



*Danburgh
Castle*

Catherine E. Chapman

~DANBURGH CASTLE~
By Catherine E. Chapman

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Also by the author

Brizecombe Hall
Elizabeth Clansham
The Beacon Singer

Chapter 1

"How am I to know that your daughter didn't conspire with her husband to overthrow me?" the Norman lord asked the old man.

"I beg your pardon, sir, she is not my daughter. I am her grandfather. Her father died some time ago. But she is like a child to me and, if you just look at her, sir, you can see she is an honest woman." The old man held out his hand, gesturing to the girl, who was held by two of Lord Robert's men, at the back of the castle courtyard.

"Bring the woman here," ordered Lord Robert.

The guards walked her forward. She came willingly, her head bowed. Her long, chestnut hair, worn loose ordinarily, had been ordered into two long, thick plaits by her mother that morning.

"Raise your head, woman," Lord Robert told her when she stood before him.

Emma lifted her head and looked into Lord Robert's eyes.

But his gaze rested on her stomach. "She is with child," he said.

"Yes my lord," the old man confirmed.

"Is it the traitor, Alaric's child?"

"Of course, Lord Robert. No granddaughter of mine would bear a child out of wedlock."

"And you suppose that I will let this woman live to bring the son of a traitor into the world?"

"I have heard you are a just man, Lord Robert," said the grandfather. "I do not believe you would put an innocent child –and its innocent mother– to death out of spite. The traitor Alaric is dead. I give you my word, Lord Robert, that if you spare his widow and child, they will remain under my roof, and be to the King subjects as loyal as myself and my good daughter, this girl's mother."

Lord Robert was silent.

"If you will permit me sir," continued the old man, "I would ask you to consider how you would feel if your own wife were to be condemned to death, carrying, as she is, your child–"

"You over-step the mark," the Norman lord cautioned angrily. "The circumstances of my own lady bear no resemblance to those of this common woman–"

"But they are both soon to have children–" the old man stated, unable to stop himself.

Emma glanced anxiously at her grandfather, fearful that his plain speaking would be her undoing. For her part, she hardly cared whether she lived or died, so wretched had her life become since the death of Alaric. But for the sake of the unborn child inside her, she wanted to be pardoned. She could hardly bring herself to look at Lord Robert, but look she must to know her fate.

Emma raised her eyes to Lord Robert's face. He was looking her up and down. Emma surveyed the powerful man, in whose hands her fate rested, in a confusion of fear

and self-consciousness.

Lord Robert lifted his gaze and looked piercingly into Emma's eyes. "Very well, old man," he said quietly, "she shall live."

Emma fell to the floor, faint.

Chapter 2

Emma's courtship had been brief and no sooner, it seemed, had she married Alaric than he'd been killed in the uprising against Lord Robert. Alaric had never told her he was a rebel but, if Emma was honest, she had suspected it from the start. Nobody wanted the Normans here. Men like her grandfather, weakened by a life of toil and strife against the various invaders to their lands, accepted Norman rule out of fear and a desire for a peaceful existence. But Alaric, like many of his young friends, had wanted to regain power over his homeland. Emma couldn't blame him. Secretly, she was proud of what he had tried to do – he died a hero, fighting to win back the land from Lord Robert.

In public, of course, Emma went along with her grandfather's story of her ignorance and naivety. She referred to her dead husband as a traitor and a fool, and she described herself and her son Oswald as poor victims of Alaric's folly.

It was only after Alaric's death in the rebellion that Emma had discovered herself pregnant with his child. It had been a traumatic pregnancy, her fate uncertain throughout. She gave birth to Oswald a month after Lord Robert pardoned her at the castle, the birth brought on prematurely by the stress of her trial, her mother believed. Nobody thought Oswald would survive. Emma herself came close to death. But they both lived. Emma felt her life had been spared to care for her son. Oswald, like his father, was a fighter.

Shortly after Oswald's arrival, news was rife in the village that Lord Robert's wife had died in childbirth at the castle. The baby had been saved. Emma's mother remarked how strange the event was in the light of Grandfather's words to Lord Robert. Emma herself felt a strange sense of pity for the Norman lord that she couldn't quite explain. His hair was dark and very short, she remembered. Alaric's hair had been long, fair and flowing.

Still grieving the loss of Alaric, forced to live back with her mother, grandfather and younger siblings, in the cramped cottage of the family farmstead, Emma's own future looked bleak. Having the responsibility of baby Oswald, she saw little prospect of a new suitor. Nor could she be of any help to her family – she only added to her grandfather's burden.

When she'd married Alaric, her mother had told her that the joy of their union lessened the blow of the family's recent loss of Emma's father. After Alaric's death the family had been left in a state of financial peril. Emma was the eldest of eight children, the youngest still a baby. Only her stoical grandfather remained optimistic about the future. Emma suspected his hope was misplaced and felt responsible for everything.

Chapter 3

One morning in autumn, when Emma was beginning to feel strong again and baby Oswald was considered well enough to be taken outside, Emma decided to go foraging for nuts and berries in the woods that belonged to Lord Robert's estate. Her mother was nervous about Emma going alone, but Emma insisted, pointing out that it was something she would have done without hesitation before Alaric's death, and claiming she wanted to contribute to the household in some small way.

Emma left the cottage, carrying the infant Oswald in a sling on her back, and felt immediately happier to be out in the open air with the child.

When they reached the heart of the woods Emma quickly located bushes beside the path through it that were heavy with blackberries. She stepped into the brambles and began to collect the berries in a basket.

After a few minutes, bending over to pick the fruit that was out of her immediate reach, Emma heard horses approaching. She turned to see who rode towards her. One of the faces she spied was unpleasantly familiar. Had she been able to move more quickly, she would have tried to conceal herself but, stranded as she was in the clump of brambles, she returned to her task, hoping to go unnoticed.

Upon first encountering Emma, Lord Robert's party merely bade the young peasant girl good day and walked their horses on along the woodland path.

Emma thought she had not been recognised and felt relief.

Moments later, however, Emma heard the horses come to a standstill up ahead. One rider returned.

Emma glanced up to see whose horse approached her. As soon as she saw the rider she looked away in dread, feeling her stomach rising inside her.

Lord Robert's horse came to a halt on the path alongside where Emma stood. The rider asked her if she belonged to his village and what was her husband's trade.

Emma nervously explained that she was the widow of Alaric the traitor. There was no point in trying to conceal her identity from the Norman lord; his power was so absolute. Emma hung her head in fear of Lord Robert's reaction to her introduction. Lord Robert said nothing but Emma sensed his gaze upon her. Feeling uneasy about Lord Robert's prolonged silence, Emma raised her eyes to look up at the well-built man on horseback. She registered that he had been surveying her figure, well-defined in the bodice of a dress that had been made for her long before her maternity. Emma was aware that the dress was now too small. She blushed, feeling ashamed of her appearance, but then she immediately felt annoyed – it was only because of Norman oppression that she and her people found themselves in reduced circumstances.

Emma drew herself up and looked Lord Robert straight in the face.

Lord Robert raised his eyes to meet Emma's and smiled at her.

Emma scowled.

"I remember you," said Lord Robert. "The child on your back, is this the same child

you were carrying when last we met?"

"Yes my lord," Emma said, avoiding his gaze once more.

"Tell me, is it a boy or girl?"

Emma hesitated, aware that a lie might protect Oswald but a lie discovered could be fatal. "A boy, my lord," she said.

"I too have a boy-child of similar age," Lord Robert told her.

Emma recalled Lord Robert's widowed state and felt involuntary guilt that her treatment of him had been hostile. But he was a Norman – she would give him no words of comfort.

Lord Robert had taken out a purse. He stooped from his horse and offered Emma a coin of value – enough money to feed her entire family for a month.

"I cannot accept such a gift, my Lord," Emma said, looking at the coin rather than the bearer.

"It is for your child," Lord Robert replied, holding the coin in front of her face.

Emma knew that to refuse the token was rude and disrespectful but a sudden remembrance of Alaric prompted her to stand her ground. "I will not take your money, Lord Robert," she maintained.

For a moment Lord Robert seemed at a loss.

Emma glanced at him and was pleased to see his face flushed with annoyance and embarrassment at her rebuff.

Lord Robert put the coin back in his purse. He then lunged from his horse and caressed Emma's cheek with his hand.

Emma gasped in shock and drew back from Lord Robert but her skirts were caught fast in the brambles – she couldn't move. Emma felt Lord Robert's hand, cool but tender against her warm skin.

"I will keep my money then, woman," Lord Robert said softly, "and hope that the opportunity will arise for me to do you some service in the future."

Emma raised her arm, intending to push Lord Robert's unwanted hand from her cheek. But she found her own hand only came to rest upon his and, rather than fending it off, she had to fight the instinct to kiss the hated hand, close as it was to her lips.

Emma closed her eyes, so intense was the sensation of Lord Robert's touch.

The hand was abruptly withdrawn. "Until we meet again," Lord Robert said, urging his horse away.

Emma opened her eyes to see the Norman lord retreating. She felt strangely desolate to be left standing alone amid the brambles. "I remember you," she whispered to herself as the noble vision disappeared.

Chapter 4

Barely a week later a man came to the farm cottage and spoke with Emma's grandfather. Lord Robert had requested that Emma come to the castle to be nurse to his own boy-child.

Without consulting his granddaughter, the old man agreed, negotiating that Emma would receive, in addition to the board and lodging offered to her in the castle, a sum for her services that was sufficient to keep the rest of the family.

"When yer grandad told me, I couldn't believe they'd said yes to it," Emma's mother informed her excitedly.

Emma was fully aware that she had no choice but to accept a fate that would ensure, not only her own security, but that of her entire family. "And little Oswald, he can come with me?" she said.

"Ah," her mother replied sadly, "that won't be possible, lass."

Emma began to weep.

"But, rest assured, my love, I will bring little Oswald up like one of my own."

Chapter 5

Within days Emma's new life was upon her. "I will send money each month," she told her mother, as they stood outside the cottage on a grey but mild autumnal afternoon.

"And news of how you get along."

"Yes."

Lord Robert's man was waiting with his horse and cart. He was eager to get on as the sun was already beginning to set and the black-blue skies over the coast signalled rain was on its way.

"Goodbye Mother," Emma said, kissing the older woman on the cheek and trying to resist her firm embrace, for fear she wouldn't be able to bring herself to leave. "Give my love to Grandfather and kiss little Oswald for me," she added tremulously, as she turned her head away from her mother to hide her tears.

Emma climbed up beside the man on the cart, on the back of which her few belongings had been loaded. The horse pulled away. Emma looked back and saw her younger sister emerging from the door of the cottage, with baby Oswald in her arms. Upon sight of her child, Emma wept unashamedly.

The man paid her no attention and continued towards the coast, his eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead. If they kept up a decent pace, they should get there just before dark.

As the cart journeyed on, along the track that led from the village, through the woodlands of Lord Robert's estate, towards the east coast and the exposed, cliff-top grounds of the castle itself, Emma thought miserably about the misfortunes of the last year. She also relived the events of the fateful day when, in the forest, she and Lord Robert had met. It was dark in the woods now; there was no sunlight. The leaves had fallen from the trees – it felt like winter was coming.

Everybody had said how fortunate she was to be going to work for Lord Robert and live in the castle. Everybody said how charitable the Lord was to have overlooked Alaric's crime and asked her to be his nurse. Emma had told no one about the nature of the exchange between she and Lord Robert in the woods. Partly, she didn't want to spoil her family's happiness over the income her work was to bring. In addition, she was embarrassed by what had happened and remained confused about the Norman lord's intentions. Also, there was the feeling she could barely admit even to herself: desire for a man who was not only her new master but also her sworn enemy.

Emma's dreamlike concerns became scarily real when she saw Danburgh Castle, her destination, looming large up ahead. As soon as the cart emerged from the forest and they caught a first glimpse of the castle in the dwindling light, the rain started to pour. The man pulled the hood of his tunic over his head. Emma had nothing to protect her from the rain. She felt the large, cold drops running in rivulets down her neck.

The castle was an imposing stone keep, located on the edge of a rocky headland, looking out to sea. Emma was too young to have seen the wooden castle that had been

quickly erected when the Normans had first arrived and taken power of the land, but she had heard of it from her grandfather.

The power of the Norman lord had now been strengthened by the gradual replacement of the timbers with masonry. Now built completely from stone, the castle and surrounding wall looked impenetrable. But what Emma feared, as the horse and cart rumbled along the track that wound up the hill towards the castle's drawbridge, and she became increasingly soaked by the heavy rain, was that, once inside its walls, she might never leave its confines again.

Chapter 6

On arrival at Danburgh, Emma was greeted by a woman-servant in the courtyard. The woman was alarmed that Emma was drenched, fearing she would catch a cold and pass it on to the baby. But instead of taking her to dry herself in the kitchens, she escorted Emma directly to the nursery, saying she could dry herself there. It was as though the servant didn't want others to see Emma.

Making her way to the nursery, climbing the spiral staircase with the servant-woman, Emma caught a glimpse of a huge, bearded man standing in the middle of the great hall of the castle. His massive figure, framed in the doorway leading off the staircase, was an impressive sight, but so striking was the young woman standing beside him –with her long, straight, black hair and her fine, vivid blue gown– that Emma stopped still on the spiralling stairs, transfixed. The serving-woman whispered to Emma not to tarry and took hold of her hand, pulling her on, up the next flight of steps.

The nursery was on the floor above the great hall. Emma was to sleep in a small bed that stood on the opposite side of the room from the crib in which her charge now lay sleeping. The woman left Emma, to fetch her some means of drying herself. Emma dared not go over to look in the crib. She stood uncomfortably in the centre of the room, cold and damp from her journey. She could hear loud voices from the hall below; she imagined it was the large man who laughed. She suddenly felt scared of this new world she had entered; she was tempted to try to run away.

"His lordship has asked that you become responsible for his son's nurture immediately," the woman-servant explained on her return. "He is happy that you should feed him when next he wakes."

Emma walked over to the crib and looked down at the boy. He was a little younger than baby Oswald and had angelic ringlets of fair hair.

"He has his mother's colouring, God rest her soul," the woman observed.

Emma felt a strange sensation: her resentment at being hired to nurture this child at the expense of her bond with her own baby was challenged by an instinct to protect so small a child who had lost his own mother.

"What became of his previous nurse?" Emma asked.

The woman-servant was hesitant to answer her question.

Emma looked her in the eye and the woman drew closer. "The fine lady you saw in the great hall," she began in hushed tones, "is Fiona, daughter of the bordering Scottish thane."

"The large, bearded man?"

The woman nodded. "Nothing has been announced but it is believed that she and Lord Robert are contracted to be married. When her ladyship died, a woman from the village came to nurse the child, but when the lady Fiona began to visit the castle, she took exception to the woman and discharged her."

"Why?" Emma asked.

“The lady Fiona said the woman was slovenly but we think she’s minded to install her own servants here.”

Emma now understood why her arrival at the castle had been so clandestine. “Does the lady Fiona take an interest in the child?” she asked the woman.

“Not in any wholesome way,” she replied. “I think she would rather it didn’t exist. It bars the way for any sons she and Lord Robert might have, of course,” she added in a whisper. “I must go, Nurse,” the woman concluded. “I have already said too much.”

Chapter 7

When left alone with the sleeping child in the nursery, Emma sat on her bed, looking out of the narrow window, to the open sea, absently patting her long wet hair with the cloths the woman had brought her. So close was this side of the castle to the edge of the cliff that she had no sense of land beneath her – she couldn't see it. Why must the window be so narrow when there was no land below? Presumably to defend against attack from the sea itself, Emma thought. Through the narrow window Emma could see the peach-pink sun setting on the horizon of a blue-grey sea. Now the storm had passed, the air had cleared and the seas were calm. It would soon be completely dark. Emma had no means of illuminating the room once the veil of night fell. Perhaps she was expected to sleep whenever the child slept.

Everybody considered her to have had good fortune in being called to the castle, but surely this room was to be little more than a prison cell. Here she would attend to a baby whose father didn't wish to see it. If Lord Robert had moved on so swiftly to his second wife, Emma, surely, as the carer of his first wife's child, must be shunned. She couldn't imagine what empty, numberless days and nights lay ahead of her, shut up in this small coastal cell.

Looking over to the crib of the sleeping child, a dark thought occurred to Emma. She had feared that Lord Robert would exact revenge on Alaric by taking Oswald's life. By virtue of her position, she now held the life of the Norman lord's child in her hands. How strange that Lord Robert hadn't considered that she might abuse her position to rid the world of his son and heir.

Emma's contemplation was broken by the child's waking cries. She went quickly over to the crib and lifted the baby from it. She held him against her and soothed him. His crying soon ceased. Emma found that tears were rolling down her cheeks. Holding the child close, rocking him and stroking his back, Emma imagined the boy was her own little Oswald. She kissed his soft cheek.

Taking a seat on the chair beside his cot, and placing the child on her lap, Emma loosened the cords that held the bodice of her dress together, undid the fastenings, pulled the fabric of her dress –still damp from the rainstorm– away from her chest, and then pulled back her smock. The baby sought Emma instinctively. She cradled him lovingly as he began to feed. Emma heaved a sigh of relief and felt a surge of maternal warmth. She couldn't help but smile upon the child's blonde crown of hair and begin to stroke it, as he fed contentedly.

Emma could hear voices again in the hall below – a woman's voice laughing indulgently this time. She imagined it was the lady Fiona. How strange, Emma thought, as she gently rocked the little boy, that Fiona could deny herself an instinct as basic as a woman's love for a child.

Emma sensed a presence in the room. She jumped when, looking up, she saw Lord Robert standing in the doorway, watching her. He held a burning candle in his hand.

"Welcome to Danburgh, Nurse," he began. "May I call you Emma?"

Emma could not reply. She'd been startled and now felt self-conscious that the lord so blatantly watched the child at her breast.

"I wanted to ensure that everything is in order for you here – and to bring you some light." He placed the candle on a table beside the crib, as near as he could rest it to where Emma sat. "You're already acquainted with your charge. He seems to be getting the sustenance he needs," Lord Robert observed.

"My lord, I have not been told the child's name," Emma said.

"It is Harry," Lord Robert replied. "He is my son and heir, Emma, so be sure to feed him well."

"I will treat him as I would my own son," Emma assured him, feeling a pang at the remembrance of Oswald.

"You know, Emma, that I have taken care to make provision for your family?" Lord Robert continued.

"I am aware of it, sir," Emma replied. "I thank you."

"My actions were not, perhaps, without an element of self-interest," Lord Robert confessed as he walked from the table towards her.

"I don't understand you sir," Emma said, feeling flustered at his approaching step.

"Let us just say I am glad to have you here, Emma," Lord Robert said as he knelt down beside her.

"Thank you my lord," Emma uttered, keeping her gaze fixed upon Harry's golden locks, for fear of looking into his father's eyes.

"Regrettably, I must withdraw," Lord Robert said.

Emma said nothing in response. She could hear the strains of the musicians beginning to play in the great hall below but Lord Robert didn't seem eager to return to his carousing.

"They play songs of love, Emma," he said.

Emma nodded but avoided his gaze.

"Goodnight, little one," Lord Robert said, bending over to place a kiss upon his child's head. Emma winced, to find him so close to her own bare skin. Lord Robert raised his head as Emma tried to compose herself.

"Goodnight Nurse Emma," the Norman lord added, beginning to rise from the floor but, as he did, placing a kiss upon Emma's cheek.

He left the chamber almost before she'd had chance to register what he'd done.

Chapter 8

For two weeks Emma spent most of her time confined to the nursery with the child. She saw nothing of her lord nor of the lady Fiona but she was aware, from the news that the serving-woman brought her daily, that the lady and her attendants had been staying at the castle all that time.

On a couple of occasions, the serving-woman invited Emma to bring Harry down to the kitchen, to sit beside the fire. This only happened when Lord Robert and Fiona were abroad, riding or hunting, and the woman could be certain that the lady would not return and discover the nurse. Emma enjoyed the opportunity to see more of the castle and to talk with the serving-woman, but she resented the fact that her freedom was only occasioned by Lord Robert's adventures with the noblewoman.

When the Lord and his fiancée were at home, the serving-woman brought Emma food and tended to her needs but, aside from her visits, Emma felt that she and little Harry were forgotten completely.

Emma calculated she had not seen Lord Robert for over a fortnight and began to fear she would go mad if she didn't escape the room of her confinement. It was evening. The serving-woman had not appeared. Harry was asleep in his cot and would remain so for some time. Emma had heard no sounds of people moving about the castle for a quarter of an hour or so. Perhaps Lord Robert had ventured out, taking his attendants with him?

Stealthily, Emma opened the door of the nursery and slipped through it onto the small landing outside. She thought she was on the third floor of the castle but was unsure how many more floors were above her. It was completely dark. Emma knew there was a torch that usually burnt in a wall-mounted holder on the landing but tonight it had not been lit.

She had no sense of anybody being present. If her theory was correct and she'd been left alone in the castle, the doors would surely have been secured against intruders – it would be impossible for her to escape to the courtyard. Her only means of experiencing freedom was to climb up to the battlements.

Emma set off in the darkness, slowly mounting the spiral staircase from the landing and then climbing its seemingly endless steps. She reached another floor level but the staircase continued up beyond this.

When she finally reached the top of the staircase, Emma, looking up, could see, through an open doorway, the black sky, lit with bright, shining stars. She gasped as she emerged onto the castle ramparts and breathed in the fresh, salty air. She stood bolt upright, sensing the fresh wind blowing against her body and through her hair.

Emma walked towards the parapet that ran along the seaward wall of the castle. She felt cold but she felt alive, after the stifling heat of the nursery, constantly warmed by the great fire that burnt in the banqueting hall below. She put her hands on the stone wall and leant forward, looking out to sea. It was a turbulent night. The moon was full

and shone brightly in the sky. Broken clouds raced across it, giving Emma the impression that the heavens were on the move.

Lit by the moonlight, Emma could see the white foam of the waves crashing against the rocks below and, further out, she saw the incoming waves undulating as they coursed towards the shore. There was drama and motion all about.

Emma jumped – something stirred behind her. She feared she would fall forward over the parapet but hands clasped her sides and pulled her back. “Who’s there?” Emma asked nervously, unable to identify her assailant in the dark.

“Your own lord,” a man’s voice replied.

“I thought myself alone,” Emma said.

“We’re almost alone,” Lord Robert responded. “Fiona has ventured home this evening. My army has set forth to escort her on her journey across the border. Only a few of my men remain below, guarding the keep.”

“Why are you on the battlements?” Emma enquired.

“I might ask the same of you,” Lord Robert replied, amused by Emma’s forwardness.

“I needed to breathe, my lord,” Emma said, “I wanted some air.”

“You can certainly take the air up here,” Lord Robert said, adding, “Strange, is it not, that I feel most free upon the battlements of a castle?”

Emma didn’t reply but shivered.

“But you shouldn’t remain here without a cloak, Emma. You will catch your death. Here, let me warm you,” and he went to enfold Emma in his own great cloak.

“No my lord,” she resisted instinctively. “It’s wrong.”

“How wrong, Emma, if it will warm you and comfort me?”

Emma folded her arms against his embrace.

“I have lost my wife, Emma,” Lord Robert whispered, “and you have lost a husband—”

“You are betrothed to another lady,” Emma was quick to respond.

Lord Robert held onto his unyielding nurse inside the cloak. “Negotiations are, as yet, at a very early stage.” He lowered his voice. “And, between you and me, Nurse Emma, I think we can safely say that the lady to whom I am now contracted is as cold as stone.”

“She is beautiful,” Emma pointed out, keeping her face turned from his, lest he should attempt to kiss her again.

“That is indeed true but what care I for beauty if a woman’s nature is cruel?”

Emma could feel Lord Robert’s breath warming her cheek as he spoke. His arms were wrapped about her own, still stubbornly folded, beneath the cloak.

“My marriage to Fiona has been proposed by her father to strengthen our control of these lands. From my point of view, the match is politically desirable. True, she is a beautiful woman, but she doesn’t care for me – she holds me in contempt. If the marriage is granted, it will not be a loving one; I know that already—”

“Then you ought not to marry her, sir—” Emma commented instinctively. She stopped herself – outspokenness was a trait she’d inherited from her grandfather. It led to trouble.

"A man in my position has responsibilities, Emma. It is my duty to the King to stabilise these lands; it is my duty to your people, Emma, to try to keep the peace."

Beneath the cloak, Lord Robert's left hand had strayed down to rest upon her side. His right hand had cleaved its way underneath her folded arms and was currently held close to her breast.

"I am just a man, Emma..." Lord Robert said meaningfully.

"Robert!" called a voice from below.

Emma was released from the firm hold. Her body once again felt the chill of the winds, as the heavy cloak was drawn back from her.

"Robert!" came the voice again, louder and clearer.

Lord Robert arrayed his cloak and turned away from Emma.

Emma stood, her head spinning, her legs weak, facing the sea and looking up at the stars.

The lady Fiona emerged onto the ramparts. "What are you doing up here?" was the suspicious greeting she offered her future husband.

"I came to fly the falcon," Lord Robert replied innocently.

Emma remained standing with her back to the lady. She looked steadily out to sea as her body rocked gently in the wind. The sea had become strangely calm now. She hoped to go undetected.

"And who is this?" the lady Fiona asked accusingly.

"This is the wet nurse," Lord Robert answered plainly. "I do not believe you have met Emma." He placed his hand on Emma's arm, turning her round to face Fiona.

Emma looked blankly upon her future mistress as she tried to control her breathing and stand still. The lady was indeed beautiful. In the moonlight Emma drank in the flawless fair skin and jet black hair for which she was famed. Her gown tonight was a rich red, ornamented with elaborate patterns embroidered in gold thread and embellished with polished precious stones about the neckline. She wore a tall, pointed headdress – a gift from Lord Robert, no doubt. The long veil that flowed from it billowed in the wind.

"Why is she here? Why is she not in the nursery attending to the child?" Fiona snapped violently.

"I brought her here," Lord Robert replied. "She has been confined to the nursery these past two weeks and was growing faint with lack of fresh air. I brought her here to watch the falcon fly."

"Then where is the falcon?" Fiona asked triumphantly.

Lord Robert turned seaward and called into the night. He picked a glove from below the parapet and put it on his hand. A wolfhound, which had been slumbering on sacks in the corner of the ramparts, whimpered, stirred itself and came to its master's side.

In a moment, a peregrine falcon, with piercing eyes, came circling above the ramparts and settled on his master's outstretched, gloved hand.

Emma's eyes opened wide at the spectacle.

"Stay absolutely still," Lord Robert instructed her, "he is the most sensitive of birds of prey. The least movement will frighten him off."

"Girl, you shall accompany me back to the nursery at once," Fiona ordered. "You

have had quite enough air for one evening," she concluded sarcastically.

Chapter 9

The lady Fiona closed the door of the nursery behind them. Emma had walked straight over to the crib where Harry lay, sound asleep.

"I wish to make you aware, Nurse, that your services will no longer be required here."

"I don't understand, my lady. I didn't neglect little Harry – he was sleeping when I ventured up onto the ramparts—"

"Your negligence is beside the point," Fiona stated. "Harry is growing. He no longer needs a wet nurse."

"But, my lady, this is so sudden," Emma protested, thinking of Lord Robert.

"Things change," Fiona said, turning her back on Emma. "Get used to it," she added flippantly, as she opened the door. "I bid you goodnight, Nurse," she called coldly, without looking at Emma. She shut the door behind her.

The lady Fiona repaired to the quarters she had already claimed as her own. As she stood in the long window, looking out over the land, combing her long, black hair, the door to the chamber was opened by another. She turned to see Lord Robert standing in the doorway. "What do you want?" she asked him.

"I came to see that you are well," he replied.

"Huh," Fiona responded, "you care so little for me, Robert, you didn't even think to ask why my journey was aborted—"

"I assumed you'd changed your mind—"

"Do you really think I would rather be here than in Scotland?" She didn't give him time to answer. "And when I come looking for you on the ramparts, I catch you with your common English whore—"

"Emma is a simple, good peasant woman. She is a caring nurse to my child – to our child."

"Harry is no child of mine—"

"I cannot think, Fiona, that our marriage will work if you cannot look upon my son as your son."

"I said I would provide you with a nurse. You went against my wishes—"

"I felt obliged to help the poor woman. She is a widow—"

"Her husband wanted you dead! Her husband was a traitor. She too is a traitor. Why do you think I returned tonight? The men feared we were being tracked by rebels. We had to turn back to avoid an ambush. Had I continued on my journey, I might have been killed."

"I'm sorry—"

"That's rich – all the while you were back here entertaining your whore!"

"I sent a retinue—"

"But you didn't accompany me yourself!"

Lord Robert failed to find words to console her. "Please don't implicate Emma in

this quarrel," he maintained, "she's just a nurse—"

"Was a nurse – I've discharged her—"

"Why?" Lord Robert asked.

"I suspect her. Someone must have informed the rebels that I was to venture forth tonight."

"Nonsense. Emma is an honest nurse. Her grandfather is a faithful subject. He vouched for her ignorance of her husband's part in the uprising—"

"You'd like to believe her innocent – you are naive."

"Besides, Emma couldn't possibly have informed on you. She hasn't left the castle since her arrival here – she's barely left that room."

"You may trust her. I do not. Anyway, Harry is grown – he has no need of a wet nurse."

"That's untrue, Fiona."

"It will be true before too long."

Lord Robert walked over to where his fiancée stood. "But we may, perhaps, have need of a nurse in future; there may be other children..."

She averted her gaze from him. "Not until we're legally married," Fiona insisted. "And even then, Robert, I will only bear your children out of a sense of duty – duty to my father, not you."

"Do you really detest me so much, Fiona?" Lord Robert asked desperately.

The lady Fiona turned from him and strode across the room. "I bid you goodnight, Lord Robert," she said with finality.

"Until tomorrow then," he replied, defeated.

"Remember, Robert," Fiona concluded, "it is my father who arranged this marriage; not me."

Lord Robert began to close the door on her.

"Here's the deal, Robert," Fiona called after him. "You get to keep your wet nurse so long as I can be certain her presence here doesn't compromise my safety."

"I don't understand you," Robert said, lingering in the doorway.

"If stay she must, she shall be kept under lock and key."

Chapter 10

Emma lay in her bed of linen sheets and woven blankets, on the nursery floor. She couldn't sleep in the small bed provided for her, unused as she was to such comfort. She'd taken to sleeping on the floor, which she found more suited to her and also much warmer than lying beneath the window. The fire in the great hall below would have died out by now but the floor of the nursery was still warm from its earlier blaze. Emma pulled up the covers about her shoulders and began to fall asleep.

When she awoke –it was difficult to judge whether moments or hours had passed– parts of Emma's body felt exposed and cold but others felt hot, pressed against warmer flesh. Lord Robert straddled her on his knees. He had come to her room with a candle to light his way. By its light, Lord Robert had pulled back the blankets and sheets of Emma's makeshift bed to reveal her naked body beneath. Desiring more light, he had opened the shutters of the narrow window to allow the moonlight to creep into her cell.

As Emma's consciousness dawned, Lord Robert stroked her breasts, his fingers playing over her nipples. Emma's eyes opened.

"You left the door unlocked," Lord Robert whispered to her, as his hands progressed down her torso.

"In case the child is ill or there is a fire – someone may need to get in."

"You leave yourself vulnerable," he cautioned, slipping his fingers between her legs.

"The child's safety is more important – I am unlikely to be preyed upon–"

"Perhaps you underestimate your desirability, Emma," he said, withdrawing his hand, in order to remove the robe he wore. Beneath it he wore nothing.

Emma gazed up at Lord Robert's naked form, illuminated by the candle and by the light of the full moon that crept in through the narrow window. "My lord, I am to leave this place," she said quietly, as Lord Robert bore down on her.

"Who told you that?" he asked, easing his way between her legs.

"The lady Fiona," Emma replied, shifting herself to resist his advance.

"Is the lady Fiona lord of this manor, Emma?" Lord Robert asked, following the question with a decisive lunge, intended to secure Emma.

"No sir," Emma replied, torn, now she was fully conscious, between what her head was telling her and what her heart desired. Feeling him hard up against her, she couldn't resist but yield herself up to him. "You are," she said with a gasp at the thrill of his entry.

"Then, be assured, Emma," Lord Robert said, thrusting himself deeper, "you are going nowhere."

Lord Robert ventured to smother his nurse in kisses as he moved on top of her but Emma recollected herself. She pushed Lord Robert's shoulders away and looked him in the eye. "This is wrong, my lord," she said, struggling still to divorce her logic from every urge she felt inside. "We cannot do this."

"Emma, you are mine and I will have you," the Norman lord replied. "You cannot renege."

But his rhythm had been broken by Emma's resistance. "I will have you," he reasserted, knowing already that his quest was fruitless if their passion was not shared.

"You could take my body if you chose," Emma said softly, "but, my lord, it would not come with my soul."

With Emma's words, Lord Robert withdrew and sat back on his haunches, defeated. "What would secure your soul, Emma?" he asked soberly.

"Your love, Lord Robert," she replied, "your true and exclusive love."

Chapter 11

The door to the nursery opened. The figure of Fiona, with a shawl wrapped about her shoulders, was lit from without. "Get up," she told Emma.

Emma rose from the floor, pulling up a sheet with her to preserve her modesty, being still in a state of disarray after her visit from Lord Robert in the night.

"Typical," muttered Fiona, looking around the room, "he gives her a bed; she sleeps on the floor like a dog."

Emma registered the comment but felt too chilled and self-conscious to react to it.

"I have been discussing your fate with my future husband," Fiona began when Emma stood upright before her. "To speak plainly, I do not trust you, but he thinks otherwise. I have reached the conclusion that you must make a choice: if you remain here, your movements will be monitored when you are outside the confines of this room; otherwise you will be locked in this room, so that I know where you are. If you find these terms unacceptable, you are free to leave immediately. What do you say?"

Emma was speechless.

"Perhaps you need time to think," Fiona suggested. "Get dressed, Nurse and make up your mind – and be sure to plait your hair – I will not have women in my future husband's household looking wanton. When you have dressed, you will come to me and give me your decision."

Fiona was about to leave but she felt an irresistible urge. Emma still stood before her, frozen. "Drop the sheet, Nurse. Let me look at you."

Emma thought she must have misheard the lady.

"You are my future husband's servant. I wish to see that you are in good health. Let me look upon you naked, I say." Fiona smiled to witness the discomfort that her order brought to the nurse. She waited, certain the woman couldn't refuse her demand.

Emma lowered her head, closed her eyes and let the sheet fall to the floor.

Fiona immediately registered Emma's full breasts. "A comely little slut you are indeed, Nurse," she observed, surveying Emma's form more fully by scanning her eyes down Emma's torso and resting them unashamedly on her crotch. "If you choose to stay, I think I will permit the soldiers who guard your room to take their pleasure with you. They are mostly common men and exercise little discernment in their choice of women. And it would be a shame to let all that fresh meat go to waste," Fiona joked, eyeing Emma's wide hips.

Emma had opened her eyes and raised her gaze, alarmed at Fiona's suggestions.

Fiona looked Emma in the eye. "Their tastes are such, I shouldn't be surprised if two or three of them didn't want to have a go at you all at once. But, huh, built as you are, I daresay you could service the entire garrison," she concluded with a wicked laugh. The lady Fiona shut the door on Emma and locked it from outside.

Chapter 12

Emma sat for a long time on the bed in her cell, swathed in the sheet and a blanket, looking out of the narrow window to the open sea. As she sat she plaited her long, brown hair. She considered the choice she had to make.

If she were to stay at Danburgh she would live the life of a prisoner, denied the basic freedoms that every innocent person should expect. But if she remained, the welfare of her family and child would be secure. Could she be that selfless?

Emma's contemplation was interrupted by Harry's cry. She went over to his cot, lifted him out and sat down to feed him. Emma rocked the child as he fed and stroked his golden locks of hair.

If she left she would be reunited with her own son. But she would be letting down her grandfather and mother. And she would lose the attentions of Lord Robert.

Emma jumped as she heard the nursery door being unlocked from outside. The door opened. It was the woman-servant. "The lady Fiona requires you instantly," she said, without looking at Emma.

Emma could tell the good woman was embarrassed, not only by Emma's state of undress but also by the incarceration that had been imposed upon her. She too felt uneasy at being treated like a criminal. She needed more time. "I cannot come now – I must feed the baby. Please tell the lady she will have my answer when his lordship's child has been fed."

"Very well," the servant said and retreated.

Harry pulled away from Emma's breast, satisfied. She lifted him up and kissed his head. It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't heard the door being relocked.

Quickly, Emma laid the boy back in his cot, threw on her clothes and went to the door. She listened. She could hear no one outside.

Emma crept out of the door and checked that the coast was clear. As silently as possible, she tiptoed down the spiral staircase and descended to the courtyard, which she found to be covered in a white dusting of snow. Having been confined to the nursery, Emma had had no inkling that the weather had turned so severe. She wished she'd brought a blanket with her, to wrap about her shoulders, but if she were to turn back to fetch one now, it would perhaps be at the cost of her liberty.

A couple of soldiers stood talking by the gatehouse. Emma considered speaking to them but decided it was best just to pass through the open gates as though her departure was permitted.

The soldiers didn't question her. Emma walked across the courtyard, through the gate, across the drawbridge and out of the castle confines. As soon as she was clear of the soldiers she quickened her pace and as soon as she was certain they couldn't see her, she ran, through the cold snow that seeped through her shoes, to freedom.

Chapter 13

Wondering whether the nurse had reported to the lady Fiona, the serving woman returned to the nursery to check. She found the door ajar and pushed it open.

The serving woman was alarmed by what she beheld: Fiona stood over the child's cot and was holding down a cushion.

The serving woman darted forward. "What are you doing?" she demanded, her deference overwhelmed by her concern for the child.

The lady Fiona glared at her, with no suggestion of remorse; merely annoyance that she'd been discovered.

"Stop that. Stop it at once," the serving woman insisted but Fiona continued, staring at the woman as if possessed. "Guards, guards!" called the serving woman.

With all her strength, the old woman pulled Fiona away from the cot, flinging her to one side. As soon as the cushion was pulled away, the baby cried out. A soldier appeared in the doorway. "Where is Lord Robert?" the serving woman asked the guard. "I must take the child to Lord Robert this instant." She picked the crying baby from his cot and bustled out of the nursery with him in her arms.

Chapter 14

After an hour of walking, weary and perishing in the freezing weather, Emma's pace was slow. She'd reached the forest where Lord Robert had encountered her only a few weeks before – an eternity seemed to have passed since then. Here, further from the coast, the snow was thicker and the temperatures even lower. She could no longer feel her feet.

Emma recalled the wolves she'd heard in the night, from the confines of her castle cell. What would become of her if she collapsed out in the open, when those wild beasts were at large and hungry in the frozen landscape?

Once in the forest, however, Emma found that the canopy of leafless trees did, at least, provide some protection against the biting wind. She just needed to keep going. Her feet would recover in the warmth of her mother's hearth – she just needed to get home. She wrapped her arms about her chest for warmth – she just needed to keep her heart beating.

Continuing to trudge on towards the village, through the blanket of snow that rendered the woods eerily silent, Emma didn't know whether she'd made the right decision. When the chance of freedom had come, it had seemed impossible to overlook it and, despite her trust that Lord Robert would protect her, she couldn't ignore Fiona's threats of abuse.

All the same, the discomfort she'd begun to experience as soon as she'd left the warm confines of the castle nursery seemed to be a taste of what was in store for Emma. She felt trepidation at the reception she would get back at the farmstead, returning with no money, nor any satisfactory explanation as to why she'd been dismissed. She would be disgraced. But she longed to see little Oswald – to take her own baby in her arms once more.

Emma's silent contemplation was broken; she heard a horse galloping towards her from behind. She diverted from the footpath into the surrounding trees and summoned her strength to run through the snow to avoid detection.

The hooded rider had already seen her. He followed her footprints off the beaten track and, within moments, intercepted her path. The rider dismounted and approached Emma.

"I am but a poor woman. I have no money," Emma declared, frightened by the hooded man, who carried something hidden beneath his tunic – a weapon, Emma feared.

"That I know," said the man, removing his hood.

"Robert!" Emma cried.

Lord Robert pulled Emma close to him and kissed her cheek. "I knew those footprints to be yours."

Emma heard a cry from beneath Lord Robert's tunic. Lifting it, she discovered baby Harry concealed beneath, swaddled in bands to his father.

"What does this mean, my Lord?" Emma asked as the child gazed up at her.

"I prefer 'Robert,'" he replied with a smile. "I bring Harry to stay with you, Emma. It's not safe for him to remain at the castle until Fiona and her people have been removed."

Lord Robert related the events of the morning.

"I'm sorry I left Harry alone," Emma confessed.

"It's no matter," Lord Robert replied. "You are both safe from harm's way now," he said, stroking Emma's hair and kissing her head.

"But you, my Lord—" she stopped herself, "you are not safe in these woods; the rebels are everywhere."

"I wear a disguise," he maintained. "It is you who are unsafe Emma, with no cloak to keep you warm."

"We are not safe here," Emma insisted. "We must find a place of shelter."

Chapter 15

Emma and Lord Robert trekked out of the forest and onto a heath familiar to Emma. Here sheep grazed and Emma knew of a covered building used as a sheepfold in wintertime. The shelter was too exposed to be inhabited by rebels and Emma believed Lord Robert could be safely stowed there.

Once at the shelter (which they found to be free of livestock) they dismounted and Lord Robert led his horse inside with them to rest.

The shelter contained a haystack and Emma, tired from her journey, lay down in it. Lord Robert set Harry down and covered the slumbering child with his tunic. He then lay beside Emma.

Lord Robert's face was close to Emma's. She stroked his cold cheek with her forefinger as they stared intently into one another's eyes.

"I need you," said Robert. "I cannot do without you."

Emma placed her finger on Lord Robert's lips and shushed him.

Lord Robert placed his own cold fingers on Emma's lips. She kissed them.

"Emma, you cannot leave me," Lord Robert announced feverishly, stirring himself. "You denied me once. Would you deny me again?"

His look was so vulnerable that Emma found her only response was to pull him to her, allowing, at last, his lips to meet her own.

Lord Robert closed his eyes. Aware of their isolation, Emma allowed herself to express her pleasure in cries and moans and she found that, with this expression, Lord Robert's ardent passion only intensified. Inside their rough shelter, amid the bleak, wintry surroundings, Emma denied her lord, and her own desires, no more.

Chapter 16

As darkness fell, Lord Robert, Emma and baby Harry set off on horseback for Emma's home. Upon reaching the farm cottage, Emma saw the glow of lights within and felt a surge of impatience to see her son. She and Lord Robert had agreed to part before entering the house but as they stood saying goodbye, they were apprehended by Emma's mother. "Emma, my Emma, is that really you?" the older woman called out, distrusting her eyes in the darkness. She perceived the child in Emma's arms and the tall, dark man standing beside her daughter. She was about to enquire who he was but his stature and his noble mien stopped her in her tracks.

"I will go," Robert said to Emma. "But once my home is made safe I will return for Harry – and for you." He turned and bowed to the older woman and then could not resist but kiss Emma once more. "Farewell," he said before mounting his horse and cantering away.

"Whatever can this mean, Emma?" the older woman asked, bemused.

Chapter 17

Barely a month later, Emma walked slowly along the woodland path. Once again, the track was covered in snow but today Emma felt warm, her feet well shod and her heart beating fast in anticipation of her future. She looked up at the skeletal tree canopy arching way above her head. The snow-laden branches shimmered jewel-like in the winter sun. Emma felt as though she was walking down the aisle of nature's cathedral.

Emma was not alone. In her arms she carried a small child and inside her –she now knew for certain– she carried another.

"Where are we going, Mammy?" the child asked.

Emma beamed at him. It had been a blessing and –she believed– a sign, that speech had been gifted to the child only upon her return to the farmstead. "To our new home, Oswald," she said.

"Is it far?" he asked.

"Not so far," she assured him, kissing his brow.

Emma's pride dictated that she walked from the village to Danburgh Castle, to take residence with Lord Robert.

Since Emma had last set foot in the castle, much had changed. The Lady Fiona had been banished.

Upon hearing of the matter, and fearing that Lord Robert's power over the land would be weakened by the severance of his alliance with the Scottish thane, the King had suggested that Lord Robert marry a Norman noblewoman. Lord Robert, however, proposed a less obvious match. He shocked the King by declaring his preference for an English commoner.

When Emma arrived at Danburgh Castle she was greeted by the woman-servant, so familiar to her from earlier times. The woman was surprised by the manner of the new lady's transport. "You came on foot?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes," Emma replied.

"But, my lady, it is not safe–"

"I hope, good woman, that my union with Lord Robert will unite our people and I intend to show that I have trust in this belief by living without fear."

Leaving Oswald in the care of the woman, Emma made her way to the great hall of the castle to be greeted by her lord. She found him, sitting in a throne-like chair on a dais at the head of the long banqueting table. His elbow rested on the arm of the chair and his chin rested in his hand. He sat in his tunic and hose, with his legs apart. He watched Emma intently as she walked the length of the table to stand before him.

Emma could see, as she approached Lord Robert, proof of his pleasure in seeing her, outlined distinctly in his tight hose.

"Where are my boys?" Lord Robert called to her.

"The good woman has taken Oswald to meet his younger brother, Harry," she replied.

Lord Robert nodded approval. "Now, will you take your place beside me, Lady Emma, as my future wife and the mother of my sons?" he asked, gesturing with his hand to the empty seat.

"No, my lord," Emma replied calmly, shaking her head.

Lord Robert looked at her quizzically.

"There's somewhere I would rather sit," Emma explained, mounting the platform, hitching up her skirts and diving eagerly upon him.

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