

FROM AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

CHRISTINA
COURTENAY

*The Silent
Touch of
Shadows*



The Silent Touch of Shadows

Christina Courtenay



Extract

Prologue, first & second Chapter

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Published 2012 by Choc Lit Limited

Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

www.choclitpublishing.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN-978-1-906931-76-6

Prologue

In the huge inglenook of the ancient manor house, the remains of the log fire collapsed with a hiss into a heap of smouldering ashes. A coil of smoke floated up the chimney, disintegrating slowly.

Nothing else moved in the room. The shadows that waited there gave no sign of their presence, apart from an occasional sigh that could have been mistaken for the draught blowing in under the badly fitting window frames.

Even so, the air crackled with restless energy and expectation. An electric charge suddenly galvanised the dust motes into a frenzied whirl, sending them spiralling towards the ceiling before they plunged downwards again in a never-ending dance.

The time had come to try again.

The time had come for the silent touch of shadows.

Chapter One

Ashleigh Manor, Kent – Present Day

The driveway appeared quite unexpectedly after a sharp bend in the winding lane, taking Melissa by surprise. There were no signposts to advertise its presence and she almost missed the turning. Something made her slow down though and look to her right as they came around the corner. And there it was.

‘Ashleigh,’ she whispered to herself as she stared at the house through a pair of wrought-iron gates. Confusion filled her mind when she realised she recognised this place, and yet she was sure she had never been here before.

The old manor house nestled in a hollow, as if it had burrowed into the ground for comfort. Picture perfect, it was built of timber and orange-red bricks, with tiny leaded windows and tall chimney stacks. The colour gave an impression of warmth, reinforced by the sunlight reflected off the myriad of windowpanes. A shiver snaked up Melissa’s spine. The view was eerily familiar.

‘Is this where the old lady lives?’ Her twelve-year-old daughter Jolie sighed and removed the ear plugs of her iPod, then directed a look of suffering at her mother which Melissa ignored.

‘Yes, I think so,’ she replied, but really there was no doubt about it. She knew this was the right place and didn’t need to check the written directions. The sensation of *déjà vu* was so strong it made her frown. Perplexed, she continued to stare through the gate.

‘Do we have to stay long?’

It was Melissa’s turn to sigh. ‘I told you we’re invited for the whole weekend. Weren’t you listening? I’ve never met great-aunt Dorothy before, so it would be nice if we could at least make a good first impression. Come on, please stop sulking now. You’ll survive. Who knows, you might even enjoy it.’

Jolie made a face and muttered, ‘Fat chance,’ then turned up her

music once more, oblivious to the beautiful countryside surrounding them. Melissa shook her head and climbed out of the car to open the gates. She had to admit to some apprehension herself, as her great-aunt's invitation to come and stay for a weekend had been totally unexpected. Dorothy's phone call a few days earlier was the first communication anyone in the family had had with her for over fifty years. Apparently Dorothy had fallen out with her sister Ruth, Melissa's grandmother, and no one had heard from her since.

So why the sudden change of heart? And how had Dorothy found her after all this time? A recent electoral roll perhaps, or had she hired a sleuth?

The crisp air made Melissa pull the edges of her unbuttoned jacket together, but she soon forgot the cold as she breathed in the earthy smells of the countryside. It was like stepping into a greenhouse where you instinctively fill your lungs to capacity from the oxygen-rich air, and Melissa couldn't seem to get enough of it. Although nature was only just waking from its winter slumber, there was plenty of greenery around, which made a welcome change from London. Melissa stood for a moment simply admiring the view.

They continued up the drive and parked next to a yew hedge, which surrounded a part of the lawn and flower beds immediately in front of the house, creating a cottage garden within the main grounds. The hedge had been trimmed to velvety perfection and grew thick and deep. A profusion of snowdrops peeped out from underneath the bushes, looking as if they were wondering whether it was safe to come out yet.

Before Melissa had even switched off the engine, a woman emerged from the front door and came down the path towards a gate set in the hedge. 'Welcome, my dears,' she called out. An excited little white terrier with a patch of black over one eye trotted behind her. When he caught sight of them he started jumping up and down, barking furiously.

Melissa assumed the woman must be her great-aunt since no one else came out. They shook hands in a rather formal way, which made

Melissa feel as though she ought to curtsy or something. Dorothy was all smiles, however, so she gathered it was just old-fashioned manners.

‘Hello, lovely to meet you,’ Melissa said.

‘And you, I’m so glad you could come.’ Dorothy turned to wag a finger at the terrier. ‘Now stop that, Russ, you’re too noisy,’ she ordered, but he wouldn’t settle down until he had been made a fuss of by his guests. ‘I’m sorry, he has no manners. He’s just so happy to have visitors. I think he’s hoping your daughter will play with him later.’

‘I’d love to, can we go now?’ The sulky expression had miraculously vanished the instant Jolie had caught sight of Russ. She bent down to scratch him behind the ears. ‘I love dogs,’ she added and giggled when the terrier tried to lick her chin.

Dorothy’s eyes crinkled with amusement. ‘Why don’t you come and see the house first, then you two can go off and explore for a while before lunch?’

‘Oh, all right then.’ Jolie reverted to her previous near-teenage pout and ignored the warning look Melissa shot her.

Dorothy chattered on about the weather and this obviously wasn’t the right time to ask awkward questions, so Melissa just nodded politely from time to time. Dorothy seemed amiable enough, although there was definitely a hint of steel in her gaze as if she was used to ruling the roost. Well, she would have had to be pretty tough in order to stand up to Grandma Ruth, Melissa thought. She remembered all too well the terror that old lady had inspired in anyone who displeased her.

While Dorothy held forth, Melissa studied her surreptitiously to see if there was any family resemblance, but couldn’t see any. Her great-aunt was tiny, with thick white hair and clear blue eyes, the complete opposite of Melissa’s late grandmother. Dressed in navy blue trousers and a cashmere sweater, with a matching silk scarf knotted loosely around her neck, Dorothy looked casual but chic. She certainly didn’t look her age, which Melissa guessed to be around

seventy.

As they walked up the path to the porch, the sense of *déjà vu* returned and grew even stronger than when she'd first arrived. Melissa stopped to contemplate the house close up, searching for an answer to this phenomenon, but could find no logical explanation in the weathered brick walls.

'Are you coming, my dear?' Dorothy had turned to wait for her.

'Yes, of course. I was just, umm ... admiring the façade.' Confused by her strange reaction, Melissa forced herself to ignore it and move on. Before their arrival, she had been excited about the prospect of visiting a house that had apparently belonged to her ancestors for generations, and she was determined nothing should ruin her enjoyment of this weekend.

Before she had time to think about it more, they were whisked into the house through a solid oak front door, which squeaked in protest as it slammed shut behind them. Suppressing the irrational feeling of recognition, Melissa tried instead to gaze with interest at her surroundings. They had entered a low, dark hallway lit by two dim wall lights. A strong smell of floor-polish hung in the air, reminding Melissa of her grandmother's house. In fact, polish seemed to have been rubbed into every surface; whether wood or metal, they all gleamed in the soft light. An old-fashioned bronze mirror distorted their images into comical shapes and Melissa saw Jolie peering into it from different angles to see what effect it would have on her features.

'This is lovely!' Melissa stopped and looked around at the smooth, plaster-covered walls, which had been painted white to contrast with the dark oak beams and planks around them. They looked ancient and solid and the sheer beauty of the workmanship was amazing.

'In here, dear.' Dorothy and Jolie disappeared further down the hall and her great-aunt's voice floated back to her, muffled by the thick walls. Melissa tried to follow the others, but was suddenly overcome by emotion at the thought of all the generations of ancestors who had walked here before her. She felt as if she was being enveloped into a collective embrace by them all and had to

swallow hard. Taking a deep breath, she composed herself and made her way to the sitting room, where Jolie waited impatiently.

‘Mum, look, isn’t this huge?’ She was obviously impressed enough to have forgotten to sulk and her honey-brown eyes opened wide as she took in the generous proportions of the room. Her winter jacket had been flung onto the floor and Melissa bent to pick it up, her reaction automatic.

‘It used to be the great hall when the house was first built some time in the fifteenth century,’ Dorothy told her. ‘If you think it’s huge now, you should have seen it back then – open all the way up to the ceiling. If you go up into the attic you can still see the soot from the cooking fire on the roof beams, left over from before they constructed this fireplace.’ Dorothy pointed to an enormous inglenook, which took up more than half a wall.

Melissa closed her eyes and was shocked at the detailed picture that formed in her mind. She could see the big hall clearly, including the massive ceiling rafters, the benches along the walls and even the haze of smoke from the central hearth drifting upwards to a hole in the ceiling. At either end she glimpsed doorways leading to storage rooms and steps up to small private sleeping chambers above. The sounds of feet scraping on the floor and the barking of dogs assailed her.

A voice came out of nowhere, calling for ale, but the man spoke with an unfamiliar dialect which made Melissa wonder where he might come from. There were candles burning in sconces set at intervals along the walls, and their distinctive smell caused Melissa to wrinkle her nose. They cast their flickering light over floorboards that weren’t very clean, and in one corner a couple of dogs were fighting over a bone.

When Melissa inhaled sharply, the stench of unwashed humans and cooking clogged her nose and throat. It made her gag in disgust and she blinked, shaking her head to clear the images away. She looked around the room for the source of the voice, but there was no one there now except Dorothy and Jolie. They were still talking and

didn't look as though they'd heard or seen anything unusual. Completely disorientated, Melissa stumbled after the others when they moved on.

'The whole of the first floor was created later to make space for more bedrooms,' Dorothy was saying, 'and an extension added in the seventeenth century made the house L-shaped.' The old lady was obviously very proud of her home and Melissa dutifully admired everything that was pointed out to her. She had no trouble making the right noises; it really was beautiful and just the sort of house she would have liked for herself. She'd been fascinated by history for as long as she could remember, so to her, living in a building this old would be paradise.

To her relief, Jolie was becoming more animated by the minute and showed great interest in what Dorothy told them.

'So this house is six hundred years old?' Jolie said. '*Six hundred* is, like, *ancient*.'

Dorothy chuckled at her expression. 'Yes, you'll get used to the idea. Isn't it nice to know that it was built to last? Just think how many storms it must have weathered. I always feel so safe here.'

Jolie nodded, but Melissa shivered involuntarily as she thought of all that must have happened during the past six centuries. Births, deaths, marriages, the house had seen them all. Laughter, sadness, love, *grief* ... As the others moved on again, a gut-wrenching sadness overwhelmed her without warning and made her gasp out loud. She wanted to curl up on the floor and howl with some dimly remembered pain. When she followed this instinct and doubled over, clutching at her clenched stomach muscles, the emotion disappeared as quickly as it had come. Melissa straightened up and took in a shuddering breath.

What on earth is the matter with me?

She felt suddenly cold and glanced over her shoulder, but there was nothing. She shook her head at her own stupidity and hurried to catch up with the others before any more strange things happened.

‘I’m so pleased you could come. I’ve been meaning to contact you ever since I found out that both your mother and grandmother had passed away,’ Dorothy said. ‘But my beloved husband, Charles, also died last year and it’s taken me a while to come to terms with that.’

They were having a chat by the fire in the sitting room and Melissa felt herself relax into the deep armchair. Entering the room for a second time, she’d been relieved not to experience any more strange sights or sounds. She put the unusual images down to an overactive imagination. It was a very old house after all.

‘Of course,’ she said now. ‘Grief isn’t easy to cope with. When I lost mum I found it so hard to accept. She was the only one I had left, apart from Jolie, of course.’

‘Yes, and what a terrible shame, dying so young. Cancer is a dreadful disease.’

Melissa nodded. It wasn’t something she wanted to dwell on. She still couldn’t quite grasp that her mother was really gone. ‘I have to admit your call came as quite a surprise. Grandma hardly ever spoke of you and I didn’t expect to hear from you.’

Melissa hadn’t even known of Dorothy’s existence until she began to trace her family tree and started asking questions, but she thought it best not to mention that. When pressed as to the reason for this estrangement, her mother had told her Dorothy wanted no contact with their part of the family and then muttered something about ‘letting sleeping dogs lie’. This was intriguing and Melissa hoped she would finally get some answers.

‘Oh, it was all so silly.’ Dorothy shrugged. ‘Ruth and I had an argument and we were both very stubborn. The years went by and before we knew it, it was too late to patch things up. It was just one of those things, but it’s all in the past now. It needn’t concern us.’

Melissa felt sure there must have been more to it than that, but before she could ask Dorothy for details, the old lady changed the subject.

‘So what is it you do exactly? I gather you’re divorced, so presumably you work, at least part time?’

‘Yes, that’s right. I’m a professional genealogist. I prepare family trees for private clients and I also do freelance jobs for several law firms, helping them to find people mentioned in wills. Some of the work can be done from home, which makes it ideal for me.’

‘Sounds fascinating.’ Dorothy looked as though she meant it and Melissa was just about to tell her more when they were interrupted by the sound of the front door slamming. The noise made Melissa’s stomach muscles clench with sudden anxiety. She was still trying to puzzle out this irrational reaction when, seconds later, Jolie burst into the sitting room, closely followed by a panting Russ. They were both oblivious to the trail of mud behind them as Jolie rushed to her mother’s side and Russ trotted over to lie down on a little dog bed next to Dorothy, looking tired but happy. Melissa cringed and tried in vain to signal to her daughter, but Dorothy made no comment.

‘Mum, you won’t believe it. There’s a swimming pool outside. A huge one!’ Jolie turned to Dorothy. ‘Can I go for a swim, please?’

‘In February? Goodness, no, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until May at least,’ Dorothy laughed. ‘I can’t afford to heat that monstrosity.’

‘Oh.’ Jolie looked disappointed, then brightened up again. ‘So can we come back in May, Mum?’

‘Perhaps you should just wait to be *invited* back?’ Melissa replied pointedly, and shook her head at Jolie.

‘Oh, yeah, right.’ Jolie flung herself into a deep armchair near the fireplace and stared into the flames.

Melissa sighed inwardly, but at least Jolie seemed to have forgotten that she didn’t want to spend the weekend in the country ‘with a stuffy old aunt’. She’d gone off to explore the enormous garden of the manor house with her canine companion, eyes sparkling with excitement.

‘Of course you’re welcome any time, dear.’ Dorothy stood up. ‘Now I expect you’re thirsty after all that exercise. I’ll get you some squash, shall I? And some biscuits, perhaps? You youngsters are always hungry, I understand.’

‘Er, do you have Coke?’ Jolie looked mildly offended to be offered a drink she considered fit only for babies.

‘I’m sure Jolie could find her way to the kitchen to fetch something for herself,’ Melissa protested. Since her divorce from Jolie’s dad the previous year, she’d been trying hard to make her daughter more self-reliant. ‘And water is fine, thank you.’

‘No, no, it’s no bother. I shan’t be a moment and I’ll see what I can find.’

‘Great, thanks.’ Jolie nodded and, as soon as Dorothy had left, she whispered, ‘Your aunt is really nice, Mum, I like her. And I like this house, too.’

‘Great-aunt,’ Melissa corrected automatically, ‘and yes, I think I like her, too.’ She felt it was early days yet and she didn’t really know Dorothy well enough, but at least they had made a start. ‘She might like you better if you take your shoes off next time you come in from the garden, though.’ She glanced at the rapidly drying mud on the carpet.

‘Oops.’ Jolie grinned and Melissa couldn’t help but smile back.

She shook her head at her daughter. ‘You’re impossible.’

‘But you love me anyway,’ Jolie shot back with a cheeky grin, her red curls bouncing. Her hair was of a particularly vivid shade of red, unlike Melissa’s own which was more a warm auburn.

‘Hmm,’ Melissa said, but they both knew she found it hard to be stern and she loved Jolie to bits.

She took a deep breath and tried to relax again, soothed by the peaceful setting. It really was an amazing house, she had to agree, although a slight feeling of unease still lingered in her mind. ‘It must be wonderful to live here,’ she said, ignoring a little voice inside her which insisted that somehow she knew exactly what it was like. ‘Aunt Dorothy is a lucky woman.’

As she prepared for bed that night in the guest room she was sharing with Jolie, Melissa thought about the odd sensations she’d been experiencing all day. Was she just imagining things, affected by the

unusual surroundings? If not, what else could be causing them?

Dorothy had confirmed that neither Melissa, nor her parents, had ever visited Ashleigh, so she definitely couldn't have any real memories of the place. There must be another explanation. Had her grandmother told her tales of the house when she was a little girl, perhaps? But she couldn't recall Grandma ever doing anything except tell her not to put her sticky fingers on her furniture.

It was a mystery.

With a sigh, she crept into bed and listened to Jolie's soft breathing. She was glad now that her daughter had insisted they share, even though Dorothy had offered them a room each.

'I'd rather stay with you, Mum,' Jolie had whispered. 'Just this first time.' Melissa knew what she meant as waking up in strange surroundings was always daunting.

She closed her eyes and as she drifted off to sleep her mind filled once more with bewildering images. Images that teased at her brain, tantalising, beckoning her. Melissa concentrated hard. She wanted to remember more, much more, but someone was calling her ...

Chapter Two

Ashleigh Manor, Kent – 1460

‘You are to return by this afternoon or I’ll fetch you myself, girl!’

Her father’s bellow echoed through the hall as Sibell scurried to the door. She bit back a sharp retort while fumbling with the latch in her haste to escape his presence. ‘Girl’ he called her, even though she was a woman grown and a widow to boot. Not that it made a difference to him, she thought, she was still his chattel to dispose of as he wished. She gritted her teeth in frustration and a sigh of relief hissed out of her as she finally slammed the sturdy front door shut.

For the moment, at least, she was safe.

‘Freedom!’ The very word was an exclamation of joy. Although she only dared whisper it, Sibell savoured the feel of it on her tongue. She gulped in huge lungfuls of the clean, sweet country air, and revelled in the warmth spread over her face by the late February sun. Its feeble rays caressed the dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose and probably highlighted the pallor of her translucent skin. Forgetting herself, she laughed out loud with sheer pleasure, then clapped a hand over her mouth. She glanced back towards the house in fear and froze for an instant.

All remained quiet. No one had heard.

Sibell set off towards the lane at a brisk walk, but soon had to slow down. Three days with only meagre rations of food had sapped her energy and she was still sore from the beating she’d received before being locked in. Out of sight of the house she stopped to catch her breath for a moment before continuing. The track, which passed for a road in this part of the world, was unbelievably muddy. Sibell’s wooden pattens made a slurping noise for each step she took, and became heavier by the minute as the thick substance stuck to the soles. Normally she would have ridden her docile mare, as befitted a lady, but this luxury had been denied her today since she was in deep

disgrace.

She had to reach her destination. *It's my only hope.* This thought spurred her on and after a quick glance over her shoulder, she began to trudge along the lane.

'Your pardon, mistress, but could you direct us to the manor of Idenhurst, please?'

The question, although civil enough and asked in a reasonable tone of voice, made Sibell jump. Her euphoria at being outside the confines of her chamber evaporated in an instant as she became aware of two horsemen who had halted just beside her. They were staring down at her from the intimidating height of their steeds. How could she possibly have missed hearing the approach of two riders? These were dangerous times and she needed her wits about her. She scanned her surroundings surreptitiously, but there was no one within sight who could come to her aid.

'Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you.' The deep voice was gentle and soothing, but as Sibell squinted up at the man, shielding her eyes from the light with one hand, her breath caught in her throat. A shard of fear stabbed her sharply. She swallowed hard. It seemed to her that she had exchanged one peril for another.

Seated on a giant war horse of shimmering grey was a huge warrior. Golden hair fell to his shoulders, where it brushed the top of his cerulean blue cloak. Strength and power radiated from every taut muscle and the determined set of his jaw indicated that he wasn't a man to be crossed. Sibell had no doubt he was dangerous; no doubt at all.

As he raised an eyebrow in amused enquiry, however, the feeling of terror subsided. She recalled that he was expecting an answer. His horse champed at the bit and pawed the ground with a massive front hoof, as if he too was tiring of the wait.

'I-Idenhurst?' she stammered, embarrassed by her lack of courtesy. 'I am going there myself and it's but another few miles along this track.'

'My thanks.' The man smiled, showing even white teeth, and

adjusted his seat in the saddle. Sibell blinked. He had the most incredible smile and she couldn't help but stare, though she knew she shouldn't.

He continued, 'Since we are travelling the same way, perhaps you'd care to ride with me and save your skirts from the mire? It's the least I can do for such a beautiful lady.'

Sibell's eyes widened and she felt the heat of a blush spread across her cheeks. He had paid her a compliment. But ... ride with him? Only an arrogant stranger would think to ask a lady such a thing.

'No, I thank you, sir. I am enjoying my walk. Truly, it's not far.' Although her voice sounded far from convincing to her own ears, she resolutely ignored the chafing of her dress against the sore welts across her back. Likewise, she did her best to ignore the sea of mud in which she was standing. The offer of a ride was most tempting, but she couldn't possibly accept.

She managed an awkward curtsey intended as a dismissal, but when she straightened up, the riders hadn't moved an inch. The golden-haired one was staring at her with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Perhaps he wasn't used to having his invitations refused, Sibell thought. Most ladies would likely have jumped at the chance to ride with him, but not her. *I dare not*. She flushed again and looked pointedly at the ground, waiting for their departure.

'Oh, I see what the problem is,' she heard him say smoothly. 'I haven't introduced myself and of course no respectable lady can ride with a stranger.' Against her better judgement she looked up as, half-standing up in the saddle, he bowed to her. 'I'm Sir Roger of Langford and this is my squire, Hugone.' He indicated the second rider, a gangly youth with straight, dark hair whom Sibell had almost forgotten. The squire had faded into insignificance next to his master, but she now saw he was goggling at her with his mouth open. He blushed at the introduction and bowed low over the neck of his horse.

She inclined her head in his direction before dropping another curtsey to his master. 'And I am Sibell of Ashleigh, but ...'

'I won't listen to any refusals, mistress.' The knight held up his

hand to stop her from arguing. 'My conscience will not allow me to leave a lady by the roadside, alone and unprotected. These are dangerous times,' he added, unconsciously echoing her earlier thoughts. His tone was haughty now, that of a man used to having his orders obeyed, she guessed.

But conscience? Sibell doubted very much he possessed such a thing and the only person she needed protection from was him. She was about to say so when she noticed a distinct twinkle in his eyes. Could he be laughing at her? She tossed her head and drew herself up to deliver a scathing retort, but he forestalled her once more.

'As you see, you are suitably chaperoned by Hugone, who wouldn't dream of allowing a lady to come to any harm.' The young squire cast a look of confusion at his master, who ignored him and continued. 'So let us be off, for I have urgent business with Sir Gilbert Presseille at Idenhurst.' Sibell's protest was cut short by another devastating smile and she found to her consternation that her mind had stopped functioning. The intended reprimand died on her lips.

Sir Roger had thrown down the gauntlet of a challenge. He stretched out his hand peremptorily, daring her with mischievous eyes to refuse once more.

Rebellion suddenly stirred within Sibell and a treacherous voice in her mind asked, 'Why shouldn't I ride with him?' Hadn't she vowed to fight her father with any means at her disposal these last few days? She must have paced her bedchamber a hundred times at least, cursing him and his edicts. Well, here was her chance to defy him.

Her mind made up, she put her small hand in Sir Roger's large one without further hesitation. She felt the strength of his fingers as he pulled her up behind him. She was lifted effortlessly, as if she weighed nothing at all, and found herself sitting on the huge rump of his war horse. He nudged the destrier and the animal set off at a slow walk.

'His name is Snowflake.' Sir Roger patted the horse with affection as they ambled along the lane. 'His white mane and tail and gleaming coat made it the only choice of name for him, so what could I do? I

had to bow to the inevitable.’ The knight laughed, a rich, glorious sound that sent vibrations of pleasure shooting through Sibell. ‘It’s not really a name to inspire awe in my enemies though, you must agree, but I try to keep it a secret. You’ll not tell, mistress?’

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his blue eyes twinkling. At such close quarters she noticed that his otherwise regular features were marred by a long scar running from the tip of the left eyebrow down towards his firm jaw line. An old wound, neatly healed, the puckered welt wasn’t ugly or frightening. Sibell wasn’t in any way repelled by it. In fact, strangely enough, she found it attractive, although she had no idea why that should be so.

She shook her head, unable to speak. He was trying to put her at ease, but she was too aware of him as a man to relax in his company. Of necessity she had to hold on to his lean waist in order to keep her seat, but she tried to keep her touch as light as possible. Even so, there was a strange tingling in her fingers every time she felt him move with the horse. She could have sworn she heard a smile in his voice when he said, ‘Hold on tight, Mistress Sibell. We wouldn’t want you falling off.’ Could he read her mind?

The morning was cold, despite the best efforts of the sun, and the warmth from Sir Roger’s steed was very welcome indeed. Sibell wasn’t convinced that riding with him was good for her peace of mind, but she had to admit it was definitely preferable to plodding along muddy tracks on foot. *As long as no one sees me.* Her father wouldn’t approve of her so much as talking to this man, let alone riding with him. Sibell shivered with remembered pain and concentrated on her surroundings.

A pox on her father, she thought defiantly.



A searing pain in her back woke Melissa abruptly in the middle of the night, dragging her out of a dream, which faded away even though she struggled to hold on to it. With a sigh, she turned over and tried to go to sleep again, but her back was very sore and she couldn’t get

comfortable. She wondered what was wrong with it and grimaced as she tried to stretch.

Slowly, she became aware of a pungent smell in the room – horse or farmyard if she wasn't mistaken. It would be impossible to imagine such a strong odour, so it had to be real. *Perhaps there's a farm nearby? That might explain it.* It was a far cry from the noxious exhaust fumes outside her London flat, and strangely enough she found it less repellent. For some reason, it made her feel at home.

Still hurting, she sat up and felt her back to determine the cause of the pain, but it was subsiding rapidly now. Within seconds it had disappeared completely. Puzzled, she fumbled for the light to have a proper look, then remembered she was sharing the room with Jolie. She would have to look in the morning. Irritated, she lay down again.

The timbers of the old house creaked and she heard the wind whistling down the chimney in the tiny fireplace. The sounds didn't disturb her. On the contrary, they gave her a feeling of security. She burrowed deep under the cover once more. If she closed her eyes, perhaps she could imagine how it must have been to live here hundreds of years ago, when there was no electricity or central heating. Only open fireplaces, horses and bold knights roaming the countryside. Bold knights ...?



'Isn't this much better than walking?' Sir Roger asked cheerfully after they had been riding for a while. 'We'll be at Idenhurst in no time.'

Sibell didn't know how to reply. It seemed to her he was going incredibly slowly and she wanted the journey over with in case they were seen. On the other hand, she enjoyed his banter and it made a nice change to be treated as though she was of consequence for once. Lately, she'd been ignored so often it felt as if she didn't exist.

She heard the sound of horse's hooves in the distance and turned swiftly to scan the surrounding area.

'You don't fear robbers, do you, mistress?' He kept glancing over

his shoulder at her.

‘What? Oh, no.’ Sibell sighed. *Robbers – if only it was that simple.*

A tress of hair had escaped her headdress and impatiently she tried to push it back underneath the linen, then froze as she heard Sir Roger’s sharp intake of breath. She saw him stare, mesmerised, at the red colour of her hair. Embarrassed, she turned away. He was probably as appalled by its fiery hue as she was, she thought, but he recovered quickly and looked away.

‘I can assure you I’m well able to defend you against all but an army of men.’ He patted the lethal-looking sword dangling at his waist and Sibell glanced at the weapon. She didn’t think it an idle boast. Most men would likely think twice before challenging someone like him. With another inward sigh, she decided to tell him the truth. No doubt he’d hear all about her anyway if he stayed in these parts.

‘No, it’s not outlaws I fear, Sir Roger, but my father,’ she admitted.

‘Ah.’ Sir Roger nodded slowly, comprehension dawning in his eyes. ‘Is there perhaps another route we could take where the chances of meeting anyone would lessen?’

‘Why, yes.’ She was grateful for his quick understanding and gave him directions and they soon turned off the track into a small forest instead. ‘It’s only slightly further this way. You don’t mind?’

‘Not at all, it’s a fine morning for a ride after all.’ He grinned at her. ‘And with such lovely company, how could I complain?’

Sibell felt her cheeks turn rosy yet again. It had been a long time since anyone had teased her in this manner and she wasn’t used to the attentions of men such as he. The horse’s gait was soothing, however, and eventually she relaxed in his company and even managed to smile back as Sir Roger continued with his banter.

‘There, I knew it,’ he exclaimed, casting a triumphant look over his shoulder. ‘You do indeed have dimples. A face as perfect as yours had to have them, it was a foregone conclusion.’

‘What nonsense.’ A giggle escaped her before she could stop it. ‘I

can see you're practised in the art of flirtation, sir, but I shall ignore you. No doubt you speak that way to every female you encounter.'

He pretended to look mortally offended and she had to laugh at his expression. 'You wound me to the quick, mistress,' he protested. 'I swear, everyone else will seem sadly wilted after your vibrant beauty.'

Sibell just shook her head. She couldn't possibly take him seriously, but she enjoyed his compliments all the same. They were a far cry from the comments she usually received at home where nothing she did ever seemed to please anyone.

As they came out of the forest and approached Idenhurst in the distance, however, Sir Roger's expression hardened. The jovial man seemed to disappear in an instant, to be replaced by the frightening stranger she had first met. 'Tell me,' he said, 'what do you know of Sir Gilbert? What manner of man is he?'

'Sir Gilbert? Why he's the best of men,' she replied without hesitation. 'One to be reckoned with, but honest and honourable at all times.'

'Truly?' Sir Roger didn't look convinced.

'Yes. He was my father-in-law, you know. That is, until my husband died last year ...' Sibell felt the sorrow wash over her once more as she recalled the circumstances that had triggered her present predicament. As always, she tried to suppress the memories. 'I met with nothing but kindness at Idenhurst.'

'He must have died very young, your husband?'

'Yes, Roland was barely twenty. He died in the recent fighting.'

'Is that so?'

Sir Roger looked as though he was about to add something to this comment, but he must have thought better of it since he turned away and said no more. Sibell saw him concentrate on his surroundings as they came closer to their destination. He looked around with keen eyes, obviously noting every detail with interest. To Sibell, Idenhurst had been a much-loved home, but she now tried to look at it from a stranger's point of view.

It was a large, moated manor house built of creamy yellow stone with red-tiled roofs. To reach it, they had to pass over a bridge and under a small tower into a cobbled courtyard, which was teeming with people going about their daily business. Directly opposite the entrance tower was the enormous hall, which had clearly been designed to impress visitors with its proportions and grandeur. It had more than the usual number of windows for a building of this size, indicating that Sir Gilbert was a man of means as well as power. A wealth of other buildings surrounded the courtyard quadrangle, effectively enclosing it. Outside were gardens and an orchard, as well as a series of large fishponds.

Idenhurst was not intended as a fortress. Nonetheless, there were a number of fighting men lounging about in the morning sun, polishing their weapons and sharpening swords and daggers. A group of young squires were practising swordplay in one corner under the watchful eye of a seasoned warrior. Several huge destriers were being curried to glossy perfection by the stable grooms.

‘Very nice,’ Sibell heard Sir Roger mutter sarcastically and it suddenly occurred to her to wonder what his purpose in coming here was. She fervently hoped he wasn’t an enemy of Sir Gilbert’s. That would mean he’d be sent packing instantly and she realised she didn’t want that.

She wanted him to stay.

To be continued

Available as an ebook very soon in paperback from 7th July 2012.