



**We declare and we hold as firmly established  
that love cannot exert its powers  
between two people who are married to each other,  
for lovers give each other everything freely,  
under no compulsion or necessity,  
but married people are in duty bound  
to give in to each other's desires  
and deny themselves to each other in nothing.**

Marie, Countess of Champagne 1174 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

**Also by Susan McGeown:**

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*Call Me Bear*

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*Rules for Survival*

*Recipe for Disaster*

*The Butler Did It*

# Rosamund's Bower

By Susan McGeown



Published by  
Faith Inspired Books

Magnificent Cover Art courtesy of Laury Vaden  
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Published By Faith Inspired Books  
3 Kathleen Place, Bridgewater, New Jersey 08807  
[www.FaithInspiredBooks.com](http://www.FaithInspiredBooks.com)



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ISBN: 978-0-6151-4878-6

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**To all Women of Faith  
who have made God smile  
through the best and worst of times...**

*The Lord announces victory,  
and throngs of women shout the happy news.*

Psalm 68:11 (NLT)



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*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, 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>2</sup>



*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

**T**homas 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

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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 lose 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 [www.susanmcgeown.com](http://www.susanmcgeown.com)

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 – [www.susanmcgeown.com](http://www.susanmcgeown.com)



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

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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

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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.

*Men's courage is shown in commanding and women's in obeying.*

Aristotle, 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>3</sup>



*Almost twenty years prior ...*

Battlefield of Lincoln, England

Lincoln Castle

Camp of King Stephen de Blois, Count of Mortain,  
Duke of Normandy, King of England

6<sup>th</sup> January 1141 A.D.

## Chapter Two

Thomas would see to his obligations. Not the bitter cold, not the stench of death, not the screams of those who lay dying on the battlefield, not even his own all-consuming horror would keep him from it. He would see to his obligations or die trying.

“You watch my possessions, boy, or you will regret it for the rest of your life,” Sir Robert FitzUrse had said to him as he had stalked off to battle, and foremost over everything Robert FitzUrse was a man of his word. Thomas, having been in his service as a page for more than two years, had learned through first hand experience that even the horrors of the battle he was witnessing were not as terrifying as the punishment Sir Robert could mete out should he become displeased. Even with the frigid cold, numbing his bare hands and toes, he could still feel the places on his body where Sir Robert’s feet and fists had last beat him. Oh yes, Thomas

knew how to prioritize his fears, and the battle before him came second to the punishment he would endure should he not see to his obligations.

Though this was the first battle he was to serve as squire, it was not a privilege he had earned. Rather, Sir Robert's squire, Martin, had fallen fatally ill not one week prior. Thomas' dreams these past few nights had been haunted with nightmares having watched the young squire writhe in agony on his pallet as he burned with fever, too fearful to cry out for help or comfort. But at least in death, Martin had at last found peace.

Thomas was not ready to be a battle squire. He knew it and Sir Robert definitely knew it. It was not for lack of knowledge, but more for lack of size. The job of a squire was strenuous work, lifting and carrying a knight's equipment: swords, shields, lances, body armor, not to mention all the armor required for the knight's horse. Thomas had the awareness of what needed to be done but not yet the muscle to do it. Even at seven years he was small for his age. He was, after all, only a *puny, good-for-nothing little bastard*, as Sir Robert liked to call him.

King Stephen had been at Lincoln castle for the past two months, four weeks outside the castle wall during the siege and four weeks inside as the victorious army. Earlier today, standing on the battlements of Lincoln Castle, they had listened to the speech made by the leader of the besieging army below. Thomas was fascinated to witness the utter gall – and sheer bravery – of a man who had lost possession of the very same castle not one month prior. King Stephen's siege, in which they had burned every bit of ground and structure surrounding the castle, had been a basic military maneuver. The only fault in the otherwise brilliant execution had been the failure to capture the Earl of Chester, defeated owner of the castle. Now the castle belonged to King Stephen of England.

But here was the Earl of Chester, outside the gates of what had once been his own castle, surrounded by a massive army of knights and men, shouting insults at the top of his lungs to the King and the King's men gathered above. The Earl was surrounded by the most vicious collection of men Thomas had ever seen, some (he had heard Stephen's men mutter '*Welshmen*' as if a curse) appearing to be unarmed and

unarmored but for their ferocious glares and sharp daggers clasped in their hands.

Thomas heard the Earl of Chester begin to describe the Earl William, one of King Stephen's most trusted men, as, "... slothful in deeds; presumptuous in heart; magnanimous in words; pusillanimous in acting; the last to attack, the first to run away, tardy in battle, swift in flight ..."

Thomas risked a glance at the man currently being described to the delight of the surrounding enemy army below. Judging by the Earl William's near purple countenance, his fury was barely contained.

"Earl William! Can you hear me?" the Earl of Chester shouted once again, grinning despite the cold wind and the impending battle. Why he could be seated in a great hall enjoying a mug of ale for all the concern he seemed to exhibit. "Earl William, a man of singular constancy in crime, abandoned by his wife by reason of his intolerable filthiness!" The enemy army laughed uproariously. Thomas stood fascinated on the battlements watching the scene unfold before his eyes. The provocative banter was something he was accustomed to – in the dining hall, on the training field, and in the knight's quarters. But he had never realized until today it could be a part of the battlefield as well.

King Stephen's army was larger, better equipped, and better trained. The outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion. "Let him have his fun," Sir Robert had growled under his breath to Lord Baldwin Claire, King Stephen's favorite noble, "and then I will cut his tongue out of his head myself." Thomas looked down at the Earl of Chester still grinning and shouting insults. Did he know how close to death he was? Thomas had never known Sir Robert to make an idle threat. Never.

And that's why he stood, slowly freezing to death, fulfilling his squire's obligations while the battle swirled around him. King Stephen had had such confidence in his own knights' and army's skill that he had abandoned the superior defensive position of the castle to rout the enemy army on the battlefield below. Thomas had followed as was befitting his duties, staying on the edge of the battlefield, yet in sight of Sir Robert. He had Sir Robert's spare horse, as well as his spare shield and spare sword. Managing the prancing mount and holding on to Sir Robert's weaponry had

begun to make the muscles in his arms and back scream with the prolonged effort. Factor in the cold and what his eyes were witnessing for the first time, and he could not control his trembling. The thought of Sir Robert striding off the battlefield filled with the lust from fighting to find him shivering and quaking uncontrollably caused Thomas even greater fear. Obligations met or not, should he appear weak or afraid before the other knights, Sir Robert would likely kill him just for that.

Thomas' senses became overloaded with the battle that stretched out before him as far as his eyes could see. Swords clashed and sparked as steel hit steel, battle axes swung and whirred overhead to be embedded into any skull that was nearby, and men and horses screamed in the agony of injuries too great for Thomas' eyes to truly process. There was a smell to a battlefield he realized, one he had never, ever known. It was fear and blood and sweat and excrement all mixed together ...

Turning, Thomas saw King Stephen to his far left, his back guarded by Sir Robert. They fought like madmen. Thomas had never seen anything like it and thought he would never again witness anything equal to their skill. Suddenly, King Stephen's battleaxe broke, but before Thomas could even locate one of the royal squires King Stephen's sword had been drawn and was clashing and sparking against his enemy. There was a high-pitched scream and a thud at Thomas' feet. As he looked down a hand and forearm clad in a battle glove lay at his feet. Thomas could not help himself and he felt the bile roll up from his stomach and spew from his mouth and down his chin.

The tone of the battle changed. King Stephen still fought like a man possessed but the enemy seemed to surge with fury and suddenly Thomas saw Sir Robert drop to his knees. He had a moment's panicked confusion wondering what he was required to do, what he would be expected to bring to him. And then Thomas watched Sir Robert topple forward on his face while an enemy knight in full battle frenzy screamed and speared his sword into his back. There was a cracking sound and Thomas watched King Stephen's sword break across the back of the man who had just felled Sir Robert.



Slowly the action of the battle slowed as King Stephen raised his hands, still clutching the broken sword shaft, above his head. One enemy knight, two, three, ... five all pointed their swords at the King, but none made a move to kill him. Over the noise of the continuing battle one knight threw back his head and let out a chilling victory cry, "Come! All of you see what I have! I HAVE TAKEN THE KING!!!"

Thomas did not know how long he stood still meeting his obligations. The field, only long moments before loud and filled with the sounds of hatred and death, gradually quieted and slowed so that only the moans of the wounded and voices of the victorious could be heard. What was one to do when one's knight was killed in battle? Was Thomas meant to die as well? Was he meant to turn and run? He had no idea. He knew simply what he had been told to do and could think of no way to release himself from the job. "*You watch my possessions, boy, or you will regret it for the rest of your life.*" Thomas took the horse's reins and stood on them. He laid the shield to the side; he could barely lift it let alone use it to defend himself. He drew Sir Robert's second sword from its scabbard and with all his might, using both hands, raised it so that it rested on his right shoulder. Should anyone seek to relieve him of his obligations they'd die ... or he would. He looked around at the men capturing and surrendering ... and prepared for his life to end.

Time ceased to exist. The cold stopped bothering him. His shivering ceased. He drew inside himself and waited, feeling surprisingly invisible - alone on the edge of the battlefield that was victorious to his enemy. The sound of footsteps gradually entered his consciousness, followed by a loud snort of laughter. "What ho? Look what we have here! A brave and fearsome knight from King Stephen's army still ready to do battle!"

There was a second voice that also spoke with laughter. "Why, based on the way most of de Bloise's men fought today, I'm surprised the whole army didn't look like this one." The knight, his helm removed and his dark hair plastered to his head with sweat, made a motion toward Thomas. "Hey boy, hand me the sword before you hurt yourself."

Thomas swung the sword using the downward momentum from its resting place on his shoulder and all the strength he still had left in his weary arms. He swung in a haphazard arc towards the knight's outstretched hand. It missed wildly but he'd made a statement.

"Why you little-!"

"What goes on here?" It was a voice of authority, drawing the attention of the knights surrounding Thomas away from his feeble attempts to get the sword back up on his shoulder ready for yet another attack.

"The little bugger just tried to take my hand off, that's what goes on here, Your Grace. I'm just about to teach him a lesson about respecting his *victorious* superiors." There were some chuckles and murmured comments in agreement. A crowd was beginning to gather.

"Do you know who he is?"

"No, Your Grace. I'll venture a guess though that it isn't his horse, shield or sword." More laughter.

"We would know your name, boy," said the voice of authority.

Thomas swallowed and looked up but did not speak. He did not trust his voice.

"Watch out, Your Grace. Seems beside his obvious weapons he has at least one hidden one."

The noble turned a questioning expression toward the taunting knight who grinned at him and said, "Vomit."

The humiliation welled up in Thomas as he remembered the stained front of his tunic. It was one more emotion in a day like no other, and in a fury he had never felt he screamed his own newly discovered battle cry and swung the sword once again.

The noble easily side stepped the swing, moving back and to the side, and in short order Thomas was dangling like a limp puppy from the scruff of the back of the neck of his tunic. He lost his hold on the sword and the horse – now free – began to move away towards better graze. He fought like a wild thing, kicking and struggling and screaming and thrashing about. After a moment the noble shook him. Like a wet rag.

"Cease your struggles. You are a captive but alive, unlike many of the men in your army. I admire your courage but have little patience

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beyond that. Decide now: struggle and die or be still and live. I have many things I must see to.”

Suddenly, Thomas was too tired to move. Truth be told, had he been told to struggle and *live* he probably would have stayed still and died. “Good,” the voice of authority said, “let this choice be the start of many more wise decisions for you. What name are you called?”

Thomas lifted his head, the muscles in his neck straining with the effort. The eyes he looked into were hard, unyielding, seasoned. The man’s dark hair was liberally sprinkled with gray. His eyes were the eyes of a man whose life had been nothing but war. But they were not brutal eyes like Sir Robert’s. “Thomas,” he managed to say.

“Have you no other names?”

Thomas hesitated, conscious of the crowd of knights who stood and stared at him dangling like a trapped sparrow in a net. “Thomas,” he said and let his head drop from exhaustion and mortification, “*The Bastard.*”

The noble lowered Thomas so that his feet touched the ground, but seemed to sense that were he to let go he would have crumbled like a piece of dirty linen. Still clutching the back of Thomas’ tunic, with his other hand, the noble forced Thomas’ chin up so that he again looked directly into his fierce eyes. They stared at each other for a space of a moment and then the voice of authority said, “So you are in excellent company, then.”

*There is a good principle which created order, light and man,  
And an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.*

Pythagoras, 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>4</sup>



*Almost twenty years prior ...*

Bristol Castle

Home of Robert of Gloucester, Earl of Gloucester

Gloucestershire, England

January 1141 A.D.

### Chapter Three

**W**ere Thomas to really think on it (although he never would, for knights never *thought* they only reacted instinctually) he was reborn that day on the Lincoln battlefield. The voice of authority, he soon learned, was none other than Robert, Earl of Gloucester, commander of the enemy army, and *bastard son* of King Henry. King Henry, as in the fourth son of King William I. King William as in William the Conqueror. King William as in *The Bastard of Normandy*. Indeed, Thomas *was* in excellent company.

In the blink of an eye, or rather the snap of King Stephen's sword, the course of Thomas' life was transformed. He walked off the Battlefield of Lincoln a captured prisoner but soon discovered that he was treated better and with more respect than he had ever been as Sir Robert's page.

His world was turned upside down, but he was not entirely sure that it was such a bad thing.

Thomas' country was at war. The worse kind of war for it was a civil war, a war in which brother could fight brother and cousin wished to kill cousin. While he did not understand all the details - so many tangled reasons that caused a hatred great enough to pray for the death of another - Thomas did comprehend the basic facts. At the start of it all had been William I. Supporters had called him William the Conqueror, for he had vanquished the royal house before him so thoroughly that those who battled *then* for the throne *were not* part of this current fight. William's successor, his son William II, had died before leaving any heirs, and that's where the real trouble had begun. As William I's successive children began to fight amongst themselves (he and his wife Matilda of Flanders had had ten children!), Henry, the fourth son, had clawed his way to the top of the pile and claimed the right to the throne. He'd held on to it for a good number of years, too - thirty-five all told.

But King Henry had left behind a tangled web of his own problems at his death. Not that he didn't try to prevent such problems, but the reality of life was that his only surviving *legitimate* heir was a *daughter* - Matilda. Now no one need explain to Thomas of the value of legitimate birth. King Henry's eight bastard children (at last count anyway) may have had all the same hopes and desires as any other royal heir, but had few solid claims to stand on. But, Thomas had also heard the comments and knew that many - male and female alike - would have preferred almost anything to being ruled by a woman. And, if her gender wasn't bad enough, Henry's daughter had married Geoffrey IV, Count of Anjou - *a Frenchman*. (Thomas knew many who spat to get the foul taste out of their mouths after saying that word.) So when King Henry died, the powerful barons had ignored his wishes and gone against the pledges they had made to him regarding Matilda's ascension and instead crowned Stephen King.

King Stephen was Matilda's cousin. He was from the royal line as well, his mother Princess Adela, another of William I's ten children. Who had the true right to the throne? Mere months ago, Thomas would have easily answered that question, having heard all the valid arguments and

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having watched men willing to lay down their lives in order to help King Stephen maintain his throne and his kingdom. But, as a captive, he was afforded the opportunity to see the opposite side of the horse so to speak, and that view, instead of making the issue more clear, had simply made the picture far more complicated.

The question of rights of succession, wishes of the previous monarch, and broken pledges made by so-called honorable men had muddied the waters to such an extent that Thomas' head swam. As he watched the captive King Stephen at Bristol Castle, he allowed himself the treasonable thoughts of *Are you the rightful King? Have you assumed the throne by right or by treachery?*

To make matters even more complicated, Empress Matilda was not an easy woman to like. Had she been kind, polite and friendly the waters perhaps would not be so clouded. The decision as to who should rule might have been a bit easier, for the people truly wished to *love* their monarch. But she was imperious, demanding, superior, and downright nasty to any but the most senior of her officials. Why even Earl Robert of Gloucester, who had set aside his very viable claim to the throne to support her (he was one of King Henry's illegitimate sons and therefore Matilda's half brother), was not immune to her vicious tongue. Thomas had heard her refer to him as *My Lovely Bastard Brother* on more than one occasion in the presence of an audience of her nobles. No one knew better than Thomas how that label felt.

So Thomas' country suffered under the dark cloud of civil war. In the east were King Stephen's supporters backed by the powerful barons who had chosen to go against their previous pledges to their former King and make their own choices. Their claims that King Stephen was true royalty, the rightful King of England, were powerful but not definitive. To the west and south were the supporters of Empress Matilda and Earl Robert of Gloucester. Cleaved down the middle, with each side alternately attacking, killing, destroying, and capturing all in the name of the cause they believed enough in *to die*, England suffered. Greatly.

And, as if matters were not as bad as they could possibly be, over the western border, hidden in the Marches of England, another threat

loomed dark and ugly. The Marches were an area that was *never* truly peaceful: “*March*” for the old Anglo-Saxon word ‘*mearc*’ - which meant simply “boundary”. The area suffered the distinct advantage of being next to the wild country of Wales (whose people probably spit every time they said the word *English!*). The Welsh were a proud but vicious people. They would never accept Norman dominance, never acknowledge England’s authority, and would always be ready to reclaim what they had lost. As the Civil War raged in England, the Welsh barons quietly dusted off their weapons, targeted their intended conquests, and made ready to avenge past wrongs. Led by a powerful Welsh Prince, Rhys ab Gruffydd, a man of cunning and superior military intelligence, they began to do something amongst the rivaling Welsh clans that had never, *ever* been done, let alone thought of. They began to actually plan and talk amongst themselves. In truth, nothing was a greater force at bringing enemies together than a mutual, all consuming hatred of another.

Ironically, being a prisoner was perhaps the best time of Thomas’ life. While King Stephen and his captured nobles were kept well guarded at Bristol Castle with their every action carefully monitored, Thomas enjoyed a freedom he had never known. With the death of Sir Robert, his page responsibilities had ceased. Thomas literally, for the first time since he could remember, had nothing to do.

He was allowed to roam the castle and explored it from top to bottom. Old Martin the stable master welcomed his company, and Thomas found Martin’s willingness to talk and tolerate his company stunning. Never had Thomas met someone who seemed so content with life or the company of one annoying boy.

“Make yourself useful, boy, and give the horses fresh hay. Mind you don’t eat any of that hay, the horses need it more than you do.”

Thomas looked sheepish as he used a pitchfork to toss fresh hay into the horses’ stalls. It seemed he could not escape his appetite and he couldn’t seem to contain it either. He thought he’d kept it well disguised, however. “I don’t eat hay, Martin,” he grumbled in embarrassment.

“Aye, you don’t, but God’s feet it seems that you eat anything else you can get your hands on. I saw you eating scraps off the plates that you  
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were helping clear last night. Is Kitchen Mary not giving you enough food? I'll have a word with her about that ...” As Martin joined Thomas in the haying of the horses he said, almost as an afterthought, “Did those cowardly English see fit to starve children under their own care as well as kill innocent men and women?”

Thomas had already listened to days and days of Martin’s litany of hate for King Stephen and his followers. He certainly didn’t need to add an additional day to the list. “Yes, Martin, they fed me,” he said in an effort to placate Martin and his rising temper. Thomas hayed faster, trying to impress Martin with his work and distract him from his temper.

“How often? Once a week?”

Thomas suddenly had a flash of himself searching through the rubbish pile for edible bits and eating dinner remains from the bucket of slops he carried out to the pigs. He shrugged, “No, more than that.” He had no idea how telling his answer was.

“Tell me truth, boy, are you not getting enough to eat here? Is that why you’re still stealing scraps?”

Thomas kept his back to Martin to hide the embarrassment he knew stained his face. “No, they feed me plenty. It’s just ...” he struggled for words and his own understanding, “it’s just that I worry that there won’t be enough ... next time, and so I try to get as full as I can *now* when the food is here, just in case.”

He kept forking the hay methodically into each stall, but the silence behind him became something Thomas couldn’t ignore. When he turned, Old Martin was looking at him with a thunderous expression.

“Don’t be mad at me, Martin. I won’t do it no more, if you say so.”

Martin threw the pitchfork down and said in barely contained fury, “Come with me,” and stalked out of the barn.

Thomas followed, for disobedience was not in his understanding, although he dragged his feet and felt the spark of fear ignite in his belly. The spark turned to a full-fledged flame as he realized they were headed to the kitchens. What was Martin about? Would he tell the others on him? Would he be punished? While he knew asking for more was forbidden,

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eating scraps should be allowed. Shouldn't it? Did the amount of scraps he ate make that much difference? Good God, would they be angry with him for stealing food destined for the pigs? Thomas knew how precious a good sow was. A farmer could live his whole life and never be able to afford just one. By all that's holy, it had never occurred to him that while he filled his belly with table scraps he was depriving the pigs of their much needed food. Oh no, Thomas thought, as the dawning realization of his actions came to him. Now he was in for it. He'd get a beating for sure. He thought back in his mind and realized that the last beating he'd gotten had been just before the battle. He'd not been quick enough securing Sir Richard's gauntlets as he'd dressed.

He sighed as they entered the kitchens. Two weeks. He'd gone two full weeks without a beating. He smiled to himself, for in truth it was the longest he'd ever gone between punishments. Every two weeks wasn't so bad. He hoped they wouldn't use the birch switch ...

"This be Kitchen Mary," Martin said gesturing to an enormously fat woman standing by the cook fires. "We call her *Kitchen* Mary because there are at least three other Marys working here in the castle." Kitchen Mary's face was flushed beet red from the heat and perspiration dampened the hair that had escaped her mop cap. She smiled and wiped her brow with the edge of her enormous apron.

"This be Thomas," Martin said to Kitchen Mary. He faced her with his back to Thomas. "He's always hungry, Mary. He's eating scraps off the plates at night when he helps clear the tables. I'm worried he might slaughter and eat one of me horses in the stable. Can't have that, you know, Lord Robert would have me head. What can you do about it?"

"Well now," Kitchen Mary said as she looked at Thomas, "first I'll be knowing if this young man is hungry because he finds my cooking not to his liking."

The concept that *any* kind of food would not be to a person's liking was as foreign to Thomas as the idea that a man could fly like a bird. And the food *here* had been better than he'd ever tasted in his entire life. His incredulity at the very idea showed in his voice, "Not like your food

Mistress Kitchen Mary?” he shook his head vigorously, “Nay, not at all. That’s why I eat the scraps, no sense such good food going to waste.”

“Why don’t you ask for more if you’re still hungry, instead of eating the scraps?”

Thomas looked from Kitchen Mary to Martin and then back again to Kitchen Mary. Was this a question meant to trick him? To get him into further trouble? He looked down at his feet and mumbled, “I know better than to ask for seconds, Miss.”

“And why is that, young Thomas?”

It was the kindness of her voice that made Thomas look up at her and answer honestly. “I know ‘tis forbidden,” he said in a whisper.

“Mayhap that be the rule in *Royal English* kitchens, but here to ask for seconds is a high compliment to the cook.”

Thomas looked up at both of them, gauging their faces and the truth of Kitchen Mary’s words. “You speak the truth?” He still could not believe her.

Kitchen Mary nodded. Martin nodded. The two serving girls at the table who were peeling a mountain of potatoes looked at him, smiled shyly, and nodded. The big man who had just carried in a new load of split logs for the stoves and who had obviously heard just the very end of the conversation looked at Thomas and nodded.

Kitchen Mary walked over to Thomas, put her hand on his shoulder, and smiled. “I’d be most pleased to have you ask for more of my cooking.”

Thomas licked his lips at the thought. “At every meal?” He needed to clarify, get it all straight, know where the parameters of this treasure extended.

Kitchen Mary nodded and smiled again. “In fact,” she said as she went back to kneading the bread dough rising on the table, “those who are in my *good graces* and see fit to help me out with small chores and such have the free run of the kitchen and can eat *any time they want*. Ain’t that right, Jack?”

The man who had brought in the wood had traveled to a corner of the kitchen where a mound of tarts and small pies and biscuits sat on a [www.susanmcgeown.com](http://www.susanmcgeown.com)

small table. There were a few crude chairs and a pitcher and mugs as well. The man called Jack took a tart and crammed the entire thing into his mouth in one swift motion. “Absolutely,” he mumbled, his mouth stuffed to bursting. He winked at Thomas and left the kitchen.

Thomas’ mouth hung open in stunned shock. The idea, *that you could eat until you were full and then some* was unbelievable. He shut his mouth, afraid that he would drool, for his mouth had begun to water at all the possibilities.

“You’ve finished helping me hay the horses,” Martin said to him. “Perhaps Kitchen Mary has a few chores she’d like you to do for her.”

“Well, Thomas the Hungry, what say you?” Kitchen Mary’s eyes twinkled, and as she brushed a stray lock of damp hair from her forehead she left a slash of flour across her cheek.

Thomas nodded his head still in a daze.

“Well then, young man, grab yourself a tart and then quick follow after Jack. I need at least five more loads of wood just to get us through to the nooning meal.” Thomas didn’t need to be told twice.

From then on his days fell into a comfortable routine. He helped Kitchen Mary before and after every meal as much as she needed and for as much as he could eat. He helped Martin in the stables before breakfast, mucking out the stalls, hauling and forking hay, currying and brushing the horses. Through Martin he met the blacksmith and armorer, Colin, who oversaw the care, repair, and creating of the weapons an army in the midst of civil war required. When Old Martin and Kitchen Mary ran out of chores for him, then he’d wander over to Colin’s forge to sit and listen, and maybe do some chores. Colin didn’t seem to mind his endless questions and seemed quite happy to talk as he worked.

As the summer ended and the cool of autumn began to creep into the air, Thomas was forced to make the acquaintance of Sewing Mary for it seemed he was in desperate need of new clothes. Old Martin said it best, “Thomas, you’ll catch your death walking around naked as the day you were born, not to mention the stir you’ll cause, and if you wait much longer that’s how you’re going to be. Why you’re fair busting out of those rags you’re wearing.”

And then Earl Robert was taken captive during another of the many battles and things were stirred into a complete uproar. King Stephen, prisoner for nine long months, now became a valuable pawn in the bargaining between the two sides. Talks of prisoner exchange and retaliation were the only topics discussed in the kitchen, in the stables, in the armory, and in the training yard.

At the start of December Thomas found himself standing in his new clothes in the great hall before William FitzRobert, Earl Robert's son. He was as imposing as his father, with just as commanding an air. Beside him sat the Empress Matilda. While the sight of the food on the massive table caused Thomas' mouth to water, he knew for sure that Kitchen Mary would be waiting for him with a tray full of tarts. That confidence allowed him to concentrate more on the people present rather than the food. His eyes took in the haughty stare of Empress Matilda, the tolerant gaze of Sir William, and the questioning gaze of King Stephen who sat off to the side.

"It seems your capture has agreed with you, young Thomas," Sir William began.

Thomas struggled to remain calm, forcing the uncertainty and fear of the unknown down deeply – below his stomach's rumblings and over the rich food aromas. He bowed formally, "Yes, Your Grace." He turned and bowed respectfully to the Empress. "Your Highness." He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Empress Matilda's somewhat surprised expression by his proper formality.

"You have been busy while you have been here." It was a statement, not a question and Thomas struggled with what was required of him.

"Your Grace?" What did Sir William wish of him? Thomas fought his rising panic.

"You have many here in the castle who have spoken in your favor. Do you know who I speak of?"

Thomas was at a loss. He shook his head no.

"Within a fortnight, King Stephen will be allowed to leave this castle." Thomas risked a brief glance at the King and then returned his gaze back to Sir William. "He will be allowed to take with him those who were

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also captured and have been held here these past months.” Still Thomas did not understand the reason why he stood before these nobles. “There are those within these castle walls who have stepped forward in defense of you and wish for you to remain here instead of returning to London.”

Sir William paused for a moment to let his words sink in. Thomas had many questions but feared his voice would not cooperate. His eyes darted around the room, past the nobles he stood before. He returned his frightened gaze to Sir William. What was he to say?

“Martin wishes to take you on as a stable hand, Mary of the kitchens wishes to keep you on the household staff, and Colin, a man of few words and fewer friends, wishes for you to apprentice with him as a blacksmith.” Sir William’s expression was unreadable. “What say you to all of this, young Thomas?”

Thomas swallowed the enormous choking mass of fear in his throat and managed to croak out, “I am at your will, Your Grace.” As an afterthought he bowed again.

Sir William continued. “I remember my father congratulating you on the battlefield for the first of what he had hoped to be many wise decisions. So I ask you, if given the choice, do you wish to return with Stephen or remain here? I would know where your loyalties would lie.”

Thomas was nothing. He was a bastard, abandoned by his mother, who knew nothing of his father. He was small, weak, and easily frightened. He heard Sir Robert’s voice, which still haunted his dreams, saying, *You cause me more grief and coin than you will ever be worth, you puny little bastard.* Through those painful memories came Sir William’s words spoken not moments before, *There are those within these castle walls who have stepped forward in defense of you and wish for you to remain here instead of returning to London.* Someone actually *wanted* him? How could that possibly be?

Thomas glanced at Empress Matilda, who appeared bored and impatient. He glanced at King Stephen, who appeared furious at his hesitation. His gaze traveled back to Sir William, who did not smile, but had fair eyes just like his father. Thomas could not begin to claim a full understanding of the war that was being waged within the boundaries of his country, but he *could* understand where he had felt happier than he had ever

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felt in his life. Heart pounding practically out of his chest, he went down on one knee and bowed as formally as he had seen the knights and nobles in court. “It would be my greatest wish to swear fealty to the Empress Matilda, rightful heir of the throne of England, and remain here in her service.”

He did not look up, but stayed kneeling, head down, waiting. He heard Sir William rise and step around the great table to stand before him. He saw Sir William’s leather shoes come into his line of vision. Still he did not look up. “You have showed great industry while here at the castle, working diligently and earning the respect and admiration of those servants I value most highly. On the battlefield you showed courage and stamina and impressed both my father and me. However, I will not honor the request of those who spoke in your defense. You will not be allowed to remain with Martin, nor Mary, nor Colin.”

Thomas’ heart ceased its frantic beating. It just about stopped for the sorrow and disappointment that threatened to break it. Sir William’s voice came from a distance, “A person with such commitment to hard work, the ability to command respect in such a short time, and the courage to face what you faced on the battlefield deserves more. I would be honored if you would become my newest squire.” Thomas felt Sir William’s hand on his shoulder. “Stand, young Thomas, and let us all hear your answer.”

Thomas stood before the unsmiling gaze of Sir William. He found his voice, from where he was not sure, but spoke loudly and clearly so that all could hear, “It would be my utmost honor to serve you, Your Grace.” And then Sir William smiled.

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<sup>1</sup>Marie, Countess of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine by Louis VII, proclamation issued by her in 1174, The Women's Chronology, By James Trager, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1994, ISBN 0-08050-2975-3, pg. 66

<sup>2</sup> Demosthenes, (?385-?322 B.C.), Greek Orator, GenderBabble, By David Olive, Perigee Books, New York, 1993, ISBN 0-399-51821-5, pg. 19

<sup>3</sup>Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), Greek philosopher, 4<sup>th</sup> Century, B.C. A Woman's Place, Quotations about Women, Edited by Anne Stibbs, Avon Books, New York, 1992, ISBN: 0-380-71850-2, pg. 6

<sup>4</sup> Pythagoras, (?532-?500 B.C.), Greek Philosopher, GenderBabble, By David Olive, Perigee Books, New York, 1993, ISBN 0-399-51821-5, pg. 17