

The Duke's Daughter

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Jodie Leigh Murray Books

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Chapter 1

Southern England, October 1066

This was the coldest and darkest place I had ever known. Rats scurried through the impenetrable gloom of the tomb-like cellar, their claws clicking both far away and far too close. There were even times, usually when I had drifted to sleep, that I could feel them crawl over me. I didn't like rats. I didn't like being thrown into the cellar either, but here I was. This was the latest of my innumerable visits to the dankest part of my home, and yet I'd never learned to hide my enthusiastic opinions from my father, the Earl.

From the age of ten, I had learned that the best way to stay safe was to remain invisible to the earl. Just a glimpse of me was enough to make him lock me in the cellar.

I couldn't guess what time it was as there was no light, no glimpse of the sun or the moon, and nothing but cold seeping into my body. Not knowing how many hours I'd lost was the worst type of punishment.

That wasn't true.

There were worse types, but this one was especially cruel to me. I wasn't the only daughter of the earl. I wasn't the only *child* of the earl, yet I was the only one who was punished relentlessly. He punished me for everything short of breathing since my mother died, and although I knew why, I wasn't about

to stop tormenting him anymore than he would stop tormenting me. Mother was no longer a barrier between us.

Earlier in the year, many men had left to defend King Harold Godwinson against the Normans, only to march to York to fight against the Viking King, Harald Hardrada. Victorious in York, Harold marched south to clash with a man from Normandy called William the Bastard, who sought to take the crown from Harold. William insisted Harold had promised the crown to him years before Edward died. Those who had survived the battle that raged in Hastings were only now returning home.

It had been my curiosity to see who'd returned that brought me out of hiding, only to be caught again and thrown into the cellar by the earl's henchman, Gunther. If I was not mistaken, Gunther hated me almost as much as the earl. Maybe more. It made me wonder if the earl even knew I was in the cellar this time. My curiosity had done little good, for I did not see if my brothers, Thomas and Alfred, had survived the battle. I had hopes most would return, but it was too soon for me to know who had won, and I wasn't privy to hearing anything while trapped in this cellar.

The door opened abruptly, the light from a candle assaulting my eyes. I threw up my hands to shield them from the brightness. Rats' feet scurried deeper into the darkness.

"Evie," I heard the whisper of my sister's voice. "Come out."

I'd been confined to the same position for so long, it took me more than a few moments to unwind my body. My cloak was the only defense against the cold I had this time. Had I been without it, I would have been numb through.

Juliana's brown hair draped down the slender column of her neck, her brown eyes full of concern as she offered a hand for me to take. She knew what to do to help me, having come to retrieve me many times. I pressed my palm against hers. The shock of my ice-cold fingers registered on her face for a

moment before she gave a gentle tug to pull me out of the cramped space.

Her arm immediately slid around my waist for support while she guided me into the kitchen. The place was dim and deserted, the utensils washed and hanging on their hooks, and the fire banked on the hearth.

“How long this time?”

“Not even a whole day,” she answered, leading me to the thick table for me to lean against and extend my full height. “You’ll have a hunchback if this continues.”

“We’ll be the same height at least,” I quipped, a touch of a smile at the corner of my mouth.

“Sometimes I don’t believe we are twins. How could it be when we look so different? I’m dark, you’re light. I’m short, you’re tall.” She shook her head, withdrawing her arm from my waist once I could stand on my own.

“Mama said twins don’t always look the same.”

Suddenly, the kitchen door burst open, and a flurry of light brown hair ran between the tables. Skinny arms wrapped around my waist and a head pressed against my stomach. My fingers drifted through the wispy hair of my little brother while I closed my eyes against the sudden knock of my heart in my chest. It had been too long this time.

“Evie,” he said, his voice muffled against my cloak. “I missed you.”

“Tovi, are you not to be in bed by now?”

The motherly tone in Juliana’s voice was to be admired. We both had reared Tovi since he was only a babe, after our mother had died shortly after giving birth to him. He was now seven, and full of such energy that both of us had to run after him most of the time. It was impossible to get him to stay still, and it did not surprise me that he was not in his bed when he was supposed to be. Juliana had taken the brunt of keeping after him the more I had to stay hidden.

The look Juliana gave me was one of exasperation. I didn't need her to tell me she had put him to bed already, and he was supposed to have stayed there. The older Tovi got, and the more distant I was kept from him, the more he rebelled. If the earl dared turn his anger on Tovi, I feared my temper would get the better of me. I would not have him mistreat either Juliana or Tovi, though he had never given me reason to believe he harmed anyone but me.

I rarely found rest in the keep. Usually, I slept outside in the stables or sometimes in the village. Wherever I would draw the least amount of attention, and where those who would help would not find me. The earl did not stray from the keep often unless he was traveling, but he didn't take kindly to those who helped me, either. I would not wish the life I led on any person, evil or otherwise. Gone were his days of training and fighting with his men. He saw to the financials, heard issues from tenants once a week, attended prayers in the chapel led by Father Henry, and sat in his chair on the dais, drinking ale.

"I wanted to see, Evie."

Tovi kept his arms firmly around my waist but lifted his little head up to look at me with shining brown eyes. Of all of us sired by Earl Eldwyn and Lady Katherine, I was the only one who had light hair and eyes. The rest had dark hair and dark eyes. Although Tovi was lighter than the rest, he was not nearly as fair as I.

Juliana knelt in front of Tovi, turning him to facing her. "You must go to bed. You can see Evie in the morning."

Tovi wanted to argue, but she shushed him and sent him on his way. He went but grumbled about not being able to see me in the morning because I would be gone from the keep yet again. It was true. I would not linger this night.

"Why has he released me?"

Juliana was quiet, leading me to believe that she knew, but was reluctant to give me the reason. Although we were the

same age, she was much more tight-lipped than I. Perhaps that was the reason the earl punished me. My tongue was sharp.

“He hasn’t released you,” she whispered, pulling me gently toward the side door of the kitchen that led out to the garden. Absently, I ran my fingertips along the ugly white scar along my cheek. “A man has arrived. I have a bad feeling.”

My hand dropped. “A man?”

Juliana pulled open the heavy door, the cold air washing over me as though the temperature of the cellar hadn’t been cold enough. The garden was relatively large, tucked within the high walls that surrounded the keep. Shadows were deep as we peered around the corner to see the garden empty.

“Aye. I saw him ride in. Strange at this hour, don’t you think?”

Travelers often stopped at Westerbury on the road to London from the west. I didn’t question Juliana’s decision, though it was not usual for a man to come at this time. If she was suspicious, she would have a good reason to be. Her judgement did not err.

“You must be careful. I won’t see you punished for me.”

“Father would not punish me. You and I both know it.”

Juliana kept my hand firmly in hers as we crept as close to the keep wall as we could, staying in the shadows as much as possible.

“Well. Well.”

We froze, not daring to breathe at the sinister voice behind us. I closed my eyes, knowing no good would come of this. It wasn’t good for me to be caught like this. Slowly, I straightened and turned to see Gunther ambling toward us, an air of supremacy in his gait. Gunther didn’t do anything unless it was the earl’s bidding or something that would earn the favor of the earl. He was his right-hand man. Even in the dark, his ominous eyes glowed.

“Do you think you’re going somewhere, milady?”

“Juliana, go,” I urged.

“You will not want to miss the gift your father has for your sister.”

Prickles of apprehension slithered down my spine like a cold drip of water, inching its way slowly toward the ground. His words about the gift gave me no reassurance. The earl never gave me anything unless it was something that would cause me great suffering. The man who had arrived this late had something to do with it, I was certain.

Gunther snatched my arm, wrenching me away from Juliana with such force she stumbled against the hard wall of the keep. I yanked my arm out of his iron grip, but he tightened his grasp and propelled me forward. Having recovered, Juliana quickly followed behind us while we walked around to the front of the keep. I was grateful that Tovi had gone back to his bed, so he didn't have to witness this.

Juliana followed us in through the door that led from the bailey directly into the great hall where the earl sat on the raised dais. His men filled the tables and benches from the dais to the door where we entered. The earl slouched in the hard, wooden chair with his arms slung along the sides, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. His penetrating eyes followed me as I walked into the room. His jaw clenched under his short, grey beard. His eyes stood out more when he was gritting his teeth. He wore his gray hair close cropped.

The hall was dimly lit, even with the light from the hearth fire and the sconces overhead and along the walls. I kept my eyes locked on his so he'd know I had no intention of cowering. He could punish me all he wanted; I would never show him I was terrified of what the next punishment might be. Even when Gunther caused me to stumble, I kept my eyes trained on him. Call it foolishness, but I refused to let anyone see a shred of fear in me.

Every eye tracked my movement across the hall. Gunther released me with a shove before retreating to the earl's side like the lackey that he was. The earl cared for no one save himself.

I would have shot an accusing gaze at the assemblage if I could have torn my eyes from the earl. They knew. They all knew how he treated me. None would help me. If they thought he would reward them for shunning me, they were mistaken. He was tight with his money, and even more with his belongings.

Finally, my eyes drifted away from the earl, glaring at those in the hall enjoying ale from the brewer, the only thing that the earl would give freely. Some stared back. And some looked away as soon as my gaze touched them, shamed for not righting the wrong that was being done here. Cowards, they were. The earl was a tyrant, and I was the only one who had ever stood up to him.

I looked behind me, only to find Juliana had gone. She never wanted to bear witness to this. Either she did not want to see our father in such a way or she was too kind-hearted to watch it. I think it was both. Here I was, standing alone to fight another battle against my father. His eyes had not wavered, the corner of his mouth lifted in mirth at my state of dress. Without the benefit of a looking glass, I knew I was dirty. I felt dirty. It hadn't been that long since I had bathed, but the cellar had a stone and dirt floor. There was no way to avoid the smudges and grit.

A gift from him was akin to a stone in the bottom of my stomach. I felt the urge to vomit at his feet. This was a time I hoped he didn't follow a cellar punishment with a beating. I could take the cellar, I couldn't take his fists, for they were large and strong and had left me with many bruises over the last eight years.

"Did you think you would not face me this night, *daughter?*" The sardonic gleam in his eyes drew the invisible finger of an

old crone up the length of my spine. He didn't wait for my reply. "I know you hide from me. But tonight . . . oh, tonight I have a gift for you."

Inky fingers of fear suffocated me, leaving a lump in my throat that could not be shifted even if I swallowed ten times. A gift from the earl was never good. I didn't like gifts, and if it was the earl's idea, it couldn't be good for me.

"Shall I tell you of my gift, *daughter?*"

I didn't like the way he was addressing me. It sent chills anew, racing up my back. Happily, I would have crawled back into the cellar to escape what was in store for me. I would even stay there for longer. But it wasn't the worst punishment I had endured.

"Shall I?"

His voice was so loud that many within the hall jumped. I could hear the tip of mugs and the slosh of the ale even though I was looking only at the earl. My eyes widened. He knew I was afraid, and I loathed myself for it. I wasn't weak. I would never be weak. But I wouldn't answer him. He knew I wouldn't. He waved his fingers toward the darkened shadows at the entrance of the hall from where I had just come.

"I would introduce you to this man," he continued, his voice dripping with derision and his eyes matching his tone. "He is going to take you on a journey. Do you want to know where?"

My tongue felt wooden and thick, not wanting to provide an answer. I scolded myself. I needed to find my voice, lest others view me as weak. Without looking back, I sensed a person walking up the center aisle and stopping behind me.

What was this? Questions raced through my mind, wondering if he had finally consented for someone to marry me. I was torn. The time had long since passed since I resigned myself from ever marrying. Tovi needed me. Torn between the want to be away from the earl and the need to be here with Tovi. I could not leave him again.

“Do you?” his voice softened, and he leaned forward in his chair. “Do you care where you are going, *daughter*? Are you thrilled to never see me again?”

I stood rigidly. If my back were any straighter, it would have snapped. The man stepped around me and presented his back to me while he moved toward the dais. He wore only black; black breeches tucked into high black boots, a black tunic under a black doublet. Even his hair was so dark it was nearly black. When he turned, I saw his eyes were dark as well, with a scattering of hair along his jaw. The only thing about him that wasn't dark were the silver buttons of his doublet winking in the sconce light.

His eyes took a slow journey down my body, noting every dip and curve. Gooseflesh pimpled every inch of my skin. If I were meant to wed this man, my life would be no different. I looked into his eyes, finding only the promise of darkness. I was a woman, and young. Perhaps there was a way I could seduce him, although that wasn't an art I had practiced. He was handsome in a dark way, but his stare was unnerving.

The chair groaned when the earl leaned back. “There will be a grand feast tomorrow as soon as you leave.”

I barely heard the earl. The man was studying me. I was studying him. There was a small scar under his chin along the column of his throat, ugly and ragged, as though someone had cut him with something dull. It made him look more formidable, even if it wasn't large. If I were to travel with him, at least there wouldn't be a cellar along the road to throw me in. I'd have to deal with a more physical punishment.

“You're destined for a convent.”

“No!”

The gasp rushed past my lips. Better to be married off than to be sent to a convent. The thought of never seeing my home again sent my hands trembling. To never see Tovi again brought the burn of tears into my eyes. Still, I raised my chin

to the earl. Let him see my tears, for my heart was breaking into pieces. Juliana would survive, and I would miss her fiercely. Tovi was almost like my own child.

The earl sat up. "I'll not have you darken these halls again with your sharp tongue and lies."

With a flash of my eyes, I stepped toward the earl until I felt a thick hand curl around my arm to hold me back. "I have told no lies."

The earl's laughter shook the room and made me burn with hatred. The man wasted no further time, grasping my elbow in his gloved hand and spinning me to lead him down the aisle between the tables. There was nothing I could say to the man who had sired me. Nothing I wanted to say.

I allowed the man to guide me out of the keep and down the steps, walking me swiftly toward two waiting horses. It didn't surprise me that the man had two black horses. Everything about him was darkness. If he thought I would go with him willingly, he was mistaken. No sooner was he reaching for his horse and I was halfway across the bailey. I knew it was a feeble attempt. When his thick arm caught me around the waist, it knocked the breath out of me. I didn't regain it until I was laying over his lap, looking down at the wood planks of the portcullis while we rode away.

As we rode down the hill, my eyes lingered on the keep—my home for all of my eighteen years from which I had been away from very few times. I didn't get to say goodbye.

Chapter 2

“I demand to know where we are going.”

“Demand all you want,” came the reply, his voice as cold as the night surrounding us. “I will make sure you do not return, *milady*.”

Dread washed over me like jumping into a frozen lake in the middle of winter. If the earl truly wanted to make sure that I did not return, it could only mean that he was telling the truth. I was destined for the life of a nun. If it weren't for my skill of speaking my mind, I might become a good nun. What I knew of nuns, they usually punished those with sharp tongues into submission.

The road from the keep continued downhill toward the village nestled in the dense forest. The village had grown in the years since I had been young. A single row of thatched houses on either side of the road had grown to two dozen dwellings that circled the watering hole nearest to the woods. The village had its own stables, its own blacksmith, and other specialties not already housed within the walls of Westerbury.

“Tell me your name,” I demanded.

“There is no reason for you to know that.”

My eyes narrowed at his back. There would be no conversation with his back turned to me, and without a doubt, he would not answer my questions. I could attempt escape again. With only my dagger strapped against my calf as protection, I wouldn't get far. I uttered a demeaning epithet just as he

turned in his saddle to pin me with his black eyes. If he meant to intimidate me, it wouldn't work. I stared back at him, my eyes not wavering.

After a moment, he turned away again. *Insufferable bastard*, I said silently at his back. The horses walked on, soon coming to the end of the road, and winding around the forest toward the west. London was to the west, I knew. I had never been to London, and if we were traveling there, I would lay claim to being excited. When I was younger, not yet in the throes of hiding, I would listen to tales from travelers who would regale me with stories of London and other towns. Through them, I could glimpse the outside world with my imagination.

"I will call you bastard."

"If it pleases you."

Grinding my teeth, I kicked the haunches of my horse lightly to move up beside him. He stared straight ahead even when I stared at him. I craved conversation. The thought of traveling in silence to our destination left a foul taste in my mouth.

"Has the earl told you nothing of me?"

"He said you were trouble."

Where the earl was concerned, he wasn't wrong. I shrugged. A harsher life could have been my destiny, but I was foolish enough to believe this could be better from what I was used to. Nothing was better than being in my home, with Tovi. He needed me. If Thomas and Alfred perished in battle, Tovi would be the future Earl of Westerbury. He needed my guidance. Juliana gave into his demands, while I made sure he did as he was told. The people of Westerbury needed a powerful leader.

Leaning my head to the side, I watched him until he finally relented and looked at me. I knew I was not an attractive woman because of the scar. We had one thing in common at least.

"I'm Lady Evie."

"I know."

"Where do you call home?"

His heavy sigh was unmistakable. *Good*, I thought. He was finally understanding I wasn't going to be quiet just because he wasn't talking. When he stared at the dark road ahead of us, I studied the unblemished side of his face. His cheekbones were high, his jaw strong under the dusting of dark hair. His forehead was high for my taste, his hair cut short even when the hair on his jaw and chin were not, giving me confirmation that he could be Saxon.

"Northumbria."

"Northumbria!" That was several days' ride north.

"Aye."

I had to trot my horse to match his pace, keeping the reins firmly in my grip even though I did not have the benefit of gloves like he did. "Is that where we're going?"

"No."

"Where do we travel to if not Northumbria?"

He turned to me quickly, and I held my breath for an assault of words, but he merely clenched his jaw and stared at me. "I am to take you away from there. That is what I know."

"To a convent?"

The set of his jaw told me what I needed to know. He knew where we were going. I could bide my time, but I was not a child any longer, and I deserved to know where I was being taken.

"Are we going to a convent?"

"No."

I pulled the reins of my horse, halting in the middle of the path and not moving until he swung his horse around and came up next to me. "You will answer me, else I will go no further."

"You talk too much."

"Answer me!"

I would not lower myself to argue with him. He would tell me what I needed to know, or I would not go further. I could get to London without his help. Surely, I could find suitable work in such a vast city. He could not force me to go.

He leaned close to me. "You will come with me."

I leaned closer to him. "I would have my questions answered, or I will go no further with you. Now answer me."

"The earl paid me to take you."

A gasp burst from my throat. "Why?"

My neck prickled with apprehension. The earl parted with his money to remove me.

He shrugged. "I need a woman to warm my bed."

My hand cracked across his face, the sound echoing into the night. His eyes flashed with an ebony rage. He grabbed my wrist so tightly that I feared he would snap my bones. He yanked me closer, making it impossible to grab my dagger. If he released me, I could reach it.

"You will never do that again."

When he released me, I did just that. I grasped the hilt, tucking the blade along my forearm to hide it from his view. My horse danced, wanting to move rather than stay still. I did not blame him. I would be away from this place quickly.

The man wheeled his horse around, riding ahead of me again before I could attempt to stab him. I nudged my horse to follow, miserable in my thoughts of what would happen. My hopes were those of a better life, even as the whore of this man. He said very little, but perhaps he could be a generous lover. I shivered. I'd never taken a lover. Even with the miserable life I had lived, I was a lady. It wouldn't be proper.

"You would make an unwilling woman whore for you?"

"Aye, and I wouldn't feel badly about it. But if you displease me, I will beat you."

I scoffed. "Is that what the earl recommended?"

“He assured me you would be compliant, and complacency is what I expect.” He turned in his saddle to look at me again. “You may like me after a time.”

“I won’t do your bidding.”

“You will do anything I tell you to.”

We’ll see. No one could force me to do the bidding of any man. This was my vow many years ago. The earl wouldn’t accept any bids for my hand in marriage, and I decided it was what I preferred. It had been my dream to remain without a husband. I was born before Juliana and would be the rightful lady of the keep if Thomas and Alfred hadn’t survived the battle. When Tovi was old enough to marry and become the Earl of Westerbury, I would set out to see the world. Beholden to no man.

“Where do we go? London?”

I heard him laugh, his laugh low. “You do not shut up, do you?”

“I have spent the last day in a cellar. I have had no light, no food, and no one to speak with. Forgive my want for some conversation.”

He reached into his bag, pulling out a chunk of crusty bread and offering it to me. I immediately grabbed it, tearing into it without gratitude. My body was used to lack of nourishment for many days straight. At first, I would be weak from hunger. But now, a few days with no food or drink was nothing I couldn’t handle. I was still hungry when the bread was gone.

“You are too thin.”

“And yet you still plan to make me your whore?”

“Aye.”

I stared at his back. Experience with men was not something I had, and I would not know what to expect. I could only hope it would not come to that. “Would you at least tell me your name?”

“Thane.”

I let his name roll around in my head for a moment. The name suited him. It suited his dark exterior. Our conversation led me to believe that he was not as hard on the inside, but he wasn't kind, either.

Chapter 3

After he had parted with his name, we rounded a bend and Thane motioned me to ride faster until we were galloping into the night. I ignored the jarring of my hip against the pommel while I relished the feel of the wind against my face. We would soon have to give the horses rest. Having slept for the better part of my day in the cellar, I wasn't tired, but my hip had gone numb and I needed to walk for a while. I had never ridden a horse for this long.

Thane wheeled his horse around, agitated by something he had heard. I didn't hear anything but the heavy breathing and snorting of the horses. With the country in a state of unrest, there were dangers on the road. Not only from the men that had come from Normandy, but Vikings were still trying to lay claim on the country. I had long since sheathed my dagger, but took it out again.

I tried to speak, but he shushed me. Rolling hills surrounded us as far as I could see, patchy with scattered woods. Clouds shielded the moon, giving us no light for aid. My horse pranced under me in agitation. I ran my palm down his neck to soothe him, while Thane motioned me to stay put while he scouted ahead.

When he returned, he motioned for me to dismount. I sheathed my dagger again, keeping a tight grip on the reins while I slid until my feet hit the ground. Thane dismounted, pulling his horse alongside mine.

We spoke no words while we walked the horses for a bit. I wanted to ask if we were going to stop, but I was grateful just to be walking for a time. I would gladly walk for a while before having to get back into the saddle. I had always dreamt of wearing breeches. My mother would never have allowed it. She always told me that ladies wore kirtles, not breeches.

I missed her sometimes. Usually, when I was in the cellar, when I would recall memories of her to help pass the time. She was beautiful, and she had the demeanor of a genuine lady in charge of a household. Although she was strong, the earl was mean, and I seemed to be the only one who noticed it. He didn't pay much attention to me then, and although I was still outspoken, punishments were not as frequent.

I heard it—the distant but unmistakable sound of riders approaching. I wasn't certain which way they came from, but I could tell that Thane was not pleased with this development. This was the open road. There was nowhere we could hide, and we could not outrun them.

I wouldn't admit it, but Thane might be my only chance for survival. He jerked his chin at me to get back into the saddle. On my first attempt, I wasn't able to get back to mount with both my legs on one side. Once more, I thrust my foot into the stirrup and swung my leg over the saddle, gasping at the feel of my sensitive bare skin against the leather of the saddle. I unsheathed my dagger and kept it my grip. The admiration in the smile that curved the corners of Thane's mouth didn't go unnoticed.

A group of eight men surrounded us within minutes. They wore chain mail and helmets that had a piece that went down over their noses. There was no way to tell if they were friend or foe, Saxon or Norman. My horse pranced, agitated. I could not mistake the looks in their eyes at my bared legs.

There was no way Thane could protect me against so many. I would need to defend myself. I'd never had to put my practice

through its marks, but I had learned to fight with a sword, a dagger, and a bow and arrow. Gareth started teaching me when we were children. As one of the gate guards, he knew the best times to sneak away.

It was in secret, for my mother, when she was alive, would have put an end to it. And if the earl knew, he would put an end to Gareth. Even after she had died, I had to be very selective about when I went to practice. It was usually in the dead of night, as it was now. I was familiar with the feeling of both hunger and sleep deprivation.

They spoke a language I knew well. When my mother had educated Juliana and me, she included French in our lessons. Apparently, Thane knew the language as well and could converse with them. They ignored me, except for their eyes.

"Give us the woman," one man said.

"The hell I will. I paid for her. She's mine."

I wanted to roll my eyes. He made a terrible liar. I wondered if he told the men this to throw them off. The day I became a slave would be the day that I drew my last breath. I didn't belong to him, or anyone else. The hilt made my palm sweat, but I tightened my grip on it.

"You will die if you try to take me," I said. "I am the daughter of an earl."

I had no chance of winning against eight armed men, but I was determined to fight until my last breath before any of them touched me. Better to die than to be raped. Thane was one issue, an issue I could easily deal with, but not eight men. I would die.

Thane drew his sword, but his one blade against this many would be futile. I could try to outrun them, but they would catch me quickly. There were too many to fight off. *Damn.*

I recalled some moves that I had learned through the years, the places my dagger could cause the most damage as quickly as possible. That way, I could take out at least one of them.

“Thane,” I whispered, my horse stomping near his. “We can fight them.”

He laughed. “That is not possible.”

“I would advise against that,” one man said, pulling the helmet from his head to reveal a shock of blonde hair. “We come from Hastings. William has defeated Harold. William will now be the king of this land. You will swear your loyalty to him.”

“Fine,” I said. “I swear my allegiance to William. Let us be on our way.”

He clucked with the shake of his head. “Nay. You will come with us.”

“We will not be going with you. We will be on our way to London if we must kneel before William ourselves,” Thane growled.

“You’re surrounded,” the blonde man said. “It would be foolish to fight us.”

Thane lifted his sword. “Let us see.”

I pulled my horse’s reins and he reared, causing the other horses to dance. There was a flurry of activity as Thane’s sword clashed with others. I maintained my seat, swinging my dagger to connect with nothing but air.

“I lied,” Thane said, his teeth clenched as he swung his sword. “Your father paid me to kill you.”

I gasped, more so from Thane’s admittance than the knight who grabbed my wrist and twisted it painfully. He meant to cause me to drop my dagger, and I did. Right into my other hand, where I grasped it and swiped it across his face. He screamed, covering his bloodied face with his gloved hand.

Another took his place. I would not be so lucky the next time. They would overtake us.

“I was to take you away and kill you.”

“But?” I asked, switching the dagger back to my right hand, swiping and missing.

"I would rather bed you," he said, just before the hilt of a knight's sword came down on his head and he slumped over in his saddle.

I screamed, having to contend with seven of them on my own. My heartbeat thundered in my chest, the blood pumping through my veins so fast that it was leaving me gasping for breath. Six had me surrounded while one grabbed Thane's horse and the other one was trying to staunch the blood I had drawn.

The blood on the dagger glistened like rubies in the moonlight. I would not bow down. I brought the blade to my throat, looking at them one by one, daring them to come closer to me. My legs, skin bare against the coolness of the night, were going numb from the chill.

"You won't take me alive."

The blonde man sheathed his sword and held up his hands. "We will bring you to safety."

"I was safe," I ground out, even though I wasn't certain I had been. Thane could have bedded me and then killed me.

Before I realized, it was too late. I felt a sharp pain reverberated through my head before everything went black and I knew no more.

Chapter 4

“Why don’t we just kill her?”

The words were distinct, and I sensed the speaker was serious about it. I struggled to open my eyes, my head feeling like they had split it in two. Whoever had hit me had been merciless. I blinked at the light assaulting my eyes, then squinted, taking in my surroundings and the person who apparently wanted to kill me.

It was a tent, a rather large one with a pole in the center. I laid on a makeshift bed, close to the floor but comfortable. Blankets covered the bed, but I was not under them. I no longer wore my cloak, just my simple kirtle. There was a short stool next to the bed where a woman sat. Her hair was a darker blonde than mine and divided into multiple braids. Her blue eyes were lined with kohl, making the color of her eyes stand out. She had a tattoo on her chin, just a simple line that ran from the bottom of her lip to just under her chin. An eye was inked on her neck. She was stunningly beautiful.

A man stood near the tent’s center. His hair was a shade of light brown, his eyes looking at me with kindness. I looked back at the woman. Her eyes were mesmerizing to look at. I didn’t see any other visible tattoos, but I knew without being told this woman was a warrior that I had heard tales of. She wore men’s clothes—clothes I longed to wear.

“We should not kill her,” the man said.

The woman studied my face just as I was studying hers. If they were going to kill me, I would prefer they be quick about it before the rest of my senses woke. The way my head was screaming in agony, death may be of a benefit to me.

“Kill me,” I whispered, closing my eyes. “Please. Do it.”

The woman laughed as though being quiet on purpose. Fine. I opened my eyes and sat halfway up, propping myself on my elbows to take in the rest of the tent. There was a trunk on the far side, along with a table and a chair. I wondered where I was to be in such a tent.

The last of my memory was my blade to my throat and surrounded by several men, who said that they didn't mean me harm. In this world, I trusted no one. I couldn't trust Thane, who had openly admitted to being hired to kill me. Was everyone intent on ending my life?

“Here.” The woman on the stool brought a cup to my lips, urging me to drink. “It tastes like rot, but it will help with your head. I think you may have been hit harder than needed. If you drink this, you will be better. I'm Freya.”

When I took the cup from her and brought it to my lips, I caught a whiff and shook my head, handing it back to her. “I'll take my chances. Just kill me.”

“No one is killing anyone.”

The voice from the doorway was deep and husky. Freya turned, allowing me a view of the imposing man who had come through the tent flap. His voice was rough but commanding. He was so tall he had to duck his head to come through the doorway. His hand did not come away from the hilt of the sword strapped to his side. His clothes were similar to Thanes, except he wore a white tunic. His brown hair was long, half pulled back just above his ears. But it was his eyes that caught me off guard, blue and shimmering, and they fell on me.

His facial hair was trimmed to frame his mouth, giving him a roughly handsome look. Freya scoffed at his comment. If

she hoped to kill me, why she had offered me a drink to ease my pain?

“What is your name?”

I pressed my lips together. I was in an unfamiliar place, with these unfamiliar people. I would not spill my secrets. For all I know, they were to make sure I would not escape death. The earl was cunning enough to have sent scouts to make sure I was dead.

“Where is Thane?”

His eyes narrowed. “What is he to you?”

I opened my mouth to give a scathing response, but snapped my mouth closed again. I did not know this man. He did not know me. I wasn’t going to answer questions until he did. My only protection was my voice, and whether to use it.

I sat up more fully, my hand reaching down to my leg, only to find my sheath empty. I cursed colorfully, and the side of his mouth quirked up. “Where is it?”

His brow arched. “Safe.”

“Am I your prisoner?”

He walked closer to me, and I had to crane my neck to keep my eyes on him. “I have yet to decide that. You will answer my questions.”

Frustration seized me. “Am I free to leave?”

“No.” He turned to leave while I ground my teeth in irritation. Just as he swept the door open, allowing light to spill within, he halfway turned around to address Freya. “Do not kill her.”

Freya looked back at me after he had gone. “If you are a spy, I will kill you.”

“She isn’t a spy.”

“Shut up, Lothair. We don’t know that.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up.”

My eyes darted between the two, their aggravating argument making me dizzy. I flopped down on my back, staring up at the

ceiling of the tent. Freya stood halfway up, her hand cautiously going to the dagger sheathed at her hip. I looked at Lothair, his hand hovering over the dagger that lay on the table.

“Stop,” I said. “I am not a spy. And I have no wish to be accused of killing either of you if you do not stop. I have no quarrel with either of you. I just want to know where I am, and where my companion is.”

Freya eased onto the stool while Lothair moved away from the dagger. Thankfully, there would be no bloodshed within the tent. It would be rotten luck to have such an event pinned on me. She leaned close to me, her fingertips reaching up to touch the side of my face like the gentle hands of a lover.

“Who did this to you?”

I pressed my lips together again. My fingertips delicately traced the length of the scar.

“Xander will extract the information from you.”

“Xander?”

She cocked her head to the side. “You do not trust me. We are not your enemy.”

“I cannot tell you.”

Her brows creased into a frown. “I will not betray you. I am merely curious who you are, and where that scar came from. Looks old, and it looks like it had a purpose.”

“It is old, and it had a purpose.”

“What is your name? We will start there and work our way into how you came to be traveling in the middle of the night with an assassin.”

I couldn't help my widening eyes at the revelation. Assassin? Thane was an assassin? He had said the earl had hired him to kill me, but he had changed his mind. If he was an assassin, he would eventually kill me. I shuddered. I wanted to spew a string of blasphemous words, but I did not want Freya to think poorly of me. Then again, I didn't think that Freya or Lothair would blink at my blasphemy.

“Evie,” I said. “And I did not know he was an assassin.”

She smiled. “I cannot wait to hear the rest of your tale. Are you hungry? You look near starved. I’ll get you something to eat.”

I nodded. Starved, tired, scarred, beaten. It was just a long list of things attached to my name. Evie. Evangeline. Lady Evie. *Daughter*. If my life improved, I would not know how to contain my excitement.

Freya left the tent, leaving Lothair to wander closer to me and study me with a cock to his head. His eyes were more than kind. They reached into my soul, into my darkest secrets.

“You can trust us.”

The way he said it made me believe I could. I needed to know what had happened to Thane, especially if he was an assassin. Did he escape? Would he hunt for me? Why would he have changed his mind about killing me?

“I need to speak with Thane.”

He shook his head, lowering himself to the stool. “That is not wise. He is a trained killer.”

“And you?”

“I am a defender. I’m not a trained killer.”

“Freya?”

“She will not kill you. Xander will not allow her to harm you. And he will not allow you to speak with the assassin. He may not even be here anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“He may already be on his way elsewhere, away from here.” He shrugged. “It is not your concern where that man goes. He is dangerous.”

I wanted to burst into laughter. Thane was as dangerous as Freya and Lothair.

“If he was going to kill me, why didn’t he?”

“Only Xander can answer your question.”

The tent opened, and Freya entered with a bowl. Lothair immediately vacated the stool and resumed his stance near the table. Freya set the bowl on the short table near the bed and jerked her chin up at Lothair. The smell of whatever was in the bowl made my empty stomach rumble. I lurched up, despite the ache in my head.

“Whoa, whoa.” Freya put a hand to my shoulder. “Drink this before you eat.”

I wrinkled my nose. The pain in my head had not subsided. It might be worth the foul taste to have the pain subside. “Fine. I need ale.”

Lothair pressed a cup into my hand while Freya pushed her concoction into my other hand. After a deep breath, I emptied Freya’s drink down my throat, chased by the entire cup of ale. I thrust it out to Lothair to refill before I opened my mouth in pure disgust, retching even though nothing was coming back out of my throat. The ale had done very little to wash away the flavor of mud mixed with what tasted like rotten vegetables. I didn’t want to know what it was.

“You’ll feel better after you’ve eaten and rested more,” Freya said.

After I downed another cup of ale, I devoured the bowl of stew. Praise the saints. The rancid taste in my mouth had disappeared after I finished eating. The ale quickly went to my pounding head, making me feel out of sorts. Did they mean to get me drunk so I would spill my secrets?

“Why you were on the road with the assassin? Where were you going? Where were you coming from?”

I folded my legs beneath me while Lothair slid down to sit at the end of the bed. I would put my life in their hands if I openly answered the questions. It would not be worse unless they brought me back to Westerbury.

“Was Thane questioned?”

“Aye.”

“What did he say?”

Freya crossed her arms in front of her, setting her jaw. “I want to hear it from you. He is not to be trusted for anything. No hired assassin is.”

“Why else would I be in the company of an assassin? He took coin to kill me.” I watched her eyes widen. “By my father.”

“Your father gave you that scar?”

I nodded but did not tell her the complete truth of the scar.

Freya glanced at Lothair. That was enough to sum up my life over the last few years. The earl was going to make me suffer. It had taken weeks for my face to heal after he had drawn his blade across it. It went from below the corner of my eye to just below my ear. A thin line.

“Do not ask me who my father is.” I untucked my legs and pulled my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs. “If I return, he will kill me himself this time.”

“I had a feeling that Thane was not being truthful.” She put her hand on my arm. “But Xander can protect you. He *will* protect you.”

I didn’t know Xander. But I doubted he could, and would, protect me. Countless others tried to take me out of the earl’s clutches by offering marriage to no avail. The earl would allow no one to have me. I never understood why, but it was better this way.

“I need to get away from here.” I looked deep into her eyes. “What did Thane tell him about me?”

A smile curved her full lips. “You are his lover, and he was taking you to his home.”

Laughter would have escaped me had it not been the truth. Thane had told me that was his plan and stuck to it. “I am in a Norman encampment?” She nodded. “Are you Norman?”

“She’s not,” Lothair said, stretching out his legs and reclining on the bed with his elbow propping him up and his hand

cradling his head. "Freya's from Norway. From a town called Akerslag, and I am from Normandy."

"I can speak for myself, Lothair," Freya snapped. "I have a tongue."

His eyes rolled dramatically, but he held out his hand in an offering for her to continue the tale he had started on her behalf.

"Vikings have raided for many years, beginning long, long ago. We met while I was in Normandy. Lothair thinks he rescued me, when I rescued myself."

"I rescued you," he quipped, earning himself a roll of Freya's eyes. They were like siblings the way they teased each other. "She was quarreling with a man who sought to rape her, and I wasn't having it. William was after the crown, and Xander was recruiting for William's army. She was a perfect addition."

I was in awe. Freya had stolen my admiration. She had stood up for herself and lived to tell the tale. It had been my desire to be someone like Freya, only I could never have put it into words. It made sense now. I knew how to fight. All I needed to do was join an army such as this.

"You should rest," Freya said.

I didn't want to rest. I wanted to hear more about her life as a Viking, raiding and traveling. While I was out in the world, I wanted to learn more about it. Nothing I had learned compared to hearing it directly from those who had lived it.

"Rest, Evie," Lothair patted my leg and sat up. "We will talk more another time."