



LEAVES ON THE WIND

CAROL
TOWNEND



HARLEQUIN HISTORICALS®



Carol Townend

Leaves On The Wind

Аннотация

Loving the Enemy After Judith Coverdale saw her family's estate razed to the ground by Normans, she vowed to avenge her family's honor. She donned a boy's disguise and joined a band of outlaws, led by her brother, to terrorize the invaders. When disaster struck, Judith found herself in the strong arms of the great warrior Rannulf de Mandeville. What she soon realized was that Rannulf was the brother of the murdering Norman who'd stolen her lands. Time and time again, Rannulf proved his devotion to her and taught her lessons in survival, but would she ever accept his love?

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“Hold me tight. It hurts less when you hold me.”

Judith made to pull him down beside her. She could feel his body stiffen, resisting her. “What’s the matter? Rannulf?”

“Tis not seemly,” came his stiff reply.

“Not seemly?” Judith was astounded. “But you are far older than I!”

“I’m twenty-one—” Amusement entered his voice. “Is that such a great age? Those knights were older still, and that would not have saved you from them!” he pointed out, more soberly.

“But they are monsters,” Judith said. “Invaders. You are not like that.”

“Judith, I must tell you—”

“Just hold me. Please, Rannulf. I hurt so.” He heard the quaver in Judith’s voice and capitulated.

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Carol Townend



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is a Yorkshire woman whose nineteenth-century fore-bears were friendly with the Brontë sisters. Perhaps this fact had something to do with the passion for the past that led her to a history degree at London University, and on, eventually, to writing historical novels.

Widely traveled, Carol Townend has explored places as diverse as North America and Sri Lanka, Mexico and the Mediterranean. When not taking refuge from the modern world by reading historical novels or writing her own, she loves to escape to the deep countryside.

Carol Townend lives with her copywriter husband and young daughter near Kew Gardens.

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Prologue

Beckford, Yorkshire, 1095

Judith stood in the doorway of the herbalist's hovel, staring up at the castle. She should have been giving her full attention to the advice the old woman was offering, but whenever she came to the village it was the same. She could not tear her gaze from the blank cliff-like walls of the keep that loomed over the villagers' simple wooden houses. Her blue eyes narrowed and fixed on the grey stone walls in much the same way as a puzzled scribe would stare at a parchment written in a language he could not understand. Two slender window slits scowled back at her from the top of the tower, like hostile eyes, she thought.

"Judith? You're wandering," Aethel chided gently, her rheumy eyes full of sympathy. "Did you hear what I said?"

Judith started. "I'm sorry, Aethelgyth," she apologised, using the old woman's full name to atone for her transgression. "You said I'm to continue giving Mother the horehound..."

"Aye, and remember: boil plenty of it in t'water, strain it off and give her the infusion. She should take it four times a day. And mind 'tis fresh each time."

Judith wrinkled her nose. "Poor Mother. It tastes foul. And I've been giving it to her for so long. Don't you think she should be improving by now?"

Aethel bent her head quickly over the herbs she was sorting

and ignored the young girl's question. "You can sweeten it with honey, if that helps," she offered.

Judith opened her mouth to demand a more specific answer to her question, but a distant flurry at the drawbridge of Mandeville Tower drew her eyes once more in that direction. At this Aethel gave a soft sigh of relief, like the breeze rustling in the autumn leaves. She did not like telling people unpleasant truths.

Judith did not hear Aethel's sigh. "Oh, God, Aethel...look!" she cried, snatching at the old woman's arm. "The knights are riding out!"

Aethel's face shrivelled up like a wrinkled apple and she made the sign of the cross. "Lord ha' mercy," she muttered. "What are those devils up to now?"

Judith tossed her blonde plaits over her shoulders and stepped boldly out into the main village street.

"Judith!" Aethel shrieked. "Have you run mad! Stay out of sight. Come back here!"

"Nay, Aethel. I want to see them. With my own eyes. I cannot believe what my brothers have told me about these knights. I'll see them with my own eyes. Then I'll believe."

"Judith, Judith, you don't know what you're saying. Aethel shook her head, and tried to force her old bones to obey her. She must get that girl out of the way. "You're fifteen now. Stay out of sight."

But Judith stayed put in the middle of the road, blue eyes burning, cheeks flushed, hands clenched tight at her sides.

Already the Norman knights were clattering across the drawbridge. Each rider had his place in the troop. They were carrying burning torches. To a man, they wheeled their mounts round on to the worn track, and galloped straight at the village. Feet scurried. Doors slammed.

Judith's heart missed a beat. It was beginning to look as though Eadwold's stories were true.

By the time the riders reached the cottages, their route was clear. Even brainless chickens knew better than to peck in the path of the lord and his men, for they had scuttled to safety. The knights could have been riding through a plague village. It was still as death.

Judith's blue gown fluttered in the warm, evening breeze. Ten pairs of hard eyes, concealed beneath steel helmets, noticed the movement. They saw a slender wand of a girl standing before one of the meanest huts, watching them with open curiosity. A strand of wavy fair hair floated free from her braids and shone in the waning rays of the sun.

"Here's sport!" one of the riders bawled. He hauled on his reins and broke line. The lack of fear in the girl's eyes was a challenge he could not resist.

Judith felt a small hand slip into hers. It gripped hard and tugged. "Judith!" a child's voice piped up at her. "Grandma wants you!"

"Leofric," Judith did not need to look at the boy to know his identity. It was Aethel's young grandson. "Run along, now. I'll be

in in a minute.” She ignored the insistent pull on her arm.

The rider had pointed his mount at Judith. His destrier came forwards slowly, huge feet stamping the dry earth. Fine clouds of powdered soil curled like mist round the stallion’s hocks. The knight’s shield hung from his saddlebow, blue with a silver device—a crescent moon? Judith found herself looking up into a face that was all steel. She could see nothing human beneath the mail and helmet. His torch flickered and muttered.

“John!” a commanding voice shouted, loud but slurred with drink.

The knight checked, reluctantly, and glanced over his shoulder. He was the only one who’d left his place. “My lord?” There was insolence in his tone.

“Curb your lusts for once, will you?” Baron Hugo, their Norman lord, was in command. Wine made his words run together. “I thought we’d other fish to fry. That one’ll keep.”

“My lord.” The knight’s helmet dipped in reluctant acknowledgement. The eyes behind the steel turned once more to Judith and gleamed. The man saluted. She could see his teeth. She knew he’d be back.

Spurs flashed, dust rose, and then the riders were gone, riding like demons from Hell.

Judith stared after them. “They’re crossing the ford,” she announced, puzzled. “The water’s splashing up; I can see the spray. Where can they be going?”

Aethel shuffled to her door, and propped herself on her stick.

Her face was haggard. “They’ll be taking t’shortcut through t’Chase,” she said heavily.

Judith frowned.

“Why are Baron Hugo’s men carrying torches?” Leofric demanded.

Judith stiffened. She felt the hair rise on the back of her neck.

“Baron de Mandeville to you, young Leo,” Aethel corrected her grandson.

Leofric released Judith’s hand and picked up a stick. He swished it through the dead leaves that had blown in from the Chase. “Aye, Grandmother,” he muttered sulkily. “Baron de Mandeville. But why are they carrying torches? ‘Tis light still, and I’ve not heard the Vespers bell.”

Judith had gone cold all over. She looked sharply at Aethel.

Suddenly severe, the old woman snatched the stick from her grandson and frowned at him. “Why don’t you occupy yourself with something useful—like helping me to tie up those bundles of herbs.” She waved her stick in the direction of her hut.

“Oh, Grandma!” Leo wailed his complaint, painfully aware that this was work for girls.

“Cease your moaning. Inside with you.” Not unkindly, the old woman pushed the boy through the door and made as if to follow.

Judith opened her mouth. “Aethel...”

Aethel froze.

“You...you don’t think they’re headed for our cottage, do you, Aethel?” Judith blurted at Aethel’s back.

Stiffly Aethel turned her head. She did not speak. Her old, tired eyes were sad.

Judith stepped backwards. Her blue eyes widened “No! No!” Her voice rose. “Not my mother! Not my father! No!”

Aethel sighed. “The miracle is, me dear, that it did not happen sooner.”

“No! I won’t let them!” Judith cried. She took hold of Aethel by the upper arms. “I need a horse,” she got out. “Quick, a horse, tell me...where can I find one?”

“But Judith, you can’t—”

“I can, and I will.” Judith shook the old woman mercilessly. “Now, for God’s sake, Aethel, tell me. I must find a horse!”

“Smithy...he’ll be shoeing—”

“My thanks, Aethel.” Judith whirled and began to run.

Aethel sighed, and shook her head. She sagged against the door-frame and her eyes were sadder than ever. There were days when she thought it was a curse to have lived so long.

The dust had settled, the village square had come alive again, but Judith did not notice. Hens scratched in the road. Two pigs guzzled, snuffling with delight, on a tumble of apples spilled from a basket. A girl stalked up to the swine, stick in hand, and, shrieking, beat them back; but Judith did not hear her any more than she heard the rising chatter of peasant voices or the rhythmic swishing of flails.

Her ears were tuned to the dull clanging of hammer on iron. It matched the pounding of her heart. She raced towards it.

The saints were with her. The smith was in his forge. Outside, unattended and tethered to the rail, a dainty bay mare waited, begging to be taken.

Judith snatched at the reins, hitched up her skirts, and launched herself on to the animal's bare back. The mare sprang forwards. Judith turned her towards the ford, thanking God that her skill made the lack of a saddle unimportant. Cold water splashed on her bare legs. Behind her someone loosed a string of curses. Judith ignored them.

She leaned forwards over her mount's neck. "Come on, my beauty," she addressed the mare. "Show me your paces. Show me how you can fly."

She dug in her heels and thought of her mother. Edith, whose beauty still shone through the deep furrows that pain and loss had scored across her face. Edith, who had not let bitterness sour her sweet nature. She dug in her heels and thought of her father. Godric Coverdale. A proud Saxon thegn in that other lifetime, before she'd been born. He was a cripple now, he needed a stick to help him hobble about. He'd lost more than his health at Hastings. The howling winds of change had blown her mother and father down from their rightful place, and now it seemed that fate had not finished with them. Sweet heaven, her parents were unprotected—Eadwold and Saewulf had gone to Tanfield! Surely God would not desert them?

The bay plunged into the Chase. Blackthorn twigs plucked at the skirts bundled about Judith's hips. They scratched her arms

and knees, and left long, red trails along her thighs.

“Faster, beauty, faster!” Judith urged. She must get there in time, she must. She would warn them. They could hide in the wood, until the Baron had gone, until her brothers returned. Then they’d go to the Abbey. They could hide there, claim sanctuary. What had they done wrong? Their only sin was that they were of the old nobility. They were Saxons, and it seemed their Norman lord had sworn to be rid of them.

Horse and girl streaked past a clump of hazels. The bay stumbled. Judith held her together by sheer will-power. She gulped in some air. She should not be riding the woodland path at such a speed. She knew that. If the mare fell, and broke her leg, she’d have to be destroyed. Judith set her jaw and ruthlessly wrung another spurt of speed from the beast.

Judith had never ridden so fast. The air rushed past her face and tugged her hair free from her braids. It was like flying. But a sinking feeling in her stomach warned her that it was not fast enough. They’d reached the tall oaks that grew in the heart of the Chase. A pheasant started up with a clatter of wings from a browning patch of bracken. The mare shied. Grim-faced, Judith clung like a leech, and pressed on.

She could smell burning.

On the fringe of Mandeville Chase, Judith reined in, and flung herself to the ground. Panic had not driven prudence entirely from her mind. She was now only a spear-throw from the cottage. Quiet as a mouse, she crawled forwards. A sturdy tree trunk

blocked her view.

The burning smell was stronger now. She wrinkled her nose, a pretty nose, slightly uptilted, with a scatter of freckles left by the summer sun. Judith swallowed. She felt sick. She dared not look. She told herself it was the time of year for bonfires. She'd left her mother preparing food stores for the winter. Perhaps she was smoking the fish herself this year, perhaps...

The mare snickered behind her. An answering whinny floated back on the warm, evening air along with the smell of the woodsmoke. Judith's heart slammed. Her parents had no horse, and the mule had gone to Tanfield...

Then the screaming began.

It was an ungodly sound, barely human, more like a wolf howling. It was her mother. Judith braced herself to peer round the tree. How could that raw, animal lament be her soft-voiced mother? She prayed her instincts were wrong and stuck her head out.

A gasp stole the breath from her lungs. Wide-eyed, Judith stared at a scene straight from the mouth of Hell.

The Baron and his knights filled the clearing. War-horses stamped and shuffled by the fallen tree her father liked to sit on to catch the last warmth of the setting sun, and ease his stiff joints. But the sun had betrayed him. It was not warming Godric now. Silver-bright, it flashed instead from the mail coats and helmets of the Norman knights.

Something was winking at her through a shifting forest of

horses' legs. With a sudden feeling of detachment, as though she was looking through a veil, Judith saw the sun was bouncing off the polished steel blade of a spear—a spear that was rammed through Godric's chest.

Judith's vision blurred. She swayed, shook her head to clear it, clutched at the rough bark of the tree, and looked again.

Her eyes locked on her mother's green robe. Edith was bending over Godric, and that unearthly sound was still issuing from her mouth.

One of the knights had wrenched the spear free. A rush of blood stained her father's tunic, her mother's green gown, and the leaf-littered grass. Edith was keening loud enough to be heard in London.

"Cease that wailing, woman." A voice as hard as stone sounded through the rushing in Judith's ears. The man's accent was as foreign as his chain-mail coat. "And be warned. So die all traitors to the King!"

Judith was still numb with horror. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Oddly, other senses were heightened, for she could feel the hard, deep ridges of the bark beneath her fingers and palms. She heard an animal rustling in the Chase behind her. A wood pigeon cooed.

One of the Baron's men wheeled his horse round and the pigeon was forgotten. He drew back his arm and threw his torch. It described a flaming arch through the evening air and landed squarely on the cottage thatch. It was then that Judith realised

why the smell of burning had set that tocsin pealing through her brain. It was not her mother's cooking fire that she'd smelled. It was more than that. The cottage had been fired. That knight had not been the first to fling his torch. Blue smoke and yellow fire were already creeping up from under the eaves.

It had been a long, hot summer. Long enough and hot enough to ripen all the grain. Judith had helped Edith dry pounds of fruit for their winter store. The straw on the roof was dry too; a small spark would have been enough to fire it. Now the dry grasses crackled. Golden flames shot along the length of the roof; greedy tongues licked upwards. It would not take long.

"Burn! Burn out all traitors!" Another fiery brand was chucked with cruel carelessness on to the thatch. The man who'd flung it was grinning, pleased with his handiwork. Edith's lament was loud enough to split the heavens apart. One of the riders laughed. Baron Hugo de Mandeville swayed like a sot in his saddle.

Judith could taste bile in her mouth. To think she'd not believed the stories...to think she'd wanted to see with her own eyes. She believed now. Eadwold was right. They were Devil's spawn. Something snapped inside her. She felt a scream of outrage rise in her throat. It threatened to choke her. Murderers! Norman swine! She set her teeth and snatched out her dagger. She'd get one of them, or die trying...

Judith lurched forwards.

A hard arm clamped round her waist and jerked her back.

““I wouldn’t if I were you,” a male voice hissed urgently in her car. “A pretty girl like you is all they need to complete their day’s entertainment.”

“Let me go!” Judith twisted to try and confront the owner of that iron arm. “Let me go!”

The arm slackened enough for her to turn, and she found herself looking into the bronzed face of a young man she had not seen before. Judith caught a glimpse of unruly brown hair and vivid green eyes. Someone had slashed his face with a whip. A red weal cut across one cheek.

She remembered her dagger, but before she could even blink the young man moved, and conjured her knife into his hand.

Judith stared at it. Her mind was spinning thoughts so fast she couldn’t take them in. She did not believe any of this was happening.

Her mother’s keening stopped abruptly. Judith’s skin chilled. A horse blew through his nose. A harness jingled. And her mother? Judith moaned and struggled to see.

The house was burning furiously. It crackled and spat. Flames streamed from it like golden pennants fluttering in the breeze. The roof ridge sagged. There was a dull crash. The main beam had collapsed, and a shower of bright sparks went spiralling upwards in the twilight air. Her mother lifted a grief-ravaged face and stared blindly at the wreck of her home.

Desperate to reach her parent, Judith lashed out. Her captor held fast. She opened her mouth, but the wretch read her

intention, threw her dagger aside, and clamped a firm hand round her mouth. A piece of burning thatch rolled off what was left of the roof and landed in the grass at Judith's feet. She was whipped clear.

"We're not safe here," the voice muttered from behind her. "That wall is about to fall. We'll hide in the Chase." He began to drag her into the wood.

Judith fought to hold her ground. She clawed. She kicked. She bit. Her captor yelped, and snatched his hands away. She'd drawn blood. Revolted, she spat it out. She faced her captor and backed to where her dagger lay. Eyes on the young man, she caught it up. "Go and skulk in the forest, coward!" Her voice shook. "I go to help my mother!"

As Judith's scornful words penetrated, the tanned face hardened. Green eyes dropped to her dagger and came back to look into her eyes. Judith frowned. She did not want to strike him...

He stepped towards her.

Judith brandished her dagger. She hesitated. It was a grave mistake. A swift hand flicked out, and clamped on her arm. The young man twisted lithely, and suddenly Judith was dangling over his shoulder like an unwieldy bundle of sticks. He made straight for the cover of the trees.

"Put-me-down!" Judith shrieked, legs flailing. The Chase seemed to be swinging up and down. It made her dizzy. She could not see straight. "Let-me-go! I-must-help-my-mother. Please,

please, put-me-down!” The words jerked from her mouth in time with her abductor’s running steps. She was wasting air. Her captor did not even falter and she needed all of her breath, for it was being bounced from her with every step he took. Her hair swept the forest floor. A few strides, and her already loosened braids unravelled completely.

Judith clenched her fists and tried beating them against the young man’s leather-clad back, but it had no effect. She thought of her mother and let out a strangled moan.

Suddenly the jarring stopped. The young man bent his knees and Judith was tipped into a drift of red leaves.

She pushed herself to her knees, twitched a leaf from her face and watched him through the golden tangle of her hair.

“We’re far enough away. I don’t think they saw us. You’ll be safe now.” He was breathing heavily, but his voice was low and pleasant. He smiled.

Judith saw him wince. His hand rose briefly to touch his damaged cheek, and continued upwards to rake back his hair.

Judith was in no mood to respond to an easy smile. She glared at him from her ignominious perch among the leaves. “Who are you?” she demanded. “What gives you the right to carry me off like this? Did you not see what they did to my father? And my mother. I cannot desert her. What kind of a man are you to run off and leave a helpless woman to face those...those bastards?”

Her eyes ran over him, and a frown creased her brow. She could not make him out. He was no serf. No serf she knew ever

possessed a fine leather over-tunic and trousers like his. His belt was a good one. It boasted a silver buckle, but it was not elaborate enough to mark him as noble. Her gaze dropped to his hands. They were fine-boned and unscarred by manual labour.

A sob rose in her throat, Judith held it down. A ghastly suspicion was taking root in her mind, and she knew she'd gone white. "Who are you?" she repeated. "And what are you doing in the Chase?" Her stomach twisted. She threw a harried look over her shoulder. Was he alone?

There was only one reason that she knew of for a stranger to be lurking in the Chase...

"My name is Rannulf. I was hunting." He shrugged easily. "What else is a chase for?"

Again that persuasive smile. Judith mistrusted it. She had to find out. She'd never be able to help her mother if her supposition was correct. She sat back on her heels and decided to try a direct attack. "I'm told the slavers are back in the Chase," she said, bluntly.

"Slavers?" The young man called Rannulf looked startled.

That had wiped the smile from his mouth. He had not been expecting that. Perhaps she might trust him...

"Aye, slavers," she said. "Where have you been that you've not heard the warnings?" Again she watched for his reaction.

He looked utterly bewildered, utterly at a loss. He was no slaver.

"So," Judith freed a trembling breath. "You claim you're a

hunter?”

Rannulf was frowning at the ground, muttering. “Slavers,” he mumbled, and nodded absently in answer to her question.

That explained the leather jerkin he wore, but not his presence in the Chase. “For whom do you hunt?” Judith demanded. “This wood belongs to the Baron de Mandeville. He was leading those brave warriors who just murdered a helpless old man.” She sobbed. “Do you hunt for him?”

Suspicious crowded back, curdling the food in Judith’s belly. She edged away from this man, Rannulf, feeling like a cornered hind facing the hounds. It appeared she had escaped one trap, only to find herself in another. She shot another look over her shoulder. If she could run very, very fast perhaps she could lose him in the dense undergrowth...

His green eyes were watching her. “I wouldn’t if I were you,” he recommended drily. “I know every inch of Mandeville Chase. I would soon catch you.” He dropped to his knees, and held out a hand palm uppermost, as though she were a wild beast that needed gentling.

Judith shrank back. “You did not answer,” she prompted.

“What?”

“Do you hunt with the Baron’s men?”

His lips curved, and Judith felt her stomach tighten. He had very white teeth.

“I?” He seemed to find that amusing. “Hunt with the Baron’s men? Never!” He fingered the red weal on his cheek. “I hunt

for myself. Do not fear that I shall take you to him. He did ever like to break things, and I will not give you up to him. Did I not snatch you from under his nose? I did that to save you. Why should I deliver you to him now, having winded myself in getting you away?"

His hand remained outstretched towards her. Judith hesitated, wanting, but not daring, to trust him. She took refuge in scorn. "You think to reassure me by such words?"

"Aye."

"Well you do not. If you are not in the pay of de Mandeville, you must be an outlaw."

"Must I?" Rannulf smiled.

"Why else be hunting in the Chase? 'Tis reserved for that nest of Norman vipers. Anyone else caught hunting here is hanged as a thief, and if you don't mind taking that risk you must be desperate indeed. A man with a price on your head. What would an outlaw want with me?"

Rannulf's lips curved. "What indeed?" he murmured, eyeing her. Then, seeing her worried look, he relented. "Don't look so worried, I'll not harm you. I give you my word."

"The word of an outlaw is meant to reassure me?"

"I begin to think I have rescued a shrew," he sighed. "Perhaps I should have left you to Hugo's men. They're hot blooded enough to knock some sense into you, though I doubt that you would benefit from the lesson." Rannulf rose to his feet and swung away.

It seemed to have gone very dark in the wood. The trees loomed in on them, like twisted bars in a prison cell. Judith shivered. She did not want to be abandoned here.

She scrambled to her feet, ran to Rannulf, and touched his sleeve. "I'm sorry, R...Rannulf. Don't leave me. P...please, take me with you."

Rannulf's hand closed over hers. It felt warm.

"I won't leave you. I know where you can stay the night, and tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow?" Judith bit on her lips to stop them trembling. Her voice broke. "I never want tomorrow to come. My father is dead. And my mother...Oh, God! What has happened to my mother?"

Rannulf grasped her chin and forced her to look at him. His eyes were as green as the Chase in high summer. "Listen," he said. "We'll get you safe, and then I'll go back. I'll see to your mother."

Judith clutched at his arm. "You will? Oh, Rannulf—"

"Trust me?"

Judith nodded and swallowed.

"Come on, then," Rannulf said briskly. "We're wasting time." He waved towards the thick of the Chase. "That way." He offered his hand for the second time, and Judith put hers in his.

Rannulf had been gone from the shelter a long time. Judith pulled the folds of the fur-lined cloak he had lent her more tightly about her body, and willed him to return.

She could hear the night-time stirrings of the forest rise and fall outside the hunter's hide. That was the sound of the wind in the dying dew-damp leaves, and that was the shriek of an owl baulked of its prey. It was black as pitch.

Judith huddled further into the small bower, wondering what protection it would offer her should a wild boar or a wolf come across her scent and decide to investigate. She fumbled for the branches of her refuge, and shook them to test their strength. She was not reassured.

Two large wattle hurdles were leaning against each other. Tied tightly at the top, they left an opening at either end. Two pieces of leather served as doors, and the outside was camouflaged with turves and leaves. It kept the wind off, but it was not designed to protect its occupant from other, more tangible enemies.

A twig cracked outside the bower and Judith's breath caught in her throat. Rannulf had returned her knife to her. She groped for it.

The leather curtain was drawn inside. "Judith?"

Rannulf's voice. Judith dropped the dagger. "M...my mother?" she asked at once, moving to make room for him.

He found her hand. "Judith, I'm sorry—"

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"Judith," Rannulf hesitated. "Judith, I don't know."

Hope flared. "What do you mean?"

"I went back, as I promised. Your father was lying as we last saw him. Your house was no more than a smouldering pile of

ashes, but your mother was not there. I looked everywhere. She has gone.”

“My brothers!” Judith exclaimed. “My brothers must have got her away. They must.”

“Brothers?”

Judith nodded before she remembered the darkness hid her face. “Aye, I’ve two of them. They are both older than I. They will have her. I know they will.”

“I pray you are right.”

“Tomorrow I will find them,” Judith declared. “And tomorrow we will...we will bury my father.” She sniffed and dashed away a tear. She’d not cry before a stranger.

“Judith?” Rannulf’s voice came softly through the blackness.

“Aye?”

“’Tis no shame to weep.”

Judith sniffed again. A silence fell over them. She could hear the wind sighing in the branches above them.

Rannulf shook her hand. “You must rest. You will need your strength tomorrow.”

“I won’t sleep. How could I?” she asked, rousing herself with an effort to speak.

“If you cannot sleep, at least you can be rested. Come. Lie you here. And my cloak, thus. There. I will stand guard over you. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Rannulf. My thanks,” Judith whispered, and settled down into the softness of his ermine-lined cloak.

The Normans had thrust a knife in her heart. They were twisting it. The pain was not to be borne.

Judith screamed and woke. She did not know where she was. Memory flooded back. She groaned aloud.

“Judith, Judith, hush.” Warm arms enfolded her, comforting arms. Childlike, she clung.

“Rannulf?” She gave a dry sob.

“You are not alone,” he said. “Cry. ’Tis better to grieve.” Rannulf stroked her hair from her face. The gesture was oddly reminiscent of her mother.

The dam broke. Tears flooded, and streamed scalding down her cheeks. Judith did not hear Rannulf’s murmured words, did not notice the hand that caressed her. She burrowed closer into his arms. She needed comfort and here was its source.

At length the sobbing eased. Rannulf’s arms fell away.

Judith lifted her head “Hold me tight. It hurts less when you hold me.”

“Judith.” Rannulf hesitated. “’Tis late. We should sleep now.”

“Aye.” Judith made to pull him down beside her. She could feel his body stiffen, resisting her. “What’s the matter? Rannulf?” She was annoyed that he should hold back from her. She needed the comfort he gave her.

“’Tis not seemly,” came his stiff reply.

“Not seemly?” Judith was astounded. “Not seemly? But you are far older than I!”

“I’m twenty-one—” amusement entered his voice “—is that

such a great age? Those knights were older still, and that would not have saved you from them!” he pointed out, more soberly.

“But they are monsters,” Judith said. “Invaders. Normans. I wish a thousand plagues on them. You are not like that. You are no Norman.”

“Judith, I must tell you—”

“Just hold me. Please, Rannulf. I hurt so.”

Rannulf could not see Judith through the gloom, but his ears were those of a hunter. They were trained to be sensitive to the slightest of sounds. He heard the quaver in Judith’s voice and capitulated. “Very well,” he replied lightly. “If you’ll try to sleep. Give me some of that cloak; I’m freezing out here.”

Light glimmered faintly from the east. A bird high in a tree cried out a note or two of his morning song.

Judith surfaced slowly from a deep sleep. She was warm. Unconsciously, she shifted closer to the body next to hers, and hugged it to her.

Deep in the Chase a dog barked. Another bird joined in the song.

Judith lifted her head, and turned curious eyes on the reassuring presence in whose arms she lay. Rannulf was still asleep. One strong arm fitted neatly around her waist. She discovered she was holding his other hand. She had no desire to move.

A grey light seeped round the edges of the leather curtain, and Judith studied Rannulf’s features. His brown hair was wavy

and tousled. He wore it shorter than either of her brothers, but longer than was favoured by the Normans. A shadow of overnight stubble marked jaw and chin. His nose was straight, lips well shaped, and slightly parted to reveal strong, white teeth. He had the tanned skin of one who had spent most of the summer out of doors. To Judith's uncritical eyes, he looked as handsome as a prince in a harper's tale.

Only the red mark disfigured him. Judith slipped her hand free of his. Curious, she ran her finger the length of the weal, from cheekbone to dark stubble on his chin. Though her touch had been as light as the kiss of a butterfly's wing, his eyes opened. He smiled. Judith's cheeks burned.

"You've managed to appropriate all of the cloak," Rannulf grumbled drowsily.

His eyes were startling at close range. Fringed with long, charcoal lashes they were not pure green, but were flecked with tints of brown and gold. Judith's stomach tightened.

"I'm sorry." She fumbled at the heavy folds of the cloak.

"Tis early yet," Rannulf yawned, and reached for her. He pulled her back into his arms, as casually as though he woke every day of the week with a strange girl in his arms. "Sleep awhile longer," he murmured lazily. "I'll go and catch us something to eat later."

Judith was jerked into full consciousness by a rough hand shaking her shoulder.

"Judith!" a familiar voice called. "Judith! My God, Eadwold,

she's alive!"

"Saewulf!"

Judith looked into the clean-shaven face of her nineteen-year-old brother, smiled at the relief she saw written in his blue eyes, and threw herself into his arms. The resemblance between them was very marked.

Another voice, rougher than Saewulf's, bawled through the opening.

"Out you come, sister. Have you no greeting for your eldest brother?"

Judith scrambled out of the hide, wondering where Rannulf had gone. He must be checking his snares—he'd said he'd go and find food. She hoped the Baron would not catch him poaching.

A dazzling shaft of morning sunlight pierced through the leafy canopy and fell on her face. She blinked up into the stern features of Eadwold. She made no effort to embrace him as she had her younger, best-loved brother.

"You're unharmed, sister?" Eadwold demanded, hands on hips. "They didn't...hurt you, did they?"

"Nay. They didn't even see me. I was in the Chase. Have you seen Mother? Is she safe?"

"Safe enough. We took her to the Abbey."

"Thank God," Judith breathed, and the black misery that had her in its grip eased a little.

Eadwold's face darkened.

Judith's spirits plummeted again. Her giant of a brother was

gazing past her, eyes narrowed in the way she recognised meant growing anger. She turned to see the cause of his wrath.

Saewulf emerged from the shelter, Rannulf's cloak in hand. It was on this garment that Eadwold's eyes were fixed.

Judith could see Eadwold assessing the worth of the cloak, hazarding a guess as to the identity of its owner. It did not look like the cloak of a Saxon...

Eadwold rounded on his sister. He was scratching his beard, face like thunder. Judith's stomach began to churn—Eadwold was best avoided when he was in one of his rages.

"So...you were not harmed, sweet sister?" Eadwold ground out. His grey eyes chilled her to the marrow. "Found yourself a protector, did you?"

"Eadwold, I—"

"What fee did he claim, this protector of yours? What was the price of your safety?"

"Eadwold, Judith is but a child," Saewulf protested, his face echoing the dawning horror on Judith's.

"She's old enough to shame our family," Eadwold spat. "I am the head of our family now. I would rather see her dead with our father, than whore to save her skin!"

Judith felt as though a cloud had floated between her and the sun. "No! Eadwold, you do not understand."

But Eadwold had seen her shiver. He stepped towards her and gripped her shoulder.

Something hard dug into Judith's thigh. She glanced down.

“You’re...you’re wearing father’s sword!” she stammered. “And Saewulf...he is armed too! Dear God, Eadwold, if the Baron’s men see you carrying weapons, there will be more trouble. You know it’s against the law!”

“There’ll be trouble all right,” Eadwold growled. “Our days of meek submission are over. Yesterday saw to that. I have pledged myself to purge our land of these Norman parasites. My father will not die unavenged. I made an oath over his dead body. Those who block my path will die. I will destroy de Mandeville and all that’s his, or die trying.”

Eadwold’s towering form blotted out the trees. He was a man transformed. Judith scarcely recognised him. This was no ordinary rage. Eadwold had become a stranger, carried along by a surging tide of hatred, and she did not have the strength to swim against it.

Eadwold’s cold gaze dropped to Rannulf’s cloak.

Judith thought about Rannulf. She could see his extraordinary eyes crinkling at the corners, because he was smiling. She looked at her elder brother. The set of Eadwold’s jaw warned her not to confess that she had had a protector. He would never believe Rannulf had behaved honourably. Eadwold was out for revenge, and was like to wreak it on the first person who crossed his path. It was not going to be Rannulf.

Mentally, Judith compared Eadwold with Rannulf. Eadwold was big, over six feet tall—heavily built like a Viking warrior. He had long flaxen hair and a flowing beard in the old Saxon

style. Rannulf was not so tall. Rannulf was no weakling, he had carried her easily enough, but he was not built in the same solid mould as Eadwold. She did not like to think of them fighting. She must get her brothers away. Before Rannulf came back with the food he had promised.

Judith cast her eyes around the fringes of the clearing. By the look of the light it was well past Matins. Rannulf could be back at any moment...

Eadwold saw her sidelong glance. His sword scraped clear of its scabbard. "Looking for your protector, sister mine?" Eadwold pressed the point against her breast. Their dead father's ring gleamed on his finger.

"Eadwold, for the love of God!" Saewulf protested sharply.

The blade moved. Judith caught her breath and glanced down. A faint red mark began to blossom on the fabric of her gown. She forced her eyes to lift to meet her elder brother's. His pupils were tiny black dots.

"I have no protector—" Judith declared in a voice that was as clear as a bell "—save perhaps my younger brother. Would you kill him, Eadwold, if he were to defend me?"

Eadwold glared into her eyes, and nodded as though satisfied with what he saw there. The sword withdrew.

Judith breathed again.

"No protector, eh?" Still Eadwold probed. "Then how came you to be safe here?"

Half the truth was better than none. "It was getting dark,"

Judith told him. “I walked for some while before coming on this shelter.”

“’Tis a fine mantle for someone to leave behind so carelessly,” Saewulf commented.

“Aye,” Judith smiled, though she could have throttled Saewulf for harping on the damning garment. “But I was very grateful for its warmth this long night past. And now brothers, where are we going?” she asked brightly. “We cannot stay here.”

“That we can’t. We go on into the heart of the forest,” Eadwold declared.

“Into the forest?” Judith asked.

“Aye, we are outlaws now, Judith,” Saewulf pointed out.

“What?”

“Outlaws,” Eadwold repeated baldly. “You’re either for us, or against us.”

“But, Eadwold, think,” Judith objected. “There will be a price on your head—and anyone who helps you will be outlawed too.”

“With us, or against us,” Eadwold stressed. “You get the same choice, sister. But I tell you this, you side against us, and you are my sister no more. I will never speak to you again. You will be dead to me.”

“But...outlaws!” Judith rubbed her brow. “Eadwold, if you are caught, you will be hanged. Maybe tortured. That would kill Mother, as surely as if you’d stabbed her yourself. Is that what you want?” The light in Eadwold’s eyes told her he was beyond reason, but she had to try.

“Revenge is all I have left.” Eadwold sounded impatient. “Judith, those murderers have destroyed everything else. Now are you with us, or against us?”

Judith hesitated.

A rustling in the bushes brought three blond heads snapping round.

Judith could hardly bear to look, but it was not Rannulf, only a blackbird grubbing in the leaves. “W...with you, of course,” she replied hastily. “Aren’t you my family? Lead on, Eadwold. I will follow you.”

Eadwold scowled down, solid as a rock.

“Well?” She pulled at his huge hand. She must get Eadwold away. Sunlight dappled the ground, the dew had already evaporated...

“We will carry no maids in our band, Judith,” Eadwold said abruptly. “I’ll take you to Mother, for you cannot come with us. I am forming an army. An army of well-trained and disciplined men, dedicated to resisting Norman rule. His eyes gleamed. “Twill be no common rabble. There will be no women to distract my men. No camp followers. Just warriors fighting together in the old Saxon tradition, fighting for justice for our people.”

“We cannot consign Judith to a nunnery, Eadwold!” Saewulf objected hotly.

Judith spread her hands in resignation. “I am a maid, Saewulf. What else is there for me?”

“Nay, Judith. You...a nun! “Tis unthinkable. Eadwold, we

could disguise her. She could become a youth!”

Eadwold snorted.

“Aye. We could cut off her hair, short like a squire—” Saewulf warmed to his idea “—find her a boy’s tunic. Mother will not want her to waste away in a convent. I will teach her to throw a knife, use a bow—”

“She could never bend a bow!” Eadwold declared scornfully. “She lacks the muscle!”

“I will make her a smaller, more supple one. Judith...” Saewulf’s blue eyes pleaded.

Judith looked wildly at the shortening shadows cast by the sun rising inexorably towards its zenith. She was so desperate to leave the glade she would have agreed to face a pack of wolves single-handed. She did not want Rannulf’s blood on her conscience.

“I’ll do it,” she agreed. “Whatever you say. No one will know I’m a girl. I’ll heal your wounds; I’ll cook for you; I’ll even try to fight for you. I’ll put my hand to the wheel. If necessary I’ll die with you. Only please, let’s hurry.”

“Hurry?” Eadwold queried, a dangerous edge to his voice.

“Aye.” Judith tilted her chin. “I...I want to see Mother.”

Eadwold smiled for the first time that morning. “Good. I confess I did not want to lose my little sister. We’ll have to find a new name for you.” He slung his bundle over his broad shoulder, and stalked to the edge of the clearing.

“Why not Jude?” Saewulf suggested with a grin. “Tis in part her real name.” He winked, and throwing Rannulf’s cloak at

Judith, followed Eadwold into the thicket.

Judith stood irresolute. Now that her brothers were quitting the place, she acknowledged a reluctance to leave. Rannulf's cloak weighed heavy in her hands. She smoothed the fur. She would have to take it with her, or Eadwold would suspect the worst.

She sighed. She did not want Rannulf to think her a thief. But better he think her a thief than die on her brother's sword. Rannulf was no Norman. Had he not been kind to her? But it would not matter to Eadwold what race Rannulf belonged to. If Eadwold believed that Rannulf had dishonoured their family, that would be enough to condemn him.

Swinging Rannulf's mantle round her shoulders, she frowned at the blood staining her gown. "If Eadwold had cut her, his sister, he would not hesitate to kill Rannulf if he thought he had cause.

Would Rannulf return and search for her? She wished she could tell him she was safe. But there was no way. Further contact would only put his life at risk.

Realising she was tarrying too long, Judith gathered up her skirts and followed her brothers into the heart of Mandeville Chase.

Chapter One

Summer, Four Years Later: The Island of Cyprus

Rannulf snatched off his helmet and ran his fingers through sweat-drenched hair, lifting it from his scalp in an effort to get cool. Waiting in the lee of the harbour wall, he was protected from the sea breezes, and that was the last thing he wanted protection from. He'd give half of his hard-won bezants for one refreshing blast of wind. The heat was almost unbearable.

He shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted at the ship unloading its human cargo on to the long wooden jetty that ran from ship to quayside. He was looking for passage home, but wanted nothing to do with slavers.

Perspiration trickled down Rannulf's back. He eased his shoulders with a grimace and cursed the ship's master who kept him waiting out here at noon, where there was no shade. He'd learnt that the sun could be as merciless a foe as any. He had taken to wearing a white robe over his coat of mail, and while this shielded him from the worst of the heat, he still felt as though he were being stewed alive inside a tin pot.

His eyes made another circuit of the harbour, and came to rest again on the bedraggled wretches who were emerging, blinking and filthy, from the hold of the slave ship.

If his man didn't appear soon, he'd try and find another vessel. But that would not be easy. The seas of the eastern

Mediterranean were reputed to be jostling with pirate ships this year—all on the prowl for the booty crusaders were bringing back home. There were few vessels with masters brave enough to risk the sun. And those that were were loaded themselves to bursting point to make it all worthwhile. Everyone, it seemed, wanted passage west.

Rannulf scowled into the heat haze, no longer seeing the glares. Where was the man? Beautiful though this island was, he did not want to watch the year out here. It was time to go home. He sighed. It was beginning to look as though the man he'd met in the tavern had been spinning a yarn. John Beaufour was not here. His scowl deepened, and he fingered the scar that stood out pale against the tanned skin of his face. He'd cause enough to dislike Beaufour; but his brother's knight had trading links out here and, if meeting with Beaufour secured passage home for him and his comrades, he'd do it willingly.

The captives, roped together like beasts going to auction, were being driven along the quayside. A crowd of onlookers appeared out of nowhere. Despite himself, Rannulf found he was watching. Some of the poor devils were women. Their clothes were little more than rags, and barely covered pale limbs that had been incarcerated too long away from the sun. Rannulf frowned. He did not like to think where they would be going.

Slavers. Suddenly a memory stirred in Rannulf's mind and his face lightened. He was back in the Chase at home and he saw again the bright blue eyes looking up at him, torn with indecision.

Even after all these years he still thought of her. Judith. She'd said slavers had been seen in Mandeville Chase. She'd mistaken him for one. He had never forgotten the way she had looked at him that day, half afraid, half wanting to trust...

Some of the women being bullied along towards the harbour perimeter were blonde. They looked drugged, poor souls. He wondered if any of them had been snatched from home. A wooden platform had been constructed in the square at the end of the quay. The slaves were to be sold here, then. Rannulf folded his arms and leaned against the wall. He would have nothing to do with such traffickings.

The heat shimmered upwards from the stone flags in the square. The haze blurred his vision. He shook his head and blinked sweat from his eyes. It must be like a cauldron out there. His gaze sharpened. A fellow knight—the one he was looking for—detached himself from the crowd and joined the slave master on the rostrum. John Beaufour. Rannulf swore under his breath. His skin crawled despite the strength of the sun. Surely even as disreputable a man as Beaufour would not treat with slavers?

Judith's words came back to haunt him. "Slavers have been seen in the Chase. Where've you been that you've not heard the warnings?" He'd always felt he'd failed her back there in the Chase. Perhaps, for her memory's sake.

Tucking his helmet under his arm, Rannulf pushed himself away from the harbour wall and walked towards the block. He could not help the slaves, he was being sentimental—there was

no denying that. Judith had been dead for nigh on four years.

Rannulf's mouth twisted, but memory drove him on. Before he knew it, he had crossed the square and was standing, with the sun beating down on his bare head, at the steps of the auction block. Beaufour had vanished.

Judith blinked and tried to focus her eyes. The light was so bright it burned. They must be in the harbour, as she could hear the sea slapping the sides of the ship. Her head felt thick and muzzy. She shook it, and her shoulder-length hair rippled about her face, but still her head did not clear. She'd been all right till they'd told her to strip and wash. When she'd refused to obey, they'd forced that drink down her throat, and her limbs had suddenly felt as though they belonged to someone else. Then they'd scrubbed her themselves and they'd dressed her, unresisting, in a clean smock.

She wondered, dully, why she could not see straight. Her mouth was dry. Maybe it was the heat. The harbour wavered and swam before her eyes like a desert mirage in a Bible story.

She was conscious of a vague feeling that she should be angry. She should be frightened. But she could not dredge up any feeling at all. Later...later she would...With difficulty, Judith directed a scowl at the hard-faced goblin of a man who was dragging her along the path. Could he not see she was going as fast as she could?

The path was dusty, and flanked on both sides by row after row of people, all staring at her, all eyes. Judith giggled. So many

eyes, they looked like silly, staring sheep. The slave-driver jerked on the rope, and her wrists burned. She tried to remember what all these people had come for, but her mind was no clearer than her vision.

The dust was the colour of amber. It swirled around in little eddies scuffed up by her bare feet. It scorched her soles, and this, rather than the proddings of the fiend at her side prompted her to greater speed. At the back of her mind fear was slowly crystallising. She tried to identify it and failed. Her head ached. It was much too difficult to think.

She forced her head up. The landscape was as alien as her strangely unresponsive mind and body. Thin spiky trees, unlike any she had ever seen, arched upwards. The sky was a rich, deep azure. Its perfect complexion was unmarred by even a single cloud. The pellucid waters around the bay echoed that pure, untainted colour. A donkey's discordant braying threatened to split sea and sky and her head apart. She stifled a moan.

The sheep-eyed watchers wore clothes whiter than any fleece. The brightness dazzled Judith's drug-dazed eyes. What were they all staring at, these dark-eyed, dark skinned men?

She licked her lips. The fear shifted uneasily in her mind. She was being shepherded towards a platform. She stared. Her mind emptied. There was a void where her innards should be.

She began to struggle, and tried to cry out, "No! No!" She only managed a mumble. That drink had robbed her of voice as well as will. Her breath came fast. She saw a wooden stage, the height

of a man, and on it swayed some half-clad girls, roped together. She recognised them. They'd been with her in the hold. It was on these girls that the men's eyes were fixed.

Judith stopped in her tracks, as a lamb will when it scents the stench of slaughter. She'd got in the wrong way round...the men with the eyes were not the sheep...the real victims were trussed up on the platform.

"Move, girl," her captor snarled, and thumped her in the back with the butt of a spear.

Judith stumbled towards the dreadful platform. The fog in her mind had quite vanished, leaving it horribly, starkly clear. This was a slave market. And she was about to be sold, like a beast of burden. Wildly she looked about, eyes glazed not with the drug but with blind panic. These men were assessing her worth. And behind the calculating stares, Judith glimpsed something else. Lust. Her legs turned to jelly.

A hundred dark eyes impaled her with the same unwavering, evil desire—the desire to possess and dominate. Far better to be a simple beast of burden than suffer this. Would that she had been ugly, or a crookback...

"Sweet Mother, help me." Her lips felt stiff, the words came out slurred and indistinct. She was at the bottom of the steps. She tossed her head, and her cropped hair caught the sunlight. An appreciative murmur ran through the onlookers. Judith baulked. The spear butt drove into the small of her back.

"No!" Her tongue was still disconnected from her will, and

her shriek emerged as a husky, broken whisper.

Another crippling blow jarred her spine. Judith pitched forward into the dust.

She choked on sand. It filled her mouth and eyes. Someone touched her arm and Judith braced herself for another clout. But the pressure on her arm was gentle—not designed to cause pain. Someone raised her to her feet.

Judith blinked furiously and tried to see through the grit in her eyes.

Her heart began to pump. The drug had dissolved her brain. She was gazing into green eyes, eyes with gold and brown flecks in them, warm eyes, tender eyes. Eyes the colour of the Chase in high summer. The grip on her arms tightened. She heard a sharp intake of breath.

She blinked again, but the manifestation was still there. She must have been driven mad. “R...Rannulf?” She felt dizzy.

“Shift yourself, wench!” her gaoler bawled, in English, placing his rank person belligerently between Judith and the green-eyed apparition. “Who do you think you are? Princess Salomé? We’re waiting for you. Aye, you. ’Tis your turn.”

The spear prodded. A hard knee jabbed, and Judith stumbled up the rostrum steps.

The auctioneer was a spindly man. She spared him no more than a glance. She twisted her head, soured the white-robed figures at the bottom of the steps, and tried willing the clouds out of her mind.

She must have been mistaken. How could it be Rannulf? He did not belong here.

She could feel sweat trickling down her back. It was hotter than a blacksmith's forge. The auctioneer began his patter, but Judith could not understand a word. The rows of eyes were eager. The auctioneer's gnarled hands moved behind her, pulling her robe tight round her body. The eyes flashed. Judith cursed her slender female form, and her Saxon colouring. She could see the latter was a rarity in these eastern parts. Who would buy her? She shivered. She clamped her teeth together, and thrust the thought aside. Where was the man who had helped her up? The one she'd thought was...

He stood unmoving at the base of the platform. His eyes, like all the others, were fixed on her, but they looked puzzled, not hot with greed and lust. Judith swayed. She felt faint. The sun shone directly into her eyes. She could not see him properly. He was bare-headed. Like Rannulf, he had brown, wavy hair. But his clothes were all wrong. He looked like a...

"Show us your teeth."

A new tormentor had appeared at her side. He spoke in French, badly, but there was no doubting his meaning. Wrinkled hands caught hold of her chin and prised her jaws apart.

This unholy wretch was short. He wore the same flowing robes she had seen on others in the crowd. His face was dark, and sun-shrivelled like his hands. Judith caught a sickly sweet smell in her nostrils and shuddered.

The man saw the movement, and his examination of her mouth completed, bared his own discoloured teeth in a snarl. “You must learn to veil your distaste, my dear...” he hissed, snaking his hand down Judith’s arm. He pinched her cruelly. “Or you will suffer.”

Judith opened her mouth to frame an angry retort, but her eyes caught those of the figure by the steps. Rannulf’s twin shook his head. She snapped her mouth shut.

“Very good,” drawled her new tormentor. He turned to the auctioneer. “I like the look of this one, my friend. Hair the colour of gold, eyes like sapphires, and it would seem she can be taught. I like her. She will do my House proud.”

The auctioneer clapped his hands. He fingered her cropped locks, indicated her eyes, made much of her unusual colouring.

Someone made an opening bid.

Judith shut her eyes.

The withered runt bettered the offer.

She tried to shut her ears.

Another bid from another quarter. That hideous wretch again. Another bid. Another.

Judith caught the word “virgin”. Her eyes sprang open. Someone laughed. She found the brown hair of the man who resembled Rannulf, and locked her gaze on him. If she had to be sold, she would rather he bought her. She could see him watching her. Why did he not bid?

Please, she willed him, make a bid for me.

He did not budge. She could hear others bidding, but he made not a move. He simply stared. Green eyes, startling against sun-kissed skin, staring out of the crowd as though it were he and not she who had been drugged.

Please, please. You bid for me, she shrieked in her mind.

He shook his dark head sharply as if to break a trance. He glanced at the auctioneer. He frowned. He reached for his purse. He weighed it in his hand.

“Oh, please, please. You buy me. Please,” Judith whispered out loud.

The wizened man glared at her. Judith bit her lip. Someone tossed in another bid.

People began to mutter.

The runt held his hand aloft. Dangling from it was a bulging leather purse.

The muttering ceased.

Judith’s nostrils flared. That smell...

Coins rattled. Another bid from the stunted midget. Judith’s stomach cramped. The crowd sighed. The stick-man grinned like a wolf.

Judith staggered backwards. “No!” she got out.

“Yes.” The auctioneer smirked. “Balduk here has offered many gold bezants for you.”

“But...but there may be another bid,” Judith protested, eyes turning instinctively towards the dark stranger at the foot of the steps. He looked pale under his tan. He shook his head and spread

his hands. She read his thoughts as easily as if she could see into his mind. His purse was not as fat as the one the auctioneer was clutching. He did not have enough money. Judith groaned.

“Ah, no! No one else would pay that much for you. Only Balduk is able to give so many bezants for a girl. You’d better not disappoint him.”

“I won’t go,” Judith declared, and noticed with surprise that she sounded drunk.

Balduk leaned towards her and fixed her with unblinking, snake’s eyes. “You will come quietly or you will suffer,” he said quietly. Death lay in those serpent’s eyes.

Judith believed him.

Balduk picked up the rope trailing from her bonds and led her from the dais.

The man with the dark, tousled hair watched their departure. His green eyes were full of shadows.

Evening. It was cooler now. There was an odd singing noise outside Judith’s luxurious prison. One of her companions had roused herself sufficiently to tell her it was made by an insect called a cicada.

“What is this place?” Judith demanded. But the girl, who was lazing on a couch eating sweetmeats, smiled, and giggled, and would say no more.

Judith was not sure what she had expected when she had been led away from the market, but, whatever it was, it had not been this. She was lodged in the most beautiful room she had ever

seen. The walls were a cool, clean white. Semi-circular arches allowed tantalising glimpses of flower-shaded courtyards. Silver fountains played. The smooth marble floors were scattered with soft, exotic rugs of such quality and texture that they looked as though they'd come from paradise.

Judith had been bathed. Healing oils had been rubbed into the scars on her wrists and ankles. She'd been clothed, after a fashion, in floating silks that revealed more than they hid. She'd been given strange foods to eat. She'd tasted olives, and octopus and swordfish. She'd been handed sweet fruits called oranges. But all this attention had not allayed her suspicions. She was being treated like a sacrificial lamb, and any moment now the officiating priest would appear and demand she paid her dues. No, however heavenly this place appeared, it had not been designed with her in mind.

"Do you understand me?" She raised her voice. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"She finds your tongue difficult."

Judith whirled round to see a plump woman standing behind her. The woman's leather-soled slippers had made no sound on the tiled floor. She had glossy raven-coloured hair. Her sloe-dark eyes had been carefully painted. Her lips were tinted ruby red.

"She managed it a moment ago," Judith said waspishly. The drug had worn off and she was both angry and afraid. "Who the Devil are you?"

"I am Zoe." Zoe's voice was low, Judith could hardly hear her.

“Where am I? Where is this place?” Judith demanded.

“You are in the House of Balduk.”

“I know that,” Judith snapped. “But where on God’s earth is that?”

Zoe’s dark eyes stared coolly at her. She seemed quite unaffected by Judith’s anger. “Does it matter?”

“It matters!”

Zoe shrugged. “As you wish. This is Cyprus. We are under Byzantine rule.”

The name meant nothing to Judith.

“You see,” Zoe said, sweet as honey. “It does not matter. You are no wiser for knowing the name of this island.”

Judith lifted her chin.

“I came to see if you were ready,” Zoe said.

“Ready? For what?” Judith demanded. “To serve your master? Balduk, he is called, is he not?” She could not keep the bitterness from her voice. “Is this his harem?”

“Balduk is your master,” Zoe confirmed. “But he did not buy you to minister to him. This is no harem.” She laughed. “You are here to please his guests.”

“I don’t understand—his g...guests?” Judith did not like the sound of that.

“I will be plain, my dear,” Zoe smiled. “You are in a brothel. Balduk runs a House of Pleasure. We are all his ladies and must do as we are bidden.”

Judith felt as though a pit had opened up beneath her. Her

mouth opened and closed, before she found any words. "A...a... brothel," she got out. "I don't believe you! I'm not a whore! What right do they have to steal me from my home and bring me here! I'm a free woman. I'm no slave!" And in a different tone. "You're lying!"

Zoe laid a hand on Judith's arm. Judith wrenched herself free. "You have no choice, I'm afraid," Zoe sighed.

"I won't! I couldn't! Never!" Judith swore. Surely she had not kept Eadwold's warriors at bay all these years to end up as a prostitute?

"Listen to me, my dear," Zoe said, not unkindly. "What is your name?"

Judith scowled and kept her tongue firmly between her teeth.

Zoe's eyes clouded. "You will tell me soon enough." Her tone became confidential. "Now, listen, my dear, for your own sake. You can make it easier for yourself. Give in now with a good grace, because if you don't...well...it will go hard for you." Zoe paused and looked enquiringly at Judith.

Judith glared.

"My dear—"

"I am not your dear! And I am not a prostitute! I've lived for years as the only woman in a company of outlaws, and not once have I been tempted to surrender to any of them! And it was not for lack of them trying, I promise you that!"

"This is most interesting," Zoe murmured, fingering a bangle on her wrist. "Do tell me more."

“No! All I’ll tell you is that I won’t agree. I won’t. I’ll fight. I’ll make trouble. And then your precious Balduk will find his...his customers go elsewhere for their pleasures.”

Zoe searched Judith’s face. Judith’s chin inched upwards. She hoped her expression was suitably defiant.

Unexpectedly, Zoe smiled. “Let me offer you some refreshment,” she said. “And we can learn a little more about each other. And later, if you still insist, I am certain Balduk will be able to find you some other, more congenial work.” With a jingle of gold bracelets Zoe indicated a low table, set with drinking vessels.

Judith hesitated. Zoe had changed her tack too quickly for Judith’s liking. Nor did she like the sound of the “more congenial work” Zoe indicated she would find her. The idea of doing any work at all in a brothel filled her with horror. However there was no point in alienating Zoe—not yet.

“My thanks.” Judith lowered herself on to one of the satin cushions and gave a cautious smile. The whites of Zoe’s eyes gleamed across at her.

“Try this.” Zoe proffered a goblet brimming with an amber liquid. “’Tis a blend of fruit juices that I do not believe you have in your country. I think you will enjoy it.”

Judith tasted it warily. The juice was sweet and tangy, slightly thick, with a hint of bitterness. “’Tis very pleasant,” she admitted, “very refreshing.”

Zoe’s red lips smiled at Judith over the rim of her cup.

“Perhaps now you would be good enough to tell me a little about yourself,” she suggested, easing her plump body deeper into the cushions.

Judith was staring in fascination at the intricate pattern engraved on her gilt goblet. She wrenched her eyes back to meet those of her companion.

“Your former life sounds most interesting,” Zoe said, encouragingly.

Judith groped for the words. How could she begin to explain to this strange woman what life as an outlaw in Mandeville Chase had been like? How could this pampered, sensual woman begin to comprehend the motives of someone who would have chosen the life of a beggar rather than submit tamely to a tyrant lord? She sipped at her drink.

Zoe was still smiling. There was something about that smile—it was hard to respond to it. Judith did not like Zoe, for all her smiles. She looked instead at the mother-of-pearl inlay on the table. The pink and blue shells shimmered in the lamp light.

“Well?” Zoe prompted.

“Oh. Oh, aye.” Judith mumbled.

Zoe’s smile froze, her face was very dark. Painted nails clutched at her goblet like the talons of a bird of prey closing on its victim.

The pinks and blues on the table swirled together. It made Judith dizzy to look at it. They must have skilled craftsmen indeed to make such beautiful things—so complicated...

The metal goblet slipped from Judith's grasp. There was a dull clank and it rolled across the tiles. The juice fanned out slowly across the floor.

Judith opened her mouth to apologise for her clumsiness. No words came out. She was slipping sideways, falling down, down into the satiny, soft cushions. She tried to move her limbs, but could not. She was trapped in a silken web, caught fast, a fly trussed up in a spider's larder.

"Stupid, stupid," she muttered thickly, struggling to resist the drowsiness creeping up on her. "Prisoner in a pearly palace." Her eyelids felt weighed down, her eyes were closing. She couldn't even fling an angry glance at Zoe, to show her she knew she had been betrayed by the drink.

But Judith could at least resist in her mind. They could not take away her will. They could chain her body with their foul potions, but they would never, never chain her mind.

Zoe rose with a fluid grace and pinched Judith's cheek.

Judith did not move.

For a moment Zoe stared down at the slight figure sprawled across the silks. Zoe's swarthy, painted face showed no emotion, but the yellow lamp light glistened on a tear-track running down one flawless cheek. "Forgive me, my dear," she whispered. "'Tis always worse for those with a will. Once I thought as you. But now I am theirs, mind and body. Mind and body."

Chapter Two

She woke to hear a low whispering close by. Even as she strained to hear it, the muttering ceased. It was replaced by the unmistakable chink of coins being counted out on to a hard surface. She swallowed. She knew what that meant. She wriggled her fingers experimentally and sought mastery of her limbs. Another faint murmur spurred her efforts. Silks swished across marble tiles. A door clicked shut. She made out the scraping of a bolt being shot home. She'd been left with one of Balduk's patrons, and she'd only the strength of a kitten to help her resist.

Judith waited, eyes shut fast, every nerve stretched to the limit. The silence was so absolute it was unnatural. At length, hoping against hope she'd been granted a reprieve, she forced her eyelids open.

She found herself lying on a couch in a pool of light. The rest of the chamber was black as sin. She could see no one else. The light was provided by two wall sconces, and a flickering oil lamp on the table in front of her. A brass ewer winked out from amid a host of ceramic dishes all overflowing with food. She licked her lips and frowned. She was so thirsty. Dared she drink?

She heaved herself up on one elbow and reached for one of the two goblets. Her hand froze in mid-air. Two goblets?

Something rustled in the shadows beyond the table. Judith snatched in a breath. Her hands gripped the edge of the couch

and she strained to see across the chamber. Her heart began to pound. She steadied herself. She knew a little about fighting; he'd not be expecting that. She'd not make it easy...

"Don't be afraid."

A bitter laugh slid from Judith's lips. English! The man who'd paid for her body spoke English! Her eyes pierced the gloom beyond the table and she recoiled. He was sitting in the window-seat opposite the couch. His white robes made him almost invisible against the whitewashed walls. A flowing head-covering and the shadows combined to mask his features.

She wanted to run, but knew her leaden limbs could not carry her. Zoe's evil brew had seen to that. Even if she made it across the room, she doubted she could budge that in her present condition.

"The door is bolted to keep them out, not to keep you in." The robed figure spoke up, reading her mind with uncanny ease. He had a pleasant voice, and somehow that made it worse.

Impotent fury freed Judith's tongue. "You swine! You bastard!" she flared. "I suppose you want complete privacy while you...while you..." She floundered to a halt, chest heaving. She tried again. She'd not submit to this lecher. "What kind of a man are you that you need to come to a place like this? You sound English. What are you doing here?"

The man rose and Judith watched in paralysed horror as he strolled towards her.

"Keep away!" she choked.

The robed figure drew nearer. "Don't be afraid," he repeated.

His tone was gentle. Judith shrank back. Was this some ploy to win her confidence? He was not fooling her. She raised her hands to ward him off. It was all she was capable of doing. She noticed, wild with despair, that they were shaking. She bunched them into fists so he would not see.

He stopped at the table. "I am English," he confirmed. "I have no intention of hurting you."

Judith wanted to believe him. She wished she could see his face, for his voice was sincere. As yet he had not made any attempt to touch her, scarcely the actions of a man who had paid for his pleasure... But until she could look into his eyes, read his expression, she could not be sure.

"Then why in Hell's name are you here?" she demanded, employing one of Eadwold's curses in a vain attempt to revive her wilting spirits.

She thought the man raised a brow, and smiled as if amused. Blast the inadequate light! His voice... there was something about his voice. It nagged away in her mind, reminding her... Judith's eyes widened. An impossible hope flared in her breast. She forgot to breathe.

"I had business at the harbour this morning," he said, and his voice sent shivers racing down her spine. "They hold slave markets there, and today I found myself watching..."

Judith bit on her forefinger... that voice... that voice...

"Normally I would not have given the market a second glance.

Trafficking in human flesh is an abhorrence in the eyes of God. But today, I saw someone from home. I watched. One of the women slaves reminded me of a Saxon girl I once met. Her name was Judith.”

Judith made a convulsive movement. She began to breathe again.

The voice continued. “I thought that Judith was dead, was just a memory. But then today, at the slave market...” He whipped off his headdress, crossed to the couch and knelt before her.

He reached out. Judith did not flinch. He took her chin in his hand, his fingers were cool and firm. Her face was angled gently up to the light. Forest green eyes held hers.

“I was right, wasn’t I?” Rannulf whispered, smiling.

He released her, and gently trailed a finger across her cheek. His hand dropped to rest on the edge of the bed.

Judith sagged with relief, and put out her hand. He steadied her.

“So it was you! I could not believe it. Rannulf!” Clinging to his hand as though it were a lifeline, Judith stared at him. His face was leaner, browner. Trembling, she touched his cheek, where a faint white line marked the place a whip had scarred him four years ago. She had never been so pleased to see anyone in her life.

“Why did you let them buy me?” she frowned.

“You saw how much our friend Balduk paid for you. I do not carry so much with me—”

“Could you not have given him your bond?” she asked in a

small voice.

Rannulf was looking at her cropped hair. He shook his head. "They'd not accept the word of a crusader. Besides, I do not believe in one person owning another."

Judith gaped. "You didn't let them buy me out of principle, surely?"

His eyes gleamed.

"You do not mean it!" she realised, striking him on the chest. "'Tis no laughing matter to me, Rannulf, to be owned by that man and put in this place," she said sombrely, and let go of his hand.

Rannulf relaxed back on to a cushion and reached for the polished ewer "Here, you must be thirsty after what they gave you." He poured a generous measure and offered it to her.

"I'm not touching that!"

"'Tis quite safe," he assured her, grinning. "They warned me how wild you were, and when I told them I would not be needing any potions to tame you, I think they thought me a madman. But they took me at my word. 'Tis plain fruit juice."

Judith searched his eyes and accepted the goblet. She risked a small sip. There was no bitter aftertaste. She drained it dry.

"When did you last eat?" Rannulf had removed one of the silver covers from a dish, and was dipping his fingers in to taste the contents. "This is good." His lips curved. "And as I have paid highly for this, we may as well eat."

"They fed me when I was brought here," Judith told him. "But I think I could manage some more. It must be hours since

then.” Judith climbed unsteadily to her feet and walked round the table. She plumped down on to one of the embroidered cushions opposite Rannulf. She still felt lightheaded, as though she were dreaming, and she was not really hungry.

He appeared to be starving, and transferred his attention to the food. Grateful that she could watch him unobserved, Judith picked at some flat bread. She needed time to absorb everything that had happened.

Rannulf ate with neat economy. Slim brown fingers hovered over the bowls, selected spiced fish and meat and carried them to his lips. His tanned skin made his eyes seem greener. In parts his hair was lighter, streaked blond by the Mediterranean sun, but otherwise it remained as she remembered it, an unruly brown tangle. Superficially he looked much the same to Judith as he had done back in Mandeville Chase four years ago. And yet...

He glanced up and sent her a smile which brought a flush to her cheeks, and set off a peculiar tightening sensation in her stomach. It was not unpleasant.

She nibbled at her bread and continued to study him covertly, crumbling her portion in her fingers. His flowing white robe was firmly belted round his waist. His frame was not large, he carried no extra weight, and with a trained fighter's eye Judith guessed he would be no easy man to best in combat. There was a hidden strength about him, a tension, a feeling of power held in control. And if it was unleashed?

Judith would not wish him to be her enemy.

An enamelled knife with a wicked, curving blade hung at his belt. No wonder she had failed to recognise him. His attire was nothing like that of the young English poacher who had helped her escape the Norman tyrant and his knights.

“Have you finished shredding that bread, or are you going to destroy the whole loaf, Judith?”

She started. “I’m sorry. I was thinking.” She looked askance at the crumbs she had scattered over board and floor.

“Murderous thoughts, by the look of what you have done to that innocent loaf!”

“I...I was wondering...”

“Aye?”

Judith coloured She crushed the crust to nothing. “In...in Mandeville Chase, when we last met, did you ever come back to the hide? I often wondered.”

“Aye. I did. I’d snared a plump hare for us to feast on. But you’d gone. I saw other tracks around the shelter, but no signs of a struggle, so I assumed your brothers had found you. To be certain, I followed the tracks for about a mile and then I found...”

“Go on,” Judith urged.

“I found evidence that you’d been murdered.”

“But, Rannulf, as you see, I wasn’t murdered.”

“Aye.” Rannulf reached across the table and peeled her fingers from what was left of the loaf. He raised them to his lips.

Judith’s fingers felt strange. Hot all over, she wrenched them away. “Don’t do that,” she scowled. She knew she had nothing to

fear from Rannulf. But he unsettled her.

Four years surviving as a youth in Mandeville Chase had taught Judith how to fight and claw for her life, but she'd learnt nothing of what it was to be a woman. She was all but naked in the gossamer silks that purported to clothe her, and felt desperately vulnerable.

"I did but salute your beauty, my lady," Rannulf smiled.

"I don't like it."

Rannulf lifted a dark brow. "My apologies. I did not realise you were averse to a harmless flirtation. I merely thought to get some return on all the money I have expended for the privilege of spending this night with you."

"All night. You will be with me all night?" Judith seized eagerly on his words. "There are to be no others, only you?"

He bowed his head. "You will be plagued by none but me till dawn touches the east and lights the sky with her rosy fingers."

Relief washed through her. "Oh."

"You are displeased by this?" Rannulf asked lightly. "I thought to save you from unwelcome...er...attentions."

"Displeased? Nay, I'm not displeased," Judith assured him hastily.

"You might express it a little more fervently," Rannulf complained. "Try saying, 'My thanks, Rannulf, for spending nearly all your money on coming to me in Balduk's House.' 'Tis not a place I usually haunt, whatever you may care to say."

"Rannulf, I..." Judith said earnestly. Then she saw that light in

his eyes. “Oh, you wretch!” She took aim, and a chunk of bread flew across the table. Rannulf ducked, and the missile sailed into the shadows.

Judith found herself smiling, and realised Rannulf’s teasing was making this easier for her. She warmed to him. “Tell me what it was you found in the Chase that made you think I’d been murdered,” she said.

“With pleasure. As I just told you, I followed your tracks, and eventually stumbled across a little bundle of clothing stuffed into the roots of a tree. It was your blue robe, I recognised it at once. There was blood on the bodice—”

“Eadwold cut me.”

“Eadwold? A friend? Surely a friend would not do such a thing?”

“My brother,” Judith told him shortly. She could not talk about him. “I understand now—” she drew Rannulf’s attention back to her gown “—you thought I’d been killed because of the bloodstains.”

“Aye. But the gown was not all I found. While I was examining the marks on your gown, something fell out among the tree-roots—your hair. Long strands of beautiful blonde hair lying like golden rope on the forest floor.”

Judith giggled. “You sound like a troubadour.”

“I have at least made you smile. You should do it more often. It suits you. To continue.” He put his hand over his heart and grinned. “What could I think but that my fair Saxon damsel

had been foully done to death, and there in my hands was the evidence? I was heart-broken.” Rannulf heaved an exaggerated sigh. “But there was worse to come.”

“Yet more?” Judith laughed, and refilled his goblet with wine.

“Aye. For it was then that I realised the full extent of the bitter blow that Fate had dealt me,” he said dramatically. “I had lost my cloak. My finest and best—the warmest cloak I had ever possessed—gone forever. Not only had those evil churls killed the young maiden whom I’d taken into my charge, but they’d also purloined my cloak!”

“What did you do next?” she asked.

“What, after weeping over my mantle?”

“Aye. After the wailing and gnashing of teeth. What then?”

“I took the evidence—your gown and shorn locks—with me and confronted Hugo.”

“What, you went to the Baron?” Judith exclaimed, her eyes opening wide.

“The same. I wanted to know if he knew anything about your death,” Rannulf explained, as if confronting the Baron was a perfectly natural thing to do.

“Nay. He’d have killed you! What did you really do?”

Rannulf met her disbelieving gaze squarely. “As I said. I confronted Baron Hugo with what I thought was the evidence...”

“You expect me to believe that you accused Baron Hugo of killing me, and lived to tell the tale?” Judith demanded incredulously.

“Of course.” He gave her an impenetrable look. “We both saw him at your cottage. He seemed the most likely suspect. I wondered if perhaps he’d decided to eliminate the whole family. I had to find out.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Do? Why nothing. Except he managed to produce a witness to testify that he couldn’t have had anything to do with your death.” Rannulf raised his goblet to her. “As you see, I live to drink to your beautiful eyes.”

His drinking vessel was fashioned from beaten copper. It glowed in the flickering light.

Rannulf drank deep. His face changed, he lowered the cup and frowned into it.

“Don’t you like the wine?” Judith asked.

“The wine’s good enough.”

“What’s the matter then? You look—”

“Judith, who do you think I am?”

She grimaced at his curt tone. “A Saxon poacher who, like many of his countrymen, has had to flee the country and take refuge abroad,” she answered confidently. “You’re a poacher from the Chase.”

Rannulf swore under his breath. “And who am I fleeing from? The Normans?” he sounded bitter.

“Aye. Who else?”

“Who else indeed? Do you still nurse a hatred against all their race?” he enquired, staring intently at his sandals.

“I do. I shall never forget that a Norman murdered my father. Never forgive it. And my mother died too.”

Rannulf’s head came up.

“The Baron did not actually use a sword on her—though he might as well have done. My mother was granted sanctuary by the Abbot. She did not see the month out. She had been ill, but it was the Baron who caused her death. She died of a broken heart.”

“And you hate every Norman alive?”

Judith nodded. “Devils every one,” she confirmed “They contaminate God’s earth. If I could call down a pestilence to eliminate them all, I would.

“Baron Hugo oppresses our people. Justice is a thing of the past. You must know that, Rannulf. You must have seen what was going on before you left. De Mandeville disinherited the true heirs to the land, and ever since then he’s done whatever he pleases.” And recently, since Lady de Mandeville’s death, Judith thought, the Baron’s activities had made the Devil seem angelic.

“I believe that the sole reason I’m here in this—” Judith choked “—in this...place, is because the Baron must have found out I knew about his squalid deals with the slavers. He knew I’d denounce him to the Abbot. Why, if someone cut out his black heart and fed it to the swine—I’d bless them for it!”

“Judith—” Rannulf shoved his hand through his hair and gave her a despairing look.

Judith stiffened. “My language offends you?”

Rannulf shook his head. “Nay. But...Judith, you cannot blame

all of his race.”

Judith lifted her chin and maintained a stony silence.

Rannulf sighed. “Is there no forgiveness to be found in your heart?”

“Not for any Norman.”

He smiled. “I do not believe you. I do not believe you could be so narrow.”

Judith shrugged.

“Take care, Judith, lest your heart turn to stone,” Rannulf warned. “It would seem I misread you, all those years ago. I thought you a gentle, delicate maid—”

“I’ve changed,” Judith declared flatly. “I’ve had to. Living as I’ve had to would change anyone.”

Rannulf’s green eyes caught hers.

Judith felt her cheeks grown warm. It was as though he would see into her soul. She wriggled on her cushion, and tore her eyes away. “Rannulf...you must agree de Mandeville is worse than any plague? Do you not know what has been happening?”

Rannulf ran his hand round the back of his neck. “I’ve been away too long. I left England for the crusade very soon after your f...after we last saw each other. I was led to believe that the Baron had reformed. I was told he was ruling with wisdom and justice. I wanted to believe those reports.”

Judith snorted. “Wisdom! Justice! That man doesn’t know the meaning of the words! Don’t glower at me like that, Rannulf. Oh, I don’t want to talk about Baron Hugo,” she sighed. “I’ve

had enough of coming to blows over him in the past. I'll worry about him when I get back home—if I ever do.” Tears pricked behind her eyes. She averted her head, and sank her teeth into her bottom lip, but, even so, her eyes swam.

For a few moments she had forgotten the reality of her situation. She was a prisoner in a House of Pleasure. Misery engulfed her. Would she ever see England again? A tear trailed down her cheek. She tried chewing her forefinger. A second tear followed the path of the first.

Rannulf pulled her hand from her mouth. “You will return. I shall help you,” he promised, squeezing her hand.

Her shaming tears forgotten, Judith stared at him, and tried not to cling too hard to his hand. “You...you can get me home?”

Gentle fingertips brushed away her tears. Rannulf nodded. “Of course. Why do you think I am here?”

Judith went scarlet.

Rannulf's eyes crinkled, but he chose not to tease her. “First, we'll sneak you out of this place.” He raised a brow. “I take it you'll accept my assistance?”

“Accept? Oh, aye. I accept,” Judith blurted eagerly. “But how? It won't be easy.”

“You're right. It won't be easy. But, then, if something's worth having, it's worth fighting for, is it not?”

There was a strange edge to his voice. She shot him a sharp glance under her lashes, but his expression was bland.

“I tried to arrange your escape for tonight,” Rannulf informed

her. “But it wasn’t possible in the short time I had. You’ll have to stay here another night.”

Her heart dropped like a stone. “But that would mean me spending another whole day here. They might find me another... another...” She gulped and tried again. “What I mean is, I might have to...”

Rannulf was at her side in a moment. Judith’s hand met his halfway. Long, brown fingers closed over hers. His eyes were very dark.

“It seems you’ll make a beggar of me yet, Judith,” he declared. “I’ll pay for the pleasure of your company till we can get you out.”

Judith gripped his fingers. Green eyes were smiling into hers, but there was something oddly intent about his face that made her stomach flutter.

“Do you agree, my maid?”

“My thanks,” Judith mumbled. She closed her eyes. Why was it that relief made one weak? She knew she should force her fingers to free Rannulf’s hand. He was too close. She felt strangely disoriented. It must be the after-effects of the drug.

She felt him lift her hand, turn it palm uppermost, felt a light pressure on her palm that might have been a kiss, and her eyes snapped open.

She was too late. Rannulf had released her, and turned to the table, and she was scowling at his back. “Don’t do that!”

“Do what?” Rannulf enquired innocently over his shoulder. “What did I do?”

Judith flushed.

“Some wine, my lady?” Rannulf held out a goblet.

He was mocking her. “You know I’m not a lady, and I’m certainly not yours!” she snapped.

Rannulf put his hand on his heart. “I can live in hope, can I not?”

“Oh, you’re impossible!” Judith snatched at the cup, but felt the beginnings of a smile tremble on her lips. “If it weren’t for the fact that I need you, I’d wish you to the Devil!”

“But you do need me,” he pointed out.

“Aye.” Judith stared moodily at the blood-red wine in her cup. She hated being beholden to anyone. She valued her independence above all else. That was why she’d chosen to go with her brothers instead of taking up the veil...

Something Rannulf had said stirred uneasily in her mind. She looked at him. There was no tactful way of asking this. “Rannulf, how much did you have to pay for me?” she asked bluntly.

Rannulf spluttered on his wine.

Cheeks aflame, Judith ploughed on. “I...I have no means of repaying you,” she explained stiffly. “And I...I would not see you beggared.” She pulled on a cushion tassel, and twisted the silken skeins round her fingers.

There was a dreadful silence, and Judith knew she had blundered. Rannulf’s face darkened.

“Maybe I should take what I’ve paid for,” he said in a hard, stranger’s voice. “Then there would be no talk of debts.”

Judith caught her breath. She lifted her eyes. “Rannulf, I’m sorry...”

Rannulf was favouring her with a glance which all but scorched her flimsy clothes from her body. His hands were clenched so hard that his knuckles gleamed white. Judith squared her shoulders and wrestled with a sudden impulse to move out of his reach.

“You wouldn’t. Not you, Rannulf.” she forced a smile.

“Can you be sure of that?” he demanded coldly.

“Aye. I think I can. The Rannulf that looked after me four years ago would never force—”

“Ah, but as you so rightly pointed out, my princess—” Judith bristled. The slaver had called her that in the market. Did Rannulf have to fling it at her as though it were a weapon? A dark brow arched “—times have changed since then. I am a mercenary coming home from the wars. I have bought your beautiful body...” His eyes glittered as he looked at her.

“But it would be wrong. I do not want—”

“I am to all intents and purposes a mercenary, Judith. I came on this crusade to earn my way in life. Do you think a mercenary should care for justice any more than Baron Hugo de Mandeville and his Norman compatriots?”

Judith put her hand to her head. “Rannulf...I’m sorry. I should not have said it. Please do not be angry—”

Rannulf did not hear her. “Do you loathe mercenaries as much as you despise Normans, Judith?”

"I...I didn't know you were a mercenary," she stammered, wishing there were some way she could reach him, but his anger was a wall between them.

His mouth twisted. "Mercenaries place themselves beyond what is good and right, Judith. Money is their master. That is their right and wrong. They have no moral code. That is what I have become. I tell you now, so you know. I am no better than an outlaw."

Judith tensed. She was an outlaw...

"So why should I not take you if I want?" Rannulf continued. "I have, as you say, paid for you. And by the laws that operate in this place that gives me the right."

"I don't believe you!" Judith flared. "You would not. And you're no mercenary."

"My lord Fitz Osbern paid me to come on crusade in his entourage," Rannulf told her. "So what does that make me?"

Judith began to relax. That hard, glittering light was fading from his eyes. "Outlaws do not lack morals—" she'd learned to press home any slight advantage "—it may not be the official moral code, but a code there most certainly is. Even mercenaries must have a code—they must be loyal to the paymaster, or no one would hire them. Mercenaries and outlaws have to know right from wrong. They must abide by their own laws."

"How do you suddenly know so much about outlaws?"

"I know because...because..." Judith floundered under his penetrating green gaze. She'd walked right into a mire.

Four years of learning to guard her tongue had made its mark on her. An instinctive wariness stopped her tongue running on any more. Even here, she must be careful of what she said about Eadwold and his warriors. If all went well, Rannulf would take her back to the Chase. She shifted her ground. "I know because I want to believe you will not hurt me," she finished. She knew it was lame and that she sounded feeble, but it was that or risk damaging her brothers' cause.

Rannulf's eyes softened. "No, I'd never harm you," he confirmed. "But there must be no more talk of what you owe me. You owe me nothing." His tone reminded her of the one Eadwold used when he was not willing to brook any argument. Then Rannulf smiled and it took the sting out of his words.

Judith stood up abruptly. The chamber was hot and airless. She felt suffocated. She crossed to the window, flung open the wooden shutter, and cooled her forehead on the white plaster of the window embrasure. There were no bars on the window.

Judith was weary right through to her bones. She could not have slept properly in weeks. First she'd been captured in the Chase, and then there'd been the voyage in that stinking hell that was the hold of the slave ship. Sheer terror had held her imprisoned in a ghastly limbo that was neither waking nor sleeping. She'd not rested for fear of what she might find when she awoke.

She glanced at Rannulf over her shoulder. He was watching her. She trusted him, but there was something that made her

uneasy...something that she had not yet fathomed...She yawned. It was a miracle that she could still stand up, a miracle she had kept herself going so long. And now, all at once, her head was whirling with fatigue. There was a rushing noise in her ears. The dark chamber blurred. It was as though she'd taken another of Zoe's potions.

She peered through the gloom at Rannulf. Her eyes refused to focus and his face remained an unrevealing blur. She wanted to sleep. Summoning up the courage to express her need, she stared out of the window. She did not think she could stand any more mockery.

Her tired eyes registered the view spread out below, as greedily as a wound soaked up a healing balm. Judith stared, her mind drinking in what her eyes were seeing. It was beautiful. "You can see the sea from here!" She roused herself. "We're overlooking the bay!"

Balduik's house was built on top of a narrow promontory jutting out into the Mediterranean. The sky was liberally sprinkled with stars, and a crescent moon rode majestically among them like an emperor surrounded by his subjects. The ocean was gilded silver-bright. The moon's rays gleamed on black rocks, bleaching yellow sands to white. Judith watched the sea rise and fall beneath her, rocking, rocking. A warm sea breeze caressed her cheeks. Their chamber was very high up.

"So that is why the window is not barred," she murmured, smothering a yawn. "There's no way out."

Behind her, she heard Rannulf move. She tensed.

He pushed Judith gently on to the window seat and gazed out past her at the sea. He was smiling. His teeth glinted in the moonlight. Out at sea, a weak glimmer betrayed the position of a fisherman's lonely vigil.

Judith found her eyes drawn, not out to sea, but to Rannulf's profile: straight nose, lips gently curving, disordered mane of hair...

His head turned towards her. She couldn't breathe. He took her by the shoulders. Judith waited for him to speak, understanding all at once that this strange, stifling, breathlessness she felt was caused by Rannulf, and not the airless chamber.

His voice was very low, almost a whisper "Is it me you fear? Or this place? Or is it yourself? Are you...afraid of being a woman?"

His questions jerked her from her sleepy state. Every nerve was suddenly awake and tingling, almost too awake. She could feel his eyes on her—when he looked at her, her cheeks stung.

He touched her hair delicately with one finger. "So soft," he murmured. "Why do you wear it short, Judith? To deny your femininity?"

"N...no." Her voice came out in an undignified squeak. She cleared her throat and swallowed.

"An illness then?" he suggested.

"No." Her voice was husky. She realised she'd been staring at his mouth. She looked out at the view, too shy to meet those

searching eyes. Her heart thumped low and hard against her ribs.

His breath warmed her cheek. She wanted to run...

"'Tis a crime to wear such hair cropped," Rannulf muttered.

She forced a laugh, noticing with surprise that his voice was husky too. "Aye, 'twas indeed crime that cropped my hair," she said unsteadily.

A confused look flickered briefly across his face, and then it was gone. And he was staring at her. And that intent expression was back in his eyes. It overrode all else.

Judith's heart was hammering now. Rannulf shifted his grip. He was going to pull her closer, and she did not know what to do. As his hold on her shoulders tightened, she ducked, managed to free herself, and grabbed at the window-ledge. She held hard.

"Judith, look at me," Rannulf commanded softly.

"N...no."

The fishing boat out on the sea had been joined by another. Two lights now rocked in the cradle of the sea.

Judith did not notice them; she might as well have been gazing at a closed shutter. Every fibre of her being was concentrated on the man who stood behind her.

"Judith."

She felt a light touch on her neck, felt warm hands on her shoulders, turning her, drawing her towards that lean body. He must have cast a spell on her, for the rest of the world faded to nothing.

"Judith." His hands slid down her arms and his fingers closed

over hers.

It was a spell. Her arms tingled, where he'd touched her. Her hands rested quiescent in his. Their eyes locked. Had she been offered all of the gold in King Rufus's treasury, she could not have broken free.

Their lips drew together, barely touching, but the sensation was so powerful and so unexpected that Judith gasped and drew back. Her eyes were wide and startled. Her hands were still fast in his. She felt no fear.

"That was not so terrible, was it?" Rannulf murmured. A tiny smile hovered on the edge of his mouth.

Judith could not find her voice. She shook her head.

His grip tightened. "Again," he prompted, and lowered his head.

The charm he had woven was too strong. It was irresistible. Instead of refusing him as she intended, Judith found herself leaning towards him, lifting her mouth to his.

That first kiss had gone some way towards preparing Judith for the havoc Rannulf could create within her. His lips felt warm. The gentle pressure increased. This time she did not pull away. They were standing very close. His hands were firmly linked to hers, his lips were moving gently over her mouth, but that was all. There was no other contact. Their bodies were not touching, but the muscles in her stomach tensed, and a warm, sweet tide of feeling flooded her senses. It made her toes curl. Judith shut her eyes, and her lips began to move in shy, untutored response.

Rannulf lifted his lips from hers. Judith knew her cheeks were burning. She tried to hide her face. But Rannulf caught her by the waist and tugged her towards him. Judith felt stifled. Her knees had gone weak. She barely managed to step towards him.

She could feel his body against hers, from her breasts to her thighs, through the fine materials of their clothes. Slender fingers nudged her chin round. She risked a glance. Green eyes smiled into hers. His face was tender.

She gave a little murmur and hid her face in his shoulder, glad that the weak light must hide her flushed skin. She felt as though she was on fire. She was afraid of what he should read in her eyes, afraid he should see how deeply he had affected her. Afraid he should think...

“Judith?” He sounded concerned.

Cool fingers pushed her chin up. She assumed a calm face. She could not afford to lose control. She must be clear headed.

“Rannulf?” She smiled. But her voice betrayed her, for it cracked. She forced herself to meet his eyes, became uncomfortably aware that one of her arms had found its way around his neck. She dragged it clear, and drew back.

Rannulf caught her hand. He kissed the tips of her fingers. Judith stared, and tried to breathe normally. Even a small kiss like that seemed to burn her skin. She was melting...

She took a hasty pace backwards. She must not let him realise the power he had over her senses. She must put some distance between them.

Rannulf released her without even a murmur. He leaned his shoulders up against the whitewashed walls, and stood watching her. His brows drew together in a frown.

Judith took her bottom lip between her teeth. He looked almost angry.

“Rannulf? What is it?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that? What have I done?”

The frown vanished. Rannulf shrugged. ’Tis not you, my sweet. I’m angry with myself,” he admitted.

“Angry? Why?”

“I should not have kissed you. You need my help. You are bound to respond for fear I might refuse you. I’m sorry.”

Judith took a deep breath. Words still seemed elusive. “Th... there’s no need to apologise,” she told him. “I do trust you.”

Rannulf stood in front of the window, a dark shadow silhouetted by the moonlight. “Do you? I hope you’re not put to the test too soon,” he said.

“Rannulf?” He sounded very cynical.

He moved impatiently. “Forget it.”

Judith opened her mouth.

“Forget it!” he said curtly.

Judith’s mouth snapped shut. She wrapped her arms about her middle.

Rannulf saw her shoulders droop. He gave a jaw-cracking yawn. “Hell’s teeth! I’m sorry, my princess,” he said, making “princess” sound like an endearment this time, so Judith did not

mind it. "I'm tired. Let's try and get some sleep," he suggested in his old, more gentle voice. He gestured towards the couch. "You must have that, of course. I surmise that your recent accommodation has left you with a need that is greater than mine. Am I right?"

Judith nodded. "The ship was Hell," she admitted.

"Rest then."

Too weary to consider where Rannulf would take his rest, Judith staggered to the couch and collapsed on to the downy mattress. She dragged the light sheet over herself, for modesty's sake, and her eyelids began to droop. Her limbs relaxed. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Rannulf had returned to kneel in the window seat, gazing out to sea.

She tried to force her mind back over their recent, confusing conversation. He implied she did not trust him. But why? Apart from her brother Saewulf, he was about the only man she did trust. Four years ago her instincts had told her he was trustworthy, and they had not let her down. She yawned and settled herself more comfortably in the bed.

Rannulf heard her. She saw his dark head turn at once in her direction. Judith smiled. She could trust him. He had not deserted her in the Chase. He had come back for her, and had looked for her—had even confronted the Baron for her sake. She knew she could trust him.

Sleep drew her into its healing embrace and the tiny smile remained on her lips.

She was woken by the light touch of Rannulf's hand in her hair as he lifted a fine strand between his fingers, and measured its length. It seemed perfectly natural that he should be lying propped up on one elbow beside her.

"Good morning. You sleep like a babe," he commented.

Judith felt very lazy. She was safe and content, and disinclined to move. A dim, grey light proclaimed that dawn was not far off. "Mmm." Vivid green eyes smiled down at her. He was wide awake. "Didn't you sleep?" she wondered dreamily.

"I slept. But not as deeply as you." He shifted his gaze to his fingers which continued playing with her hair.

"You make me feel safe," she admitted and stretched like a cat.

Slender fingers slid round to her cheek, and idly traced a circle. Judith flushed.

"Safe?" he teased. He was so close she could see the golden flecks dancing in his eyes.

"Aye," she said huskily, all confusion.

He bent his head and planted a brief kiss on her lips. It was warm and gentle. It was reassuring, and quite without passion. Judith wanted more. She shifted on the couch. She wanted him to hold her. She wanted to feel his arms around her. Her hand reached for his.

A bell tinkled in the corridor outside their chamber.

Judith hardly heard it. She'd caught at the sleeve of his robe, and could feel the muscles in his arm. They flexed beneath her

touch.

Rannulf had stiffened. He glanced over his shoulder at the barred door. He swore softly. His hand still rested on Judith's neck, but his eyes showed him to be miles away. Judith frowned, and covered his hand with hers, trying to bring him back. But the moment had gone, and although he responded by taking her fingers in his, the eyes that looked down into hers were clear and unclouded by emotion.

The bell rang again, more insistently. Judith heard it this time, and her blood ran cold. It could only mean one thing...

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