

“Why are you standing in the rain, milady?” Jordan le Courtenay asked in lieu of a greeting.

Lady Isabella regarded him with bafflement. “I said I would wait here.”

“That you did, but it was not raining then.”

“I said I would wait here,” she repeated as if he had no more sense than one of the spring blossoms bobbing beneath the rain along the priory’s wall. “I need to speak with you. I was sent to find you to seek your assistance.”

“Who sent you?”

“I am here on behalf of Queen Eleanor.”

He frowned at her. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Confusion again was on her face as she drew her hood back up over her blond hair. “Because I have just told you that I am here on behalf of Queen Eleanor. You have no reason to accuse me of lying.”

“Nor do I have any reason to believe you.”

“True.” A hint of a smile tipped one corner of her expressive mouth, and he fought his own that wanted to respond to that charming motion. “However, milord, if I wanted to fill your head with lies, I could have done so in the shelter of the priory. I would not have waited here in the rain.”

“Unless you wanted me to believe you were being honest when

you were not.”

She laughed, and he wondered if the storm had been swept away by sunshine and a rainbow. Everything seemed abruptly alive with light and color.

“Lord le Courtenay, we can stand here for as long as you wish and debate what I might have done if I had come with lies. However, the truth is that I have been honest with you. I have been sent by Queen Eleanor to find you, and it would behoove you to believe the word of a lady in her service.”

He hated to admit so quickly that she was right. Unless she made the queen appear out of thin air – an unlikely event – she could not prove she was speaking the truth. . .and he could not prove she was not. And she was kind not to remark on how he had been less than truthful when he first told her she was not interrupting his time by the unmarked grave.

“Even if you are an emissary of the queen, why did you come to speak with me?” he asked.

“Because you are the nephew of the abbess of St. Jude’s Abbey.”

He nodded to keep her from guessing that he had not expected to hear her speak of his aunt. He had seldom seen Aunt Heloïse, for she had been named as abbess of St. Jude’s Abbey before he was born. Four times she had come to his father’s estate of La Tour du Courtenay, staying less than a fortnight each time. He recalled her smile, because he had noticed, even as a child, that her eyes remained

intense and gauging the reaction of everyone around her. When he had mentioned that to his father, he had been told that he should not expect an abbess to react as others did.

But she had acted in a very familiar way. She had, at that moment, resembled his father when the earl had some important matter on his mind.

He knew an abbess had all the responsibilities of her abbey to consider, including the spiritual well-being of everyone who lived within its walls. In that, her duties were not so different from a lord who held a fief on behalf of his king.

“Why did the queen send you?” he asked. “Is something amiss with my aunt or her abbey?”

A faint smile once more eased the tension on Lady Isabella’s face. “The abbess told me before I left the Abbey that you would be concerned about her, and she said as well that I should assure you posthaste that she is well.”

“You were at St. Jude’s Abbey?”

Her smile wavered, and she bent to pick up her satchel as she said, “Surely you know that the Abbey welcomes any visitors who travel past its walls.”

“If my aunt is well, why are you here?”

“As I told you, I am here to seek your help.”

“Mine? For what?”

She drew her cloak closer as the breeze freshened with a chill

that had not been banished with winter. “May we walk away from the priory, milord? What I have to say to you should be heard by no other ears.”

“Even monks?” He laughed coolly.

“No other ears.” She started to walk toward the trees and did not turn to discover if he followed.

Jordan pulled his own cloak more tightly to him as he turned into the wind and the driving rain. His horse whinnied a protest, but turned away from the prospect of seeking dry shelter. Ahead of them, Lady Isabella had bent her head only slightly, as if she were indifferent to the discomfort of the storm. As he caught up with her, matching her paces, he waited for her to speak.

Even though she did not glance in his direction, she clearly realized he walked beside her because she said, “The task I was given – and for which I need your help – sounds quite simple. Queen Eleanor entrusted some papers with the erstwhile Bishop of Lincoln, and, now that the bishop has assumed his new duties in Rouen, she wishes to have the papers retrieved and delivered to her.”

“Why would the queen need to send us to retrieve papers from the cathedral? She could petition the current bishop – ”

“There is no bishop in Lincoln now.”

He wanted to fire back that he knew there was no bishop and that she should not interrupt him when he was about to suggest the queen could petition whoever had served as the bishop’s assistant at

the cathedral. He swallowed his retort when they stepped out from beneath the trees. Ahead of him was the mound. It appeared even more pitiful and lonely in the downpour. He turned to tie his horse again, not wanting anyone to see his pain.

“Who lies there?” Lady Isabella asked, her voice gentling from its assertive tone.

“My most trusted friend.”

“I am sorry.” She was silent a moment as they paused by the grave, then asked, “Why does he lie here in an unmarked grave on unconsecrated ground?”

“The brothers within Kenwick Priory denied him burial inside their walls because he died during a tournament.”

For the first time since they had walked away from the priory’s gatehouse, she looked at him. Her eyes were narrowed, and he guessed she was appraising him anew. “During a tournament? What a shame for a man to lose his life so worthlessly!”

“It was a waste. If I had been here, I would have tried to persuade him not to accept the challenge to ride in order to gain a woman’s hand. No woman is worth a man’s life.” He watched her closely as a delicate fragrance drifted from her, tempting him to imagine what hid beneath her cloak instead of waiting for her reaction to his derogatory words.

Again she did not speak for a long minute as she stared at the grave; then she whispered, “I agree.”

“You do?” He was astonished. His disparaging comment about a woman’s value that would have gained him rebukes from his sisters. And he could not imagine her brothers accepting such an implied insult without demanding a chance to regain their honor through personal combat.

“There are enough men dying in wars. More should not die simply to gain a woman’s admiration.” As she raised her head to meet his eyes, her hood slipped back again to reveal her hair that framed in her face in a golden cloud. He barely noticed that as she caught his gaze with her intense one and whispered, “What the queen has asked of us could prevent another war from erupting here in England and on the continent.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, because that was all I was told. It was enough for me to offer my service. Is it enough for you, milord?”

“It is,” he said, glancing at the unmarked grave. An end to battles between the king and his sons that left good men dead? Was it even possible? He must find out. “It is more than enough. Tell me how I can help you, Lady Isabella.”