Badger. Vulture’s one, innit?”

“’Tis Sir Thomas,” the blacksmith agreed amiably.

“Lessee. Must be one more....” Craggy Face pondered seriously.

“Lion?” The third man suggested.

The blacksmith glanced at William knowingly. “Nay. None of the Lord’s sons has earned *that* title. And if the first two don’t, you can bet the latter won’t. Elder brothers won’t be outdone.”

“Hence ‘the Crow,’” Craggy Face snorted.

“Boar,” the third man supplied helpfully. “’ee’s the biggest ’un.”

“Sir Stephan! That’s got it done. Boar suits him too. Even the teeth.” Craggy Face barred his teeth and chomped. A stench wafted on the breeze.

William’s eyes were drawn back to the Crow as he moved away, tall and straight in the saddle. From the back his shoulders looked broader still. They narrowed in a defined V to an almost delicate waist. “And that one? The Crow? What’s his Christian name?” William asked.

That earned him guffaws of laughter from all three of his new companions. William looked at the blacksmith in annoyance, his hand going to the hilt of his sword. The blacksmith held up his large paws placatingly. “No offense, Sir Knight. Only his name is Christian. Sir Christian Brandon. ’Tis that what’s amused us.”

William smiled and relaxed. “I see. I must be getting prescient. He’s young to have his spurs.”

“Not *so* young,” Craggy Face said.

“What has Sir Christian, twenty summers?” the third man questioned no one in particular.

“Say what you like, ’ee’s earned them spurs,” the blacksmith said firmly. “Them brothers of his gave him no quarter. Hard as iron nails, every last one of ’em.”

“Let’s go watch ’im shoot,” said Craggy Face, with eager anticipation. They hurried away from William, following the general flow of the crowd towards the archery targets.

William almost followed. He was curious to see the Crow shoot, to see if he had any skill to match that noble bearing. But then he thought better on it, changed direction, and headed for the stables. He did not know what to make of the youngest Brandon, knew not the meaning behind his look. But an uneasy feeling warned him that keeping his distance was the most expedient course. He was here for a purpose. He needed to put his cause to Lord Brandon and earn his help. He couldn’t afford to antagonize any of his sons. And he couldn’t afford to get led astray with wenching, gaming, or fighting either. His suit was too important—to Elaine and to himself.

William walked away, leading his horse to the stables as the *thwunk* of arrows and the roar of the crowd sounded loud behind him.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER 2

Christian strode through the castle hallways, his blood thrumming in a splendid rush. It had been a good day. He'd taken top honors in archery and had acquitted himself well in foot combat. He'd earned his father's pleased nod as he handed Christian his cup. And he was bestowed a kiss upon his cheek from Lady Gwendolyn.

Lady Gwendolyn's lips were soft and perfumed. Christian had been unable to stop his eyes from shyly falling to the ground like a callow youth, which had earned him laughs and hardy slaps on the back from his father's men. And even as he blushed and grinned, Christian's eyes had sought a certain face in the crowd, one with lips not soft and not perfumed. Christian hadn't found him there.

The knight's name was Sir William Corbet. Christian had learned this from the man who ran the tournament. William was the son and heir of a minor noble, Lord Geoffrey Corbet, whose lands lay fifteen leagues to the southeast. Christian had noticed William in the first jousting bout of the day, when William had beaten six of his father's knights, including Christian's brother, Thomas.

Christian's eyes had been drawn to the knight from the start—the one in the silver armor, wearing a crimson surcoat with a black lion on the front. Even with his visor down he was arresting. His body was large and broad, strong and confident in the saddle. He'd ridden sure and easy, and he handled the lance with restrained power. Christian had found himself more and more riveted as the bout went on. The knight had beaten his opponents soundly, and then he removed his helmet to accept his accolades. Christian's breath and heart and the thoughts in his head had all frozen, like a gear stuck and held, if only for a moment.

Sir William Corbet was magnificent. He had light brown hair, worn straight to just below the shoulders, serious and kind blue eyes, a square face, full lips, and a closely shaved beard. He looked the epitome of a knight—noble, powerful, and true. Christian had never seen his equal. Desire had

spiked in Christian then, that dreaded, hot, heady, unwelcome feeling that betrayed and stung him, like an adder in his breast.

God's blood he hated it, hated it all. If he were his father's daughter, he might have had a prayer of claiming, wedding, a knight like Sir William. As it was, his response to the man was not only hopeless but deeply shameful. And yet, despite knowing this, despite being fully aware of the risks, Christian had been unable to stop himself from looking at Sir William as he rode past him on the way to the archery. Christian had only meant to glance, maybe nod politely in an offer of friendship. But once his eyes had locked with William's, he could not tear himself away.

Christian cursed under his breath. He had probably made a spectacle of himself. But at least a gaze was only a gaze, and he was sure none of his brothers had seen it. He had done nothing truly damaging—not yet. Dear God, not yet.

If he could only inure himself to the idea that what his eyes could feast upon, and his heart desire in secret, harmed no man. Then he might at least look forward to seeing Sir William at the banquet tonight and be able to—

A whisper of a sound broke through Christian's thoughts. In a moment, his dagger was in his hand, even as he was spun and pressed hard against the wall.

Malcolm's face, contorted with hatred, glared down at him. His beefy arm pressed across Christian's throat. A chainmail sleeve dug into the delicate skin there, bearing down on his windpipe. As the arm pressed deeper, threatening to crush what could not be repaired, Christian let his dagger's sharp tongue slip under his brother's hauberk to prickle and sting his thigh. Malcolm's eyes narrowed on a gasp of pain and the pressure on Christian's throat eased.

His brother's breath stank of ale and of the waft of carrion that always accompanied Malcolm these days, as if there were something rotting deep inside him. The smell seemed to go hand and hand with his increasingly erratic behavior, though none except for Christian seemed willing to acknowledge it.

Malcolm hissed words into Christian's face. "You think you walk on water, do you not, *your highness?*"

“No.”

“Are you full up with victory, my brother? Does your own pretty glory make you hard?”

Malcolm ground a cruel thigh into Christian’s groin, and Christian gasped in shock. Malcolm had always been sadistic but never before in a sexual way. Christian thanked his stars that Malcolm’s attack had turned his body cold after those warm thoughts of Sir William.

“I will sink this blade if you don’t get off me, *brother*,” Christian threatened, his voice soft and deadly. The point dug in, piercing the padded leggings and the skin. Christian took great care with his blades. It was as pointed as a needle and sharp enough to sink in to the hilt, as if flesh was as easily spread as a whore’s thighs.

Malcolm sneered but backed off. “Be warned. Ne’er dare go against me in the joust little Crow, or I will impale you in front of the crowd and lick your blood from my fingers.”

“Tis not my event, as you well know,” said Christian coolly, but his dagger remained pointed at the ready in his hand.

As if to show he had no fear of it, Malcolm reached out and gave Christian’s jaw a caress bitter with disdain. “Remember, you quivering bitch. I am watching.”

Christian jerked his chin away and Malcolm slunk off. Christian wondered briefly if Malcolm even realized the insult he’d made to himself—calling Christian a female dog, as if it were the lowest creature, when Malcolm bore the name ‘hound’ thanks to his exceptional skills at tracking.

By the saints, it was pointless to try to understand Malcolm. He was disordered in his mind, truly, and grew more so year by year. Heart pounding, Christian forced himself to calmly walk to his room. But once inside he bolted the door and leaned against it, trembling.

Malcolm hated him, had always hated him. But what had provoked Malcolm this time? The fact that Christian had won acclaim? A nod from his father? But Christian always won at archery; that was nothing new.

Christian remembered the warm look from Lady Gwendolyn, the way her lips had lingered on his cheek. At the last banquet, he'd seen Malcolm watching her, his eyes greedy and half-lidded with want.

God's teeth. *I don't want her!* Christian wanted to open the door and shout it down the hall. But then, he reminded himself, Malcolm already knew that.

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When Christian was eight he became a page in his father's household. Most boys were sent to a neighboring castle for such duty, but he was the seventh son. Rules and attention to such structured matters were much relaxed by the time Christian came along. His father was stingy with servants and his older brothers were demanding. Christian did his service at home.

His brothers trained hard and long in the training yard near the castle's stables. When he wasn't doing menial labor, Christian was pressed to join them. He'd looked forward to his training at first, eyes aglow over the blunt wooden swords and the spinning quintain. But once in the arena, he was pushed and bullied and beaten, expected to keep up with his older brothers at once and with no relenting. Training came to mean pain and humiliation, and there was no escaping it.

Thus darkness ate up the rest of his childhood years, like a black dragon grinding up infants in its razor-sharp teeth. His only comfort had been his sister, Ayleth, who bandaged his wounds, came to him in the night, and held him. She stifled his cries and sometimes she cried with him.

Malcolm, six years Christian's senior, had come close to killing Christian at least twice in the training arena. His hand was stayed only because of the watchful eye of Sir Andrew, the knight in charge of their practice. No one else knew it; or at least no one else would admit it. But Christian knew; so did Malcolm. Christian's other brothers all gave him plenty of bruises and half-hearted abuse. But none loathed him as Malcolm did. None had cracked his ribs, crushed his fingers, or kneed him so hard in the groin he'd pissed blood for a week.

There was something deeply wrong with Malcolm; Christian knew this. It got worse the older Malcolm got. He knew his father and other brothers were worried, but they did not see the worst of it because Malcolm saved his most violent tendencies for Christian alone. And if Christian complained, he only looked weak and childish. At times Thomas or Stephen or one of the others would snap at Malcolm to leave off, to let Christian be. But it was not enough to save Christian truly, never enough. And his father? The great lord dismissed all of their infighting as an annoyance.

Christian had had no choice. He was forced to toughen or die. He'd toughened—until he'd become as brutal and wild in the arena as any of them. His gentle mouth was taught to bare its teeth in hatred. His sharp wits were bent to outmaneuvering and treachery.

Once, when he was fifteen, and Malcolm had “accidentally” pushed him off the top of a hayrick whilst they were building it up, Christian had cornered him against a wagon and asked him one thing. *Why?*

“Because I see you, brother,” Malcolm had said, low and terrible. “I know what you are inside, what you try to hide. And I will kill you before I let you disgrace this family.”

“I won't,” Christian had said, shocked and ashamed.

“I know, brother,” Malcolm replied with an evil smile. “I will make sure of it.”

Thus Christian kept his doors and windows locked at night, always. Thus he carried several sharpened blades, even inside the castle. He'd escaped for a number of years, as a squire, and they had been the best years of his life. But he'd been sucked back in as irresistibly as a man sinking in quicksand. His father's orders; once Christian had earned his spurs he was a knight, and as a knight he owed his fealty to his father's castle.

Between those who wanted to bed him, those who wanted to wed him, and those who wanted him dead, the castle was a place more dangerous than any battlefield.



## CHAPTER 3

William had requested a private audience with Lord Brandon. He did not get it until his sixth night sleeping in the castlebailey. He was impatient, humming with anxiety for Elaine. But he forced himself to wait. Lord Brandon was his best hope.

To pass the time, he helped train the castle's youth in the training arena. He loaded and unloaded wagons, making himself useful. He took long rides in the surrounding countryside on Tristan. He courted his own patience.

He had conversations with two of the lord's sons, Sir Thomas and Sir Stephen, talking about battles and distant lords and their armaments. He curried their favor as much as pride and honor would allow.

He saw Sir Christian several times, at a distance. The mere sight of the young knight triggered memories of the gaze they'd shared on the tournament field. And that, in turn, caused William to feel unsettled and angry. He found himself staring at the man despite himself. But when Sir Christian turned to look at him, William looked away. And once, when Sir Christian was clearly walking towards him to speak to him, William pretended he hadn't noticed, mounted his horse, and rode off.

He knew it was cowardly and rude. But he told himself he and Sir Christian could have nothing in common. It was better to avoid any awkwardness.

On the sixth night, most of the tournament's guests had left and Lord Brandon dined alone with his family. William was invited to feast with them and have his audience.

In the great hall, Lord Brandon sat in the place of honor at a table loaded with his sons. His eldest, Edward, sat on his left. The second eldest, Stephen, on his right, and on down the table on either side. Wives and children sat at another table, and Lord Brandon's highest-ranking knights and a few guests were at a third. It was as private as a castle was likely to get, and William knew it. It was now or never.

They were on the second course, which consisted of platters of various fowl, when Lord Brandon spoke loudly.

“Sir William Corbet. Come forth and name your purpose.”

William wiped his fingers carefully on his napkin and stood. He walked to the front of the lord’s table. With his legs slightly spread, he thrust his right hand across his breast and inclined his head in a sign of deference.

“Lord Brandon. I’m grateful for your generous hospitality in sharing the bounty of your castle. I thank you.”

Lord Brandon nodded.

“You may know that my beloved sister, Lady Elaine, was wed to Lord Robert Somerfield when she was sixteen. ’Twas seven years ago now.”

Lord Brandon narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

“We’ve received only a few letters from her in that time, letters that were deliberately vague. Then last month we had a visitor who came from Lord Somerfield’s castle. He—” William’s voice wavered and he swallowed. “He spoke of horrors visited upon my sister—beatings, imprisonment for perceived infractions, being denied food and water. I’m on my way to Cumbria to defend her honor.”

Lord Brandon sucked on a leg of pigeon, looking thoughtful.

“Have you an army?” Lord Brandon asked.

Regret firmed William’s mouth. “No, my lord. I know you have a long-standing dispute with Lord Somerfield. I can offer my arm and my shield if you press the matter now. I’ve led men in battle for five years. I can—”

Lord Brandon held up a hand, stilling William’s tongue. William felt his face heat and he strove to look detached. His request sounded much less reasonable here in the dining hall than it had in his head.

“Your father, Lord Corbet—he is not with you on the matter?”

William spoke coldly. “He had a large debt forgiven by Somerfield when he gave Elaine in marriage. He is not interested in repaying it.”

Lord Brandon smiled bitterly. “The law regards your sister as your husband’s property. Your own father does not support your cause. Yet you expect me to?” His voice was more curious than anything, but it sent a ripple of shame down William’s back.

“Somerfield is our common enemy. I can help you defeat him.”

Lord Brandon put down the leg and took up his knife, picking at his teeth with dull eyes.

“What I may do about Somerfield, I will do in my own time and for my own reasons.”

It was clearly the end of the discussion. William was bitterly disappointed, but he tried to salvage what he could. “I understand, my lord. Thank you for considering my request. Would you permit me to buy supplies from the castle? And hire a few of your men? I’ve never been in Somerfield’s territories. I need a guide.”

Lord Brandon opened his mouth to speak. His answer was not going to be favorable; William could see it on his face. But before anything came out, a voice rang out loud and clear from the end of the table.

“I’ve been in Somerfield’s territories. I’ve seen his army do battle and can advise. I’ll go.”

William knew to whom the voice must belong, even though he had never heard it. He felt a cold wash of fear and anger in his belly as he turned his head to look at Sir Christian. Surely the man jested? He was mocking William. But... perhaps not. Christian was standing on his feet, facing his father with stoic determination, his arms clasped behind his back.

“Out of the question,” Lord Brandon said dismissively.

“When I squired for Sir Allendale, our force attacked Somerfield. We were in his territory for weeks.”

Lord Brandon took up his wine glass, drinking with a frown.

“I know that land better than any of your men,” Christian insisted.

“You were a mere squire then. You fought not.”

“I was a squire with eyes and a strong sense of direction. And now I’m a knight with keener vision. It’s time we took another look at Somerfield’s holdings. I’ll bring you maps, lists of his forces, and—”

Lord Brandon slammed his mug down and glowered at his youngest son. “I cannot be seen to support this. Sending *my own son*—”

“I’ll use another name,” said Christian quickly. “And I’ll not get near the castle. If I’m caught—and I won’t be, you know how slippery I can be—I’ll tell no one who I am. You tell me I need experience. Let me earn it.”

Lord Brandon considered it. He actually... by the Virgin’s knees, he was *considering it*. Suddenly William realized it might actually occur. He might be stuck with Sir Christian Brandon. He spoke before thinking it through.

“With all respect, my lord, I would not want the responsibility of safeguarding your son.”

It was the *wrong* thing to say. The silence that fell in the hall was deafening. William could hear the thudding gallop of his own heart. Lord Brandon’s face was as stormy as a summer thundercloud. He rose slowly to his feet. And almost as one, all of the sons on both sides of him rose also.

For pity’s sake, William was never going to get the chance to let Somerfield disembowel him. It was going to happen right here.

“My son,” Lord Brandon said stonily, “is the best archer in three territories. He may not be the pick of my loins, but, by my sword, he’s a knight and a Brandon!”

William did not dare look at Sir Christian, realizing belatedly the insult he’d cast on him, and, apparently, on the entire bloodline, perhaps back a multitude of generations. He kept his gaze steady on the father, his face passive.

“Forgive my rash words. I did not speak true. What I meant to say was that I only expected to hire a few of your men. Allowing your own flesh and blood to accompany me would be... exceptionally generous of you, my lord. It would be a great honor.”

For a long moment Lord Brandon did not speak. Then one of his sons did. It was Sir Malcolm, a man William's age but with eyes as black as pitch, a lumpy face, and cruel lips. "Let the Crow go, Father. He needs more dirt on those spurs. And if he can gather intelligence on Somerfield, he'll have done something useful for once in his life."

"I am master here. Not one word more on the subject. Sit!" Lord Brandon barked. His sons all sat, except Sir Christian, who, William could tell from the corner of his eye, remained stubbornly standing.

"How do you intend to defend your sister's honor without an army?" Lord Brandon asked William coldly.

William tilted up his chin. Truly, he *had* hoped for Brandon's army. "Lord Somerfield will grant me an audience. I will ask him to release Lady Elaine. If he refuses, I'll challenge him to single combat."

Lord Brandon managed not to laugh, but the calculation that came into his eyes was ominous. William didn't like the odds that he saw there and he steeled his jaw stubbornly. But either Brandon was not adverse to games of chance or he had motives of his own. He sat down and took up his knife. When he spoke, it was with finality.

"My son, Sir Christian, will accompany you. I will give you supplies for the journey, but no other men. Christian will lead you to within sight of Somerfield's castle and do reconnaissance for me. Christian, you will, under no circumstances, enter the castle bailey. And if you are caught, you can expect no acknowledgment of blood and no rescue. Is that understood?"

William finally looked at Sir Christian then. He still stood, arms clasped behind his back, looking at his father. His color was high—that red flush that crawled across his cheekbones like a battle flag unfurling on the field. His eyes were alight with excitement. Cursed fool.

"I understand, Father. It will not come to that."

"And upon your return, you will wed," Lord Brandon continued. "Lady Margaret White is besotted with you. Her father has offered me an exceptional dowry. And if not her, you will choose another at once."

His tone brooked no argument. Sir Christian froze for a moment and then took a deep breath. “Yes, Father.”

Lord Brandon waved his knife at William. He was dismissed.

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## CHAPTER 4

Two days later, William found himself riding out of Lord Brandon's bailey with Sir Christian Brandon at his heels. It was just the two of them off to face the dragon. William had not brought along a squire. His last one had just achieved his spurs, and William hadn't yet replaced him when the news of Elaine arrived. He'd been in such haste to leave that any delay had been out of the question. He'd assumed he could hire a lad to help him with his armor once he was closer to Somerfield's castle. Besides, the idea of taking a new squire on such a dangerous quest disturbed his sense of honor. Men who knew what they were getting into, and who were still willing to fight by his side, were one thing; an inexperienced youth was another.

Disturbingly, he had no clear idea which of these Sir Christian was, spurs or no.

William considered hiring additional men along the way, mercenaries who would trade loyalty, or the appearance of it, for his few sovereigns. But he didn't have enough to raise an army, and his battle sense told him he either needed to attack Somerfield with a full force or go in alone. A dozen men would only prick Somerfield's wariness and make him itch to defeat them.

On Christian's part, he was apparently so newly minted a knight that he had no squire, and he hadn't deigned to choose one of the local lads to go along. So they'd be building their own fires, brushing their own horses and hauling their own water—*their own* being the operative word. If Christian expected to be waited upon, he would be sorely disappointed.

William was musing upon this as they left the woods and entered onto a broad track. Christian pulled his horse alongside William's mount. The mere sight of the man annoyed William and made his sour mood sink lower and lower until his stomach churned with it.

Christian was not wearing the blue-and-eagled livery now. He was in a simple brown quilted gambeson. His armor, along with William's, was stowed on the packhorse William had bought. And still, his straight and easy bearing on the horse, the refined line of his silhouetted face in the light of the rising

sun, the gracefulness of his hand as it held the reins loosely on his thigh, the depth in his eyes when he glanced toward William—all of these spoke of an elegance that was, well, *personally offensive*.

God's teeth! William did not want to be taking Sir Christian Brandon into danger. And he did not want to have to be close to the man. For *weeks*. It was the worst possible outcome of his detour to the Brandon castle. He'd wasted ten full days, gained no army, and been saddled with a knight too young and far too comely to be of any use as a warrior.

He spoke gruffly. "It will be hard going. I intend a punishing pace. I won't stop at alehouses—'tis a waste of money. It'll be bedrolls on the ground. Dried meat. It's not too late to change your mind."

Christian looked at him wryly. "Do you imagine I've never travelled before? Never spent nights on the ground?"

*Yes, that's what I imagine. You look like you should be lying on a queen's bed with the queen herself feeding you grapes, damn it all to hell.*

William huffed grumpily.

Christian sighed. After a moment he said, "Do you know, those are the first words you've ever spoken to me, Sir William."

William frowned. He opened his mouth to protest and then thought better of it. He'd talked plenty the day before, as they'd prepared for the journey, but most of it *had* been to other people—the cook, the steward, the blacksmith, the stableman.

Perhaps all of it, actually. Suddenly his vexation seemed childish and inexcusable. He felt ashamed of himself.

"I..." he began, only to falter. "What I said to your father, about safeguarding you. I didn't mean it as an insult."

Christian laughed aloud. "Oh, but it was one, a dagger straight to the heart. Nevertheless, it was quite entertaining to see my father and brothers leap to my defense. I think I heard the gates of Hell yawn open over that one. So I suppose I shall have to forgive you."



William cleared his throat, feeling no less confounded. “It was kind of you to offer to show me the way. Truly, I’m grateful.”

Christian shrugged. “I know the way. You needed a guide. I wanted to get out of my father’s castle. If it was a kindness, ’twas not an especially noble one.”

William could have asked questions. *Why did you want to get out of your father’s castle? Why should your brothers’ defense of you be surprising?* But that would only lead to talking and silence seemed wiser.

“William,” Christian said quietly.

William looked at him, forcing himself to meet those brown eyes. They were hard and cold, and they struck an icy chill down the center of his body.

“Do not underestimate me.”

William nodded, once, and set his eyes back on the road.

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By the morning of the fourth day, William had to admit to himself that he *had* underestimated Sir Christian Brandon. Christian took to travelling as effortlessly as he seemed to do everything else. His horse, Livermore, was an excellent mount, and Christian treated him well. He rode long days without a single complaint. Indeed, he often rode slightly ahead, as if impatient to see the scenery. He kept his face subdued, but his eyes revealed a child’s delight in the woods and hills.

It was quite inconsiderate of him to disprove William’s biases so completely.

They fell into a routine of the evenings. William would brush, feed, and water the horses while Christian gathered firewood and built the fire. William would never admit it, but he preferred the duty with the horses because he was tired and it was less moving around. Though he knew Christian must be exhausted as well, he never said so. By the time the horses were settled, Christian would have their bedrolls laid out on opposite sides of the fire, a pot of water boiling, and dinner cooking.

On the second evening, Christian had taken one glance at their stores of dried meat and arched an eyebrow. “I think we can do better than that,” he said. He slipped on his bow and quiver and vanished into the forest.

Fifteen minutes later, without a single sound from the woods that William had heard, Christian returned carrying an enormous hare with an arrow through its neck. He cleaned and dressed it without asking for help. It was delicious.

Though they were equals in rank, Christian deferred to William’s advanced years—he was twenty-five—and took on the more menial tasks. William said nothing, but he was slowly adapting his view of the younger knight, like a man whose eyes were slowly adjusting to a brighter light..

Even William’s perception of Christian’s appearance was changing. Before, he’d seen a youth so unusually beautiful as to invoke disdain. He’d assumed vanity and callowness. He’d assumed a sense of entitlement. Christian was none of that. But he was comfortable in his own skin—quick, able, and surprisingly strong.

On the fourth day they came to a stream near some rapids. William rode up to the edge of it, scanning the water.

“It’s not deep,” he told Christian, nodding his head at the opposite bank. “We can cross.”

But when they tried to get Tristan, Livermore, and the packhorse, whom they’d dubbed Sir Swiftfoot, to enter the water, they shied away. Tristain shook his head angrily.

“It’s the rapids,” Christian said, pointing to the misting white water just slightly downstream. “They don’t like the look of it.”

William cursed. The bank further west looked soft and unstable and the trees were thick. They’d have to backtrack to get around it, and William was not in the mood to lose time.

“Let’s lead them,” he said, swinging himself down.

Christian did the same and they tried to pull the reluctant horses into the stream. But Tristan gave a panicked neigh and kicked his front hooves into the air. Livermore and Sir Swiftfoot just dug in like mules, refusing to be tugged.

“God’s teeth!” William roared. “Tristan has never been a coward before. He’s faced legions of flea-bitten, axe-wielding vermin on horseback and not batted an eyelash!”

Christian tried to smother a smile. “Is that so? Well, every horse has his weakness.”

“Not mine!”

Christian made a noise like a strangled cough. He looked around, scanning the brush.

“Up there!” he pointed.

There was an old oak overlooking the stream. An enormous limb had been split from the trunk by lightning and was caught in its upper branches.

“Tis high up and well snagged,” William said doubtfully.

Christian didn’t answer. He stripped off his gambeson and pushed up the linen sleeves of his shirt, revealing strong, wiry forearms rich with veins. He pulled himself up into the tree with surprising strength and agility.

“Watch out for deadly squirrels,” William said dryly. Christian just snorted.

Watching him climb, William’s perception shifted again with a bone-rattling jolt. Christian was not *soft*, William realized. There was nothing of the coddled child in him. He was hard and tough as sinew. Refined? Refined as a purebred stallion, perhaps, or an elemental sprite. But not weak, no. He was powerful and very male.

For some reason, this shift in perception allowed William to watch Christian, to keep his eyes on the man, unthreatened, for the first time since they’d locked gazes on that tournament field. He watched Christian pull himself up higher and higher, wrestle with the huge limb, lifting and wresting it out of the tree with raw muscle, maintaining his balance all the while. When

the limb was free, Christian shoved it off towards the bank of the stream. As it crashed down, his feet were spread wide to brace himself on a sturdy limb. He looked down at William and grinned, his face open and happy for the first time since William had known him.

And something new stirred to life inside William. Not anxiety, fear, or confusion this time, but something far steadier, thick as honey, and painfully sweet.

It felt like such an integral part of him that William didn't even question it. He just blinked twice, returned Christian's smile, and moved to place the limb across the river.

With their view of the rapids blocked, the horses crossed without further ado.

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## CHAPTER 5

Christian was in seven kinds of heaven and three kinds of hell. He was free of his father's castle, free of his brothers, free of the need to guard his back at all hours of the day and night. It was even better than when he'd squired Sir Allendale. For then, he'd been of the lowest rank in the camp, and his role was to serve and be silent. Sir Allendale had been good to him, but there had been rough words from other knights and even older squires, as well as shoves and smacks when he did not move fast enough or got in the way.

And there had been, too, a few knights he'd feared in the company, men who looked at him too calculatingly and too long, who would have bugged him cruelly had they gotten the chance, even though Sir Allendale had made it clear that Christian was blood and not to be mistreated.

Those men had been ugly, crude, and cold-blooded. And while Christian might have dreamed his secret dreams of being held in strong arms, of being filled by the cock of a lover, he knew that the experience with men like that would be nothing but pain and humiliation. He kept his knife at the ready, always. And he never went into the woods alone.

But travelling with Sir William, for the first time, Christian was treated as an equal. He couldn't fail to notice the looks of approval William bestowed on him more and more—when he made quick work of building the fire, when he caught game for the evening meal, when he rode from dawn to dusk without complaint. Those approving looks, and his soft words of appreciation and praise, were like balm on the torn places in Christian's soul. He worked harder, did more, acted like he was never tired, ran spritely with aching limbs, climbed trees and moved boulders, just to see that approval shining in William's eyes, to earn that precious reparation.

And yet... it was torture too. It was one thing for Christian to ignore his desires in the castle keep, where there was the constant danger of discovery and unguarded moments were few. It was one thing to hold himself in check when William had been cold, when he'd obviously disliked the very sight of him. Christian had understood that. He knew that his looks inspired scorn in some men and jealousy in others. It was why he cropped his hair so severely

and had learned to school his face against any softness. It had been sharply disappointing that *William* had turned out to be such a man. But it did have the advantage of keeping Christian from acting a fool.

No longer. When William looked at him now there was warmth in his eyes; now he smiled, now he was generous, now he was kind. Now his eyes lingered instead of shying away. Those long looks, those lovely, aggravating, bewildering looks, made Christian hope and burn. And except when they passed through a village, he was alone with William day and night.

If he'd thought Sir William was handsome before, it was nothing to how he felt now. It was like watching a distant rider grow more and more defined the closer he got—familiarity bred an acute awareness of every part of the man. William was solid as an oak and muscled from long days of training and battle. His sturdy waist and chest seemed to call Christian to wrap his arms around them. William's eyes were like the sea after a storm, sucking Christian in. And his lips—whether they smiled and sang, or were pensive and sad—made Christian's own mouth itch with a need to press against them.

Now it was Christian who looked away, afraid his eyes would reflect the hard, bitter edge of his yearning.

Looking away did not help. He was never less than half hard, and the woods along their route had seen enough of his covertly spilled seed to found a forest of Brandons, could babes grow as trees did. William must be beginning to wonder if Christian had a malfunction of the kidneys, he disappeared so often and so long.

It went against Christian's nature to be circumspect. You did not grow up the youngest of seven boys and not learn to take what you needed and what you wanted, roughly if necessary. You grabbed for the platter of meat as it hit the table or your belly went empty, and no one would feel sorry for you and rectify that. That lesson had been ingrained in him from his youth.

That part of Christian wanted to act boldly. It was cruelly unfair. His brothers were never troubled by lust. If they wanted a maid, they pulled her into their lap and began pawing her. If she had serious objections, she'd knock them upside the head with a mug or a platter and they would find another. But

Christian's desires were another matter. They were like hidden daggers turned inward, and he knew if he pressed forward, he might just bleed to death.

Especially with William. To make an advance on another knight could prove deadly. He might be rewarded with a broken arm or a formal challenge. If the man was slightly less offended, Christian might merely be sent home in shame. The worst part about that was he would have let William down. He wouldn't be able to fulfill his pledge to help William rescue his sister. William would be forced to cast him off and carry on alone—alone and with even fewer chances than he already had.

So Christian resigned himself to silence. He would say, do, nothing until the business with William's sister was done. If they both survived, he would make it clear to William, perhaps by moving in slowly for a kiss—*I want to lie with you*. And then, should William not feel the same, he might at least be obliged enough to Christian to send him home rather than force them to single combat or expose him publically.

The possibility of rejection was terrifying. Christian had never dared make his interest blatantly known to a man before. But then, he'd never desired anyone this much, nor been as wracked with speculation and second-guessing. He would gladly take a clear-cut rejection over wondering and wishing, over pondering the meaning of William's every glance.

It was a reasonable plan. But it was not perfect. One or both of them might not survive the confrontation with Somerfield. And even if they did, they would then be travelling with William's sister. If there was even a small chance that the handsome knight returned his interest, this could be their only chance to indulge it.

But Christian had no choice other than to continue to try to prove himself to William—and wait.

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## CHAPTER 6

After two weeks of hard riding they were nearly to Derby. The past two nights they'd ridden until nightfall, and Christian had no chance to hunt game. But on this night William saw the exhaustion in the horses and decided to rein them in a little early.

Christian went into the woods and came back with two pheasants and a pouch full of mushrooms. They prepared the birds and roasted them over a spit, letting the juices drip into a pan with the earthy, fluted mushrooms. William insisted that they had to finish the wine so he could refill the bladder in Derby. It was a feast.

After they ate they remained at the fire, passing the wine back and forth. William felt a contented warmth he hadn't in years. Even his concern about Elaine faded to a low murmur.

"Why were you eager to leave your father's castle?" he asked Christian.

Christian tossed a chestnut into the fire to hear it pop. "My family is not fond of me."

William frowned. "How can that be? You earned your spurs. You're said to excel at archery. The crowd at the tournament loved you, from the cries I heard. Especially the maidens."

He said this last with a wink, but a sad, ironic smile traced Christian's lips. "Things are different on the inside than they appear on the outside."

"Then tell me how it fares on the inside." William wasn't sure he should press, but it was still early and he felt in the mood for conversation. Besides, he truly wanted to know more about Christian.

"My brother Malcolm wants me dead," Christian said with no emotion. "The others would just as soon have me gone. My father has always both loved and hated me."

"But Sir Malcolm supported your request to come with me."



Christian barked a laugh. “Well, my apologies, Sir William, it did sound a rather hopeless cause. ’Tis easier for him if someone else sticks the knife in my ribs.”

William stilled his questions, but he wondered. A seventh son should be no threat to his elder brothers. Of course, Lord Branson’s other sons were rough-hewn and lumpy, like their father. They could not hold a candle to Christian’s natural looks and grace. Such things could inspire bitter jealousy, especially if a specific woman was involved. Is that why Sir Malcolm wanted him dead? Had Christian stolen his beloved’s heart?

As if sensing his questions, Christian spoke again. “’Tis a simple matter. All my brothers share the same mother, Lady Mary. She was my father’s first wife. She bore him eight children, six of them boys. Then she died of a fever.”

Christian took a slug of wine and continued. “My mother was Lady Enndolyn, my father’s second wife. The story goes that she was a renowned beauty and my father lusted after her for years. But she refused to have anything to do with him while he was married to another.” Christian paused. “In fact, it is said that Lady Mary’s fever might have been helped along with a dose of poison, so strong was my father’s lust for Enndolyn.”

William breathed in sharply. “’Tis an evil accusation to lay on your own sire.”

Christian shrugged. “I only repeat what is whispered among the servants. It was before my time, as you can well surmise. I know naught of it. But however it happened, by means fair or foul, my father was at last free, and he married my mother. He had her for only one year before I was born. She died in childbirth. He has never forgiven me. And my brothers—they hated my mother for dispossessing their dam, and by that same token, me.”

William’s heart ached at the placid, frozen expression on Christian’s face. Christian had learned to school his emotions well.

“My mother also died when I was young,” William said. “’Tis why I was so close to Elaine. She was younger than me, but she raised us both in my mother’s stead. I am sorry, Christian.”

Christian shrugged. “They say I look a great deal like her.”

“She must have been a very great beauty.”

When Christian looked at him in surprise, William felt his face reddening. “What I mean to say is... you do not resemble your brothers or your father.”

“No. I am nothing like them.”

For long moments they sat watching the fire, then Christian spoke again. “I was fortunate that when I was fourteen my mother’s brother visited our castle, Sir Allendale. He saw how I was treated, and he took pity on me. He asked my father if I might squire for him. It got me out of the castle for a number of years. I owe him a great debt.”

“He taught you well,” William said. “Was it your uncle who dubbed you ‘The Crow’? Archers are more oft called after vipers or scorpions or eagles.”

“No, I got the name quite young. I used to sit on the fence of our training arena, watching my brothers fight. I liked to sit with my feet on the top log and balance on my haunches.”

Suddenly, William could see the image clearly. He couldn’t help but chuckle at the vision of a small, dark-haired boy sitting thus.

Christian smirked. “I thought it would build my leg muscles and improve my reflexes.”

“I’m sure it did,” William said seriously, choking back a laugh.

“In truth, the name was meant as an insult.” Christian shrugged. “But it suits me. A crow knows how to get away from its enemies, sitting up high in a tree, watching, invisible. It sees the moment to attack, swoops in, and stings—snatching a sparkling treasure or a bit of prey, and ’tis gone again before it’s even seen. It’s clever and bold, but never foolhardy. That is my warrior’s road.”

William couldn’t help smiling to himself at the earnestness of Christian’s description. He had the pride of any young warrior, still in love with the dream of his own ferocity.

“And you, Sir William? You’re called the Lion. Your strength and bravery is much lauded. But how would you describe your warrior’s road?”

“Me?” William composed his face into a serious scowl. “I sunder things with my sword. Oft.”

Christian blinked at him for a moment and then started laughing. He covered up his mouth as if embarrassed at how it made him look. William felt a wave of anger that Christian had been forced to learn such restraint. He wanted to pull down that hand, to say, *Laugh. Laugh Christian, for there is none here to chide you for it*, but he didn’t. Instead, William smiled back, then he caught Christian’s laughter as if it were a spark, and they chuckled together easily for a good while.

When their laughter died down, William stretched out his legs towards the fire, accepted Christian’s offer of the last swig of wine, and thought about all that Christian had said. He flushed with shame, remembering how it had felt to stand in front of Lord Brandon and admit that his own father refused to help Elaine. But he attempted a teasing tone.

“I’m glad you told me why you joined my hopeless cause. ’Tis good for a man to know where he stands.”

“William... that—that is not the only reason I came with you.”

Christian’s voice was quiet, but there was something in it that made the hair on the back of William’s neck stand up. He looked at Christian then. Christian stared back at him—and held.

William was used to Christian avoiding eye contact of late. But not this time; not tonight. William gazed into those eyes, caught by a pull he couldn’t break. And what he saw in those fire-lit fields of golden brown was an undeniable invitation. Just as their laughter had done, heat jumped from Christian to William, spreading through him, pooling heavily in his groin, and causing his pulse to race like a bolting horse.

At last William swallowed and tore his gaze away. He could feel his face blazing as he struggled to control his body and his thoughts.

“Tis late,” William said. His voice did not sound like his own. “We should rest.”

He got up and, without looking at Christian again, began his nightly preparations.

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## CHAPTER 7

Sir William lay sleepless that night, watching the dying embers. He was thinking about Edmund. Edmund, his older brother—handsome, quick to smile Edmund, beloved so intently by William, Elaine, and their father. He'd been lost in a battle in Wales when he was only twenty-eight.

William had worshipped Edmund as only a younger brother can. He told him everything. Now he could not stop replaying a conversation they'd had, over and over in his mind. William had been fourteen.

"I need to seek your advice, brother," William had asked with utmost seriousness.

"My word, it sounds ominous," Edmund teased. "Did you steal a piece of cook's pie? And if so, where's my share?"

"*Tis* serious," William protested. "Will you promise to guard my secret?"

It was something they said to one another, Edmund and he, as if secrets were gems that could be locked away in a box.

"Aye. Speak from your heart, Will."

William could not bear to look into his brother's eyes. His face heated. "Is it normal for a boy my age to... to have lust?"

Edmund laughed. "More normal than whiskers. More normal than lice."

"I do not have lice!"

Edmund laughed again.

"Be serious! Is it normal even if you lust for... for..."

"Speak up!" Edmund urged. "Is it Dame Mendelsohn?"

William was aghast. Dame Mendelsohn was gray-haired and wizened. "No!"

"What then? Be not afraid."

"Other boys." William stuck his chin out fiercely and met his brother's gaze.

Edmund studied him for a moment and then laughed. "Aye. 'Tis normal enough. You're a Corbet male and you've fourteen summers. Not even the suckling pigs are safe."

"But...." William was astonished by the easy acceptance.

Edmund leaned in and winked. "Any inch of skin, any curve of ass will stir the blood at your age. 'Tis a natural drive, brother. Virility! You'll thank God for it once you've a wife to swive. Our grandfather was still bedding wenches two at a time in his seventies!"

His smiling face grew serious. "But be careful where you stick it, Will. Messing with a boy or two might be tolerated at your age, but not much older. Find a woman grown, a widow perhaps. They love to tutor a boy still wet behind the ears. Only make sure she's clean. The pox is a living hell."

"I understand," William said, though he didn't.

Edmund's face grew darker. "There isn't a man sniffing around you, is there? That's tutoring of a sort you don't need."

William recognized the murderous glint in his brother's eye. He spoke hurriedly. "No, I swear. 'Tis only in my own head."

Edmund relaxed and ruffled his hair. "In your head? Or your hand? Perhaps I should find you a wench, 'ey? Give you a release for all that lust before you get yourself into trouble."

William sputtered and prevaricated and managed to get out of an imminent intervention by his brother. The idea of Edmund taking him to an older woman was terrifying. And not long after, Edmund had left for war and had never returned.

*Messing with a boy or two might be tolerated at your age, but not much older.*

Now that William was grown and had travelled widely, he knew the truth was both more complex and darker. Some knights used their squires for sexual release. He'd heard it in the dark around him on the road on many occasions. While it was generally tolerated, he thought it an abuse of power, and his

respect for the men who did it diminished, especially upon seeing more than a few squires who obviously did not relish the role and appeared beaten down.

Still, to use a boy in such a way was largely overlooked, as long as it happened away from home, when men had no alternative. As long as it *was* a boy.

There was a name for men who preferred other men—sodomites. They were publically shunned here, but on the continent such men were burned. There had been treatises calling for the same in England.

Prince Edward II was rumored to be a sodomite, granting outrageous favors to his male lover. But he was despised for it. And then too, it had always been the case that the debauchery that was tolerated at court was a far cry from what was acceptable anyplace else.

The one thing that William was certain of was that it was shameful to want, to bed, another man. So even if the desire had never left him, he had faithfully ignored it. He suspected he did not enjoy women as much as the next man, despite the Corbet virility, and he still found his eye drawn appreciatively to the male form now and again. But it had never been so irresistibly strong, nor so accessible, that he'd acted upon it. All visitors to his bed had been female.

But now he was alone on the road with Sir Christian Brandon. It wasn't only Christian's unusual beauty that provoked William. If he'd been merely a doll with a cold heart, William could have dismissed him readily enough. No, there was something about Christian that struck a deeper chord—a warmth, sweetness, and vulnerability in his deep brown eyes, the hint of shyness, and a need to please that peeked through the mask of cold strength that he wrapped around himself like a disguise. William felt almost bewitched at times, so strong was the urge to protect the man, to stare at him, to brush against him as if by accident, or clap a hand on his shoulder, to make him smile.

God's wounds!

Worst of all, it was not only himself that William had to guard against. For he was beginning to feel certain that Christian... that Christian was... that he was a lover of men—

*Sodomite? Evil, odious word. He could not make himself apply it to Christian.*

—and that Christian wanted William too.

*That is not the only reason. The heat in those eyes in the firelight.*

William's cock throbbed and ached, despite having already relieved his lust once before bed, off in the woods. He groaned in frustration and turned onto his stomach, grinding his inflamed flesh into the stony ground. He would discourage by pain what he could not seem to discourage by duty and logic.

Sir William Corbet would not dishonor himself, nor Christian. He would *not*.

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## CHAPTER 8

It felt like he'd been asleep only a few hours, and the moon was still high, when a hand gently shook William's shoulder. He woke and started to speak, but a hand covered his mouth. Christian's dark eyes were inches from his own.

"Bandits," Christian whispered.

William's hand reached for his sword even as he blinked his eyes to clear them. He strained his ears. He heard a soft sound from the brush, barely there.

And then Christian was gone, melting into the darkness in a crouch. William stood, thrusting off his bedroll and readying his sword. He withdrew it from its sheath quietly, but the metal still sang a soft song in the night. There was a shout and they were attacked.

William's eyes were adjusted to the night, and the light of a full moon turned the world a silvery blue. He could see well enough, and he could see that they were outnumbered. Five men came out of the woods, two of them larger than William, and all of them rough and vicious-looking. Hell, he could already smell them. They were predators. Maybe they'd been soldiers once, but now they looked eager to skin William and Christian alive for their horses and whatever bits of gold and food they carried.

*Christian.*

William felt a sudden stab of fear for Christian and he glanced around. With any knight in this situation, he'd prefer to fight back-to-back. But Christian was nowhere to be seen.

William felt a surge of disappointment that was surprising in its acuteness. He had been starting to trust Christian. But the young knight was a coward after all. It was true, the odds stank. But you did not desert a comrade in battle.

The five men drew in tighter, two of them moving around to encircle William. He raised his broadsword above his right shoulder and half crouched. As a younger knight, he might have hurried to attack, trying to gain an advantage by sheer audacity and surprise, but now he knew better. He waited,

letting the anger and bloodlust curl in his veins and infuse his body with power. He'd let his attackers make the first mistake.

*Where was Christian?*

The two men directly in front of him raised their swords and rushed forward.

It happened so fast, it took several breaths for William to realize what was taking place. The largest bandit, directly in front of him, suddenly jerked backwards, like a fish on a hook. An instant later, the man next to him clutched his throat, gurgling. Through the grasping hands, William saw a feathered stick.

*Arrows.* Christian had not left him.

With a grin and a roar, William spun around, swinging his sword. One of the bandits stumbled back to avoid it while another, a man that had not been anywhere *near* William's blade, suddenly clutched at his throat and then went to his knees.

William looked at the dying man, just a tad annoyed. But the last two bandits were running now. William took chase with a battle cry, determined to sunder *something*.

He heard the arrows coming just before they hit—*thwunk, thwunk*, seconds apart. The remaining bandits went down, one with an arrow cleanly shot to his heart—dead instantly. The other took one in the shoulder. He clutched at it with a scream of pain and stumbled on. A moment later, a second arrow through the back finished the job.

William stood in the clearing, his sword pointed at nothing, breathing hard. He looked around at the five corpses. He scratched his head. A lithe figure separated from the shadows of the trees and approached.

“Let me explain to you the etiquette of battles,” William said tightly as Christian joined him.

The younger knight's cheeks were flushed with excitement, the rosy hue dark in the gray light of the moon. Christian blinked at him, his proud smile faltering. "Uh..."

"It's considered polite to leave me *at least one!*" William shouted. He thrust the tip of his sword in the ground, underscoring his point.

Christian bit his lips. "I... I'm sorry, William. I guess I got caught up."

"You got caught up."

Christian looked around at the bodies. "Well... five is not very many. I could easily have taken out twice that in as much time."

"Are you saying I was too slow?" William said warningly.

"No! I—" Christian looked at him, aghast, but then saw the grin William was fighting to hide.

William suddenly guffawed with laughter. He pulled Christian in with a strong hand around the back of his neck, ruffling his hair and knocking their foreheads together. "By Christ's toes, you are a show off! Trying to impress me, 'ey?"

Christian leaned into the touch, almost stumbling off his feet. But William pulled away, suddenly aware of their proximity. Christian had the grace to look abashed. "Well... I may have been showing off a little."

"Well I may be a little impressed. And in the moonlight too!"

"It wasn't that good," Christian protested modestly. "It took me longer than I hoped to get up in the tree. And then I meant to get both the last two in the heart, seconds apart. That would have been impressive. But I missed and got a shoulder instead."

"Toothless cur! You must try harder next time," William teased.

He went to the nearest corpse and searched the body. He could almost feel the vermin crawling off the man and onto him, and the stench was overpowering, but he had to look. He found a large, soft pouch and tore it off the man's belt. Opened, it revealed a nest of some sort. There were still a few

embers in the firepit and he took it over to get a better look as Christian cast on a few more pieces of kindling.

The pouch was full of hair, human hair, a dozen colors at least, matted together.

The last of William's humor faded and he looked up into Christian's cold eyes and clenched jaw.

"They're well dead," Christian said darkly.

William nodded.

There was no remaining at the camp with the corpses, and dragging them into the woods was not distance enough. Neither one of them wanted to linger. So they packed up and headed out, with hours to go before dawn.

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## CHAPTER 9

That day they rode along a wide road, approaching Manchester. They'd be able to refill their wine and provisions in town, and Christian was looking forward to seeing it. He'd passed through it once, with Sir Allendale, but they had not stopped. He hoped for an eyeful of the church at least.

But though he relished travelling, the closer they drew to Somerfield's lands, the more Christian's mind worried at the problem of what would happen when they got there. He and William rode side by side on the wide track. They sang awhile—William had a very nice voice. And William talked about his first battle. Christian enjoyed listening to William's tales, but when a comfortable silence fell, he broached the subject foremost on his mind.

“When we get to Somerfield's castle, do you really intend to ask for an audience?”

“I do.”

“And you will tell him that you wish to take Elaine home for a visit?”

William narrowed his eyes at the road in front of him. “I will tell him I have come to take Elaine and her children back home.”

“By the Blood! You would.” Christian cursed.

William frowned at him. “What would you have me say?”

“Say that your father is quite ill. You wish to take Elaine and the children to visit him on his deathbed.”

William pursed his lips firmly. After a long moment, he spoke. “'Tis not a bad plan. But I dislike standing in a man's hall and lying. A knight does not lie. And even if Somerfield bought the tale, he'd be a fool to allow all three of them to go. He'd keep the children so Elaine would have no choice but to return.”

Christian nodded. He'd already thought as much. “Are you sure Elaine would not leave the children? If she hates her husband so much—”

“Never,” William said without a trace of doubt. “Not Elaine. No matter what their sire has done.”

Christian’s chest tightened. “You would not seriously challenge Lord Somerfield to single combat?”

“I must. I can’t raise an army to defeat him. My only option is to get him to fight me man to man.”

“By the saints! You do not challenge a lord in his keep. He’ll have his guard grab you and behead you on the spot. Or perhaps he’ll lock you in the dungeon for a slow death!”

“*Enough*,” William snapped. “’Tis my own affair.”

Christian didn’t argue. They rode on for a bit, then William rubbed his chin pensively. “My best chance is to insult his pride. Somerfield is said to be cruel and vain, and he was a renowned fighter in his younger days. If I say he is too cowardly to face me one-on-one—”

“He will have his guards disembowel you,” Christian finished surely.

“’Tis a chance I must take. You cannot know what he will do, no better than I can.”

“I know *my* father. And I know what he would do.”

William did not reply.

Christian felt his stomach churn with anger. It was even worse than he’d suspected. William’s sense of honor was sure to get him killed. And Christian could not bear the thought of it, if only for the sake of William’s kindness to him if naught else. And there was else—much else. He had to convince William he was wrong.

“Listen,” Christian said, taking on a softer tone, “the lesson I learned in my youth was this—when you do not have the advantage in size and power, you must use your wits and cunning. I don’t suppose that’s a lesson you were ever forced to learn.”

William arched a bemused brow. “Are you saying I lack cunning?”

Christian barked a laugh. "I'm saying you probably have never lacked for power. But such trickery as I have had to learn? Yes, you do lack it. 'Tis no insult, I assure you. Do not go in to see Somerfield boldly. It will go easier if he does not suspect you are there. Don't ask for Elaine; steal her."

William frowned, a deep crease on his brow. "Subterfuge would be difficult. He knows my face."

"But not mine."

William abruptly reined in his horse, stopping. His scowl was fierce. "You, Christian Brandon, are not going into that castle. I gave my word to your father."

"You did not," Christian said coolly. "I did. Or rather, he ordered it of me. I never gave my pledge."

William looked surprised as he thought about it, recalling the exact conversation with Lord Brandon. "And it means naught to you to obey your father's orders? Where is your fealty?"

Christian felt his face flush with a surge of bitter rage. "I keep faith with those who have kept faith with me."

William shook his head in disbelief. "God save me from ever having sons like you."

"I would wish it on no man," Christian said sincerely.

William started riding again, but his face was set. "It matters not what I promised or did not promise to your father. I won't endanger you, Christian. 'Tis not your fight and I won't have your death on my conscience."

"I may not know your sister, but I know *you*," Christian said calmly. "'Tis my fight now, whether you will it or not. I won't have *your* death on *mine*."

William's jaw clenched stubbornly. "I will proceed as I have stated."

"Then you will die and Elaine will not be saved."

William said nothing. They rode in silence for an hour, 'til the sun was high in the sky. Christian suddenly said, "I will strategize on it."

“Now *that* is frightening,” William said.

Christian chuckled darkly.

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## CHAPTER 10

Three weeks into their journey, and a half day's ride out of Whalley, they had to cross the Ribble River. The ferry was not running, and the alternative was a day's ride out of their way. They decided to swim the horses across. But it was late afternoon and they'd been riding since dawn.

"Let's camp here," William decided. "It will be safer to cross in the morning, when the horses are rested. And then we'll have all day to let the sun dry us."

"As you say." For once, Christian and Livermore looked tired. It was a hot day and the young knight gazed at the river longingly from his mount.

"Let's set the camp back from the river," William said. "So we'll not be seen by anyone drifting by."

They found a small clearing in the woods not far from the river and tended the horses together in silence. It was still early for supper, and there was not the usual haste to set up camp before nightfall.

"Go bathe in the river," William told Christian as he finished feeding Livermore. "I'll start the fire."

"No, you go. I'll make the fire," Christian offered.

William growled. "You are not my squire, Christian. I can start the bedamned fire for once. Go on, before I pick you up and toss you in the water myself."

Christian opened his mouth to protest, but the look on William's face stopped him. He grinned. "As you wish, m'lord," he said playfully. He took some soap from his saddlebags and ran off towards the river with a whoop of joy.

William chuckled to himself. He stretched and started looking around for deadwood, his heart inexplicably light. Gathering the wood did not take long. William dumped it in the center of the clearing and looked at it for a moment. The sun was still warm. It would be a waste of tinder to start the fire now.

Besides, he was hot and sweaty and the river beckoned. With a lazy grin, he answered.

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When William stepped from the woods onto the stony riverbank, and saw Christian in the river, his happy anticipation of a bath was snuffed out like a candle caught in the gust of a brewing storm.

Christian was hip deep in the water, hair and skin wet, as he scrubbed at his arms with a bit of cloth and lye soap. William's knees were suddenly unwilling to support him. It would be weak to retreat into the forest now, even if he had the will to do so, and he did not. But neither could he bear to disturb this vision. So he quietly made his way to a large, flat rock on the river bank and sat, his legs bent and spread, arms on his knees. And watched.

*By the Holy Virgin.* Clothed, Christian was striking. Naked, he was inhuman, a heavenly vision. His shoulders and arms were roped with muscle. His chest and stomach were so lean and pale that every ridge, curve, and nuance that lay beneath the skin could be seen. The bumpy plain of his abdomen marched from breastbone to the waterline like a cobbled road. A girdle of muscle topped his narrow hips and veed inwards, disappearing below the lucky tide.

As they'd ridden further and further from his father's castle, Christian's face had gradually let slack its defenses. And now, as he bathed, it was open and vulnerable, with a vaguely dreamy look in those dark eyes. He looked like a male nymph or a godling.

Christian dunked under the water, rinsing himself. Then he floated onto his back, legs kicking. This raised his hips to the surface, revealing his cock, which was long and thick in its silken sheath and slightly swollen.

William drew in a ragged breath. Perfect. So perfect.

The world William inhabited was frequently ugly. Any market in the land was rife with faces ravaged by fevers and pox. Malformations of limbs were not uncommon, by birth or by the crude setting of broken bone. Equally as common were cleft lips, disfiguring birthmarks, scars, and malnutrition. Men

were oft times coarse and unwashed. Women had a brief youthful bloom that faded quickly, like wildflowers in the field. But Christian... he was unique, a rose blooming in a frozen tundra. Had Christian been a woman, he might have married a king. As a man, he could have any woman's bed, or all of them.

He could inspire ballads. He could inspire wars.

William watched, bewitched, as Christian's lazy kicks spun him closer to the riverbank. He stood suddenly, and he was only thigh deep—thigh deep, water streaming down his skin, and partially erect.

Christian looked down at himself with a musing, distant look, his thoughts far away. His hand skimmed down his chest to grasp himself with a small, secret smile. He glanced up then, towards the woods, as if to verify that he was alone—and froze when he saw William sitting on the rock.

His hand fell from his cock in horror, and then both hands came up to cover it. His cheeks stained scarlet, sending red tendrils as far down as his jaw. He abruptly turned his back.

"I was going to ask if the water is cold," William teased, though his voice sounded deep and rough. "But the evidence suggests that it cannot be as cold as all that."

"I didn't know you were there," Christian said, a rather obvious statement. For a moment he seemed frozen with panic or indecision. He did not turn around—but neither did he walk further into the river to cover himself. His shoulders relaxed in acceptance.

The air grew heavy and charged.

William felt it thickening around him even as he blinked in dazed attention at his new view. He stared in awe at the shape of Christian's back—his shoulders so broad for that slender frame, his torso narrowing to the tender flesh of his waist, dimpled *there* at the small of his back, and then swelling again into the plush curves of his arse...

William had been hard since he first glimpsed Christian in the river. But now a powerful lust—a crude word, a crude emotion, but accurate enough—

curled around William's chest and groin like a constricting snake and squeezed. He could scarcely breathe.

*Oh, God. By the saints, by the Virgin, by the most sacred blood.*

He was suddenly aware that he was standing on a knife's edge.

Over the weeks they'd been together, without William even realizing it, the firmament of his resolve and control and self-denial had been eaten away far below the surface. And now he could feel how thin the thread was that held him in check—perilously, horrifyingly, inconsequentially thin.

He stood abruptly and headed for the woods.

"*William.*" Christian's voice rang out sharply, stopping him in his tracks.

William paused, his back to the river. He could not look.

"They call you the *lion*. I wouldn't have expected you to be such a dog-hearted coward."

Christian's voice held disdain. And those words, those *outrageous, inflammatory* words, made William tremble, literally shake in his boots.

No man spoke to him like that.

William was filled with an imperative urge to stride into that river and grab Christian, push him, tackle him, hold him down, make him take it back, those words, to make him... *beg*. To take him, to crush him, to kiss him, to *fuck* him.

William's trembling fingers scrambled at the laces of his gambeson and, with a muttered curse, he ripped it over his head and *threw* it. He yanked off first one boot, then the other, hurling them at the trees and causing birds to take flight in alarm. Then his linen shirt was pulled over his head and away, suffering a nasty tear in his fit of pique. He only barely refrained from spitting on it for good measure.

He almost left on his hose, striding towards the river still in them. But the wool was a bastard to dry, and he needed something more to assuage his wrath before he got his hands on anything that could actually *bruise*. So he stopped and yanked them down. He was so hard that his cock slapped against his belly

loudly as it pulled free of his hose. In his rage, he felt not the slightest prickle of shame.

Christian was wide-eyed as William stormed into the water. He put his hands up in front of him, as if to ward William off, but his face told a different story. He gazed up and down William's approaching form with unmistakable hunger, lingering on his chest, then his cock. And if he'd intended to run, like any sane man would have done, it was too late, because suddenly William was there.

He grabbed Christian's upper arms in his two strong hands and pulled Christian up, holding him so that their faces were of a level and his feet were off the riverbed. William didn't bring Christian close, he just held him, firmly. And he glared, growling low in his throat.

Christian licked his lips, looking slightly nervous. But his eyes were heated and they slipped from William's eyes to linger on his lips and then down to the muscles of his chest. When Christian met William's eyes again, it was abundantly clear that he wasn't going to struggle, wasn't going to resist, or even defend himself with that wicked tongue. He tilted his head back slightly, his eyes going half-lidded, as if offering his throat.

God's teeth! The man was more beautiful than anything in the heavens or the earth. And William's anger merged with a strangling desire.

"Do you. Want me?" William asked through gritted teeth, because he wanted to take, he *had* to. But he wouldn't take what was not freely offered.

Christian answered fiercely. "Since the first time I saw you on the jousting field and every minute since."

William pulled Christian in, wrapped him in strong arms, and kissed him.

*Oh.*

Oh, the feeling of Christian in his arms. William pressed him tight, crushing that beautiful body against his own as firmly as he could without causing harm. Christian's flesh was warm above, from the heat of the sun, and cool below from the river. And the lean strength of it, the flat chest against his own, the hard cock pressed next to his, felt so right and perfect that it filled

William with shivers of delight and brought a stinging heat to the back of his eyes.

Oh. William was so lost.

He plundered Christian's mouth, tasting him deeply. His mouth was warm like a summer day and earthly like the woods and... innocent. Christian was all eagerness, almost frantic with desire. His arms wrapped around William's shoulders in a painful clutch, and he crushed his lips to William's as demandingly as a starving baby bird. But for all that, his mouth was untutored, his moves hesitant.

How was it possible that no one had ever kissed this man?

The thought brought a wave of tenderness, and William softened his hold. His palms pressed flat on Christian's back and he relaxed his grip. But Christian would have none of it. He pulled himself in tighter and began to rut against William's stomach in desperation. His cock was still a bit slippery from the water as it rubbed against William's dry skin. William groaned, wanting to give him what he needed, what they both needed. He turned and started for the riverbank, following a deep instinct to lay Christian down on the ground and take him.

But then he stopped—Christian was not a woman. William did not know what to do. He knew it was possible to take a man's arse but he wasn't sure how the thing was done, not without brutality and pain. So he swallowed down his pressing need and carried Christian deeper into the water.

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Christian couldn't believe he'd challenged William like that—called him a dog-hearted coward. It was a dangerous gambit. But he'd just... he couldn't stand it anymore, all the dancing and denial. No man was meant to suffer so much for the want of love. It wasn't fair.

Ever since the night they'd talked at the fire, Christian had been sure. Well, almost sure. What he'd seen in William's eyes that night convinced him that William wanted him, that he'd been as aroused as Christian was himself. So when he'd caught William watching him on the riverbank, desire written all

over his face, Christian had *needed*, acutely, and he was determined not to accept another diversion. So he'd pushed.

And he'd won. It was William's colors that lay now, muddied, on the tournament field. But in victory, Christian only felt the desire to surrender completely, to let William take him, do whatever he willed. Dear Holy Mother, *anything*, as long as this heady feeling didn't end.

Christian pressed himself hard against that broad frame. William was strong and sturdy and immovable. Nothing in Christian's entire life had prepared him for how this felt—so safe, so wondrous, so arousing. William's skin was smooth silk over hard muscle. His lips were as soft on Christian's as he'd imagined they would be. His tongue stroked in Christian's mouth, and every caress spurred Christian's need higher and higher. William's cock was as hard as the river stones had been beneath Christian's feet. William was that hard *for him*.

Christian rutted helplessly against William's stomach, along the side of his shaft. The friction on his aching flesh was so pleasurable he couldn't still his hips or his cries.

William began to carry Christian towards the river bank, but then suddenly they were moving deeper into the water. William pulled his mouth away.

"Put your legs round me," he said as the water crept up to Christian's waist.

Christian did. He wrapped his legs around William's hips and recaptured his mouth, desperate for the taste of him. The cool water lapped at the furrow between Christian's legs, tickled the undersides of his bollocks in a marvelous fashion. But the new position meant his cock was not as tightly against William's stomach and he whined in frustration and tilted his hips, trying to get closer.

"William," Christian begged.

William groaned in answer and half-swam backwards, pulling them in deeper.

“By my sword, what you make me feel,” William growled. He pulled Christian in tight, hands on his arse, and ground them together. *Yes. There.*

The pleasure of it, the sheer sexual pleasure that came from the friction of Christian’s swollen, sensitized cock rubbing against William’s stomach and iron shaft, was so much more intense than anything Christian had ever felt when he’d touched himself that he was in awe of it. He got lost in the sensation—being in William’s arms, the sweet heat of his lips and tender tongue, the delight of their cocks rutting against each other between their bodies.

That Christian could have a man like this, and not just any man, but *William*, a man more handsome, stronger, and more decent than any he’d ever known, seemed entirely unreal. As if, by all rights, the earth should cleave in two at the audacity of Christian daring to be so happy, daring to get so much.

Then William, with a moan, removed one hand from Christian’s backside and pushed it between them, taking them both in his large hand.

Christian threw back his head at the sensation of those strong, calloused fingers on his shaft, and the press of William’s large cock moving tightly against his own. He couldn’t stop the moans that poured from his throat.

“Christian, look at me,” William ground out.

Christian looked.

“Need to see your eyes. So beautiful,” William panted.

“William.” Christian stared into those stormy blue eyes. The level of intimacy shattered him.

“You’re so beautiful, Christian. So fine. You should know that. You should—”

The words were too tender, too much. They tipped Christian over the edge.

“Ah! Oh, God!” He squeezed his eyes shut as orgasm overtook him, streaming hot from his flesh into the cool river tide.

“Look at me!” William cried.



Christian forced his eyes open, still in the throes of his release, and he saw William's pleasure wash across his face. His cock pulsed against Christian's. Christian drew his hand down quickly to the head of William's cock, because he had to feel it, needed proof of William's desire. The hot semen struck his palm with surprising force even underwater. It was such a vulnerable, erotic thing that William was letting him see, letting him feel, that it touched the core of him. William held Christian's gaze fiercely until the last of the ecstasy had faded from his eyes.

Christian felt profoundly changed. He knew he could never go back to the person he'd been an hour ago. Something had irrevocably shifted inside him. But as their ardor faded, he suddenly felt unsure. He wanted to bury his face in William's neck, to feel their heartbeats slowing together in the warm circle of William's arms. But he feared that, with William's passion spent, his denial would return and he'd look at Christian like he was perverted and wrong, perhaps want to punish him. Christian tried to pull away.

"No," William said, pressing him tight.

Christian was stiff for a moment, but when it was clear William was not going to relent, he relaxed in his arms, placing his forehead on William's shoulder with a sigh.

"I wish you could see yourself as I see you," William said quietly.

"How do you see me?"

William stroked his back. "Perfect in every way. If I could freeze time and place I would choose this moment and this river, with you."

Christian's heart soared at the words, a stab of joy so acute that it hurt. But then he also heard what was not said—*but we cannot freeze time and this cannot last.*

Christian pushed the thought away. He placed his hands on William's waist, relishing the feel of the taut skin under the water. *Say what you like. You are mine and forever will be.*

"And you are my perfection," Christian said, and then quickly, so that William need not reply, "Now let me loose, and I'll hunt us a fine dinner."

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## CHAPTER 11

They worked in companionable silence as they made camp and cooked dinner. Christian caught another hare in the forest—the woods were overflowing with them—and William broke a fresh round of bread from Whalley. They shared a pungent red wine William had purchased at The King's Horse, filling his leather costrel. There was no need for idle conversation.

When Christian would have sat several feet away from him at the fire, William patted a place next to him on the log. As they ate, they bumped knees and elbows, but neither moved to put distance between them.

Now that William had taken the step he'd fought all his life, there was no undoing it, and he would not waste time on regret. He didn't feel ashamed or confused. He felt... strongly protective. He wanted to shield Christian from any more pain in his life, including the pain Christian obviously expected in the form of William's cruelty. William would never be cruel, not to Christian, not deliberately. But he didn't have to be, because the situation was cruel enough. William felt the first knot of a great sorrow, born under his ribs. He knew how brief a reign this thing between them would have. It *had* to be brief, but that made him all the more greedy for every moment of it.

William had heard the troubadours sing of love. His tutor had made him read *The Song of Roland* and much bad romantic poetry. He understood the notion of courtly love, had seen some of his friends pine for their beloved. He'd pretended amusement, teased them mercilessly, but he'd been envious. He'd always hoped that, someday, he would have a wife whom he would love thus, as if she hung the moon and the stars. He'd never met a woman who made him lose his head like that. But he could lose his head over Christian. Perhaps he already had. He recognized that the dewy perfection he saw when he looked at Christian was unrealistic, a sign of a heart struck by Cupid's arrow. But it was so sweet he didn't care.

*And you are my perfection*, Christian had said. That infant bud of sorrow grew just a little more.

It was dark when they finished dinner, and with no plate or cup to hold in his hands, they felt irreverently empty when Christian was only a breath away. William slipped an arm round the knight's waist, relishing the slender solidity of him. When Christian did not object, William pulled him close. They had not talked about what had happened, and William's sense of honor pushed him to rectify that.

William cleared his throat. "If you were a woman, I would already be before your father on bended knee."

Christian said nothing, but he leaned further into William.

"'Tis wrong in the eyes of God and men," William said firmly, to explain himself. "I cannot regret you, Christian. But we cannot take this much further."

Christian tensed in his arms. "When I was thirteen," Christian said slowly, "and in the sanctity of the confessional, I told our priest that I felt desire for men."

William's hand, which had been rubbing Christian's side, stilled.

"He told me I was possessed by a succubus, a female demon that hungered for men. He told me he would pray for guidance to free me from this creature."

"For a week, I was terrified. I tried to feel this insidious being inside me. I prayed to all the saints, to Jesus, and the Holy Virgin to free me from it, to cast it out. I wondered what I had done to be vulnerable to such an attack. I wondered if I were truly as weak and worthless as my brothers had always claimed, deserving of their hatred and my father's coldness. Why else would the succubus have chosen me?"

"'Tis not so," William breathed into Christian's hair, feeling a murderous anger for the sake of the young boy.

"The following week, when I returned to confession, eager to hear the priest explain how he would free me from the succubus, he told me that God had shown him the way. He made me follow him to his chambers. There, he made me undress and he forced me to kneel. He tried to put his hard cock in my mouth."

William growled.

“He told me that in order to get the succubus to leave we had to give her what she wanted—a man’s essence. We would be forced to feed her until she had fled. It might take months, he said.”

“I shall kill him,” William said darkly.

“He’s already dead, gone in an epidemic of fever that struck my father’s castle while I was on the road with Sir Allendale.”

“Christian....”

“Fear not. I was no fool, not even at thirteen. I let him taste my dagger, and I told him what he could do with his cock and his succubus. He threatened to tell my father I lusted after men. I threatened to carve off his staff and eggs in his sleep. You could say it was a stalemate.”

William could not stop a smile at the thought of young Christian acting so boldly. “You did well. But I hope you are content to leave my staff and eggs where they are.”

Christian’s hand stole onto William’s thigh. “As long as they serve me well.”

William chuckled, but a tingle went down his spine. After witnessing Christian’s attack on the bandits, he had no doubt that the young warrior could be deadly.

Christian sighed. “The lesson is thus: man makes God’s law and shapes it to suit his purpose. I believe there is a God, but what he thinks of my desires, or those of any man, no one can tell. I am done listening to priests on the matter.”

“’Tis still a sin,” William said with soft conviction. “One corrupt priest does not change that.”

Christian pulled away, his words angry and passionate. “No! I told you, William. I do not break faith with those who do not break faith with me. God broke faith with me. He took my mother, leaving me in a house of enemies. He ignored my prayers for help, night after night when I was only a boy. And his

priest wanted to sate his own lust, not save my soul. I care not for God's law! Or man's either. There should have been laws of decency, laws of conduct, laws of family that protected me when I was young, but there were none. No law saved your sister from a husband who was a monster, nor helps her now. So what allegiance should I have to man's laws? Should I believe it more of a crime for us to love one another than the harm my brothers did to me without any fear of retribution from my father or the king? Never!"

William felt his pulse thud sickeningly for what Christian had endured, but he knew it changed nothing. "You mayn't believe that you and I lying together is wrong, Christian. But that doesn't change the fact that it is contemptible in the eyes of everyone else."

Christian's jaw only set more stubbornly. "Then we must not be caught."

"Do you imagine it would not be obvious? Were we to be lovers in a lord's castle or in a company of knights?"

Christian got a calculating gleam in his eye. "Not if well done. One or both of us could wed—"

William groaned and covered his face with his hands. "By the saints, he's thought this through."

"What? The right kind of wife, one only interested in hearth and babes, separate chambers... It needs somewhere remote. My father was granted a small holding, four hundred acres in Scotland, by King Edward. I've been trying to talk him into letting me take it over, but he says I have not the experience, nor will he send me without a wife. In a place like that—"

William pulled Christian tight, a stab of fear going through his heart. "Hush. Hush, I pray you. You chill me to the marrow with fear for you when you talk like this. You will bring yourself to ruin."

Christian stilled and pushed deeper into William's arms.

"We have another six, seven day's ride ahead. Let me have you, hold you, for this long, Christian, and let us be content with our fate. I won't waste time fighting about what mayn't be. Can you do that?"

“Aye,” Christian answered. He sighed bitterly, but his lips rose to meet William’s.

The desperate need with which he pushed against William’s chest, as if they might never have this again, acknowledged every word that the older knight had said, even if Christian himself would not admit it.

They lay their bedrolls next to each other by the fire that night and made love again, stroking each other to sweet release, indulging in endless kisses. It would have to be enough, William told himself, enough to last a lifetime.

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## CHAPTER 12

“I have thought on a plan to free Lady Elaine,” said Christian, as they rode through the forest three days later.

They were nearly at the village of Kendal. It would be the last town before crossing the Cumbrian Mountains and approaching Somerfield’s remote castle on the wild coastline of northwest England. As they drew closer and closer to Somerfield’s lands, Christian could sense William’s concern for Elaine growing. And he could see in the stony set of the older knight’s countenance as they rode through long days, that he was mentally preparing himself for battle.

Perhaps even preparing himself for death.

And yet, William never completely turned from him. Their bedrolls were now routinely placed together, and William had no hesitation in reaching for Christian. He made love each night as tenderly and fiercely as any lover could. Christian gave back everything that he had. They’d begun exploring each other’s bodies with their mouths as well as their hands. It was unprecedented bliss. And the feeling—the *love*—that Christian had for William settled deeper and deeper into his bones every day.

He could not give William up; he would not. He’d never been surer of anything in his life. But Christian knew it was useless to speak of it, so he said no more about plans for the future. His thoughts for now had to be centered on a more urgent goal—finding a way for William to simply survive the rescue of Elaine.

“What is your plan, Crow?” William asked, with a tone studiously neutral.

“As you have said, Somerfield knows your face. If you directly challenge him, it *will* go badly. Our best chance is to get Lady Elaine out by subterfuge. I will go to the castle and seek work as a servant—”

“Absolutely, and adamantly, *no*,” William said. Loudly.

By the saints, Christian could swear the man was not called the Lion for his valor but for his cantankerous roar.



“You might hear me out before saying nay,” Christian said coolly.

William said nothing.

“I’ll seek work in the castle,” Christian continued. “I’ll learn in what rooms Lady Elaine is kept, and what her schedule is in a week’s time—when she walks in the garden or attends confession. That way, we might find the best time and place to get her and the children out unobserved.”

“I do not want you entering that castle.”

“’Tis our best chance of success! You must consider Elaine. Our goal must be to free her *and* keep your head on your neck. And damn your pride, Sir William Corbet.”

William considered it for a few silent moments. Then he spoke in frustration. “It is an ill thing to risk your neck for hers.”

“’Tis a very small risk,” Christian snorted. “No one knows me there, and a travelling laborer is as common as fleas. I will only be observing after all.”

William said nothing. His face was troubled.

Christian moved his horse closer and reached out for William’s hand. “I beg you, don’t make me watch you play the hero and die. Let me help you in this.”

“I like it not.”

“I am a knight,” Christian reminded him with a hint of ice in his voice. “A trained warrior. Even if I let you hold me as a woman, do not mistake me for such.”

William looked at him wryly. “Oh, I do not.”

“Then trust me to *be* a warrior. It only makes sense to assess the situation. I can do this.”

William finally nodded, but he did not look pleased about it. “If we can abduct Elaine and the babes away, ’twould be better. But if we cannot, Christian, I *will* challenge Somerfield.”

“I know,” Christian said quietly.

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In Kendal, Christian slipped away while William replenished their supplies and questioned the locals. Christian made the purchases he needed and packed them out of sight in his saddle bags before rejoining William. It nearly took the last of his coin, but it would be worth it.

“What did you learn?” Christian asked William when they met up again.

“That Lord Somerfield is a vicious, pox-marked bastard, and that everyone in his household fears him. ’Tis said Lady Elaine sits at his side meekly, so well-beaten she never speaks a word, even when he propositions wenches in front of her.”

“Someone told you that?”

“Aye. I would give my eyeteeth to castrate Somerfield. And then cast his innards on a spinning wheel.” William glowered. “But at least we know Elaine is still alive.”

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It took them two and a half days to cross the Cumbrian Mountains on horseback. Christian remembered where to find the best path, and where to avoid straying off it onto misleading shepherd’s trails. The mountains were beautiful and chill, but neither man was in much of a mind to enjoy them.

They descended to the foothills on the third day and made an early camp, still far enough away from the castle to feel safe.

“If I leave at sunrise,” said Christian, “I’ll arrive at the castle before midday.”

“Christian,” William said firmly, “I am still not easy about your going into the castle bailey alone to spy.”

“But we agreed,” Christian said calmly. “My face is not known. I’ll get the lay of things and be back in one week. At best, I will learn something that gives you a better option. At worst, you’ve lost some time.”

William wiped his face with a large hand. “But if you’re caught as a spy...”

“I will not be caught.”

“You won’t be able to take your quiver. You’ll be vulnerable.”

Christian raised his gambeson to show off a wicked dagger. He removed it and looked around the clearing. “That sapling there.” He pointed. A moment later, his dagger was sunk deep in the very center of the narrow trunk, nearly toppling the thing.

William could not help a chuckle. “Impressive, Crow.”

Christian grinned with delighted pride, like a young boy being praised by his father. He retrieved his knife, and when he returned he stepped far closer to William than was proper, causing the heat that was always banked between them to stir and rouse.

“I survived my brothers for fourteen years. I’m no fool, William. I beg you to have some faith in me. You are not alone in this.”

William felt his will slipping. He knew he would approve the plan in a heartbeat as a military commander. And he did trust in Christian’s strength and agility, his cleverness. He did. But his heart did not want to let Christian anywhere near Lord Somerfield or his forces. It was bad enough that Somerfield had Elaine.

“You must make no move without me,” William ordered. “You will return in one week—sooner if you can. And you will not take risks—no sneaking into Elaine’s quarters, no going into private areas, no risky questions that would give you away. Swear to me, Christian.”

Christian hesitated. “I swear to you that my dearest wish is for us to be together safe again, and that I will act in no way to endanger that.”

Christian moved even closer to William as he spoke, his eyes full of a fierce affection. A wave of desire dried up William’s demands along with his ability to form any words at all. It seemed the more he had of Christian the more helplessly he wanted him.

“Have no fear,” Christian said softly. He ran long fingers along William’s jaw. “I will slip in and out like a shadow.”

“You put much faith in your... charms,” William said mildly, even though he was already stiffening.

Christian smiled slyly. “I do. I bought something for us in Kendal.”

He went to his horse and pulled something from the saddle bags. William had wondered why Christian had been so long in the shops. When he returned he held out a small stoppered jar.

“Poison?” William asked warily.

Christian laughed. “By the blood, I pray not, considering where this is going.”

Christian uncorked the jar and dabbed some on his fingers. It was clear. He ran it over William’s lips. William tasted it.

“Oil?”

“Linseed oil.”

“For cooking?”

Christian corked the jar and wrapped his arms around William’s neck, standing on his toes to murmur in William’s ear. “For easing your way into my passage.”

William’s heart seemed to leave his chest and get stuck in his throat. His hands moved to Christian’s sides and his face burrowed into Christian’s neck. He groaned as lust shook him and his cock became as solid as his iron sword.

“Is that—you cannot want that.”

“I want it,” Christian said fiercely. “This may be our last night alone together, William. I want everything.”

“You are a saucy wanton,” William muttered, in a tone that said it was a quality he greatly admired.

He pressed Christian tight against him, felt his lover harden as they strove to get closer, as if they could merge flesh, mouths kissing hot and sweet. William was so primed his cock ached like a sore tooth. He certainly had thought about being inside Christian, not only at the river but every time

since—about Christian’s long legs wrapped around him, his lovely arse.... But William would never have asked such a thing of another man and particularly not of a knight. He had too much respect for Christian to ask it.

“Are you sure?” William pulled away from Christian’s kiss. “If it is our last, I want you to enjoy it. I want to give you pleasure.”

“I want it, William, I swear. I want to know what it’s like. Don’t deny me.”

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William held himself in check with great determination as he kissed Christian, divested him of every stitch of clothes, and settled him onto the bedroll. The act Christian had offered seemed to awaken even more tenderness and protectiveness in William than usual, and he wanted to kiss and soothe and touch Christian everywhere, preparing him for what he hoped was their mutual bliss.

Christian let him do as he would, not hurrying him, though his cock was rigid and glistening with arousal on his stomach and his eyes burned with far gone desire. William could not get enough of touching that sweet flesh. He ran his hand over Christian’s chest and stomach and hips again and again. His own cock throbbed every time he passed over a dusky nipple and Christian made an involuntary little gasp. But eventually, Christian dug in his heels and lifted his hips.

“Use the oil on me,” Christian said, his voice rough.

William, shaking, obliged. He poured some of the oil into the center of his hand and stoked it over Christian’s stiff cock. Christian arched upwards in pleasure and hissed.

“Not there! I will spend in an instant, I beg you.” He spread his thighs and moved over a little so he could pull his knees towards his chest, opening himself up.

It was the most shameless, vulnerable, and erotic thing William had ever seen. He blushed, even as his eyes fell to the pale perfection, to the tight pink bud Christian revealed so wantonly.

William's fingers shook as he smoothed oil over that tender flesh, making it slick.

Christian moaned. "Press in."

William pressed one oily finger gently against the pucker, then, when it did not give, more firmly. The tip of his finger sank in. Christian made an incoherent sound.

"*Further,*" he demanded almost churlishly.

William thrust the finger deep, determined to not to be mawkish in his inexperience. Christian cried out in shock and pleasure. And *God's teeth*, the way his channel felt around William's finger—grasping and hot and slick with the oil. William almost spent against Christian's thigh like a callow youth.

He muttered Christian's name and thrust his finger in and out, mesmerized by the sight of it disappearing into that pale flesh. Gradually the tight ring slackened a little against him.

Christian pulled at his arms, trying to get William to lie atop him. "Now, William. I pray you."

William resisted only long enough to coat his cock with the oil. Then he dropped the jar and covered Christian fully with his body, using his hand to guide himself to the entrance.

He paused there, his face inches from Christian's, lost in those dark eyes. For a moment they stared at each other, their locked gaze so intense that it did not bear breaking, not even for the act they both desperately wanted. Then Christian thrust up his hips. "Breach me," he demanded.

William pushed in, feeling the resistance, stopping when Christian's face showed pain. But slowly, slowly, inch by inch, retreat and pursue, his cock sunk deep. Until finally, he was buried and there was only the grasping intimacy and ecstasy of being inside Christian's body.

Nature took over, causing William to thrust again and again, now fast to spur them upwards, now slow to keep it from ending too quickly. He loved the feel of having Christian underneath him, pressed flesh to flesh, of being so

intimately united with his body. They kissed. They stared into each other's eyes. Christian's hands roamed over his back. And all the while, William's most sensitive flesh was stroked and suckled, giving him blinding pleasure, and the emotions that chased across Christian's face made it clear he was just as affected.

When William could hold back no longer, he rose up onto his heels and pulled Christian into his lap. Poised thus, William could thrust deeply and stroke Christian at the same time. It only lasted a matter of seconds, but the moment was burned permanently into William's brain—the sight of Christian's slender body below him, that beautiful face, those eyes so loving and passionate gazing into his, Christian's cock, so decadent, stiff in William's hand as he stroked it, Christian's pale spread thighs lying over his, and the sight and sensation of William's own cock plunging into that beautiful body.

In that moment, William knew that this was it for him—the pinnacle of sexual and romantic bliss. Nothing would ever match this; nothing could come close to being as lovely, erotic, and rousing as Christian, just like this, letting William take him. Not a woman, not even another man, if he ever dared such. This was the moment he would take to his grave.

*I love you*, William thought as his peak ripped through him like a tempest. And even as he recognized the significance of the moment, he was mourning the fact that he would very likely never have this again.

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## CHAPTER 13

Christian awoke before dawn. He gently disengaged himself from William, assuring himself first that the older knight was asleep. When he rose, he paused for a moment to stare down at his lover.

By the saints, Sir William Corbet was a handsome man, virile and strong in a way that made Christian feel profoundly moved, like the sight of a perfect sunset or the view of green rolling plains from a hilltop. Christian knew it might be the last time he ever saw William, so he allowed his gaze to linger. But soon the ache it provoked in his chest was too much, too large a threat to his will, and he made himself move.

He left his bedroll with William, and quietly led Livermore out of the camp. If William woke, he would only have more doubts about letting Christian go to the castle, and leaving him behind would just be that much more difficult.

He rode all morning. When he could see the walls of the castle, he turned Livermore into the woods. He found a small stream and unpacked his saddle bags. He drew out his purchases: a rolled length of bandaging, a white wimple, a blue linen gown, and a pair of women's simple black shoes.

Christian had never done this before, and it took him some time. He shaved his chin very carefully and soothed it with the linseed oil. He would have to do that often. He could not forget. He bound his cock and bollocks back between his legs. He dressed. He bunched the excess bandages in his bodice and did his best to shape them.

He put on the wimple, which hid his hair and draped over his gown. It helped mask the unnatural shape of his bosom. When he was done, he stood and looked at himself, head to toe, in the moving water of the stream.

Fear spread its icy finger through his chest.

God's wounds, this was an insane idea. How could anyone look at him and not see Christian Brandon, a man? How had he ever thought of such a disastrous plan?



His panic held him tightly for several painful seconds, and then he forced himself to look again, this time with the eye of a stranger. A very odd creature stared back at him, half woman, half man. He blinked. Mostly a woman?

*I can do this. I can.*

He had thought of it some days back, before he'd ever broached the subject with William of doing espionage in the castle. But he knew if he told William everything he planned, there was no way William would allow it. By Christ's toes, he'd barely gotten William to agree to let him go to the castle at all, just to do reconnaissance.

But as Christian had pondered their situation, he'd come to one inescapable conclusion: Their best chance of freeing Elaine was Somerfield's death.

Yes, there was a slim chance that Elaine might be able to be spirited away, that there might be a time and a place within her daily routine that would allow such, or that her rooms would be but lightly-guarded, or even that Christian could get her a message and she could extract herself from her warders and meet them outside the bailey's walls. But he doubted it. If Somerfield were the beast he was reputed to be, it was unlikely Elaine would have that kind of liberty. And even if they managed to escape with her and the children, her absence would quickly bring alarm, and they'd be pursued by Somerfield's army.

Christian was not completely dismissing that scenario. But he was prepared to go further—should the opportunity present itself. And it was much more likely to present itself in this guise, as was any chance of getting close to Elaine.

He looked down at himself critically. His hands were too large. He would have to hide them as much as possible. And—by the Holy Virgin—he had not thought of the archer's callouses on his right hand. If anyone noticed those he was done for. His voice... He practiced a falsetto, but it sounded laughable to his own ears. He would have to speak as little as possible. The wimple hid his throat, which was all too male, and accentuated his face, which was the disguise's best hope. Or so he'd thought.

When he'd first thought of the plan, he'd been swept up by its cleverness, by the irony of it. He'd been told so oft, and so disdainfully, that he was pretty, womanly, soft. The fact that he might use that to his advantage was too delicious to resist.

But now, his reflection seemed to only emphasize what was male about him, which was much. He'd spent his whole life acting as masculine and cold as possible. And now it was not a woman's face that looked back at him. He tried to soften it, smiled sweetly at the water. It was an improvement. But would he not revert back to the familiar the moment his attention wandered? It was dangerous.

"Courage," he whispered over his pounding heart. "I can do this. I *shall*."

If he was caught out, a man dressing as a woman, he would most likely be killed. William would be frothing at the mouth if he knew Christian was attempting this. He would murder Christian if he found out.

Nevertheless, the thought of William calmed him. *William*.

Christian would save William. He would be clever and invisible and bold.

Resolved, Christian untied Livermore's reins and gave the horse a nudge and a pat. "Back to Tristan with you. Go on."

Livermore looked at Christian indignantly for just a moment and then took off at a gallop back to camp.

Christian walked on foot towards the castle.

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## CHAPTER 14

“Take this and hurry up with you!” The cook, Hilde, thrust out a platter bearing an enormous roast goose that was set round with crabapples.

Christian took it, placing both hands on the bottom of the platter to keep them out of view. Not for the first time, he was surprised at the strength women were expected to have. By the Saints! The platter was damned heavy. He couldn't imagine Ayleth carrying such a thing. But then Ayleth was a lady, not a servant. Christian carried it up the stairs towards the dining hall.

It had not been difficult to get work at the castle. There seemed to be a steady exodus of servants from Lord Somerfield's care and keeping, and Christian had already witnessed enough to understand why.

Lord Somerfield was not quite the age of Christian's father, but he was close. His coarse hair was still full, but the midnight was shot through with bitter grey, as if his brain's poisonous thoughts were slowly leaking out. His face was broad, with a sharp nose and full lips. He'd been handsome once, but now indulgence and cruelty had twisted his features; they were bloated and coarse. His legs were thick and muscled but a heavy stomach hung above them. Twice in the five days Christian had been here, he'd witnessed Lord Somerfield strike a servant at table. Once because the servant put a pitcher down badly, interrupting Lord Somerfield's conversation with a bang and sloshing the contents. The other time, it seemed the blow had come for no reason at all except that the servant had gotten too close to the lord at table and had been smacked down for it.

Lady Elaine sat next to Somerfield at every evening meal. She was pretty but wan and egregiously thin. She kept her eyes downcast and her face studiously blank. Christian never saw her during the day. Her rooms, along with the children's, a girl a year old and a girl aged three, were in the southwest tower. Its entrance was well guarded at all times. Christian might have been able to slip Elaine a message in the dining hall, but it would endanger them both, and to what end? To entreat her to escape would be like asking a fish to get off the fisherman's hook, and even giving her news that help was at hand might make her act in a way that would be risky.

Christian placed the platter of turkey on the lord's table. He dared a glance at Lady Elaine and she looked up just then and met his eyes. It was only a brief moment, but she did smile ever so slightly before casting her eyes back downward.

As Christian backed away from the table, he glanced at Somerfield.

Somerfield was staring at Christian with a heavy, hooded look that Christian recognized all too well. His heart slammed against his ribs in a rush of excitement and fear. His eyes dropped and he backed away completely.

In the five days Christian had been in the castle, he'd been surprised that his identity had never once been questioned. He was accepted at face value. And why not? Who would dream of a man choosing to dress as a woman? It was unthinkable. There had been some glances at his hands, times when he'd had to take a pitcher or scrub the floor, unable to shield them. But they were only glances of curiosity, probably thinking they were unfortunately large for a woman. He'd managed to speak little, and his voice was not questioned either. For that matter, the cook herself sounded like a grizzled old man, perhaps from so many hours spent bent over the smoke.

Indeed, the most dangerous aspect of Christian's role thus far had been avoiding the interest he had from various male admirers. Apparently he was attractive as a woman after all. He'd said he was married, pulled strongly away from grasping hands, and stayed in the kitchen as much as possible. There were few chances of getting caught alone there.

He'd been assigned to serve the dining hall almost at once, being relatively cultured-looking for a serving wench. That had been his first real stroke of luck.

Christian went back down to the kitchen for more platters. Cook handed him a large wooden bowl of what looked like stuffed intestines covered with mushrooms. It smelled pungently sour.

"The lord's table," Cook ordered. "His is the only one that gets that dish."

As Christian made his way to the stairs, he was tempted. In his bodice was a pouch and in the pouch was deadly nightshade. Sir Andrew, who'd taught

him archery, had taught Christian to recognize the plant. It was sometimes used on arrow tips, but you had to be very careful to avoid getting it in cuts or letting it linger on your hands. Christian had never used it thus. But he'd seen the plant as he and William crossed the mountains, and he'd picked a good quantity. The leaves could be crushed into a paste and the paste....

He'd hoped to be able to slip it into Lord Somerfield's food or drink, and now he considered the bowl in his hands. But there was no way to know who would eat from the bowl, perhaps even Lady Elaine. He dared not risk it.

If he were to use the nightshade, he would have to put it in Somerfield's cup. But Somerfield was a cautious man with many enemies. He had an older male servant who stood behind his chair and who poured Somerfield's wine and filled his plate. No other was allowed near him whilst he was dining.

Lord Somerfield's private rooms were in the northwest tower, but they were also guarded. Christian had not dared to go there. But his options on accomplishing his goal were dwindling, and his week was nearly up. The longer Christian stayed in the castle, the more likely it was that his secret would be discovered, or that William would decide to take matters into his own hands and appear to request an audience.

Christian entered the dining hall with the bowl of sausages and mushrooms. He sat it on the lord's table, placing it close to Lord Somerfield. Christian raised his eyes coyly. Somerfield was watching at him, his mouth greasy as he chewed. Christian allowed his eyes to heat and linger for a moment. Then he lowered them and started to back away.

"You, wench," Somerfield ordered. "Come 'ere."

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It had been five days, and William had gone from being beside himself to resigned calm more times than he could count. Christian had sent him a message two days ago, through a young tanner's apprentice he'd hired to seek William out in the foothills. Christian had merely written that all was well. He'd gotten a serving position in the castle and was pleased to have the work.

It was a harmless missive that, if caught, would mean little to anyone else, even if it was rare that the serving class could read and write. But Christian's message was clear—he was proceeding as planned. He would not have used the word “pleased” if things were awry. But then again, Christian could merely be trying to keep William from doing anything rash. Which was exactly what William wanted to do.

Christian endangered himself every minute he was in that castle. What William didn't know was how careful Christian was being. He could only hope and pray. Still, he'd agreed to give Christian a week and he forced himself to be true to that. A week and no more. If Christian was not back in two days' time, there would be hell to pay.

Twice, William had ridden Tristan to within sight of the castle, watching for any signs of alarm. There were none. The market traffic rode in and out of the bailey's walls as usual. There were no signs of smoke or increased activity.

By the Virgin, it was the longest, most torturous week of his life. William would much rather roar into battle and take on an army than to wait, helpless. He ached to feel blood on his claws. He was thirsty for it.

It was nearly dark on the fifth day when he saw the tanner's boy approaching the foothills on an ancient donkey. William hastened from his camp to meet him.

“Here, Sir. From the lady.” The boy held out a folded letter. William gave the boy a pence and took it.

From the lady? Was it from Elaine? William hastened to read it.

*Beloved,*

*I wish I could see you. I can picture you waiting to sweep me away, at midnight on your horse, at the mill that lies outside the bailey perhaps. Tonight I will dream on it.*

C

William closed his eyes, the missive clenched in his fist. Tonight. Christian had written coyly, but the message was clear. For whatever reason, Christian wanted to leave the castle tonight, and he wanted William to come for him. William did not pray oft, but now he sent forth a most urgent prayer.

Let Christian do nothing too dangerous between now and then. Let him be safe. William would give anything; only let Christian and Elaine be safe.

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## CHAPTER 15

Christian approached the two heavily-armored guards at the door to Lord Somerfield's tower. His pulse thumped ominously in his chest. Sweat trickled down his back inside the gown. He was not afraid of Lord Somerfield, but he was afraid of the importance of this moment—that he'd finally gotten his chance—and he was anxious to do the job quickly and well and to be away before he was caught.

He *was* starkly afraid of being caught.

But, as Sir Allendale taught him, valor comes not from being unafraid. It comes from the determination to proceed anyway. And Christian was very determined. He'd been granted a rare opportunity to get close to Lord Somerfield. The next hour could decide everything. He would not fail.

The guards looked Christian up and down lewdly, despite the fact that he'd borrowed a cloak from one of the other servants, and it revealed precious little of his shape. One guard made a bawdy allusion to bearded oysters. The other told the first to shut up but grinned lustfully anyway. They didn't search Christian, and when they let him through it was obvious that danger and deceit were the last things on their minds.

Christian's dagger was bound against his inner thigh. He'd been quite anxious about being searched. But he was alone on the stairs leading up to Lord Somerfield's rooms, so he took the risk of reaching up under his gown and removing it, placing the dagger inside of one long sleeve. There. Far better.

His pulse sounded like battle drums in his own ears. Christian continued upwards. He tapped on the door at the top of the stairs and Somerfield bid him enter.

The door opened onto Lord Somerfield's bed chamber and Somerfield was alone. The fire was lit, and he had already mostly disrobed. He wore only a heavy linen shirt and hose. He lounged in a chair by the fire, his legs outspread and parted, like a debauched satyr.



Christian's mouth went dry. The dagger seemed to burn at his wrist. He slipped off his cloak and let it fall by the door.

"Evening, pretty," Somerfield purred. He looked Christian up and down but didn't bother to rise. "You look nervous, wench. A virgin's coyness doesn't suit you."

Christian forced a seductive smile. "'Tis shyness. I only hope I can please you, my lord."

Somerfield grunted. "Come here and take my cock in your mouth. That will please me." He spread his legs a little further and pushed the linen shirt to one side. The outline of his stiffening member was evident in his hose, even though it was nearly overshadowed by his belly.

*The lazy swine.*

Christian lowered his eyes modestly and bit at his lower lip. "I will, my lord, but may I not first have a kiss?"

He kept his eyes downcast, glad for once, for the easy heating of his cheeks. They were flushed now from the pounding of his blood in fear and, increasingly, anger. But Lord Somerfield didn't know that. After a moment he heaved himself to his feet.

"Want a little courting, 'ey?" Somerfield sounded a little more interested and a little more dangerous.

Christian looked up into Somerfield's eyes, managed not to wince at the reek of him, and then Somerfield grasped him with both hands, pulling him in hard and mashing down his mouth on Christian's.

Christian moaned, an involuntary noise of disgust and surprise, but Somerfield took it as encouragement. His tongue thrust into Christian's mouth. He tasted sour, like the intestines dish smelled, but worse, bitter and stale. His tongue was pointed and poking, like an eel. Christian wrapped his arms around Somerfield's neck and set to work with nimble fingers, untying the sleeve of his gown and slipping out the dagger. Somerfield's hands began to wander upward on Christian's bodice. His "breasts" would in no way pass inspection.

Christian broke the kiss. “Touch my cunt,” he said baldly. He tried to look lovestruck and dazed with passion.

Somerfield grunted in approval and attacked Christian’s mouth again. His hands changed course—thank God—and he began to gather the material at Christian’s thighs, pulling up the gown. Christian had to fight not to gag on the man’s tongue.

*Wait. Wait.*

And then one of Somerfield’s hands was under the gown, groping Christian’s thigh.

“You wear much clothing,” Somerfield complained at finding hose there. Christian barely heard him, his blood was roaring so loudly in his ears.

*Wait.*

And now both hands were under the gown, under the gown where they would be trapped by the fabric, if only for a moment. One hand slid to Christian’s arse while the other pushed between his legs.

*Now.*

Christian sensed the moment that Somerfield felt his cock and balls, bound in the bandaging. His eyes flew open, and in that instant Christian did three things. With his left hand he pulled hard against Somerfield’s neck, keeping them locked in the kiss, he turned the right side of his body out slightly and, with his right hand, he thrust the dagger with all his might into Somerfield’s chest, his blade easily finding a path between two ribs.

Somerfield jerked and screamed, his eyes staring with shocked, horrified understanding into Christian’s. But the scream was muffled in Christian’s mouth. Somerfield tried to pull away, but Christian held him firm, both with the hand on his neck and with the dagger impaling his body. The man struggled for what felt like an eternity, but was probably less than a minute. As the life in his eyes began to fade, Christian broke the kiss.

“For Lady Elaine from her brother, Sir William,” he whispered into Somerfield’s face. And he was almost positive the man heard him, just before

his gaze went glassy. Christian felt nothing but an icy rage at the man for having abused those in his charge so completely, rage and a tremendous relief that it was accomplished.

It was done. Somerfield's lifeless body was limp and terribly heavy in Christian's arms. Christian became aware of the blood that still pulsed and oozed, soaking into his gown. He released the dagger and moved to catch the body. Struggling, he dragged it to the bed. He laid it on the floor whilst he turned down the bed linens. He wiped his bloody hands on the sheets where it would not show and then squatted. Panting with exertion, Christian managed to lift the body into the bed and cover it up. He laid the head on a pillow, turned from the door. With any luck, Somerfield would not be discovered till morning.

Christian removed his blood-stained gown. He found a basin of water in the room and washed. He used his gown to wipe the blood off the floor, hoping to delay discovery as long as possible, and then stuffed the gore-covered fabric into a wooden chest. When he was done, he found a fresh shirt of Somerfield's and put it on over his hose. He put back on the borrowed cloak, closing it up to his neck, hiding some specks of crimson that dotted the bottom of the wimple.

He steeled himself for the trip back down the stairs, willing the cold rage to leave his face, trying to replace it with a saucy, sated confidence. He closed his eyes and thought of William, of smiling flirtatiously at William in the firelight. His hands calmed and his face relaxed. He tugged the cloak more tightly about himself and descended.

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William had packed up camp as soon as he'd read Christian's letter. He waited for full dark and then rode towards the castle. The path was only dimly illuminated by the quarter moon. He found the mill easily enough by following the stream. It was close to the castle walls but surrounded by woods. He waited, his thoughts bouncing around like a wild bird in a cage.

Christian was leaving the castle early. Perhaps he'd learned something which made it imperative that they move quickly. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps

Elaine would be travelling and they could waylay her retinue in the mountains. Perhaps Christian had been discovered and had to flee.

Perhaps, perhaps.

It didn't matter. All William prayed for now was that Christian would get out of the castle safe and be here soon, in his arms. That would do for the moment. Only that. Only let Christian be safe. William didn't know why he felt so anxious, but he did. He prayed that Christian had not done, would not do, anything too foolhardy. But right now the hope felt false.

The night seemed to pass at a leaden pace; it felt like a lifetime before William heard a soft noise from the forest. A dark shadow came down the path to the mill. Christian.

He was dressed in a linen shirt William didn't recognize, his own hose, and his shoes. And he appeared unharmed. William strode to him in three steps and pulled Christian into his arms. William clasped his body tightly, feeling the thudding heart against his own. He buried his face into Christian's neck and smelled sweat—and blood.

“Are you all right?” William asked harshly, pulling back to give Christian's arms and torso a quick inspection.

“Yes, but let's move quickly. I want to get farther from the castle.”

“What's wrong?”

“When we're further away, I beg you.”

William heard the urgency in Christian's voice and he heeded it. He mounted Tristan and pulled Christian up behind him. They made their way through the woods and then back on the path to the foothills.

William looked behind them, but he saw no riders coming from the castle and no signs of alarm.

“Do you think you were followed?” he asked.

Christian glanced back. “I pray not. Ride on.”

They rode as quickly as William could push Tristan with two riders. When the castle had vanished from sight, he spoke again.

“What happened? Tell me.”

Christian had his hands on William’s waist and now he grasped him tighter. “Let’s wait until we’re back at the camp. Better yet, let’s ride on and make camp further up the mountain. You have Livermore?”

“Aye, he’s at the camp with Sir Swiftfoot. But—”

“Please.”

“Are Elaine and the children safe?”

“Yes. They’re safe. I swear it.”

With this, William dropped his questioning, though he was afire to know. Clearly Christian had been found out and had to flee. But there was something more. They rode on for another hour before reaching the camp. Christian jumped down and untied the two horses. They moved on.

“This is far enough,” Christian finally said in a weary voice, another hour up the mountain. They left the path and headed into the woods a ways before stopping. As they tied their horses, William turned to the younger knight.

“By my sword, tell me what happened, Christian. I smell blood on you. Whose is it? Did someone find you out?”

Christian shook his head. “’Tis Lord Somerfield’s blood. He’s dead.”

“What?” William whispered. He felt suddenly weak with fear.

Christian ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I had the opportunity. I was sent to serve him alone in his rooms, so I used my dagger and I killed him. I pray it will be dawn before he is found, but it’s best we get as far from the castle as possible. Perhaps we should ride back to Kendal, or, better yet, south to St. Bees.”

“You...” William could not believe it, neither the fact nor the arrogant disregard of danger implicit in such an action. “You *murdered* Lord Somerfield in his rooms? And they know it was you?”

Christian winced. “They know my face. They do not know my identity. But no, I can never show my face there again. You cannot be seen to travel with me. When you return.”

“What?” William said, still confused. He felt a confused rage at Christian for doing this, for taking William’s revenge into his own hands, for risking his own neck so baldly. And he felt an overwhelming fear for what might have happened. It was the worst, most sickening feeling he’d ever known.

“You could have been killed,” he said in a dead voice. “You should by all rights have been killed, Christian. I can’t—”

Christian grabbed William’s arms and shook him hard. “William, *breathe*. Listen to me. I was not caught and I was not killed. Think on it! You know the only way to free Elaine from Somerfield was his death, and you were unlikely to be able to achieve that, being known, being her brother. There is nothing holding her now. In a few weeks’ time you can go to the castle and tell them you want to take Elaine and the children home to visit your father, and there will be none to oppose it. Elaine’s children are both girls, not Somerfield’s heirs. His family will not try overly hard to keep her. It is *done*.”

William pulled away from Christian stiffly. “You had this planned when you went in. You swore false to me.”

Christian shook his head helplessly. “I thought that if I got the chance I would take it, but I did not truly expect to get the chance. And once I was inside I could see that any other option was hopeless. Elaine was well-guarded. We would never have been able to steal her away. And Somerfield—he would never have fought you in single combat, William. He was too old and too debauched. He *would* have had you killed if you’d challenged him.”

William looked up at the moon, frowning. He didn’t know what to believe. But he couldn’t shake his anger or that blood-curdling, belated terror.

“Let’s keep moving,” he said gruffly, untying Tristan and Sir Swiftfoot.

“Tristan needs rest.”

“The horses and I have done naught but rest for nearly a week,” William said bitterly. “We should travel at night and hole up during the day to avoid being seen. We’ll ride till morning.”

He mounted his horse and turned back towards the mountain path, not waiting to see if Christian would follow. After all, Christian could take care of himself, could he not? Christian, the Crow, who had gone into the castle and killed Somerfield in his rooms with a lethal sting—all by himself.

“William....” Christian began as William rode away.

William didn’t stop. Behind him, he heard Christian mount and follow.

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## CHAPTER 16

They travelled to St. Bees, which lay south of Somerfield's castle on the coastline. They travelled at night and hid during the day, camping in the woods.

When they neared the town, they circled around to the south and rode in boldly, looking every inch the noble knights. Christian brought out a blue velvet tunic he'd packed in his saddle bags, his gold spurs, and his half armor. He helped William put on his full tournament dress. They were differentiating themselves from the travelers who had gone through Kendal a few weeks before. They were laying down the approach of Lady Elaine's brother-knight Sir William. They said they'd come from Lancaster, to the south, and were headed to Somerfield's castle.

In St. Bees, the rumors about Lord Somerfield's murder had just arrived and were spreading rampantly. It was said the lord's perversions had claimed him in the end. Apparently, he'd gone too far with a serving wench, and she'd snapped and killed him with a kitchen knife. The rumors varied greatly as to what lascivious acts Somerfield had been trying to commit at the time, and as to where he'd been stuck with the blade. One story said his most personal bits had been carved off and fed to his horse.

The wench had never been caught.

If William wondered at the rumors, why it was said to have been a woman servant and not a man, he didn't mention it. Perhaps he assumed that since so much of the rumors either contradicted each other or were fantastical that part of it was too. Christian was only grateful not to have to lie further.

That night they stayed in an alehouse for the first time since their journey began. William thought it wise to cast a record of their passage through the town, should anyone look for it. Christian bathed in front of the fire while William went out. When he came in later, he was more than a few pints of ale looser than he'd been for days. Christian sat up in bed and made no secret of watching William as he used the tub of water in front of the fireplace.



William had not said more than a dozen words to Christian since they'd left the foothills near the castle, much less touched him.

"I did what I thought I needed to do to protect you," Christian said quietly, as William stood up from his bath. The water rolled down his muscled body, and he looked so fine in the firelight that Christian would have given his soul for one more kiss, one more night of tenderness.

"I know," William said.

"You think I lied to you. But I *did* intend to do the things I said, get information about Elaine's routine. Only when I had the chance at Somerfield, I—"

"I understand it perfectly, Christian."

Christian wasn't sure William did. Because the thing that made sense of it, words like *I love you more than anything I've ever had in my life*, and *I would give anything to keep you safe, to keep you with me* were not things he could say to William while he was being cold and distant.

"Will you ever forgive me?" Christian asked.

William dried off with a cloth and came to bed. He slipped in naked, which was more than fine, because Christian was naked too. Christian rolled onto his side to get closer to him, but William grasped Christian's hands, keeping them off his body.

"I don't need your protecting. If I cannot be your master, I *will* be your equal, Christian," William said in a voice that still tasted of anger.

Christian stared at him blankly. "William, you are far superior to me, as a knight and as a man."

"And yet you kept things from me to 'protect me.'"

"Only because I knew you wouldn't allow me to go into the castle if I admitted to even *thinking* about killing Somerfield!"

William stared into Christian's eyes, his face grim.

Christian frowned and swallowed. "You're right. 'Tis an ill excuse." He took a deep breath. "I did withhold things from you. And I swear I'll never do it again. Only don't be cold with me. I cannot bear it."

Christian meant it with all his heart. William's distance had hurt him as nothing had ever done. He knew he'd damaged William's pride, stolen his revenge, and had not taken seriously enough his need to be protective of those he cared for. And that had nearly been unforgivable to a man like William.

He waited for William's verdict, allowing everything to show on his face.

William's eyes were still grim, but his hold on Christian shifted. He grasped Christian's wrists hard and pinned them over his head, rolling Christian onto his back and covering him. Christian found himself out of breath as he stared up into William's relentless eyes. William only stared down, unmoving, even as Christian felt his lover's cock hardening impressively against his stomach. Christian himself had been hard since he'd watched William in the bath.

Christian bit his lips as desire slammed into him. He could not stop his hips from thrusting upward. But William only lay on him more heavily still.

"If you ever do such a thing again, Christian, I *will* never forgive you."

"I swear," Christian promised. And then he added, "I would do anything for you."

The words were said in lieu of *I love you*, because he was unable to stop himself from saying *something*.

With a sigh of release, William crashed his lips down on Christian's. And for the first time since he'd passed through the walls of Somerfield's castle, Christian tasted William's kiss, felt the possessive press of his body. He moaned as aching need ran straight through the center of his soul, not only for William's body, but for the return of his love and admiration. He arched up into that sweetness as William ground down.

"Take me," Christian said.

This time William didn't argue. He used his spit to open Christian up and press himself inside. His thrusts, the grip of his hands, his grim face staring down into Christian's, were all rough and demanding in a way he'd never been before. But even so, he was slow with the breaching, watching Christian closely for signs of pain. That mix of tenderness and aggression inflamed Christian's blood all the more.

When the motion became easy, and they were deep in the throes of it, Christian watched the emotions flicker over William's face.

*Mine. Submit. Safe. Last time.*

*Remember me.*

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## CHAPTER 17

Two weeks after Lord Somerfield's murder, Sir William Corbet rode into Somerfield's castle bailey. He came on his mount, dressed in armor and looking every inch the seasoned warrior. By his side was another knight, dazzling in a royal blue tunic and silver mail, a quiver of arrows on his back. The upper part of his face was covered by the plate of his helmet, and he said nothing, only stood silently with the horses as William went into the castle.

The very next morning the pair rode out again. This time they were accompanied by Lady Elaine, her two young children, the children's nurse, and an older male servant who had begged to go with her.

Christian had been right. The next in succession to the title was a cousin who'd be arriving at the castle in a fortnight with his large family in tow. Lady Elaine had failed in her duty to give the family sons for the line of succession. They seemed relieved to hand her back over to her brother and get rid of her permanently.

Lady Elaine rode next to William at the front of their small procession. Christian, riding behind her, saw her turn her delicate head and *spit* on the ground as they cleared the castle's walls, anger tight in her proudly-set shoulders. He felt a vengeful sense of pride at the gesture and smiled darkly.

They rode only until mid-afternoon before making camp that first day. The children were restless and fussy and Elaine was drooping with weariness. Christian wondered when she'd last had a decent night's rest.

He'd never seen the children's nurse in the castle. And the older male servant he'd glimpsed once or twice, but only from afar. One thing his time in the castle had taught Christian; people saw what they expected to see. He removed his helmet on their ride, as it was a warm day, and he didn't think another thing about it until he was on his knees making the fire at their camp that evening. Lady Elaine stepped up to warm her hands—and suddenly gave a small cry. Christian looked up to find her wide, frightened eyes on his face.

He stood slowly and carefully so as not to alarm her. She continued to stare at him as realization dawned, writ plain on her face. Then her mouth opened

and her eyes grew bright with tears. Christian gave her a tiny, courtly bow, not knowing how she would react. Elaine covered her mouth with her hand, breathed a sob, and flew around the fire to throw herself into Christian's arms.

He held her, feeling both embarrassed and deeply moved. His mind went to Ayleth and he was very grateful in that moment to have been able to repay his sister's kindness, even if it was to another woman. William was watching them as he tended the horses, his face pensive.

"Thank you," Elaine whispered into Christian's ear. They were simple words, but the emotion in them was anything but.

"My lady."

Elaine collected herself, wiped at her eyes, and nodded at him. She turned away to see to the children.

William came over. "She knows?" he asked Christian quietly.

"Aye. She recognized me from the castle."

William clapped a hand on Christian's back, his eyes still on Elaine.

"We are much in your debt," William said in a raw voice. It was more of an acknowledgement than Christian had ever expected to hear from William. William's hand fell away and he went back to the horses.

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That night, when the children and servants were asleep, William, Christian and Elaine stayed by the fire for a good while, enjoying the silence and the fire's warmth. Elaine had taken a nap and then said very little all evening other than gentle words to the children and their nurse. She stared at the fire now. William studied her face. Her petite features were still as attractive as William remembered, but they'd changed. The laughter and spark, the sweetness, were gone, replaced by a flat affect. Her eyes were haunted by shadows upon shadows, and he had the feeling that if he looked too deeply into them it would break his heart.

He wished, with a surge of impotent anger, that he had his hands around Somerfield's neck right now. But that fare had already been paid.

“Where will you take me?” Elaine asked, looking at William.

William came back from his thoughts with a start. He realized that he’d been so preoccupied with the task of simply getting Elaine from Lord Somerfield’s castle that he hadn’t given any thought to what would happen next.

“I suppose... home. Father will shelter you and the children now that Lord Somerfield is dead, though it will take him some time to forgive me for leaving without permission.”

“No.” Elaine eyes as they met William’s were filled with rage. “Father sold me to Somerfield when even *I* had heard rumors of the man’s cruelty. He assured me they weren’t true. I’ll never forgive him for that, Will. And I’ll never place myself back under his care, where he might force me into another marriage.”

William felt the passion behind her words, but he didn’t know what to say. As his father’s heir, he didn’t have lands, or a home, of his own. He served as his father’s right hand—or he had until he’d abandoned all that to rescue Elaine.

“Where would you have me take you?” William asked her.

Elaine looked pained. “I would enter a convent if I could. But I’d have to leave the children with someone else. That, I cannot do. I will not blame my sweet babes for their father’s sins.”

“I’m sure Father would not... if I explained. He’d give you time.”

“No! He held my life in my hands once and nearly destroyed me. I won’t give him the chance again.”

William nodded. In truth, he did not blame Elaine. He himself had been away in battle when she’d been hastily betrothed and wed to Lord Somerfield. He’d not even known of it until he’d come home and found her gone. He’d been angry, but his father had assured him it was for the best. And when the news had come recently of her abuse, he’d been shocked that his father had only shrugged. *What a man does with his wife is his own affair. She is his wife now, not my daughter, not your sister.*

William had thought otherwise.

“In truth, sister, I have not much love for Father myself. Perhaps I could give my allegiance to another lord who might grant us a small—”

“Marry me,” Christian interrupted. He’d been silent all this while, so much so that William and Elaine had almost forgotten his presence, speaking freely of family matters. But now his voice was firm, and it cut through the night like an arrow shot from his bow.

Elaine and William both stared at him, but Christian’s dark eyes, dancing in the firelight, were gently fixed on Elaine.

“Pray forgive me, but I will *never* marry again,” Elaine said with conviction. Her eyes fell modestly to her skirts.

“I swear to you on my vow as a knight,” Christian said, laying his palm on his chest, “That I will never lay a hand on you in anger and never in passion either. You may live chaste in your own rooms, and your children will be well cared for.”

“Christian,” William growled, finding his tongue. By the saints, Christian was serious. William was profoundly surprised but underneath that was something he never thought he’d feel—intense jealousy. Did Christian really want Elaine?

“William, my father said I must wed upon my return. This is the perfect solution. Elaine will have a safe harbor, and you and I—”

“*Christian*,” William warned again, loudly.

Christian bit his lip and fell silent, but he returned William’s stare stubbornly.

Elaine was watching them both now, her brow furrowed in confusion. William could feel the sweat pop out on his brow. His extremities suddenly felt numb. He poked at the fire to avoid her gaze even as his face burned.

But Christian—the man could simply not stay silent for long. He went on, his voice low and soothing, as if speaking to a child, but it was strung through with excitement. “I told you of my father’s land in Scotland. If I wed, perhaps

he'd allow me to take over the management of it. We could live there, you and I, Elaine and the children."

"You swore to me you would stop scheming,"

"I swore to you that I would never again hide my plans from you. I'm not hiding them! Think on it! This will allow us to all get what we want."

William glanced up at Elaine to find her gaze on him from across the fire, questioning and intense. He felt shame surge through him at the idea of Elaine knowing his unnatural desires. What would she think? He dropped his eyes.

"William?" Elaine asked him quietly.

He couldn't answer her. He sensed Christian stiffen near him on the log. But Christian said nothing.

Finally, Elaine spoke. "When I was living in that castle for six long years, there was only one person who was truly kind to me. Her name was Muriel and she was my lady-in-waiting for a time."

William raised his eyes to find Elaine looking at him. There was no judgment on her face.

"I loved Muriel and she loved me, even though our relationship was a chaste one. But when my dearest husband saw that I cared for her, that I had one thing in my life that gave me courage and hope, he had her thrown from the top of the ramparts."

*"Elaine."*

She shook her head, her face dead of emotion. "If I ever let another person into my heart or my bed—and right now I cannot even imagine it—but *if* I ever did, it would be someone like Muriel."

William shut his eyes and took a ragged breath. He was reminded of why he'd always loved Elaine. She had such a generosity of mind, was so wise beyond her years and her proscribed station. He should have known; if there was one person he could count on to stand by him no matter what, it was her. But that did not fully erase his sense of shame.



“You will change your mind,” William insisted softly. “Time heals. Now you say you do not want another husband, but you are young. In a few years you’ll want the warmth of a man in your bed, more babes. Do not decide hastily and trap yourself in a loveless match.”

“No, brother. You are wrong.” Elaine began to undo the laces at the front of her gown.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me,” William said.

Elaine ignored him and, when her bodice was loosened, she stood up and turned her back to them, pushing her gown off her shoulders so that it revealed her back. It was covered with a hideous maze of red and white scars.

Christian cursed under his breath. William gave an involuntary cry, his eyes stinging, his fists clenched painfully tight. “Somerfield had you *scourged*?”

“No. He scourged me himself,” she said quietly. “Part of his bedroom games. It roused him. And when I was bloody and wrecked, he raped me. It happened again and again. He liked to show the power he had over me.” She pulled her gown back up and laced it. When she turned around her face was unmoved. “I swear to you on my ruined virtue, brother. I will take my own life before I let another man touch me.”

William nodded, his tongue thick in his mouth. “And I swear to you, sister, that none ever shall against your wishes. I’m sorry I was not there for you till now. I didn’t know.”

“But can you not see?” Christian said fervently. “We can best protect Elaine if she and I were to wed. She’d have a husband who would never be tempted to her bed. And it would be only natural that, with our union, you pledged alliance to my father. We might all live together and—”

“And act like thieves in our own home? Hide from our own servants?” William demanded roughly.

“Well... we would have to choose servants carefully, but—”

“Lie to your family? Lie to our neighbors?” William insisted.

Christian frowned in frustration, as if he could not understand why William was being so difficult.

“Do you love my brother, Christian?” Elaine broke in.

Silence fell around the campfire. *Don't answer, please don't answer*, William thought. He wasn't sure if he could not bear to hear it for his own sake, or if he could not bear for Elaine to hear it.

“With all my heart,” Christian said quietly. He looked at William, the red blush staining his cheeks.

William groaned and put his head in his hands. Dreamers and schemers! It was impossible. Nothing about it was right, nothing could work. Could Christian not see that? Could he truly be so simple-minded? And there he was, already risking his neck just by speaking the truth to Elaine. It was dangerous! William wanted to rend something with his hands.

“Have you no thought of what we would risk?” William hissed, his words heavy with anger. “What I would be risking for Elaine's sake, for the children's, much less for yours? What we've already done is dangerous enough, but to build a life on it....”

“There is risk. But if we're careful, we will not be found out. No one will question what they see on the surface.”

“But *I* am a man of honor, Christian! I cannot live a life full of lies. I will not!”

Christian looked at him fiercely, anger sparking in those dark eyes. “William, I have no choice but to live a life of lies. If I go home and marry a woman of my father's choosing, I will live a lie. At least I can *choose* the lie and find what happiness I can in the sanctity of my own home.”

William shook his head. “As always, you have pretty words, Crow. But I... I cannot live without my honor.”

William's words were thick with finality. Christian buried his head in his hands, pulling on his spiky locks in frustration. And then, without another word, he rose and ran off into the woods to be alone.

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William and Elaine sat for many minutes at the fire in silence. William stared at the flames, angry and riddled with doubt and guilt, feelings he could affix to nothing in particular, only the unfairness of life in general, and the hurt he'd caused Christian, even though he hadn't sought it.

Why had he been born thus? Why had Christian? Why was it that the one person who made him happy, who was brave and true, who made him want to sing love ballads and make of himself a giddy fool, was forbidden to him?

But it was what it was; he could not change it, and he would not waste his breath cursing God like a spoiled child. He rubbed his chin, wiped tiredly at his eyes.

"He's remarkable, your Christian," Elaine said finally. "He killed Somerfield."

"Aye."

"For that alone I should wed him. Do you love him, Will?"

William heaved a sigh. "He's a man."

"'Tis not an answer."

William said nothing.

Elaine wrapped her arms tightly around herself. "All I want is a safe shelter for myself and my children, somewhere I can see them grow unafraid and strong, and where I could have no fear of being bothered myself. I like the idea of Scotland."

"'Tis no place for a lady," William said. "Living so remotely."

"Sounds like heaven. I'm done with dances and courts. I have dreamt of peace and quiet for so long."

*Sounds like heaven.* For one moment, William's defenses slipped and he could see them there, in some remote manor house surrounded by mountains and woods. Elaine was relaxed and smiling, playing in the yard with the children. And Christian warmed his bed, welcoming him with a smile....

“What good would I be without my honor?” William asked her in despair. “Tell me, my sister, I pray you. Advise me truly.”

Elaine thought for a bit. “It was my duty to marry the man my father chose for me—a daughter’s duty, a lady’s role in life. Sometimes, William, what the world asks of us is wrong. And when it is *that* wrong, there is no honor in obeying it.”

“You sound like Christian,” William growled. He looked down at his hands, rough and strong. He’d sworn to be loyal and true when he’d become a knight, but to whom did he owe his allegiance now? His father? The King? God? Elaine? Himself? Christian?

“I do love him,” William admitted reluctantly. “God help me, I wrestled with the devil himself trying to avoid it.”

Elaine smiled at him then, a sweet, sympathetic smile, the first he’d seen on her face since he’d come for her. “Think how different my life might have been had I wed someone like that, while I still had a heart left in me. ’Tis no small thing, Will, to have someone’s love.”

William nodded.

“Some might say it’s worth any risk. Do not discard it recklessly, Brother.”

William put another piece of wood on the fire.

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## CHAPTER 18

Christian had to get away. He was so frustrated he could scream. He could feel the emotion tightening his chest, strangling his lungs, threatening to burst his heart if he did not let it out. But men did not cry, let alone knights. He stumbled on into the dark woods, crashing through them like a wounded boar.

He'd never be able to change William's mind. Damn the man's blasted sense of pride and honor! He'd never yield. No, William would ensure that Christian was sent back to his father's castle, alone, his heart crushed as truly as if it had been ground with a mortar and pestle. And he would never see William again. William would go home to his father and marry some woman, determined to live an honorable life. The thought made Christian wretched with anger, jealousy, and a sinking hopelessness. Such was the price for daring to dream.

He paid little attention to where he was going, only heading directly toward the waxing moon so that he might be able to retrace his steps. He'd just climbed over a fallen tree, and had stopped to rest for a moment on the other side, when he heard a noise, a soft footfall behind him.

"William?" Christian said in surprise, turning.

A sack descended over his head in one swift move and strong arms bound his elbows to his side, locking and squeezing. Christian fought with fear and fury, trying to throw them both back, but to no avail. He writhed, trying to shake his attacker, trying to free his arm enough to reach for his dagger. But the man was strong, whoever he was, and he was prepared for a fight. He dug in and hung on.

And then Christian became aware of a throat-clogging smell within the sack, tasted bitter powder on his tongue. *Poisoned*, was his last, frantic thought as his mouth went numb and his body slack. Darkness slid over his mind like an eclipse over the moon.

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When Christian awoke his head was pierced with pain, a sharp throbbing ache that was no doubt the result of whatever powder had been in the sack. He

didn't open his eyes nor lick his lips, even though they were cracked and dry and he was desperate to do so. He tried to determine his situation.

He was lying on a cold, stony floor. He thought it must be a castle, perhaps a dungeon. But the air smelled sweet and fresh, and a breeze chilled him. Daylight shone bright against his eyelids but he could not feel its heat on his skin. He was outside, then, in the shade. There was no sound at all. A rope bound his upper arms to his sides and his calves to each other tightly. He tried pushing his limbs outward, to test his bonds. They were tight and sure.

After a moment he opened his eyes.

Sitting no more than a foot away on the ground, watching him, was Malcolm.

Christian released a groan. The desperateness of the thing hit him like a slap in the face. Malcolm had him, had him helpless and far away from any possible source of censure. If Malcolm had followed him all this way....

He would never see William again. No one would ever know what had happened to him.

“Awake at last, darling brother,” Malcolm purred. His face was calm, but his eyes were purely demonic. “’Tis well. I was getting bored.”

Christian looked overhead. He could see the top of stone walls and the midday sky. By the position of the sun, it was just after noon. The drug had kept him unconscious all night and through the morning. And they were in some old ruins. Likely Malcolm had taken him east towards Hadrian's Wall. Ruins littered that area.

Christian would have screamed, but it was likely useless. Chances were high there'd be no one near to hear him, and Malcolm would only gag him with something foul. Christian turned his eyes on his brother.

“How brave of you. You must be proud to have mastered me at last—with rope and drugs. Too bad you could not beat me as a man.”

Malcolm smiled. There was more wolf in it than hound. “I have you at my mercy, brother. I care not how I got you there.”

Christian's eyes narrowed. "You are pathetic and weak."

Malcolm shrugged. "We'll soon see who is pathetic and weak. I followed you. I wanted to make sure you'd never come home."

"How boring for you. Slinking after us all these weeks."

Malcolm's smile was razor sharp. "Not boring at all. I watched you and your Sir William Corbet fornicating in that river, and then writhing in your bedrolls, making the two-backed beast. Foul, brother. So very foul."

Christian felt his face burn. He would kill Malcolm for those words, were he capable of it.

"I was almost tempted to denounce the pair of you. But... no. 'Tis far better like this. Our family should never have to carry your shame."

Christian looked up at the blue sky, a cold calm filling him. "Kill me then."

"Oh, I will!" Malcolm said. "In good time. I know you were in Somerfield's keep. I know you had something to do with his murder, even if I know not how you accomplished it. Did you seduce a wench and get her to do your bidding? Such a whore, Christian. Truly."

So Malcolm did not know everything. Really, what did it matter?

He felt Malcolm move closer. His face leaned in, his lumpy countenance blocking the sky. His lanky hair hung down like seaweed. Malcolm studied Christian's face almost serenely. He drew a finger down Christian's cheek. Christian turned his head away, shuddering at the touch.

Then he felt Malcolm's mouth on his cheek in a sexual, open-mouthed kiss, wet and passionate. Christian shut his eyes, forcing himself not to wince.

"No one need ever know," Malcolm whispered. "Roll onto your back for me, Christian. Spread your thighs whenever I say. Tell me that you want me. Speak well, Brother. Convince me. And maybe I will let you live."

By the Virgin, Malcolm's voice.... Christian had never heard him sound like that before—soft, pleading, and completely mad. It sent a chill of horror through Christian as he realized there could be worse things than death.

Was this why Malcolm had always hated him? Had he harbored some secret desire all these years? Or was this just a brief fancy caused by whatever was rotting his brain?

Christian turned to look into Malcolm's eyes. They were hopeful, pathetic.

“The only way you will ever touch me, *Brother*, is when you have bound me thus, so tightly that I can do nothing to prevent it. I will never let you take me willingly. I'd sooner cut off your cock than let it near me.”

The door that had been open in Malcolm's eyes slammed shut and his face turned murderous.

“Foolish, foolish choice, Brother,” Malcolm hissed. “Now I am going to fuck you, trussed up like the bitch that you are, and then I'm going to carve you up like mincemeat.”

Christian pressed his lips tightly to hold in his frustration. He looked up at the sky as Malcolm's hand rubbed down his body, over the rope, onto the tunic at his waist, and down to cup him through his hose. Malcolm's hand was hot and sweaty even through the wool.

“You not only desire a man, you add incest?” Christian said, trying to think of anything that would change Malcolm's mind. “Truly, you beg for hell-fire, my brother.”

“Ah, but you shall feel its heat first, sweet Christian. In fact, you'll be there today.”

Malcolm put his hands on Christian's sides and rolled him over like a sack of grain onto his stomach. Dear God, but Malcolm stank—of man's sweat, of his horse's, and of piss. Christian's face rubbed against the unforgiving stones and stung. Malcolm had wrapped the ropes around his arms and chest so tightly that he could scarcely breathe. He felt the hem of his tunic pulled up, felt Malcolm press against his arse through his hose, his cock already hard.

“Whore,” Malcolm whispered in Christian's ear, panting and aroused. He thrust his member against Christian through two layers of wool.



Christian closed his eyes. He tried to summon up words that would so anger Malcolm that he'd be killed on the spot. If he had to die, he'd rather not face the indignity of rape first, and he did not want to leave this earth remembering Malcolm's touch instead of that of his beloved William.

But at that thought, all the fight went out of Christian. A numbing despair and sadness burst through his breast in a warm gush, as if his heart had cracked, sending blood flowing, or perhaps it was the tears he'd held inside for so long, breaking free of their dam.

In that moment, Christian accepted death. It was for the best. He didn't want to return to his father's castle, and he could not bear to live without William. Better his life end here, now. He had never fit in this world. William had the truth of it. No matter how much Christian tried to twist things, use his cleverness to make things right, in the end he himself was wrong and there was no cure for it.

*Just let me die quickly,* Christian prayed.

His deepest regret was that Malcolm would get the satisfaction of having killed him, that after so many years of slipping out of his brother's grasp, Malcolm had won.

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## CHAPTER 19

Christian did not return. Elaine went to sleep, but William stayed by the fire waiting. He waited all night in vain. When dawn finally offered him a sip of the day's draft of light, he took off into the woods, trying to discern where Christian had gone. He would not have left them thus, with Livermore still tied next to Tristan, with his saddlebags still at the camp. Had he been hurt? Had he fallen into a ravine? Been attacked by beasts?

William was a decent tracker, and he forced himself to stop his headlong rush and use his skills. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and began scanning the brush. If he knew Christian, he would have followed a straight line using the moon. He just had to find the line and—

There, a bent pine sapling, a crushed fern. William followed the trail.

It took him half an hour to find the tree that Christian had climbed and then—several sets of footprints, evidence of a struggle. One set of footprints escaped the mess—dragging something heavy through the woods.

The gears in William's mind froze, hanging up on what he was seeing, refusing to accept it. He looked over the ground again and again, searching for any clue that would tell him he was misinterpreting it. He found not a single drop of blood, which was good. But nevertheless, the evidence was plain. One man had jumped another and dragged him away. There was no blood, which meant he'd not been stabbed, but it could have been a blow to the head or a powerful punch to the gut. Whatever the assailant had done, it had not been instantaneous. The victim—Christian—had fought, but not for long.

William felt chilled to the bone. *Christian.*

Someone had dragged him off. Had he already been dead? Or merely wounded? Had it been bandits? A hermit who lived in the woods? A madman? Perhaps it was someone who knew Christian had killed Somerfield and was out for revenge. Had Christian been recognized in the castle? Had they been followed?

No answers were forthcoming, but William began to push through the woods, following the attacker's trail.

It is the gift of fear to be able to focus the mind, clear away the dross. And the fear of losing Christian gave this gift to William. The misty confusion that had lived in his pounding heart for days was at last crystalized until there was only one message, clear and strong.

*He had to find Christian, his love, his heart, Sir Christian Brandon.*

If only God would allow Christian to live, William swore to Christ, the virgin, and all the saints that he would not let Christian down again. He would never let him out of his sight, never doubt them, would face any risk just to have Christian by his side, even if legions were to come against them.

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Malcolm yanked on Christian's hose, frustrated at how difficult they were to shift as Christian lay on his stomach like dead weight.

"Lift!" Malcolm ordered angrily.

Christian didn't move.

"I shall cut them from you," Malcolm warned. "And my hands feel very clumsy today. Your skin will suffer for it."

"Cut then," Christian said flatly. "Cut deep."

Malcolm spat some savory curses. He moved off Christian, no doubt to get his dagger.

That's when Christian heard it, the slow, deliberate song of a long blade as it was pulled from its scabbard.

Time seemed to stop. For a moment, Christian heard only Malcolm's alarmed breathing against utter silence. Then there was a scrabble of feet on rock, and the second, quicker song of sword leaving sheath, the heavy clank as blades met in the air. A sword fight.

Christian managed to roll over even as he tried to push himself back against the wall with his feet, to escape the melee, and rise up to sitting. He finally got his head raised enough to see the courtyard of the ruins clearly—and saw William, in full armor, helmet down, locked in battle with Malcolm.

Malcolm was not wearing his armor or mail, and he'd been taken by surprise. He was an excellent swordsman, strong and agile, but already William had the advantage. He was furious; Christian could see it in the line of his body and in the aggression in his attack. He was forcing Malcolm back, his blows coming fast, hard, and relentless. Malcolm countered each crushing blow, but he was barely keeping up with them. Both his hands gripped the hilt of his sword, and he stumbled backwards away from William's onslaught, his eyes wide. And then—

A mighty, swinging blow from William's sword pushed Malcolm's blade strongly to the right. Before he could recover, William's sword fell again like the hand of God from Malcolm's left—and severed his head completely from his neck.

Christian was transfixed in disbelief as Malcolm's face, that hateful, angry face that had tormented him since childhood, spun up into the air once, twice, his hair flying behind like a horse's tail, before it landed with a sickening thud on the stone floor of the ruins. A second later, Malcolm's body collapsed in a heap.

Christian stared at it in shock. He felt rather than saw William fall to his knees at his side.

“Christian! Are you all right?” William demanded, ripping off his helmet.

Christian nodded blankly.

William drew a knife and began to work at Christian's bonds, slicing them angrily as if they were deeply offensive, first the ropes at his calves then his arms. The moment Christian was able to tug his arms free, he pushed himself off the ground and threw himself against William, arms wrapping around his shoulders.

“You came for me.”

William gripped him tightly, so tightly his armor bruised Christian's skin, but he didn't care.

“Were you in Hell itself, Christian. I would always come for you.” William's voice was choked with emotion. “When I saw the tracks in the

woods, that he'd dragged you to his horse, I thought.... Thanks be to God that you're alive."

Christian held him closer, feeling his passion for this man, for his soul, his being, his body, his heart, overwhelm him. After tasting the bitterness of death, it was a sweet, heady brew. "I love you, William. I know I cannot ask you to be something you detest, no matter how much I want to be with you. But I love you."

William pulled away so that he could cup Christian's face and kiss his lips sweetly. "No, you were right. If I left you—if I could even make myself do such a thing—the rest of my life would be a lie. So I guess my honor must be to you and Elaine, and to my own heart. As for the rest, we shall have to put our trust in your stratagems, Crow."

Christian barked a laugh as something hot moistened his eyes. "I would dream up a million schemes to stay with you."

William smiled. "Just one good one will do."

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## EPILOGUE

The Scottish do not love the English, that is a fact. And while it is not uncommon for the British monarch to give away bits of their sacred homeland to his favorites, a thing that is not in any way *illegal*, since the king does own quite a lot of Scottish acreage, the Englishmen who move onto such land generally find that they are not welcome with open arms. By half.

And yet. There have been, in the course of time, exceptions. Scots are honest and hard-working, fierce and loyal. And it is in their nature to respect a man, once he has proven that he is the same and not a foppish puppet of King Edward II.

Take, for example, the English who lived at Glen Braemar Castle. Its acres of heavily wooded lands were rich with game. But other than the area right next to the castle itself, no man had ever been persecuted for poaching that land. In fact, Sir Christian Brandon, the lord of the place, was an excellent hunter himself. He took game to the widows in the neighboring village at least once a week, even in the deepest, most snow-covered winter. And he always donated several deer to church festivals.

They say Sir Christian could shoot a deer with his arrows even when they were in full run, even in half light. Come to think on it, perhaps that is why poachers were not a huge problem for Glen Braemar Castle.

Sir Christian's wife, Lady Elaine, tended to the sick and unfortunate. Her compassion was legendary. Once, when she saw a woman in the village with a battered face, she attacked the woman's husband so fiercely, it took both Lady Elaine's husband and her brother, Sir William, to pull her off. It might have ended badly, except the woman stammered that her husband had not touched her and, well, the husband was too cowardly to fight both Sir Christian and Sir William—which was not especially cowardly, given their reputations.

Not long after that, the woman left her husband and went into service at the castle. No one in the village complained. The brutish husband moved away and was never heard from again.

The family became accepted in the community over time, English or not. It was, after all, a boon to have two such fine knights in the area, and they were not selfish with their skills. Sir William taught the local youth at swordplay and Sir Christian taught archery.

When the English attacked in 1301, Sir Christian Brandon and Sir William Corbet fought alongside Sir William Wallace—and acquitted themselves admirably.

And if even that did not cement their acceptance as Scots, because Scots can be *quite* hard-headed, then the two bonny lasses who were the daughters of Lady Elaine, both with long golden hair and blue eyes, who were wooed and wed by local Scottish nobleman, certainly did.

The three of them now rest together in the small graveyard of Glen Braemar Castle. Lady Elaine was the first to go, succumbing to a fever in her fifty-sixth year. Her body had never been strong. Sir Christian and Sir William lived another twenty years, Sir William going first at the ripe age of seventy-three and Sir Christian following on only a month later.

And if there had, on occasion, been a rumor that surfaced now and again, like a piece of flotsam on the wild seas, that handsome Sir William had never wed because he was hopelessly in love with his sister's husband—a tragic, romantic, and shocking tale of the sort young maidens love to whisper—well, no one of consequence had ever taken it very seriously.

May they rest in peace.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Having been, at various times and under different names, a minister's daughter, a computer programmer, a game designer, the author of paranormal mysteries, a fan fiction writer, an organic farmer, and a profound sleeper, Eli is happily embarking on yet another incarnation as a m/m romance author.*

*As an avid reader of such, she is tickled pink when an author manages to combine literary merit, vast stores of humor, melting hotness, and eye-dabbing sweetness into one story. She promises to strive to achieve most of that, most of the time. She currently lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with her husband, three bulldogs, three cows and six chickens. All of them (except for the husband) are female, hence explaining the naked men that have taken up residence in her latest fiction writing.*

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