

VALIANT HEARTS ♦ *Book Three*

Courageous



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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.



But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:9–10 NIV



Prologue

*I commission thee, Rosalind of Ipsworth,
Defender of the Holy Cross
And crusader of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Soon I will hear those sacred words, and there will be no turning back. My mind swirls with possibilities. I can barely focus on the grand Cathedral of Edendale as I file down the center aisle behind a stream of knights in armor, glinting with an array of colorful lights from the many stained-glass windows surrounding us.

Arched ceilings seem to tremble and radiate high over my head. Walls painted with biblical scenes take on a special sort of glow this day. The marble floor whispers up holy echoes with each step I take toward the altar. Incense wafts over and all around me, flooding my senses with divine presence and keen delight.

With both great honor and the utmost humility, I wear my surcoat emblazoned with crosses in the North Britannian colors of black, ivory, and crimson. Perhaps with more humility than most, for of this crowd, I alone know my greatest sin.

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The one for which I am desperate to atone.

At that thought the waves crash over me, as they always do. Waves of pain, of loneliness, of regret—yet followed by a new wash of warmth. The warmth that came with this decision to travel to the Holy Land. The warmth offering a hope that somehow I might find redemption, and that this crusade might open the way.

As I reach the front, I dip a knee before our esteemed duchess, Adela DeMontfort. She smiles at me with warm familiarity. Then I likewise bow before her cousins, the Lady Honoria and the young Lady Sapphira. Sapphira, whose eyes shimmer like the gems for which she is named, with some otherworldly light. With a sense of passion and intensity that has brought us all to this place.

Indeed, that special light inside Sapphira has sparked this crusade. And soon hundreds of men and dozens of women—along with a handful of specially chosen children—will sail away to the Holy Land inspired by Sapphira’s divine vision, Honoria’s stalwart leadership, and Adela’s funding and support.

A true woman’s crusade to surpass even Eleanor of Aquitaine’s.

Only, ours shall be far more successful, or so we all believe. And unlike the doomed children’s crusades of not long ago, this one will match sacred passion and visionary guidance with sound reason and proper planning.

As I join the ranks of crusaders lining the front of the cathedral, my heart speeds, tingles ripple up and down my arms, and my knees quiver as if they might give way. The glow, the radiance, the power of this moment threatens to engulf me. Then the bishop presses his hand in a downward motion, and I thankfully lower myself to my knees along with the many others. The cold, smooth floor is solid beneath me, and I anchor my hands to it until I catch my bearings.

“We are brought here today,” says the bishop with holy fire

crackling through his voice, “by the direction of God himself. For He has spoken through the pure, young Lady Sapphira, giving her a vision to inspire us all. A vision of the Holy Land, and a clear call to set the captives free—captives like Lord Richard DeMontfort, the duchess’s beloved brother, with the hope that he might be returned safely home to us as our rightful Duke of North Britannia.”

As the bishop continues in his inspiring tones, I glance about for my friends and partners in this endeavor. I search out my beloved mistress, the Lady Gwendolyn. She had been just behind me. I feel certain of it. And yet I find her nowhere. My chest tightens. I turn to look for her husband, Sir Allen of Ellsworth, but he is missing from the ranks of those being commissioned as well.

I attempt to maintain subtlety as I peek over my shoulders, but I do not spot them in the throng beyond. Nor my mother. Nor my siblings. Although they are my reason for living and breathing, for working, and even a large part of my reason for pursuing this crusade, I did not invite them this day. The sight of their faces yet brings back too many haunting memories.

I continue to scan the crowd. Of course I see many I know. Knights in the duchess’s service, a handful of barons, several ladies of renown—all of whom I met during my time at the grand castle serving Lady Gwendolyn. The duchess herself, who shares my feisty nature and sharp wit and always brings such joy. But I do not spy the two people who matter most to me.

Sir Randel Penigree catches my gaze and grins reassuringly, as if noticing my frenzied search. Sir Randel, so good-natured and calm. A faithful friend to both Gwendolyn and Allen.

“*Where are they?*” I mouth Randel’s way.

“*Never fear,*” he mouths back with a wink. “*All is well.*”

And somehow I believe him.

Just then the ladies around me stand to their feet and move

toward the bishop. I follow suit. One by one they kneel before the duchess. Then the moment is upon me. The one I have so desperately dreamed of during this past year of regret and despair.

I fall to my knees before the duchess, who is flanked by the bishop, Honoria, and Sapphira. She taps the flat edge of her sword to my right shoulder and then my left. Heat radiates down my body. I imagine it burning away the darkness. Burning away my sin. “I commission thee, Rosalind of Ipsworth, defender of the holy cross, and crusader of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The wonder of it sends my thoughts reeling once again.

Then the bishop swipes my forehead with holy oil in the shape of the cross. It seeps into my skin, into my very mind, settling deep into my heart. “I anoint you for this task in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

As I stand to return to my place, a lightness, a cleanness, swirls about me. I feel as if I just might float away.



After the ceremony I stand in a sea of well-wishers, still searching out my mistress. At last, I squeeze through hugs and pats of congratulations to Sir Randel, a typical-looking soldier with his short-cropped dark hair and crusader surcoat. Though not as broad as some of the knights, he is well muscled, and easy to spot due to his attractive crooked grin.

“Where are they? What do you know?” I scan the crowded cathedral yet again.

He lifts my hand and presses a quick kiss upon it.

Although I no longer relish flirtatious attention from men, have in fact avoided it this past year, the chivalrous and sincere gesture heartens me.

“As I mentioned, all is well,” he says. “Come. They await you outside in the courtyard.”

His dark eyes sparkle with a secret knowledge as he tucks me under his arm and fights his way through the crowd. This day has left me in a daze. Although I am well trained and able to defend myself with weapons aplenty, for once I am happy to let a knight in shining armor come to my rescue.

As I step from the shadowy cathedral into the bright winter sunshine glaring off the snow, all goes dark for a moment, but Randel continues leading me forward. Soon this snow will melt, and we shall set off across the sea.

When my eyes clear, I spot Gwendolyn waving to me with her handsome husband at her side. Both wearing everyday attire.

“There you . . . but . . . what . . .” I stutter, aware that I am making no sort of sense at all.

Sir Allen wraps his arm about Gwendolyn in her woolen cloak of dark blue.

My young mistress’s bright smile nearly outshines the shimmering snow. Though now a married lady, she is a mere seventeen years of age, same as me. “We did not want to tell you before the ceremony, but Allen and I shall not be going on crusade this time, for a very good reason.”

What reason could possibly keep the bold and daring Lady Gwendolyn from this grand adventure?

Allen presses a hand to Gwendolyn’s flat abdomen. “It seems we are about to undertake our own crusade of epic proportions, especially if our little one has the spunk of its mother.”

“Oh!” Gwendolyn swats his chest.

A child! How had I failed to guess? But my mistress’s cycles always have been irregular, perhaps due to her strenuous training at the warrior arts. Still, this was Gwendolyn’s dream long before it was mine. To go on crusade. To fight for the innocent. “But we discussed this possibility. You said you wished to go no matter what.”

Gwendolyn shakes her head in a beatific sort of wonder.

“I know, but motherhood does such odd things to a person. Strange particles seem to flow through my blood. As soon as I realized my condition, all my instincts turned to protecting this tiny creature.” She encircles her belly with her hands. “I cannot put him . . . or her in danger. Perhaps if we had already started along our way . . . but we have not.”

“And I shall stay with her and oversee the palace guard.” Allen pulls Gwendolyn tighter to his side. “I do not want to miss the big event. And the duchess needs good warriors here with so many leaving.”

“Precisely,” Gwendolyn says, “and I shall attend the duchess until the babe is born.”

I struggle to collect my thoughts. So much has happened this day. A baby . . . Of course I am happy for them, and yet, it stirs such memories. . . .

“Well, I for one congratulate you. And I think you have made a most excellent choice,” Sir Randel says, rousing me from my speechless stupor.

I glance from him to my friends and back again. “Of course. Congratulations to you both. But I still do not understand. Why did you not tell me?”

“Because if we had, you would have insisted upon staying here. And I know this crusade means the world to you.” Something in Gwendolyn’s gaze suggests she suspects more than I might wish her to, yet she speaks with compassion and understanding.

“You are going, my friend,” says Sir Allen, reaching out to give my shoulder a shake with a lordly sort of authority. “You have been officially commissioned. And do not make excuses of your family. We shall care for them well, precisely as we promised.”

“But I was to attend you, m’lady. What shall my role be now?”

“You shall be attendant to the young Lady Sapphira. She

is the heart of this mission, and the duchess wishes her to be well protected.”

Sir Allen nods to me. “We all know that after my wife’s training, you have ample skills to watch over her.”

“That was to have been . . .” I cannot even finish the statement. That was to have been the Lady Gwendolyn’s own role. A great honor. One I doubt I deserve, yet I will do my utmost to live up to it. I will protect Lady Sapphira—body, mind, and spirit—and I shall aspire to be an admirable role model who shall in no way lead her astray.

“Yes, you shall go in my stead.” Gwendolyn hugs me tightly to her chest with her strong arms. Not so long ago, Gwendolyn nearly beat her champion husband, Sir Allen, in a tournament—although to this day, few know that secret. “And it has been decided that young Sadie of the Farthingale ghosts shall go along on crusade to fill the emptied slot. You will need to watch after her as well. Once we get home, we shall show you the cottage and plot of land we have chosen for you and your family. We want to make sure you have good incentive to return to us well and whole.”

I cling to her woolen cloak to keep from stumbling as I breathe in her comforting scent of wild herbs and imagine my own cottage upon their lands. My family will be so happy there.

Perhaps Gwendolyn does understand me, more than I ever realized. How else would she guess that nothing would make me happier than my own home, which might safeguard me from having to marry?

Marriage. A dream I gave up on a disastrous night over a year ago. A dream I will no longer suffer myself to indulge.

This crusade does indeed mean the world to me. Despite Gwendolyn’s wish that I return home safely, in truth, nothing would please me more than to offer my life in God’s service—and prove myself worthy of His almighty love once again.

Chapter 1

May 1219

Near the coast of the Holy Roman Empire

“Come, Garrett. Your turn next.” Randel beckoned the hesitant lad who reminded him so much of himself at that age.

Garrett pushed up from the deck of the huge sailing ship and reached to take the blunted practice sword from the hand of the much taller and far more arrogant Jervais. At the last moment possible, Jervais swiped back the sword and chuckled as Garrett missed it.

But he gave Garrett a friendly pat on the back when he finally handed it to him. Though the two boys were both thirteen years old and spent much time together, Randel always marveled at the differences between them. Garrett’s even, young features turned bright pink beneath his wavy brown hair, but he pressed forward, determined despite his embarrassment.

As Garrett lunged before Randel and prepared his sword, a natural dexterity overtook the lad that belied his youthful awkwardness. If only Randel could help him find his confidence

and his competitive drive, the boy might make a fine knight someday.

Randel bandied swords with Garrett, thrusting and parrying, dodging and striking. They both made proper adjustments for the slight to-and-fro sway of the ship. After two months at sea, it had become a second home.

He intentionally swung at Garrett from a weak angle to see if the boy would properly respond. Sure enough, the boy ducked low and came up to catch a blow against Randel's side.

"Excellent!" Randel shouted, not bothering to correct the lack of thrust behind the strike. Garrett was strong enough for his small stature, but he hated to inflict pain.

Again, Randel empathized with the young fellow. He had once been small and timid, had hated to hurt a soul. Thus his parents had trained him for the church. Yet a desire for battle had always burned somewhere deep inside of him. So he had snuck off as oft as possible to train with his friends Hugh and Gerald and their sister, Gwendolyn, in secret. And in the end, he had achieved the knighthood he desired.

They continued their match, Randel testing and baiting more than actually fighting. If faced with a true enemy, with true danger, all of this skill and technique would come back to Garrett, and he would do what he must. This Randel knew, for though only nineteen, he himself had already faced the situation many times.

He turned his sword arm to an incorrect position, and surely enough, Garrett took the opportunity to swipe Randel's sword from his hand. It flew through the air and clattered upon the wooden deck.

"Ho! Huzzah! Garrett wins again!" he cheered.

Garrett let a shy, crooked smile slip forth. Although the boy often retreated into a still and stoic sort of mode, not unlike a tortoise in its shell, Randel loved to bring out Garrett's enthu-

siasm. Each of these children needed a special sort of touch. Some put in their place and taught a healthy bit of fear, and others, like Garrett, needed the encouragement of a win and a heaping dose of praise.

The other four boys, ranging in age from eleven to fifteen, ruffled Garrett's hair and slapped him on the back. Jervais scooped him up around his waist and tossed him upon his shoulder in a celebratory sort of romp—no doubt actually intended to remind everyone that he was the larger and stronger of the two.

Garrett seemed pleased nonetheless.

When the fairylike Lady Sapphira—whose vision had launched this entire crusade—called over, “Good job, Garrett!” he bit his lip and scurried down from his friend's shoulder like a frightened squirrel.

Randel chuckled. How he loved to watch the interplay between those two. They had been raised side by side, as Garrett was the son of Lady Honoria's head knight. Sometimes they appeared to be the closest of chums—siblings, almost—and other times Garrett looked as though he wished the floorboards of the ship would open up and swallow him whole just to escape her. Much as he did right now.

Randel flung an arm over Garrett's shoulder and turned him from the young lady's appraising eye. “You boys go and get a drink. The bell shall ring for your lessons with Father Andrew soon. After our midday meal, you shall work with Rosalind at daggers.”

“I still don't understand why we must learn from a stupid old girl,” Jervais said with a snicker.

Randel shot Jervais a quelling glare. “Perhaps when you can actually hit the target such a statement shall not sound so ludicrous.”

“I for one am happy to work with the lovely Maid Rosalind. Night and day, if need be.” The adolescent Lord Humphrey, an

entitled and pompous young pup with his head of black curls, winked their way. At fifteen, he no longer pretended to find girls troublesome. He was more than happy to explain the wonders of the fairer sex to his companions.

Randel reached over with his free hand and gave Humphrey a playful thump against his head. “What have I told you about showing respect for the ladies. They are your comrades, and you must treat them as such. Why look, they are training as hard as you are.”

They all turned back around to watch.

The young Lady Lillian, in her kirtle of girlish buttercup yellow, let the dagger fly from a limp wrist. It loped several circles through the air before clattering to the deck short of the target.

Jervais stifled a chuckle. “Oh yes, they are quite skilled.”

Sapphira, dressed in a kirtle of cornflower blue, shoved her friend aside in frustration. “Goodness, Lillian, they shall think us all a bunch of ninnies. Straight and sure. Like this.”

Her white-blond hair wisped about her as she threw the dagger with admirable technique. Still, the weapon merely caught the outer edge of the target. The girls clapped and bobbed up and down like a bouquet of wildflowers in the wind. Only Sadie stood by nonplussed in her earth-toned tunic and boy’s leggings.

But Sapphira was never one to be satisfied with less than perfection. She huffed and stomped her slippers foot upon the deck. “’Tis these insipid shoes, I tell you. I cannot keep my grip on this tilting deck.”

Rosalind shot her a glare similar to the one Randel used with the children. “No excuses, Sapphira.” They had all given up on the tedious lord and lady titles weeks ago. “Your job is to rise above whatever complications you might face.”

“But if only I could practice in my bare feet. . . .”

Sadie grunted in annoyance and flipped her own knife in the air, catching it neatly. “You cannot fight in bare feet.”

“Enough with the bare feet,” Rosalind said. “Your sister would have my neck if I let you traipse about like that. Although, you are more than welcome to wear your ‘ugly old war boots.’”

Rosalind fetched the fallen dagger and handed it to the red-haired Lady Issobelle, who looked no more excited to throw it than Lillian had. She took the knife and held it awkwardly away from herself as if it might bite her. Randel really must find a way to rally these girls.

Continuing to watch the comic display, Jervais whispered. “Thank goodness they shall never go near an actual battle.”

“Nor shall you,” Humphrey said.

“Hey,” Jervais elbowed him.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Randel cut the bickering short. “If all goes well, you youngsters will be kept safe on the back lines to support us through prayer alone. But matters do not always go as planned. We are headed into enemy territory, and we must be prepared for anything.”

These boys were old enough to serve as pages or even squires to the regular knights, but they had all been placed on this ship and in his care for a specific reason. They, along with these girls, would be Sapphira’s special troop.

“You might be called upon to protect the young ladies,” Randel said, “but you never know. They might need to protect you. I for one would happily trust Rosalind with my life.”

“Oh, most certainly you would.” Humphrey’s voice dripped with innuendo. As the heir of the Earl of Haverland, the ranking nobleman on this crusade, Humphrey was far too quick to speak his mind.

“I imagine you would trust her in all sorts of instances.” Jervais wiggled his brows, emboldened by Humphrey.

“Enough of that. Rosalind is my friend.”

“Right. Your *very* good friend.” Even Garrett dared to tease.

Now Randel suspected his own cheeks had flushed. Of course

he admired the strong and beautiful young woman, but he was not interested in romance. “Keep that up, young buck, and I’ll have you spar with Sapphira next time.”

Garrett’s eyes grew wide with horror. His mouth gaped, and they all laughed.

“Go on with you now. Get that drink while you can.” Randel shooed them away.

He leaned against the rail of the ship and took a deep breath of the chilly sea air. When he had signed on for this holy crusade, he had not fancied himself involved in child rearing. But he had been chosen because of his own youth and his love for children. He must admit, the energetic youngsters had turned what otherwise might have been a tedious two-month journey into a rollicking adventure and stirred up his own youthful enthusiasm.

Randel would do everything in his power to keep these children safe and to prepare them for any contingency. He had lost men before, which had been terrible enough, but he could not bear losing even one of these young lives. Many thought taking the children along nothing but a foolish whim, but Randel understood. Though he himself had not yet reached two decades in age, already he had seen far too much heartache and tragedy.

These children brought a sense of purity to their cause.

He watched as frothy waves rippled along the side of their Frisian ship, which stretched to a length of one hundred feet and a breadth of thirty. They were moving at a good speed for such a large vessel, as they had for most of their journey. Often crusaders were waylaid by storms or skirmishes. But God had showed them favor all along this trip. Sails full of wind, minimal rain, and not a single impediment. It seemed almost too easy.

They had left North Britannia with the first breath of spring, and if matters continued on this course, they would arrive at Tripoli in a few weeks. He lifted his face to the sun, relishing this calm moment.

The last year had been a difficult one for him. First being dismissed from the grand castle by the council for helping Sir Allen with his short-lived rebellion, then being rejected by his parents for his continued resistance against joining the church, and finally his stunning defeat at Gravenworth Castle just a few months ago, from which he had not yet completely recovered.

But he did not wish to relive those days. He wanted to move forward into a new season. And he prayed that, once in the Holy Land, he would at last be able to join his own desires and the desires his parents had long held for him. If all went well, after helping with this mission, he would join the Knights Templar as a warrior monk.

A bell rang, jerking him from his quiet contemplation. The children rallied in a circle and sat cross-legged on the deck before Father Andrew. Even Rosalind sat upon the deck alongside them, face upturned, awaiting today's lesson. Her eagerness made him smile. Much like the children, Rosalind had broken the tedium of this trip for him and helped to chase away that darkness that hovered always at the edge of his awareness.

Being a warrior monk might mean that he would have to relinquish certain aspects of life, like any hopes of a future with a fair maiden at his side, but he could bear that. Though he had briefly pondered wedding the Lady Gwendolyn to save her from a brutish husband, he had been reared for a life in the church and a tonsured scalp.

Rosalind shook out the loose locks of her long silky black hair that fell from a braided circlet atop her head. She giggled at something the priest said with her rosebud lips contrasting prettily against her ivory skin. Her blue eyes mirrored the clear sky overhead.

But such enchantments would never deter Randel from his goal.