

The Queen's Knight

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The Lionheart Chronicles
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Chapter One

Hay on Wye 1189

'God's teeth! You are worse than a beagle chewing on a dead duck!' exclaimed Lord de Rochford.

'And you are enough to give it indigestion!' replied Lady Rhoslyn. Her brother stopped her with a gesture and turned towards his daughter.

'Elizabeth, take yourself outside and find some fresh air. You're already too headstrong for a girl and need no lessons!' He glared at Lady Rhoslyn.

Elizabeth raised her brows, but curtsied and left her family to their discussion of her betrothal. She descended the spiral stairs that led from the guest accommodation of Clifford Castle deep in thought.

The first sight of her bridegroom upon meeting him that morning had been a horrible shock. She had been told he was a man in his prime, but he was a good deal older than her father. Lord de Clifford had eyes on her dower-lands and she recoiled from the thought of marrying him. She knew that marriage was for making alliances between families, but

still it made her skin crawl. Should her aunt not persuade her father to stand firm, then today, instead of signing a betrothal contract, she would be actually married and this would be her new home, Clifford Castle.

It smelt sour.

She wandered out across the cobbles of the inner bailey, looked around at the grey walls and passed between the two tall towers protecting the entrance. She looked down the steep ramp. A boat unloaded sacks at the jetty on the River Wye below. Men and horses milled about in the outer bailey, and to her right was the walled garden pleasance, planted forty years ago by Lord de Clifford's former wife.

Elizabeth pushed open the heavy door to the garden and sniffed the cool damp of the day. Wrinkling her nose at the stench wafting from the ordure chutes below the castle walls, she walked on and examined a wet, blowsy rose.

'Strange,' she told it, 'this afternoon I shall be the next Lady de Clifford with a husband older than my father.' She plucked the rose and all the petals fell off. She quirked her lips.

Her embroidered kirtle, decked with pearls, was an encumbrance. She kicked off her jewelled shoes and wished she dared take off her surcote too.

A heavy-set boy appeared from around the corner, dragging a reluctant puppy on a rope. He had a short riding-whip in one hand.

Elizabeth lowered her head modestly. Noticing her bare feet were showing, she drew them back beneath her hem. She observed the boy from under her eyebrows, the elegance of his apparel and the sneer on his face. He swaggered with the conceit of ownership. Her presence was clearly an intrusion into his domain. The puppy spied her and dashed an excited, zigzag course across his path, which ruined his lordly air. He kicked it and yanked the rope around its neck.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed.

He glared at her. 'What are you doing in my garden?'

'There's no need to shout,' she said, unwilling to cede ground to His Belligerence. 'Besides, it will be my garden too by tomorrow.' The Devil beckoned, and a gleam came into her eye. 'And do not kick your puppy if you want his trust.'

He glared at her, raised his arm with the riding-whip, whirled around

and hit the animal, which yelped and ran to the length of its rope.

'He's mine to do as I want,' he said, thrusting his jaw forward, 'and you will stay out of here until I say you may come in.' He was taller than she. He gave her shoulder a shove. She retreated and he followed, pushing her again. 'I do not let women tell me what to do. Women should....' He stepped forward to give her another shove and tripped over the rope. She stood aside as he staggered and stuck her foot out. He fell, most satisfactorily, into the roses.

He sat up, muddled and scratched. The puppy ran around the bush, the lead tangling him, infuriated and helpless, in the branches.

Elizabeth suppressed the triumph that bubbled up, and stifled her desire to laugh. She slipped the rope off the puppy's head, enabling the boy to extricate himself. The animal licked her hands. She scratched his ears and patted him, noting his enormous paws.

The boy emerged, still clutching his whip, which he brought down across the pup's back. 'I'll teach you a lesson for a start...' The puppy yelped and, finding itself free, ran off before another blow could fall.

'No!' remonstrated Elizabeth.

He turned, whip upraised. '... and you for a finish.' He brought it down just as she moved towards him, and the blow fell across her face. She screamed in pain and disbelief, whirled and ran for the door. He followed her. She struggled to open it, but the catch would not budge. He struck again, but she ducked, avoiding the blow, which fell heavily on the door.

'Ouch!' he yelled as his hand hit the rough surface.

'Help! Oh, help!' Small chance, she thought, of anyone hearing. 'Ow!' This last as he struck her arm and shoulder. She ran back under the fruit trees, then darting sideways, shot through the herb garden.

On her way through the roses, she stooped to collect a broken branch for defence. In her panic, she was unaware of the heavy thorns digging into her hand. She gained the door once more and struggled with it, shouting for help.

As the boy came up, Elizabeth turned and whipped the rose branch around to keep him at bay. The long twig caught him full across the face, leaving him bloodied. Shocked at the damage, she dropped the branch and, in desperation, tore at the door-latch with both hands.

Suddenly it shifted as someone moved it from the other side. She gave up struggling and turned her face to the wall, screaming, as blows began to rain down on her back.

A deep voice sounded behind her. 'Ho there! What...?'

She caught a glimpse of the new arrival, a dark-haired squire, who knocked the bully backwards with a sharp rabbit-punch. Her persecutor sat down in the mud of the gateway, winded and gasping for breath. Elizabeth turned around, panting, and leaned her back against the wall for support.

'My lady, are you hurt?' her rescuer asked.

Elizabeth looked up at the squire, then down at her erstwhile attacker in wonder. She was most impressed, such a quick, easy jab with immediate results. Her eyes widened, her mouth opened a little and she put her head on one side, observing the effects.

'Could you teach me to do that?' she gasped.

'Possibly.' The stranger's lips twitched. 'Make a fist. No ...' He took her hand. 'Put your thumb there, or you'll break it. Look—like this.' He formed a fist, looked from his hand to hers, and raised his brow. 'Tut, look at the size of you. Forget about fighting.'

He suddenly whirled round. 'Excuse me!' He blocked a blow from behind him. Snatching the whip from the boy, he snapped it across his knee and threw it away. The boy looked incredulous.

'How d-dare you?' squeaked the bully. 'I'm the grandson of Lord de Clifford.'

'Believe that and you'd believe anything,' said the squire. 'Lord de Clifford's grandson would have far more sense than to attack a lady walking in the garden.'

'Are you saying I'm stupid?'

'Yes, witling, you're stupid,' agreed her rescuer.

At that moment, a party of nobles, deep in conversation, entered through the gate and stood transfixed by the cameo before them. They stared at the state of the Baronial heir de Clifford.

'He hit me.' The lad pointed an accusatory finger. All eyes swivelled to the squire who stood, not a hair out of place, his pale tunic and hose immaculate. Elizabeth, hidden from general view by the width of his cloaked shoulders, busily tidied herself.

Having taken in his spotless apparel and unruffled demeanour, all eyes swivelled back to the bloodied cheek and filthy state of de Clifford. No one said a word, but a few eyebrows rose. The scion de Clifford blushed to the roots of his hair and called to the men-at-arms standing beyond the door.

'Ho there! Throw him in the dungeon.' This was too much for Elizabeth, who stepped out from behind her protector. De Clifford looked triumphant. 'It's her fault.'

The men took in her bloodied, bruised cheek, the muddy whip marks across her arms, and their eyes swivelled once more to de Clifford.

They looked at each other, and the silence deepened.

In the privacy of the castle solar, Lord Ranulph de Rochford still struggled against the battle tactics of his sister, Lady Rhoslyn.

She repeated her argument. 'Lord de Clifford's debts to old King Henry weigh heavily on him. The old king is dead; now King Richard will demand repayment of those debts. De Clifford needs this marriage contract before the coronation. He has no time to arrange another. He'll have the income from Elizabeth's land until she becomes his wife in a couple of years. He won't push this latest demand, just stand firm.'

'She is of legal age to marry,' said Lord Rochford, chewing his lip.

'Yes, but just look at her childish figure! She's not yet physically mature. Listen to me!' she continued. 'Should you agree to this, and Lord de Clifford dies before her—and at the grand old age of seventy-what, and she fourteen, you have to admit that's a possibility—she will only be left with what he gives her at the church door. The rest of her dower-land will pass to his son!' She had a retentive memory for legal niceties.

A servant had been knocking for some time, but they were oblivious. Lord de Rochford pursed his lips. In the silence the door opened. The bride stood there, filthy. Blood welled from her lip, and her shoes hung from her hand.

'Whatever have you been doing?' shrieked Lady Rhoslyn.

Elizabeth had been in enough scrapes to know that her aunt thought she had been tree-climbing again.

'Oh my child!' cried Lord de Rochford. 'Who did this to you?'

Elizabeth noted wryly the slight difference in concern expressed. She spoke carefully, minding her lip. 'The grandson of my betrothed took exception to my walking in the garden and beat me.'

'He must be a complete lackwit. Why would he do such a thing?' exclaimed Lord Rochford.

'I would guess that something had displeased him, and he wished to take it out on someone. First it was his dog, then me. He wouldn't stop until one of Lord Percival's squires came and made him.'

'Made him?' enquired her father.

'Yes, he knocked him down in the mud and broke his whip.'

'He took to you with a whip?'

Elizabeth nodded bleakly.

'Good God!' said her father and sat down suddenly. He looked at the servant standing quietly against the wall with eyes the size of goblets. 'Call Lady Elizabeth's maid. Fetch water and cloths.' He looked at her dress and groaned. '— And a seamstress.'

'Father, could you offer help to the squire who saved me? They were threatening him with a whipping for daring to touch young de Clifford.'

'Were they?' he said grimly. He drew his cloak about him and departed.

'You didn't bring this retribution down upon yourself, did you?' asked Lady Rhoslyn suspiciously when he had gone. 'What was he doing to the dog that made you take a hand?'

Elizabeth reflected that her aunt was a good deal too perspicacious. Even so, after several minutes of questioning, Lady Rhoslyn obviously felt they had a strong case for complaint.

'This puts us in a stronger position for negotiation. Staying here can hardly be argued to be in your best interest now,' she said. Elizabeth recognised a note of satisfaction in her aunt's voice, hiding unholy glee. 'Come with me as you are and say nothing. I am about to have words with Lord Walter de Clifford.'

'Aunt, I hurt.' Elizabeth touched her face. 'Could I not stay here?'

'Excellent idea. He can attend us. We'll keep the servants out until he has been, and do not struggle to put such a brave a face on it, silly child.' She patted her shoulder. 'I desire that he see the full extent of the damage. He has been trying to hoodwink your father into making you

marry today. This gives us an admirable opportunity to have him stick to the promised contract.'

All Elizabeth wanted to do was crawl away to a quiet place and hide. She closed her eyes, then opened them suddenly.

'The dog! I forgot the dog!'

'Sit still, you are not losing your dower-lands over a dog.'

Squire Luke de Brigaine was ravenous.

He reflected that he'd had a remarkable day and saved a damsel in distress, but his present position, incarcerated below the guardhouse at his lordship's pleasure and staring at the wall, was unenviable. Dragons had less influential relatives, a point to remember.

He had been promised a whipping and might lose his position as squire to Lord Percival. This latter possibility occupied his thoughts by far the longer. He should shortly become a knight, but not if Lord Percival sent him away. The whipping would be excruciating and humiliating, but at least it would be finished quickly. How to endure being sent home in disgrace?

There was a rattle at the door and a little window in it slid open.

'Luke?' Alain's voice.

Luke stood, eased the cramps from his chilled muscles and peered out. 'Alain! What's afoot?'

'A jug of Rhenish greased the guardhouse door, and they let me come down to talk to you. Your little altercation in the garden led to the postponement of the betrothal mass until six o'clock this evening.'

'I thought so, but 'tis over three hours since the bells sounded for the end of mass.'

'Yes, the feast has just about finished now, too,' replied Alain. Luke's stomach growled as he thought of it. 'Though indeed, they'll be drinking all night.'

'Indeed. Thank you. Have you quite finished talking of eating and drinking before a starving man? Unless you happen to have a costrel of wine with you...?'

'No,' said Alain regretfully. 'But...' he groped in his tunic and produced a small loaf stuffed with bacon. He pushed it through the bars and shivered. 'Ugh! It's cold and it stinks down here.'

'I hadn't noticed,' said Luke sarcastically. He took the loaf with freezing fingers. 'Thank you, your reward will be in heaven. What transpired after I was thrown in here?'

'I was in the kitchen when news came that the ceremony and the feast were postponed.' Alain gave a short bark of laughter. 'The messenger barely escaped, despite having the reflexes of a startled hare.'

Luke grunted encouragement and Alain continued, 'The cook was carving a haunch of venison. I watched him stare at it and for a moment I thought he couldn't have heard. Then he roared an oath and threw the carving knife straight at the messenger who, luckily, ducked. By the time the cook picked up another, he was out the door. The knife hit the door jamb. You could say the kitchen staff was seriously discommoded.' He snorted and shook his head. 'By St Mary, the language was barbarous.'

Luke raised his eyebrows and a muffled rumble was sufficient persuasion to keep Alain talking. Shortly, there was a commotion somewhere up the stair behind.

'Someone's coming.' Alain slammed the little window. Luke resumed his seat and brushed the crumbs off his front. There was a stir at the door and it opened to reveal Luke's liege, Lord Percival, accompanied by Lord de Clifford's marshal. Luke stood, his head bent so that he did not loom over the two older men in the confined space.

Lord Percival addressed his squire in his usual bellow.

'Sirrah! I understand you've been guilty of causing serious damage to young de Clifford.'

There was a lack of concern in his expression, which informed Luke of his actual feelings on the matter. 'Well, well, we have apologised, and the father of the young lady has done much to clear the matter up. You are free to leave this place.'

Luke could see Alain behind the two men, pressed into a dark corner of the stairwell, trying to make himself invisible. He bowed and with uncharacteristic meekness said, 'Thank you, my lord.'

'You will not thank me when you hear the terms of your release.' Luke straightened up. 'You will stay away from the wedding guests, also the feast, and you'll have a guard with you until you leave tomorrow morning—as surety of your good conduct.'

Lord de Clifford's marshal, having observed the passing of the sentence, bowed briefly to Lord Percival and stumped off back upstairs.

Luke saw Alain emerge from the shadows to stand behind Lord Percival. Seeing him there, his lordship evinced not the slightest surprise, but said, 'Alain will guard you.'

They mounted the winding stone stair and walked across the bailey.

'And the good news?' asked Luke of Alain.

'Lord de Clifford will not insist on having you whipped.'

'Damned decent of him—what about his grandson?'

'The less said about that the better,' replied Lord Percival, whom Luke had not thought to be listening. 'The only thing I shall say is, having met the father, I can see why young de Clifford is such a pleasure.' Lord Percival swung around and indicated the kitchen building with a nod. 'You're a good lad. See if you can find something to eat.' He clapped him on the shoulder and returned to the great hall.

Luke looked in surprise at Alain, who punched his shoulder in a comradely fashion and shook his head in mock reproof. They turned for the kitchen.

'Lord de Clifford was roaring for your blood, wouldn't listen to anyone, and you know how Lord Percival bellows like a bull. They went at it hammer and tongs. The whole castle could hear them. Lord Percival made some telling comments about his antecedents, which were rather near the bone.'

'What?'

'Hmm, you must have heard that old man Clifford was originally the steward, who married the daughter of the castle's rightful owner, Ralph de Toeni. De Clifford took the name Clifford from the castle not vice versa.'

'Lord Percival actually gave that an airing?'

'Not in so many words, but let's say he managed to convey his meaning.'

'I'm surprised they're still feeding us.'

'Well, my lad, you'd better hope the cook's stopped throwing knives.' They reached the kitchen, and he pushed open the door. A sudden silence fell at the board where the servants ate. Everyone stopped and stared at Luke.

He paused. A gentle push from Alain propelled him forward as the slow thudding of knife handles on the table began. Broad grins broke out on the servants' faces. The thudding reached a crescendo as he was ushered to sit at the head of the trestle. A trencher quickly appeared before him, and all manner of meats were thrust in his direction. A jug of wine was pushed into his hand. He stood, raised it to the company and drank deeply. A ragged cheer went up, and general noisy chatter broke out. Alain seemed uncommonly pleased. Luke lifted his brows, gave him a suspicious look and addressed his ravenous attention to the trencher.

'Holy St Martha, he exclaimed, without a noticeable pause in the rate at which he was shovelling food into his mouth. 'You deserve a drubbing. I suppose you organised this?' He waved a hand at the plates of food that surrounded him.

'Not I. The cook must have been told that Lord Percival was off to fetch you. Fancy setting upon such a well-loved character and pushing him in the mud! You are famous.' He gestured at the table. 'This was the cook's idea. Just one word of advice, avoid the rat's arse and his father.'

'What happened to the girl?' asked Luke.

'She went through with the ceremony.'

'You mean that child was the bride?' Luke looked incredulously at his friend, started laughing and found he had to force himself to stop.

Alain nodded, 'She wore a heavy veil, which was unusual, but it kept the main players happy. They may imagine no one knows what happened.'

'Jesu! What a family. What will happen now to the girl? I wouldn't be in her shoes should she stay here.'

'Well, she'll return now to Castle Rochford with her father, until the marriage is, er—finalised.'

As Luke ate, the kitchen gradually fell quiet. The exhausted cook and his staff retired for a few short hours of sleep before the onslaught of the next day. Most slept near the massive fire, now ashes, where the walls retained the warmth of the day's cooking. They had been working for a fortnight on the feast and at a frenzied pace for the last few days. They still had a castle full of guests to feed on the morrow.

Luke and Alain sat talking a little longer, discussing the year's

calendar. Prince John was soon to marry. Then, at King Richard's coronation in a few weeks' time, they were to take their knightly vows at Westminster Abbey.

There was a noise outside, and the kitchen door opened quietly on a straggling line of stable lads. One of the grooms to the fore looked acutely uncomfortable. He approached the table as those behind pressed him onward. He bowed, saying, 'Excuse me, sire.' He stopped and fidgeted.

Luke looked at him in surprise, but signed for him to continue, which he did in a rush.

'His lordship give the young master a pup—a wolfhound it be. Now young master blames the dog for bein' unlucky, seein' as what happened. He give orders to slit its throat.' He stopped and gulped. 'The lads,' he waved a hand behind him, 'being fond of the pup, want you... er... beg you to take him.' The line of anxious faces looked at Luke.

A cold, wet nose pushed itself into his hand, which was on his knee under the table. The animal had obviously been well hidden since the afternoon. He looked down at the engaging, furry face. A clever ploy, for such untutored lads, he thought.

The garbled tale made some sort of sense, but he asked, 'How many dogs in the litter?'

'Two, sire, and we do not want 'im to get his hands on the other, if you take my meaning.'

Men had been hanged for less, but as well for a sheep as a goat, thought Luke.

Alain looked at him. 'Remember, I'm supposed to be keeping you out of trouble. I recognise the unmistakable signs of mischief here.'

'Well, since it's your neck, what say you?'

'Since it's my neck we'll take them. I know what you want.' Alain grinned. 'If you've finished filling your belly, we'd better take this animal over to the stables because that's where you're sleeping, and tomorrow you leave—sorry, we leave—as soon as the gates open. Should Lord de Clifford find out, there's no power on earth going to stop him having your ... Oh Hell, our blood.'

'Well, he's bound to find out from some prattling gossip.'

'Hopefully after we are in the next county.'

'What will Lord Percival say?' mused Luke.

'Plenty, you know him, but he'll not make you bring them back!'

Elizabeth had been told repeatedly what a wonderful opportunity this marriage was. Her father and aunt had been adamant, and even her devoted grandmother had been encouraging about it. She had been firmly escorted here to her bridegroom's castle and, short of throwing herself off the walls, or swimming across the River Wye, there had been no hope of avoiding the "advantageous alliance."

She ate sparingly of the feast. Her head felt fuzzy, partly due to the herbal medication which her aunt claimed would settle her down, and partly due to her indignation and refusal to feel settled after the violence of the morning. She had made her vows in a detached way. She felt like a barn owl, watching the ceremony from a perch in the rafters. The outcome of the church service seemed so unlikely—to be promised to old Lord de Clifford.

She had remembered to notice the vow as she said it because Lady Rhoslyn had told her the important difference between 'I shall take you...' and 'I do take you as my wife'. The former meant that at some future date she would be married, but the latter meant 'I do now take you'. Therefore, she was assured that she was merely betrothed and not required to sleep tonight with the smelly old man next to her.

After the mass, they had moved to the side chapel to sign the betrothal contract. A servant brought a salver of wine, and people started talking to each other as Lord de Rochford stooped to sign the vellum. He smiled encouragingly at his daughter, handing the quill to her so that Elizabeth might give it to Lord de Clifford.

Lord de Clifford was talking to one of his sons, a burly, resentful-looking man, and took the quill without a glance in her direction. He turned to the table, dipped it in his wine, and short-sightedly scratched at the vellum, before complaining that there was something wrong. It would not write. She quietly took it from him, charged it with ink, and handed it back. He looked surprised and signed the contract.

They moved to the great hall, where the betrothed couple sat together, an ill-sorted pair, at the centre of the main table on the dais. Lord de Clifford's chief tenants filed past, and he accepted their gifts

and good wishes. He seemed well pleased with himself, but she thought that, in unguarded moments, he looked hard-bitten and calculating.

The elderly Lord de Clifford had a number of middle-aged sons present at the feast. Elizabeth looked along the line of heavy features and greasy double chins sitting to his right. They were all of a similar stocky build and arrogant attitude. The eldest son, father of the brutish boy, was a loud man with a permanent scowl. The food was not to his taste; the wine not of the standard he was accustomed to drink; the servants could do nothing right. His scowl deepened whenever he glanced in her direction.

The grandson was absent, she noted with satisfaction. As the long meal continued, she observed several faces at the near end of the lower tables that bore a jowly resemblance to the Baron. She wondered whether they were Lord de Clifford's natural sons. If so, their presence at the feast showed that the old man recognised the claims of his own flesh and blood. She thought the better of him for that, even though they showed a woeful lack of fidelity to his wife.

When the speeches were over, she commented to Lady Rhoslyn, 'Lord de Clifford seems to have a great many sons. The high table was full and there were a fair few below the salt.'

'Yes, his natural sons, the FitzCliffords, are all recognised; he finds them a useful military support. His sons are trained as knights regardless of status. However, some lack any social graces.'

Elizabeth nodded. She had observed one piddling against the wall at the side of the hall, but refrained from telling her aunt that detail.

The meal was cleared away. The last servants scurried out with unusual energy as a performing bear entered the hall. He "danced" for their entertainment, but his master kept him on a close chain and had a whip in one hand. After her initial amazement at the animal, Elizabeth found it a pitiful spectacle. She was not sorry when it was replaced by a juggler, whose pelt looked to be in better condition.

In view of the age of the groom and the battered state of the bride, there was no dancing. The men settled down to steady drinking. The ladies left before manners and conversation became coarse. Lady Rhoslyn ushered her charge from the great hall. They were lodged in a tower in the wall of the inner bailey.

Elizabeth accompanied her aunt as far as the foot of the tower and made an excuse to visit the guard-robe. 'I'll come up directly,' she said, before slipping around the tower and out into the garden.

As she entered, a soft fragrance of night-scented flowers rose about her, cool and soothing after the raucous noise of the great hall—though it was much darker than she had imagined. Even so, she intended to find the puppy. A gibbous moon gave some light.

She fumbled for the piece of meat she had wrapped in bread and saved from the meal. Calling softly for the dog, she worked her way around the garden. The scent was now of creeping thyme, growing in the path underfoot.

She was under the darkness of the fruit trees when she saw a movement. Someone else was entering the garden! She froze; her heart pounded. The fuss should she be found here! Another thought occurred to her: what if it was her erstwhile attacker? She thought he'd probably take the opportunity to finish her off and wondered what it was called when you killed your grandmother—grandmatricide? This made her want to giggle. She put her knuckle to her mouth and bit her finger to stifle the threatening hysteria.

She felt a cold, wet nose nuzzle her hand, and a squeak escaped her.

A voice called, 'Wolver!'

The desire to giggle died.

'Wolver!'

Whose voice was that? She stood rooted to the spot, hardly breathing. However, the puppy could smell the meat. He bounced enthusiastically around her, making what sounded to her ears like a deafening crashing in the weeds and dry leaves. She gave him the meat quickly to quiet him and tried to retreat further into the shadows. Noises indicated fast progress with the food, and it was not long before the puppy found her again.

It was hopeless. The shadowy person came over to investigate. She stepped back, bumped into a tree-trunk and kept very still. The puppy was licking her hand, removing any possible vestige of meaty gravy.

'Hail.' The man stopped, obviously looking directly at her and seeing her without any great difficulty. To her great relief, the voice was not that of de Clifford.

'Hail,' she said, and feeling some explanation of her presence was needed, 'I just came looking for a dog.' She could swear the man was smiling, which she did not find a comfort.

'A particular dog?'

It occurred to her that, indeed, there would be dogs galore in the castle. How to explain which? 'Um,' she prevaricated. By this time, the stranger had come right under the tree with her. She thought his voice was familiar, but she retreated all the same. After the earlier violence in the garden, she felt very vulnerable. She manoeuvred around the tree-trunk and a shaft of moonlight caught her.

'We met this afternoon.'

'I was betrothed this afternoon,' she agreed, scarcely caring what she said as she wondered how fast he was and whether she might make a successful dash for the garden door.

'Are you feeling all right now?'

This put her at a loss. Was this one of the lords who had been shocked by her appearance?

Then she flushed. 'Oh! You're the squire! I wasn't sure who... I'm very grateful to you.'

'Are you looking for the dog that was in the garden?'

'Yes,' she admitted. 'Young de Clifford was mistreating the puppy for tripping him up.'

'Was that when you took a hand?'

'A foot actually. I helped him into a rose bush.'

'That explains his face, does it?'

'Well, not entirely,' she admitted, honest to a fault. 'That explains the mud. His face was due to the rose—I hit him with a rose.'

'So, let's have this straight.' He sounded as if he were trying not to laugh. 'He attacked you with a whip, and you hit him with a rose?'

'Doesn't sound too good does it?'

'It sounds as though a little military training would not come amiss. Was that when I arrived?'

'Yes. I'm sure I did not thank you properly either. I'm sorry for what happened afterwards. They hustled me away and wouldn't listen.'

'No,' he agreed grimly. 'I know the feeling. What did your father say?'

'He said, "Children are a great comfort to you in your old age —and they help you become so, faster." She paused. 'Well, that was after he recovered from the shock.'

He was grinning; she could see his white teeth. 'How are you now?' he asked.

'A bit sore, but it was worth it because now I do not have to stay here. I am to go home for a year or two. I was dreading staying here. All the Cliffords seem to be men.'

'Yes, Lord de Clifford has six legitimate sons here. He has some older daughters too. One was the renowned 'Fair Rosamund'—although she's dead now.'

'Trust Aunt Rhoslyn not to tell me something interesting! Who was "Fair Rosamund," or at least, why was she renowned?'

'I'm not sure I should sully your ears with the tale, but, since the entire adult population of England must have heard it, you ought to know. She was the favourite mistress of King Henry, may he rest in peace. The king visited here, and Walter de Clifford, your betrothed, took the opportunity to push his daughter under the king's nose to gain royal favour. His plan worked well. The king fell in love with her and made him Lord de Clifford, which certainly improved his tenuous hold on the castle here.'

'How shocking. I wonder how she felt?' mused Elizabeth. 'Fair Rosamund, that sounds so lovely. How did she die?'

'I know not, but she had retired to live in a nunnery by that time. It was years ago.'

'I expect it was a broken heart because King Henry was married to Queen Eleanor. Where was she at the time?'

'I think the Queen lived mostly in Aquitaine, but perhaps she came to London now and again, because the story is told that the king had a maze built with a cottage, for Rosamund to live in, hidden at the centre.'

Just then Aunt Rhoslyn's irritated voice could be heard calling out in the bailey. Elizabeth gave a start.

'Oh, goodness, I've been gone ages. I'm glad I found you—and the dog.' The animal was lying contentedly between them, his head on his paws. 'This is the same puppy, isn't it? Are you looking after him now?'

'Yes, he is and I am.'

'Oh good. Thank you.' She was already moving away. 'Goodbye,' she called as she ran.

It wasn't until later she realised she hadn't asked his name.