

New York Times Bestselling Authors

CHRISTINA DODD
CONNIE BROCKWAY



Once Upon
a
Pillow

“Witty, sensual,
delightful and pure fun!”
Romantic Times

Once Upon a Pillow

by

Christina Dodd and Connie Brockway

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Once Upon a Pillow

One bewitching bed...four captivating couples...two enthralling authors...

Once Upon a Pillow tells the story of the magnificent Masterson bed and the passionate couples who share it through the ages. This sparkling quartet of tales by two of historical romances' brightest stars—Christina Dodd and Connie Brockway—is set during four of England's most enthralling eras and proves that true love—and sizzling desire—are truly timeless.

First Knight by Connie Brockway

In medieval England, a battle-weary knight returns from the crusades searching for peace and forgiveness, but instead finds the feisty—and bloodthirsty—wife-by-proxy he'd forgotten he even had.

Kidnapped by Christina Dodd

A poverty-stricken lord concocts the perfect plan to win a fortune by abducting and marrying a wealthy heiress, but finds his own heart stolen when he snatches the wrong girl.

Her Captive by Connie Brockway

During George's III reign, a highwayman's beautiful sister will do anything to protect her brother from the bold kingsman set on his trail, even if it means chaining the fierce and furious man to her bed.

Last Night by Christina Dodd

The man in her house is a stranger to her, a danger to her, and the one man she should never love. But she can't resist.

Praise for Once Upon a Pillow

“Four delightfully humorous and delectably sexy romances that exemplify Brockway and Dodd’s witty writing and talent for creating compelling characters.”—*Booklist*

“Witty, sensual, delightful and pure fun! A perfect anthology that allows Ms. Brockway and Mr. Dodd to showcase their talents for storytelling. Each tale is unique, lovingly crafted and peopled with such likable characters that I wished for more of their stories and so will you. This is a shining example of what a team of talented authors can do with an idea—and what an idea it is!”—*Romantic Times*

Dear Reader,

Even though our husbands have never met and live almost two thousand miles apart, we were amazed to discover that they are constantly asking the same question: “What can you two possibly have to say to each other and for so long?” (Before the advent of e-mail and cell phones, they used to say this while waving around the latest phone bill.)

We always answer, “We’re talking about writing. Yeah, uh...writing.”

Because neither one of us is a liar, merely a tale-spinner, you hold in your hands the proof that we really *do* talk about writing. In a fit of creativity, we conceived the idea of writing *Once Upon a Pillow*—a series of romances centered on a bed constructed in medieval times and treasured by each generation of the Masterson family until it is finally retired (ha!) into a modern-day museum.

So it is our pleasure to present you with four luscious tales in one wonderful story. We had a fabulous time writing *Once Upon a Pillow* together and we hope you have just as much fun reading it.

Love,
Connie Brockway and Christina Do



First Knight

by

Connie Brockway

In which the Bed is made...

In the beginning...

Marking the border of Cornwall and Devon, a small, inconsequential river runs out of the moor. Like a royal courier on a vital mission, the river Cabot gains impetus as it goes, ultimately flying past the tiny village of Trecombe before plummeting over the steep cliffs into the sea. Of late, the banks of the river have yielded an unforeseen boon in the form of a particularly fine clay which has, in turn, given rise to Trecombe's new cottage industry.

Most people would concede it is a long overdue reward for the faithful Trecombians who have long lived in this grand, often austere, but always beautiful land. Indeed, there are families who claim they are descendants of the town's founding father, a knight who, on his mandatory quest to find the Holy Grail, fell asleep beside the river and was awakened by a tall, green-eyed maiden who bade him stay. Along with a number of interesting things which in no way affect this story.

Needless to say, stay he did and whether the tale is true or not, the fact remains that even today Trecombe boasts a greater number of green-eyed residents per capita than any other place in England. It was one of the few things that German bombing runs and severe economic depression failed to destroy. In fact, few of the neat, picturesque cottages here are over a hundred years old and the town, pretty though it is, would seem to have little to recommend itself to an archeologist or social historian.

However, a small way out of Trecombe, as if distancing themselves from the town's pedestrian concerns, stand two ancient buildings. Roosting atop the cliffs is St. Albion's chapel, complacent for having escaped the dissolution that claimed its adjacent abbey. The other structure, a short distance inland, is Masterson Manor, once the home of the town's first—and as far as anyone knows, only—crusader, Sir Nicholas.

From behind the manor's stalwart walls, Sir Nicholas had directed the fortification of Trecombe against brigands. In its high-ceilinged rooms he had sired eight sons, all of whom had lived to adulthood. From its graceful mullioned windows he had watched his castle being built atop the cliff walls. And while that castle, emblem of his might and power, has been reduced to a few ruins, the manor still stands, noble and handsome in its antiquity.

In its current incarnation, Masterson Manor is a private museum. Regrettably, the house isn't the stuff from which successful private museums are made. It is small as house museums go, having only twenty rooms, and set in a wildly beautiful, untamed landscape, not the manicured Disney garden that day-trippers with kiddies prefer. And while the assortment of Masterson heirlooms the current curator has so lovingly and painstakingly collected is impressive, there is only one item unique to Masterson Manor, one item which draws the specialist and historian along the twisted lanes and remote byway.

that lead to Trecombe: The Masterson Bed.

But even this gem has not been able to generate enough money to keep the doors open, the tax paid, and the current owners in treacle pudding. And so, the Masterson Museum is closing. Indeed, has already been sold. And this is the last tour of the last day...

Laurel Whitney, the museum's curator, house sitter, and social historian, closed her eyes briefly as the group she was leading murmured appreciatively over the contents of the dining room. She would have few opportunities left in which to soak up the atmosphere of the place, an atmosphere she was in great part responsible for creating. For it had been Laurel had found the Chippendale dining table that exactly fit an earlier Masterson lady's description of the one her family had owned. Just as Laurel had painstakingly hunted down the complete silver service placed on that table, located and hung the exact pattern William Morris paper she'd seen gracing these walls in nineteenth-century daguerreotype and, through sheer perseverance, had bullied a local family into relinquishing the original Tabriz carpet that lay on the floor.

She adored Masterson Manor.

It was the stuff of dreams for a doctoral candidate in Social History because manor houses of this vintage were much harder to come by than castles. In fact, she couldn't remember being happier than since she'd come here... Well, in point of fact, she could. But that hadn't been *real* happiness; it had been *sex*. This was happiness with staying power: The happiness that comes only with the Acquisition of Knowledge.

In the library she'd found a sixteenth-century diary and a pair of black candlesticks that a good cleaning had revealed to be a fourteenth-century silver candelabra. In the bedroom, she'd discovered a secret drawer containing a fan written over in a tiny delicate scrawl with the names of Reginald and a gentleman. And in a rosewood chest she'd found artifacts from the long gone abbey, including a ninth-century cross and a gold paten.

She'd identified at least eighteen clothing eras from examples pulled from the attic's mothballed cushioned trunks and had begun to sift through a cache of ledgers she'd found in the basement when the current owners had announced that they had sold the manor to a private party who intended to make it his summer home and that all the contents were being auctioned off.

Laurel had been aghast. *Was* aghast. She'd spent the month since the announcement frantically trying to complete a rough transcription of the ledgers she'd found before the new owner arrived. Only there had been more time. But there wasn't. There wouldn't be.

She glanced briefly out the window to the west where the sun made a spectacular orchid and magenta display behind the tumbled castle walls. An hour at most before the tour ended and then what did the future hold for her? Would she go back to America? Move to London? Maybe Glastonbury?

The thought caused her stomach to twist in knots. She *belonged* here. Knowing she drank from the same gilt and rose-patterned Wedgewood teacups as Lady Meredith Masterson gave her a sense of

continuity. When she took the footpath to the castle ruins and stared out across the sea as the wind rushed up from the breakers and whipped her dark hair, she felt an exhilaration no place on earth had ever engendered in her. And sometimes late at night, when the house was closed and the owners gone and she'd wrapped herself in a cashmere shawl and was toasting her toes at the hearth, she could almost hear the sounds of those earlier Mastersons moving about on upper floors, quiet of foot, deliberate in movement. She would miss those discreet ghosts.

Unconsciously she straightened. She couldn't think of the future. She *wouldn't*. It was too hard. Just as the past had been too hard to contemplate when she'd first arrived here under the excuse of researching her doctoral thesis: "*The Medieval Bed, A Study of Matrimonial and Social Obligation.*" It was too hard, just like the presence of that...that handyman was too hard to think about.

If it had been her decision, Max Ashton wouldn't have spent ten minutes in this house. But it wasn't her decision. The new owners had hired him to "make the place halfway habitable" before their arrival. *Habitable*. They'd probably tear up the ancient flagstones in the kitchen and install no-wax tiles. She quelled the urge to shudder and fixed a smile on her face as she turned back to the tour group.

"If no one has any other questions for me regarding the dining room, we'll proceed upstairs," she said.

The little group, a trio of American women including one lady's teenage son and a honeymooning couple, shook their heads in the negative as Laurel ushered them into the hall. She stopped at the foot of the staircase and gestured around.

"As I pointed out earlier, Masterson Manor is built in the traditional hall style, with family areas distinctly separate from public rooms. But over the centuries, the house has been renovated and altered. The barrel vaulting overhead, however, contains the original three load-bearing beams, each cut from a single piece of wood and weighing over half a ton."

The young husband, John, looked suitably impressed while the bride, Meghan, appeared anxious. Tenderly, he pulled her against his side. "It's stood nine hundred years, pet. I don't think she's about to come down now."

His bride laughed at herself and shook her head and Laurel felt a pang of envy for them. Once she'd felt like Meghan... "If you'll follow me?" she said briskly, moving up the staircase.

She pointed out the Chinese vases in the niches at the top of the stairs, pristine and gleaming red and cobalt. She was not the only one who took pride in her work here. The housekeeper, Grace, could easily have let these small things go untended but didn't, unlike the butler, Kenneth, who should have retired years ago but couldn't because of an unfortunate predilection for the racetrack. As Laurel started down the gallery, she heard the sound of pounding behind the door at the very end. Blast. *It* was still working.

"When are we going to see this bed you've all been talking about?" the teenage boy, Brian,

suddenly asked.

“Shh,” his mother, Mrs. Plante, said.

Laurel turned, smiling. “It’s all right. Everyone wants to see the Masterson bed. I was hoping the handyman would finish before we got to it, but time is flying and I should hate for you to be rushed through. It is the highlight of the tour.”

And you wouldn’t mind seeing him again, either, would you, Laurel? she asked herself derisively.

The group assured her they did indeed want to see the bed, settling the matter. She led them to the master bedchamber and stopped in front of the door. “Very well. Here she is, live for your entertainment and edification, the one, the only...” She paused dramatically, her eyes twinkling. She always loved the look on the faces of the tourists when they got their first glimpse of The Bed. “The Masterson Bed.”

She pushed open the door and stood back. Inside, Max Ashton stood up, wiping dusty hands on his jeans. Without a glance at him, Laurel ushered her group into the room. The onetime solar was a large chamber, the walls covered with Masterson family portraits, furnished in authentic Regency era artifacts, a painted screen and cherry tallboy, a carved bombe chest and black japanned inlaid desk, twin settees covered in cream and green print, drapes of heavy green damask. Still, all the sumptuous furnishings paled before the overpowering presence of the room’s centerpiece: the Masterson bed.

Eight feet tall by eight feet wide by eight feet in length, the ancient walnut beauty presided over the room with the contented, slightly disreputable air of one who has weathered any number of pretenders to its crown as the oldest surviving bed in England. The deeply carved posts rising from the corners were as thick as her waist—indeed, one legend had it that they were actually dryad legs transformed and hewn while in their wooden state—while the rails and canopy frame glowed darkly, polished by thousands of hands over eight hundred years. Sumptuous, detailed, and faintly exotic, the carvings covering it had provoked centuries of debate over the bed’s origins.

Whatever its beginnings, the sheer weight of the thing had obviously been instrumental in its continued existence. Simply put, no one could get it out of the bedroom. Centuries had pretty much petrified the wood into something closer resembling stone than fiber. It certainly weighed as much as stone. Laurel could attest. She and Kenneth and Grace had once tried to shove it to the back wall in an attempt to get to the floorboards beneath. They had not been successful.

She eyed the epic proportions fondly. The years had taken their toll, and generations of former owners had left their scars on it, but these were only to be expected. What male Masterson had ever been able to resist marking anything that came into his possession? Still, it was a handsome, grand old thing and just looking at it filled her with a sort of reverence. One the handyman obviously didn’t share, since he was regarding the group with the indulgence an adult generally saves for tots at the cartoon matinee.

She didn’t spare him more than a glance but that didn’t keep her from realizing that he was no

sparing her plenty. And why not? At five and a half feet, packing a well-toned hundred and thirty pounds into a pair of well-cut navy slacks and snug cream-colored cashmere sweater, with hair black and shiny as a raven's eye, and a face some men called piquant, the one thing she wasn't insecure about was her looks.

"Come have a good look-see," Laurel invited her group.

The middle-aged American ladies made a beeline for the bed. The smallest one, Mrs. Stradling, red-haired and comfortable-looking, began a minute inspection of the headboard. Brian—more interested in power tools than antiques—wandered over to where Max had exposed the wall's internal wiring.

"She's a grand old thing, isn't she?" Miss Ferguson, buxom and pert, asked.

"How do you know it's a 'she'?" the honeymooning groom asked curiously.

Miss Ferguson regarded the younger man with the condescension of the *cognoscenti*. "Honey, once it gets made, it gets rumbled up, and it gets walked away from in the morning. Of course, it's a 'she.'"

Meghan blushed. The other ladies chuckled and even Max Ashton grinned. Only Brian didn't seem to get the joke and that was because he was backing into Max.

"Oops! Geez, I'm sorry, mister," the boy exclaimed guiltily. He'd been trying to peer through the hole in the wall.

"Think nothing of it, lad," Max replied.

At once, the three female American faces swung toward him. "You sound just like Laurence Olivier," Mrs. Plante breathed.

"Only you're taller, and fairer, of course," Mrs. Stradling pronounced, eyeing Max speculatively.

"And while the voice is refined, the look is definitely rugged." Miss Ferguson nodded sagely.

"A duke," Miss Ferguson clipped out, "with an agenda."

"Or a vendetta," Mrs. Plante mused quietly.

"Or a past," proposed Mrs. Stradling.

Even the starry-eyed Meghan was eyeing Max in friendly, if objective, appreciation. The tour was definitely getting sidetracked and Laurel did not want to spend any unnecessary time weaving fantasies about Max Ashton. She'd woven one too many in that area already.

"Please," Laurel said in barely suppressed exasperation. The women turned around from the contemplation of Max and looked at her.

"He's not Dan Stevens and this isn't *Downton Abbey*, you know," she said, trying for jocularitas and ending up sounding tense. "Mr. Ashton, would you mind finding something else to do while we're in here? We won't be but a short while."

Max shrugged, his smile lazy and knowing. "Not a bit. But since you won't be long, and I was going to call it a day after I was done in here, why don't I just hang about while you lecture? Might even learn something interesting."

“I am sure nothing I have to say could interest you.”

“Are you?” His smile had become softer. His dark eyes darker. She felt a little breathless, a little cornered by the look in his eyes... *Nonsense!* “Yes. Besides, I wouldn’t want to bore you.”

His smile faded and his gaze became even more focused on her. “Never.”

She felt herself flush and to cover her sudden confusion, she turned her back on him. “As you wish. Now, what say we turn our attention to the star of this show?”

“Yeah,” agreed Brian.

“Good.” Laurel smiled at the boy. “First off, anyone have any questions?”

This wasn’t how this part of the tour was supposed to go. Usually, she did a five-minute chronology of the bed and “*hasta la vista, tourists.*” But today she wasn’t in any hurry to have them leave and the museum close for the last time. She wanted to extend this rare sense of ownership. Even more, deep within her was welling a strange feeling of urgency that there were a million stories in her that needed to be told, or else they would be silenced forever.

“Come on,” she urged them. “Anything. This bed is a legend. How often do you get to sit on a legend and ask a Legend-Meister questions?”

Miss Ferguson raised a hand.

“Shoot,” Laurel said.

“Okay. When was the bed made and who made it?”

“Good question.” Laurel nodded sagely. “The fact is, we don’t know for certain who made the Masterson bed. It’s first mentioned in historical annals in the late thirteenth century, when a visiting nobleman wrote about his sojourn in Trecombe and how his host gave up ‘a wondrously carved and magnificently foreign bed for my comfort.’

“‘Magnificently foreign’ is a direct translation and our best clue as to its origins.”

Laurel knew she was good at this, not because she was smart or conscientious, but because she loved it. As she spoke, she could feel the decades and centuries slip away, a world form in her imagination that she only needed to close her eyes to see, feel, smell, and hear.

“From this reference and judging from the motifs in the carving, we can gather that the bed was made somewhere near Jerusalem at the beginning of the same century,” she went on. “Undoubtedly it was brought back to England by a crusading knight.” She smiled happily. “That’s right. The first recorded Masterson was a *bona fide* knight.”

A knight in shining armor, a man who understood and lived by a code of chivalry, a ‘flower of manhood,’ she thought wistfully. And while logically she knew she would have found a thirteenth-century knight chauvinistic, egocentric, and violent, she wished there were men about today—she glanced at Max—who treated a lady as well as they did, with respect and consideration.

“Just think of what it must have been like to be a knight in those days,” she went on dreamily. “It was like being a rock star today, only the jousting field was his concert hall and noblemen and

noblewomen were his groupies.

“And a tournament! The ultimate concert! It would have been fabulous. Imagine one in which the Masteron knight rode.” She sighed deeply, her eyes fixed on an interior vision she alone could see.

“He enters the field on his prancing destrier, his armor shimmering in the sun. The pennants ringing the field snap beneath a cerise-colored sky as the crowds dressed in silks and satins cheer. The children throw him flowers while the ladies toss him their silk scarves.”

She closed her eyes. “I wish I could have seen it...”

*Trecombe, Cornwall
circa 1200*

“Get those pigs off the tilting field!” Simon Gundry, sheriff of Trecombe, hollered at the children.

The two boys, eager not to postpone the promised entertainment, complied without complaining after their father’s escaped sows, sliding and whooping across the icy uneven ground.

Simon watched until they’d cordoned the pigs off by the tanner’s stall and then turned back to the task at hand.

“It is agreed then,” he bellowed with as much authority as he could muster, “whoever is unhorsed by his opponent first, will withdraw his claim on the lands abutting the river.”

Simon watched as the knights mounted their destriers at opposite ends of the long jousting field, the length of which was separated by a low rail. He blew into his hands and shivered in the raw March wind. It was early in the day yet and the field was still frozen. Later, the sun would turn the ground into an ice-clotted mire. Not that the cold had kept spectators from turning out.

The young gentlemen from Teague Manor milled about the far end of the list, while their ladies wrapped snug in rabbit-lined pelisses, their hoods drawn tight about rosy faces, roosted on rough benches hauled out by their servants. Along the rest of the field’s length stood the free folk of Trecombe. Even the holy brothers from tiny St. Albion’s Abbey stood in the crowd.

And why not? Simon thought. Trecombe was too small and remote to attract tournaments the way the cathedral cities and market towns did. Trecombe’s only tournament was the one held annually on Saint Neot’s name day. For the common people of Trecombe, this was a rare holiday, while for manor-born sons and daughters, it was an escape from a long winter of boredom.

Simon, however, being neither manor-born nor bored, but instead in charge of all the civil justice in the shire, was unhappy. He did not like this. Not at all.

A dispute between knights regarding property should properly await the king’s assize. Unhappily, as knights, the two combatants had every right to demand judgment by combat rather than await the king’s justice, and consequentially endure the loss of a valuable planting season.

Aye, Simon understood the reasoning behind the challenge. But he liked it no more for that understanding. He stomped his feet and offered a quick prayer that his role here did not come back to haunt him. Then he cupped his hands and hollered, “Are you ready, Sir Moore?”

Pretty as a maid with his golden hair and ruddy cheeks, Sir Guy Moore looked born to the brilliant raiment he wore, presents his proud parent had bestowed upon him at his knighting nine months past. Since then, he’d already won three tournaments. Now, he dug his golden spurs into his destrier’s milky white sides. The brute arched its neck, rolling its eyes and drumming its hooves anxiously upon the

hoar-touched ground.

A cheer rose from the crowd in response. Simon, who'd seen his share of knightly posturing and had known Guy Moore when he was a spoiled bit of snot hanging from his father's nose, wasn't easily impressed.

"I am ready!" Guy shouted, his voice ripe with confidence.

Simon turned toward where the other knight, a stranger here, fought his borrowed warhorse to standstill. It was woefully apparent that he was not ready. The crowd eyed him without warmth. A few snickered.

The stranger looked like Hotfoot compared to Guy Moore's Gabriel. Where Moore was fair, smooth, and light, this one was dark, bearded, and huge. Where Moore looked like greenwood, supple and tensile, this man looked to be carved from a bole, hard and obdurate.

He was a crusader, knighted, rumor had it, upon a bloody battlefield by Richard himself before following that same Richard to the Holy Lands. It was a good story, Simon admitted, but Trecombe had seen crusaders before and knew all too well that knightly armor as oft shielded vice as virtue. After all, Sir Gerent Corbet had been a knight, and only think on the years of terror his tenure had wrought in Trecombe.

No, what stimulated curiosity about this man wasn't what he was, but who he was: Sir Nicholas, whose origins were so humble and obscure they did not even boast a proper surname, the newly named heir to Corbet Manor. Once it had been Sir Gerent's demesne and now it was the richest in the land.

Making Sir Nicholas No-Name, as the town's brats had dubbed him, even more fascinating was the fact that he'd never actually seen the lands to which he held tide—not until he'd ridden into Trecombe two days ago. Because before he'd come into his inheritance, he'd been lost on the crusade and presumed dead. Indeed, even now perpetually lit candles graced the altar at St. Albion's, assuring his soul's ascension to heaven.

He'd come on the Sabbath, entering church as bold as brass, and announced himself. Amid a cacophony of amazement, Father Timothy and Father Eidart had vouchsafed that this Sir Nicholas was who he said he was, having known him from Glastonbury and having been instrumental in the event that had led to his inheriting the Corbet lands.

But before Sir Nicholas could even retire to spend a night at his newly claimed manor, Guy Moore had arrived and challenged the stranger to ownership of the orchard by the river. When Sir Nicholas had disclosed that he owned no steed, the holy brothers had come to his aid yet again, finding within their snug stables the destrier of a knight they'd lost to God's grace this very winter. Unridden since then, the horse had grown unruly and Sir Nicholas now had all he could do to keep the creature under control.

No wonder the people of Trecombe, great and small, were willing to forsake their work to see this particular joust. 'Twas not often a man returned from the grave—particularly a Syrian grave. If on

he'd looked the part of God's returned champion. He did not.

For while Guy Moore looked every inch his position, not even the most accomplished troubadour could have found much in Sir Nicholas's person worth romanticizing. Nicholas's dull mail—again, the deceased knight's—was as ill-fitting as his horse was ill-tempered. Even his lance was borrowed from its history, like his own, a mystery; its strength and straightness as suspect as the man who wielded it.

Simon shook his head despairingly. It would be, he feared, a short tournament.

"Sir? Are you agreed?" Simon shouted to the newfound lord of Corbet Manor.

In answer, Sir Nicholas raised his arm. Impossible to read his expression. His already dark visage was further obscured by a thick, untrimmed beard and the black locks that fell unkempt upon his shoulders.

But his green eyes were clear and his gaze seemed steady enough. If he felt at a disadvantage on his vexatious mount with his borrowed lance, he did not reveal it. He wore composure like a mantle.

"By the thighs of the poxy bitch that whelped you, Simon, get on with it!" Moore shouted.

"Ride!"

Both men's lances rose in brief salute and Moore's steed reared, silhouetted against the blinding blue of the newly flushed day. Then he was flying down the field, his mail shimmering, the red silk ribbons braided in his horse's mane rippling, his young body canted forward.

As for Sir Nicholas... Well, no one would be writing odes to Sir Nicholas's prowess this day, that was a certainty. His mount plunged forward, unbalancing his rider and sending the point of Nicholas's lance pitching earthward. For an instant, Simon thought it would impale the ground, unseating Nicholas before Moore drew near enough to take credit for it.

Pity, Simon thought morosely. Then, slowly amazingly, the battered knight pulled the tip of the thirteen-foot lance from its perilous drop. Alas, not in time to guide its path.

Still, The Virgin must have favored her resurrected knight, for in heaving back to keep his lance from falling, Nicholas's shield shifted, slanting sideways so that when Moore's lance struck it, it skittered along the shield's surface, its force deflected.

Moore cursed roundly and the riders thundered past one another to their respective ends of the list. Moore wheeled his mount sharply and adroitly while Sir Nicholas fought his mount into a looping turn.

"Ready!" Moore shouted and, without awaiting his opponent's consent, spurred his destrier forward once more charging down the tilting rail. And once more, Sir Nicholas's mount gathered its haunches and bolted.

This time, however, Sir Nicholas was ready. He crouched low over the beast's withers, his lance steady.

The crowd held its collective breath. Only the thunder of hoof beats and the squeal of the incarcerated pigs broke the quiet. The air frosted over with the spectators' mingled breath. Flecks of

mud sprayed from beneath flying hooves. Somewhere a baby squalled.

Twenty feet from his adversary, Nicholas abruptly stood up in his stirrups. It was a bold ploy. Raised thus, if Guy struck true, Nicholas would easily be toppled. But, the stance also allowed Nicholas a few precious inches of height which he used to his advantage, leaning out and over the top rail, risking all on the gamble that by doing so his lance would reach Guy a split second before Guy reached him.

Close...closer...

The lances seemed to strike the knights' shields at the same instant. Nicholas fell back into his seat, pitching sideways, his lance swinging up as he tried to right himself. Guy, quick to seize the advantage, yanked savagely at his reins, trying to wheel his mount on his rear legs in order to finish off his flailing opponent from behind.

He had almost turned his horse, dropping his shield to do so, when suddenly Nicholas spun around, his leg swinging over the pommel so that he circled round in the saddle without bothering to turn his mount to match his direction. His seemingly uncontrolled lance suddenly sliced through the air in a deadly up-swinging arc, colliding into Guy's unprotected side.

And with that, it was over.

Like a bothersome fly, Guy Moore was brushed from his destrier's back and landed in a clatter of metal on the muddy ground.

* * *

Either the hammers pounding against his temples or the taste of rotted wool in his mouth would have pleased Nicholas. Neither was pleasant and the knowledge that he'd willfully pursued both did not make them any more appealing. He'd never been a man to lose his caution in drink, and less the sort to deliberately spend his joy after having dulled his senses. Pleasures—in his limited experience with them—were too rare to enjoy with less than a full complement of faculties.

But his triumph at having won the joust, and the release that came of having yet again cheated death, had for once overwhelmed him. He'd started drinking as soon as he'd found a tavern. Now he was paying the price, learning anew that self-indulgence was a luxury he could scant afford.

He squinted into the shadowed interior of the only proper bed he'd found in Cabot Manor, noting the plain dark curtains hanging about it and the rough texture of the wood surface, hand-planed and unadorned. 'Twas far cruder furnishings than one would expect in so well-made and well-tended manor house—at least, he recalled thinking it well-tended after he'd finally found his way here early this morning. Still, he thought with a sweet sense of ownership, it was *his* bed.

He had never owned anything in his life besides his honor, the skills to do bodily injury to another man, and his fearlessness in doing so. Or rather, there'd been a time he'd been fearless. No more.

Once more he felt fear gnaw in his gut, fear that he no longer remembered the art of jousting, that it, along with so much else, had been lost in the Saracen dungeons or baked to dust under the Holy Land's sun-blistered sky; fear that he'd escaped that blasted land to slave and beg and labor three thousand miles only to have it end on a rural tilting field, killed by a pretty boy in silver mail.

But he hadn't lost.

Nicholas let his head roll back and smiled into the shrouded darkness. Finally, he was someone. No matter how short a time he held Cabot Manor, history must forever bear witness that he had existed, that he had been. For he was lord of this manor, master of three thousand acres upon which lived three hundred serfs, a mill, a granary, a buttery, a stable...and a bed.

The tightness in his gut relaxed and the thundering in his head abated. He sighed and, stretching his arm out, brushed against something soft and yielding. A female breast. He looked over, startled.

Ah, yes. He remembered now. As a newly christened debauchee, he had apparently decided to make up for the years he'd lain fallow in a Syrian dungeon. He studied the ripe figure sprawled beneath the blankets at his side. She was snoring and the scent of ale and peat smoke rose from her pink and grimy skin along with a mélange of other odors which, he suspected, had taken up residence on her person long ago.

Sowenna? Aye, Sowenna. Warm, full-bosomed, avaricious, blonde Sowenna. After six years gone from England, he had been stirred by the sight of blond hair. He had promised her a trinket for his company and while he knew that in the eyes of the church offering "a trinket for company" was no different than offering a coin for prostitution, well, he'd had what he wanted and she'd gotten what she needed.

Need and want. He'd always considered them separate, but of late he'd come to wonder how far apart they really stood.

Still, the reminder that he was paying for her favors dimmed his initial pleasure. He scratched his chest, hoping she hadn't given him fleas, and remembered an exotic room filled with steaming pools and ladles of clear water. Not every memory he'd brought back from the crusades was cursed with bleakness or fraught with peril.

He closed his eyes and Sowenna rolled atop him.

"You're awake!" she crowed and fumbled between their bodies. "Good. Now let's see what I 'ave here. Nuthin' I like better than to start the day with a nice—"

Whatever Sowenna liked to start the day with was to be forever lost, for at that second the bed hangings snapped open and sunlight poured in, blinding him with brilliance. A slender figure stood by the side of the bed, her features eclipsed by the sunlight behind her, a nimbus of fiery darkness above her head, her hands on narrow hips. Her chin jerked up, as though she'd been slapped, bringing her features into view. She was lovely, lovely and careworn and proud. Like some displaced faerie lass, slight but strong, with a wisdom that belied her youthful visage.

Sowenna blinked crossly, her playful demeanor wilting like harebells before a frost. “What do you think you’re doing?” she squawked, scooting upright without bothering to cover herself. “Who do you think you are, anyway, you scrawny get of a scrawny whore!”

Nicholas closed his eyes, Sowenna’s shrill battle cry renewing the drumbeat in his head.

“Who am I?” The slender beauty asked, pointing her finger at him. “I’m *his* wife.”

Jocelyn Cabot stood above the bed, sick and furious, feeling as if she'd walked straight into her life seven years ago. The clothing lying in heaps about the room, the yeasty stench of ale under-pinned by the thick pervasive aroma of sex, it was all the same. From the spilt tankard on the floor to the look of sluttish triumph on the face of the woman peering over the man's muscular chest, it was familiar.

It could have been her uncle Gerent lying there with his latest woman, too drunk to meet with the guild masters, too stupid to rely on diplomacy to listen to them. Instead, he'd sent her out to feed the man's threats. Not again. Never again.

"Get out!"

With alacrity, the woman scooted from the bed, grabbed her clothes and bolted out the door.

The man, her *husband*, Sir Nicholas *No-Name*, swung his muscular hairy legs over the side of the bed and glowered at her. That, too, sharply brought back a memory. She flinched reflexively, expecting at any second to be struck and sent careening across the room.

But he did not raise his hand to her. Instead, heedless of the fact that he was unclad, he rose and stood over her, naked and huge. Not huge like Gerent who'd been a grizzled, filth-encrusted bear of a man. Nay, this knight was a stallion in his prime, so flat of belly one could see the muscles clearly delineated beneath the dark fur that started at his chest and covered him all the way down to the scrotum hanging heavy and turgid between his legs.

Jocelyn flushed, averting her eyes. With a scowl, Nicholas looked around and snatched the sheet from the bed, securing it low around his hips.

Resentment and despair vied within Jocelyn. Resentment, because she'd kept her part of the bargain. She'd honored her husband's memory, kept candles lit for his salvation, made donations for masses to be said for his soul. Despair, because after six years of rectifying all the wrongs Gerent had heaped on this tiny village, once more a whoring, drunken knight was lord of this fief.

"You are supposed to be dead!" The words burst unbidden from her lips. Again, she cringed, certain now that she'd won not merely a smack across the face, but a graver punishment. One would think that after her years as Gerent's ward, she would have learned to keep a still tongue in her head. Not so. And the people of Trecombe had on more than one occasion thanked the good Lord for her inability to let any miscarriage of justice pass unremarked.

She closed her eyes and waited, fighting back tears of anger, trying desperately to ignore the fact that they were also tears of fear.

"Pardon me for returning alive," Nicholas finally answered.

She opened her eyes and looked up. He looked grim and dangerous, but his arms remained at his side. He was so big. Father Timothy had never mentioned that the man she'd wed by proxy was so

physically intimidating.

No wonder this man had been knighted on the battlefield. He'd only need to stand over his enemy—as he was standing over her now—to have him quaking like a leaf in the wind—as she was shaking now. The reality of her situation came back to her with breath-stealing force. *This was her husband*. He could do with her anything he wanted. She was his chattel.

What *would* he do to her? Impossible to say what lay behind those bright green eyes. Impossible to discern the expression on that dark, bearded visage surrounded by those long, matted locks of hair. She swallowed, deciding the best course would be to retreat while she could.

“I will leave you to dress, sir,” she said with as much dignity as she could manage. She began to back away.

At once, he followed. Her eyes widened and she backed up more quickly. He matched her pace for a moment, deliberately herding her backward across the room until her shoulders banged into the wall.

He raised his hand and she turned her head sharply. His eyes narrowed a fraction but he only lifted the braid that hung over her shoulder and looked down at it a second before turning his cool, uncompromising gaze to hers.

“Why do you want me dead?”

“Why?” *Because you are a blight on this land, a curse on these people and they have been cursed enough.* The words trembled in her throat, waiting to be spoken, but she managed to keep them back.

“We were informed of your death. We have grown accustomed to it,” she said breathlessly, albeit accusingly, for his fingers still played idly with her braid, like a merchant testing the quality of a suspect bolt of silk. “King Richard himself sent word of your capture. And later we learned that knights whose families could not pay their ransom were killed. We were *certain* you were dead.”

“I assume a ransom was demanded for me,” he said carefully. “Why wasn't it paid?”

“There was no money,” she answered. “Gerent left nothing but the land and that entitled save the demesne which had been overworked and yielded few crops.”

“You could have sold some land.”

How dare he lecture her on husbandry and economics? She had done more for Trecombe in six years than her uncle had in the thirty. “To whom, pray thee tell?”

“Perchance, that flower of manhood, Sir Guy Moore?”

Her mouth flattened. “Guy Moore has never paid for anything in his life. What he wants, he takes.”

“How is it then that he hasn't taken the lands by the river?”

“Everyone knows King Richard honors the memory of his fallen knights. He would look sorely on any who tried to wrest land from the family of a crusader who'd died in the Lord's—and Richard's—service,” she replied. “That is why I have been able to achieve some small prosperity for this demesne for these people. Your *death* has protected us from jackals.”

“I can hold the demesne,” he said. Once again, he reminded her strongly of Gerent and yet, the

was a difference. True, Gerent would have made such a statement, but where Gerent would have swaggered and sneered, there was not even a tincture of the braggart in Nicholas's voice. He was simply stating a fact.

And she did not doubt him. He looked every inch the ready warrior. Before he'd covered himself she'd seen a long white jagged scar on his left flank. More scars puckered on his shoulder and left arm. They only accentuated the impression he gave of strength and power.

"You mistake my meaning, sir," she said roughly, too aware of how close she was to his naked chest. "Because there has not been a need to hold this demesne, we turned our eyes to greater purposes than keeping and taking. We built and cultivated."

She'd been convent-raised, torn from the holy sisters' care at the age of twelve when she'd been hauled off by her sterile, vile, drunken uncle Gerent who had installed her in Cabot Manor as his heir. Fresh from religious instruction, she'd taken one look at the decrepit manor and the miserable, cowed faces of Gerent's serfs and villeins and immediately understood her role in life.

She was to be these people's liberator. Nine years later, she knew herself to have been a good liberator, a good mistress, a wise and prudent steward. But now, for some unknown reason, God had seen fit to test these poor folk—and herself—with a new ordeal. She glared at the ordeal.

"*That* is why the buildings are in good repair, the fields fertile, the cattle plump, and the people content. In short, because you were dead and there wasn't anyone an ambitious knight could challenge for what we have."

"But now there is," he said.

"Aye. Only look what your return has already wrought! Not two days here and blood already shed and more than like, every jackal within a day's ride sniffing that spilt blood and ready to come running."

A renewed sense of injury filled her, not for herself, but for the people who would be trampled in any clash of knightly conceit. And there was always knightly conceit.

"And you would rather I had died than return to share with you that which your uncle bequeathed me along with your hand."

"Might I speak plainly, sir?"

At this, the huge warrior gave a short bark of laughter. "Blind me, Madame, but if your last words were an example of honeyed words, I fear I shall be smote asunder by your 'plain-speaking.'"

She gazed at him, subtly comforted by that brief sardonic speech. He had wit then. Gerent would not have known irony if it had given him a written introduction. She straightened her shoulders. When she left this room, they would both know exactly where they stood.

He sighed. "Speak, girl, before you bite through your tongue."

"We covet peace, sir, not riches. We are not political, we are not significant, nor do we stand in the path of ambitious princes." The words rushed from her, severe and accusatory. "We are a tiny fief of

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