

LANA  
WILLIAMS

BELIEVE  
IN ME

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## DEDICATION

To my readers: thank you so much for all the emails, FB messages, and tweets! They inspire me in so many ways. Writing stories wouldn't be near as much fun without you to read them.

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## CHAPTER ONE

*England, September, 1268*

A life dedicated to God was not for her. Of that, Lady Cristiana Ormond was quite certain. Her stay at the Convent of Saint Gabriel had not changed her lack of aspiration toward a religious life. She and the sisters had a difference of opinion—one that could not be easily overcome. They'd been kind the past two months since her mother's death, but refused to give credence to her need to discover the identity of her mother's murderer.

'Grieve,' they said, 'and forgive.' How could she when anger burned so bright within her?

With a wary eye on her formidable keeper, Sister Mawde, Cristiana put down the shoe in which she'd feigned interest and edged closer to the back of the shoemaker's tent. Somehow, she had to find a way to escape. Though her heart pounded with fear at the thought of the journey that lay before her, her fury was greater. Her mother's death would not go unpunished as long as Cristiana lived.

Yesterday a message had arrived at the convent advising Cristiana that she had been granted the privilege of becoming a ward of Bishop Thomas Duval. The sisters were ecstatic at the honor to be bestowed upon her. An escort was scheduled to arrive this very day to see her safely to Longsbury Cathedral.

She could not—would not—let that happen.

Her plan to discover who'd murdered her mother did not include living under Bishop Duval's care. He was the one person her mother had warned her to avoid at all costs—the man Cristiana suspected had been involved in her mother's death. She would not be his next victim.

Through the narrow slit of the tent, she glimpsed the noisy crowded chaos outside. The Michaelmas fair covered the rolling meadow of the small shire, including the busy shoemaker's tent in which she stood. The autumn harvest had been plentiful, and the local lord had arranged for a great celebration. Once she slipped outside, the crowd would serve to hide her until she could make her way into the surrounding forest.

At least, that was her hope.

"Surely those are far too large for you, Sister Mawde." Cristiana pointed to the shoes the nun held, hoping to distract her sentry.

It took only a moment for the short, stout nun to latch onto the feigned insult. "Indeed they are. I need something much smaller," she informed the shoemaker.

"But your feet measured that size," the man sputtered.

The resulting conversation escalated into a heated argument between the pair, allowing Cristiana to take another step closer to the narrow opening.

She might be committing an unforgiveable sin by seeking revenge rather than offering forgiveness, but her eternal life be damned. Whoever had killed her mother deserved her wrath and would soon have his hands full with it. Wasn't God supposed to be on the side of the righteous? Her throat tightened as the pain of her loss washed over her. Perhaps after her mother was avenged, she'd be able to grieve properly.

"You heathen!" Sister Mawde accused the

shoemaker. “First you insult me by insisting I have large feet and now you try to rob me blind! If you think anyone will pay such outrageous prices, you’d best think again.” She waved the birch switch she always carried in his face.

The man cringed as he denied her claim.

Cristiana shook her head, thinking the sister’s behavior rather harsh for a woman devoted to God.

With a deep breath, she looked out of the tent again and determined the moment ripe. “Good day to you, sister,” she quietly bid the back of the angry woman who still haggled with the shoemaker, then slipped outside. As nonchalantly as possible, though her heart clattered in her chest, she wove her way around the next tent.

She pulled off the wimple covering her long blonde braid and stuffed the garment inside her black novice tunic, grimacing as the coarse wool scratched her work-worn hands. The constant scrubbing required at the convent had granted her chipped nails and chapped knuckles. While she wasn’t afraid of hard work, the scouring of already clean surfaces seemed pointless and surely hadn’t helped to ease her grief or save her soul.

Behind another tent, she stopped to remove the tunic and wrap it over her arm, certain Sister Mawde wouldn’t search for the deep crimson kirtle she’d hidden underneath. That morn, she’d donned every item of clothing she’d brought to the convent, the only way she could think of to take them with her. Bringing along her belongings in a chest had been out of the question, and she had no intention of gracing the doors of the Convent of Saint Gabriel at a later date for her possessions.

She threaded her way through the crowd, moving toward the nearest copse of trees, her breath hitching with every step. Boisterous laughter flowed amongst the tents followed closely by the soft music of a lute,

the joyful sounds at odds with her dark thoughts.

Craftsmen hocked their wares, and entertainers of all sorts roamed the area. Villagers dressed in drab clothes rubbed elbows with merchants and brightly clothed nobility, each identifiable by the color of his clothing and the weight of his purse.

Food was abundant for a small price, including the traditional well-fattened geese. The appetizing aroma of spit-roasted goose wafted through the air, causing Cristiana's stomach to grumble. The time for the mid-day meal had passed. Though she was hungry, the scent mixed ominously with her nerves.

The food served at the convent provided another reason not to extend her stay. While the heavy weight of grief had diminished her appetite, the pottage served at each meal failed to entice it back. The ease of which she'd been able to don all her kirtles attested to her recent weight loss. She carried a few coins in her pouch but those couldn't yet be spent despite the tempting aromas that filled the air.

"Hold!"

Cristiana's heart flew to her throat. She spun to look behind her, only to realize the man yelled at the children bobbing in and out of the crowd, their laughter and shouts adding to the confusion.

She closed her eyes, weak with relief. On trembling legs, she continued toward the cover of trees a short distance from the crowded meadow where a fence bordered the clearing. A young girl balanced precariously on a fence rail, her focus intent on the savory meat pie she munched, ignoring the pleas from the boy who stood before her.

"Please, a bite is all I ask. They're my favorite and well you know it!" The boy's lip quivered with the intensity of his feelings.

"You've had your own already, and I'm not sharing," the girl replied between mouthfuls.

Cristiana's sympathies fell squarely on the side of



the girl. She wouldn't have shared either.

"Please?" the boy pleaded.

"Nay, and don't ask again." The girl's golden curls bounced as she shook her head, her brow furrowed.

A typical male, the boy resorted to violence. He grabbed the girl's leg and tugged.

With a scream, the girl lost her balance, the meat pie flying through the air as she rapped the back of her head on the fence and fell, landing on her arm.

"You there," Cristiana called to the boy before he could do further injury.

He looked up, his eyes wide with fright. "I didn't mean to hurt her, my lady."

"Aye, I could see that by the way you pulled her off the fence." Her sarcasm was lost on the boy. "Fetch help quickly!"

His bright blue eyes filled with tears before he spun and raced across the meadow, disappearing into the crowd. She could only hope he did as she'd bid. The little girl lay still, her face pinched with pain, her big brown eyes full of panic.

Cristiana knelt down and smoothed the tousled curls off the girl's face. With a deep breath, she steeled herself for the task ahead of her. She'd never been able to deny anyone who needed her gift, regardless of the price to herself. Resolved to what needed to be done, she hoped the delay wouldn't cost her the freedom she sought. The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach didn't bode well. Pushing aside her worry, she cleared her mind, preparing herself for what needed to be done. "Does it hurt?"

The girl nodded once, her face scrunching as she started to cry.

Cristiana glanced about to make certain no one watched. Then, as casually as possible, she held her hands at the back of the girl's head. "Can you tell me where the pain is?" she asked, trying to keep the child's mind off of what she was about to do.

“My head.” She pointed to where she’d struck the fence, her chest shuddering with sobs.

Cristiana closed her eyes, gathering her focus as she pressed her fingers against the lump swelling at the back of the little girl’s head. With a deep breath, she pushed her thoughts toward the injury for a long moment then drew them back, bringing the ache with her, wincing as it pierced her head then flooded her body. She opened her eyes. “Is that better?”

The girl’s tear-filled eyes widened with wonder. “My arm?”

Cristiana moved her hands down the girl’s arm, searching for the heat that accompanied injuries. Right there, at her wrist, a broken bone. Trembling, Cristiana again drew a long, slow breath, closed her eyes, and held the wrist.

Pain, sharp and searing, flowed into Cristiana starting at her own wrist before diffusing through her. She sucked in her breath and waited for the sensation to ease, trying not to moan. As the pain slowly ebbed, a deep exhaustion slid through her, weighting her limbs. Her attempt to escape already seemed impossible, and she hadn’t yet made it out of the meadow.

“My lady, however did you do that? My arm, my head, they’re all better.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Cristiana smiled even as pain and weariness rolled through her. She fought to keep her expression and voice steady. “Sometimes it takes a moment to recover when you fall.”

Too late, she sensed a presence behind her. She turned, expecting a concerned parent, wondering what explanation she could give for the girl’s quick recovery.

Instead, she discovered a tall man with a face that begged a second look. His surcoat, emblazoned with a roaring lion, and the imposing sword strapped to his side marked him as a knight.

His brown wavy hair was overly long, brushing the top of his shoulders. A few wayward locks curled over

his forehead. His high cheekbones and narrow, straight nose gave him the perfect looks of an angel. Brown eyes—or did they hold a hint of green?—held a steely edge that put any thoughts of an angel to rest. This was not a man to be crossed.

As she eyed the imposing length of him, she feared her attempt to escape had just been thwarted.



Sir William de Bremont stared down at the lady where she knelt beside the child, uncertain if he'd found his quarry. Blonde hair shot with gold was pulled back from the woman's face in a tight plait. Her nose ended in a pert upturn. Brows a shade darker than her hair framed deep brown eyes that held a wary intelligence. Her rounded cheekbones softened the planes of her pale, heart-shaped face.

He'd seen the child fall, yet from the grimace of pain on the lady's face, she appeared to be the one hurt. Surely he was mistaken. He glanced over at Henry, his companion, and motioned for him to remain where he was.

The older knight nodded and eased into the crowd, keeping William in sight.

William looked back to find the lady's expression of pain had eased. "Can I be of assistance?"

The deep brown of her eyes was cool. "I don't suppose you're her father?" she asked, her voice husky and hopeful.

"Nay."

"I feared not." She heaved a sigh then turned to the girl who sat beside her. "All better?"

The child nodded, eyes still wide.

"Off with you then." The lady tried to lift the girl to her feet, but couldn't quite accomplish the task.

William stepped forward and raised the little one to a standing position with his good arm, trying not to

grimace at the pain the movement caused.

The lady dipped her head in thanks, as though embarrassed at her weakness. She smoothed the girl's golden curls. "Don't let that boy hurt you anymore, all right?"

Again the urchin nodded then bounded off, none the worse for the wear, her meat pie forgotten in the grass.

William said nothing as he tried to reconcile all he'd witnessed. Deciding he'd misinterpreted the events, he offered his hand. "Would you be Lady Cristiana Ormond?"

"A moment if you please," she said with a shake of her head, remaining where she was, not even looking at his outstretched hand.

Irritated at her odd behavior and unable to guess why she preferred to remain on the ground, he waited impatiently as she gazed around the meadow. William could only shrug at Henry's puzzled expression. He was confused by her as well.

If this was indeed Lady Cristiana, she'd caused him enough problems already. But then again, beautiful ladies always complicated a plan. She was supposed to be awaiting him at the convent, but instead, he'd found her attempting to flee the fair.

Though he'd never before met her, she'd caught his attention earlier while amongst the gaggle of sisters who'd wandered the fair in their plain black tunics. Her striking beauty and grace had set her apart. He'd followed her at a safe distance until she'd disappeared. Luckily, it hadn't taken him long to spot her, though she'd shed the black tunic and wimple.

Complications were not what he needed.

He glanced down again to where she sat, lingering too long on the curve of her cheek, on the blonde tendrils that had escaped her braid. Beautiful, indeed.

"All right then." With a twist of her mouth, as though she were less than grateful for his assistance, she raised her hand for him to take and rose slowly,

leaning heavily on him.

“Are you unwell, my lady?”

“I am fine, merely tired.”

Tired in the middle of the day? But he kept his thoughts to himself. “Are you Lady Cristiana Ormond?” he asked again.

Those large eyes narrowed. “Who would be asking?”

“I’m Sir William de Bremont. I was sent by Bishop Duval to escort you to him.”

Her lips pursed, and he could tell she debated lying to him about her identity.

“So close,” she muttered as she closed her eyes for a moment.

“Pardon?” he asked, not certain he’d heard her correctly.

“Never mind.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I truly appreciate you coming, but I am not going with you to the bishop’s.”

Perplexed, William could only stare at the woman. “Refusal is not an option.”

“Of course it is. You’ve asked me to accompany you, and I have refused. I believe our business is complete. I’m sorry you’ve wasted your time.” She turned away but William caught her elbow.

“I fear this is not an invitation, my lady, but an order.”

“An order?” She scoffed, then leaned around him to look past his shoulder, her gaze scanning the crowd. Apparently satisfied with what she saw, she faced him once again. “How much?”

“What?”

She rubbed her fingers together. “What will it cost?”

“To do what?”

“For you to forget you saw me.”

Surprised, William could think of no response except to stare at her. How odd—she didn’t look daft. “I fear there’s been some misunderstanding.”

“Good heavens, sir. What is it you don’t

understand?" she asked, her agitation increasing. "What is the bishop paying you? I will do my best to double it if you forget you saw me and let me continue on my way."

William shook his head, taken aback by her boldness. "My services are not for sale."

Lady Cristiana scoffed. "Everyone is for sale, including you. The bishop hired you, correct? Now name your price and be quick about it, else the sisters will discover me and your opportunity will be lost." She tapped her finger against her lips as she waited for him to respond. "Out with it, sir. Quickly."

"My lady—"

She peeked over his shoulder yet again and her eyes widened in alarm. With a gasp, she stepped closer to him, gripping the front of his surcoat as though she suddenly found him irresistible.

Her gaze found his, those eyes now soft and warm, their panicked depths dragging him in. "Please. Please, good sir, I beg you. Will you aid me?"

She stretched up on her toes, her lips parted a hair's breadth from his. He could already taste their sweet fruit, feel the warm press of her lush body against his. Blood rushed to his nether regions, leaving his thoughts far behind.

What had been her plea?

He caught himself not a moment too late, for he had very nearly nodded in agreement, prepared to fulfill her every wish. Where was his honor? His sense of duty?

"I've given the bishop my word to deliver you to Longsbury."

"Truly? Of all the knights who could've been sent to fetch me, the bishop managed to find one bound by honor rather than a few coins? Just my rotten luck." She released his surcoat and sighed. "You had best seek out the sisters and tell them you've found me before they tear apart the fair searching. The villagers

will not take kindly to a disruption of their celebration.”

He smiled, amused by her clever attempt to escape him. “And leave you unaccompanied? I think not. I’m certain the sisters would prefer to see for themselves that you are safe.”

She scowled at him. “You’re not the trusting sort, are you?”

“On the contrary, my lady. I’m very trustworthy.”

“And a fine sense of humor, I see. Rotten luck indeed.”

He offered his elbow. “Shall we?”

Cristiana stared at him, obviously weighing her choices. “And if I refuse?”

“That would not be wise.”

She sent him a measuring look, clearly not convinced.

“Do not cross me, my lady.”

Still she said nothing.

Deciding he’d gain more ground if he changed tactics, he added, “I would provide you safe escort to speak with the bishop and you can discuss the details with him.”

“Lady Cristiana!” a shrill voice interrupted.

William turned to see the stout form of a nun barreling toward them, a switch grasped tightly in her hand.

“Oh, dear,” Cristiana muttered as she waved at the nun. Sadness came over her tired expression like a window shutter blocking out the sun. “You have no idea of the havoc you wreak. But for the moment, I see you’ll not be convinced to allow me to depart. Let us find the other sisters and leave this place.”

William frowned, confused by the lady. Why did he feel as if he’d just lost the upper hand with her?