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The Love Knot

Elizabeth Chadwick

CHAPTER 1

FOREST OF DEAN,

GLOUCESTERSHIRE,

SUMMER 1140

Oliver Pascal drew on Hero's rein and sniffed. 'Smoke,' he said.

Gawin de Brionne, his companion in arms, halted his own mount and inhaled deeply. 'There's only the hunting lodge at Penfoss nearby. Aimery de Sens holds it for Earl Robert.'

Oliver grunted and shifted his position to ease his aching buttocks. New saddles were always hell, and this one was scarcely a week old, purchased from a craftsman in Bristol. It would take at least a month to mould it into a comfortable shape. What Oliver wanted to do was cross the Severn at the ferry and ride on to the Earl's keep at Bristol where he was assured of a hot meal and a safe place to sleep. With civil war raging through town and shire as King Stephen and his cousin Mathilda fought tooth and nail over England's throne, opportunities to sleep sound were rare.

A man more inured to the depredations of this particular war might have ridden on, but Oliver was still tender to the game of raid and counter-raid, of pillage and slaughter which was becoming so commonplace that men's morals and sensibilities were bludgeoned from existence. For most of the conflict, he had been absent on pilgrimage, dragging a burden of prayers for his dead wife's soul over the stony ground to Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre. It was only in the last six months that he had returned to a burning, bleeding land, and discovered that, like so many others, he was now a landless man.

Gawin, five years younger at one-and-twenty but a world more experienced, slackened the reins and made to turn away. 'Like as not it's a charcoal burner.'

'You believe that?'

Gawin shrugged. 'There is nothing we can do. It isn't wise to become embroiled.'

Oliver shook his head. 'Perhaps not, but we cannot just ride on.'

The younger knight sighed, his blue eyes weary within the shadows of his helm. 'Your conscience is a millstone around your neck.'

Oliver compressed his lips. Unlike most of his contemporaries he was clean-shaven, for in contrast to his flaxen hair, his beard, when permitted to grow, was a blazing fire-red that made him feel like a freak. 'You leave my conscience to drag me where it will and search your own,' he said coldly, and swung Hero towards the smell of burning.

Gawin hesitated for a moment and then, with a roll of his eyes, spurred after his companion.

Within half a mile the wafts of smoke were stronger, removing the hope that the source was a domestic, controlled fire, and they thickened significantly as the men struck the main track to Penfoss. The horses grew restive and difficult to handle, forcing the two knights to dismount and continue on foot.

Penfoss was enclosed by a stockade of sharpened oak stakes cut from the surrounding forest, with entrance gates of the same, lashed together with hemp ropes. These now hung askew, and beyond them the thatch of the lodge and outbuildings was obliterated by licks of flame and churning black smoke.

Cautiously, swords drawn, Oliver and Gawin abandoned the cover of the trees and approached the stockade. A man's body sprawled across the gateway. There was a gaping wound in his throat and he had been stripped of every garment but the loincloth that he had stained in his death throes. A large black hound lay nearby, its breast split open.

Gawin grimaced and looked around nervously. 'Best leave. There's nothing we can do here, and whoever did this must still be close.'

Ignoring him, Oliver entered the compound. Smuts of soot soared on a fire-wind and gusts of heat belched at him. Bodies were strewn haphazardly across the courtyard, butchered in flight to judge from the number of wounds to the back. The armed and the unarmed; men, women and children. Fluid filled Oliver's mouth and he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. It was either that or hurl the weapon as far from himself as he could. 'Not in three years of wandering amongst the wildest places on God's earth have I ever seen such as this,' he said hoarsely.

'Better grow accustomed then.' There was a quiver in Gawin's voice that gave the lie to the callous words and his free hand groped for the cross around his neck.

Oliver moved on. A shining mass of golden hair drew him to the body of a woman. She lay on her back, her legs flung wide. Her eyes were open, staring blindly; her cheekbone was swollen and her lip was puffed and split, but she was still breathing.

'God's mercy!' Oliver fell to his knees at her side. 'Amice, Amice, can you hear me?'

'You know her?' Gawin's voice was appalled.

'From a long time ago,' Oliver said without looking round. 'She was one of Earl Robert's wards at the same time as my wife. If circumstances had been different, I might have married her instead of Emma. Jesu's pity, I do not believe this!' He closed her legs and pulled her gown back down over her stained, bloody thighs.

The woman turned her head and focused on Oliver, but there was no recognition in the dark sapphire eyes.

Gawin tugged at the close-cropped beard edging his jaw. 'How badly is she hurt?'

'I don't know. Knocked down and raped as far as I can tell. We can't leave her here. Go and fetch the horses.'

Her vacant stare was unnerving. Oliver well remembered their first meeting for it was inextricably bound up in his memories of Emma. It had been the spring of 1129 in Earl Robert's garden when he had encountered the girls – two giggling cousins of fourteen and fifteen – playing with a ball. Amice, the older, had a sheaf of golden hair, ripe curves, and a way of looking through her lashes that turned a man's blood to steam. Emma, his future wife, was tiny and fey with a smile that lit up her little pointed face and made it quite beautiful. He had been fifteen too, a gangly youth in no hurry for the marriage that his family was foisting upon him, but Emma had changed all that. Now she was in her grave with the still-born daughter whose three-day bearing had been her death.

The year of their wedding, Amice had become one of old King Henry's concubines and had borne him a lusty son. It was the last Oliver had seen of her, if not heard, until now.

'Go on, Gawin, damn you, stop gawping and bring the horses!' he repeated on a ragged snarl.

When Gawin still did not move, Oliver raised his head and looked round, his lungs filling with a bellow. Then he too saw the young woman standing against the well-housing, a wooden bowl in her hands. Her gown was of tawny-gold wool, worn over an underdress of contrasting green-blue linen. Both the cut and the colours of the garments proclaimed her noble status. Two heavy braids of raven-black hair hung for a full twelve inches below the end of her wimple. She had been creeping backwards but, realising that she had been seen, turned to flee.

'Wait!' Oliver cried. 'We mean you no harm!'

Gawin started after her, but had run no more than a dozen yards when a familiar whirring sound cut the air and he was stopped in mid-stride by an arrow, which punched a hole through his mail and lodged in his collar-bone.

Oliver shot to his feet and stared wildly around, his hand flashing to his sword hilt.

'Throw down your blade!'

The voice was so cold that it should have belonged to a hardened warrior. Instead, Oliver found himself confronted by a lanky boy of no more than nine or ten years old. The bow in the child's hand was drawn taut and the arrow was aimed straight at Oliver's breast.

'We're not raiders, we want to help.' Slowly, Oliver lowered his sword. His heart was thundering in his ears, reminding him how swiftly it could be stopped. To one side Gawin was clutching at the shaft protruding from his mail and swearing.

The boy's face was ashen. 'Get away from her,' he spat. 'Get away from my mother!'

'Your mother?' Oliver dared not take his eyes from the lad to look at Amice. This then must be the son she had borne to King Henry. 'I know Lady Amice, lad, she's an old friend.' He made a calming gesture. 'I'll take you both to safety, I swear.'

The boy's arm trembled. In a moment he was going to release that arrow, and in all likelihood this time he would kill. Oliver took his chance and charged, weaving from side to side as he ran. The arrow shot from the bow and whined past his ear like a hornet. The next shaft was already nocked as Oliver struck. Man and boy rolled over in the dust and Oliver discovered that he was wrestling with an adversary as slippery as a Severn eel. A sharp elbow jabbed his ribs, drawing a grunt of pain; a fist flailed in his face and connected with his eye socket. The fingers uncurled and gouged. Oliver ceased being gentle, hit the lad with his fist, forced him down and sat on him.

'God's teeth!' he panted. 'The only safety you need is a cage!'

The boy lay rigid beneath him. Gingerly Oliver relaxed his grip, but remained alert to tighten it again if needful. 'I spoke the truth,' he said in a breathless but less fraught tone. 'I do know your mother and I can help.'

The stiffness remained a moment longer, then the battle-light left the boy's eyes which filled with the glitter of unshed tears. A lump was swelling on his temple where Oliver had cuffed him.

'I was out hunting squirrels with my bow,' he said jerkily, 'and I saw the knights in the forest riding away from here with bloody swords. I ran home and I found ... I found ...' His throat worked and the words strangled.

‘All right, all right, go gently, lad.’ With a feeling of guilt for his own violence, Oliver rose off the boy. Small wonder that the child had reacted as he had. Great wonder that he was not reduced to a cowering huddle.

Gawin came up to them, the boy’s arrow now in his hand.

‘Are you hurt?’ Oliver looked from the flight to Gawin’s white face.

‘Stung more than anything, thanks to decent mail,’ Gawin said with a grimace. ‘It’s not a full-grown man’s barb or I’d be dead, but it’s still made a nasty nick. The repair to my hauberk will cost the best part of half a mark.’ He pressed the upper edge of his quilted gambeson against the wound to stanch it and gave the boy a jaundiced look. ‘I told you we should have ridden on.’

‘Put your morals before your mouth for once,’ Oliver snapped. He jerked his head at the blond woman lying in the dust, alive but lifeless. ‘That’s his mother. Look around you. What would you have done in his place?’

Before Gawin could respond, the boy leaped to his feet and sprinted across the compound towards the other, younger woman who had stopped in mid-flight when he attacked the knights. ‘Catrin,’ he sobbed and she swept her arms around him and hugged him desperately, burying her cheek in his hair.

Gawin looked puzzled. ‘I thought you said yonder was his mother.’

‘She is.’ Thoughtfully Oliver returned to Amice and, removing his cloak, laid it gently over her. Her eyes were now clear, and this time they widened in recognition.

‘You missed the festivities, Oliver,’ she whispered with a bitter half-smile.

‘I missed them more than ten years ago, Amice. Look, we have horses; we’ll take you to tending and shelter.’

The sinews tightened in her throat and she folded her knees towards her belly and clutched with rigid hands. ‘It is too late for that!’ she gasped.

The other woman hastened over, the boy in pursuit. ‘I knew this would happen,’ she said grimly as she flung herself down beside Amice. ‘It’s been threatening for days now, and after what they did to her ...’

‘Knew what would happen?’ Oliver demanded.

‘She’s with child, but not carrying well. For the last month she’s been spotting blood. That’s the father over by the gate, Aimery de Sens. They slaughtered him like a Martinmas hog and raped her as he died – one after the other, turn upon turn. Richard, go and bring me some water.’ She gave the boy the wooden bowl and spared Oliver a look from clear, amber-green eyes. ‘I thought you were scavengers come to pick over the bones.’

Oliver watched the boy trot away to the well and shook his head. 'We were on our way to the Severn ferry when the smoke guided us to you from the main track.' He looked at her curiously, for her French accent bore a lilting inflection. The boy had called her Catrin, which he thought might be Welsh. 'How came you to escape this carnage?' He gestured around.

'I was in the woods gathering oak bark for dyeing, but close enough to hear the commotion – and see what the whoresons did.' She leaned over Amice. 'What quarrel did we have with anyone?'

'We have to get her to safety.' Oliver's gut was queasy. He would rather face the entire hoards of hell single-handed than deal with a woman in childbirth. It was worrying too that a band of raiders should be abroad in the heart of Gloucester's territory.

'No. If she is moved, she will bleed to death. I have only a little knowledge, but that much is certain.' She sat back on her heels and regarded him sombrely. 'Her only chance is to remain completely still.'

'Is there no midwife nearby?'

'Dead,' she said with a grim gesture at the bodies strewing the compound. 'And the nearest settlement is more than ten miles away.'

He swore beneath his breath. Jesu, Gawin was right. They should have tarnished their consciences and left well alone.

Walking carefully so as not to spill a drop, the boy returned with the bowl of water. Catrin took it from him and gently raised Amice enough to drink.

'I'll go and make camp,' Oliver said abruptly. He felt as helpless as a straw cast upon the surface of a raging flood. 'Come, lad, you can help me.'

The boy hesitated, but at Catrin's nod and his mother's forced smile followed Oliver.

It was a little beyond full dark when Amice's child came still-born into the world, drenched in its mother's blood which continued to trickle and seep despite all Catrin's efforts. The afterbirth that followed the baby was torn, and Catrin knew that when such a thing happened the mother either bled to death or died within a few days of a suppurating fever.

Sitting at Amice's side, her hands red to the wrists, Catrin uttered a small sound of frustration. The fair-haired knight had given them his own portable shelter for the night and had built an open fire before it. Then he had made another camp across the compound for himself, his companion and Richard, giving the women a modicum of privacy. For much of the time Catrin had been aware of his presence in the corner of

her vision as he moved among the dead, straightening and composing, murmuring prayers. Between the labour pangs, Amice had told her his name and a little about him. What she had said had made Catrin even more aware of his quiet, deliberate movements.

'It is no use, Catrin,' Amice said in a reed-thin voice. 'There comes a time when death will not be cheated.'

'My lady, I ...'

'Be quiet, there is no time to argue.' Amice licked her parched lips and Catrin helped her to sip from the bowl of water. 'Bring me Oliver Pascal. I need to speak with him - hurry.'

Catrin rinsed her hands and, drying them on her gown as she walked, approached the men's fire. Richard was staring into the flames, his hands wrapped around his upraised knees. He raised his eyes to her face, then slid his gaze over her bloodied clothes. Catrin wanted to cry. Instead, her voice wooden with control, she delivered Amice's summons to Oliver.

'How is she?' The knight rose swiftly to his feet, his expression full of question and anxiety.

Catrin compressed her lips and shook her head. 'There is nothing that anyone but God can do. She has lost the baby and there is too much blood.'

He flinched, but Catrin was too busy containing her own emotions to notice. Sinking to her knees beside Richard, she drew him into her embrace.

Oliver crossed the compound. Behind him, a pattern of glowing embers marked the place where half a day since buildings had stood. From what the child had told him, Oliver understood that Aimery de Sens was a man of few ambitions beyond the bedchamber and even fewer personal enemies. Penfoss had simply fallen foul of a random raid. It was destruction for destruction's sake, and someone had derived warped pleasure from the deed. Oliver shivered at the thought and wondered how men managed to live with themselves.

Reaching the shelter, he stooped inside and crouched beside Amice. His dark cloak covered her from throat to feet, making her resemble a corpse on a bier. Her skin was waxen, her eye sockets the dark hollows of a skull. To one side there was a pile of bloodied rags made from a torn-up undershirt.

For a moment his inner eye exchanged these cramped surroundings for the well-appointed bedchamber of his brother's keep at Ashbury, the fire built high, the huge walnut-wood bed dwarfing Emma's pale, still form. Her cold hands were wrapped around the cross that the priest had given her to hold in her dying moments and had it not been for the drained complexion, the bluish tinge in socket and cheekbone, she might have been asleep. Five years had passed, but the memory was still unbearable.

'Amice?' Kneeling, he held her hand.

Turning her head, she forced her lids apart. Her fingers twitched and Oliver felt the cold strike through his own warm flesh.

'You know that Richard is the old King's son,' she said in a thready whisper.

'Yes, of course I do.' And what a scandal it had been at the time. A girl of sixteen and a man old enough to be her grandfather. People said that the troubles in England now were God's payback for Henry's fifty years of lechery.

'It has been so long. I do not know the roads you travel these days, but I ask ...' she swallowed. 'I ask you to take Richard to his kin at Bristol.'

'I serve his uncle, Earl Robert, and I'm bound there of my own accord. You need not worry about the lad. I'll deliver him safe.'

She gave him the ghost of a smile. 'I know you will. You were always steadfast, whatever the temptation.'

He winced. She did not know how close he had come to yielding to that temptation.

'Emma saw it in you. I was jealous of her.'

He cleared his throat and looked away; he did not want to think about Emma. 'It is in the past.'

'It is as fresh as yesterday,' she contradicted.

Oliver fought the urge to leap to his feet and stalk away. What she said was true. Despite the passage of time, some memories remained as sharp as glass. If Amice had been jealous of Emma, how much more had he envied Amice her life and her healthy child. Both might have been his had he chosen differently. Now, in place of envy there was weariness and the all-too-familiar sensation of guilt.

'There is one more boon I must ask of you while I yet have breath,' Amice whispered.

Oliver clenched his jaw to withhold the snarl gathering within him. When he spoke, it was with great gentleness, his hand smoothing hers. 'Name it, and it is yours.'

'Find a place at Bristol for Catrin too. She is a widow without family and she has been a loyal companion to me.'

'As you wish.'

'Nothing is as I wish.' Amice smiled bitterly. 'Yesterday was better.' She closed her eyes. 'In the garden, Emma and I ...'

Oliver set his hand against her throat. The pulse still beat there, but erratically. Her breath stirred the guard hairs on the wolfskin border of his cloak; then it didn't and her mouth fell open. Oliver released her hand and gently crossed it with the other one upon her breast. In the garden. Was that a reference to the past or where she was now?

Taking his cloak, he returned slowly to the fire where the living were gathered.

Catrin rose from her place beside the boy and hurried to meet him. Her eyes went from his face to the cloak draped over his arm and he saw the small shudder run through her body.

'I will tell the lad,' he said quietly. 'Go and prepare her so that he can look at her if he wants.'

Her gaze filled with hostility. 'It is not right. You are a complete stranger to him.'

'Sometimes it is better that way. You will still be here to give him comfort, won't you?' He nodded towards the small shelter. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be!' she snapped. 'You know nothing about us!' Her face started to crumple and she pushed blindly past him.

Oliver frowned and smoothed the fur on his cloak. Perhaps his regret was for not knowing until it was too late. After a brief hesitation he went to the fire and took Catrin's place beside the boy.

'You don't need to tell me,' Richard forestalled him. 'I know she's dead.'

'Weep if you want.' Oliver extended his hands to the flames, drawing life and warmth back into his body. Across the fire, Gawin poked the burning wood, sending flickers of yellow heat into the night sky.

'I don't feel like weeping,' Richard said stiffly.

'It will come.' Oliver took the flask of ginevra that Gawin stretched out to him, gulped a burning mouthful and passed it on to the boy. 'Sooner or later everyone has to weep.'

Richard took the flask, drank, then choked on the fiery brew; but when he had ceased coughing, he put the flask to his lips and took a second, longer swallow. 'She is better dead.'

Which was not the kind of remark for a ten-year-old to make about his newly deceased mother.

'Why do you say that?' Oliver retrieved his flask before the boy could avail himself again.

Richard shrugged. 'She always had to ruin what she had,' he said moodily.

When nothing else was forthcoming, Oliver broke the silence by murmuring, 'I knew her before you were born, when Earl Robert was her guardian.'

'Did you lie with her like all the others?'

Oliver's palm flew, but he stopped it just short of the boy's ear. Richard did not flinch, his stare blank and dark with misery. 'Christ, boy, what sort of question is that?' Lowering his hand, Oliver wrapped it around his belt and drew a steadying breath. 'No, I did not lie with her,' he said evenly. After all, it was the truth, no matter how easily he could have joined the ranks of 'all the others'. 'She was my wife's cousin and childhood companion. Last time I saw her was at your father's court when you were a tiny baby.'

'We didn't stay there long,' the child said in a savage voice. 'Did you know that she wasn't married to Aimery de Sens? He's just my most recent "papa", but of course he's dead now too.'

Oliver's fingers tightened around his belt. He made a conscious effort to relax them. The boy's pain was a raw, open wound, hence the provocative tone, but what he said was probably true. Amice's nature had been inconstant and wanton as he had cause to know. Had she been male, she would have been granted a modicum of leeway, but as a woman she was damned as a whore. It was unfortunate if the boy had been a witness to the darker machinations of adult behaviour. 'No, I didn't know,' he said, 'but it makes no difference to me. She was a friend, and she was kin by marriage.'

Richard frowned and toyed with the frayed end of one of his leg bindings. 'What will happen to me now?'

'As to that, I do not know. I told your mother that I would take you to your half-brother, Earl Robert, at Bristol. You will be cared for, I promise.'

'Promises are easy.' The boy's tone was far too adult for his years.

Oliver sighed and rubbed his hand over his jaw where the prick of red stubble was beginning to replace the morning's smoothness. 'Not to me,' he answered, 'and not of this moment. I swore to your mother that I would see you safe, and do so I will. Catrin too.'

'What if I don't want to go?'

'Since I promised your mother, I suppose I would have to tie you to my saddle.'

The boy threw him a look to see if he really meant it. Knowing that he was being tested, Oliver returned the look for long enough to impose his will, then rose to his feet. 'Do you want to see her?'

Richard silently shook his head.

Oliver rubbed his jaw again in thought, then turned and stooped. 'Here,' he said gruffly, 'roll yourself in my blanket and try to sleep. It will be a long journey on the morrow.'

When Richard did not move, Oliver draped the blanket around the boy's shoulders himself and then went to check on the horses before walking a circuit of the burned-out settlement.

Kneeling beside her former mistress, all signs of the bloody struggle cleared away, Catrin sniffed and knuckled her eyes. She had been fond of Amice, who had taken her in, a soldier's widow with nothing more than two silver pennies and a roan mule to her name. For almost three years Catrin had sheltered beneath Amice's generous, mercurial wing, turning a blind eye when a blind eye was required, being a companion and confidante, sometimes a scapegoat, but always needed – if not by Amice, then by Richard. What would happen to her and the boy now she did not know; she could only hope that Robert of Gloucester would have the compassion to take them in, penniless dependants as they were.

A shadow passed between Catrin and the fire. She glanced up in alarm, then breathed out in relief as she saw it was the knight, Oliver Pascal.

'I didn't mean to frighten you,' he said, and crouched at her side, adding when she did not speak, 'I'll keep vigil now while you go and rest. I'm taking you and the lad with me to Bristol on the morrow and it will be a long ride.'

Catrin eyed him warily. 'I suppose Amice asked you.'

'She did, but I'm bound there anyway. I serve the Earl and I've to report to him.' He looked at her curiously before leaning over to replenish the fire. 'Amice said you are a widow without kin, but surely you must have had a home once?'

Catrin watched him select and arrange the split logs. In all the earlier conflagration it was ironic that the wood pile had not been touched. 'Chepstow, I suppose, since I was born there, but there is no one left in that place to welcome my return,' she said with a shrug. 'My mother was Welsh, my father a serjeant of the Chepstow garrison, but they are both dead. My husband was also a soldier there.' She compressed her lips, her mind filling with a vision of Lewis's thin, dark features and blazing smile. 'And he too is dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

The predictable response. She had heard it from so many lips by now that it was irritating and meaningless, a stepping stone to buffer the discomfort of others. 'Amice came to Chepstow a six-month after my husband's death,' she said, eager to have done with her story. 'When she left, I begged to go with her rather than dwell alone with my memories.'

He positioned the last piece of wood and dusting off his hands, rested them on his thighs. 'I too am a soldier, one of Robert of Gloucester's hearth knights,' he said after a while, 'although not by choice. My family lands lie close to Malmesbury and my older brother lost them, together with his life, when he declared for the Empress Mathilda. I'm his heir - his dispossessed heir.'

'I'm sorry,' she said in the same polite tone he had used to her, paying him back in the same coin. Then felt honour-bound to add, 'And I'm sorry about your wife. Amice told me about her.'

He gave her a long, level look. 'Sorry doesn't help, does it?'

Catrin blinked and turned away. Mary Mother, she was not going to weep in front of this man. 'I must go to Richard,' she said and started to rise.

Oliver grimaced. 'Be warned then; he was angry - with her, not me - and because of the anger, the grief is trapped within him. He asked me if I had lain with his mother like "all the others".' He glanced grimly at the dead woman's shrouded figure, the red shadows licking the hem of her gown. 'How many "others" were there?'

'Because it matters to you or to him?'

She saw the twitch of his brows, the knotting of muscle in his jaw. 'Obviously it matters to him,' he said stiffly. 'I am not about to sit in judgement if that is your fear.'

'I do not fear your judgement,' Catrin snapped angrily. What else was he doing but sitting in judgement? 'Yes, she liked the company of men, yes, she took them to her bed when she would have been wiser to abstain, but Richard was always well cared for. Her heart was too soft and she sought for love in all the wrong places, but if that is a sin, then more than half of us are damned!' She drew an unsteady breath that caught across her voice in distress.

He stared at her, his mouth slightly open in a surprise that might have been comical under different circumstances. The fire spat and a burning ember flared in the space between them. 'And the rest either find it or go without,' he rallied as the blossom of wood dulled to grey, but his gaze held poignancy and regret rather than challenge. He made a rueful gesture. 'Go and take what rest you can. Tomorrow will be a long day.'

That at least was not something to be disputed. Catrin had neither the heart nor the sharpness of mind to spar any more tonight. Glancing at the weary set of Oliver Pascal's shoulders, she thought that neither did he.