

*Mistresses we keep for pleasure, concubines for daily attendance upon our persons,
wives to bear us legitimate children and to be our faithful housekeepers.*

Demosthenes, 4th Century B.C.ⁱ



Current Time

Warwick Castle

Home of Bartholomew Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick and

Maud Fitzjohn, Countess of Warwick

Warwickshire, England

14 August 1161 A.D.

Chapter One

Thomas sat with his back guarded against the stone of the castle wall. His position, though relaxed, was calculated and precise. He felt light without his armor, so accustomed was he to wearing it, often even as he slept. The grim reality of life had taught him the necessity of always being careful and on guard. Even at a wedding. The festivities below had warranted a less threatening attire, however, and he had complied. To some extent. His sword was still strapped to his side, his dagger was still in his boot, and another knife was tucked at the base of his back, all nestled against him like the comfortable companions they were. Besides his horse, they were the most reliable associates he had. He straddled the castle parapet, negligently dangling one leg over to the sheer drop below, eyes closed, all other senses alert. It was the closest he came to being at ease. He let the beauty and delight of the night seep into his bones; the smooth aroma of warm earth baked by the summer sun, the flutter of bat wings and songs of night bird calls, the utter stillness of the brilliant array of stars and brightness of the half moon. This was where he needed to be to relax.

Not down in the great hall. Festivities or no, more food and drink than a body could imagine, the fetid smell of bodies in close proximity, so many unwashed, made him loose his appetite. And that was no small feat, for he was always hungry. It was a standing joke among the other young knights that no matter how much he ate he could always, happily, eat a bit more. He

was often the first to arrive in the morning when they broke their fast and when dinner was served in the evening. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck and then tucked his finger in the collar of his tunic and pulled. It was tight. Again. Another collection of clothes he would be forced to discard. Another collection of new gear for which he would be forced to work off the purchase. He had so many other more permanent things he wished to purchase with his meager salary such as land; a place to call home. Just when would this growing cease? At a score and eight, most of the other young men of his company had settled comfortably into the size and stature they were destined to be. But not him. It sometimes seemed that overnight he outgrew his clothes, his shoes... God, please not his armor. Again ...

Thomas knew, suddenly, that very shortly he would no longer be alone. With senses alert he gauged the person's approach up the nearby stairs while he silently lifted his leg back over the parapet in a more defensive stance. He leaned back into the shadows of the wall behind him and waited.

It was a woman, a young one, dressed in a splendid gown, her hair piled stylishly about her head. Jewels glittered at her ears, neck, wrists, and hair. She was quite lovely, he thought in a distracted sort of way. He had no time for women, although certainly was willing to appreciate a beautiful one if she came into his view.

Thomas watched her for a long while. She seemed, he thought, almost to be seeking exactly what he had come into the night for. Peace. Renewal. She was completely unaware of him. She clasped her arms about her in the chill night air, closed her eyes, and took a huge breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. She looked up at the moon and the stars, smiled for a brief moment and then said quietly, "Hello."

He made no sound and yet, all of a sudden, Thomas knew she was conscious of him for her stance changed; relaxed turned tense, peaceful turned alert. Slowly she turned and looked at him, still concealed in the shadows. For a brief moment, she said nothing, but seemed to try to decide who he was and, perhaps, if she should know him.

"Should I fear you, sir?" she asked after a time.

"No," Thomas said and stepped back into the moonlight and resumed his precarious perch straddling the castle wall. "You have no need to fear."

"I see that you seem to be enjoying the festivities as much as I," she said with a small smile.

"Yes, it would seem so."

"Should I know you? I have been introduced to so many people this evening that I am afraid I will not be able to remember my own name. Please accept my apologies if we have already been formally introduced."

Thomas shook his head. "No, we've not been formally introduced. I will not overload you with another meaningless name, either. I leave on the morrow with the rest of William FitzRobert's knights who are a part of King Henry's forces." He shrugged. "There are so many of us here at this celebration I knew I would not be missed should I choose to leave early."

She smiled. "Were you at the festivities at all?"

He grinned then. "I walked past an alcove opening and peered in at the crush. Does that count?"

She shook her head. "I think not. You must truly experience the entire, stifling ordeal in order to say that you were *there*." She smiled again, and looked out at the night.

"You are not enjoying the festivities?"

"No."

"I would think a beautiful young woman would be dazzled with all of the pomp and circumstance a wedding between two highly placed families would offer."

She looked at him. "You know much of beautiful young women then?"

"No," he conceded. "I probably know almost nothing."

"Well, let me give you some much needed information, then," she began briskly. "Young women," she glanced at Thomas, "beautiful or no," and then looked back out into the night, "in the case of wedding festivities, are usually filled with absolute terror. The bride is at the mercy of the men in her life who have made choices for her in which she has had no say. She is expected to go off with the groom of her family's choosing with her head held high, a smile on her face, and her decorum at its most perfect. She goes off to a life that, should she be lucky, will place on it a value at least equal to her husband's horse." She looked at him again, "But that is doubtful." She looked away from him out onto the dark horizon, "and she must then begin the only real task that anyone cares about: producing a healthy heir to the family dynasty. Should she be successful and produce this heir – and live - she may achieve some level of prestige and honor. Should she fail, her life will be a misery that cannot be imagined unless lived. For those young women at the wedding who are not the bride, those destined for the same fate, they watch with fear and trembling *and pray*."

"Does it work?"

She looked puzzled at Thomas' question so he explained himself. "The praying."

"Yes," she nodded emphatically. "It does. I would not be what you see before you had it not."

"How old are you?"

"I will be fourteen years in a month."

"You don't seem to be fearful and trembling to me," Thomas observed.

"It is a skill I have mastered," she said and closed her eyes, "*through prayer*." She took another deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly.

"I am impressed."

"Are you fearful and trembling when you go into battle?" She looked at Thomas again as she spoke and he struggled unsuccessfully to determine the colors of her hair and eyes.

"No," and then he conceded, "not anymore."

She smiled at him, almost in a tolerant fashion he thought. *Could she only be thirteen?* "I am impressed," she said giving his words back to him.

He smiled back, understanding her point. "It is a skill I have mastered."

"Without prayer," she qualified.

“Yes,” he acknowledged. In a teasing tone he said, “Perhaps I would have acquired the skill sooner had I tried it your way, however.”

She smiled but did not respond. They stood in silence for a period of time. “I know of the groom,” Thomas said at last.

“Yes, I do, too. He is an acquaintance of my father’s. Sir Humphrey and my father grew up together, studied together, fought together ...”

He studied her in the moonlight. “Sir Humphrey is considered an honorable man.” It was the highest compliment Thomas could offer.

She sighed. “Yes, he is an honorable man. I do not think that I have ever heard a harsh word out of his mouth to his men, to women, or to the servants. I do not believe that he will be cruel to his wife, and that should give her some small comfort.”

She turned to him, reluctantly he thought. “I must go back,” she said finally. “Someone is bound to have missed me already.” She looked at him then. “Thank you for letting me intrude on your solitude.” She had a thought. “Where do you head tomorrow?”

“The Marches,” He gave her a wry grin. “to follow King Henry’s orders. We join with the King when we leave from here. He seems to have a standing date with a few mad Welshmen. There is always training, preparing, and fighting.”

“I would know your name so that I can remember you in my prayers.”

“Do not trouble yourself,” Thomas said dismissively. “My sword, dagger, and horse are all I need.”

“Then you are a fool,” she said with absolute certainty. “Prayer protects you in places where nothing else can.” She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. One single tear escaped from her closed eyes and she brushed it away impatiently. She turned to go.

“By some, I am known as ‘Thomas,’” he said to her retreating back.

She turned and looked at him, now composed and serene. She inclined her head like a queen. “Whether you wish it or not Sir Thomas, I shall remember you nightly in my prayers. I will seek to secure your safety and continued health and happiness.” She smiled at him then. “Whether you attribute those things to your horse, your sword, your dagger, or God is entirely up to you.” And then she was gone.

He managed to find a meal for himself late into the night. There was no possible way he would have been able to sleep otherwise, for his stomach would not have allowed it. He slept with his horse, washed in the early hours at the water trough, dressed in full armor and readied his possessions to ride out immediately after dawn with the rest of the men after breaking his fast.

Thomas had not exaggerated when he had spoken last night and said that there was always training, preparing, and fighting. Even with the civil war effectively over there never ceased to be minor skirmishes no matter where they traveled. And now with Henry’s all consuming determination to demolish every single baronial castle that had been erected without royal license, well ... Thomas had participated in more castle sieges than he could count.

He liked the new King though, truth be told. King Henry was a fighter and a thinker, a good combination in a leader in Thomas’ opinion. He agreed with the King’s desire to obliterate the

rebel castles built during the civil war under King Stephen's rule, for their loyalty would always be questioned. In establishing a clear base, a definitive standard, King Henry showed one and all what was required and who would be making the rules. Thomas' only concern in the systematic destruction of the castles was the weakening of the western border defenses from the Welsh. The mad Welsh.

Just the thought of them sent a chill up his spine, still, now. God, Thomas could still remember the wild Welsh army standing bare chested, with little armor and fewer weapons on that cold January day in Lincoln so many years ago. He had been just a child then and on the *opposite* side of the fighting to where he was now. Just a lowly page for one of King Stephen's trusted knights, standing on the parapets of the castle wall witnessing his first battle. He remembered, too, the way King Stephen's men had said, "*Welshmen.*" At that time, Thomas had thought it was said with contempt; but now he realized what it had truly been: awe and fear. No, it had not been King Henry's attacking knights that had caused the initial tightening of King Stephen's gut, it had been the *Welshmen* accompanying them.

Those Welshmen had been helpful in the Lincoln battle only because it had suited them. They had felt no binding loyalty to Henry, the new King then nor did they now. Earl Robert, King Henry's most senior man at the time, had been able to control the Welsh, but he had been dead these past ten years. Earl Robert's son, William, while a powerful and confident man in his own right, could not command the same respect with the Welsh that his father had. Thomas chuckled to himself, for truth be told, he did not think that Earl Robert had ever *really* controlled the Welsh, but more likely they had respected him enough simply to listen to him.

Like the march barons, the Welsh had taken advantage of England's preoccupation with its lengthy civil war. The Welsh had plundered, conquered, captured, terrorized, and reclaimed. When it suited them they joined forces with others for a time, such as at the Battle of Lincoln as allies to King Henry. But now, in present day, the Welsh blatantly challenged King Henry with their military tactics. Despite the fact that the civil war was now over, King Henry, with the aid of his knights, needed to continually remind both the march barons *and* the Welsh who, indeed, was Sovereign. It was a never ending duty.

Not that he was complaining. All this fighting was certainly good for Thomas. He had nowhere to go, no home to return to, no place to long to get back to. The average knight's duty was for forty days a year and then he was free to tend to his own personal life. But Thomas had no personal life. He had his horse, his armor, his shield, and his sword. That was it. So he continued to serve and to fight, growing stronger and more experienced. He was pleased to be part of the close circle of knights that now rode exclusively where King Henry rode. It was an honor and a privilege. Considering his beginning, he had certainly come far.

Achieving glory and fame was not what he sought, however. Thomas never had. Anything and everything he did had one means to an end. To own - outright, free and clear - his own place. He cared not whether it was a farm, a small cottage, or a castle. Having never had *anything* but the clothes on his back and the necessary materials to continue on with his profession, the concept of owning a place that one could call home was nigh onto staggering. The reality was that even working

year round he had little coin saved and certainly not enough to purchase anything in which he could eek out a comfortable living. The other knights joked continually about finding a rich heiress, marrying well, and acquiring lands and title, but Thomas was more of a realist. His life had taught him thus. What titled heiress would set her sights on him, a lowly knight – without status and family – and a bastard to boot? Nay, he was not foolish enough to delude himself with dreams that would never be. He would continue to serve King Henry faithfully, working year round and carefully saving as much as he could. Perhaps when he was a score and ten he would have enough to purchase a small plot of land. The idea of a wife and family were so far on the distant horizon that it did not even register in his thoughts. But a place to call home, now *that* was something to dream about.

Thomas decided to try the hall that morning, hopeful that the majority of the people still present after the celebrations were sleeping off the results of their revelry. He found the place relatively quiet and secured a seat at the large table next to other of King Henry's knights.

“Where were you last night, Thomas?” Brian, a knight to his left said. Of all the knights, Brian was one of the few he considered friend. “With all that food around, I thought for sure you'd be right in the thick of things.” Brian grinned at his own humor.

“Found yourself something better than food?” The knight to his right, Gavin, said in a disbelieving tone. Another man whom Thomas counted as friend. Gavin looked around at the others feigning absolute puzzlement. “For the rest of us a beautiful woman, a glass of fine port – well then I would understand – but everyone knows that nothing gets in the way of your meals.” He clapped Thomas on the back. “Were you ill?”

Thomas was used to their ribbing. He would have felt left out without it as a matter of fact. “I got my meal,” he said between mouthfuls, and then couldn't help himself, “and had a lengthy conversation with a beautiful woman as well.” There, let them stew on that for a while he thought as he reached for another hunk of bread and cheese.

There were loud wolf whistles and catcalls around the table, and Thomas received some good-natured shoving. He purposely let them think anything they wanted and made no effort to provide more information. He just kept eating. God knew when he was going to get another full meal again once they were traveling.

The mood changed when Sir Humphrey, Earl William, and the other nobles strode into the hall. The volume of conversation dropped, the general ribald humor disappeared, and an air of controlled behavior permeated the table. The new arrivals were seated at the raised dais, at a table set aside for those of elevated social standing.

“The groom looks happy enough,” Brian mumbled under his breath. Thomas spared Sir Humphrey a brief glance while reaching for a leg of mutton.

“You wouldn't see me at this hour of the morning after my wedding night, I'll tell you,” Gavin said. “I'd be ...” He sighed a great sigh and then grinned. Thomas chuckled and shook his head.

“They're up early because they're leaving early,” volunteered Robert, another knight at the table. Robert envisioned himself – in Thomas' opinion – as superior to the other young knights. He made it his concerted effort to be the first and foremost with every piece of new information. “They

will travel to Sir Humphrey's holdings in Herefordshire – Goodrich Castle. I know, too, that Sir Humphrey will mix business with his pleasure.” He gave them a knowing smirk.

“Thank you for your efforts to inform,” Gavin said sarcastically. Robert frowned. Others around them snickered at Robert's expense.

In order to live a relatively peaceful existence among the knights, a man needed three things: a good sense of humor, a thick skin, and a strong right hook. Most of them had at least two, but Robert had none. Consequently, he bore the brunt of most of the jests, most of the insults, and most of the misery the men could force on one another. It was often a riding bet how far Robert could be pushed and prodded until he lost control. And once that happened, then the fun really started.

Before Robert could respond and before his baiting could truly begin the women began to arrive. As befitted ladies of rank, the knights stood in deference.

“Were you here at all last night?” Brian mumbled to Thomas under his breath as the women appeared in the upper hallway and began to make their way down the staircase. Brian, as his closest friend in the group, would have been surprised if Thomas had said that he'd been present.

“No,” Thomas admitted.

“That's Countess Maud,” he said as the first richly garbed woman descended the stairs. “She's married to Earl Bartholomew. You *do* know that they own this castle, do you not?”

Thomas gave him an impatient glare.

“That's Lady Margaret, she's the mother of the bride. That's -”

Thomas interrupted him. “I *know* who that is.” Earl Williams' wife, Lady Hawise, was a diminutive woman with a temper that could set your hair on fire should she choose. Everyone knew who Hawise was, or found out in a rather painful and immediate fashion.

Thomas saw her then, at the top of the stairs, just as serene and composed as she had been the night before. *Ginger hair*, Thomas thought. She was dressed regally and carried herself with a quiet dignity.

“And that,” Brian said, “is the bride, Lady Rosamund. She doesn't look that much the worse for wear having endured a night of raging passion with Sir Humphrey, do you think Thomas?”

Thomas heard her voice from last night then, watching as she elegantly descended the stairs. *‘She is expected to go off with the groom of her family's choosing with her head held high, a smile on her face, and her decorum at its most perfect.’* He watched her as she walked past him, smiling placidly, nodding attentively to Lady Hawise's whispered conversation. He searched her face and her movements, looking for a crack in the façade that he knew she had built around herself. There was none. Only he had seen the crack last night, he realized then, in the form of one solitary tear. But only one.

Sir Humphrey came down from the dais as she approached and kissed her chastely on the cheek before putting his arm around her and escorting her to her seat beside him. Once the ladies were all seated, the knights sat as well and resumed their meal. For the second time in less than a day Thomas found that he had lost his appetite and set his uneaten leg of mutton down.

He felt Brian's eyes on him. In a low tone Brian spoke so that only Thomas could hear, “That's the beautiful woman you spoke with last night.”

It was said as a statement, rather than a question. Thomas looked at him but said nothing.

Brian grinned and then nodded with his own certainty. “Lady Rosamund. That’s who you spoke with. You look like you’ve just been hit in the back of the head with a sword.” But still Thomas did not answer him. He looked at her sitting, smiling, nodding, responding.

Let me give you some much needed information.

He heard Earl William shout loudly with laughter along with Sir Humphrey while Lady Rosamund smiled shyly and the women around them tittered daintily behind their handkerchiefs.

He felt as if someone had just lit a candle in a dark room. He, who had worked and fought and laughed and lived considerably in his score and eight years thought he knew quite a bit about life and the world in general. Thought he had most of the answers to the puzzles of life. Knew what was important, what was worth fighting for and dying for. But as Thomas sat there with his meal slowly congealing on his plate he realized what a narrow view he truly had had.

Thomas let his mind remember what had brought him to this exact point in his life, experienced and yet so shockingly ill informed. He had learned how to survive. Knew with complete certainty that anything of real importance could be acquired with hard work and determination. Believed that life was what you made of it and how you chose to deal with it, be it with sword or fist.

Riding out with the King’s men, lost in thought remembering his sorry past where he had honed these beliefs, he heard her say, *Prayer protects you in places where nothing else can.*

And at last he understood what she meant.

ⁱ Demosthenes, (?385-?322 B.C.), Greek Orator, GenderBabble, By David Olive, Perigee Books, New York, 1993, ISBN 0-399-51821-5, pg. 19