

A medieval castle with two prominent towers sits atop a rocky hill. The scene is set at night under a deep blue sky filled with stars. The foreground shows a grassy slope leading up to the castle.

Destiny's Disguise

Candice
Kohl

With special appreciation to
Robert and Elizabeth Cook

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



LionHearted Publishing,[®] Inc.
P.O. Box 618
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448-0618
888-546-6478

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Visit our web site www.LionHearted.com

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Cover art by Cathryn McClelland

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ISBN: 1-57343-025-0

Printed in the U.S.A.

To my husband—he knows who he is—and to
every friend—you know who you are—who said:
“Don’t quit. You’re going to make it!”



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Chapter One



Gwyneth stood in the drafty outbuilding considering the iron pots and wooden vats in which her ale was brewing and her mead and mulberry wine fermenting. She turned to her servant and said, “Jean, you’ll be sure to keep the fire through the night?”

“Aye, milady. If the draughts don’t push through the chinks and cracks, blowin’ it out altogether.”

Gwyneth nodded in understanding, pulling the hood of her cloak up over her cinnamon hair as Jean tucked her own arms beneath her woolen shawl. “What’s that?” the serving woman asked, cocking her head. “The wind, is it?”

Both of them fell silent, straining to hear. Suddenly Gwyneth’s emerald eyes widened, and as she bolted through the doorway she exclaimed, “It sounds like Gwendolyn!”

The hems of her bliaut and cloak swirled as she raced into the yard. The chickens pecking

among the stones flapped their wings and fluttered away at her intrusion, like ripples in a pond. Gwyneth ignored the fowl as Jean joined her and they peered into the gloomy, gray dusk of the blustery, autumn evening.

“There!”

Gwyneth turned to where Jean was pointing and spied the girl running toward them, her long, red braids flying out behind her. Gwyneth opened her arms and the girl ran into them, clinging to her tearfully.

“Gwendolyn, what is it? What’s happened?”

“The—the baron’s men. They—they’re sacking the village! Ethel’s cottage has been fired, and—and little Robbie, Alice and Willie’s son... Oh, Gwyneth, he was trampled to death by horses’ hooves! I saw it, Gwyn! I saw it!”

Gritting her teeth, Gwyneth stroked her sister’s head and tried to comfort her. But her eyes remained on the path Gwendolyn had taken up the hill. Just beyond, an unsettling orange glow brightened the smoky sky giving credence to the girl’s report that the house belonging to the cottar James and his wife, Ethel, was indeed aflame.

“The baron?” Jean repeated, putting a hand on Gwendolyn’s shoulder. “Elwood of Eye?”

Before she could reply, thundering hooves pounding up the path from the village below interrupted. Reacting instinctively, Gwyneth shoved Gwendolyn and Jean behind a full haycart,

where the three of them hid in its shadows. Within seconds two warhorses galloped into the yard, prancing and pawing the air as the knights astride them sawed on their reins.

“Arnulf! Arnulf, prepare to pledge your fealty to Lord Elwood, or lose your village, its people, your house and your kin this very night!”

Gwyneth could feel Gwendolyn’s continued shaking, though she held the girl firm. But her eyes never left the yard or the intruding knights until the door to the manor house opened, and Arnulf appeared.

He stood on the top of the steps at the second story entrance. He was garbed in full armor, as the knights on horseback were, but he looked, Gwyneth realized, almost foolish. Arnulf was old and frail; it appeared as if he might crumple under the weight of his mail and helmet. Yet he spread his bowed legs in a fighting stance as he gripped his lance firmly.

“I’ve sworn my fealty to the baron,” he announced, his voice not nearly as sure as it had been thirty years ago.

“*Only* to the baron!” Elwood’s man clarified.

“I cannot do that,” Arnulf insisted, shaking his head, though it was apparent his protest was futile. The baron’s knights knew full well the circumstances the village of Sherborne found itself in. Yet the lord of the manor continued, as if there were some hope of reasoning with these

intimidating and unwelcomed visitors. “My allegiance is dual, to both Elwood of Eye and the earl of Farleigh. I’ve done nothing for one and against the other.”

The knight on the lead horse laughed, and his steed’s front hooves pawed the dirt. Gwendolyn uttered a startled cry, but Gwyneth silenced her by placing a hand none too gently over her mouth.

“There is no earl of Farleigh! Old Hugh and his son went on crusade and died there. It’s been years, old man, and we’ve a new king now, Henry, Count of Anjou, and a new queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. And you, Sir Arnulf, have only one lord, Elwood of Eye, baron of all this shire!”

“No!” Thunder in his eyes despite his squawky voice, the old knight, Arnulf, pounded the shaft of his lance on the stone stoop. “Hugh has a son who’s the earl now! I’ve not heard our new King Henry declare otherwise.”

“God’s teeth, you blithering fool!” the second knight swore in exasperation. “The longer you stand there arguing, the more of Sherborne is lost to you.”

“If it’s lost to me, it’s lost to the baron as well. Methinks your lord shan’t be well-pleased if you plunder and burn to the ground one of his richest holdings!”

“There’s no earl,” the other insisted again. “Old Hugh’s sons are dead, either beside him in Jerusalem or felled by fever here at home.”

"Not all," Arnulf snarled. "John still lives."

"Are you a seer?" the knight fired back sarcastically. "The youngest has not been heard from since he went to foster in Maine at the end of old King Henry's reign! He will not be returning, and you are not bound by your oath to that house where only a seneschal rules. Your only loyalty is to Elwood of Eye!"

"He's witless," that one's companion declared impatiently, pulling his horse up alongside the other's. "Kill him, be done with it. There's wenches still to be had—"

The baron's man never finished his sentence, except with an explosion of air that blew past his lips at the impact of an arrow piercing his back and splitting his chest. The remaining knight turned quickly, twirling his mace, but he had no chance to defend himself. He, too, was killed by an archer's arrow.

The women remained hiding until the long bowmen appeared. They were Arnulf's men-at-arms, and they were on foot. The old lord climbed awkwardly down the steps, clanging like a ghost bound with chains, and joined them in the yard. "The village?" he asked as his womenfolk crept out of the shadows and several servants emerged from the house above and the stable below.

"There are fires what still need putting out," one explained. "The baron's men slew several of the town's folk, including children who had the

bad luck to stumble into their way. And I fear a few maids were used badly. But we put an end to the lives of a number of Elwood's men, and the rest rode off quickly enough."

"Go!" Arnulf barked to his people. "See what you can do to put out the flames before all the village is reduced to ash and rubble."

Obediently, everyone save the youngest children ran off down the path; the archers who had saved their lord's life and manor trotted briskly after them, their weapons still at the ready. Even Jean headed toward Sherborne town, leaving only Gwyneth, Gwendolyn and the manor servants' babes behind with the old knight.

"Father!" young Gwendolyn sobbed, looking as if she longed to embrace him, though she was restrained by his scowl, or his armor, or both.

"In the house, you two."

"Come, children," Gwyneth ordered, lifting two toddlers and carrying them up the stone steps into the house. She followed the old man and the young girl, while the little children followed her like ducklings trailing their mother.

There was only one large room in the manor, with an open bower loft extending a third of the way beneath the vaulted roof. A decent blaze roared in the large pit at one end of the main room but, Gwyneth noticed, despite her best efforts to keep the floor clean, bones had been strewn among the rushes. Setting the children down, she

began picking up the remnants of past meals as she told Gwendolyn, “Bring blankets from the chest in our bedchamber. I’ll settle the babes down close to the fire so they can sleep ’til their parents return.”

Obediently Gwendolyn climbed the narrow, wooden staircase. As she ducked between the heavy curtains that separated the women’s sleeping room from Arnulf’s, she was hidden by the velvet wall that afforded those above protection from any prying eyes below. When she returned to the lower floor, she spread the blankets near the hearth and tucked the children in as Gwyneth, her cloak now removed, assisted Arnulf in shedding his knightly garb.

When both the ladies’ tasks were done, Gwyneth poured methagline from a flagon into three pewter goblets. The drink was laced with herbs designed to ease the old man’s aches and pains, but all three of them drank it that evening, sitting on benches at the long, trestle table, Gwyneth and Gwendolyn hoping to still their trembling fingers and pounding hearts.

“The bodies—in the yard—” Gwendolyn muttered, her green eyes locked on Gwyneth’s, so much like her own.

“The men will remove them before dawn,” she assured her and then, without pause, she spoke her next words to Arnulf. “They were right. Elwood’s men were right. You should have

renounced your oath to the earl and sworn your fealty to the baron alone. There's no lord in Farleigh Castle; there hasn't been for many a year. If the young Henry, in the two years' time he's been king here, has not seen fit to reward one of his loyal barons with the earldom, it is still no reason for you to keep your oath to a ghost."

Arnulf's rheumy green eyes widened, and more quickly than it would seem possible for a man of the knight's many years, he raised his bony hand and cuffed Gwyneth soundly. She, however, barely flinched, having received many blows in her lifetime as daughter and wife.

Scowling, Arnulf sat back and took a long gulp from his goblet, the red liquid dribbling sloppily down his chin and into his stringy beard. For an idle second, Gwyneth wondered if the red streaks in his gray whiskers were remnants of its former color, or simply accumulated wine stains.

"You dare gainsay me?" he snarled, scowling angrily. "Nearly a hundred years ago my grandsire fought beside the Conqueror, and in reward this fief, this manor house and town, was bestowed upon him. From poverty he rose to landed knight, and he held to his heart his duty to protect this place and its people."

"But as the town lies 'twixt the lands of the baron and the earl, the Lord of Sherborne has always owed dual allegiance to the two. Forty days service he gives to each, and the fruits of the fields

he shares with both,” Gwendolyn recited by rote.

“Damned right, girl!” Arnulf swore, slapping his palm on the table so that the child jumped. Then he turned his eyes to the woman. “So it has ever been, and so it will ever be.”

“But with only a seneschal managing the earl’s estate, Lord Elwood will soon take it over. It’s his plan, as everyone knows,” Gwyneth pointed out. “When he makes himself earl, he’ll rule all the lands surrounding Sherborne. Why do you refuse to see? There is no way for it but, without an heir to Farleigh, the baron will one day be your only lord. Save for the king,” she added.

“Save for the king!” Arnulf shouted. “It is he who rules England, not the land-lords who make war upon each other. You’d best remember that, woman.”

“I do remember it,” she admitted grudgingly. “But this new King Henry is little more than a boy. Has he any wit, or might, or vision? I think not, or the house of Farleigh would have a lord to rule and protect those beholden to it.”

For a moment the old knight stuttered and stammered, and the women thought he might collapse in a fit, or worse, dead. But when he found his voice it was still a bellow: “How dare you speak with such contempt for our sovereign lord! No wonder females must be guarded, instructed and beaten into submissiveness! You haven’t room for a single intelligent thought

between your ears!”

Arnulf's shouting had wakened one of the servant's babes. Glad for the distraction, Gwyneth stood, picked up the child, and brought her back to the table. Concentrating on quieting the little girl, she jiggled and rocked her, cooing softly in her tiny, pink ear.

“What is fact,” she pointed out as she returned the child to its makeshift crib of rushes and swaddling, “is that Lord Elwood will one day be the earl of Farleigh. If you do not give up your stubbornness, you'll see us all in graves alongside the old earl to whom you once swore fealty.”

When Arnulf stood, his bench did indeed topple. Young Gwendolyn, who had been sitting on the end of it, tumbled off and was, therefore, unable to stop him as he lunged for Gwyneth. She did manage to grab the hem of his tunic, which fell to mid-calf, but that only caused her father to fall against Gwyneth. He grabbed his older daughter by her shoulder and slammed his fist into her face more than once before she managed to push him off.

“Cease! Father, please!” Gwendolyn begged, scrambling to her feet and putting herself between the two of them.

Spittle clung to Arnulf's whiskers and his eyes were narrowed to dangerous slits, but he paused long enough for the girl to help Gwyneth stand upright. “She didn't mean what she said, surely

she didn't," Gwendolyn apologized. "It is only—Elwood's a cruel overlord, and should you defy him, he will see us all brought low. Besides, there has been no earl at Farleigh since the last one died nearly three winters past. Why do you think another son lives?" she asked anxiously. "Where is this man, John, whom you wait for?"

It was Gwyneth, as stubborn as Arnulf, who replied, "In heaven, with his father and brothers, no doubt."

"No!"

Gwendolyn intercepted another blow Arnulf intended for her sister. He seemed upset to have missed his mark. "Get up," he growled. "And do not interfere again."

This time it was Gwyneth who helped Gwendolyn to her feet. The two leaned against each other for support as the man deigned at last to answer his younger daughter's question. "John, Hugh's youngest son, the last alive and the present earl of Farleigh, is on his way here. He'll be returning—soon."

"How do you know?" Gwyneth demanded skeptically, despite Gwendolyn's pleading look that she remain silent.

"Because the blind old witch what lives on the edge of the forest told one of the lord's villeins. Word reached my ear just this morning: John of Farleigh is on his way home."

Gwyneth was inclined to scoff, but this time

she heeded her sister's baleful look and remained silent. Let the old fool believe what he wishes, she decided, that a man who was absent all through King Stephen's reign is alive and well and on the road home.

Chapter Two



Sirs Lionel and Bruno trudged at a slow pace on their palfreys as they followed the ambling dirt road. “God’s teeth, but it’s damnably hot in Gascony this autumn!”

Lionel was a thick man in his middle years while Bruno was youthful still, having been knighted only a few years earlier. Yet it was Bruno who was complaining as he pulled back the hood of his hauberk and wiped his sweat-stained brow.

“Homesick for the cold, damp winds of England, are you?” Lionel asked, turning to look at his companion.

“Aye, I am,” the younger man admitted. “We’ve been on this quest for nearly three years, now. I’m tired of wandering.” As they came around a bend in the road, their pack horse trailing behind them, Bruno peered up at the walled fortress that suddenly loomed ahead. “What if he’s not here?”

His friend looked at the castle, too. “He’s here,” Lionel declared with certainty.

“The Dane may well be here, I’ll grant you that. But there’s no guarantee he’s the man we seek.”

“He must be,” Lionel insisted. “Our lord was dubbed The Dane while he was still fostering, a mere squire. It must be he.”

Bruno spat in the dirt as they continued at a walk. “All of Henry’s lands are peopled with the descendants of Danes. Who’s to say the one we search for is the only one called that?”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Lionel said reasonably, kicking his mount into a trot that Bruno’s horse quickly mimicked.

“But if he isn’t?”

“Then we’ll keep looking.”

“I think not,” Bruno countered. “I think, if our information has once again led us to naught, that we should return home and declare the man dead.”

“With what proof?” the older warrior demanded, his bushy brows knitting together into a frown.

“Why should we need proof? After all these years, he is certainly dead. How can we be expected to supply any proof, except for the stories we’ve been told and the conclusions we have reached?”

Sir Lionel did not reply. They had reached the access road that meandered like a river up the motte to the gate in the keep’s outer wall. With a sudden burst of determined speed, Lionel urged

his horse up the narrow road at full gallop; his companion and the pack horse were forced to keep pace. Only when the guards appeared above the parapet did Lionel slow down to a walk and then halt completely.

“Who are you? What business have you here?” a sentry shouted down to them, and Lionel explained who he and Bruno were and why they had come to Hubert de Tusaine’s barony.

The gate was opened, and when they were inside the outer bailey the two knights dismounted, slapping the road dirt from their chausses and tunics. “The captain of the guard!” Bruno shouted up to the man on the wall who had allowed them admittance. “Where might we find him?”

“Right here.”

Bruno and Lionel whirled around to face the captain. After introductions were completed, Lionel explained their purpose there. “Does the baron employ the services of a knight called The Dane? He would be new here; he’s not been too many months in Gascony, we don’t think.”

“Why do you want him? He’s not an outlaw, is he?”

“No.” The knight shook his graying head. “If The Dane is the man we think he is, he’s a landless knight no longer. He has come into an inheritance of some substance.”

“I’d hate to lose him, if that be true. But I’d wish him well,” the captain admitted. Standing

aside, he pointed. “He’s there, on the practice field, leading a training exercise.”

“He answers to ‘The Dane?’” Bruno inquired.

“If you need to call him out, yes. But there’ll be no need, I suspect. You cannot miss him.”

The English knights strode toward the practice field where the baron’s men were parrying and thrusting their broadswords. The dozens of men were paired in twos, pretending at mortal combat, all except for one who stood alone in the center of the melee, thwarting haphazard attacks with apparent ease as he shouted directions. He stood head and shoulders taller than the rest, but with his hooded mail hauberk and conical helmet complete with nose guard, it was impossible to discern his features.

Patiently, curiously, Lionel and Bruno waited for the exercise to end. When it did, and the baron’s knights began to leave the yard, Bruno hailed The Dane, not by name but with a wave and a shout. “Yes?” the tall soldier said, pausing distractedly as his eyes followed the others making their way to the inner bailey.

“You’re the one called The Dane?”

“Yes, but I’ve no time—”

“Please, milord. We’ve been on the road more years than months, tracking you.”

The Dane removed his helmet and pulled back his hood, revealing a wealth of unfashionably long, golden hair that glinted red in the sunlight

despite the fact it was disheveled and damp with sweat. "Tracking me?" he repeated, scowling at Bruno. The expression made his bright, cerulean blue eyes darken, and the scar on his left cheek, which disappeared into the neatly trimmed beard on his chin, look deep and black. "Who sent you after me? That fool, Von Riggins? His daughter's babe wasn't mine. I never touched her though she appeared, more than once, naked on my pallet."

"Gerald sent us," Lionel explained quickly.

"Gerald?" The Dane's eyes went from Bruno to Lionel.

"You don't know him, then," Bruno surmised, giving his friend an I-told-you-so glance.

"He wouldn't know Gerald," Lionel informed his young companion. "He's been gone too many years."

"That's true enough. I know no Gerald, and I must be off. If you'll grant me leave," The Dane said, about to move away.

But Lionel stopped him by asking, "Are you John? John of Farleigh?"

The man pivoted on his heel and faced his two visitors again. His expression changed so completely even Bruno would have had to admit that the battle-scarred warrior, who had surely celebrated forty natal days if he had celebrated one, was a handsome man. The hard, impatient edge to his voice was gone, too, when he replied, "Aye. I'm John, John of Farleigh. My father,

Hugh, is—was—the earl. I’m sorry,” he apologized quickly. “It’s been so long since anyone has called me by my birth name, it caught me unaware.”

“I knew it.” Lionel cast a smug smile in Bruno’s direction.

“Is the Gerald of whom you speak Penworth’s son?”

“He is, indeed, and he himself has been seneschal of Farleigh Castle since Penworth passed on more than fifteen summers past.”

“Good God.” John shook his head and stared at the dirt at his feet. After a moment his head snapped up and he asked, “Gerald sent you to look for me? When? Why?”

“We have been on our mission the best of the last three years. We began at Maygenne, where you fostered,” Bruno explained, “and have since been following you throughout the kingdoms of France, Germany—the entire Holy Roman Empire, or so it seems!”

“Why?”

“You, my lord,” Lionel informed John respectfully, “are now the earl of Farleigh. You have been since your brother Robert died on the fourth day of Christmas in the year 1153.”

“Robert was earl? And you say he is dead?”

Though the knights on the practice field had been unable to fell him, this news seemed to knock the wind from John. Turning his back on

Bruno and Lionel, he ambled to a bench and sat. The other two men followed him but remained silent until he could gather his thoughts.

At last he looked up. "My father died on crusade and my brother, Garwin, with him. I received word of that. But that would have made my elder brother, Vincent, earl. What of him? How did Robert come to be earl?"

"Lord Vincent did inherit the earldom," Lionel explained. "He ruled the estates for some four years, and during that time Robert returned. But in the year of our Lord, 1152, a sickness swept through the land in the south. Vincent of Farleigh succumbed, as did his wife, Evelyn, who was some months with child at the time of her death."

"God's tears," John mumbled, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly as he swallowed hard. "Now Robert's dead, too, I surmise."

"Aye." Bruno nodded. "The sickness of which Lionel spoke began to wane in the summer. Robert, as earl, went searching for a bride to ensure heirs. Late the following year he became betrothed to one Lady Ardyth, whom he was to wed after the new year. But suddenly he fell ill with the fever as the sickness reared its ugly head once again, and he passed on before taking his marriage vows."

For several long minutes no one spoke, the three knights ignoring the chatter and commotion going on around them in the outer bailey. "The

entire house of Farleigh is gone,” John whispered finally. “All my family dead.”

“Nay, not all, milord,” Lionel argued gently. “You’re still among the living, and by God’s hand destined to rule and defend Farleigh’s holdings and people.”

John shook his head and Lionel continued. “It’s true! God’s chosen you, surely He has, for ’tis a miracle we’ve even found you, as you’ve been gone so many years and hired on to serve so many masters.”

“It is what the youngest, landless sons must do,” John reminded him, cocking one fair, arched brow.

“Yes. But no longer. You are the earl, and Farleigh needs you more than you can know.”

“How so?” John came to his feet again.

“Elwood of Eye has been busy making war upon his neighbors, all in an effort to expand his domain. But what he yearns for most is Farleigh, for yours is an earldom that has been handed down from long generations of Saxons and Danes, while his own barony is, in comparison, of little consequence.”

“He was in favor with Stephen,” Bruno explained, “but not so with the new king. Never has Henry called the baron of Eye to his council.”

John tucked his helmet under his arm. The hard look of the warrior had returned to his face. “Come,” he said simply, “I will see you fed. Then

we will be off.”

He strode ahead of the two English knights, and Bruno paused to smile at Lionel. “I thank the sweet, holy mother of Jesu! We’re going home at last and for good.”

“Aye, that we are. But I fear the last years will seem like a May Day romp compared to what we will find for ourselves serving our new lord, John.”

“Why?”

“You told him yourself: Elwood of Eye wants Farleigh for his own. The new earl will fight hard and long to prevent that. And we, as his loyal defenders, will fight right alongside him, unless death takes us from his side.”

The smile disappeared from Bruno’s handsome, young face. Still, he was eager to return home to England.

Chapter Three



The sisters were in their bedchamber, which was brightened only by the starlight shining through the small window they had not yet covered for the night, and two thick candles. There was an obvious similarity between them. Despite the considerable difference in their ages, they shared the same coppery red hair color and green eyes and their slim figures were much the same. But Gwendolyn's eyes were wide and round, her nose dusted with faint freckles, and her bosom as flat as her hips were narrow, while Gwyneth's dark-lashed eyes were slanted like a cat's, her smooth skin creamy, and her curves more voluptuous.

"You shouldn't provoke Father so," Gwendolyn advised from her perch on a three-legged stool as Gwyneth ran a comb through the length of her locks. The girl knew that in spite of the fact there were no marks yet, tomorrow Gwyneth would be swollen and bruised where Arnulf had struck her this evening. "He's old and

short-tempered, and the results are always the same.”

“I’m old, too,” Gwyneth replied. “Too old to accept his ill-advised arguments. Look what happened today! Elwood slaughtered a dozen of our own sheep—and for what purpose? A portion of their wool would have been his. He ordered it simply to frighten the old man into obeying his command. And why shouldn’t Arnulf oblige him, I ask you? There is no longer any earl of Farleigh he must serve.”

“Father believes there is.”

“His brains are addled.”

“Even if that’s true—that there is no living heir to Farleigh, not that Father’s brains are addled,” Gwendolyn explained as she spun about on her stool. “Even if it is, the earldom of Farleigh still exists and Sherborne owes allegiance there just as we do to the barony of Eye.”

Gwyneth looked down at her and shook her head. “A man gives his oath to another man, be he king or baron or knight. Arnulf and the people of Sherborne town do not owe their loyalty to a castle or a plot of land, no matter how many hides it is.”

“You are as stubborn as Father.”

“That isn’t so.” Gwyneth set the comb down. “I simply do not wish to see you hurt, and I fear the worst at Elwood’s hand if Arnulf does not submit.”

Gwyneth waited for Gwendolyn's reaction. She had no wish to frighten the girl, who was only fifteen and more innocent than most her age. But Gwendolyn's response was unexpected. Raising her chin almost haughtily, she stood and announced, "I fear neither Elwood nor his men. Thomas will protect me."

Surprised, Gwyneth recovered quickly. Stepping to the rail, she pulled back the edge of the heavy fabric hanging that served as the chamber's second wall. Peeking through the slit, she could see the floor below. As usual it was dark and smoky, and at this late hour nearly everyone who lived in the house was asleep. Sprawled on pallets among the rushes were Arnulf's men-at-arms, several servants, and the lord's young squire, Thomas of Brandywine. He had come to Sherborne to foster at the age of seven. He was now nigh on eighteen years, and a handsome lad with sandy hair and twinkling brown eyes.

Gwyneth dropped the curtain. "So that's how it is, is it?"

Immediately, Gwendolyn was defensive. "He's a good man. He attends mass every morning, he's honorable, chaste, and—and he will defend me with his own life."

"Go to bed," Gwyneth urged indulgently, pulling back the coverlet on the bed they shared.

Obediently the girl crawled in, but still she continued with her praise for Thomas of

Brandywine. "He is a wonderful soldier, skilled in all the knightly arts."

"I am sure he is."

"He's brave and strong."

"I am sure that's true as well."

"He loves me."

With a sigh, Gwyneth sat down on the edge of the mattress. "How was he born?"

"Second son. So he may marry."

"His father's estate?"

"Grunwald of Brandywine's fief is not too very large," the girl admitted. "But Thomas assures me he will inherit something."

Gwyneth said nothing. Grunwald of Brandywine's holdings could be no bigger than a fly's dropping if he'd sent his son to foster with Arnulf, who was only a landed knight with no castle, no keep.

Gwendolyn seemed to read her thoughts. "When—if—we wed, I'll have my dower lands."

The girl forgets the order of things, Gwyneth thought. There's little enough here and she must share it with me. She gets none of it 'til Arnulf dies.

But Gwyneth did not speak her thoughts. Instead she covered the window opening with the oiled skin nailed above it and blew out one candle, leaving the remaining one burning to keep the night pixies at bay. Then she snuggled in beside Gwendolyn and closed her eyes, trying for sleep.

After long minutes Gwendolyn whispered, “Gwyn, do you wish things were as they used to be? Are you never lonely for your husband, Ector? And do you not miss Matthew and Rodney and Richard?”

“Aye,” she whispered back, “I miss my sons.”

Not more than a few minutes later, Gwyneth recognized Gwendolyn’s even breathing of sleep. Not so much as drowsy herself, she sat up, pulled felt shoes on her bare feet, and wrapped her woolen cloak over her lightly clad shoulders. Then, lighting the cold candle from the one that still burned, she slipped out of her bed chamber past a snoring, raspy Arnulf, asleep on his own fur-covered bed, and down the stairs into the main room. Picking her way through the prone, sleeping bodies, she gave a quick nod to the one alert sentry posted inside the door, and went outside.

The cold of the stone stairs penetrated the cloth soles of her shoes, but Gwyneth ignored the discomfort. Moving quickly, she crossed the yard and hurried between the outbuildings. She did not head toward the daub and wattle cottages that made up the town of Sherborne, nor did she run into the common fields. Instead she made for the river. There on its bank she sat, huddling beneath her cloak as if it were a tent, and cried.

Gwyneth was a strong woman who rarely cried, no matter how brutally she was beaten, how frustrated she became, how fearful she was, or

how bitterly her heart was breaking. But now she cried, alone where no one could see her except for the sprites that lived in the wild and the stars in the uncommonly clear night sky. She cried because Arnulf was an honorable but stubborn old man who would see his family and the whole town destroyed before too many months were out. She cried, not because she feared for herself but because of sweet, young Gwendolyn's dreams, which would most certainly be crushed. She even cried for Gwendolyn's love of Thomas, because that sort of love was so precious and rare, and something she herself had never known.

But mostly Gwyneth cried, not for Ector, who was cold in his grave and good riddance, but for Matthew and Rodney and Richard. Mattie, Roddy and Richie, she had called them when they were children. Was it really only months ago, she marveled, that they'd returned from fostering in the northern shires—men, all of them, at eighteen and nineteen years—informing her they'd outgrown their childhood nicknames? She had called them by their Christian names then, to humor them, but in her heart—which was bursting with her love for them—they were children still. It was how she saw them in her mind's eye: sticky-fingered, bow-legged little boys, with bright eyes and giggles spilling from their rosy lips.

But they were babes no longer, that she knew. Each had earned his knighthood; all had faced

danger and, so far, survived. She wondered, as she wiped the tears from her thick, sooty lashes, if she would see them again before they all were in heaven. That hope seemed dim.

Yet at that very moment, in the dark, lonely night, Gwyneth happened to glance skyward to glimpse a shooting star. It shot across the glossy heavens, leaving a glittering tail in its wake before disappearing as if it had never been.

She sucked in her breath. Perhaps it was an omen. Perhaps it portended good fortune. Perhaps the future was not so black, after all.



Three trail-weary knights approached the gate of Farleigh Castle as the wayward star shot across the inky sky. All the men noticed it, but only two thought it a timely and prophetic heralding—John was too world-weary and cynical to believe heavenly bodies manipulated or reflected upon the circumstances of earthly men.

The castle guard shouted out, “Who goes there? Identify yourself!”

“Odo, it’s Lionel and Bruno, back from our mission at last.”

“Lionel?” the guard repeated before shouting a quick order over his shoulder that resulted in the bridge being lowered over the moat and the portcullis being raised.

The knights did not dismount in the outer bailey. They left their pack horse in the care of a sleepy stable boy, but continued across the second bridge that led to the inner bailey and keep. The three of them dismounted finally in front of the keep's main entrance and trudged up the steps to the door.

Not surprisingly, the great arched and timbered hall was littered with bodies of servants sleeping on the rush-covered floor. Torches and a low fire in the hearth glowed dimly through the gray haze as the smoke took its time seeking the outdoors through narrow windows and chinks in the thick stone walls.

Lionel and Bruno smiled at each other, delighted at having returned home. But John, as he removed his head gear, had a strange look on his face. He appeared both stunned and confused, and not a little sad. Farleigh Castle seemed the same as the day he'd left it nearly a quarter century earlier, yet he could feel the emptiness herein. They were all gone, his family, every one of them. It was not right, it should never have happened. Yet he, the youngest son, forced by tradition and law to be landless and unwed, had returned to assume the title of earl, a position he had never expected thrust upon him and, therefore, had neither coveted nor trained for.

Some of the sleeping servants stirred and peered at the intruders through slitted eyes. Bruno grabbed the shoulder of one man lying near his feet

and barked in his ear. The servant's eyes suddenly bulged, staring at John as if he were seeing a ghost. Jumping to his feet, he ran off.

Minutes later, from the stairs that led to the small rooms in the gallery that ringed the great hall, a small, slim man appeared. It appeared he had been wakened from sleep and had quickly pulled on a rumpled tunic, for his feet were bare and his dark hair disheveled. "John?" he said, his voice questioning. "Sweet mother of Jesu, is it you, John?"

With a nod and a grin at last, John opened his arms and approached the seneschal, Gerald. Quickly they embraced, clapping each other on the back, and laughed happily.

When Gerald pulled back, he shook his head. "It's almost impossible for me to believe it's you. Last I saw you, you were a gangly lad of fifteen with arms and legs too long and awkward to suit you. But I see that you've gained enough height and girth to justify your ungainly limbs."

"But not you!" John countered. "What were you last I saw you—ten or twelve years? If you'd not been an only child, you'd have been the runt of the litter. Have you grown a hair's breadth or gained the weight of a flea?"

"It may surprise you, my lord, but I have." Gerald smiled. "Yet compared to your mighty stature, I'm afraid my growth has been negligible." The seneschal considered his friend and master

critically, his eyes roving from the toes of the earl's muddy shoes to the top of his leonine head. "No wonder I've heard it said you were known far and wide as The Dane. Though it never showed itself in your father or brothers, you seem to have inherited every drop of Viking blood that ever flowed through your ancestors."

At the mention of his family, John's smile faded. Immediately, Gerald glanced at the two knights who had escorted the heir to Farleigh Castle home, and they departed to seek their individual comforts. Next he looked to the servant that had roused him, who stood off to one side, eagerly observing the homecoming of the new earl, and ordered him to wake the cook and see that victuals were quickly prepared and served. Lastly, he motioned for John to precede him up the stairs. Only on the gallery landing did Gerald join him at his side and lead him into a small chamber with a window overlooking the interior hall below.

"Sit," Gerald beckoned, motioning to a sturdy, carved chair beside a small table. As he poured wine into a pewter mug, which he then offered to John, he urged, "Tell me of your life since last you resided at Farleigh. I've had little news of you the past fifteen years; none the past ten."

Sipping the mulberry wine thoughtfully, John told his friend, his seneschal, of his years as a mercenary knight. It did not take long. John was

not given to eloquent talk, and he detailed neither the bloody battles he had fought in, the festering wounds he had survived, the close comrades he had lost, nor the trysts with pretty village girls that had no doubt resulted in more than a few bastards growing up fatherless in the lands beyond the Channel.

“And here?” he asked when he finished his tale, already halfway through the array of foods that had been brought up for him to sup on. “Tell me all that has happened here, and why.”

“Lionel and Bruno did not explain?”

“They did. But I wish to hear it from your lips.”

So Gerald told John of his family’s tragedies. He paused after mentioning the nearly three years’ search for/ the last heir to Farleigh Castle, its demesne, and all its holdings.

John’s meal, by that time, had been consumed, the trencher pushed aside. Now he leaned back in his chair and sipped from his full mug of wine. “Why hasn’t the new English king rewarded some vassal of his with this estate?”

“Your father was loyal to Henry and then supported his daughter, Matilda. Henry II is aware of this, I know, and has been generous enough to wait a fair while until you, the rightful heir, could be found. But...”

Gerald, too, leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers together.

“Yes?” John’s golden brow arched curiously.

“Your men told you about that foul cockshead, Elwood of Eye?” Gerald asked, and his lord nodded. “All his life, in as much as I’ve heard, he’s been a lazy sluggard, willing to cheat and mistreat his villeins so that he could have the best in life while they went cold and hungry and sick to early graves. You know his keep is still a wooden one erected in King William’s time? And that he’s outlived three wives—killed them all, I’ve no doubt, by accident or design. As well his one living son, Walter, is a sorrier man than his sire, a drunk and a gambler with neither enough brains nor wit to keep his ears apart.”

“Aye,” John said a little impatiently. “But what’s his threat to me? He wants Farleigh for his own? Little chance of that, I think, now that I’m here to defend it.”

“True,” the seneschal agreed, “except, since Stephen’s death, Elwood seems to have gone a little mad. If not close to our late king, the baron was at least tolerated and thought to be in royal favor. But such is not the case with our young Henry, and being shunned by the present court seems to have sent Elwood into a furious rage. The last two years he’s ordered his men into wild, seemingly purposeless warring, most frequently in border disputes with his neighbors.”

“But he has never attacked Farleigh?”

“No. Only the town of Sherborne, which

serves two masters, both Farleigh and Eye. He has been trying to coerce Sir Arnulf, Lord of Sherborne Manor, to disavow his oath of fealty to your house, and pledge his loyalty to Eye alone.”

“Has he done the town much harm?”

“Elwood’s men have made sporadic raids on it. Some dwellings have been fired, some women raped. I’ve heard, less than a fortnight ago, Elwood’s knights trampled to death a small boy with their horses’ hooves.”

“Damn!” John swore, making his callused hand into a large, clenched fist. “I’ve seen much of that kind of horror in my time away. War drains men of their humanity, and the first to lose it are always the soldiers ordered to wreak destruction and death. Never before, though, has it been mine own who are victims.”

“Sherborne was vassal to the baron, too. Eye’s turning against the man and his people in this way is unprecedented and unforgivable.”

“Arnulf would not give in?” John asked, and Gerald shook his head. “Good God, Arnulf! I would have thought he’d been dead years ago. He must be nearing a hundred.”

The seneschal leaned forward across the table. “My lord,” he said softly, “you must make Sherborne your own. To have a manor and town divided between two barons has never worked well. Now, for Sherborne, it has become impossible.”

“You want me to emulate Elwood? You’re

saying two wrongs make a right?"

"No. I suggest you protect the people of Sherborne as a father does his children, by enveloping them in the folds of his cloak."

"How?"

"Marry Sir Arnulf's youngest daughter."

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Candice Kohl

Candice was born and spent most of her life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There she worked as a copywriter in advertising and public relations. She also performed as an actress at the Sunset Playhouse, a major midwest community theatre. In her spare time, she taught English as a second language to recently arrived immigrants. She and her husband, Phil Brabant, raised two sons. Christopher is now a jazz musician in New Orleans, and Dustin is a student in Milwaukee.

Meanwhile, in late 1992, Candice relocated to the Atlanta, Georgia area with her husband. They now live on five-plus forested acres with her horse, Miz Ed—who has yet to learn to speak as her namesake did. In 1993, her first book, *The String On A Roast Won't Catch Fire In The Oven—An A to Z Encyclopedia of Common Sense* was released to excellent reviews, including one by the American Library Association.

Candice has had numerous articles published in periodicals and newspapers, and is even writing a book about her husband's ancestors, King Leopold I of Belgium and the natives known as Brabanters. But her great passion has always been the historical romance.



Photo by Randall C. Lovely

Candice Kohl

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“I LOVED IT! Your dialogue is excellent and your settings/characters expertly drawn... my God, girl, you really had me going! I suddenly understood the popularity of the romance novel.”

Susan L

Lord John, the earl of Farleigh—his giant frame scarred by battles fought as a mercenary knight—returns home to England to claim his unexpected inheritance. But now he must battle against the wicked baron Elwood of Eye, and a woman with an inner strength to match his own who dares to love him.

Lady Gwyneth—her willfulness and deceit borne not of treachery—determines to wed the new earl in her sister’s stead. Expecting nothing but cruelty at her husband’s hand, she is surprised to find herself the recipient of that which she has so often given but never received: love.

But Gwyneth has dark secrets that will inevitably be revealed, secrets that will test the strength of their love.