

Chapter One

Summer 1384. Berkhamsted Castle, Hertfordshire, England.

“Servants may marry whomever they want, but a king’s ward has no freedom at all.”

Evangeline broke off the song she was singing. A lump rose in her throat. Through her open window facing the castle bailey she watched the servants talking and laughing and milling about, finishing their morning chores.

A kitchen maid was drawing a bucket of water at the well in the center of the bailey. A young man approached her.

Alma gave him the dipper, and he lifted it to his lips.

The stranger’s hair was brown and fell over his brow at an angle. He was tall, and even from Evangeline’s bedchamber window on the third level of the castle, she could see he was handsome, with a strong chin and a sturdy stance.

He passed the water around to the other men who had followed him to the well. Evangeline leaned out the window to try to catch what they were saying.

“Thank you,” the man said as he handed the dipper back to the servant. He wore the clothing of a peasant—a leather mantle over his long linen tunic.

“Where are you from?” Alma asked.

"Glynval, a little village north . . . brought . . . to sell . . . and wheat flour . . ." Evangeline couldn't make out all the words.

The man wasn't like most peasants. Not that she had seen very many. But this man held himself upright with an air of confidence and ease she had rarely seen before.

Evangeline leaned out a little farther, hanging on to the case-ment. The man was moving on as the cart started forward, Alma still staring after him. He turned to say something to the other men and suddenly looked up at Evangeline.

"Evangeline!"

She jumped backward, her heart crashing against her chest.

"What are you doing, hanging out the window like a common—? Don't you know better than to behave that way?" Muriel hurried to the open window and peered out. "What are you doing?" She closed the window and clamped her hands on her hips.

"Am I not allowed to look out the window? I'm no better than the prisoners in the dungeon. You know, I feel much pity for them. I daydream sometimes about releasing them and running away with them." She tipped her face to the ceiling as if turning her face to the sun and closed her eyes. "How good it would feel, walking free through the fields of wildflowers I read about in a poem once, breathing the fresh air, free to go wherever I want."

"You think your jests are amusing," Muriel said, "but when the king of England is your guardian and is planning your wedding to a wealthy nobleman, you should not expect pity. Envy is more likely."

"Wedding? What do you mean?" Evangeline's heart seemed to stop beating. "What do you know?"

"It is only gossip, but it is said that the king has promised you to one of his closest advisors."

"Who?"

"The Earl of Shiveley."

Evangeline reached out and placed a hand on the stone wall as the room seemed to teeter from side to side. How could the king betroth her to him? Lord Shiveley was old—almost forty—and Evangeline was barely seventeen. She had only seen Lord Shiveley a few times when he had accompanied the king to Berkhamsted Castle. He stared at her in a way that made her stomach sick, and he always managed to put a hand on her—on her shoulder or her back, and even once at her waist. She would always writhe inwardly and step away from him as quickly as she could.

Besides that, it was rumored that Lord Shiveley's first wife had died under mysterious circumstances.

Evangeline shuddered.

"The king and Lord Shiveley will arrive tonight, and you must be ready to greet them." Muriel bustled over to the wardrobe where Evangeline's best dresses were kept. She opened it and rummaged through her clothing. "You should wash your hair. I have ordered your bath sent up, and I shall—"

"Muriel, stop!" Evangeline stared at the woman who had been her closest companion and confidant for ten years. Though Muriel was nearly old enough to be her mother, she could not be so daft.

Muriel stared back at her with a bland expression. "What is it?"

"Surely you must see that I cannot marry that man." Her voice was a breathy whisper.

"My dear," Muriel said, not unkindly, "you know, you have always known, you must marry whomever the king wishes you to."

Evangeline's throat constricted. "The king does not care a whit about my feelings."

"Careful." Muriel's gaze darted about the room. "You mustn't risk speaking against the king. You never know who might betray you."

"I shall tell the king to his face when he arrives that I shall not marry Lord Shiveley, and it is cruel to ask it of me."

"You know you shall do no such thi—"

"I shall! I shall tell him!"

"Evangeline. You are too old to get in such a passion. Sit down and calm yourself. Breathe."

Evangeline crossed her arms over her chest and ignored Muriel's order. She had to think of some way to escape. Women often married men they did not particularly want to marry, but she could not marry Lord Shiveley. She was not like other women. They might accept unfair treatment, but Evangeline would fight, argue, rebel against injustice. Other women conformed to what was expected of them. Perhaps they did not dream of freedom and a different life.

"You must listen to reason," Muriel said. "Lord Shiveley is rich and can give you your own home. You will finally have the freedom to do whatever you wish. You will have servants and your own gardens and even your own horse. Many ladies enjoy falconry and hunting. You can have as many dresses and as much jewelry, or anything else your heart desires."

Only if her husband allowed it.

Muriel knew her well enough to know what might sway her. But a husband did not give freedom. A husband made rules. He took away his wife's control and replaced it with his own. A wealthy, powerful husband could order his wife around, beat her, do whatever he wished to her, and she could do naught.

Peasants, if they were not married and were free men and women, might be poor, but was it not a hundred times better to be free than to have fancy clothes and expensive food and servants to do everything for you? Freedom and independence were worth more than all the gold a castle could hold. Freedom to choose whom to marry, freedom to walk about the countryside unhindered, to drink from a cool, clear stream and gaze up into the trees, to ride a horse

and eat while standing up. To bathe in the river and laugh and sing at the top of her voice—that was freedom.

And now King Richard was about to force her to marry an old, disgusting man.

“But you said it was gossip.” Evangeline began to breathe easier. “Perhaps it was only idle talk.”

Or if it was true, once she was able to talk to King Richard, he would understand. They’d been friends since they were very young, being cousins and only six months apart in age. Although she had not seen much of Richard in the past few years, surely he would listen to her pleas.

Her stomach sank. She was fooling herself. Richard would not listen to her if he had made up his mind. His loyalty to his advisors came before any childhood friendship he might still feel for Evangeline.

“At least Lord Shiveley is taller than you are.” Muriel arched her brows.

“Just because I am taller than half the men I’ve ever met doesn’t mean I want to marry this man.” Evangeline turned away from Muriel and sat on the bench by the window, placing her head in her hands. Perhaps if she was able to cry, it would relieve this terrible ache in her chest.

“There now.” Muriel sat beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Do not fret about something that may not even be true. We shall wait until the king arrives and let him tell you why he’s here and if he has aught to say to you.”

But the gentle warmth of Muriel’s hand did not feel comforting. Muriel was fifteen years older than Evangeline, but they were both illegitimate daughters of important men—Evangeline’s father was the king’s uncle, while Muriel’s father was an archbishop. Both of them were dependent on the kindness of King Richard.

Fortunately for Muriel, she was not valued as a pawn in the king's political maneuverings, to be married off to a man the king wanted to please or bribe. It was easy for Muriel to tell Evangeline not to fret about marrying a repulsive man.

A knock came at the door. Muriel opened it to a man wearing the livery of the king.

"A message for Evangeline, ward of the king, daughter of Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence."

Evangeline stood. Muriel brought her the missive, which had been sealed in dark-red wax with the king's signet ring. She tore it open. The words leapt off the page at her:

Evangeline, I and the Earl of Shiveley would enjoy hearing you sing for us with that famous, incomparable voice of yours. I believe you are acquainted with my advisor, which is more than most noble brides can boast of their betrothed. He became quite enamored of you the last time he heard you sing.

Betrothed.

The note slipped from her hand and fluttered to the floor.

Muriel snatched it up while Evangeline's whole body went cold. Would her blood congeal from horror? Would she fall to the floor dead? Her throat seemed to close and she was dizzy.

She could not allow herself to be overcome like other women she read about who fainted but then went to their fate like sheep with no compunction or will of their own.

Jesus, is that what You would wish me to do? Comply and submit and allow myself to be married off to someone who makes my stomach churn and my skin crawl? Jesus submitted to a terrible fate for the good of mankind, but Evangeline could not see any good that could come

from marrying Lord Shiveley. Except that it would please King Richard.

"Now, my dear." Muriel carefully laid the letter down on a shelf. "I know you think you do not wish to marry Lord Shiveley, but consider some other good things this will bring to you. You will win the king's favor. Your husband may truly love you, and you may get children from the union. Indeed, there are many benefits that will come."

"How can any of that be worth marrying someone I cannot abide? And you know what people say about his first wife." Evangeline spun away from her. Muriel would refuse to listen or understand how Evangeline felt.

"That is only idle gossip. No one pays attention to such talk. And it will be far better if you simply accept that you have no choice and try to make the best of it. What else can you do?"

"What else can I do?" Evangeline's voice rose in near-hysterical tones. "Accept that I have no choice?" Sobs choked off further speech as she kept her back to Muriel. Muriel would think she was selfish not to do as the king asked, and Muriel would stop loving her if she thought she was selfish. But it hurt so much to think of losing any chance of contentment and throwing herself away on Lord Shiveley.

"I shall leave you alone for a while." Muriel turned and her footsteps receded to the door. Then she seemed to hesitate and said, "I am truly sorry, Evangeline. But God will sustain you." The door clicked open, then shut again.

If she were like other women, she would let the king use her as a gift, a favor, a pawn. But she would do something no other noble ladies that she knew of ever did. She would refuse to marry Lord Shiveley. If necessary, she would run away, take on another identity, lose herself in the English countryside. She had imagined it many times, had thought long and hard about the different ways she might escape.

All her life Evangeline had lived in various royal residences—mostly at Berkhamsted Castle—wherever the king sent her to live. The king was so afraid she might be kidnapped and held for ransom he had ordered her to stay inside the walls, only allowed to venture out occasionally when she had guards nearby. Most people in England probably did not even know the Duke of Clarence had a second child or that her name was Evangeline.

When the king visited, he and other special guests would accompany her on a hunt in the adjacent deer park or a walk around the gardens. She obeyed, accepting that she was not the master of her own fate. Evangeline had rarely done anything courageous or unexpected.

Tonight was a good time for a change, to see if she was brave enough to carry out her fantasy of running away.



Westley le Wyse thanked the servant girl for the water.

Above him in the castle window, a young red-haired woman was staring down at him. Was she the one who had been singing just moments before? He had been listening, rapt and still, to that voice, the one singing a rustic ballad with such refinement and grace, until it suddenly went silent. As soon as their eyes met, she disappeared from the window, almost as if someone had snatched her back.

He only glimpsed her, but he got the impression she was not a servant by her clothing and hair, and that she was quite lovely. The rumor was that the king had a ward living at Berkhamsted Castle, a young woman with an ethereally beautiful voice. Some said she was the illegitimate daughter of the king's dead uncle, Lionel of Antwerp, which meant she was the granddaughter of King Edward. But she

might be only a myth. Legends often were created from some tidbit of gossip.

"Did you hear the news?"

He shifted around to face the servant girl, who lingered in the bailey with her bucket of water.

"King Richard is coming to Berkhamsted Castle tonight."

That would be a sight. Even Westley's father had never seen the king.

"We are all busy with preparations for the king and his retinue. What provisions did you and your men bring for us?" The girl was standing on tiptoe, trying to see over his shoulder.

"Wheat flour, oats, malt, and some large cheeses."

It had been a good year for several crops in Glynval and the surrounding land. Westley had come to Berkhamsted Castle with his father's servants to sell their excess items.

"This is my little sister." The servant girl indicated the golden-haired child playing behind her. "I have to watch her today since my mother is sick."

The little girl looked to be about six years old. She was squealing and grunting as she leapt and spun about, trying to catch a bright-yellow butterfly that fluttered just out of her reach.

A horse's angry neigh drew Westley's attention to the other end of the bailey.

"Steady," said a man holding the horse's bridle. Its neigh grew into a high-pitched screech. The horse leapt straight up, snatching the bridle out of the man's hands. The horse's hooves touched the ground and the animal bolted forward. The cart knocked the man to the ground as it jolted past him.

The horse galloped across the bailey—heading straight for the little girl.

MELANIE DICKERSON

"Get out of the way!" Westley pushed the servant aside as he raced toward the little girl, willing her to move out of the path of the horse.

The girl suddenly seemed to hear the noise of the horse's hooves and the clattering cart barreling toward her. She froze and stared, her mouth open.

Westley ran and grabbed her around her middle with one arm, then dove to the side. He held her above him as his shoulder and back collided with the ground.



Chapter Two

When Muriel left her room, Evangeline wandered back to the window that faced the bailey.

While she watched Alma talk with the handsome young man, a horse broke away from its handler and careened toward Alma's little sister.

The child saw the horse coming. Why didn't she run? She seemed frozen.

Evangeline screamed, "Run!"

The handsome young man leapt toward the girl, grabbed her, and pulled her out of the way just in time.

The horse galloped on and crashed the cart into the stone wall around the well. The cart now in pieces, the horse kept going and finally stopped at the opposite wall of the bailey.

Evangeline clutched her chest as air seeped back into her lungs.

The little girl was crying. The young man set her on her feet, and Alma ran to her and hugged her. Was the stranger hurt? He took quite a hard fall as he protected the child in his arms.

He got to his feet as the other men with him rushed to his side. He must have spoken to Alma and the little girl because they turned toward him. How Evangeline wished she could hear what they were saying! She leaned out of the window but couldn't catch their words. She imagined he asked the kitchen maid if the child was uninjured

and imagined her replying, "Yes, only frightened," as the child's crying lessened.

The man's friends brushed him off and clapped him on the back, their eyes wide as they seemed to be congratulating him on his act of bravery.

He gave them all a smile, and her stomach flipped at his gentle expression.

After a few moments, he approached the little girl and squatted to look her in the eye. They seemed to be having a quiet conversation, then the child stepped close enough to put her arms around his neck. The man put his arms around her.

Evangeline's heart turned to wax and melted into her stomach.

"If only I were a peasant," she whispered. "I could fall in love with him, someone kind and brave and strong. Though he was poor, if he loved me, I would give him my heart."

He walked away with his friends, and she sighed.

What hope did she have to enjoy such a love as portrayed in the traveling minstrels' ballads? She was a king's granddaughter, even if her birth was illegitimate. She would never be free to go wherever she wanted, to work and play and live in the sunshine. If she ever wanted to be free to marry for love, she had no choice but to run away from Berkhamsted Castle and never return.



After an afternoon of bathing, dressing, being fussed over, and sitting still until her neck ached while a servant prepared her hair in loose curls, Evangeline could feel her self-control slipping. They dressed her in a patterned Flemish cotehardie of pale green and pink flowers with an elaborately embroidered hem. Then they placed a jeweled circlet on her head over a sheer headrail. But every minute

she was thinking of the bag she had begun to fill with necessities—clothing she had taken from the servants' quarters, money, and a pair of sturdy shoes, also pilfered from the storage closet where the head house servant kept a surplus.

She was getting dressed up for the king and Lord Shiveley when she did not even know exactly when they might arrive. The only thing that mattered was pleasing the king and his important guests.

She might as well be that poor horse who had broken away from its owner in the castle bailey earlier. Was he so tired of the bit and bridle that dug into his soft, tender mouth that he could take it no longer? Was he in pain in some other part of his body? Did he want to eat? Sleep? Find his mate? No one knew, no one cared, and the horse had had enough of it.

Evangeline knew just how he felt. But if she bolted, just like that horse, would she also be recaptured? Forced into doing her duty to the king after all?

Muriel burst through the door. "The king is here!" Her voice was brisk and breathless. "He is asking for you, Evangeline, just as I knew he would."

"He wants me to come to the Great Hall for the evening meal?"

"He wants you to come now to the solar."

"To sing for Lord Shiveley." Evangeline's stomach sank to her toes. She sat staring at the door.

"What are you waiting for? Go, Evangeline."

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course."

Evangeline stood. "If you are there as my witness, Lord Shiveley cannot do anything vile." She grabbed Muriel's arm. "Promise me you will not leave my side."

"Very well, I shall try." A flash of sympathy passed over Muriel's face, which only made Evangeline's stomach sink even more.

They made their way through the castle and up the stairs that led to the solar. Evangeline had never noticed before how gray the stones were, gray and hard and cold.

When they reached the room, two guards stood outside the door. The guards opened it, then closed it behind Evangeline and Muriel.

Richard was lounging in the largest chair, leaning back against the cushions. Evangeline and Muriel curtsied, bowing their heads.

"My cousin, little Evangeline! Come here." Richard held out his hand to her.

Her heart beat fast as she approached her childhood friend. But she hardly recognized him anymore. Richard was the same height as Evangeline. His blond hair was darker, less yellow than she remembered. Having just turned eighteen years old, he had lost his soft, childlike facial features. Already he had dealt with killings and uprisings, not to mention he had been married for two and a half years.

There was a hardness around his eyes and mouth. Richard had seen the fighting during the Peasants' Uprising three years before, had actually witnessed some of his close advisors murdered. It must have been very hard for him. He was not without feeling. At least, not when he was a boy.

He squeezed her hand, then motioned to her right. "Lord Shiveley wishes to greet you."

Evangeline barely glanced at Lord Shiveley before sinking into a quick curtsy.

"My dear Evangeline. What a beauty you are, and always have been."

He bowed over her hand. His wet lips touched her skin and her stomach turned. She tried to pull her hand out of his grasp, but he held on.

The Earl of Shiveley had a head full of black hair streaked with white. His lips were thick and shiny.

"My dear," King Richard said, "Lord Shiveley and I are eager to hear you sing. Shiveley especially has told everyone in London about your exceptional voice and ability."

Evangeline glanced at Lord Shiveley and couldn't help but see the predatory look in his dark, deep-set eyes—something between masculine and animalistic. She shuddered.

"And just in time, here are the musicians."

Three men entered the room, one carrying a hurdy-gurdy, another with a lute, and another with a flute.

"What song do you prefer? They can play anything," Richard was smiling and leaning toward her.

All eyes were on Evangeline. She had sung for the king and his retinue before, but the thought of Lord Shiveley watching her with those squinty black eyes, thinking she was soon to be his bride . . . Her cheeks burned.

Evangeline named a song, and the musicians began to play. She cleared her throat and closed her eyes, willing her voice not to shake, but to be clear, strong, and defiant.

It was a warm day, and the window was open. Evangeline imagined that her voice was carrying straight out that window and into the ears of people who would not only appreciate it, but who did not expect her to be their pawn, plaything, or anything else she did not wish to be.

As she sang several verses, Evangeline kept her eyes focused out the window on the trees well beyond and the sky and clouds above those trees. Singing made her feel free. If she kept her mind on far-away places and people, she couldn't think of Lord Shiveley, so she continued to sing to the trees and the clouds and the birds, to the

invisible masses in her mind, her heart swelling with the notes, soaring into freedom.

When the song ended, tears pricked her eyelids. Her heart seized at the way Richard was staring at her, at the thought of facing Lord Shiveley.

"Sing another, if you please, Evangeline," King Richard said.

She gave the musicians the title of another song, grateful for the distraction, even though it would only postpone the inevitable.

Could anyone hear her out that window? Inexplicably, in her mind she saw the young man who saved the little girl from the runaway horse. Could he hear the desperation in her voice? Would he be willing to come to her aid and help her escape from the prison that was her life?

But that was foolish. No one could help her. She had to save herself.

When the song was over, she glanced in Lord Shiveley's direction. He smiled.

King Richard was speaking. "We shall have a short ceremony here tomorrow with my own priest. We will have the banns cried afterward to satisfy the Church, but Lord Shiveley is eager to have the formalities over. I'm sure you cannot mind, since Lord Shiveley is well able to take care of you. His country estate in Yorkshire is even larger than Berkhamsted Castle."

Blessedly, Evangeline's mind went numb. She took the time to swallow. He would not even allow her time to accustom herself to the idea or to try to persuade him not to force her to marry Lord Shiveley. What could she possibly say that would change his mind?

"It is sudden, Your Majesty. You had only mentioned this once before."

Richard's eyes widened, then his brows lowered. "But you have no reason to object." He was not asking her; he was telling her.

Instead of replying, she simply lowered her head, a cross between a bow and a nod. She steeled herself against looking at Lord Shiveley. She did not want to see whatever expression he might have at her reluctance to acquiesce to their wedding on the morrow.

"Very good, my dear cousin. Now tell me how you have fared. Are you in good health? Have the servants been treating you as they should?"

"Yes, I have been in very good health, and the servants have been as dutiful and obliging as they have ever been. And you? How has Your Majesty's health fared?"

"Very well, except for a fever I suffered for a few days. I am quite restored now. Shiveley had some lemons sent to me, and they quite cured me. Lemon juice and honey will cure nearly any ill, I am convinced."

Yes, Lord Shiveley was quite the perfect friend and ally, no doubt. And now he must be rewarded. He must get whatever wife he wished, even though he was old and disgusting and—

"How is the hunting this time of year?" the king asked.

"I do not know. Your steward often provides us with venison and pheasant, so I believe the hunting is good."

"Have you still not taken up falconry and hunting stags, my dear?"

"I do not wish to disappoint you, my king."

Richard laughed. "You always did have a mind of your own. Behind that pretty face, you have the mind of a man—though not a man's taste for hunting, as yet I see."

She cast her gaze down at the floor to hide her rebellious eyes in the hopes of looking demure. "I hunt as often as I am allowed to, Your Majesty."

"Evangeline, if I may ask," Lord Shiveley said, his voice as smooth and oily as his hair. "What do you enjoy doing, if not hunting? I know

you sing beautifully. Do you also play an instrument? Or perhaps you prefer painting or embroidery?"

It was probably regular and polite conversation, but somehow Lord Shiveley sounded as if he were placing her beneath him by naming these strictly feminine pursuits.

"I do not paint." She disdained telling him that she rather enjoyed embroidery. "I play the lute, and I sing for the servants every Sunday evening." *Shut away here in this stone prison.* "When I am fortunate enough, the steward allows me to roam the gardens, where I enjoy identifying plants and small animals and insects. Muriel helps me by drawing the specimens, and we have started compiling them into a book."

"I see. That is most interesting."

"But I am planning to start training in sword fighting, archery, and knife throwing." She could not resist the rebellious declaration, even though she knew she should pretend to be demure, compliant, and passive.

Lord Shiveley peered at her while stroking his thin black goatee.

Richard suddenly laughed. "She has quite the humorous streak, Shiveley. A bit of rebellion, perhaps, but Evangeline is as sweet as honey. Aren't you, my dear?" Richard's lip quirked up in a smirk, but a brittleness shone in his eyes.

Heat rose into Evangeline's cheeks. Thinking of her half-packed bag in the bottom of her trunk allowed her to smile. "I enjoy music, my lord. And decorative sewing and reading. I am afraid I have no other talents."

Lord Shiveley lifted his thin lips in what must have been an attempt at a smile. "Your modesty becomes you. And if you wish to learn archery, I am sure that can be arranged."

How magnanimous of you.

"And His Majesty has graciously agreed to allow you to bring any

servants you wish to take, anyone you are attached to, and of course, as your personal companion, Muriel will accompany you.”

They carried on a three-way conversation until Richard began talking with Muriel. He had known her since he was a child and always remembered her name. Most of the other servants would have been struck speechless, and possibly senseless, if the king spoke to them. Muriel was amazingly unintimidated by him. She spoke with the confidence of a duchess, and he seemed to like that.

“You will enjoy my country home,” Lord Shiveley said quietly, bending his head toward Evangeline. “I will not require you to travel with me when I am with the king, but you may join me at the king’s favorite residence, Sheen Palace, when I accompany the king there.”

His gaze dipped to her chest. Evangeline cringed and leaned away from him, but he did not seem to be bothered by her reaction. His small, alert eyes did not seem to miss a thing, in spite of how low his eyelids hung.

“I hope you are as eager for the marriage as I am. The king has said no one else has asked for you, no doubt because your birth was illegitimate.”

Evangeline’s face burned. “I should be thankful you are willing to marry me, then?”

His smile disappeared. “Marriage to me will greatly improve the way you will be remembered. Any woman in England would be glad to marry the king’s closest advisor.”

“I am surprised you do not marry someone more worthy of your status, then. After all, I am illegitimate and have neither fortune nor title.”

Lord Shiveley’s nostrils flared. “Be that as it may, you have royal blood, which is what I want, and tomorrow you will be my wife.” His voice was low and harsh. “Whether you wish it or not.”

Her stomach churned. If only she could wipe the smirk off his

face. He must think he had Richard completely within his power, proclaiming himself the king's closest advisor.

"It grows late," King Richard said. "Evangeline, you go on and enjoy yourself. I am too tired from my travels to join you for the feast in the Great Hall, but Lord Shiveley will keep you company."

They all began to take their leave of the king, but Evangeline hung back. "Your Majesty, may I speak to you alone for a moment?"

She sensed Lord Shiveley standing behind her, waiting for the king's answer. Was the king shocked at her boldness?

Richard stared at her for a moment. "Everyone leave us. I will speak with my childhood friend."

The others shuffled out the door behind her as she locked gazes with the king. Finally, all were gone except for two guards who stood discreetly in the corners.

"Now, what is it, Evangeline? You must have something important to say." The warning in his voice was unmistakable. "But before you say anything, I want you to understand that it is quite an honor to you that I have granted Lord Shiveley permission to marry you."

"Yes, he has made it clear that I am fortunate to be marrying him, since I am only an illegitimate daughter of the king's dead uncle."

"Who left you without any fortune?"

So this was the king's attitude toward her. She needed to be strong, to stand up in dignity to him, even if he thought her selfish. Crying would only confirm to him that she was but a weak female. She bit the inside of her mouth.

"It is true, I have no fortune." She carefully considered what she would say. "But you do not resent allowing me to live here, do you? I have not cost you much, have I? All I ask is that you not force me to marry Lord Shiveley just yet. Delay the wedding." It was all she could possibly hope for.

"What is the matter, Evangeline? You are of age. Seventeen is quite old enough for marriage."

"But I do not wish to marry Lord Shiveley." Her voice sounded so desperate, surely Richard would take pity on her.

"My dear," he said after a short pause, "marriage is nothing to be afraid of. And none of us marry who we wish to or whom we have fallen in love with. Love before marriage is for peasants, a foolish notion invented by poets and minstrels. I was fifteen years old, as was Anne, when we married. Two and a half years later, our marriage is as peaceful and pleasant as anyone could wish. I have no doubt that you and Shiveley will be the same."

This was as she feared. The king not only would not come to her aid and postpone the marriage—during which Evangeline hoped something might happen to prevent it—but he thought she was selfish and unreasonable for not accepting his will.

"As a king, my situation is always precarious. I must take care to make alliances with the most powerful people I can to preserve our country's well-being, not to mention my own. I married the woman I believed would bring me the most powerful and influential allies in England's struggles against her enemies. And I have my own personal enemies, Evangeline, of which you could know nothing. You are safe here at Berkhamsted Castle, while I am the object of hatred for some, not the least of which is the Duke of Templeton, who is even now trying to turn the opinion of the nobility and parliament against me. He would have me deposed and would set up his own puppet in my place. Even though I despise Templeton and know he would stab me through the heart if he could, I would gladly marry off my daughter, if I had one, to his son, simply to ensure that he would not someday put that knife through my heart, either literally or politically."

The king sighed. He shook his head. "As I told you, no one marries for love except peasants or perhaps a merchant or landowner

who has no political enemies. But you are the king's close cousin, the granddaughter of a king, and therefore . . . Shiveley is a good man, you will see. Steady and reliable, he is everything you could want in a husband."

"I am very grateful for your kindness, I am sure," she murmured, hoping he would stop talking. But if he stopped talking and sent her away, where could she go except to join Lord Shiveley in the Great Hall for the feast?

"You are pleased, then, with marriage?" Evangeline said the first thing that popped in her head. "What I mean is, marriage is something I have never been near enough to observe. I am very close to Muriel, as we are together every day. I imagine marriage is similar to that—a close sort of depending upon each other. And yet I had hoped marriage could be . . . romantic."

Richard's gaze wandered to the ceiling for a moment as though he was thinking. "You have made a good description of it, a close sort of depending upon each other. Muriel is your companion, more than a servant, but marriage is nothing like the relationship between a servant and master. Or it should not be. It is a bit like two souls becoming connected, a stronger bond, even, than friendship or family. You shall understand the mystery I speak of, my dear, once you and Shiveley have been married for a few months."

Hearing him describe that type of bond was beginning to stir a longing inside her—until he mentioned Shiveley. She had no wish to have that sort of bond with him. In fact, the very thought made her sick in her stomach.

Should she try to convince the king that Lord Shiveley was not as virtuous, perhaps, as he thought? That she sensed an ugliness of character to match his less-than-handsome face? That the thought of kissing the man and becoming his wife made her fear she might never be able to eat again?

"Perhaps I will come with you to the Great Hall after all," the king said. "I am feeling more rested now."

"Very good." Evangeline let out a relieved breath. At least she would not be alone with Shiveley.

They walked down the keep steps to the Great Hall where all the guests were waiting. Lord Shiveley's eyes widened when he saw the king, and he shifted his feet as Evangeline and Richard approached.

"I thought you would eat in your room, Your Majesty." Shiveley stood, waiting for the king to be seated at the end of the table.

"I changed my mind."

They sat at the long table with a few other lords and advisors who had traveled with the king, as well as several knights at a separate table.

Evangeline settled herself a few seats away from Richard, allowing some of the earls and barons to sit between her and their monarch, on the opposite side of the table from Lord Shiveley.

The king caught her eye and motioned to her. "I insist you sit beside your future husband. Come, over here."

Everyone turned to see to whom the king was motioning.

She tried to think of an excuse. Finally, she had no choice but to stand and move to the other side of the table. With as much dignity as she could muster, she sat primly beside Lord Shiveley.

King Richard introduced Evangeline as Lionel of Antwerp's daughter and the soon-to-be wife of Lord Shiveley to the nearby guests. Evangeline barely heard the guests' names as she acknowledged each of them with a nod.

The food began arriving, and thankfully Lord Shiveley and the king were listening to an earl tell about his hunt for a deer earlier that afternoon. She talked with the woman next to her—the only other woman at the table—about her journey. The woman was the wife of one of the courtiers, a baron, and they were traveling with

the king but would be separating from his retinue soon to go to their home in Derbyshire.

Evangeline was even able to eat some of the food, as it seemed Lord Shiveley would continue to ignore her through the entire meal. As she reached for her goblet, her elbow brushed against his arm. She snatched her arm away as if she'd touched a hot ember.

She felt Lord Shiveley's eyes on her, but she refused to look at him. From the corner of her eye, she saw him lean toward her. The urge to lean away from him nearly overwhelmed her, but she controlled it. His voice rumbled near her ear, "You are not afraid of me, are you, Evangeline? I do not want a wife who is afraid of me."

Her spine stiffened and she glanced at him. "Of course I am not afraid of you."

For several moments he said nothing. Then he leaned even closer, so close she felt his hot breath in her ear, as he growled, "You may not care for me, but you will submit to me."

Her cheeks burned. She glanced at the king. He was laughing at something someone on the other side of the table had said. Lord Shiveley's hand pressed against her back. She squirmed, but there was no way to escape the hand without slapping it away or otherwise drawing attention to herself.

Evangeline turned to Lady Pettwood. "Will you walk with me to my room? I am feeling unwell."

"Yes, of course, my dear. I am very tired myself."

Evangeline stood, breaking away from Shiveley's touch. She only had to wait a moment for Lady Pettwood to tell her husband she was leaving, and the two of them took their leave of the king, curtsying and hurrying away.

"Will you be well?" Lady Pettwood seemed genuinely concerned.

"I shall be well in the morning. I only need to go to bed early."

"It is to be your wedding day." Lady Pettwood patted Evangeline's

arm. "Do you need me to tell you what to expect? My own daughters are too young yet to need to be told any—"

"No, no, I assure you, I do not need . . . no, though I thank you, Lady Pettwood."

They arrived at Evangeline's door first, but then she had to show Lady Pettwood to her room, as she had lost her way in the corridors of the large building.

When Evangeline arrived back at her room, she closed her door behind her and locked it.

Her heart raced as she ran to the trunk where she had stowed her bag. She drew it out and quickly folded her undergowns and stuffed them into the cloth bag. The servants' clothing she had taken only left enough room for two of her oldest and least fine overgowns if she was to include any books at all. And she simply could not bear the thought of not packing her Psalter and Book of Hours.

She closed the bag and stood staring at the door, her bag clutched to her chest. Should she try to leave now? Or wait until everyone had gone to bed? If she left now, Muriel would surely discover she was gone. Could she trust Muriel not to tell the king?

But she could not wait until morning, as the wedding would take place tomorrow. If she waited, Shiveley and the king would send their guards after her and she would not get far.

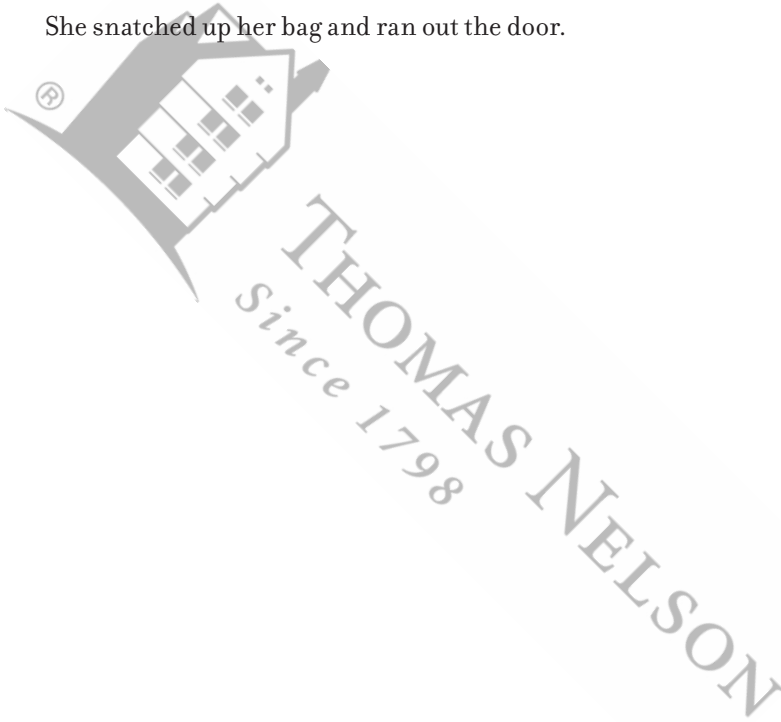
Her heart pounding, she went to the window. The castle bailey was deserted except for a servant who was drawing water from the well. But then several men appeared, walking away from the castle and across the bailey toward the gate. They approached the well and refilled their water flasks. They packed away the water on the cart their donkey was pulling and continued toward the gate leading out of the bailey to the road beyond.

The party of travelers was the same group with the kind man who had saved Alma's little sister.

She had to take off her elaborate silk dress. But the neckline was too small to pull over her head, and the dress buttoned down the back.

She took hold of the neckline and jerked with all her strength. Buttons flew off, pinging against the wall behind her. She pulled it over her head and flung it away. She grabbed one of the ones she had borrowed from the servants' quarters, then pulled it over her head and over her long white undergown.

She snatched up her bag and ran out the door.



Chapter Three

As she hurried down the darkened corridor, lit only by a few torches, Evangeline pulled the metal circlet from her hair, then took it and the veil attached and stuffed them behind a loose stone in the wall. Her hair fell unencumbered down her back, and she ran her hand through the few small braids that had been woven through her hair, unbraiding them and jerking her fingers loose when they became entangled.

No one else met her in the corridor, but once she reached the back stairs, she could hear voices. The servants would be running around tending to their extra duties due to all the guests in the king's retinue—all the extra food to be prepared, extra beds to be readied, as well as the care of the extra horses.

She could only hope they would be too busy to notice her.

Evangeline slipped from the bottom step to the door that led outside. Just as her foot touched the ground, someone grabbed her arm from behind.

Evangeline cried out.

"What are you doing?"

"Muriel!" Evangeline clutched her bag closer to her chest.

"Where are you going?"

"Do not try to stop me. If you do, I shall kill myself before morning. I would rather die than marry Lord Shiveley."

They were whispering as men milled around the inner bailey near where they stood.

"You foolish girl!" Muriel's voice was bitter and her brows drew together, wrinkling her forehead. "Why can you not accept your fate as any other woman would?"

"Let me go." A fierceness rose inside her. Evangeline pulled out of Muriel's grasp.

"I am coming with you, then."

Her words made Evangeline stop and look back. "No, Muriel. You cannot."

"I will not let you get killed out in a world you know nothing of. I am coming."

"You will cause me to be discovered. I can blend in better without you." Evangeline tried to say whatever would be most likely to deter Muriel. Searching the bailey for the man and his companions, she saw some men just passing through the gate over the first moat.

"I must go *now*. I cannot wait for you." She blinked back tears at saying such a thing to her friend, but she was desperate.

Muriel only hesitated for a moment. "Let us go, then."

Would Muriel alert the guard at the gate that the king's ward was escaping? Would she get word back to the king where Evangeline was staying? Short of doing bodily harm to her friend and companion, she had little choice.

"Come then. But do not betray me." Evangeline frightened herself with her passionately whispered words.

Muriel answered in her own harsh whisper, "If I wished to betray you, I would run back into the castle and tell the king what you are doing."

"Hurry." Evangeline hastened across the bailey. Her skirt was a bit too short for her tall legs, but that enabled her to move faster. Soon Muriel, with her shorter, heavier frame, was huffing and puffing behind her. Evangeline pushed forward, as the men had already exited the gate.

The main gate on the other side of the double moat was guarded by four men. Would they demand to know their names and what their business was? Servants rarely left the castle, and they certainly should not be leaving now, while the king was there. What would she and Muriel tell them?

Evangeline slowed her pace and kept her head down as they approached the guards. Muriel walked beside her. Evangeline held her breath. At any moment the guards could command them to halt.

As she and Muriel entered the gate, the guards looked at them but then glanced away without pausing their conversation. None of them said anything to Muriel or Evangeline.

Evangeline hurried on, and after several more yards she bowed her head to speak quietly in Muriel's ear. "I will pretend to be mute so no one will suspect my true identity. You will tell this group of men that we wish to travel with them. You may tell them we are peasants whose lord has died of the plague and we are looking for work."

Muriel's eyes widened. "This is your plan?"

Evangeline straightened. "You may go back to the castle if you wish."

"Very well. I suppose it is a good disguise—for you, at least. I will do the talking."

Muriel's dress was much too fine for a peasant's. What if the men did not believe them? What if they became suspicious and alerted the guards?

And why was Muriel being so helpful? Perhaps she wanted to do her duty and protect Evangeline. She probably thought she could talk her into going back to Berkhamsted Castle later.

The men and their cart were just ahead. When Evangeline and Muriel had nearly caught up with them, the two men at the rear turned and saw them.

"Good evening," Muriel said to them, a smile on her face.

The men called to the others in the group, who also stopped and stared.

"We are traveling tonight," Muriel said, "and would be very grateful if you would allow us to travel with your group."

"Where are you going?"

The man who had rescued the child from the runaway horse stepped toward them. He was even more handsome close up in the light of the moon and stars.

"We are going . . . in the same direction as you. We are free women servants whose master died in the last outbreak of plague, and we are in search of work. Is there work where you are going?"

Muriel sounded so simple, not like herself at all. Perhaps she truly was trying to help Evangeline escape.

"We can always use more workers in Glynval during harvest-time." A look of suspicion crossed his face. He probably did not believe that their master had died. Muriel once told her that many poor villeins claimed to be free, when they were actually legally bound to the land and to their lords and were running away unlawfully from their villages. Since the uprising three years earlier, everyone was even more suspicious of strangers.

"You are welcome to travel with us. You have nothing to fear in our company."

What would she have felt if Richard had asked her to marry this handsome stranger, with his kind face and friendly voice? If Lord Shiveley had looked and behaved like this man, she might not be risking her life to find whatever freedom she could.

"I am Westley le Wyse of Glynval, and these men are Roger, Robert, Piers, and Aldred."

"I am Mildred, and this maiden is Eva. She is mute."

"Mute?" Westley raised his brows.

"Yes, her . . . master's wife beat her and injured her throat, and she has not been able to speak since."

She felt a stab in her middle at the outrageous lies Muriel was telling—lies Evangeline had forced her to tell.

Westley le Wyse's mouth went slack with such a look of compassion, she felt another stab. Compared to the Earl of Shiveley, he had such young, perfect, masculine features. Perhaps she was already falling in love, that contemptible emotion that King Richard had spoken of as something only peasants felt before marriage.

They continued on, the rocks on the road cutting into Evangeline's feet. The thin, calfskin indoor slippers would soon wear out, so she needed to change into her sturdier servant's shoes as soon as possible.

Westley said, "I suppose the head house servant asked you to leave, due to the king and all his guests being in the castle."

"Oh yes," Muriel said. "We are not fancy enough and might get in the king's way."

"She told us it was his guards who wanted anyone not of the king's party or of the household servants to leave the castle for the sake of the king's safety."

"Oh yes, that too." Muriel gave Evangeline a quick cringing smile.

The darkness surrounded them like a thick fog, and the moon was a sliver in a sky of tiny stars. The sound of the cart wheels covered the sound of their footsteps so that any number of bandits could have been lurking along the road. Yet Evangeline felt safe in the company of the strange men.

She sighed as she walked along. Her feet hurt from the rocky, uneven road, but she was free from King Richard and Lord Shiveley and their oppressive expectation that she would be wedding that man in several hours.

Muriel scowled. Did she think Evangeline was selfish to leave the castle like this, to put them through this hardship? She should have tried harder to convince Muriel not to come with her. *Please, God, don't let her think I'm selfish.*

After an hour or so, Westley said, "We shall stop here for the night."

Evangeline and Muriel hung back and watched as the men guided the donkey and cart off the road. There was nothing here except grass and a few trees, no inn or structure of any kind, and it suddenly struck Evangeline—they would be sleeping on the ground.

The men went into the woods two or three at a time, no doubt to relieve themselves. Muriel and Evangeline went in the opposite direction to do the same behind some thick bushes.

"I cannot believe we are here, defying the king like this, traveling with these strange peasants," Muriel muttered. "I've never slept on the ground in my life."

"It is an adventure, Muriel," Evangeline whispered back. "And you can return to Berkhamsted Castle anytime you wish."

"And what do you think they will do when they realize you lied to them and you are not mute at all? They'll be furious. They will cast you out of their midst."

Evangeline shook her head. They would not be that angry, surely. Perhaps she would tell them she had been miraculously healed. But that lie seemed worse than one that did not include God.

They went back to where the men were spreading blankets on the ground.

Evangeline sat down several feet away on the grass. She pulled off her thin slippers and shook out the dirt and small rocks from her shoes. Muriel did the same while she huffed her displeasure.

Evangeline lay down on the soft, cool grass, hugging her bag to her chest. Muriel stretched out beside her. "I am dirty and tired and

I do not have proper shoes for this kind of walking. I have no way of washing even my face, as we have no water.”

“If we ask,” Evangeline dared to whisper back, “the men will probably let us share their water.”

Muriel huffed again. “I’m too tired tonight. I will ask them in the morning. Are you not sorry yet for what you have done?”

“No.”

“Sleeping outside on the ground is not something any lady should be doing. How will either of us get a moment of sleep?”

Evangeline did not answer. Muriel was always prone to complaints. Evangeline would send her back to Berkhamsted as soon as she was settled into a new life. Then Muriel could not complain—and Evangeline would not feel guilty about her not being pleased.

She herself felt quite content on the soft grass, staring up at the peaceful stars. She could imagine God winking down at her. Was God thinking, *My beloved child Evangeline has escaped from Berkhamsted Castle?* She imagined God as the father she had never known, a perfect Father. He was proud of her for not staying and marrying someone she could never love. It was also possible that God was angry with her for not doing as her king had directed her. But she preferred not to believe that.

She closed her eyes, stretching her arms above her head, then pillowed her cheek on her hands. She was free of Berkhamsted Castle and free of her own identity.

The day that had begun as the worst of her life had ended as the best.



Evangeline awoke to a soft light all around her and blue sky above her. She turned her head and saw flattened grass beside her.

It was not a dream. She truly had run away and escaped from the castle, King Richard, Lord Shiveley, and her own wedding. And she had slept all night on the ground.

A smile broke out on her face as she opened her arms up to the sky, barely stifling the giddy laugh that bubbled up inside her.

Evangeline finally sat up and looked around. The men were packing up to leave, and Muriel stood over her.

"Get up. We must go. Though how you could sleep all night and still be sleeping at dawn . . . The ground was so hard I barely slept at all."

Evangeline dug through her bag and pulled out her sturdy shoes. As she put them on, she took a deep breath through her nose. Even the air smelled better away from the castle. All around her was fresh and clean and green with life. Birds sang into the stillness like minstrels with no thought for their audience, singing for their own joy.

Westley, the apparent leader of their little group, approached her with that compassionate look on his face. The sun was rising behind him and illuminating his head like the halos surrounding the saints on the chapel windows at the cathedral she'd visited once as a child. His eyes were the same blue as the sky. His chin was slightly square—a chiseled continuation of his masculine jawline. His slightly parted lips gave him a vulnerable expression.

"Mildred told me you did not have a container for water. I have an extra flask." He held it out to her.

Evangeline opened her mouth to thank him, but her chest emptied itself of air.

She had almost forgotten—*I am supposed to be mute!*

She thought she must seem addled as she gazed up at him, so she changed her expression to a sheepish smile.

"I filled it up for you."

She nodded, enjoying the view of him, his brown hair lying in

a perfect tousle across his forehead, framing his matching brown brows and thick lashes.

“May I help you up?” His large hand reached down to her.

The touch of his hand sent a sensation through her fingers and up her arm, and she let him pull her to her feet.

He was a bit taller than she was, and he was staring into her eyes. Did he think she was pretty? Even though she was wearing a plain servant’s dress and her hair was hanging down her back, having not been brushed since the day before. But the way he was looking at her . . .

“I did not realize you and your friend did not have a blanket last night. I would have given you one of ours.”

He did not expect her to answer him, of course, so she shrugged and kept smiling.

“As soon as you are ready, we will be on our way.”

Evangeline bent and picked up her bag. She was ready. Ready to follow him wherever he was going on this beautiful, perfect morning.