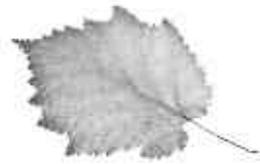


VALIANT HEARTS ♦ *Book One*

Dauntless



DINA L. SLEIMAN



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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.

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To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

—Isaiah 61:3

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Prologue

I am air.

I am wind.

I am stealthy like a cat.

A wild lynx of the forest.

I whisper my chant as I await my prey, crouched in the branches of a tree, one with it, as I must be. My green tunic and hood, my brown leggings, even my stray wisps of hair blend into the forest about me. The rough flaxen sack, the quiver and bow upon my back, add texture and disguise my feminine shape. Only my trembling hands give me away as human, as other. But I must be dauntless to accomplish this task.

Again I steel my heart. Steady its beating. Will it to turn hard and sharp like the dagger in my belt? Though I have never thrust a blade into human flesh, if needed, I think I could. I fancy myself a fearless leader, but my hands—I glance down and rub them together—my trembling hands always give me away.

Taking deep, calming breaths of maple-scented air, I study the forest across the dirt road from me, picking out the eyes from

leaves, bushes, and branches. My “men” remain well camouflaged, as usual, but if I peer closely enough, I can always find their eyes. Tough eyes, strong eyes, yet with echoes of little boys hidden in their depths, begging me to care for them. To somehow, somehow, be the mother and father they each have lost, though I am naught but seventeen myself. My men will back me up, protect me with their lives if needed. But I cannot call upon them to do so.

I will do this thing alone. Stealthy like a cat. In and out before they realize. 'Tis always best this way.

In the distance, I hear the first creaks and jangles against the rustling of the leaves. I sigh. One way or another, soon it will be over—until next week, or perhaps tomorrow. I must not think about that now.

I have heard tales of a fellow in Sherwood Forest, not so terribly far away. Robyn of the Hode, they call him, with his own band of men, although I imagine his are actual *grown* men. Oh, a few of mine are large enough. And I've trained them to fight like the guards who once protected me . . . in a stone castle that used to be mine . . . until it was all taken away. Robyn and I, we have that in common if legend holds true.

Yes, I tell myself, *I am ready for this*.

An explosion of bright color bursts onto the scene. Two stalwart knights on white steeds, covered with drapes of purple and red, proudly displaying some inconsequential coat of arms, ride to the front of the retinue. Another knight in a matching surcoat drives the traveling wagon and clicks to his well-trained team. The wagon itself is painted and gilded like an exotic bird swooping through the green and brown world of our forest. A wagon intended for noble travel, with a rare wooden roof and luggage fortuitously secured on top, just as my informer reported.

I await, lest there be more.

But no.

To my great relief, that is all. A rear guard would be my worst enemy. Perhaps a servant or two yet ride along back to hue the cry if trouble approaches, but no guards watch from behind. The quaking in my hands subsides to a slow tremble. If I still believed in God, I might have whispered a thanks. But I do not. I only believe in me. And the children I must protect. Robyn of the Hode might steal from the rich and give to the poor, but we are the poor, and I concern myself only with caring for us.

I ready myself. Stealth and silence. These are my allies. Cunning and the forest. My forest. And timing. Timing is of the utmost. I will rely on these, and I will prevail.

I give my men the signal. The whistling call of a crested lark.

As the wagon approaches, I scramble along my branch at precisely the right moment and hop onto the roof with nary a thud. I hold tight for a moment, but if the occupants sensed a disturbance, they must have thought it naught but a bump in the road. With great haste I rifle through bags and trunks, grabbing up food supplies and useful trinkets, stashing them in the sack upon my back but leaving nothing amiss.

I catch a flash out of the corner of my eye. My men flying through the forest, quiet as phantoms alongside the wagon.

There remains one last chest. A small one. Locked. I know what this means, and I must make my choice in an instant. It may be the difference between meager dinner and feast. Between prison and death. But our funds run low. One never knows when a little one might need a physician. Or we might require quick passage aboard a ship. And so I stash it as well, with not a moment to spare.

Just ahead, there it is.

The most delicate part of this mission. My escape branch—higher than the one I descended from. I must jump to catch it

and swing myself up before I am spotted. One fraction of a moment off and all could be lost. I must account for the extra weight upon my back. But I have trained for this.

Moving closer to the front of the wagon, I leap, a cat, at just the right time. I catch the branch and swing myself up, clutching, clinging, indeed like a scared kitten.

The wagon continues down the road, no one the wiser. My branch sways ever so slightly as a servant perched on the rear board stares up into the puffy white clouds while picking at his teeth with a stick. And then they are gone, around the next bend.

Once upon a time I, too, stared into clouds, dreaming they were dragons, or flowers, or . . . or handsome princes who would carry me away.

But I no longer believe in handsome princes. So I climb down the tree and am met by a quiet but hearty round of hugs from my men. They slap me on the back, grinning like the overgrown children they are.

“Good job, Lady Merry,” whispers Allen, as Red and Cedric boost me atop their shoulders.

I wish he would not call me that.

Red grunts. “She’s heavy today, boys.”

“Must have caught us something good!” Henry, only fourteen, nearly shrieks with delight.

We all shush him.

James returns the conversation to a whisper. “I’d say she caught us an awfully big fish.”

“I think you shall be pleased,” I say with a sly smile. Taking my sack from my back, I withdraw the small ornate chest and display it for them.

They stare in reverent silence.

“But you know what this means.” Shrewd Robert, always a step ahead of the others, knows that if gold lies in that chest,

we shall have to move camp. I had only stolen anything so substantial once before, and we all agreed if it happened again, we must move on.

“’Tis worth it.” Red waves his hand in dismissal. “A great story and an even greater victory!”

“Besides,” says Cedric, “’tis high time we start a new adventure.”

A new adventure indeed. I will miss this stretch of forest, which has grown to be a friend, but I agree with Cedric. Time for a fresh start. Whispers already circulate through the surrounding villages that ghosts reside in these woods, stealing from passing travelers. The Ghosts of Farthingale Forest. Would anyone believe that ghosts had need of gold?

We have survived for nearly two years here, but we can start again. “Let us get back to camp for now. The chest is locked, and we need to pick it. No doubt the girls and the little ones are anxious for our return.”

Being carried through the woods thus, seeing the appreciative smiles of my men, hearing the joy in their voices, makes it all worthwhile. But a piece of me will always long to be back at camp like the other girls, caring for the children, preparing the meals. No, not at camp. In the castle great hall with my mother, embroidering and playing the lute. Waiting for my father to run through the door and catch me in a warm embrace. But those days are long gone, and truth be told, embroidery never made my blood rush like a successful plunder.

I grin in spite of myself.

Chapter 1

Wyndeshire, England

Late August 1216

“I hear tales that the Ghosts of Farthingale Forest might have descended upon our very own Wyndeshire.” Lord Wyndemere looked up from sharpening his favorite sword. “What hear you?”

Timothy Grey shivered at the intense stare his employer shot his way. It somehow matched the cold stone walls of the surrounding armory. “No doubt the overactive imagination of some fool villager.”

“Perhaps.” The lord ran his finger along the glinting blade. “Perhaps not.” Light gleamed against his balding head in a manner that intimidated rather than amused. His remaining salt-and-pepper hair and matching beard framed sharp features. Though a fair man, he could be ruthless if crossed. “I shall not tolerate thieves in my realm.”

“Of course not, my lord.” Timothy continued polishing Lord Wyndemere’s gilded shield with a smooth white cloth.

“They have plagued those to the east for years. And word has it they might be the ones who stole that chest of taxes headed to the king.” The lord performed a thrust and parry, testing the weight and balance of his weapon.

“Ghosts stole the gold? Whatever shall they do with it in the netherworld?” Timothy chuckled at the ridiculous notion.

“Ah, but we, my good lad, are not silly villagers. We understand that the ghosts must employ some human form. A new and most brilliant band of thieves, methinks.”

“Stealing gold intended for taxes? Sounds more like Robyn of the Hode than the Ghosts of Farthingale if you ask me.” Timothy held the shield to the thin streams of light pouring through the barred windows and spotted a smudge on the upper right corner.

“True, not their typical thievery. But over the past month we have had reports of hams, turnips, even tunics gone missing from these parts, with nary a sound nor a wisp out of place. Either the Farthingale ghosts have moved to town, or we have acquired our own.”

“We should await proof before we trouble ourselves with the matter. Nothing has gone missing from the castle thus far.”

“Ah, my stalwart Timothy Grey. Always cautious and prudent. Little wonder you have grown to be my most trusted assistant.” Lord Wyndemere tousled Timothy’s hair as though he were a child and headed out the doorway.

Timothy did not let the abrupt departure halt his polishing. Lord Wyndemere knew his own mind and rarely shared it with others. No doubt some random thought had flitted through his head and launched him on a new mission. Or his stomach had rumbled, sending him in search of a kitchen maid. Or . . . as Timothy considered the comely kitchen maid, he realized his lordship might be thinking of something else entirely.

His face heated, and he focused on his work, banishing disturbing images from his head.

Oh, to be a lord. To jaunt off at the slightest whim. Master of his own fate. Never answering to the beck and call of superiors. But he would not likely know that pleasure. His sisters might receive the courtesy titles of Lady Ellen, Lady Ethel, and Lady Edith, but never him. Never a nobleman's son who had been "blessed" with eight elder siblings. Nine children! Such families were all but unheard of in their corner of England.

Blast the hearty Grey stock.

He would forever be Tiny Little Timmy, runt of the Grey clan. Never mind that he had passed nineteen summers and two yards in height. Never mind that he had mastered both sword and lance and his shoulders had at long last broadened to fill his velvet tunics. No, people would forever go about ruffling his hair, even if they must reach up to do so.

A pox upon his flaxen white-blond hair.

He would never be the strongest. That would be his brother Derek, the valiant warrior off on crusade. Nor the smartest. That would be Frederick, the priest in London town. Nor even the handsomest. That would be Randolph, no doubt somewhere wooing the ladies. He would never give his parents the most grandchildren. Ellen had a twenty-year advantage in that area. And he would never, ever be called Baron of Greyham. No, only his father and someday his eldest brother, Noel, would be called that.

Unless he did something drastic, he would be just plain Timothy Grey for the remainder of his pathetic life. Just a plain scribe. A plain servant. With his plain grey eyes to drive home the point.

At least for the time being he had escaped to help Lord Wyndemere in the armory, but soon enough he would be back to transcribing correspondence at his desk. Thank goodness he

was at least smart enough to read and write, to learn Latin and earn some sort of employment. Otherwise he would have rotted at home as the family pet for all eternity.

But as Lord Wyndemere himself so readily admitted, Timothy had grown invaluable to him in a few short years. His steady temperament the perfect complement to the earl's impulsive ways. More and more often his lordship called upon him to help with a variety of tasks. Perhaps in time Timothy might gain favor. Perhaps please the king. Perhaps, just perhaps, if he worked terribly hard and made himself indispensable, he might earn a minor title and a small piece of land to call his own.

He inspected the shield before him to make sure it was perfect. No, it yet required one more round of buffing. So he continued.

Timothy was a patient man. He would do his job, await his opportunity, and then seize it with all his might. Someday he would conquer some foe, unveil some plot, perform some feat so legendary that he could no longer be ignored.

Some feat . . . like capturing the Ghosts of Farthingale Forest.



Merry Ellison surveyed the newly constructed camp. Their little huts were both durable and disguised to blend with the surrounding forest. Small children dashed and squealed through the circle between the dwellings as they played an energetic game of chase. How lovely to see them settled into their new home and behaving as normal, happy children once again.

The trek had taken weeks. They had skirted several large towns and walked through endless forests before coming to this area far to the west of their old camp. Finally the scouts spotted this perfect vale, surrounded on all sides by a ring of hills and with a creek nearby.

Merry took in a deep draught of air, tinged with Scotch pine and meadow flowers. Home again. At long last.

“Lady Merry, Lady Merry!” Abigail nearly crashed into Merry in her enthusiasm.

“Whoa there.” Merry caught her by the shoulders as the youngster slid to a halt.

“I’ve lost my tooth.” With great pride, the child held the bloody, hollowed tooth for examination.

“Oh, how . . .” Merry quelled the churning of her stomach. “How wonderful.”

“Gilbert tumbled me to the ground, and I bumped my chin and it fell out from right here. Look!” She pointed to the gaping hole in her gum. “But don’t you worry. Been loose for weeks, it has.”

Merry did take a moment to look—at far more than Abigail’s bleeding gumline. The child’s blond hair shimmered in the sunshine to match the healthy golden glow upon her skin. Though her tunic was a bit grubby and rumpled, it was made of fine lavender linen.

Each of the children owned several tunics now, as well as warm woolen cloaks, and sturdy shoes. Although they lived a rough life by Merry’s former standards, she had never seen the peasant children so plump, healthy, and well-dressed back in their home village. When they first escaped, many of them had been dressed in tattered brown rags.

Little Wren wobbled up beside them upon her chubby toddler legs. “Ma-wee, Ma-wee. Me have teeth!” She grinned with teeth together and gums spread wide to display a row of tiny teeth the color of pearls. Then she began to cough. A rough, croaking cough.

Merry withheld a frown. For the past two autumns, Wren had been struck by a malady of the lungs. Might it be starting again? Merry determined to check her supply of herbal remedies

soon. But no need to concern the child now. “Those are lovely, my little Wren. Be sure you let Abigail scrape them clean with a stick each night before bedtime.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wren stuck her thumb in her mouth.

Merry doubted many of the children had cleaned their teeth before she took over their care.

Even their huts looked better constructed than the wattle-and-daub homes of the peasant village surrounding her father’s castle. Though she had long considered her father a fair and brave man for standing against the king, she now considered their entire social order as fundamentally unjust.

Red poked his head through the doorway of the largest construction project—a wooden fort of sorts, which could serve as a storage facility, group dining hall, meeting place, and even a school when time allowed. “Lady Merry.”

Just plain Merry, she grumbled to herself, knowing saying it aloud would accomplish nothing. “Yes, Red.”

“The council of elders is ready for you.”

Council of elders, indeed. Merry held back a grin at the ludicrous title. When first they had all been orphaned, she appointed this group of “elders” to help her lead. At the time they had ranged in age from thirteen to fifteen. Now, two years later, this esteemed group ranged from fifteen to her own seventeen years of age. She thought giving them an impressive title would instill confidence, and somehow it had. Even for her.

If only her beloved older brother had not gone back to help on that ill-fated night. If only he had stayed with the children as her father instructed. If only . . . Her life was full of *if onlys*. If only her father had not plotted against the king. If only King John was not so epically evil.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Focusing upon what could have been served little purpose.

But somehow their band of raggedy orphans had managed eight seasons alone in the woods, outside of the law, keeping everyone alive. Even their precious Wren, the infant they had carried into the forest that horrible night.

“God give you good day,” she said to Big Charles as she ducked through the low doorway of the hut, and he merely nodded. Charles rarely spoke. Due to his childish mind and huge size, he had been assigned as permanent guard of the camp, a task he performed with admirable diligence.

Inside the dim room with walls of woven branches waited Red, Cedric, James, Allen, Kate, and Jane, all in a semicircle. Merry assumed an air of dignity she did not feel and lowered herself onto a large stump. She pulled back her hood, giving them an unobscured view of her feminine features and hair. Although she had bobbed her brown tresses to chin length long ago, the silken curls would ever give her away as a girl.

She cleared her throat. “Welcome to the first official meeting in our new home.”

They cheered.

“Let us begin with reports. Kate, you first, please.”

“Supplies are holding.” Kate brushed her own straggly brown hair from her eyes with a regal air of authority. These former peasants took great pride in their new positions. “We have plenty for two fortnights, assuming hunting, fishing, and minor raids continue with the same degree of success.”

“Fishing and hunting are going well,” reported Red.

“Raids upon wealthy townfolk and manor homes have proven profitable, although I still wish we would leave some sort of token,” Cedric said, with an incorrigible wiggle of his eyebrows. “The Ghosts of Farthingale Forest strike again. Perhaps a single wisp of white cloth.”

“That would serve no purpose but to demonstrate our

arrogance and leave a trail.” Although amused by his wit, Merry glared in his direction.

He sat a little straighter. “I merely jest, Lady Merry. Of course I would never do such a thing. Anonymity is our friend.”

“Stealth . . .” Kate opened the chant, and they all joined in. “. . . anonymity, and restraint. These are our allies. These three we shall never betray.”

“Excellent.” Merry clapped her hands together. “Let us never forget it. This pledge has taken us further than we ever dreamed.”

“And now we have an entire coffer of gold coins to guard,” said Allen, head of camp security.

That gold had lain heavy upon Merry’s mind since the moment she had stolen it. The chest contained much more than she had imagined. A small fortune. She feared she had made a dreadful error that would move the Ghosts of Farthingale Forest from fanciful local legend to notorious thieves worthy of capture. But the deed could not be undone. “When we resume full-scale missions, some of the men must always stay behind to help Big Charles guard the camp. And the time has come to train the boys who have passed ten years of age since our initial formation. How many is that, Jane?”

Jane served as surrogate mother to the younger children. She had a commendable system for organizing them and assigning tasks. “Only three boys have passed their tenth birthdays since the first round was trained, but I believe Sadie fancies herself the next Lady Merry. Methinks she will insist to be trained as well. She’s already quite handy with the bow.”

“Four, then,” said Merry. “Excellent. Allen, you can begin training at once. And do not dare go easy on Sadie.”

Years ago, all the older girls besides Merry had chosen traditional female roles. Excitement thrummed through her at the

thought of raising up another woman warrior. “Be tough on that girl.”

“Yes, sir . . . um . . . I mean, m’lady,” Allen stammered, with a blush that colored the center of each cheek.

Authority suited her, and well she knew it. Someday she might choose one of the young men as a husband, to share her position of authority. Perhaps Allen, with his sandy hair and hazel eyes. But she was in no hurry to share her leadership role. And goodness knew, they had no need to bring more children into their group.

“Sir, ma’am, m’lady—it matters little to me, as long as you follow orders.” She sent him a pointed look, and everyone laughed.

“I know we don’t say it enough, but we are blessed to have you as a leader, Lady Merry.” Jane bit her lip, as if she should not express herself so, although Merry had never demanded such a high level of respect that the others could not share their thoughts at will. Old habits were hard to break, she supposed. To them she would ever be the local nobility, despite the fact her father had been officially stripped of title and lands before his execution—or as she preferred to call it, slaughter.

“Thank you for your kind sentiment, Jane, but back to the business at hand. We have a few weeks until someone shall have to venture into Wyndbury with a conspicuous gold coin to purchase supplies. During that time we must establish a story that shall allow us freedom to spend that coin.” Such bounty they now possessed, yet near impossible to spend. One wrong move could bring the law upon them.

“In Farthingale, giving presents to the villagers seemed our best strategy,” offered James. “Some venison steaks and a few of the pretty trinkets from our raids should do.”

“I have a thought.” Robert served as her tactical advisor. All eyes turned to him in anticipation. If Robert had an idea, every person in this room would be in for a wild romp.