

A Lady of Ravensburg

By Haley Kovach

Chapter 1

"Christina! Christina! Wake up! Hurry!"

"What?" I sat up in bed, blinking the sleep away from my eyes. My younger sister, Marie, bent over me, face pale and eyes huge.

"Aunt Margaret is dreadfully ill! Martha is with her now. She said to come quickly. She said she never saw anyone so sick who- lived through it." Marie's voice quivered.

I jumped out of bed and threw a shawl on over my nightgown.

Aunt Margaret sick?

I tried to stifle the fear tugging at my heart. I followed Marie at a run as she hurried down the corridors. Martha, our

housekeeper and cook, sat by the bed in the sick-room. Aunt Margaret's normally pale face shone flushed and hot. She gasped for breath, her face damp with perspiration.

"Martha! What on earth is wrong?" I whispered, kneeling on the bed beside my aunt and taking her hand.

Martha shook her head. "I don't know, miss."

"Has someone gone for the doctor?"

"Yes, miss. He should be here soon."

"Oh, I wish he were here now," Marie wailed. "Aunt Margaret?"

Her eyes were open, but glazed over. I doubted if she could hear or see us. Then her eyes cleared, and with a start, I saw that she stared at me.

"Chris-ti-na," Aunt Margaret gasped.

"I- I'm here."

"Where- is Marie?"

Marie stepped forward, panic etched into her expression.

"I love you both." She rested her head back onto her pillows as she panted for air. "Take care of Marie, Christina- be a good Lady"- she began to cough- great, hoarse coughs. Her eyes closed as the fight for air continued.

A door opened and closed somewhere in the house. A moment later the doctor, a middle-aged man with a fringe of gray hair

around his balding head, entered the room. His cloak swirled behind him as he hurried to the bed. He felt Aunt Margaret's forehead and wrist, and then rummaged through his bag for a stethoscope which he held to her chest. He listened through the instrument for a moment before raising his head. Looking at me, he shook it. He gazed down at her for a moment, sorrow flitting across his face, before turning and leaving the room. Martha followed. Marie stared at Aunt Margaret, now asleep, for a moment before huddling herself up on the floor beside the bed. I leaned my head against the wall, staring across the room. The doctor's voice rose and fell as he spoke to Martha in the corridor outside. Aunt Margaret slept fitfully, tossing and turning in the bed. My thoughts drifted back to last night. Had it only been last night? Aunt Margaret, Marie, and I were walking home from a Council meeting...

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My back hurt from the hard chairs in the meeting hall, and my head ached from the warmth and noisiness of the room. I gave a short sigh. Lady Margaret turned to me. "Is something wrong, Christina?"

"No, I'm just tired," I replied. The Council meeting seemed very long."

"Long?" she said with a smile. "Discussing the food situation, the wall repairs, and the treasury seems to take a long time? I can hardly believe it of you, Christina." I knew she was teasing by the squeeze she gave my arm and the laughing tone in which she spoke.

"Aren't they tiresome for you, too?" I asked.

"They don't affect me as they do you. I have a say in what happens here. In some cases, I am entirely responsible for serious decisions. It is all part of being the Lady here in Ravensburg. How will you like that, Christina?" I felt her looking at me. "To govern this settlement, to judge cases, to take care of the sick, to report to the king?"

"I'm sure Marie will make a better Lady than I, Aunt Margaret."

What is it about becoming the Lady that repulses me? For that matter, why must I eventually become the Lady of Ravensburg at all? Perhaps because it's almost the only choice I have. Which is worse- to be a Lady of a tiny, dull, poor little town like Ravensburg, or to be a nobody?

"You don't want to." Aunt Margaret stated.

"I don't want to stay in Ravensburg for the rest of my life," I said. "I wish I could go to the Capital someday. Ravensburg is a great or luxurious town, Aunt Margaret! We live here as a- a servant might live in the Capital."

"I'm sorry, Christina. But I'll take you to the Capital next time I go to give my report to King Philip. Will that do?"

Marie gave me no time to answer. "Is the Capital very grand?"

"Oh yes, very grand. I enjoy my visits there. But I love Ravensburg more."

Is something wrong with me? Why is it that my aunt and sister love Ravensburg so much and I don't?

"Do you really love Ravensburg, Aunt Margaret?" I asked, kicking at a rock in the dirt road.

Rocks and dirt roads. The Capital doesn't have any of those, I'm sure.

"It's my home," she said. "And as my home, my town, and my people to take care of, I do love it." She laughed. "Come, my dear nieces. It must be late. Those meetings are long, and we've been dawdling along shamefully. We're home now, Martha must be sitting up for us, the dear soul, and our beds are calling."

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Tears slid down my cheeks as I finished recalling the memory of this conversation.

I didn't know then how soon I would have to decide.

With Aunt Margaret in this condition, it really did look as if I must choose. Should I become the Lady? The Council would be sure to approve me. But to be a Lady... I shuddered. Which was worse? To be a Lady, or an orphan with nowhere to go? I became aware of the sudden stillness in the room and looked at my aunt. Aunt Margaret lay still and quiet. The breathing stopped.

"Martha!" I screamed as Marie sprang to her feet.

Martha and the doctor ran into the room. The doctor went to the bed and, snatching up Aunt Margaret's wrist, felt for her pulse. An agonizing moment slid by before he looked up.

"She's dead, Miss Christina."

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"I don't understand," Marie said as we entered the house on our way back from the meeting hall the day following Aunt Margaret's death.

"What don't you understand?" I took off the black shawl I wore and hung it on the cloak stand. I stared at it for a moment. Black. A color I had never worn before. When my mother and father had died, Aunt Margaret had refused to dress either Marie or I in the color, saying that we were much too young to wear mourning.

Aunt Margaret.

I pressed back the tears that rose in my eyes, turning to the window to hide my face.

"I don't understand why someone of royal blood must be chosen."

"That's the law, Marie. The Lord or Lady must be of royal blood."

"And we are the only ones with royal blood in Ravensburg."

"Correct." I turned from the window and lowered myself into the rocking chair before the fireplace in the sitting room.

"Christina, why won't you be the Lady? I'm too young, I know that. I won't be thirteen until winter. But you're fifteen."

I closed my eyes, aware of the argument that was about to arise. "I don't wish to be a Lady. You should know that much by now, Marie."

"Christina!" Marie stared at me. "Why don't you want to be a Lady? It's one of the highest position in Anglond. We are all alone in Ravensburg now. You have to be the Lady."

"I won't," I repeated, irritated. "And we aren't all alone. Have you forgotten Martha?"

"It's not the same as living with your aunt," Marie said.

"No, it's not. But regardless of whether I became Lady or not, we wouldn't have Aunt Margaret back anyway."

We won't have Aunt Margaret back anyway...

"You know what I mean! As a Lady we would have servants and status and belong here."

"We'll go to the Capital then." My voice was defiant, but I winced, knowing what Marie would say.

"What do you mean, go to the Capital? Are you crazy? What would we do there?"

I closed my eyes again. "I don't know, Marie. Please."

"You're crazy," Marie repeated. "You know we would never go to the Capital. What would we do there? What do we have there? And even if we wanted to, how could we get there? Don't be

silly. We'll stay here. And since you won't be the Lady, we'll have to stay here and live all by ourselves and"-

"Stop it!" I snapped, standing up.

Marie stared at me, her lips tight. "Don't be stubborn. I can't believe it of you, Christina. Aunt Margaret wanted you to be Lady of Ravensburg." Her voice quivered before she resumed. "It's the only way we can actually have a future, it's a great honor, and Aunt Margaret wanted you to do this and what do you do? You refuse it."

I ignored her, tears spilling down my cheeks.

Is she right? Am I making a foolish decision? No, I'm not. We will go to the Capital someday. Doesn't the queen have lots of ladies-in-waiting? What could be more natural than for her to invite the orphan nieces of a Lady to become one? Even if she doesn't, I couldn't be a Lady here in Ravensburg. I just couldn't! I will leave Ravensburg someday and go somewhere civilized. I will.

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It has been a month. When will the messenger return?

I leaned my face against the glass of the window, staring out at some children playing in the road.

The journey usually takes two weeks to reach the Capital and come back. Of course the man must ask the king to choose a Lord or Lady. But still- shouldn't the messenger be back by now?

"Christina! Marie!"

I ran downstairs, almost bumping into Marie who emerged from her room.

"Yes, Martha?" we asked in unison.

"John is back from the Capital, with news about the new Lord I imagine."

"He is? Oh, thank goodness!" Marie ran out the back door with no further ado.

I sighed. "She never will learn to act like a lady. I'll be back in a minute, Martha." I followed Marie from the house, sighing as I saw her pick up her skirts and run. I followed at a brisk walk. As I came closer to the town square, I saw the messenger sitting on his horse.

I mingled with the townspeople, who ceased their chattering to give me quick, deferential nods. The messenger waved his hat in the air to quiet the buzz of noise.

"What did you hear? Has someone been chosen by the king?" someone called.

"Yes," he answered. "The King appointed a nobleman of royal blood, Sir Richard of Elizabethtown. Our new Lord with his men will be here shortly."

As he spoke, I noticed a small cloud of dust racing down the road out of the forest. It grew larger and larger until it became distinguishable as a group of men. "Here he comes!" the messenger cried. Cheers erupted as the group of horsemen came closer and rode through Ravensburg's open gate. They stopped in the town square before us. A tall man who appeared to be the leader lifted his hat and bowed.

"Sir Richard of Elizabethtown?" Sir Fitzgerald stepped forward.

"Yes, that is I," the man said.

"Welcome to Ravensburg. Will you come to the meeting hall, over there, and meet Ravensburg's Council after supper tonight?"

"Certainly. Thank you for welcoming me to this beautiful town," Sir Richard said.

More talk passed back and forth. "What about my horses, and men? Where shall we stay?" Sir Richard glanced at the different buildings surrounding the town square, mostly small cottages.

"You may take your residence in the manor house," Sir Fitzgerald answered.

As he pointed to the manor house, I felt a twinge of rebellion. The manor house belonged to Marie and me, not to any stranger. Of course, I knew I was wrong. It belonged to Ravensburg's Lord or Lady. We'd count ourselves as lucky if the new Lord let us stay there at all.

Sir Richard said something to his men and they wheeled their horses. Together, they galloped down the street to the manor house. The people returned to their business. Marie and I followed the men on horseback to the manor house. We entered through the kitchen while the men were busying themselves in the stable. Martha glanced up from where she stood kneading bread.

"So, is the Lord here?" she asked.

Marie nodded. "Yes, he is. His name is Sir Richard, and he is in the stable, taking care of his horse with all of his men, or knights, or whoever they are." She paused. "I'm glad we don't have any stable-boys."

"What on earth?"

"I don't fancy him much," Marie declared. "His clothes are so fancy. It doesn't look like he's done a lick of work in his life. It will do him good to do something for himself."

"Don't use slang, Marie. Aunt Margaret would not be pleased to hear you."

"A lick of work," Marie retorted, "is not slang, Christina. Martha, I think the men will expect you to make their supper." She leaned against the table, a scowl on her face.

Martha glanced at my sister. "What's wrong?"

"I still think Christina should be Lady." Marie refused to look at me, but folded her arms on the table.

"We've gone through that already," I said.

"He gets to be Lord. And he gets the house," Marie muttered. "And I suppose we'll have to help Martha make dinner tonight, since you can't make all that food in time for supper by yourself, Martha."

"Is there anything wrong with doing a bit of honest work?" Martha pushed the dough for the last time and placed it in a pan. "And I thought you were just saying that it would do this Sir Richard good to do some work."

"It's not the work part," I helped Marie. "It just doesn't seem right that we should be working when we are- that is, were- Lady Margaret's nieces."

"Hmph," Martha grunted.

Lucy, our only maid, hurried into the room, her apron askew and curls falling from her bun around her flushed face. "The new Lord is here," she gasped, breathless. "He has about a dozen men

with him, too, and the bedrooms haven't been aired or dusted or cleaned in weeks!"

Martha shrugged her shoulders. "We'll manage, Lucy. Go along, Miss Christina and Miss Marie."

"What do you mean, 'go along'? You can't get the rooms aired and supper made at once, and supper for a dozen men is a lot of food."

"You are the Lady's nieces," Martha objected, a hint of sarcasm in her tone. "We couldn't have you serve anyone, now."

I permitted myself a half-smile. "Don't be a goose, Martha. Of course, we'll help. Marie, you help Martha, I'll help Lucy." I heaved a sigh as I covered my dress with an apron and shouldered a broom and mop before I left the kitchen.

It's not the work that bothers me. It just doesn't seem right, somehow.

As I hurried to the stairs, I saw Sir Richard standing alone in the hall way. He tossed me a careless glance.

"I understand that the former Lady's nieces live here," he said. "I want to meet them. Will they be at supper?"

I rose my eyebrows in astonishment. "Excuse me," I began.

"I didn't ask for 'excuse me's,' he snapped. "Will they, or will they not, be at dinner?"

"Yes," I stammered. I hesitated as he turned away, and opened my mouth to speak, but then snapped it shut again. I went upstairs, fuming to myself.

After I helped Lucy prepare the rooms, I hurried to my dressing room and chose my dress with especial care.

Sir Richard will see his mistake!

I chose my most beautiful dress and checked my appearance in the mirror before going down to dinner, with every bit of etiquette taught to me by my aunt in mind. Sir Richard and his men, seated at the table, glanced up when I entered. I caught a hint of recognition in his eye.

Ha. He recognized me.

I looked around for Marie.

Oh no. She's not-

Marie entered the room, bearing a platter of steaming food. Close behind her came Lucy, also carrying food. Marie made another trip to bring the potatoes, then surveyed the table with her hands on her hips.

Please, go and change.

I hoped that she would change her dress for something more formal before she sat down to eat, but I knew that the idea would never cross her mind. She plopped herself beside me in her old faded gown and apron.

"Shall we say grace?" she inquired.

Sir Richard straightened. "I believe I heard that you had a sister? Where is she?" he addressed me.

"This is she," I said, flushing.

"Oh. Pardon me." He surveyed Marie for a moment, before turning again to his food.

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I grew accustomed to seeing Sir Richard's men about town. They stood out in a crowd, for they looked different from Ravensburg men- taller and broader, and I noticed that they always bore swords. There seemed to be one of them everywhere- one in the store, one in the town square, a couple standing at the gate.

Three days dragged by, and then a Council meeting was called. I dressed for it without much thought; any change in the long days came as a welcome relief. Marie accompanied me, and we found seats together. It felt strange not to sit on the platform, which belonged to the Lord or Lady and those they chose to accompany them. Sir Richard seated himself there instead and waited while the Council members filed in the room and found seats. When all were there, Sir Richard stood up.

"Good men"- he glanced at Marie and me- "and ladies of Ravensburg."

A dutiful clapping scattered throughout the hall.

"As Lord, I may as well make one thing very clear." He paused, and surveyed the room.

What is his announcement? Whatever it is, I wish he would hurry up and make it. I don't want to listen to him talking all evening. I don't like him much. Maybe I'm just prejudiced.

"There will be no Council."

I stared at him without comprehending his words.

Surely he must be joking. What is the man saying?

I looked around the room. The Council members stared at each other, as stupefied as I. Sir Fitzgerald voiced the thoughts racing throughout my head.

"My Lord is joking," he said.

"No. I have never been more serious."

"A Lord has much power, it is true," the doctor protested. "But there are laws that protect the people's rights, and the votes of the Council are one of those rights."

"The Council is no more," Sir Richard repeated. He gestured to somebody in the back of the room. I turned to look over my shoulder just in time to see several of his men enter the room. With their hands on their sword hilts, their faces looked dead

serious. "Disperse, gentlemen," Sir Richard continued. "There will be no more Council meetings from this time onward. I will make all of the decisions. If anyone feels that he must protest..." he let his words trail off as he gestured toward the men in the back of the room. In silence, Sir Fitzgerald stood and left the meeting hall, passing between the men without giving them a glance.

"No one may leave Ravensburg, either," Sir Richard's voice rose so the departing nobleman could hear. "I have men posted along the wall. My men will do the hunting and fishing."

Sir Fitzgerald halted as Sir Richard spoke, then resumed his pace. In silence, the other men got up and followed. Marie and I hastened to depart with them, feeling some measure of safety in their midst.

The man is crazy. Or is this some kind of trick?

The next day Marie came to Martha and me in the kitchen, upset and angry. "There are more," she said.

"More of what?" I set my embroidery down.

"More of the Lord's men. I saw them coming into the town on horseback. There was a little boy in the street, and the horses trampled him. Somebody carried him to the doctor; three of his ribs are broken."

"No." Martha looked horrified. "What are things coming to? Miss Marie, you will stay indoors now unless you are with your sister, and even then you should stay off the roads. With more of those men around, the streets aren't safe anymore." She paused, drumming her fingers on the table. "Miss Christina, finish these floors up for me while I start some soup. That poor boy's mother won't want to be cooking dinners while she takes care of him."

Another day, Marie and I returned to the house shaken. Martha noticed it and inquired.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"We wanted to go to the back meadow," I said, glancing at Marie. "We thought we could climb over a wall somewhere to leave since there are always men at the gates."

"Couldn't you?"

Marie shook her head. "No, we couldn't. There were so many men guarding the wall. When we asked to leave to get some flowers, they wouldn't let us."

"If only the King knew what was happening," I muttered. "He would fix everything. I suppose Sir Richard knows it too, and that's why no one can leave Ravensburg."

"I feel like just going up to him and- and hitting him," Marie cried. "I just hate him."

Martha jerked up in alarm. "Don't do that, now, Miss Marie," she cautioned. "The hitting him, I mean."

"And why not?"

"Do you know Jacob? He was put in jail today for making protestations against Sir Richard."

"They put him in jail for that?" Marie clenched her fists in an ominous manner.

"If you hit him, you would really be in trouble," I remarked.

I hope this will make Marie stay quiet. She is so head-strong.

Marie kicked at a chair leg. "Well, I still hate him."

"Enough of that," Martha rebuked. "I'm surprised that none of the young men haven't sneaked away to go to the king. They do just about everything else fool-hardy."

"We just told you!" I exclaimed. "Lord Richard's men are everywhere, Martha."

"And Ravensburg so far from every other settlement," Martha sighed.

The next day the most dreadful happening of all occurred. It started while I ran an errand for Martha. As I hurried down the street, I noticed a small crowd gathered in the town square.

Curious, I joined them, groaning as I saw who stood in the middle.

Marie. How on earth did she manage to sneak out of the house by herself? Martha has been watching her like a cat watches a mouse.

"Shall we endure this oppressor of the peace to rule over us?" she shouted. "Shall we mind our own business while our friends and family members are thrown in jail and our hardships are increasing? Well, shall we?"

"Marie!" I shouted. "Come here now!"

Her eyes met mine and, with a few parting words, she pushed through the group to me. "What?" she demanded. "All this town needs is a little motivation. We outnumber Richard five to one. You don't wish us to live like slaves?"

"It's not that," I said. "Marie, you will be in such trouble if anyone besides our people heard your little speech. Why can't you be more discreet?"

"If everyone were discreet, what would the world be like?" she flashed.

"Oh, just be quiet for once," I snapped. "Come. Let's go home." I hustled her to Martha's house, where we now lived—neither Marie nor I felt comfortable in the manor house anymore.

Sir Richard would hear of this sooner or later, I was sure of it.

The next day was vivid and hot. The house felt like an oven, but I forced Marie to stay indoors with me. The sky looked as blue as blue can be, the sun shone brilliant. The roses by the cemetery flaunted their colors openly. Marie paced up and down in the small, hot, and cramped house.

"Let me go out, Christina," she said, glaring at me.

I returned the look. "You're staying indoors, since you can't seem to be quiet outside."

"I'll be quiet! I promise!" she stamped her foot as I shook my head. "Fine then. I'll go in the cellar. At least it's cool there." She opened the trapdoor and went down the ladder, flashing me an indignant look as she did so.

"I'm going to go down to the store, Martha," I said. "Do you need anything?"

At the shake of her head, I opened the door and walked out. The sun beat down on my head. I looked up at the sky, closing my eyes and drinking in the warmth. The heat burned my face. Somebody grabbed me, and I turned around. Sir Richard himself stood over me._

Chapter 2

"Here you are," he muttered. "Come with me, girl."

He pulled me behind the store. I didn't resist, almost paralyzed with fear. My legs felt wooden, as if they could not bend. I stumbled and he jerked me to my feet again. Behind a building another man joined him.

"Shall I take her?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. Take her, and quickly. Here is a key to the door." Lord Richard pushed me over to the other.

The man took my shoulder, pushing me before him as he walked. Lord Richard stood behind, watching us go. When he was out of sight I struggled beneath the man's grasp, hitting him as hard as I could. He grabbed my wrists with one large hand. Panic rose within me.

What is he doing? Where is he taking me?

I struggled harder, trying to jerk away from him. He retained a tight hold on me. We were not far from the city wall at this point, and as we approached it I saw a break in the wall, where the large rocks composing it had caved. One of Lord Richard's men sprawled on the ground nearby, eyes closed. He sprang to attention as we approached. Recognizing my kidnapper, he relaxed and leaned against the wall.

"What are you doing with the lass, Mot?" he asked, drawing his sword and polishing the blade with his cloak.

"Sir Richard's orders," Mot answered as he pushed me through the gap.

Ravensburg now lay behind. I tried to jerk away again.

Where is he taking me? Christina! What are you thinking?

I screamed.

Let anyone hear me. Anyone at all.

The man cursed and slapped a big hand over my mouth, tightening his grip on my wrists as he did so. I stopped struggling. No one could hear or help me now.

The forest loomed up before us. The man took me into the thick of the woods. There we came to an ancient, tottery stone building, the look-out tower of an old fortress, long demolished. The place looked as if it would tumble down in one strong wind. I shivered as I glanced around.

What is he going to do to me here?

Mot halted and looked about us. "Here we are," the man muttered. "You'll be safe and secure here, miss."

"Why am I here?" I demanded, trying not to sound frightened. "I haven't done anything."

"The Lord Richard commands it," he answered. "Do you question his decisions?"

Yes, I do.

"What are you doing to me?"

He did not answer, but pushed me to a wooden door at the base of the tower. We entered into a large room. Odds and ends cluttered the place. I tensed myself.

He is loosening his grip.

As he pushed me to a rickety-looking flight of stairs, I wrenched myself from his hold, turning to dash out of the room.

If I can just get outside- then I can slam the door shut.
Just a little farther- a little farther-

I shrieked. Mot had me by my hair. Muttering something under his breath, he pulled me after him across the room and up the stairs, which creaked and groaned under our footsteps. The man took me to the third and last floor. A door at the top of the stairs opened into the room. Mot opened it, pushed me inside, and slammed the door shut behind me. Then a key rattled in the lock, and I heard his retreating footsteps.

What am I doing here? Why did they take me?

He wants to get rid of me. And this is an easy way to do it.

At length I looked around. The room was composed of stone. It was completely empty. My slippers scuffed against the stone-paved floor as I walked across the room to the window. No glass, covering, curtain or shade covered it- it was just a hole in the

wall. I stared out. The ground lay three floors below. I could not escape.

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Three weeks later, I jerked up, instantly alert.

Am I really hearing voices? Who could it be?

Lord Richard's men, perhaps?

But they don't sound like voices from men...

The owners of the voices came into sight. There were two of them, both on horses.

Ben! Andrew!

They were boys from Ravensburg; my friends. They left on a trip to the Capital a few months ago so that Andrew could be knighted and Ben become his squire; they had not returned at the time that Lord Richard kidnapped me. Ben did not see me at first, but Andrew nudged him and they both looked up.

"Christina!" Andrew waved, keeping one hand on his horse's reins. "What are you doing up there?"

"Andrew! Ben! I really need your help."

"Yes?"

I hesitated. How much should I tell them now?

No one has come with food today. I must be quick and send them away, before they are caught.

"I'm locked in this tower," I blurted.

"What?" Ben looked confused.

"Someone locked me in this tower," I explained. "I need to get out, but I can't right now; someone will be coming. Will you come back in a few hours? I'll call you."

"What? Someone locked you in the tower?"

"Yes! I'll explain later. Leave, quickly, please."

"All right," Andrew said. I could tell he was still puzzled.

"And don't, on any account, go into Ravensburg!" I called after them.

They rode away, and I collapsed against the side of the wall, relief washing over me.

Finally. I will be rescued.

All right, Christina. Return to business. After the boys help me escape- then what? Back to Ravensburg? Yes. Ravensburg. There isn't anywhere else I can go. And Marie and Martha are there. Poor Marie- she must be wild with worry, and Martha too. But what about Lord Richard? I'll be caught again. The men will see that I'm gone tomorrow. They will look for me in Ravensburg. Perhaps I could live in the third story of the manor house. Lord

Richard and his men live in the first and second story. The third is dusty and cramped and little used- they won't go or look in there. I can live there, in one of the little bedrooms. Martha still cooks and helps Lucy clean for them, I think- I hope. She can help me too.

My plans made, my mind drifted back to the boys.

What luck that they came back now. They will go to the king; and soon all this mess will be cleaned up.

The boys were back in a few hours. I waited at the window as they hurried up. Andrew tilted his head up toward me, shading his eyes from the sunlight with his hand. "Shall we get you out first before we talk, Christina?"

"Yes," I called back.

"Is the door locked or barred?"

"Locked."

"Alright. Then we can't simply let you out... Ben, get me the rope. We're going to throw one end of this rope to you. Catch it and tie it to something up there, alright?"

"Alright," I called back.

He threw it up and I grasped for it. It fell to the ground. After three more tries I caught it. I tied it to a jutting piece of rock by the window-ledge.

"Is it alright to tie it here?" I asked.

"Yes, that's perfect. Now, climb down," Andrew said.

"What?"

"Climb down the rope. We'll be down here to catch you in case you fall."

"I can't do that." I knew that I sounded stubborn, but I didn't care. I looked down at the ground below the window and quickly turned my gaze away. The ground seemed very far away.

"You have to, Christina," Andrew repeated. "It is the only way to get you out. You will be fine."

I stood by the window, outwardly silent, inwardly raging.

They can't expect me to do this. I won't! They can do something else- break down the door, look for the key. I won't climb down this rope. I'd break my neck.

I looked down and saw Andrew below me. His face turned up, I saw his expression- very patient looking. The patience provoked me.

He needn't look at me like a suffering saint!

After an inward struggle, I turned around and knelt on the wide edge of the window-ledge, grasping the rope with my hands.

"Very good," Andrew called. "Get the rope between your knees, hold on to it with your hands, and inch your way down."

I placed the rope so that my legs clasped it. My skirt hampered my movements so I yanked it to the side. Clasping the

rope with legs and hands, I again inched my way to the edge of the window-sill- out- out- I drew back on the very edge.

I can't do this.

"Come on, you were almost there," Ben shouted.

They are watching. I don't want them to see me fail.

I checked the knot, gritted my teeth and pushed myself off the window sill, giving a stifled scream as I dangled in the air. Did I tie the knot well enough? My hands burned as I slid one hand a little below the other.

If I fall now- or if the knot breaks- I'll surely be killed.

My arms felt as if they might snap like brittle firewood. I slid the other hand a bit lower and risked a look up. I still hung almost on level with the window. I inched down a little further.

"Good job," Ben called. "You can do it."

I uttered a half-sob as I slid one hand down again. My knee bumped against the wall, but I did not notice the pain. I could just picture my knot loosening; coming apart. On I went.

Oh. Oh. My arms! I really think I must let go now... no... I
looked down. "How much farther?" I panted.

"Almost within jumping distance," Andrew called.

Jumping distance?

I looked down again.

The ground still looks dreadfully far away.

The next moment, everything changed. I hurtled through the air, rope still clutched in my hand. I fell to the ground with a thud. For a moment I could not breathe at all. I tried to gulp in air but air would not come. Just as I thought I would die from lack of oxygen, I managed to pull in a lungful.

"Christina! Are you all right?" Both of the boys knelt over me. I did not move, still gasping in great breaths of air.

"Ben." Andrew pulled his attention away from me. "Look at the rope. It's been cut."

"Cut?" Ben's voice sounded high pitched.

"Someone's up there. Come on, quick. You help Christina. I'll get the horses."

Ben grabbed my arms, helping me up. "Christina! We've got to go. Get up."

"Make sure she can move for goodness sakes," Andrew shouted.

"I- can," I gasped. "I think." Everything hurt all over, from my head to my feet.

"Here, mount Ben." Andrew brought the horses over at a run. Ben jumped up, and Andrew helped me up behind him. Then he sprang onto the other horse. I heard footsteps and turned my

head. One of Sir Richard's men dashed toward us, hand at the hilt of his sword.

Andrew drew his sword and spurred the horse straight towards the man. The man stared at the horse bearing down on him and ran away.

We rode until we were in a section of the forest unknown to me. There we halted.

"Are any bones broken, Christina?" Andrew asked, getting off his horse.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Good. Someone must have sneaked up there while you were beginning to climb down the rope and cut it."

"One of Sir Richard's men," I said.

"Sir Richard?"

"Lord Richard, I mean. The new Lord of Ravensburg." I stopped as the boys exchanged confused glances. "Of course, you don't know." I told them of what had happened, finishing with: "Andrew, someone must go the king."

"I'm so sorry," he said when I finished. "About Lady Margaret, I mean."

I did not speak.

"We must decide what to do. You are right, the King must be told of what is happening," Andrew said.

"There isn't anyone to tell him but you," I answered.

"I'd be willing to do that, and so would my squire," Andrew said. Ben slumped in the saddle. "It is our duty," he continued, glaring at Ben. "What about you?" he continued.

"Me?"

"Yes. Will you come as well?"

"Me? No, of course not."

"Oh."

Me go? What is he thinking?

"What will you do? You can't go back to Ravensburg."

"I can, if I went back through the gap in the wall, or climbed over. I could then go to the manor house. Sir Richard is living there, but surely no one would search the third story. You remember it- we used to play there often enough. I could sleep there, and I know Martha would get me clothes so I could pretend to be a maid."

Andrew hesitated. "That might work. But soon this Lord Richard will know you are gone. One of his men has already seen us. They will try to find us. Why not come with us to the Capital? The journey is dangerous, but no more so than hiding in the village, and you would be a good eye-witness. Ben and I haven't actually seen what is happening in Ravensburg."

I shook my head. "The way is too dangerous, and- and you don't have another horse, and..." I ran out of excuses.

"Not that dangerous," Ben said, sitting up a bit taller. "And you have a knight and his squire to protect you."

"We can offer you companionship and some measure of safety," Andrew said. "Really, Christina, we need you. How would it sound to the King or Lord Councilor? 'We didn't actually go inside the town, just ran into an old friend who was imprisoned in a tower who gave us this information, sir.' We believe you, but it isn't the same as having an eye-witness."

I shook my head again. "I don't think so," I said.

Christina, this is the chance you've been waiting for. Why don't you want to go?

I knew the answer.

I don't want to go on horseback. I don't want to go in these circumstances.

Andrew shrugged. "Well, alright," he said. "But if Ben and I are to go, it should be as soon as possible. We should leave today. There will be men looking for us. What do you think, Ben?"

"Alright," Ben mumbled.

I nodded. "Well then. I'd better go back to the town now. Thank you very much."

"We'll take you back to Ravensburg," Andrew said. "It won't take long."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"We'll be careful," he assured me.

We reached the town in a few moments. When we came in sight of the wall we dismounted and made the rest of our way on foot.

We stole to the gap where the wall was broken. No one stood sentry. We hurried through back lanes to Martha's cottage.

As we hurried down the road, the boys looked around them in bewilderment. "How could Ravensburg have changed so much?" Ben demanded in a whisper. "Where are the people? I don't see any. And all the houses are quiet."

I rapped at Martha's door, glancing over my shoulder toward the street. There were sounds; it sounded as if- as if-

"Someone is running in this direction," Andrew whispered. "Hide."

I rattled the door, hoping against hope that it would be unlocked. It wasn't.

"Quick," Ben whispered, diving to a tree.

I dropped gingerly to the ground behind a large bush. Andrew threw himself beside me.

I raised my head in time to see several men running down the street. Their black cloaks fluttering behind them served as

identification- they were Lord Richard's men. They pounded down the road to the wall where we had just come. They disappeared to view and we stood up.

"They were looking for us," Andrew whispered.

We went to the back door of Martha's cottage and entered the kitchen.

Martha stood at the stove, stirring something in a pan. As she saw me her face lit up, and she rushed over to enfold me in her embrace. "Why, Miss Christina! Where on earth have you been? The word was that you had run away, or were dead. No one has seen neither hide nor hair of you!"

"It's a long story, Martha," I said, wincing a little as her hands rested on my bruised shoulders. "But who is this?" I glanced at the man sitting in the corner. He stood and bowed. I gasped. "Why, Sir Fitzgerald! How do you do, sir?"

"Very well, thank you," he said. "But I might ask the same about you. The whole town has been nigh crazy about you for the last few weeks, ever since it leaked out that you were gone."

"Sit down, for goodness sake," Martha said. "And Mr. Andrew and Mr. Benjamin too."

I poured out my tale. Sir Fitzgerald spoke first. "But of course, you must go with Andrew and Ben," he said. "I see no other choice. You will surely be caught in this small town

within a few days. And Andrew is right: the King's council will want an eye-witness."

I looked at him, aghast. I had expected that the adults would support my decision. "But I can't possibly go so far, on horseback," I said.

"You can't remain hiding here, either," Sir Fitzgerald said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came.

"The town has been in a terrible plight," the nobleman continued. "More people have been thrown in prison. There has been talk that Sir Richard will execute the prime offenders, although nothing of the sort has happened yet. The people are frightened, and stay in their houses most of the day. I have made myself unpopular with the new Lord; now I am afraid of imprisonment or worse. Martha is letting me live in her spare room here. Everyone is trapped within the town walls."

"But what of the break in the wall?" Andrew interrupted. "We came in with no difficulty at all."

"It must be a trap," Sir Fitzgerald said.

I jerked up. "A trap?"

"I am certain it was meant to be a trap. The only hitch in Richard's plan is that no one was there to catch you when you

first entered- you came just a bit too soon. There will be sentries now."

I remembered the men, running down the road, and shivered.

Andrew and Ben exchanged alarmed glances. "Will we be able to get out?" Andrew asked. Sir Fitzgerald fingered his beard.

"At night, perhaps," he said. "But not without a fight, most likely."

Andrew stood. "Perhaps the sentry is still away. Our horses are out there..."

Martha shook her head. "Look out of the window. You can see the gap from this one."

I stood and peered out of the window. Two men stood on either side of the break. Swords gleamed in their hands.

"I wouldn't mind sentries at night," Andrew muttered. "But now..." he sighed. "Ben and I must leave tonight as soon as darkness falls."

"Why can't Ravensburg's men fight them?" Ben demanded. "Couldn't we knock on doors and collect them all together? Then we could band on this Lord Richard. There is strength in numbers."

"No," Sir Fitz said. "The men are, unfortunately, cowed. They have no decent arms. They are peace-loving."

"Then we must leave," Andrew said again. "But will none go with us? Surely some of the men would journey with us, if not fight."

"You can't risk going to them," Sir Fitz said. "Richard's men are everywhere- they would recognize you in day and arrest you at night."

"Tonight, then." Andrew stood up.

"But Christina..." Ben studied me. "She's right, Andrew; the journey is dangerous. Especially with a fight."

Andrew looked at Sir Fitzgerald, who sighed. "If she won't leave, she won't."

"She can stay here," Martha said.

I began to feel annoyed with everyone for speaking as if I were not present. "Yes, that will be best, I think."

As Sir Fitzgerald bent his head, I had the uncomfortable feeling that he measured and found me wanting.

Chapter 3

I turned to Martha. "Martha- where is Marie?"

Her face sobered. "She's in prison, Miss Christina."

"Prison! What do you mean, Martha?" I demanded. "People don't put little girls in prison!"

"She was protesting against Sir Richard. You know the girl. She made a fiery speech about freedom and tyranny after you disappeared, and then she was taken."

"But- but- when?"

This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Martha is confused- she can't be right.

Martha sighed and stood up, going to the stove where she began to stir something simmering there. "When? The day after you left."

"Is she- well, is she- all right?"

"She's sick," Martha said. "I don't know what it is. She probably caught it from being crammed in a little cell with others and from not having proper meals or blankets."

"Sick?" I remembered the day that I woke to find Aunt Margaret deathly ill and shuddered. My throat tightened. "It isn't serious, Martha?"

"The doctor can be the judge of that."

"Martha! Answer me!"

She isn't very sick. She can't be. Martha! Why won't you answer?

The room deadened with silence. "Yes, fairly serious," Martha said at last. I tightened my lips. I did not see the little room filled with friends before me. Instead I saw a thin, pale girl lying in a dark, dank, smelly prison on a pile of rags.

"Can't we do anything?" Andrew asked.

"Who's the warden?" I demanded, starting for the door.

"One of Richard's men. I don't know his name. Come back here, Miss Christina."

I stood still, irresolute. "Oh... one of Richard's men. But-Martha. This is ridiculous! They must let her out. She's a little girl." I stamped my foot.

"They won't. Miss Christina!"

"They will." I reached for the door handle.

"Christina." Andrew sprang to his feet and caught my arm. I turned on him.

Come with me or stay behind, but I must see her.

"What?" My voice quivered with anger.

"You can't do anything, Christina," he began. He sounded a little awkward. He glanced over his shoulder at Martha, uncertain.

"I'm going," I insisted. I tried to open the door but he kept a hold on my arm. I pulled away.

"There are no buts about it. Miss Marie is in that jail, and in that jail she remains. I don't see any way to get her out." Martha's voice sounded firm. I had encountered that tone too many times to not know what it meant. Martha's mind was made up.

In the back of my mind, I knew that they were right. I couldn't get her out, and would only be caught again. At the

moment, I simply did not care. "I'll visit her then," I said. I tensed myself for the reply I knew was coming. Martha fixed me with another piercing look.

"You can't go. You are supposed to be locked up in the watch-tower."

"But..." Exasperation welled up.

Even though I'm the mistress and she the servant, she never fails to remain completely in charge.

"Well then, I'll disguise myself." I steadied my voice so that it sounded perfectly calm and reasonable.

"As?"

"As- as a peasant girl."

"A peasant girl, visiting Miss Marie?"

I stamped my foot again and tightened my fingers around the door handle.

Aunt Margaret told me to take care of her. She is my little sister.

I felt like someone hitting their head against a rock wall.

"Martha. I have to see her!"

"No sense getting yourself caught again for something like that," Martha observed. She hesitated a little as if not quite pleased with her next words, "If you insist, however, and if you

wear a hood over your face, you may come with me when I visit her later."

* * * * *

I walked down the street, shrouded in a huge cloak, the hood pulled as far over my face as possible. My face felt damp and hot with the thick material covering my head.

Dusty, hot summers. Is the Capital like that, I wonder?

I nudged the thought to the back of my mind. I could not go to the Capital, regardless of what the others thought. Girls weren't even supposed to be able to ride horses unless they rode side-saddle. The whole trip would be most un-ladylike.

There's Marie, too. I can't leave her, even if I can't help her now.

Looking up, I pulled the hood from my face far enough to see where I was. Nearly there- the jail stood only a few buildings down. Before I pulled the cloak back over my eyes, I noticed a woman walking down the street toward me. I recognized her; she was a great friend of Martha. She was the only one on the street besides me. Once again, the quietness of Ravensburg hurt me.

I never realized how much I enjoyed the bustle until it is gone.

She walked with eyes in front, paying no attention to her surroundings or to me, a basket full of market purchases held close to her side.

I tripped over a rock and fumed to myself.

More rocks. Why can't they have normal streets in Ravensburg, instead of these- these uncivilized dusty ones?

Had I reached the jail yet? I took another quick glance from under the hood.

Not there yet.

I saw a party of unfamiliar men come up behind the woman with the basket.

Are those Lord Richard's men? What are they doing? Are they looking for-

I hope they don't see me.

I reached up to my hood, tugging it down once more until my eyes were covered. I stood opposite the jail now. I went to the window and peered in. Martha was speaking to the warden.

"Wait a minute, woman," a voice said. I spun around, heart pounding against my rib cage, and relaxed as I saw that no one was addressing me. Striding forward, one of the men placed his hand on the basket. With a frightened glance, she released her

hold, drawing back. She seemed frightened to stay, yet did not want to abandon her purchases. Laughing, the man rummaged through it.

What is he doing?

I stood still, watching.

"Hmm, flour, not much use to us, is it men? Salt- ah-hah! Eggs! This will make a nice breakfast! And what else do we have? Butter!" Chuckling, he held up some boxes and pushed the basket back to the woman.

"Is that all?" another cried, snatching the basket back again. He looked through it. "Flour, oh, here! Look what you missed, Tom! Coffee! And some sweeties!" he held up a little bag of candy. A man grabbed at the bag of coffee and Tom sprang back. Another man snatched it from his hand and ran away down the street. In an instant, all the men were after him. The basket fell to the ground. A white cloud of flour flew everywhere. The woman jumped forward and picked the package up, pinching the bag shut and putting it back in the basket. She stared at the spilled flour in the dirt for a moment, tightened her lips, took up her basket, and hurried down the road in the opposite direction from the men.

They stole from her in broad daylight!

I stared in the direction that the men had gone for a second before I hurried to the door of the jail.

How could they do such a horrid thing? To a woman, no less!
If they would do such a thing to her, what would they do to- me?

My mind full of the scene, I opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind me. A stench struck me and I wrinkled my nose, looking around. I caught a glimpse of Martha's shawl and headed in that direction. I could not remember a single time when the jail was in use. It looked so much more different now. I tried not to look about me as I hurried to Martha, who knelt by a cell holding some women. There were four women and a girl. The girl lay on a blanket, her face flushed, eyes looking up at the ceiling.

I stared at her.

Marie!

As I knelt down by Martha and opened my mouth to speak, Martha glanced at me and shook her head.

"Don't say anything," she whispered.

"Why?" I hissed.

"She is almost delirious. If she recognized you, she might cry out- I don't know what she might do. And then you might be caught." She nodded her head toward the warden sitting in the front of the room.

What was the point in letting me come to visit her if I can't even speak?

I stared at Marie for a moment. She flung an arm up and tossed around. Her eyes met mine but showed no sign of recognition.

"Martha! Cannot the doctor visit prisoners?" I whispered.

Martha shook her head and whispered back. "He is in jail now too."

I stared at her for a moment.

My mind screamed at me.

Leave this place at once!

I sprang to my feet and rushed from the building. I found myself running down the street, feet kicking up dust. I coughed but kept running.

Too conspicuous. Everyone will see me.

With difficulty, I slowed down. I raised my head and noticed a man's face at a window. He stared at me in surprise. I lowered my head and ran again. I did not stop until I reached Martha's cottage. Slamming the door open, I pounded through the kitchen and up the stairs, then stopped on the sixth stair.

Sir Fitzgerald is staying in the spare room now. Where can I go?

I went back to the kitchen, passing the closed sitting room door.

Thank heaven it is shut so they didn't see my hasty entrance.

My eyes locked onto the loom in the corner. I went to the loom and squeezed behind it, sitting down. I leaned my head against it for a moment. Thoughts tumbled through my head. The few tears that trickled down my cheeks slid by unnoticed.

When the door squeaked and I saw Martha enter the room, I stood up and went to the parlor. Martha followed. The boys were sprawled on the floor, muttering to each other in low voices, and Sir Fitz sat with his eyes closed in a chair. They all jerked up and looked toward me as the door squeaked open.

"I'm going with you," I said.

A slow smile spread across Sir Fitzgerald's face. Andrew stared at me in surprise. Ben looked blank.

"We leave at midnight," Sir Fitzgerald said.

"We?"

"Yes. I'm going as well."

Chapter Four

"Miss Christina? Sir Fitzgerald sent me up to tell you it is near midnight." Martha stood in the doorway.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed, running my hands over my eyes. "All right, thank you, Martha."

"Do you have everything?"

I glanced at the knapsack on the floor. "I think so."

"Do you have clothes and a blanket and a brush and soap?"

I smiled. "Yes, yes, Martha. I do."

"What about-"

"Martha, I can't take much. I have to be able to carry all my belongings in this thing." I nudged the knapsack with my toe as I stood up. I took my cloak from the hook on the wall and draped it over my shoulders, fumbling with the clasp as I tried to close it.

"Come downstairs and get some food," Martha ordered.

I followed her down the stairs. Her starched, crisp apron rustled before me- a familiar sound that I had grown to recognize as an infant.

It will be long before I walk down these stairs again. And long before I see Martha.

I got a choky feeling in my throat.

Perhaps I will never see her again.

Stop it. You're going. Period. And with the boys and Sir Fitzgerald I will be very safe.

The others waited in the kitchen. Martha went to the cupboard, took out several loaves of crusty bread and wrapped them in paper. She sighed as she handed them to Sir Fitzgerald. "I wish I had more. You all will starve."

"Not starve, Martha," Sir Fitz answered. "This will last us for a while."

"Is that all?" Martha asked.

Sir Fitzgerald looked around. "Yes, if we all have blankets, clothes, food and water." He looked at me. "Christina, you do have a weapon?"

Martha gasped as I raised my eyebrows. "A weapon? Of course not."

A weapon? Why should I need a weapon? It's not like we're going anywhere very dangerous. The only things to fear are animals.

"Yes, a weapon. One never knows what one might run into in a forest. Here." He knelt and rummaged in his knapsack before pulling out a leather sheath. A handle stuck out. Sir Fitz drew it and revealed a small sword. It was smooth, strong, and plain. "Here you go, Christina. Wear it at your belt."

I drew my cloak aside and looked at my belt. It was a simple leather strap that looped around my waist. Attached to it were two small cloth bags. In one were little miniatures—pictures of Aunt Margaret, Marie, my dead parents, and the king. I felt that although I would be leaving Ravensburg, a part of home would come with me in this bag. In the other bag was money.

Sir Fitzgerald handed me the sheath with the dagger and I examined them closely, running my fingers around the smoothness of the leather and handle. I attached the sheath to my belt and rearranged my cloak over it. I was surprised at how light it felt.

"We're all set," Sir Fitz said, lowering his voice. "This is the plan. We go through the back lanes. There will be sentries at the gap. Andrew and I will threaten, and Ben and Christina will tie and gag them. Then we will get the horses. If they haven't wandered or been attacked by wolves."

Wolves?

"If they are not there we must do the best we can on foot. We must hope and pray that the horses are still there, along with Andrew's and Ben's possessions."

"If not?" Ben shifted from one foot to the other.

"I am bringing the necessities." Sir Fitzgerald looked at his watch. "We should be going." He turned and looked at Martha. "Thank you, Martha."

I went to her and threw my arms around her ample middle. I felt her hands running down my hair. "Take care of Miss Christina, gentlemen," was all she said.

"Oh, we will, don't you worry, Martha," Ben assured her. Martha gave a sigh and pushed me away a little.

"Be careful, Miss Christina," she said. "And come back soon."

Andrew opened the door and one by one we filed out, each settling our knapsacks on our backs. The night felt warm. We walked through the back lanes. It was hard to see anything, it was so dark.

We're really off.

Ben stopped and I bumped into him. Andrew stopped behind us. We could all hear it: the sound of voices. I felt a hand grasping mine and guessed it to be Ben's.

"Follow me," he whispered. "Get Andrew's hand."

I caught it and we began to creep to the left. Shivers tingled up my spine as the voices grew louder.

Ben halted and I stopped with him. I could feel a hard wall behind me.

A house?

I could hear Andrew moving to my right. I became aware of a soft radiance coming from a light advancing on the street. The light grew brighter as it came nearer.

A torch.

From where I stood, pressed against the wall, I could not see anything but the dim light coming from my left. The light stood stationary, but no one spoke. Then I heard a movement and a sigh and knew they were still there. I pressed against the wall again, my backbone pushing against the rough stones.

"Don't see anyone, Mot."

I stiffened.

Mot. My captor. The man who took me to the tower.

"I thought I heard someone out. Maybe not."

"May as well look around some," the other voice said.

The light grew brighter.

They are coming toward us! They can't help but see us in a moment!

I closed my eyes for a second, then opened them again. Whatever was going to happen would be bad, but it would be better to have my eyes open when it happened than closed. I looked in the direction of the light and froze. I could see the men now. There were two of them. One held the torch.

At the same time they saw us. With a shout the one without the torch sprang at us. I dropped Andrew's and Ben's hands as we split up. I hesitated, unsure of where to go. The man rushed at me.

"Hank! This is the girl!" he reached out his hands to grab me.

I sprang to life and just managed to duck under his outstretched arms. My cloak fluttered back and the man caught it. I tugged it away and the rough material slipped through his fingers.

That was much too close.

I grabbed my cloak with one hand as I ran, holding it close to my body. My lungs began to ache.

Where are the others?

I risked a look backwards. I could not see them.

Where am I going?

The torch light retreated as I ran from it. Running from the light into the darkness, I could not see a thing. I ran as one blind, tripping over rocks and bushes, kept from falling onto my face by some miracle. Then I ran into something hard. I fell back, almost stunned, but had enough presence of mind to drop to the ground. A pointy rock gouged my stomach and I barely held back an exclamation of pain. Mot was only a short distance

behind me. His footsteps stopped, but I heard his heavy breathing.

"Hank! Get over here!" he shouted.

"I'm coming," the other called from a short distance away.

"Where's your light?"

"Something just knocked it out of my hands and it went out."

I heard an angry snort. "We almost had the girl, and you know what the master will give us if we can get her again. Get to a house and get a light. Now. The girl is around here somewhere."

"You get it," growled Hank. "I'm not your servant."

There was a silence. "Fine then," Mot snapped. "Get over here and listen for sounds."

"Something wrong?" Another voice called.

I closed my eyes as I saw a faint gleam of light appearing down the road. I tensed.

"Who is it?"

"Tom."

"Oh, Tom. Get on over. Quick now. We need your light." The relief was evident in Mot's voice.

Andrew! Ben! Sir Fitzgerald! Where are you? Save me!

I made myself take a silent breath.

They'll see me in a second. I'll have to run for it again.

The light came closer. I raised my head to look around. I was lying on the ground by the fence that encircled someone's garden. I couldn't see the men, yet.

"There she is!"

Without turning my head, I sprang to my feet, almost stumbling onto my face as I got up. Again I ran, dodging one of the men. They ran after me- Mot, Hank, and Tom. The torchlight behind me gave me just enough light to see. I put on a burst of speed, enough to run around the corner of the street and leave them behind. I was now in darkness, but I hurried to the side of the road, groping with my hands. I felt rough wood and decided it was a small picket fence. Slivers dug into my palms as I climbed over, ripping my skirt, and fell to the ground on the other side, panting, as the men came up.

Is this really happening, or is it a dream? Where are they?
Don't let them see me. Please.

They ran down the street. I waited until they were gone and I could see them no longer. Then I let myself breathe, great gasping breaths.

What can I do? What should I do? Where are the others?

Go to the wall. If they don't get caught, they'll go there.

How can I do that? I don't even know where I am. I have no light. I can't wait by the wall if they aren't there yet. There will be guards.

Go there anyway.

I squirmed a bit, my knapsack poking into my back and elevating it uncomfortably. I lay for a moment more, staring at the sky. It was a dark, dark blue. Tiny little bits of light glittered.

Stars. No moon- at least I can't see it now. Why don't stars give off more light?

My breaths came slower and deeper.

Alright. I can go now. If I only had a light!

Candles. Do I have one?

I sat up and took off my knapsack. I opened it and rummaged around inside. Finally I felt the waxy lumpiness of one of the candles I had packed.

Thank goodness! Now, matches.

I found the little tin that held a supply of matches- new inventions, very marvelous. I struck it and lit the candle before blowing the match out. Then I stood up, threw my knapsack over the fence, climbed over, picked up my knapsack, and started down the street, shielding the candle with my hand. I made for the wall. Once I felt it I blew out the candle and hesitated.

What should I do now? There are sentries everywhere around the wall. I'll be caught.

There's no one right here.

I can't climb over the wall here! It must be at least twelve feet high!

Would I rather fight the sentries?

What about just going home?

I sat down and rested against the wall. Climb the wall, fight sentries, or go home. Which? A part of me leaned heavily toward simply going home. How much easier that would be.

What about the others? Will I leave them?

I can't.

I stood up again. I couldn't go home. Not now. And I couldn't fight. So the only option left would be to climb the wall.

Ha. Who am I fooling? That's impossible.

"Christina?"

"Right here," I called back.

In a moment the boys and Sir Fitzgerald joined me.

"Thank goodness you are here," Sir Fitz sighed. "I was sure they had caught you."

"Almost," I said.

"Hush," Sir Fitz breathed. "We must leave. Come now."

The moon, no longer blocked by trees or houses, shone upon us, giving us just enough light to steal to the gap in the wall.

A sigh and a rustling warned us of the sentries posted there as we crept forward. I heard a fumbling and suddenly a candle was lighted- one that Sir Fitz held. The sentries sprang for their swords, their faces looking unnaturally pale and startled in the feeble light.

Andrew and Ben sprang forward with their swords while Sir Fitzgerald rushed forward at one man with the candle. I hid my eyes, afraid of what I might see. When I heard no sounds or cries, I looked up. Ben was tying Sir Fitz's man with a rope. The man still looked stunned at the turn of events. Sir Fitzgerald gagged him with a handkerchief as Ben went to Andrew's man and tied him up. Once both men were tied and gagged, Sir Fitzgerald gestured to us.

"Come," he whispered. "These are not the only guards. Three are already hunting us. Quickly!"

The way he said "hunting" made me shiver.

"Look," Ben whispered, pointing to the street behind us.

A light could be seen bobbing and waving about, along with several figures.

"Run!" Sir Fitzgerald sprang through the wall, with Ben close at his heels. He turned his head to beckon us on as Andrew and I jumped to life and followed.

"Get 'em! There they are!"

Not again. At least I'm not alone this time. Yet.

Sir Fitz blew out his candle. The faint light from their torch lighted us on our way as we ran. The woods loomed up in front of us. Two hundred more feet- one hundred feet- my breath began to sound ragged, and my lungs felt squeezed.

How much more running can I do tonight?

I turned my head. The men seemed to be slowing down.

Sir Fitzgerald and Ben were already in the woods now. Then Andrew.

A sudden shuddering overtook my body. I shook it off.

This is the real beginning of our journey. Ravensburg is behind me now.

I entered into the forest and tripped over a bush. I landed on my hands and knees.

Andrew was at my side in a flash, pulling me up. "You all right?" he panted. "Hurry, hurry!"

I got to my feet and stumbled after him. Roots, bushes, stones, and plants kept catching either my skirts or my feet. I was forced to trot instead of run.

"Hide," Sir Fitzgerald hissed. "Quick! Now!" He darted to the left and dropped himself down in the underbrush.

I followed his example, dropping behind a bush. Stones and sticks poked into me.

How many times have I done this tonight? Is this whole journey going to be one of hiding and running? Heaven forbid!

After what seemed like eternity, I heard a rustling and someone rose close to me.

"They're gone," Sir Fitz spoke.

There were more sounds, than a lantern burst into light and Sir Fitzgerald stood close to me. Ben and Andrew rose as well. I followed their example.

"Welcome to the forest," Sir Fitzgerald said. "Let's get farther away from the town and then we will discuss our plans. Christina, are you all right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. I am thankful they did not catch you earlier. But more talk later. Let us retrieve the horses. If they are still there."

We walked to the place where the horses stood waiting. They nickered as we approached.

"We must hurry," Sir Fitz said, patting the nearest horse and examining it. "Men will be sent after us very soon- perhaps

at this moment. We must make for Elizabethtown to get more horses."

"Shall we go by the road?" Andrew asked.

"No," Sir Fitzgerald said. "We would go much faster; but we would almost certainly be caught tonight. And we must ride double until we can obtain more horses."

He cupped his hands together and placed them by the horse's flank, palms upward, and nodded at me. I stared back at him in bewilderment. "Go ahead, my lady," he said.

"Do what?" I had an uncomfortable feeling that I should know something.

"Mount, of course," Andrew said, swinging himself up on the other horse.

"Mount?"

What do his hands have to do with mounting?

"Yes. Just step into my hand and I'll give you a boost up."

My cheeks burned hot as I placed my muddy shoe in Sir Fitzgerald's hand.

Why didn't I know that?

"Harder than that, my lady," he said. "Set your foot down firmly so you'll be carried up with the boost."

I complied, my face flushing warmer.

The boys, seated on the other horse, looked down at us.

I must look like the greatest simpleton in Anglond to them.

It isn't my fault. I've never ridden a horse before today!

Still.

"Ready?"

I nodded and Sir Fitzgerald brought his cupped hands up in a swift motion that carried my foot up with it. I clutched for the horse's mane as I felt myself tipping and grabbed it with both fists, pulling up with all my strength as I threw my leg over its back.

Poor horse. It must feel like I'm ripping its hair out.

Seated, I examined the horse.

It doesn't appear to have noticed it.

Horses must be different from people.

Of course, Christina. You didn't know that?

Sir Fitz jumped up behind me and took the reins. "Off we go, then," he said. "Follow my horse, lads. Ready?"

A tingle of fear and excitement shot through me, causing me to shiver.

We are really and finally off. Ravensburg-

I hesitated. For years I had looked forward to the day that I would leave Ravensburg. But I felt differently than I had expected.

Ravensburg, goodbye.

Sir Fitzgerald kicked the horse's flanks and it began to trot.

The journey began.

Sir Fitzgerald knew of some trails which we followed. They were not well worn, and could barely be seen. The horse managed to keep up a somewhat brisk pace on them however. As the night progressed, the excitement began to leave me and my eyelids drooped. The jogging motion of the horse almost felt soothing as I settled into its' rhythm.

Right now Martha will be in bed.. her featherbed.. her featherbed with the white crisp sheets and the fluffy red quilt..

"What was that?" I straightened, sleep and beds instantly forgotten.

"What was what?"

"Those eyes." I shivered. "They were yellow eyes, staring right at us." I twisted to look behind.

"Yes." Sir Fitzgerald sounded calm.

"What- were they?"

"Eyes, of course. I don't know what animal they belonged to."

Raccoons. Possums. Bears. Wildcats. Panthers. Bears...

"Won't they- attack us?" My voice sounded quivery to my annoyance.

"Probably not since we have the lantern. Don't worry, Miss Christina."

Easier said than done.

I could not stay alert for long. I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I knew it was gray dawn and the horse stood still. Yawning, I looked around. The boys were on the horse behind us. Ben's eyes were closed and he drooped in the saddle. Andrew looked pale and had dark circles under his eyes. Their horse stood, a patient droop to its head, nibbling at a bush.

"Ben!" Sir Fitz snapped.

Ben woke up. "Yes? What?" He stretched.

"Don't fall asleep while riding, for heaven's sakes. It could prove very dangerous."

Oh.

Sir Fitzgerald looked at the sky. "It is not even dawn yet- I had hoped to go a little farther. Shall we?"

Andrew nodded. "I can."

"I guess," Ben mumbled.

"Christina?"

No. Bed. I must sleep.

A little farther- I can't let them down.

Oh yes I can.

"A little bit farther," I said.

"Good." Sir Fitz sounded pleased. "Let's go 'til noon and then we can rest and eat."

My stomach rumbled at the words, and I realized that I was almost as hungry as I was tired. Supper, a thick soup made by Martha and eaten before we left, was hours ago.

"Can't we eat first?" Ben rubbed his stomach.

"No, not now. We must hurry. And we don't have much food; the loaves we have must last us until Elizabethtown."

"Oh." Ben slumped behind Andrew. "How much farther is Elizabethtown?"

Perhaps we can reach it by tonight. Then I can sleep in a bed...

"Another three, four days. Possibly five. Most journeys take longer when one travels through the forest than on the road."

And maybe I won't sleep on a bed tonight.

"Come on, let's go. We still have several more hours to ride." Sir Fitz spurred the horse on.

Although I at first thought it impossible to sleep with an empty stomach and sore muscles, I drowsed off several times during the next six hours. I was asleep when Sir Fitz stopped the horse again. As I sat up, looking around me with sleep-dimmed eyes, I noticed that the very air seemed bright and hot.

"Let's make a camp here before you all fall off the horses. Lads, get the blankets out. Christina, would you cut some bread? Only one loaf, please."

He dismounted and helped me get down as well. My legs were unsteady. I leaned against the horse. Its' skin felt warm and moist.

"Here is the bread, and here is a knife," Sir Fitzgerald said, handing me one of the loaves and a small knife. I cut it. After handing the boys and Sir Fitz their slices, I took mine and munched on it, too tired to eat very quickly. Then I found my blanket and lay down. The ground felt very hard under me. Something that felt like a twig poked through the blanket.

What would I give for a clean bed with sheets and a quilt?

Ha, Christina. You'd give a lot for most of the things you'll have to do without.

Very comforting.

I could not stay awake for long. Within seconds, I fell asleep.

* * * * *

Sir Fitz woke us long before I was ready to be woken. Sighing, I sat up, stretching, sore from all the riding. I

looked around as I stood up. We seemed to be in the middle of the forest. There were few bushes or plants and no grass. Instead, huge trees with pine needles instead of leaves and large cones towered above us. I had seen a few of those trees in the woods near Ravensburg, but never so many or so huge.

Sir Fitz handed me a small slice of bread and several handfuls of blackberries. The boys got up and took their food. I looked about for water and picked up the water jug.

"Don't drink too much," Sir Fitz cautioned. "We need to fill up at the next clean stream and that's a while away."

"Did anyone else see those eyes last night?" I shuddered, taking a sip of water and putting the jug down.

"I saw many," Andrew said.

"Are animals the only threat?"

"No. There are Lord Richard's men, too. I am certain that we are being followed at this very moment. Then there are also the Elsenburgs."

"Elsenburgs- the tall men who come to Ravensburg sometimes?"

"Yes."

"Why should we fear them?" Ben asked.

"Well, perhaps not fear them," Sir Fitz said. He sat in silence for a moment, rubbing his beard between his fingers.

"They have always been friendly to Ravensburg. But they are a strange people. They are very tall, firstly; almost giants; and secondly they live in the woods instead of a town. And thirdly, they do attack travelers."

I looked down.

What have I gotten myself into?

"Well, let us be on our way," Sir Fitzgerald said. He rose to his feet, brushing his hands off on his trousers.

"Do you think Richard's men will follow us into the woods, or take the road?" Andrew asked. He ran his fingers through his red hair, looking at the ground. The worry in his voice caused a stab of fear to pierce my heart.

"Both." Sir Fitz's voice sounded unconcerned. "We have a head start on them- if we don't spend too much time here. Come along."

* * * * *

"Christina," Sir Fitz said.

"Yes?" I looked up, wiping my blackberry stained fingers on the back of my dress.

"Have you ever learned how to use a sword?"

"No."

It is a useful skill to learn.

It's hardly lady-like.

Is riding a horse astride lady-like? What about sleeping on the ground?

"It's high time you learned then. Andrew, Ben, keep a lookout. Come over here, Christina, to where the ground is more level."

I stood and went to him.

"Now then, draw your sword."

I took out my dagger. It was the first time I had done so since the time it was given to me.

"Are you frightened?" he smiled.

"Well- yes." I smiled back, a little ashamed. "I'm frightened that I'll have to use this. I wasn't expecting it all to be so- so- dangerous."

"Hopefully you never will have to use this weapon, Christina. But it is better to be prepared. You will make a fine and courageous swordswoman, I am sure.

I shook my head. "Not courageous. Not while I'm frightened like this."

"Ah, but being frightened does not conflict with being courageous."

I stared at him, puzzled.

He sat down, beckoning for me to sit down with him.

"Listen, Christina. 'Courage' and 'not afraid' do not mean the same thing."

"They- don't?"

"No. To be courageous is to act in spite of your fear. You may be afraid, but don't let your fear prevent you from using this sword when necessary."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

He smiled and patted my leg. "Very good. Let's begin your first lesson then, shall we?"

* * * * *

Four days passed, and our food grew less and less. Sir Fitzgerald decided that it was best to ride at night- we didn't dare sleep at night without a fire but couldn't risk the fire being seen- so we slept during the morning and rode most of the rest of the time, using a lantern only when it grew so dark that we must. We kept on with no incident until the fourth night. Late that night- nearly morning- we saw a light in the distance. Sir Fitzgerald told the boys to stay back before we rode toward the light. Before we got too close I saw that the light came

from a fire. Several men lay sprawled on the ground. One man sat hunched over the fire.

"Who are they?" I hissed when we reached the boys again.

Sir Fitz lowered his voice to a whisper. "They are Lord Richard's men."

Chapter 5

They are trying to catch us. Sir Fitzgerald was right.

"Can't we stop them?" Ben whispered.

"We must," Sir Fitzgerald whispered back. "But I refuse to attack them as they are now, unwary and unarmed. And if we gave

them warning, they could easily defeat us with their superior numbers."

"Can't we tie them up?" I suggested, remembering the sentries at Ravensburg.

"No; the animals would get them then. We don't wish to kill them or leave them in a position to be killed. But we must hinder them in some way. The--"

"Horses!" Andrew exclaimed.

"Right." Sir Fitzgerald nodded his head. "We will get rid of their horses." He looked back in the direction of their fire. "Let us wait a little longer in hopes that the sentry will fall asleep. Then we must go."

"What will we do with their horses?" I fidgeted.

"Take two for ourselves and scatter the others." Sir Fitzgerald drew his cloak around himself. "Normally, of course, I would never suggest that we take- no, steal- another's horse; but seeing as they are on a mission to catch or kill us, I see nothing wrong with it on this occasion. We must go there on foot; one of us should stay here with Princess and Alex."

"I shall," I offered.

"Good. You will stay with them at a distance where you can see the fire, so you won't get lost or be too far off." Sir Fitzgerald looked at the sky, and then changed his mind. "Let's

go now. We mustn't lose even one hour." He muttered some instructions to the boys, then handed me the reins of the horses. "We will be back in a moment," he said. "Here." He handed me something else. Running my fingers over it, I discovered it was the lantern.

"Don't use it unless you must. We'll be back soon."

They slipped off. I could hear their footsteps for only a few seconds before they died away.

Well, might as well go a little farther so I can see the fire. No sense in staying here in the dark.

I urged Alex, my horse, on with my foot. Princess followed after a tug on her bridle. We had only gone a few steps forward when something caught in my hair. I stopped the horses and situated the lantern on the saddle between my legs. I felt my hair with one hand while I held on the reins with the other. A branch had caught in my hair. It took a moment to untangle it; then I urged the horses on, looking around, a little confused. I strained my eyes, looking for the fire.

Where is it? Why can't I hear anything? Why can't I see it?

I continued riding, peering before me. Still I could not see any light. After a moment, I stopped the horses and closed my eyes, trying to remember the way we had come when Sir

Fitzgerald and I rejoined the boys after seeing the men. It was a blur.

This is ridiculous. I don't need to worry. I'll just keep going, and I'll see the light in a moment.

A minute passed, than another, than another. Both Alex and Princess seemed to feel a pressing need to stop and rest, and I had to keep urging them on. My nerves grew more jumpy by the second. Then, with a start, I saw a glowing pair of green eyes staring at me from several feet away. My muscles tensed.

What do I do? What should I do if it springs at me? The light. I need to light the lantern. It will frighten the animal away.

I can't! The men will see it!

Not if they are asleep. And if I'm not in sight of their fire yet, they won't be able to see my light either.

What of the sentry? The second you see their fire, he'll be able to see yours.

The eyes continued to stare at me.

Regardless, I'm lighting it.

I looped the reins around my arm and hoped that the lantern would not fall off my lap. I could not hold it now. I shrugged the knapsack off my shoulders and set it before me. An object slid across the saddle.

No. Not the lantern. Not the-

With a sharp crack it fell to the ground. I dug through the knapsack, frantic. I found the little tin of matches, opened it, spilling some of the matches all over, and took one, striking it with fumbling fingers. A thin flame burst into existence. I held it before me. Shaky shadows sprang up all around. The glowing eyes caught the light and gleamed. Forgetting the lantern, I peered at the glowing orbs. I could make out a body, covered in shiny fur.

Get away from me. Please.

The animal stayed still, eyes fastened upon the light. It showed no intention of walking away.

What would Sir Fitzgerald do? Ignore it? None of the animals attack us when we have a light.

I looked at the animal again. It was just to the side of where I could pass.

Much too close to pass by and pretend not to see it.

Attack?

I shuddered.

No, not unless I must. Maybe if I go closer, it will be frightened and run away.

I urged Alex forward. He shook his head and stayed put.

"Come on, Alex," I muttered, giving him a light kick. He took an unwilling step forward. There was a sound of crunching glass. I glanced at the ground, startled, and saw that Alex had stepped on the remains of the lantern. Broken pieces of glass lay scattered around his hooves.

"Alex, don't you dare get glass into your foot," I muttered. Then I sucked in my breath as the realization of what the broken lantern meant penetrated my mind.

The lantern. Not the lantern! It's the only one we have!

Now it's broken.

Wonderful.

Not to mention that Alex will probably be good for nothing now that he most likely has glass in his hoof.

"Ugh!" I spat out the word between my teeth.

I'm all alone in the dark, with some strange animal in front of me, I just broke our only lantern, and Alex might be a cripple... how could things get any worse?

My eyes darted back to the animal.

I still have to deal with this beast. At least it doesn't look too large... could I ride right past it? Will it attack me? Maybe it's just a large raccoon. Those don't attack humans, do they? Where are the boys and Sir Fitzgerald? They've been gone

for at least five minutes. Surely getting the horses can't take that long.

I sat still for a moment and then made up my mind. I urged the horses on toward the animal. The eyes remained stationary.

Go you- you thing!

The horse stopped and I did not urge it on. I stared at the eyes for a moment, shivering a little. The match flickered out. I was in the dark.

I stared at the eyes in a kind of horror as they moved while the animal stood up. Taller and taller they went until they were above me. All I could see were the orbs glowing above me, seemingly all by themselves in the dark. The horses had been quivering and trying to back up for several moments. Now they went crazy. Turning, they fled. My knapsack jolted onto the ground as I flung my arms around Alex's neck, keeping a tight grip on Princess' reins.

A branch slapped across my face, stinging. Another one raked through my hair. The horses were crazy with fear. They galloped at top speed, swerving trees.

I turned my head to look behind us. I could still see the eyes- they were following. I closed my eyes in terror.

Several minutes went by. When I looked around again, the eyes were gone. I stopped the horses, heaving long breaths as if I were the one running.

It's gone. It's gone. Finally, it is gone.

So is our only lantern. And my knapsack- the one that held my clothes and blankets. Sir Fitzgerald will not be pleased.

Sir Fitzgerald. Andrew. Ben. Where are they? Are they safe?

A dreadful thought struck me.

They don't know where I am. And I don't have any idea of where I am, either.

Oh no.

Oh yes.

I hesitated and then turned the horses around. They obeyed, but unwillingly. I made them walk back, keeping my eyes wide open, looking for any light.

I lost my matches too. Matches, lantern, and knapsack. How could I ruin things any more?

Then I saw eyes again. This time they were not green, but yellow. There were two pairs of them.

Two animals! This can't be happening.

I felt like I was in a nightmare. The running, the ghoulisn eyes, all seemed products of fantasy.

My left hand groped for the dagger hanging at my belt. I found the handle and drew it. A bit of moonlight caught on the polished blade.

So there is moonlight...

I held the dagger before me. "Go away," I said in a low, what I hoped was threatening, voice. "Go away." The words reminded me of a little girl saying "go away" to a large dog, brandishing a stick that she would never dare use on the animal. I knew that I could never use the dagger on these beasts either.

"Go away," I repeated.

I had rolled my sleeves up to the shoulder that day, during the heat of the late morning. Now goose-bumps prickled on my bare arms, not just from cold.

I cannot go past those eyes.

We've never been attacked before.

We had light then!

The eyes came nearer. One of the pairs sprang up toward me. I heard a growl and Alex's scream and knew that the animal- whatever it was- had hurt him. Alex bolted. His sudden turn caught me by surprise, and I fell. I landed on the ground with a painful jolt, Princess' reins, wrapped around my wrist, bruising it as she ran after Alex. She pulled me along for several seconds. Half sitting, I tugged at the reins around my arm and

managed to pull them off my wrist. I was free. The horses galloped off. I lay, panting, feeling the scratches on my arms and face sting and half-moaning as I felt my wrist. It was tender and bruised.

A twig snapped and I sat up, staring around.

No.

Both pairs of eyes were there again. They stared at me, sprawled on the ground. Looking up at them, they seemed much more terrifying than when I was up above them, seated on the horse.

They advanced. Paralyzing fear swept over me.

Let death be swift and painless.

Wait a minute. My dagger! Where is it?

I dropped it.

I flew into action. The eyes were only half-a-dozen feet away, but they stopped, probably surprised, as I felt the ground frantically. No dagger. The eyes advanced again.

My hands closed on a smooth handle. I grabbed it, running my finger along the side of my weapon. I got to my feet, brandishing it in my hands.

Please, go away! I don't dare try to beat you off.

Why can't I defend myself? Would I rather be eaten? I've learned to use this. I need to use it now.

As the eyes continued towards me, I took a grip on my courage and hit at one pair with the weapon. I felt the impact all through my arm as it hit the animal. The eyes seemed to get bigger and fiercer as they rocketed toward me. I turned and fled.

Then I saw, in the distance, the soft glow of a fire.

Finally.

I put on an extra dash of speed, not daring to look back. My side began to hurt. I heard a growl and tried to force my tired feet to run more quickly. Turning, I could not see the eyes, but from the sound of things the two animals were fighting. I stumbled and fell on my face. I waited, eyes closed, for claws to pierce into my back, but when nothing happened I sat up and looked back again. They still tusseled. I hurried to the fire, keeping to the shadows behind trees. Now that I seemed to be relatively safe, at least for the moment, I didn't wish to be seen by whoever was there. I tiptoed to a place behind a bush where I could see the men.

They were not Sir Richard's men.

Two tall men sat by the fire. They both wore rough gray cloaks over their shoulders. Their brown hair reached to their shoulders- one tinged with silver.

Elsenburgs. The people that Sir Fitz spoke of! The people who live in the forest...

One of them turned and stared in my direction for a moment.

"Did you hear a noise, father?"

The man with silver in his hair turned and glanced over his shoulder. "Don't be alarmed, Edgar."

They were silent for a moment before Edgar spoke again. "But I don't understand," he said.

"When was the last time you came with me to Ravensburg?"

So they have been to Ravensburg.

"A year ago."

"A year ago. Do you remember who the Lady of the town was?"

They know my aunt!

"Lady Margaret." The younger man shifted in his seat.

"Do you remember much about her?"

"No, not much. She was friendly to us."

Yes, yes. Come to the point. Why are you asking about Aunt Margaret?

"Yes. You have heard of the discussions between the other leaders and me about Ravensburg, have you not?"

"Yes, of course."

"Lady Margaret died not long ago, and there is a new Lord—a man by the name of Sir Richard. The man has overtaken

Ravensburg. I suspect he has a plan- I know of the man. He is powerful, intelligent, and ambitious. He doesn't want a tiny town like Ravensburg for its own sake."

"And? What does this girl have to do with that? What do we have to do with that?"

Girl?

I stiffened.

Can they be talking about- me?

"The men looking for this girl come from Sir Richard. She knows of his plan, or is somehow hindering it."

Plan? What plan?

"What does this have to do with us?" the younger man repeated.

"You or I can get the girl any day I choose. Any Elsenburg could. Sir Richard knows this. If we refuse to give him help, he will very likely bring his vengeance upon us."

"What do you think his plan is?"

"I do not know yet, for sure," his father paused. "Later perhaps when I know more I will tell you. But we still must determine our plans about this girl and her friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes, she is traveling with a couple of boys and a man."

He is talking about me!

"If we hand them over to Sir Richard we would be in his favor. And if he has his mind set on larger schemes, that would be a desirable thing to have."

But I mistrust him. I do not desire to help him."

"Then we help the girl and her friends," the younger man said.

"Yes. Watch for them- if you find them, help and protect them, my son." He sat in silence for a moment before saying, "Lie down, Edgar. Rest before the sun rises- we will be busy today with many things."

Edgar lay down. The father remained sitting hunched by the fire. I did not dare move while he sat thus; it was only when he leaned over his son and woke him, when the sky was beginning to lighten, and threw himself in his cloak for a short nap while his son wandered away into the woods that I crept off. My mind whirled with everything I had learned. It relieved me that they appeared to be on our side; but it frightened me too that they knew who I was.

Now what? I'm lost without food and horses. I could go to them and ask for help.

They may be on my side, but there is nothing to prevent them capturing me. The Elsenburg said that Sir Richard would be

angry with them for refusing help. But if they captured me, they could make him believe that they really are on his side.

The forest around me remained quiet and I heard not a sound, but suddenly something- or somebody- touched my shoulder. I whirled around. Both of the Elsenburgs stood behind me.

"Girl, what are you doing?" the elder spoke. His voice sounded gruff but his eyes were not cruel. His face was clean shaven except for gray stubble on his chin. His face looked strong, worn, and kind- but there was something behind his face that made me fear him.

I tried to speak but the words stuck in my throat. The father put his hand on my shoulder and made me turn. He and his son took me back to the camp I had just left. Nodding his head, the man beckoned for me to take a seat as Edgar stood, quiet, behind his father as he sat on the ground. Although the elder Elsenburg did not speak with a loud or angry voice, there was something commanding in his eyes.

"Who are you?"

Why is he asking me? Surely he knows. But if he doesn't... should I tell him?

I remained silent.

"Tell me."

"Christina." I looked down at my hands, folded in my lap.

"Where are you from, Christina?"

"The forest." I refused to answer straight-forwardly.

He was silent for a moment, then: "How did you get separated from your friends?"

I didn't reply.

"You are from Ravensburg," he said. The Elsenburg turned to Edgar. "Edgar, get one of the horses and look for the girl's friends. Tell them we have her."

With an obedient nod of his head, Edgar leaped up onto one of the two horses tied to a tree nearby and rode away.

Instead of speaking again, the Elsenburg lay down on a blanket, keeping a watchful eye on me. I did not move or look at him. An hour drifted past. The Elsenburg rose and searched through a bag. Then he put a piece of dried meat on a large leaf before me. He returned to his blanket. I took the meat and ate it, too hungry to be proud. Another hour went by. Then I heard horses from far away. Sir Fitzgerald, Andrew, Ben, and Edgar rode up. Sir Fitzgerald jumped off the horse and looked at my captor, who rose to his feet.

"What do you want with the girl?"

The father stepped forward. "We want nothing with the girl. I merely want to discuss some things with you before you

continue on your journey. Will you sit?" he gestured to the small fire.

Warily, Sir Fitzgerald took a seat. "What is it we need to discuss?" he asked.

The Elsenburg sat down across from him. "Firstly, my name is Calver," he said.

"I am Fitzgerald," Sir Fitz answered.

"I know where you are going and why," Calver said.

Sir Fitzgerald raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Calver smiled. "I do know. You are going to the Capital with a message for the king."

I thought I detected a glint of worry in Sir Fitzgerald's eyes, but he shrugged it off. "Perhaps you are right, and perhaps you are wrong," he replied. "Why should it matter to you?"

"I am right," Calver answered. His quiet but firm tones left no room to argue. "It has much to do with me."

Sir Fitzgerald looked at the Elsenburg in the eyes. "What is your purpose in wanting me? Why do you have this girl? Why are you questioning me? Is there something you want?"

"I have the girl because we found her wandering alone in the forest after listening to a conversation between myself and

my son," Calver replied. "You are going to the king. Lord Richard is pursuing you."

Sir Fitz said nothing.

"So. This is my offer. We can become friends, allies. Otherwise, we are enemies."

"Why should you want to be our friend?"

"Because I do not favor your Lord Richard," Calver answered.

Sir Fitz hesitated. "I will require time to think it over," he said. "I will also require it alone with these children."

"Very well. My son and I will leave. But know"- here Calver paused and stared at Sir Fitz- "that you cannot leave this place during that time alive."

Leaving us to think over the implication of this remark, he and his son withdrew.

Sir Fitz, Andrew, and Ben sat down beside me. "What happened, Christina?" Andrew asked.

I told them.

Sir Fitzgerald sat in silence for a moment. "So," he said at last, "What do you think, Christina? You heard their conversation."

What do I think?

"I don't know what we can do, but be their allies," I said.

"It would be extremely dangerous to make enemies of his people," Sir Fitz said.

"Would there be any risks in being friends?" Ben suggested. "I can't see any. They could aid us in our journey- no, maybe one of their number could take the message! They know all the paths and have the best horses. They could give us food, shelter, warmth, and safety."

"Risks in friendship?" Sir Fitz sputtered. "That is the talk of a fool. I'd say there are risks. There is the risk that their guide would abandon us in the woods. There is the risk that they would lead us straight to Lord Richard's men. There is the risk that they will treacherously mur-" he broke off as he glanced at me.

"I believe that they were sincere," I said, remembering Calver's face.

"Why would a good leader want to risk harming his people for a cause that probably will only bring them Richard's anger?"

"But, Sir Fitzgerald," Ben said, "Won't it be less risky for us to be friends with them rather than enemies? If we outright refused, they will be angry."

"We'll vote on it," Sir Fitzgerald decided. "Either way holds risks. One never knows when it comes to Elsenburgs. All in favor of being friends, raise your hand!"

I held up my hand. Just after me, Ben raised his, then Andrew. Sir Fitz stood up, exhaling a long breath as he did so.

"For better or for worse," he said, "we will be the friends of the Elsenburgs."

Chapter 6

Calver looked at us. "So?" he asked.

"We would like to know exactly what you mean by 'friends.'" Sir Fitzgerald's voice sounded quiet, and I knew that he still mistrusted the Elsenburgs.

"Here. Let us sit down. By 'friend' I mean that we will help you and you will help us."

"What do you mean? What do you want from us?"

"All we want from you is for you to tell the king of what is happening in Ravensburg. In return, we will give you food and my son, Edgar, will guide you on your way."

"Will your men help us fight them?" Sir Fitzgerald looked up, bushy eyebrows quivering.

"Fight them, no. It is too risky for my people."

"But don't you see?" Sir Fitz pleaded. Then he stopped.

"Your people? Are you their leader?"

"I am."

Sir Fitz hesitated. "Why do you want us to go to the king?"

"Why," Calver leaned forward, eyes intense, "why would a man as powerful and intelligent as Sir Richard take over a town such as Ravensburg except for some greater purpose? He has some greater scheme in mind- and it must come to a halt."

Sir Fitz did not look surprised. "Then my suspicions are not foolish," he said.

Calver nodded, and the men rose to their feet.

"Then," Sir Fitzgerald said, "We accept your- invitation. We will be your friends and allies."

"Good," Calver said.

"Very well, then. Richard's men are without horses for the present, but Elizabethtown is near and they will doubtless get mounts there. We must go."

"Not without rest and food," the Elsburgen stated. "The young men and the girl look weary."

Sir Fitzgerald glanced at us. "Oh- indeed they are," he murmured, an absent expression in his face. I could almost see the wheels in his brain turning away. "Very well, then, we will take a short rest."

We started again in the late afternoon. Edgar led us as we set off on Lord Richard's horses, with dried meat and bread in our saddlebags, also courtesy of Lord Richard's men.

We stopped when Sir Fitzgerald said it was midnight. I got off the horse I shared with Sir Fitzgerald and stretched, looking around. A pair of yellow eyes stared at us from a nearby tree, and I shuddered, turning again to the others.

"Can we light the fire?" Ben sounded doubtful. "Won't Sir Richard's men see it if they are anywhere close?"

"Someone must scout around and see if they are nearby," Sir Fitz answered. "We must have a fire."

"I shall go," Edgar said.

"And I," Andrew volunteered.

"Very well, Ben and Christina and I will set up camp," Sir Fitz said, lighting a lantern.

As the two boys rode off, we busied ourselves with setting up camp. Sir Fitz and Ben made a round, circular bare patch for the fire, ringing it with stones and piling wood inside of it. When finished, they stood back, looking off into the forest.

"It's very dark. Aren't we going to light the fire soon, Sir Fitzgerald? The lantern that the Elsenburgs gave us doesn't give off much light," I said.

Sir Fitz nodded. "Yes, I know. But I don't want to light a fire until the boys get back. I regret that I sent them off alone."

"They probably are still looking around for Lord Richard's men still," Ben said.

"That or"- Sir Fitzgerald shook his head. "Ah well, I'll stop worrying like an old woman. All Elsenburgs are trained in wood craft since they are babies, and Edgar is no different. They'll be back soon. However, as they apparently haven't found the men yet, we can be sure that they aren't anywhere close. I'll light the fire now, as you suggested." Bending, he produced a match and lit the kindling. It caught on fire and the clearing burst into a flickering light. We sat down around the flames.

Half-an-hour went past, according to Sir Fitz's gold watch. Sir Fitz stirred, got up and checked on the horses, and produced some food Calver had given us earlier in the day, which he divided up and we ate. Still we waited.

What is taking them so long? Perhaps they were captured.
Perhaps they were attacked. Perhaps-

I shook myself and scanned the woods around us.

Worrying isn't going to help any.

The moments dragged by. Then Sir Fitzgerald got to his feet and lit a lantern. In answer to our surprised looks he said, "I'm going to find them. They've been away for too long. Stay here, by the fire, and keep it burning- the light will guide me part of the way back. I will be back in a few hours- if I am not back by morning, and Andrew and the Elsenburg have not come either, make your way east- it will lead you to Elizabethtown. Send a messenger from there to the king." He raised his arm in a salute and jumped up onto one of the two horses. He vanished into the darkness. Even after he had left the firelight, I could hear the plop-plop of his horses' hooves on the ground.

Another half-hour went past, and I drifted off to sleep. I do not know how long I slept, but I woke to Ben's voice.

"Christina," he hissed.

I opened my eyes and partly sat up. "What?"

"Hush. Listen." He drew his sword with his right hand and went to the east side of the fire.

I now heard what he had heard- the sound of footsteps and muffled voices.

Why is he arming himself? It will just be Sir Fitzgerald
and-

What if it isn't? What if it is Sir Richard or his men?

I got to my feet as well, straining my eyes to make out the dark shapes in the forest. Twigs snapped and voices spoke. Within a moment of the first sounds, a person stepped from the darkness into the ring of light that the fire cast.

Mot. The man from Ravensburg. My captor.

His hand rested on the hilt of his sword but he did not move otherwise. For a long moment, he and Ben stood facing each other. Out of the shadows beside him stepped another man- one I again recognized from Ravensburg. Then another and another left the shadows, until at last eight men faced us.

God, have mercy on us now.

A slow smile appeared on Mot's face. "Well, look here! The little girl and one of her friends, too! It's about time, ain't it? Get her, Will. Hank, take the boy!"

As Will and Hank stepped forward, Ben spoke in a quiet, measured voice.

"Whoever comes a step nearer," he said, "will have a taste of this sword."

Is this the impulsive boy I've known all my life?

"Well go on, get them!" Mot shouted, waving his arms at the other men. "Go on! Take them! Alive! Don't let it be said eight strong men let a couple of children frighten them!"

The taunt stung. All of the men stepped forward, three heading for Ben. Three others started for me.

I hit the panther, or bear, or whatever it was last night.
I can do it now with these men. I can. I can!

The men were closer now. I glanced at Ben. The three men were advancing toward him. Then firelight reflected off blades as the fight began. Ben parried, feinted, and lunged, the sword darting back and forth so quickly I could hardly follow the moves.

I drew my dagger and faced the men approaching me, tensing myself as my heart raced. A sword flickered toward me and my dagger fell to the earth. I stepped back, tripped on a rock, and fell. Searing pain shot through my ankle.

"Got her!" A man caught me by the shoulder and tried to jerk me to my feet.

"Stop!" I tried to push him away, my voice rising shrill and angry. "Can't you see I'm hurt?" I closed my eyes, tears prickling behind my eyelids, as I took my ankle into my hands and felt it.

"I've got her," the man said to the other men who just ran up.

"Take her to Mot," one of them said.

My captor took my shoulder again and pulled me up, half-dragging me back to the fire. When he let me go, I crumpled to the ground in a heap, bending my head to hide my tears. My ankle throbbed. Running- or walking- was out of the question.

"Stop this fighting, or we'll hurt the girl more," a voice said. I looked up, wiping my eyes to see who was speaking. Mot faced Ben.

"What did you do to her?" Ben fell back, panting. His sword-arm fell limp to his side.

"We'll hurt her more if you don't quit this fighting," Mot repeated.

Ben hesitated, glancing at me. He looked around, eyes searching the shadows in the trees.

Mot nodded his head at my captor, who caught my arm and twisted it. Excruciating pain clouded my brain. My vision cleared suddenly and I saw Ben's face as he stared at us, distressed. He looked out into the woods again.

"Now, boy."

I gasped as the hold on my arm grew tighter.

Ben jerked his head, tightening his lips. "I surrender."

"Your sword."

He dropped the sword onto the ground. Mot snatched it up, looked it over, and gave it to one of the other men.

"Let go of Christina." Ben's voice sounded tight, too.

Mot jerked his head at my captor who released me. I sank down, cradling my arm against my body.

"We won't harm you. Come now, men. Alright then, let's move," Mot said. He glared at Ben. "We'll use the horse you stole from us. You'll be treated all the more harshly for that bit of work."

"There's only one of the horses," a man growled.

"I know. I get it. Now. Is anyone injured?"

"I am," a man sniveled. Looking up, I saw that blood soaked his shirt and hand.

"I already know you're hurt," Mot snapped. "No one else? All right. Come on. Sir Richard is waiting for us at Elizabethtown."

Sir Fitzgerald! Andrew!

I looked out into the forest. Before I could figure out what the noises approaching were three figures on horses came up. The firelight shone in their faces.

Andrew! Sir Fitzgerald! Edgar!

All three held swords in hand. They galloped forward.

A man slashed at Sir Fitzgerald's horse and the beast went down with a terrified scream. Sir Fitzgerald jumped out of the

way as the horse crashed down and started for the man who had injured the beast, waving weapon in the air.

"Get the other horses!" Mot yelled.

Before my eyes, swords flashed and blood flowed as the two horses went down. Edgar leaped from the horse and fought like a whirlwind. Andrew was not as lucky. He fell onto the ground as the horse lurched, then disappeared as the horse fell on top of him, shaking its head in a frenzy of pain and terror. Sir Fitzgerald started toward one clump of men, while Edgar went for the other. Ben squirmed free from the man holding him and darted forward to help Andrew. The odds were eight against two.

Sir Fitz lunged at one man, sweeping his sword toward him. The man fell. Sir Fitzgerald jerked his sword back and with lightening speed it fell again. The second man ducked back. I gasped as another sword swept toward Sir Fitzgerald's chest. Sir Fitz darted back and caught the man's blow on his sword. Slash for slash, parry for parry, the sword clashed with Sir Fitz's. Edgar fought with three men at once, his sword flashing through the air.

I felt my arm caught up again and brought behind my back. I caught my breath, determined not to make a sound. I saw light glint off of something and looked up. The man's sword was held directly over my head.

Edgar's sword dropped to the ground and a man snatched it up. Edgar backed up, but the men showed no intention in killing him.

The only ones now fighting were Sir Fitzgerald and his man. Sir Fitz looked completely absorbed in the fight. Mot raised his voice.

"The girl!" he bellowed, motioning for Sir Fitz's opponent to stop fighting.

Sir Fitzgerald partially turned, keeping a wary eye on his man. A look of horror crossed his face as he caught sight of me.

"We'll kill the girl unless you surrender," Mot shouted again.

"What will you do with us?" Sir Fitzgerald demanded.

"We won't hurt you, only bring you to Sir Richard," Mot said. "If you continue fighting, we will be forced to kill this girl."

"What of the boys?"

"Sir Richard wants them alive. But he doesn't care if the girl is alive or dead. We shall be forced to make her the latter if you continue to resist."

A moment drifted by. The pain in my arm grew more intense, and it took all my will power to keep silent. I could not restrain my tears; I lowered my head, that none might see them.

The tip of the sword lowered. Its' cold, sharp tip rested upon my neck.

"Very well." Sir Fitzgerald spat out the words. The point of the sword lifted off my neck and the man dropped my arm.

"Let's go." Mot glanced at everyone. "I get the horse; the rest of you can walk. Sir Richard is expecting us by morning."

"What of the girl?" My captor sounded uncertain. "I don't think she can walk."

"She's walking," Mot growled. "If she can't we may as well kill her now."

My captor shrugged and then pulled me to my feet. As he began to walk, pulling me behind him, I grew dizzy. Then everything went black.

Chapter 7

I lay in blackness.

Where am I? What is happening?

I stirred, my elbow rubbing against the wood of the floor I lay on as I struggled to sit up. My wrists were bound together with something rough and hairy, as were my ankles, making it difficult to move. My ankle throbbed.

"Hello?"

No one answered.

"Hello?" I repeated it louder.

Where is everybody?

Perhaps I'm dead.

In a panic I pulled at the thing holding my wrists together. No use. I went to my ankles and clawed at it there. It remained firm and unyielding.

Is it rope?

I moved my feet and winced. My ankle- I had forgotten. Looking around, I inhaled with relief. Light shone in a rectangular outline several feet or so before me. A door.

I must be in a room without windows, or a closet.

My heart slowed its furious pumping.

Do I hear voices?

The voices came from the direction of the door. I wriggled my way to it and put my ear to a crack where the light shown through.

"We will leave Elizabethtown today as soon as possible. We go to the Capital."

Elizabethtown- I'm in Elizabethtown. But that voice- I've heard it before.

"Of course, Sir Richard."

I stiffened.

Sir Richard?

"I will entrust you with a secret which you must tell no other man. If you do, you know what will happen."

"Yes, my lord." The voice sounded a bit shaky.

My mind went back to Calver and his suspicions.

Is this secret the scheme Calver suspects him of?

I hardly knew if I were more excited or frightened.

"I have plans in the Capital. There will be trouble brewing in the west very soon- rebellions against the king, disturbances of the like. If I know the King at all, he will journey there right before autumn sets in- when most of his trips in the east are completed- to quiet everything and restore peace. He will be very busy finishing up last minute affairs beforehand."

He paused.

"Yes, my lord?"

"The disturbances in the west will be the doings of my men."

"Ah."

"While all in the palace are busy on that last day, I will slip in and dispose of the king."

What did he just say?

I felt my heart thumping.

"You, leading the other men, will dispose of those loyal to King Philip and pronounce me king. I have men- many more than you know of- who will come and support me. By sheer outnumbering and surprise, we shall win."

"My lord!

"You will not breathe a word of this. If you prove faithful in this trust, I will give you a high place in the land once I am king. If not..."

"Of course, my lord. I will not say anything."

"Good. Now go to the west, to Leavens, and inform my men there..."

I collapsed- quietly- to the floor.

What is it I have overheard?

I felt dizzy and closed my eyes, willing my heart to slow its frantic pace.

Sir Richard is planning to assassinate the king.

* * * * *

With a last effort, I pulled my hand out of the rope around my wrists. My hands were free- bruised, scratched, but free. I waved my hands in the air for a second, trying to get relief from the burning, then dropped them to the rope around my ankles. Now that my hands were free, it could only be a matter of minutes to free my feet.

Once I am free- then what?

I shook my head, dispelling the unwelcome thought. I could plan that out after I had untied my feet.

If only I had a knife. Everyone else who is unfortunate enough to be tied up seems to have one around to aid in rescue.

I felt the knot and groaned. Tight.

What is the use of getting this off? I don't even know if I can open the closet door. Maybe it won't have a handle or catch on this side of the door. Even if it does, I'll either have to crawl or hobble my way out of this place- wherever I am. In doing so, I'll most likely be caught. If I do get out, there is no chance that I can find the others- wherever they are.

I leaned my head against the wall.

Why must everything be so difficult?

* * * * *

I hobbled to the door and put up a hand, feeling it. My fingers brushed across something metal and I fingered it carefully.

The catch to the door handle.

Twisting it around, I tried pushing the door. After a few seconds of twisting and turning the catch, the door creaked open.

An empty bedroom. Am I in a house?

I stepped out of the closet, resting one hand against the wall for balance.

Now for the test. Can I walk with my ankle hurt as it is?

I hobbled across the room.

Thankfully, yes. I just hope I won't have to run.

Opening the door, I peered out.

A hallway with many more doors.

I hurried down the passageway, not daring to open any of the doors. I was rewarded by finding a flight of stairs leading downwards. I limped my way down these. The stairs led to a large room. The tables scattered throughout and the counter-top at one

end, littered with many mugs, told me that I was in an inn. A stout man wearing an apron standing behind the counter studied me over. I hurried out.

Unsure of what now to do, I made my way to a bench in the town square and sat down. Hunger, thirst, pain, and dejection raged within me.

What can I do now? Somehow I have to get out of here without being found. But I don't know where the others are. What did Sir Richard do to Sir Fitzgerald? And Andrew? And Ben, and Edgar? And now I know what the scheme Sir Fitzgerald suspected of him was- yet I cannot do anything.

"No." I muttered the word aloud almost without noticing.

This has got to stop. I can do something. I must! The life of the king depends on it. I must go to the Capital. They said that the king will leave shortly before autumn- I still have time, though not much...

I shuddered as I thought over the land I had to cross. A river lay just outside of Elizabethtown, I knew that much; beyond that, more forest. Alone, crippled, on foot, that would take me- weeks? Months?

As if I could survive that long without food and water.

Wait. Why is it that I must go? Why not somebody else? Why could I not tell the Lady of this town- Lady Elizabeth, I believe her name is- about what is happening?

I got up, determination giving purpose to my steps.

At last I can give this task to somebody else. Why, in heaven's name, did I set out on this journey in the first place?

It was Marie.

The thought of her brought pain. I closed my eyes.

Marie, help will be coming very soon. Please- please be all right.

* * * * *

The room in which I entered, escorted by a servant, was grander beyond anything which I had expected. The floor was marble, gleaming and smooth underneath my feet. Large and beautiful pictures adorned the walls. The chair at the far end of the room looked more like a throne than a chair; and Lady Elizabeth sitting there reminded me more of what I had pictured a queen to look like than a Lady. My fingers went to my waist and caressed the little bag at my belt in which my miniatures were kept. I knew the miniature of Lady Margaret by heart- her blond hair swept up onto her head, a simple gown worn, a slender

necklace around her neck. Lady Elizabeth wore necklaces composed of large beads, earrings dangled from her ears, her hair appeared to be coiled around her head in a most intricate design, and her dress, lacey, jewel-bedecked, looked like one that might be worn by the Queen herself. Lady Elizabeth's face, looking out from behind all this finery, looked much more mild and gentle than her adornment had given me to expect. She stood.

"Yes?"

"Lady Elizabeth," I said, curtsying. As I held out my skirts, I became aware of how filthy and thread-bare they were. My cheeks grew warm at the sudden observation. I made an attempt to bring my thoughts back on track.

I'll tell her, she'll send a messenger, imprison Sir Richard, help me find the others, and all will be well.

Several seconds passed after I told her of all. I waited for her exclamations of shock, her promises to capture the villain, her expressions of concern and pity for me, and her promises of immediate action.

It didn't happen like that.

"You must be mistaken," she said, voice sharp.

What?

"My lady?"

"You must be. Sir Richard did not do any of the things you accused him of." Her voice was cold.

"But my Lady Elizabeth, I assure you, he did," I insisted.
"He--"

"You no longer are mistaken, you are purposely telling falsehoods," she said, the anger clear in her voice.

I lost my temper.

"My Lady Elizabeth, he did indeed," I said, trying to keep my voice calm but not succeeding well. "Not only did he abolish the Council and throw my people- my people!- into prison unjustly, but he put my younger sister in prison, chased and fought my friends and I, imprisoned me, plots to kill King Philip, and--"

"Enough!" Her voice clipped my own short. Her eyes, previously mild, now blazed. "Guard!"

A man entered. "Yes, my Lady Elizabeth?"

"Escort this girl from the town."

"Yes, my lady."

He led me out of the palace, down a road, and then past the gate. There he left me.

I stared after him, smarting with humiliation and fury.

Is the woman sane?

She refuses to believe me, my friends are gone, I have no way to get home, the Lady is acting very strangely, and now I'm banished from the town. How could things get any worse?

Angry and resentful, I limped away, not knowing or caring of direction.

"There she is!"

I turned my head sharply. A man- I presumed one of Sir Richard's men- ran toward me.

Panic flared through me. I turned and ran. Or tried to. Forgetting my ankle, I placed full weight on it and fell as it buckled beneath me.

Chapter 8

I rolled over, panic screaming within me.

He'll kill me. He'll kill me. He'll-

A sharp snap from behind me jerked my head around.

Andrew?

He stepped forward, sword in hand. I heard the sounds of footsteps behind me- running away.

"Christina! What- but no, I will ask questions later. We must hurry." He gave me his hand.

I pulled myself up, wincing as my injured foot touched the ground.

"Where did you come from? Where are the others?"

"They're in that direction, come on. The man had no sword, that's why he ran. They will be on our trail again." He looked at me in some concern. "Are you hurt?"

"I twisted my ankle during the fight- I think I can walk, as long as I'm careful..."

We're about to be pursued and I can't run. Simply marvelous.

He bent and picked up a stout looking stick lying on the ground. "A bit too long, but it must do. Use it as a cane, and lean on my shoulder." He said nothing else, but the nervous glance he threw over his shoulder toward Elizabethtown reminded me of the necessity for speed. We hurried, as fast as I could hobble, away from the place.

"Andrew, where are we going?"

"To the river. Not much further. Ben and Sir Fitz and Edgar are there."

"River?"

"Yes, the river. River Caline. We must cross it."

I almost said, "Cross River Caline?" but bit back the words before I uttered them.

No need to appear a simpleton, repeating everything he says back to him.

Wait- River Caline?

"Is there a bridge?"

He laughed briefly. "No. It's not as simple as that."

Of course not. Nothing in this journey has been simple.

"Well?"

"We don't know how to cross it yet, Christina."

"Oh."

Just what we need right now, too.

The sound of the river became audible. In a moment we stepped out of the forest into sand. The stick I was using as a cane sank into the wet, oozy particles.

"Ben! Edgar! Sir Fitzgerald!" Andrew shouted, waving his hand to the three standing on the riverbank.

They turned, saw us, and hurried forward.

"Christina! How did you get Christina, Andrew? What happened?"

"Miss Christina! Thank God! Andrew! What- how?"

"Andrew! You have the lady!"

I smiled, warmed at their pleasure and excitement, though uncertain of what to say, especially since none of the remarks were addressed to me.

"I found her. I'll explain later. We will be followed any minute by Sir Richard's men."

Sir Fitzgerald wasted no time in lamentations or frustration. "Very well. We'll have to swim then."

"Swim!" I glanced at the river.

"Yes, swim."

I glanced behind us into the forest and gasped as six men dashed toward us from behind the trees. The sun glinted against the metal of their weapons.

"Draw your swords! Quick!" Sir Fitz shouted.

I felt at my belt and found nothing. "I don't have mine!" I shouted.

"Hide then!" Sir Fitzgerald sprang forward to meet the men, the boys close behind.

I backed away from the fight, the icy river water hissing as it splashed against my legs. One of Sir Richard's men splashed into the water before me. I snatched my stick up, holding it like a weapon, planting my feet deeply into the sticky sand to keep my balance. The man fumbled with his sword, trying to pull it from the sheath.

With no time to think, I brought the stick in front of me in a defensive position just in time to block his thrust. The stick cracked but did not break.

"Christina!"

I heard a splash almost directly behind me. Stumbling back in the water away from my antagonist, I glanced toward the sound.

Andrew's sword.

I snatched it up from the water, the sudden movement almost toppling me. The sword felt heavy and slippery in my hands. My mind flashed back to my first sword lesson. I didn't dare close my eyes, but I reviewed the lessons Sir Fitzgerald had taught me in my mind.

One foe. The five other men have all gone after the Sir Fitzgerald and the boys. I can defeat this lone man. I must!

The man's sword darted forward, quicker than my eye could follow. I raised Andrew's sword. The blades clashed. He drew his back, and again it came forward. I caught the blow on my blade. Almost without thinking I slashed for his legs. The blades clashed again, drew back, went forward again. My confidence grew as the fight continued.

He lunged forward. I made myself focus on the tricks Sir Fitzgerald taught me as we fought.

Don't lock wrist.

Follow up lunge with a second, unexpected lunge.

Bring arm up.

I'm tiring...

I girded up my strength and slashed at the man with every ounce of strength in me. The blow landed against his sword, which fell to the ground. As I bent to snatch it up, the man made a lunge at me. His great weight crashed into my body and I fell.

The water splashed everywhere as I fell into a sitting position. I spluttered, resisting the impulse to wipe the water from my face.

My sword. Where is my sword?

There was no time to look for it. The man rose to his feet from beside me, his eyes wide and bloodshot in his red face. I tried to duck out of the way, but I ducked too late. Water filled my eyes, mouth, and nose as my entire body went under the water, a pressing, crushing weight on top of me. My head crashed against a rock but I didn't feel the pain. Helpless, terrified, panicked, I struggled under the water.

The sword!

I could not see it but I felt the hilt poking into my shoulder. I grabbed it as alarm bells rang through my head and my mind started to darken, my lungs about to burst. With as much of my strength as I could muster I jabbed the man in the stomach with the hilt.

The weight disappeared. Dizzy, my chest pumping for air, I half-dragged myself into a sitting position again.

Air.

It was more precious than gold, diamonds, jewels, anything, as I gulped it up between choking coughs. I dragged myself to shallow water and collapsed onto my back, still taking it in with deep breaths.

Seconds, then moments passed. Finally I heard voices.

"There she is! She's--"

"Hurry!"

Feet splashed through water. Then something took my arm and dragged me to a sitting position.

"Christina!"

I opened my eyes to look into Ben's, Sir Fitzgerald's, Edgar's, and Andrew's frantic faces. They appeared to relax a little as I stirred, coughing again.

"She's alive," Sir Fitzgerald muttered.

I put my hand to my aching head, coughing again. They helped me up and patted my back until I was done choking.

"Come," Sir Fitzgerald said, voice urgent. "We are done with these men, but Sir Richard has more. We are still in danger. I shall feel much safer once we are across the river."

* * * * *

"We may count ourselves very blessed," Sir Fitzgerald said, throwing a stick onto the fire. "Not a one of us killed or even seriously injured."

"Although Christina came pretty close to it," Ben said. He ran his fingers over the bandage around his leg.

"Christina remembered the lessons I taught her," Sir Fitzgerald said, voice warm.

I blushed. "I only remembered them because you first taught me," I said. "And I am not wounded, like the rest of you. But- Sir Fitzgerald- I have a question."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well- I was frightened. Frightened that I might hurt or- kill the man who was attacking me. Does that make me a- a coward?"

"No. No, of course not," he said. "Courage does not mean defeating your enemy, Christina."

"I- know."

"Sometimes it takes courage to not injure an enemy," Sir Fitzgerald said.

"Yes," Edgar agreed.

I remained quiet for a moment before remembering something. "What happened last night? When I woke this morning, I was in a closet, all by myself."

"We were taken to an inn in Elizabethtown. Sir Richard had us taken out for questioning; then he ordered his men to take us to the prison. We escaped and got our swords and some of our possessions back on the way there. Here is your dagger." Andrew rummaged around in a damp knapsack and pulled the weapon out.

"Why did Sir Richard not want me?"

"I assume he did not know you were there. From what the men said last night, I gather that he did not care whether you were alive or dead, and not seeing you come out, thought you were dead."

"How did Andrew come to find you?" Edgar asked.

"I escaped," I said. "I left the inn and went to the Lady. She refused to believe me. She had me escorted from the town. It was then that one of Sir Richard's men saw and almost attacked me, before Andrew came. How did you happen upon me, Andrew?"

"I was looking for any sight of you," he replied. "If I did not see you, we were going to plan a rescue."

"But I do not understand why Lady Elizabeth would not believe me." I clenched my fists in my lap, feeling the anger I had first felt against her.

"Did you accuse Sir Richard?"

"But of course." I looked up from my lap at Sir Fitzgerald, surprised at the question.

"It is no wonder then, for Sir Richard is her nephew."

"Nephew!"

"Yes. It is true. But we must sleep. The night grows late. We have much traveling tomorrow."

"Sir Fitzgerald!" I jolted up, voice loud.

How, how, how could I forget this?

He looked at me, startled. "What is it, Christina?"

"Sir Richard. He plans to assassinate the king!"

Chapter 11

"Excuse me, sir?"

The guard standing at the gate glanced at John and I.

"Yes?"

Once it would have been "Yes, my lady?"

I pushed the thought away. He could not be expected to know who I was. After one look at my filthy dress, I really could not blame him for his mistake.

"Is this the Capital?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Thank you." I curtsied. "Where can I find the king? Is he well?"

"The king?" he echoed. Again he scrutinized me. "Yes, he is quite well."

"Where might he be?"

"In his palace, most likely. He has public hearings I believe; but they are over by now. You will have to wait until tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning!" I exclaimed. "But sir, I cannot wait that long. My business is very- extremely- urgent."

"I am sorry," he said, turning away.

I glanced at John, standing beside me.

At least I know where the palace is, and I know the king is well. At least I'm here.

Finally. Those last five days were torture.

"We're here," I said aloud.

"Yes..." John's attention was not on me, but on the buildings around. I had to stare with him. This was a city. The streets were cobbled instead of the ordinary dirt roads. The houses- houses, not cottages!- were tall, second story affairs, made of polished stone. Beauty, elegance, luxury, and comfort were written all over them. Water splashed in a fountain not far away. The salty odor of fish mingled with the warm, fragrant scent of bread.

"I believe I will look around a little," John said.

"All right. Oh, I have a little money here"- I dug some coins out of my money pouch- "Here, for food."

John smiled and leaned awkwardly over in a bow. "Thank you, Miss Christina."

"Goodbye. I'll find you later," I said as he limped off.

I located a baker, bought some bread for myself, and sat down on the wooden bench surrounding the fountain.

So the King is still well. That is good.

Moments slipped past as I stared into the fountain and ate my bread. I stirred only when I felt a touch on my arm. I turned; a bearded man stood before me. I knew I had seen him before...

One of Sir Richard's men!

I sprang to my feet but he seized my arm and pulled me from the fountain to a secluded place behind a building.

"I mean no harm," he said. "I swear you that."

I studied the ground, refusing to look into his face, anger and despair mingling in my heart.

"Come now. I have a proposition to offer. You are trying to reach the king, are you not?"

As if I'd tell you that!

I didn't answer.

"You are," he continued after a brief pause. "I have a message for you to give him."

Oh? And you expect me to believe this?

"Sir Richard will try to kill him tonight."

Startled out of my disdain, I looked up.

Tonight! So soon! No, I did not know that.

"You're a brave girl," the man continued, lowering his voice until it came only as a hoarse whisper. "He'd kill me if he suspected me of telling you this- he doesn't know you're here. If I could I would never swear allegiance to him- but what is done is done."

So I've observed.

I looked back at the ground but kept my ears wide open.

"Here is the plan," he went on. "The king should be working in his room this evening. There is a ball tonight in the far end of the palace, but the king will be busy and will come late, Master Richard says. The Master will enter the palace through a side door and go to the room while the servants and guards are busy with the party. You hide outside of that door and follow him. Then sneak up behind him and"- he made a quick motion with his finger across his throat.

"I can't do that," I exclaimed, horrified. "That is the most cowardly form of fighting yet. It isn't fighting! It's murder!"

"Keep your voice down," he hissed. "Listen, girl. This is the only way the king will be saved. You do want to save the king."

"Of course, but"-

"You can try to tell guards about it- won't work. Master Richard has a clean slate here."

"Why will you not do it?"

"Me?" He shook his head. "No, not me."

Coward.

"I will not do that," I said. "I will warn the king in another way. But I cannot do that."

His face became distorted with anger. "You're a foolish, foolish girl," he growled. Then he left. I stood motionless, staring after him.

Tonight.

* * * * *

"Yes, my lady?"

Be persuasive, Christina, I told myself. I have two advantages here- I'm a lady and I'm a girl. They must listen to me.

How is he to know if I'm a lady? I look just the opposite. And perhaps he would be more likely to listen to me if I were a man.

"Yes?" The man repeated.

"I- have business with the king."

The butler shook his head. "I am sorry. The king does not accept audiences in the afternoon."

"This is very urgent," I pleaded. "I know of an assassination plot, sir."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really?" His face, smooth and impassive, did not reveal his thoughts.

Yes, really. Listen to me!

"Yes, sir. This is very important, I assure you."

The butler sighed. "Very well, then. Perhaps you had better speak with the chief of the guard."

"Yes, yes, please," I said, relieved.

The butler gestured me into the palace and led me to a small room that contained two wooden chairs and a table. "Wait here, madam," he said, gesturing to one of the chairs. I took a seat and he left, shutting the door behind him.

After a few moments the door opened. I looked up to see a tall, young-looking man enter the room and shut the door again behind him. I stood up and curtsied as he bowed, then took a seat again, my heart pounding more quickly than usual with excitement. The man took a seat opposite from me.

"I am Sir Gerald, Captain of the King's Guard." His voice was polished.

"I am the daughter of Sir Edward of the Capital. My name is Christina."

"Very well."

I clasped and unclasped my hands. A nervous feeling blossomed and grew in my stomach.

What if I don't say it in the proper way, and he won't believe me?

Nonsense. Of course that won't happen.

Sir Gerald, Captain of the King's Guard, settled back in his chair, looking at me expectantly. "Tell me of this assassination plot. When is it to take place?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight?" he raised his eyebrows.

I nodded.

"Very well then. Who is the would-be-assassin?"

"Sir Richard of Elizabethtown."

Sir Gerald straightened in his seat. "Richard of Elizabethtown," he said in a tone of surprise, "Really, my lady? He is a most noble man, my lady; a very loyal subject to the king indeed."

If he's planning to assassinate the king, how can he be loyal?

"It is he, my lord," I replied.

"Indeed? Well then, tell me of how you learned this plot."

"I overheard a conversation between him and one of his men."

"Indeed?"

I bit my lip before saying 'indeed' right back at him.

"Yes, sir."

"And how did you happen to overhear this?"

I fidgeted. "I was imprisoned nearby."

His eyebrows shot up. "Imprisoned? How? Why, my lady?"

"We fought them"-

"We? Who else was with you?"

I tried to bite back my irritation at being interrupted.

"Sir Fitzgerald of Ravensburg, Sir Andrew of Ravensburg, his squire, and an Elsenburg were with me."

"An Elsenburg! Indeed?"

Indeed!

"Yes."

"So, my lady?" he leaned back into his chair again and bent his fingertips together. "And how did you happen to fight with Sir Richard?"

"They attacked us."

"Indeed?"

Yes, indeed you fool! Must you keep saying that?

"And why did they attack you?" Something resembling an amused smile hovered over the young man's lips as he relaxed in his chair.

I could barely keep my voice to a calm and quiet tone.

"They attacked us because we left Ravensburg against orders, so we could tell the king"-

"Tell the king what? Of the assassination plot?"

"No!" I snapped. "To tell him that Sir Richard had taken over Ravensburg!"

Why can't he ask me these questions in a logical, orderly manner so it doesn't sound so ridiculous and confusing?

"I- see."

Of course you do.

"So. And what exactly did Sir Richard say in this-overheard conversation?"

"He said that some of his men were going to stir up trouble in the west, and the king would go there in the autumn, and while he was so busy beforehand Sir Richard would kill him and become king in his place."

"Do you really think everyone would be so ready to acknowledge him as king?"

"Sir Richard has many men who will make him king, regardless of whether the people acknowledge him or not!"

"Indeed?"

I kept my mouth shut.

"So Sir Richard said that he would kill the king on- let me see -the sixth day of the week?"

"No"- I inwardly writhed, knowing that he would find this next part even more unbelievable than the rest- "another man in his band who is disloyal to him told me that part a few moments ago."

"I see. Well, my lady Christina," Sir Gerald said as he rose, "Thank you very much for this warning. Have a pleasant day." He bowed.

"Will you put extra guards on the king? Find Sir Richard and prison him?" I stood as well.

He sighed. "We will do our job as always, my lady."

"You won't do anything more."

"My lady, really"-

My voice rose, almost hysterically. "You won't do anything?"

"My lady, I assure you that we will do as we always do."

I stalked from the room, jerked the big palace door open myself without waiting for the butler, and marched out.

Sir Fitzgerald's, Edgar's, Andrew's, Ben's, and Marie's lives- to say nothing at all of the king's life!- are to be thrown away because of some- some- bone-headed man who says

'indeed' and 'really'! Some 'Sir Gerald of the Captain Guard!'

Some-

I forced myself to take several long, deep breaths.

No. Their lives are not going to be thrown away because of him.

I'll tell the king myself.

I started to hurry off down the street when something caught my eye in a large glass window. I halted, staring at it.

I had looked at my dress enough to know it was filthy-sleeping and traveling in the dirt did that- but I had not seen my entire self for quite a while. What I saw shocked me.

No wonder the man wouldn't listen to me. Maybe if I had looked a little more like a lady...

I could dress like a noblewoman. Although I'd have to buy expensive clothes. What else could I dress up as? Who could get ready admittance into the palace?

The trees in a small park nearby beckoned to me. Weary, I made my way through the swarm of people who seemed to be everywhere and sat on the cool grass. And then the thought struck me.

A servant. There will be many servants in the palace. If I could dress like one of them...

I looked at the sun. It appeared to be mid-afternoon.

I have time.

I found and bought the proper clothes without much delay. The woman who ran the shop let me wash and dress in a back room. When I finished I looked at myself carefully in a mirror. My face, arms, and legs were clean. A white, frilly cap covered my hair. My new gray dress almost reached the floor and sagged a little at the waist but that didn't matter. The apron was a cheap affair, one that no well paid maid would wear- and the maids who worked in the palace were certainly well paid- but again, that didn't matter.

Now comes the difficult part. How can I find the side door that Sir Richard will use? What if I choose the wrong one? If I just hide by a door, I might easily choose the wrong one, and while I'm waiting in another place, he may-

I shuddered.

No; I'll simply have to find the room the king is working in and tell him himself.

I chose a back door and entered, coming face to face with a stout woman wearing clothes similar to mine and wielding a broom.

"The kitchen is in dreadful need of more assistance. Go there and offer your services- they will be welcome," she said.

That was sudden. At least she really thinks I'm a servant.

"I am new here, and I don't know where the kitchen is."

"Down the hall, turn left, turn left again. It'll be right in front of your nose." The woman began to sweep again.

I followed her directions, the strong scent of soap from the corridors fighting the delicious wafts coming from the kitchen.

A servant here can give me some news, surely.

A strong wave of heat rolled over me as I entered the kitchen. One of the servants, a tall, thin woman, saw me and bustled over. "We can certainly use you," she said, taking my elbow and leading me to a table where a girl pounded potatoes with a fork. "Just mash these as quick as you can."

"I wondered"- I sighed as she hurried away. I turned to the girl before me. "Excuse me. Do you know where the king is right now? I- I've had orders to- clean the hallway outside of his room."

The girl shot me a queer look as she continued to mash the potatoes. "That's strange. The most urgent work right now is to help with the food. Who told you to do that?"

"The- housekeeper."

"The housekeeper? Oh. Well, I'm sorry, but I don't know where he is. Ask the housekeeper."

"All right. Thank you."

I turned away and touched the sleeve of a girl working behind me. She turned, flicking a blond curl out of her eyes.

"Yes?"

I asked her my question and she turned away, shrugging her shoulders.

Will no one in this horrible kitchen tell me?

"You, girl. Help, please." It was the woman who had ushered me in. She stared at me, a frown wrinkling her forehead. "Do you not understand? We are in a hurry to get this food ready."

"Excuse me," I tried again, "but do you know where the king is right now? The housekeeper gave me orders to clean the hallway outside of his room."

She fixed me with a hard stare.

"I'm the housekeeper, and I don't recall giving you any such orders."

"Oh..."

"We need help in the kitchen."

I started to walk away.

"I'll discharge you if you don't come back this instant!" the woman called.

I ignored her. Somehow I must find the king. A large grandfather's clock tick-tocked loudly, straining my nerves almost past endurance.

I suppose I'll just have to look for him. Oh, let me not be too late!

Ten minutes of wandering up and down hallways made me desperate. The palace seemed almost deserted- everyone appeared to be at the ball. Sir Richard might be here any minute. I pictured him stealing down a corridor- drawing his sword- opening the door that separated him from the king-

Stop it. Stop it! I must find him in time. I must.

My feet made no noise on the stone floor, but my breathing seemed to echo off the walls of the passageway. I hurried through hallway after hallway.

It's hopeless. I can't find him. He may be in any of these rooms, and the door is shut so I don't know it. Maybe he's in the ballroom with the others right now- maybe Sir Richard's man was wrong.

I paused for a moment to catch my breath, then rounded a corner. I saw a man hastening down the passageway, walking away from me.

Finally, someone whom I can ask!

I broke into a run toward him. "Please, sir! Do you know where the king is? I must find him."

The man turned, drawing a sword, and stared at me while my breath caught in my throat.

The man was Sir Richard.

He stared at me in astonishment for only a second before his face grew distorted with anger. Before I could run he caught my shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he hissed. "I have half a mind to"-

He seemed to change his mind as footsteps were heard from nearby. He slid the sword back in its sheath.

"You little wretch," he growled. "I have business to take care of, and you shall not ruin it this time, regardless of when I can dispose of you."

I swallowed, refusing to meet his eyes. I was caught this time.

Maybe not.

I opened my mouth to scream, but Richard's hand slammed across my mouth and the only thing that came out was a muffled squawk.

"No you don't," he muttered. "You are coming with me, if that's the only way I can keep you quiet for now. But just wait, little girl. You will suffer for the many inconveniences you have caused me." He snatched the cap from my hair and stuffed most of it into my mouth.

Pushing me in front of him he went on. Expertly he wound through hallways.

He'll kill me if I try to stop him or escape.

Do I have my dagger?

Without drawing his attention I felt carefully at my waist.

No.

I couldn't fight him anyway. He's a much better swordsman than I.

Then the king must die.

Hot tears welled up in my eyes.

The king will die.

Marie, my little sister. Was she even alive? Sir Fitzgerald, Edgar, Andrew, Ben. My most faithful, loyal friends. Were they alive?

Then I thought again of the king.

The handle of Sir Richard's sword was so close that it poked into my back as we walked.

Now!

I jerked myself from Sir Richard's grasp, turned, grabbed his sword, and backed away from him. The sword felt heavier than I had anticipated, but I held it to his throat. Sir Richard cursed and stared at me. I stared back at him as I pulled the cap from my mouth and threw it on the floor.

"Stand still," I ordered, swallowing to dispel the starchy taste.

He looked from me to the sword to me again. "Listen. I will not harm you. I will make you a great lady if you will only put down that sword."

"I can be a lady any day I choose," I shot back. "Ravensburg is my town, and the people in it are my people."

"Ravensburg," he sneered. "A tiny country town."

Exactly what I thought, so long ago. Or was it so long ago?

"I will not put down this sword," I said.

Now what can I do? I can't- can't kill him. No, I can't do that.

I opened my mouth to scream for help. The palace seemed deserted, but there must be servants and guards about. Then I caught a movement from the corner of my eye.

John?

"What are you doing here?" Sir Richard snapped.

John hobbled nearer. "Only to help you, my lord."

What?

"Mister John!" I gasped.

"I don't need help," Richard snarled. "Warn me if anyone approaches."

What- how-

"What of the king? Hadn't I better take care of the girl while you-?"

"No. This girl has caused me enough trouble already. I'll take care of her once and for all."

He lunged forward as if about to seize the sword back. Heart pounding, my sword went back to his throat.

How could John-?

I stole a glance at the old man, who stood, motionless, a short distance away.

"Mister John- what is happening? Why are you here?"

"Why? Because he is my man. He owes his allegiance to me," Sir Richard said.

"What?"

John didn't look at me.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Not everyone is brave enough to join their friend's enemy," he said.

"Brave! He wasn't brave to do so."

"Oh? And what would you define courage as? You certainly don't have it. If you did you would kill me right now. You are too frightened to do a thing."

"Being courageous does not mean that I must kill you," I flashed.

"But admit it. You are too frightened to do so."

I stared at him, anger and fear coursing through my blood.

I am frightened. But that does not mean I am being a coward. And I am not being a coward because I am not killing him!

"I- am not a coward." I forced the words out.

"If you are not, I suppose you are implying that I am?"

What?!

His words sunk in.

"I never said you were," I faltered. "But you would kill me if you could. And I- I hold your life right now in my hands. And I have courage enough to leave you alive."

Then he moved so swiftly I barely saw what happened. With a sudden lunge he had snatched the sword from my hand. It was now my turn to feel the cold tip of steel against my skin.

"Well now. I have spent enough time as it is with this little maiden." He hesitated, and I could see his mind whirling in thought. "Take her along with me, John. We can dispose of her in the king's room. Move, man! The king will be leaving at any moment for the ball. Then it will be hopeless."

Sir Richard hustled me down the hall. "There the room is," he muttered. I stared in horror at the wooden door opposite us. Thirty steps away- fifteen- ten.

The king.

Courage.

With some supernatural strength, I wrenched myself from Richard's grasp and darted to the door that led into the king's room, screaming. A person moved inside- there was the sound of a chair being pushed back. "Your sword! Your sword!" I screamed through the door. Then Sir Richard hurled me to the floor. He lay his hand on the door-handle, turned it, and slammed the door open. It crashed against the wall. My attention was focused only on the two men before me- one cruel, heartless, evil- and the other loving, compassionate, strong.

I warned the king.

Sword met with sword.

With the Lord's power, I warned the king.

Richard fell to the floor, with the King standing over him.

Chapter 12

"The lady Christina, your majesty." The servant made a quick bow and left.

"Your majesty." I curtsied.

At last this time I'm wearing a dress I needn't be ashamed of.

"My lady Christina. I am very pleased to see you this morning. Will you take a seat?"

I sat down in the chair offered.

He lowered himself into his chair. "The purpose of this meeting is to discuss something with you that, perhaps, I should have proposed weeks ago when we first met."

"Yes, your majesty?"

"It is just this: Lady Christina, the queen and I would be most honored to have you and your sister make the palace your home."

"My king!" I gasped.

He smiled, teeth flashing. "Do not thank me, child. Your sister will be here soon?"

"Yes- today, most likely."

"Discuss it with your sister then, and see what she thinks about it; then tell me when you have reached a decision."

* * * * *

"So, Christina." Marie drew her knees up and clasped her hands around them. Her face looked thinner than it had been, and her eyes more hollow in her white face, but she was the same old Marie. "Tell me! What did the King do then?"

"He helped me up and took me into his room, and I told him everything. John- Sir Richard's follower- testified to it. The king was very kind and wise."

Marie did not speak for a moment. "What about Andrew and Ben? And Sir Fitzgerald, and Edgar?"

"The king promised to send soldiers to free them and the other slaves."

"Good. They'll come back to us, don't worry, Christina."

I shook my head.

"I'm not so sure."

Marie shifted on the sofa and rested her head against my shoulder. "What did the King do for you? He gave you a reward of some sort, didn't he?"

"I didn't do this for a reward."

"Of course you didn't. But he must have given you one."

The words came with some difficulty. "He told me that if we wished, we could stay here, in the palace, in the Capital, for as long as we lived."

"You have always wanted to live in the Capital! How marvelous, Christina! It will be lovely to live here."

She wants to stay, then.

I sighed. "It's late. Go to bed, dear. You just reached the Capital today, and you don't look as well as I could wish."

"Very well. Good night, Christina."

"Good night."

Marie left. I turned to the window and leaned my elbows on the sill as I looked out over the city.

Why do I feel like this? I ought to be joyful. The journey is over; the king is saved; Sir Richard is gone; Marie is alive and as well as can be expected- and my dream is coming true; I can be a lady here in the Capital at last.

I stood up, running my hands down my silk skirts as I did so.

I'm just tired. I'll feel better after some sleep. Then I can awaken to these new and beautiful clothes, and my sister, and this lovely room to live in.

I glanced around the little parlor. It was the most beautiful room I had ever seen; perfect in every way.

This will be mine for always, living in the palace.

Somehow, the thought seemed to oppress my spirits more.

I woke the next morning to find the room flooded with sunlight and the very dust sparkling.

How different from the time when I woke in the goblin's tunnel to find the others gone and myself all alone!

I shuddered.

I'm still not happy. If only Andrew, and Ben, and the others could be with me now.

Yet it isn't just them that I'm missing, either. What is it I want?

I rolled out of bed and went to the window, drawing back the white, lacy curtains. Birds trilled from the trees outside and a cool breeze swept into my face.

I have almost anything I could possibly want now. What is wrong with me?

The door opened. "Good morning, Lady Christina," Marie trilled.

Startled, I half turned. "Lady Christina? I'm not that. Only actual Ladies like Aunt Margaret are called that, Marie."

"What do you wished to be called then?"

"Miss Christina, I suppose."

"Everyone else, including the king and queen, call you 'lady.'"

"They don't mean it as in an actual Lady. You did. I could tell by the way you said it.

Marie burst into laughter. "How can you hear the difference between the two?"

"Can't you?"

"No, I can't," Marie answered. "But never-mind, Lady Christina, it is time to get dressed if we are to sit at the royal table. It isn't everybody that gets a special invitation to eat breakfast with the King and Queen."

* * * * *

"Good morning, my dears," Queen Eleanor greeted us. "I am glad that you made your journey safely, Lady Marie."

"Good morning, and thank you very much," Marie answered.

The king said grace and we began to eat.

I suppose I should tell them.

"Your majesties, I- I"- my tongue faltered and I felt a strange reluctance to say what I had planned. "We would be most honored to stay in the Capital and live here in the palace."

"Oh, I am so glad," the queen said, smiling. "You will let me treat you both as my daughters, will you not? I must have some girls to indulge and pamper; and my ladies-in-waiting are much too old, of course."

"Of course," Marie said, laughing.

"My wife will indulge and pamper you as much as you let her," the king said, smiling at his wife. "I am most honored that you will make your home here."

"I shall have to determine on a person to become Lord or Lady of Ravensburg very soon, then. Do you have any suggestions, Lady Christina?"

Ravensburg.

I felt an odd sensation in my throat. "No- none at present."

The rest of the meal seemed to drag by. All I wanted to do was to retreat to my room and think. Once excused, I hastened away, Marie following.

"Christina! Whatever is wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, sobs struggling in my chest. "I- just want some time to myself, Marie. Excuse me, please."

I closed the door to my bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, letting the tears come out.

Ravensburg.

That is what I have been wanting. I want to go back to Ravensburg. I want to be its' lady now. I love it- the people, the cottages, yes, even the dirt roads. How could I never have realized it? I love Ravensburg. I always have. No, I cannot stay here- I must go back.

But can I?

Perhaps I should stay. This is everything I have ever hoped for. It is a great honor- how can I refuse it? And I have already agreed to stay.

Of course, I could always tell them that I had changed my mind...

But what of Marie? She will never receive this opportunity again. And she was so eager regarding it last night.

Should I?

Shouldn't I?

What would Sir Fitzgerald do? He has guided me and taught me so many things. He is so wise. He would know.

If only the boys and Sir Fitz were here! Why were they caught, and not I? I am no more worthy than they; yet they are slaves and I am treated like royalty. And to think that I will never see them again!

Ravensburg will be different with them gone.

But in spite of that, I love Ravensburg.

Many moments went by before I left the room and went to the parlor where Marie sat, curled up on a sofa with a book. She looked up as I entered.

"Christina- what is wrong?"

I sat down beside her and ran my fingers over the sofa's thick fabric.

"I- have been considering my decision to remain here in the Capital."

"Oh." She looked down at the cover of her book. "Have you- changed your mind?"

"No- no, I have not. We will stay." I wiped my cheeks and then began to sob again. "No, I can't say that. Yes, I have changed my mind. No- Marie, I know I have always wanted to live here in the Capital- but I don't now. I want to go home. I want to go home to my people. I want to be their Lady. But- I know that I should stay here- an opportunity"-

A light dawned in Marie's face. "You mean you want to go home?" she demanded. "You do? Really?"

"Yes," I sobbed. "Why- do you want to? I thought you wanted to stay here-"

"I only acted so because I thought you wanted to."

"So- you do want to go back?"

"Christina," Marie smiled at me with eyes full, "could I ever stay away from Ravensburg for long?"

I threw my arms around her.

Ravensburg, I am coming home.