

VALIANT HEARTS ◇ *Book Two*

# *Chivalrous*



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To my readers:

My prayer is that you will be strong and courageous. Follow the path God has laid before you, wherever that might lead. Be a doctor, a lawyer, a professional athlete, a wife, a mother, or even a president.

Chase after your dreams, and if a handsome knight in shining armor should happen to come alongside you, headed in the same direction, and you should happen to fall in love . . . then join together and become partners in your quest.

But please remember—you are complete, you are beautiful, and you are dearly loved by God just the way you are.



A woman of valour who can find? for her price is far above rubies. . . . Strength and dignity are her clothing; and she laugheth at the time to come.

Proverbs 31:10, 25 jps



## Prologue

*I am a knight.  
Strong like steel.  
Ready to conquer any foe.*

Energy surges through me, striving to burst out my skin. The moment is ripe. Above my horse's whipping white mane, I stare into the eyes of my opponent. Though at a distance, I know them well. Bright blue and shimmering with intelligence.

One must always understand one's opponent. Find a way inside said opponent's mind. This one will feint to the right before pressing dead center, but with a flicker of hesitancy just before the end. I shall seize that moment. And victory shall be mine.

Pointing my lance to the sky, I ready myself. In my mind's eye, I picture grandstands made of wood festooned with colorful coats of arms. I can almost see the pennants swaying in the breeze and hear the crowds roaring with anticipation. Just over there, a herald blasts a trumpet. Our names are called. The duke and duchess, arriving just in time, wave to the crowd and take their seats in the ornate chairs prepared for them.

## *Chivalrous*

But the picture fades. In truth, our only audience is the tree-lined hillside surrounding this flat patch of grass, the scatter of wild flowers alongside our battle course, and a craggy old mountain looming beyond. Diverting my focus for just a moment, I spy a red bird fluttering past and a squirrel chomping a nut nearby. They alone shall witness my triumph. But it shall be sweet nonetheless. And perhaps someday, against all odds—if dreams come true—I might joust in a real tournament.

I give heed to my opponent once again. With a nod, I lower my lance to the parallel position. The warrior across the field mirrors my every move.

*Now!*

I slam my heels into my horse's flank and thrust my weight forward with all my might. Locking fist, wrist, elbow, and shoulder into place, I steel my lance against my side. As the wind whips past, time grows oddly slow. From the corner of my eye, I note as the startled squirrel pivots and dashes toward a tree.

My opponent speeds closer one pounding hoofbeat at a time. Blue eyes squint within the slit of the helmet. A loose lock of black hair slaps against the silver armor. Almost there. As I assumed, the lance headed my way shifts subtly to the right. Before my opponent can straighten once again, I lean yet farther forward for the strike.

In an instant lasting an eternity, our weapons clash, tangle, and arc toward the sky. But only I am prepared, and I hold tight. My opponent's lance continues its heavenward flight, looping through the air. The armor-clad figure is thrown backward by the impact, fights for control, and then topples, flipping feet over head before crashing to the ground.

Our horses fly past each other, but only I remain seated with my weapon in hand. I whoop in victory. Waving my blunted

lance in triumph, I turn and bow toward the squirrel, who is now hidden in the branches above.

I long to linger and bask in the glory of the cheering crowd. To kneel before the duchess and receive my tribute. Alas, such favor shall not be afforded me this day. Those such as I are not permitted to fight in tournaments. Not even in this supposed Eden where we dwell. Here on the practice field, in secret alone, can I thrill to the excitement of the joust.

My attention turns to my opponent. The armored figure lies crumpled, facedown upon the well-trampled field. My stomach catches in my gut, for my intention had never been to injure. Only to defeat.

Trotting my horse back in that direction, I hop off. “Are you well? Rosalind, answer me, please.”

I kneel alongside my beloved servant. Dare I touch her? Might I injure her further?

A few pathetic moans emanate from the too-still figure.

Having little choice, I gently roll her over.

She jerks and spasms, coughing several times, and then flops down again with her arm at an odd angle. Through the slits in her helmet, I detect her tongue lolling from the side of her mouth.

My stomach clenches into a tight knot. “No,” I whisper, pressing my hands to my mouth as my heart speeds and my blood chills. I shall never forgive myself if she dies, all for my selfish entertainment.

“Ha, ha! I fooled you.” Rosalind bolts to sitting. She pulls off her helmet, revealing gleaming black hair escaping its braid, milky skin, and berry-tinged lips turned into a wicked smile.

I give her a shove as I attempt to breathe normally and untangle my stomach. “That is not funny! You scared the life right out of me.”

Rosalind frowns. “You deserved it, Lady Gwendolyn. Besides, ’twas not all an act. You did knock the wind from me. I told you this was a bad idea.”

“If I ever wish to improve, I need to test my jousting against a live opponent, not merely the practice quintain.” Removing my own helmet, I allow my long blond braid to fall free, and I breathe deep the fresh summertime air.

Rosalind pants as she speaks. “My old mum never thought I’d be in such danger when she sent me to serve a fine lady in a castle.”

“Oh, you love it.”

“‘Do the lady’s hair,’ she said. ‘Dress her in fine gowns,’ she said. ‘No job like it in the world.’ That’s what Mum promised when she sent me from home.”

Rosalind stands and brushes the dirt away, appearing twice her normal width in her thick padded vest covered with chain mail. “She got the last part right enough. Nowhere else on earth would a handmaiden be set to jousting in a field. I don’t mind a sword match now and again, and I admit to enjoying target practice with arrows and daggers. Even a woman must be ready to defend herself and her children when need arises. But I hate this heavy armor. ’Tis hot like Hades!”

“Hush you and take it off, then.”

“You like to joust because you know you’ll win.” Rosalind tugs at her hauberk.

I help Rosalind lift the weighty chain mail over her head, being careful not to catch her hair. “Hugh has been too busy helping the duke to tilt with me. A girl must keep her skills sharp.”

“Must she? And for what purpose, might I ask?” Rosalind’s blue gaze pierces straight into me. “Have you plans to go on campaign that you have not apprised me of? Perhaps to slay a dragon or a monster along the way?”



The young woman stands nearly my height and can look me in the eye, unlike most females. One of the many reasons I chose her, along with her brash personality and saucy wit. Her astounding beauty almost put me off at the first, but Rosalind has a way with hair and paints that might stand in my favor someday, so I overlook that inconvenience.

Besides, truly, how many maids could be convinced to joust?

Though she is, of course, right that my fighting skills hold little purpose, I do not concede. “I long to protect the weak and the innocent. To defend our just dukedom. Eleanor of Aquitaine led a crusade. One never knows when doors might open for a female warrior.”

“One might suppose that if they are not open in the fair and progressive dukedom of North Britannia, they will never open anywhere.” Rosalind unfastens the heavy, padded gambeson and removes it.

Her linen tunic clings to a figure far more slender than my own, revealing every curve and cranny until she shakes it loose. “Oh, bother with this heat. Jousting in midsummer. Who ever heard of such nonsense? Shall we try swimming in December next? I hear the water is delightful that time of year.”

Ignoring her off-subject tirade, I continue my argument. “One might rather say that if those doors might open anywhere, it would be here. I have met Duchess Adela on a few occasions, and she seems a feisty sort.” I cross my arms over my chest, hoping to appear fierce. “The Amazonian women were warriors. I tell you, it could happen.”

“You and your Amazons.” Rosalind huffs and shuffles to her horse, dragging her armor along the ground. “One legendary group of women in the entire history of the earth, and you must seize to the idea as normal.”

Naturally I am fascinated with the Amazons—women who

justify my height and sturdy build. Throughout childhood I played at Amazonian princess and, despite my brothers' teasing, took great pride in my imaginary role. "Let us not forget the prophetess Deborah."

Rosalind swings her armor atop her horse. "Of course we must never," she says with a heaping dose of sarcasm. "But even Deborah did not joust. Perhaps when you foretell the future, I shall hold out hope for your destiny as a knight, but until then, you must be realistic. How long can you avoid marriage?"

Panic rises within me like an icy mountain spring, threatening to take my breath away. "I shall never marry."

"Right then, good luck with that." Rosalind turns her full attention to me. "You never want to plan for the future. But one day soon it will be upon you. Then what shall you do?" she asks with all the wisdom and experience her two additional months upon the earth allot her.

I scowl her way and head back to Andromache, my giant, snow-white mare. I nuzzle the horse, taking comfort in her scent of hay and oats. Andromache never judges me. Never demands that I plan a future or take the practical course. She contents herself to live in the excitement of the moment with me.

At sixteen, I have managed to escape marriage longer than many noble women. With Father ever away and practically in denial about my existence, who is to say I cannot stretch it another three years, or even five? By then I will be past my prime, and perhaps between my advanced age and my ill-suited stature, no one will want me at all.

Perhaps one of my dear brothers, Hugh or Gerald, shall take me in. I could help him train for battle, guard his home when he is off to war, and be a favorite auntie to his children. All might yet be well.

I mount Andromache, and Rosalind pulls alongside upon

a gentler brown mare. “Lady Gwendolyn, do not be cross. I only speak the truth, and only because I care. You are a noblewoman, reared for marriage and breeding. You can’t outrun your fate, but perhaps if you are well prepared, you will find happiness within it.”

Pressing my heels into Andromache’s side, I flick the reins. I shall not argue further with Rosalind. The silly romantic girl does not understand what I know all too well.

There can be no joy in a noble marriage arranged for power and alliance. Only misery.

And so I will live in the moment and milk every bit of pleasure from life while yet I can.

# Chapter 1

## *England, Late Summer 1217*

Allen of Ellsworth dismounted and propped his lance against the rails. Victorious as usual these days, he offered a hand to his training opponent and helped his fellow squire from the dirt. The captain of the guard simply nodded his head, but Lord Linden entered the practice field, cheering as he came.

“Excellent job, my boy.” The earl, dressed in a regal mantle and cape, gave Allen a good thump on the shoulder despite his chain mail. Allen had come to adore the kindly man with his crinkling eyes and long waving hair that circled a shining bald spot on his head. “Come and walk with me for a while.”

Allen turned to the captain, who nodded once again with the same stoic expression upon his face.

“Sir Walter will see to your things, will you not?” Lord Linden gestured to Allen’s horse and weapons.

“If you say so, m’lord,” the captain answered, for he was ever drilling into his men that their equipment was their life, and they must take care of it at any cost.

How odd it must be to have your every whim granted as Lord Linden did. Since moving to Lindy almost a year ago, Allen still hadn't adjusted to being so closely associated with the local nobility. He pulled off his gloves and helmet, placing them in a stack upon the ground.

"Are you ready, then?" Though well into his middle years, Lord Linden grinned from ear to ear like a small boy. Something must be afoot.

"Yes. Where are we heading?"

"To the village. I have news to share with everyone."

"Excellent." Now that Allen lived with the soldiers in the garrison, he did not spend much time in the village. But he did miss the children of Ellsworth, otherwise known as the Ghosts of Farthingale Forest, his old band of outlaws, and he loved watching them work at creating their new home. Only Red trained with Allen to be a knight at Lord Linden's castle. The rest of the group served nearby as peasant farmers in the village of Lindy.

"I have received word that the king is sending Timothy home to us soon," the earl said.

"I'm sure you'll be happy to have him back." Allen mopped the sweat from his brow and pushed his light brown hair from his eyes.

He had no particular need to see Timothy again, but he would try to be happy for Lord Linden's sake. Not so long ago, Allen had lost his heart to the lovely Lady Merry Ellison. Although he knew she did not belong with a common fellow like him, their joint standing as outlaws struggling to survive in the realm of the evil King John had muddied the situation for a time. In the end she accepted the proposal of Timothy Grey, her childhood sweetheart who was both son and nephew to powerful noblemen.

The baron rubbed his hands together with excitement as they strolled side by side down the wooded lane. “We are all anxious for his return, and we hope a wedding shall soon take place.”

Everyone had expected the two noble lovebirds to marry quickly, but no sooner had their intentions been announced than Timothy was summoned to the court of the new young King Henry. It seemed, as a small child, Henry had admired Timothy, and as a newly appointed king at the age of ten, had desired his hero by his side.

“It makes sense that he shall return now that the peace accord has been signed. I’m certain Lady Merry shall be relieved,” Allen said.

“Merry, her aunt, and my wife have had the grandest time planning the nuptials and celebration. Once Timothy arrives, we shall set a date and invite all the nobles in the area for the long-awaited event.”

Allen looked away, hoping the man beside him never realized that he had tried to thwart Merry and Timothy’s romance. Though he had come a long way in letting go of his affection for Merry, the memory still stung, and he had no real desire to watch her and Timothy celebrating their marital bliss.

“A long-awaited wedding, indeed,” Allen said, trying to appear pleasant about the situation. “Four years in the making, one might say.”

“King John certainly did have a way of mucking up matters, did he not?”

“God rest his soul,” Allen mumbled, for he would wish the fires of hell upon no man, not even King John, who had murdered his family and would have seen their entire village dead if he’d had his way.

“You looked good on the jousting field.” The shorter man reached up to clasp Allen’s shoulder.

“Thank you. I try my best. God has gifted me with height and strength, and you have gifted me beyond my wildest dreams with training. I only hope to someday live up to those gifts and serve my country well.”

Though Allen had been raised a peasant, after the Ghosts’ two-year ordeal in the forest, Lord Linden had given sanctuary to the young survivors of Ellsworth. Allen had grown several inches in the past year and broadened considerably. At eighteen, he towered over most of the soldiers in the garrison.

Lord Linden nodded thoughtfully. “That someday might come sooner than you think. Sir Walter says you are ready to move from squire to knight. I look forward to conferring the honor upon you, although I assume there is another to which you hope to pledge your fealty.”

Allen had not deemed himself ready to head off into the world, but if Sir Walter thought him worthy to be a knight, perhaps he should go now, before Timothy returned and the winter weather arrived. “I still long to head to North Britannia, m’lord. You of all people know that I’ve felt oddly drawn there ever since I learned about it. Do you truly believe there might be a place there for one such as me?”

“Now that the political situation has stabilized, North Britannia has opened its borders, and as we assumed, it has continued in its quest to become a just and righteous dukedom after the tradition of Arthur’s Camelot. They say that any man of valor and pure heart might find his place there.”

“As much as things have improved in England as a whole, I still wish to be a part of such a quest. I cannot help but believe that God himself has placed such a strong desire in my heart.” Anticipation rushed over Allen.

“I shall send you with a letter of introduction and give you my highest recommendation.”

“You are too kind, m’lord, but I would not wish to inconvenience you.”

“Tis no bother. I am proud of you, my boy.” Lord Linden led the way around a turn in the path.

The previously abandoned village, which had been a tangle of weeds, bushes, and decrepit huts a year earlier, now appeared neat, tidy, and bustling with life. At a distance he spotted Lady Merry, dressed in a lilac kirtle rather than the boy’s clothes she had worn to lead their forest raids. She sat on the steps of the manor home singing to little Wren, who cuddled upon her lap. Merry’s waving brown hair had grown from its previous short cut and now tossed in the breeze, accenting her striking features.

“Please do not tell them I plan to leave,” Allen said. “I would like to speak to Lady Merry first.”

“I am certain your former mistress will support your decision.” Lord Linden seemed not to understand how close they had all become in the forest, nor how class divisions had melted away. And he most certainly did not know that Allen, born of the lowest class, had once kissed the noble Lady Merry on a tree branch.

Allen’s cheeks warmed at the thought, but he hoped that any ruddiness would blend with the flush of the day’s earlier battle. “Yes, but I feel I should tell her before we make the news public.”

“You shall stay for the wedding, of course,” Lord Linden said.

“I think not. I had best start out as soon as possible. It will take me several weeks to get there, and I should be well on my way before any early snows might block the mountain passages.”

“You have ample time, but I understand your eagerness. I had thought to save it as part of the wedding celebration, but I shall arrange for your knighthood ceremony a few days hence. An exciting adventure awaits you!”

“Thank you.” Allen hoped that Lord Linden was correct, for he was about to leave everything and everyone he held dear far behind.





“You shall never win at that pace!” Gwendolyn shouted over her shoulder as she raced Andromache through a rainbow field of wild flowers.

Rosalind’s faint, “I’m trying,” was muffled against the rush of wind.

Gwen thrilled at the exhilarating moment of freedom as she clutched her horse’s mane, leaning forward over her graceful white neck. Hovering weightless with each powerful stride, she felt as if she could fly.

Together they dashed down a rolling hillside and crashed through a trickling stream. Droplets of frigid mountain water splashed against the bare skin of her forearm and speckled her tunic. They raced across her hidden jousting field, through a patch of trees, and up a rocky incline before pulling to a stop next to a small wooden building.

Gwen had already removed her hilt and sword by the time Rosalind joined her, though she left a small jeweled dagger in her boot.

“Not fair,” declared Rosalind. “Should I not get some sort of head start? You’ve been riding all your life.”

“Now, where would be the fun in that? You must challenge yourself if you wish to be a warrior worth your armor.”

“Who said I wished for that? I’d be happy braiding flowers into your golden hair and fussing over your silken gowns.”

Although Gwen had managed to woo Rosalind to her warrior ways, the young woman had not adjusted entirely. Rosalind might have spent a boisterous childhood dancing through fields, climbing trees, and tussling with village lads in the dirt, but weapons of steel and giant horses still tested her limits.

“But admit it.” Gwen grinned impishly. “This is so much better.”

Rosalind giggled. “I suppose so. I never dreamt of such excitement. If I ever need to look for employment again, I shall have an exhaustive list of skills to my name.”

“You see. You might guard a threatened princess.”

“Or escort a noblewoman on pilgrimage.”

Gwen gathered her armor. “Come, time to head home.”

They hung their swords inside the dim little structure next to lances, shields, chain mail, and even a battle ax. Her brothers had helped her build this hidden structure years ago. Though her mother cared little what Gwen did, if word ever reached her father that she trained at the warrior arts, she dared not imagine the consequences.

One of the few times he had deigned to visit home, he had thrashed her bottom merely for riding on horseback. According to Father, true ladies rode in traveling wagons, or better yet, were carried in litters, or best still, did not leave home at all.

Once their weapons were safely stowed, Gwen brushed her mantle of rich burgundy down over her tunic and turned to Rosalind. “How do I look? Ready for inspection?”

Rosalind pulled a twig from Gwen’s braid and tucked some flyaway strands behind her ear. “That will have to suffice until I can redo your hair for supper. If one does not peer too closely, you might almost pass for a lady.”

“Funny.” Both of them wore thick men’s leggings and leather boots beneath their women’s apparel with slits up the sides for freedom of movement.

They gathered their horses and led them at a walk down the trail, for they did not wish to startle the villagers by thundering through. Gwen picked a green leaf from a bush jutting into the pathway and crunched it between her fingers for the feel of its lush snap. A rich, herbal fragrance wafted to her nose, and she drank deep the smell of the countryside she loved. She gazed

into the azure sky, which rippled with white clouds like waves in the sea.

As they reached the village and passed through the huts with their mud-daubed walls and pale thatched roofs, Gwen waved to her father's serfs. These people had been more a family to her over the years than most of those who dwelt in the cold stone castle, always busy with their own affairs. She surveyed this world of browns and tans, so subdued after her afternoon in the bright field yet brimming with vitality.

A young girl named Maggie, wearing naught but a plain tunic with tatters about the hem, dashed across the muddy lane and threw her scrawny arms around Gwen's waist.

Unable to resist the wave of warmth that filled her, she scooped the girl off the ground, feeling her bones beneath coarse fabric. "Maggie, have you been eating your porridge?"

Hugging Gwen tight, the girl wrapped her legs around Gwen's waist and caught her grimy, bare feet together behind her back. "I don't like it so much as I like them apples you bring me."

How Gwen wished she could offer Maggie—not to mention the other village children—trenchers of bread filled with hearty meat stew. But her eldest brother, Reginald, who ruled in her father's absence, would never tolerate such generosity to their serfs. "Well, I have a surprise you might like."

With Maggie dangling from her, Gwen dug through the sack on Andromache's side. Pulling out not one, but three bright red apples, she held them before the wide-eyed little girl. "Now you must promise to share these with your brother and sister."

"Of course, miss." Maggie dropped back to the dirt and jumped about.

"One should call her Lady—" Rosalind began, but Gwen cut her off with a wave of her hand.

She had no need for ceremony with these villagers. Handing

the treats to her small friend, she hustled Maggie to her hut. Then Gwen and Rosalind continued toward the austere stone tower, which she was obliged to call home.

If only Reginald would tend their serfs in the manner recommended by Duke Justus, she should not have to fill her sack with apples. His dukedom, North Britannia, had grown near legendary for its adherence to the law and Christian charity. Chivalry and kindness ruled the day. The very reasons Gwen wished she could fight to protect the dukedom alongside her brothers.

But her eldest brother, Reginald, walked a fine line. While he had little choice but to treat their serfs with a modicum of fairness, being so close to the grand castle of the duke, he also had to please their father, who expected him to rule by the old values.

The only Christian principle her father seemed to stand by was divine order—nobility over peasants, men over the spawn of Eve. Forget the Ten Commandments. Forget the gentler instructions of Jesus’s sermon on the mountain, which their duke held so dear. An eye for an eye would suffice for her father. Being sent such conflicting messages from a young age, Gwen had chosen to ignore religion, trusting instead her own inner sense of right and wrong. She could not help but think religion mostly a man-made system for proving one’s own preferences correct.

Hoofbeats drew her attention as a horseman in full armor raced in their direction. When the rider drew near, her brother Hugh’s jovial features and riot of golden curls came into view.

He pulled his destrier up hard beside them and hopped lithely to the dirt road, tossing up a cloud of dust with the impact.

“Gwennie! My most darling and beloved sister on the entire earth.” He caught her head under his arm and tousled her hair in a boisterous display of affection, as he had since childhood.

“Your only sister on the entire earth.” She shoved him away with a chuckle. After handing off Andromache’s reins to Rosalind, Gwen gestured to Hugh’s formal attire. “What is this? And why the dramatic greeting?”

Rosalind cut between them and curtsied. “Afternoon, Sir Hugh. How can we be of service?” Her flirtatious tone revealed far more about the nature of her relationship with Hugh than Gwen wished to acknowledge.

Hugh, always carefree and charming, raked Rosalind’s form with his gaze. “Ah, my fair maid Rosalind, I fear there is little you can do for me today but bid me a fond farewell.”

“Are you leaving?” The words burst from Gwen in an unexpected shout as her heart sank to her boots. Her brother Gerald was still supporting the king’s army in Lincoln where they had defeated the rebels. Must she lose Hugh as well?

“Yes, I am to escort the new king, Henry, on a tour of his recently reacquired northern realms. Father believes my jovial nature might be an asset with the young sovereign. Perhaps I shall pull a gold coin from his royal ear.”

Gwen swatted her irreverent brother. “I am just glad England is no longer under the rule of that awful King John.”

“As are we all, but that is not why I came,” Hugh said. “I must warn you that Father has at long last returned. You best rush back home and into your finest gown.”

Gwen’s stomach plummeted to meet her heart in her boots, and there proceeded to churn mercilessly as she struggled to catch her breath. Father? Home? Why after all these years? Was there no war to be found anywhere? She gathered her courage to ask the only question that might bring some respite. The words emerged in a breathy whisper. “For how long?”