

Chapter One

On a road in France, October 1307

“*ROLAND!*” Eleanor screamed, as the sword lashed out.

Her page’s eyes swung to her, dilated with the knowledge that the blood pumping from his slashed throat meant the end of his young life, before it had scarcely begun.

Eleanor jerked into action, wheeling her horse as the murderer lowered his bloodied sword and Roland toppled to the ground. Before she could gallop off, the other ruffian spurred forward and snatched her from the saddle. He twisted his head away as she slashed her nails at his eyes, then a deep powerful voice arrested the violent action.

“Stop! What devilry is this?”

Eleanor, the breath crushed from her lungs, her legs dangling helplessly, swung her gaze toward the newcomer who’d ridden up unnoticed. She saw a tall knight, clad in a full suit of chainmail under a white surcoat, brandishing a drawn sword.

Before she could speak, the murderer thumped himself on the chest where his livery displayed the royal arms.

“King Philip’s business, fellow. Ride on.”

Rather than quelling him, this speech enraged the knight.

“Aye! A proper business indeed for Philip the Foul—child-murder and abduction!” His sword flashed in the early morning sunlight as he spurred his charger forward.

“King’s business! King’s business!” The murderer’s shouts turned into a choked-off howl as the knight’s sword hissed through the air, avoiding his parry with contemptuous ease, and cut him from the saddle.

The knight didn’t spare him a second glance, but wheeled his horse toward Eleanor and her captor. But the man pressed his sword to her throat.

“Go!” he screamed. “Leave, or she dies!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the knight struck again. The ruffian’s weapon dropped away, together with the arm that held it. His other arm that held her spasmed, then its grip loosened.

Eleanor twisted free and slipped to the ground on the left side. The knight took advantage of the open target to dispatch the ruffian with his sword’s back-swing.

Eleanor fell to her knees, shaking, almost overcome by the sudden, appalling horror of the scene. She forced herself not to vomit. Her eyes frantically sought Roland. *Could he still be alive?* Shutting her mind to the frightful carnage, she crawled over to him and cradled his head on her lap, heedless of the blood. His eyes gazed up at her sightlessly, ghastly to see in their lack of the lively youthful sparkle. She bowed her head over him, unaware she was keening like a wounded animal.

She cried out in terror as a mailed hand came into her field of vision, but instead of seizing her, it gently closed the boy’s eyes.

“I’m sorry I wasna sooner, ma dame,” the knight said. “Was he your son—”

He must have then noticed the youthful curve of her cheek and lips, all that was visible of her face under the curtain of dark-blond hair escaping from her veil, for he amended, “—brother?”

Eleanor shook her head, and noticed Roland’s dagger lying nearby, where it had fallen from his hand after he drew it to defend his mistress. She gestured toward it.

“He—he was my page,” she whispered, after several vain attempts to speak. “My gallant, brave, *foolish* page.” She began to wail, helpless to stop the hysteria overwhelming her.

The knight took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly.

“Quiet, ma dame. Hysterics won’t help. What were the pair of you doing here, alone on the road?”

Eleanor took a grip on her fast-disappearing shred of sanity, nurtured and grew it until she could stammer, through chattering teeth, “We—we were going to Honfleur. To Roland’s family.”

“What now? D’you want to go home?” Eleanor shook her head violently.

He gave her a speculative look then added, “Honfleur is on our way. I’ll escort you there if you wish.” He looked up as another knight came riding up.

“What’s this, Brian?” The newcomer was a thickset man with a peevish, suspicious cast to his glance. The tall knight stood up from his crouch at Eleanor’s side and explained the situation.

“I’ll not leave such a brave lad to lie with this carrion! Call in the boats, Luc. We’ll put him on board.”

The man called Luc bridled at this. “Why risk it? Just sling him over his horse!”

“God’s blood, the body will be stiff by the time we get to Honfleur! Would you have him come home to his family bent like a bow? And there’s no risk—you can see the road is clear behind us.”

Luc still hesitated.

“Jacques de Molay gave *me* charge of this enterprise. Do as I say, Luc!”

Muttering under his breath, Luc turned his horse off the road toward the bank of the River Seine that ran parallel to the road, some fifty paces away.

The tall knight called Brian took up Roland’s dagger and put it back in its sheath, then picked up the boy’s body in his arms and stood in an easy surge of power. He gave Eleanor a harried glance.

“Wait here, ma dame. I’ll take care of him.” He turned away and strode toward the river.

Eleanor staggered up from her knees and followed, unwilling to stay with the hideous corpses of her attackers. He glanced back at her, but made no comment on her disobeying his instruction.

Soon she saw a team of percherons standing motionless on the towpath, their dappled gray coats making the great horses almost invisible in the early-morning mist rising from the river. As she watched, the towrope attached to their harness drooped into the water and a barge drifted in to the bank, parting the reeds with a soft rustle. More barges, tethered in line astern, loomed faintly on the river in the misty gloom. It was slack-water on the full tide, bringing the boats on a level with the towpath.

The man, Luc, muttered an irritated explanation to the boatmen. Brian laid Roland’s body on the deck, took up a leather bucket and washed off the worst of the blood. Ignoring Luc’s impatience, he then bound up the wound with a strip of cloth, arranged the body on its cloak with hands crossed on its chest, made the Sign of the Cross on its forehead, then began to recite.

“*In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis.*” He wrapped the cloak around the body, then stepped off onto the towpath and faced Eleanor.

“Will you ride along with me, ma dame, or go in the boat?”

Eleanor glanced from the indistinct, unknown figures of the boatmen, to the unfriendly Luc, then to Brian. His respectful handling of the body and recitation of the holy words had taken the edge off her horror at his efficient and savage disposal of her attackers.

“With you, mon sieur, if you please.”

“Very well.” He jerked his head at his companions. “Luc, take the point. Boatmen, on your way.”

The teamster goaded the draft horses into action, and the boatmen poled the barges away from the bank. Mist swallowed the aquatic caravan. The trio mounted up. Luc wordlessly rode off into the lead, the hunched set of his shoulders radiating disapproval. Brian tied the reins of Roland’s horse to the back of his saddle, then set off after Luc, gesturing to Eleanor to follow. In contrast to his reverent treatment of Roland’s body, he didn’t spare their assailants’ corpses a glance.

Eleanor moved up beside him, riding in a daze. The horror and rage that possessed her at Roland’s brutal, needless murder seemed to have frozen her will, leaving her emotions circling helplessly in her mind, making it impossible to plan her next move. Besides, what use was it to plan? What could she possibly do now? Where could she go?

At dawn that morning, having no ideas of her own, she had fallen in with Roland’s scheme to seek sanctuary at his parents’ chateau. Now the plan proved itself obviously romantic and hare-brained. But she’d thought, if nothing else, it would give her some breathing space to think of a more permanent sanctuary.

Impossible, now this man Brian had killed the king’s minions. Oh, not that she wasn’t grateful for her temporary deliverance. But now she couldn’t ask *anyone* to give her sanctuary. Such a request would call down the king’s wrath upon any person who helped her.

She glanced at Brian. *He* hadn’t shown any compunction about going against the king. His face, though, and his bearing in the saddle, appeared extremely tense. She noticed how very white he looked around the jaw, and how his eyes darted everywhere.

They met hers; brown eyes, bloodshot from...exhaustion? As if embarrassed at the contact, they both looked away. He stared back behind them, as if fearing pursuit. Eleanor turned and looked also.

The mist was dissolving under the rising sun. A mile of empty road met their eyes. Brian grunted, turned to the front and took off his helmet, setting it on the pommel of his saddle. He thrust back his mail coif with an impatient gesture, and rubbed his forehead where the metal rings had left a red pattern on the skin. Eleanor gazed at him again.

Sunlight struck ruby lights from thick, rough-cut auburn hair. To her surprise, Eleanor saw he was quite handsome. A noble profile, she thought, with that proud aquiline nose, firm jaw and well-defined dark brows; and the hair, such an unusual color. His name wasn’t French, and his accent odd. Who could he be?

Eleanor gazed at his surcoat in frustration; white as his jaw, anonymous, bearing no device or escutcheon.

Why was his jaw still white? He wasn’t clenching his teeth anymore...

She returned her attention to his surcoat. There seemed some ghostly form there, and what she’d first taken for a spot of blood she now recognized as a tiny piece of red thread, just on the outline of the almost invisible shape of a...of a...

“Do you find something of interest in my surcoat, ma dame?”

Shocked out of her absorption, Eleanor raised her eyes to his face. He read her expression as alarm, and said, more gently, “You have no reason to fear me.”

No, of course not. He’d saved her on the road...

It all fell into place. What group of knights protected travelers on the road?

“You’re a Knight Templar!”

It was his turn to look shocked. “What makes you think that?”

“A surcoat without a device is most uncommon,” she said, gaining confidence from his surprise. “Yet I can see a faint form, where the cloth hasn’t faded from the sun, and it looks remarkably like the shape of a Templar patté cross. There’s a tiny piece of red thread you

overlooked when you removed it. Also, Templars are always bearded. Unlike the rest of your face, your chin and cheeks are not sun-browned.”

Brian looked down, saw the red thread and plucked it out of the weave, rolled it between his fingers for a moment then dropped it.

“You’re a most canny observer, ma dame.”

“So, you *are* a Knight Templar, Sir Brian.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded.

“Is that why you’re helping me? As I recall, the Order of Knights Templar was formed to protect pilgrims on the road.”

“Are you then a pilgrim, ma dame?” he parried. “What shrine or treasure are you seeking?”

“Myself,” Eleanor said, without thinking. They turned and stared at each other, equally startled by the single word.

Brian’s surprised expression gradually transformed to thoughtfulness. He turned away and stared forward between his horse’s ears, as if he might find some great truth there.

He spoke, then, as if to himself, so Eleanor strained to hear.

“A difficult quest. One that many have taken, and very few completed to their final satisfaction.”

He turned back to her, and raised his voice to a conversational level once more. “Do you ken the nature of this self you seek?”

His tone, free of banter, demanded an honest answer. Eleanor thought carefully before replying.

“Not in detail,” she said slowly. “I only know I no longer want to be anyone’s pawn or plaything. I want a life of...of my own personal integrity.”

To her surprise, instead of persuading her to be more practical, he nodded, and his gaze on her sharpened. “And have you any ideas on how to gain this happy state?”

“None. I’d thought to enter a nunnery, but I doubt that’s possible, since...”

“Since the king set his puppet on the throne of St Peter, and since I killed his familiars he sent to abduct you,” he finished for her, his tone bitter.

“Mon sieur...how did you—? You did me a great service! I’d much prefer to be in my present situation, dire as it is, than on my way to Paris and the life of a concubine.” Eleanor sighed. “Rather than suffer that fate, I’d rather kill myself. But that is a great sin, to take my fate out of God’s hands, and so I will go on, searching for an honorable path, until I have no other alternative.”

Brian looked at her for a long moment. She saw pity in his face, and...could that be admiration? Finally, he spoke.

“There are convents other than in France, beyond the reach of the king, and even of the pope. Your unchancy state is partly my fault, so I’m duty-bound to offer you help. You may accompany me, if you wish, on my journey out of the country.”

She stared back at him with dawning hope.

“Where are you going, Sir Brian?”

“I canna tell you that, in case we’re taken. I bear a heavy responsibility apart from you, ma dame. I can tell you our destination once we’ve left these shores. Until then, you must trust me. Blindly!”

Eleanor didn’t hesitate. “Though we go to the ends of the earth, it’s surely a better fate than awaits me here.”

He nodded, with an air of resignation. “So be it, then. What is your name, ma dame?”

“Eleanor de Lillebonne. And yours, mon sieur? You speak the language well, but by your accent I deem you’re not French.”

Brian opened his mouth, then hesitated.

“Let’s just leave it as Brian, for now. My full name and nationality is part of the story I must keep secret, for the present.”

He glanced behind again, then returned his sharpened attention to her.

“‘King’s business’, your attacker said, and you mentioned the threat of becoming a concubine. Is it King Philip himself who seeks you as his mistress?”

Eleanor nodded, clenching her jaw.

“Would such a life of luxury be so dismal a fate? Many fine ladies would be entranced by such an offer. And the king is not named ‘the fair’ for naught.”

“His handsome face is just a mask, concealing the devil within,” Eleanor snarled. “One needs only to look into his viper’s eyes to see—” she choked with remembered rage.

“Calm yourself, ma dame,” Brian said softly. “I merely spoke thus to test you. It’s clear to me now we’re both enemies of the king. But have you no protector? Are you not married?”

“My husband died last night.” She held up her hand as he opened his mouth. “Save your condolences, mon sieur. I had no cause to love or respect my husband. His death seemed a happy release to me...at the time.”

“Did it, indeed?” His expression turned speculative, even disapproving. “What about relatives? Do you have kin, brothers, or a father?”

Eleanor laughed mirthlessly. “My father! My dear father sold me into marriage to a cruel, disgusting old man, purely for his own advantage. He’d deliver me to the king by his own hand, and hold out that hand for reward!”

“Hmm. Isn’t it a daughter’s duty to obey her father?”

“And isn’t it a *father’s* duty to look to the welfare of his daughter? Both her bodily welfare, and the ease of her soul and conscience?”

Brian frowned, struggling with this revolutionary thought. Finally, he nodded. “There’s something in what you say.”

There’s much in what I say! Eleanor didn’t voice the thought, however. She needed this knight’s goodwill.

And she must make allowances; as a member of a celibate, religious-warrior order, he’d have had little, if any, experience of the constraints society placed on a woman, and her point of view about this situation. She wiped the frown from her face and gave him a tentative smile. After a moment, he smiled back.

Her heart gave an odd lurch. An unseemly thought came into her head. *Celibate? What a waste.*

The smile lit up his tired face: a frank, open smile, nothing secretive or false about it. Since her experience with the king, she distrusted handsome men. But Brian had spoken to her as a person, not as a pretty object to be coveted. On the other hand, he’d also displayed the typical male view toward women, but something about his conversation and that smile suggested he could be...*teachable.*

But not by me. Eleanor’s mind shied away from the thought of any sort of intimate involvement with a man. Her life with Gilles, her late unlamented husband, had cured her of any carnal interest.

Still, it was a pity for women in general that so many swinish men like Gilles were available for marriage, and such a one as this should remove himself from contention.

Brian interrupted her musings. “Had your husband been poorly for long?”

“Not at all. It was very sudden.”

“What was the manner of it?”

“We were at table, last night. The king’s minions, those two you slew, were our...guests.” Brian gave her a sharp look in response to the inflection she put on the last word.

“We’d just finished dinner. Gilles suddenly clutched himself and moaned. Then he fell off the bench, voided his stomach and bowels, and died within minutes.” Her nose wrinkled at the memory.

“Do you think the king’s men poisoned him?”

“Very likely. Our liege lord is known for that art, is he not?”

Brian laughed bitterly. “Indeed. But how did your husband so offend the king?”

“Merely by existing. He stood in the path of the king’s desires. I can see now that, in a way, I pronounced a death sentence on him.”

Brian raised his eyebrows.

She explained, “The king came through on a progress a month ago, and stayed at our chateau. He bore himself most charmingly toward me, but in a way I found exaggerated and rather repellent. Just before he left, he took me aside and made an offer.”

“Oh?”

“It was, on the face of it, to come to court as a lady-in-waiting to the queen; but he talked around the subject in such a way that he left me in no doubt my true position would be as his mistress.”

“And how did you answer him?”

“I pretended not to understand his meaning. I thanked him for the offer, and said I must decline, as my husband’s place was here, and I couldn’t leave his side while he lived.” Her mouth twisted.

“And so—”

“And so, I condemned Gilles to death. But how could I know the king would go to such lengths to possess *me*? There must be many beautiful women who’d be glad to fulfill his desires!”

Brian frowned. Was she really so oblivious to her own beauty? If he, who by his vows had sworn off women for life, found her so beautiful, how much more so would the king, a known lecher?

He studied her fine-boned face, with its blue-sky eyes under winged, dark-bronze brows. The merest hint of a cleft in her chin lent firmness to the delicacy of her features. Most rare was her creamy skin, free of the almost universal blemishes of nature or disease.

He recalled that, despite her grief and agitation, her willowy figure had moved with an innate grace. She was tall for a woman: the top of her head came level with his chin.

“I think you underestimate your charms, ma dame,” he said at last. “Besides, King Philip would see your refusal as a challenge he couldn’t ignore. Not that you’d have known that.”

Eleanor tossed her head and turned away. Brian gazed for a moment at her profile, surprised at how moved he was by its beauty. It was fortunate his vows protected him...

Then, with a sudden hollow feeling, he recalled that his vows’ protection rested on temporarily shaky ground.

He remembered the momentous interview, four nights ago, that had changed his life.

He’d thought it the most cataclysmic shift he’d ever experienced when Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, had called him in to reveal the rumors of disaster hanging over the order, and the part he was destined to play.

Now, glancing at the woman he’d taken under his protection, he couldn’t be so sure. Cataclysms could take many forms. Perhaps even the form of beauty.

Chapter Two

They rode on side by side through the brightening morning, passing Chateau Lillebonne, which Brian assumed was Eleanor's ancestral home. He saw her glance once at the chateau then return her attention to the road, biting her lip. The awkward silence between them stretched out.

He licked his lips, trying to think of something to say. He'd always envied glib men; men who could turn a merry quip to make a tavern wench laugh or blush, or do both at once.

He glanced sidelong at Eleanor, her lovely face now forlorn. Even to think of jocular phrases would be an affront to her, he thought, and to think of this grave and dignified lady at the same time as a tavern wench seemed little short of sacrilege.

Finally he blurted, "You're very quiet, ma dame."

She heaved a deep sigh, and gestured off toward a small chateau a half-mile ahead of them.

"I'm thinking about poor Roland, and there's his parents' house. I dread telling them their youngest son is dead."

Well, at least that was a service he could do for her. "No need to dread it, ma dame. I'll tell them for you."

"Thank you, Sir Brian, but Roland was my page, and died heroically in my service. It's my obligation to bring them the sad news. But I'd be most grateful if you could bring him—his body—after giving me some little time to prepare them."

"If that's your wish."

"It is. Thank you." Eleanor took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and turned her horse up the path to the chateau.

Brian gazed after her for a moment, surprised and touched by this assumption of her duty. Were women, then, capable of honor? Maeve wouldn't have done that, nor Brigid. Shaking his head, he spurred down the road to where Luc rode hunched in the saddle.

"Luc! We're taking the boy's body to his home over yonder. Ride on slowly, and we'll catch you up."

"We? Do you mean that woman's not staying there? How much further is she coming with us?"

"All the way, if necessary. There's nowhere in France safe for her." Facing down Luc's incredulity, he quickly explained what had brought about Eleanor's dire situation.

Luc heard him out, then scowled. "You're mad."

"Aye, perhaps I am," Brian said, then raised his voice. "But I wouldna leave a dog to the king's tender mercies!"

"We're leaving our brethren to him!"

Brian flushed. "I know that well enough! But you know very well we're under orders to do so. I'll take full responsibility for her."

"On your head be it, then." Luc shook the reins and moved off down the road.

Brian sighed, and went to call in the barges.

Brian tethered his horse alongside Eleanor's to the hitching rail at the chateau's entrance, took the stiffening corpse in his arms and trod through the open gate into the courtyard. He didn't see Eleanor, but heard the sound of women weeping coming from an open window, so he assumed she was inside with them.

Four grim-faced men stood before the door; one middle-aged, one young and the other two mere youths, obviously Roland's father and brothers. He halted a few paces from them, and at

that moment Eleanor appeared in the doorway. She had changed her bloodstained gown for a clean one.

He returned his attention to the men, and said, “Mon sieurs, it’s my melancholy task to bring home your son and brother, fallen in the execution of his duty.”

The three brothers, blinking away tears, lined up and held out their arms. Brian gently placed his burden upon them. The father cleared his throat.

“I am Etienne de Serville, Sir Brian. Lady Eleanor told us your name, and also that we have you to thank for avenging his murder.”

“Aye. I left them lying unshriven on the road, like the mangy dogs they were. But enough of those carrion. Understand this, mon sieur: although your son didn’t live long enough to attain his knighthood, he died like a true and courageous knight, defending his lady against overwhelming force, with no thought at all of his own safety. A credit to his parents, and a noble example to his brothers.”

Etienne, now weeping unashamedly, came forward and gripped Brian’s upper arms. “I thank you for those words. I’d offer you the hospitality of my house, but for Lady Eleanor’s safety, and the apparent urgency of your errand, I expect you’ll want to be off.”

“Indeed, we must leave immediately.” He glanced at Eleanor, who nodded.

“Then fare you well,” Etienne said. “We’ll pray for your safety and good fortune.”

“Thank you, mon sieur. And, for your own safety, perhaps it would be better if you forgot you’d ever clapped eyes on us.”

Brian saluted them all, stepped back for Eleanor to make her farewell, then they hurried out to remount and canter off to catch up with Luc. They didn’t speak until he came in sight down the road, and they slowed their horses. Then Eleanor turned to Brian.

“That was well done, Sir Brian. You were very eloquent. Thank you for your kind words.”

Brian’s eyebrows shot up. No one had ever called him “eloquent” before. He’d merely spoken from the heart, giving the boy his just due. He mumbled some reply, then they rode on in silence again, each wrapped in their own thoughts.

But not quite as before. Brian felt the silence to be less uncomfortable, even companionable.

He’d almost fallen into a doze when he sensed Eleanor stiffen.

“Someone’s coming up behind!”

Silently cursing his inattention, Brian called, “Luc!” He hastily pulled up his chainmail coif and donned his helmet. Luc rode up to join him and they waited, hands on sword-hilts, watching two riders galloping up the road toward them.

Brian relaxed. “It’s all right. I recognize one of them: it’s Fulk. They’ll have the latest news.” He glanced at Eleanor. “Pray bide here, ma dame.”

He and Luc urged their horses forward to meet the oncoming riders.

Eleanor watched as the four came together. She saw the newcomers gesticulating urgently, and her heart sank at the look of icy fury on Brian’s face, and what was no doubt a string of curses from Luc, as they listened to the news.

When they eventually turned their horses and approached her, Brian fell in again at her side, his face thunderous. The newcomers, after curious glances at her, rode on to the point with Luc.

“More bad news, Sir Brian?” she ventured after a time, when he failed to enlighten her.

Brian grimaced. “The worst. But not unexpected.” He forced a bitter smile. “Never fear, it has no bearing on our present situation. You and I are no better nor worse off than before. The disaster is to others.”

He didn’t elaborate further, and she didn’t press the issue. No doubt he would reveal all, or as much as he deemed she should know, when he felt the time was ripe.

“They bore one piece of good news, ma dame, which I can tell you for your peace of mind. We’re not being followed. The king’s men are all off scouring the roads between Paris and La Rochelle.”

“Why that way, mon sieur?”

“The Templar fleet is harbored at La Rochelle. They fancied we’d head straight for it.”

“I see. Did you anticipate this, Sir Brian?”

“Aye.”

The matter-of-fact monosyllable reassured Eleanor out of all proportion to its length. It confirmed the impression she’d been forming of this man who’d taken on the role of her protector: that he was not some steel-clad empty-headed swashbuckler, like so many itinerant knights, but a man of intelligence and foresight. Combined with the fighting ability she’d witnessed, it made him a formidable guardian indeed.

She turned to him as a thought struck her.

“How long have you been on the road, Sir Brian?”

“Four days.”

She smiled. “Long enough for the fleet to sail up to the river mouth, perhaps?”

He started, then gave a rueful smile. “I thank God, ma dame, that you are not the one advising our pursuers.”

She answered his smile, and they rode on in silence once more. Before he could gather his thoughts enough to start a conversation, they came upon the others, halted on the road.

“What’s amiss?” Brian said.

Luc pointed ahead, to where a walled town now came into sight.

“That’s Honfleur. The towpath ends there. What now?”

Brian, blinking rapidly, tried to gather his woolly thoughts. *Lord, to sleep! If only for an hour!* He rubbed his hand over his face.

“Pull the barges along by the bank over yonder, where the reeds and trees will hide them from the road. You three join the boatmen. Get some sleep. Tell them to keep the skiff ready; if any river-traffic comes by and shows interest, sally out in it and take them prisoner. I’ll go on to the meeting place with the lady, and make the signal tonight. Pray God they’re in the offing to see it.”

“Why take her?” Luc demanded. “Better she stays with us. I’ll guard her.”

“Just that I can pass as her escort. It’ll look more natural than an armed knight on his own.” He turned to Eleanor. “If that’s acceptable to you, ma dame. Or would you rather bide along here?”

“I’d prefer to come with you, mon sieur, if my presence is of use.”

“So be it, then,” he said, raising his voice to cut off Luc’s protest. “Come!” He wheeled his horse and led her away from the other three.

Eleanor noticed subtle signs of tension in Brian’s bearing as they approached the town gate. The guards, however, lounging in the autumn sunshine, waved them through, with no more than a lascivious stare at her.

“They’re very slack,” she heard Brian mutter to himself. “King Edward’s death works for us in more ways than one.”

Eleanor frowned. The guards’ indolence could be attributed to the relief now felt in France, three months after the death of the warrior-king of England, the French Crown’s implacable enemy; but what other advantage could it be to him?

Then it struck her: she’d thought Brian a Breton, as some old Celtic names survived in that region of France. But what if he were a Scot? That would better explain his accent. King Edward had been Scotland’s implacable enemy also, and his death gave the almost-defeated nation a much-needed breathing space.

The new King Edward the Second seemed more interested in sporting with his favorite, Piers Gaveston, than completing his father's dream to subjugate the north.

I'll wager we're going to Scotland!