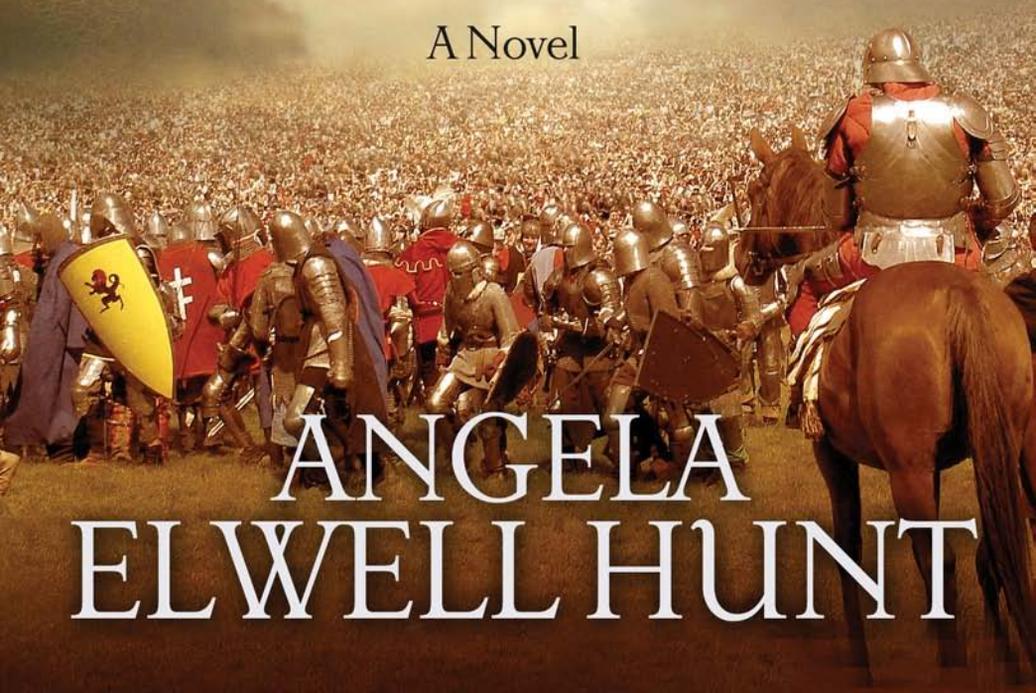




THE SILVER SWORD

The heirs of Cahira O'Connor

A Novel



ANGELA
ELWELL HUNT



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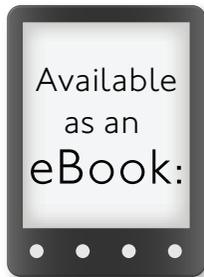
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And More...

She checked the girth strap, then slipped her left foot into the stirrup and threw herself over the horse's broad back. Manville, she noticed as she glanced toward the far side of the stable, had already mounted his favorite steed. A servant held his horse's reins and was leading him toward the castle barbican.

"Hurry," she told the groom in a low voice.

The stableboy attending her grinned foolishly, then gave the horse's flank a slap. "In a hurry to get yourself killed, are you, Kafka?" He grinned and handed her the reins. "You are as ready as you will ever be."

She straightened, then made a quick clucking sound with her tongue, turning the stallion toward the doorway. Nervous flutterings pricked her chest as the huge animal moved out of the stable, through the barbican, and onto the tournament field. Averting her eyes from the crowd of onlookers gathering behind a rope, she faced the opposite end of the jousting field and forced her riotous emotions to settle down. In a few moments she would have completed her test. If she acquitted herself well, she would earn the right to be dubbed a knight. Of course Novak would feel compelled to tell Lord John her secret, and the Lord of Chlum might not agree to knight her.

But it wouldn't matter. In the eyes of her fellow knights, she would have proven herself. Her parents and Sir Petrov, watching from heaven, would see and know that she had not failed them. And if Lord John cast her out of Chlum Castle, she would take her new-found skills to another manor and continue her quest of vengeance. For she had begun to believe her father was right—war did lie just over the horizon, and she was sworn to be involved in the battle.

She gave the stallion a slack rein and cantered slowly across the field toward her position. Midnight's speed and power exhilarated her, and her blood raced in response. Let the test begin. She had no intention of permitting herself to fail.

THE
SILVER
SWORD



ANGELA ELWELL HUNT



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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are from the King James Version.

Most of the characters and events in this book are fictional.

For further information on the historical basis of the book, see page 389.

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The Heirs of Cahira O'Connor



Book I: The Silver Sword

Book II: The Golden Cross

Book III: The Velvet Shadow
(available Spring 1999)

*The
Heirs of Cahira O'Connor*



Book 1

Prologue

Even from across the library I could feel the stranger's eyes upon me. "Just ignore him and he'll go away," I muttered to myself, clicking furiously at the computer keyboard. But from the corner of my eye, I could still see him—a soft little man of late middle age, his features delicately carved with lines of concern and a small round paunch bulging over the waistband of his trousers.

The screen before me flickered a moment, then brightened as the modem received its transmission. When in the world had the college installed this computer, anyway—1993?

With infuriating slowness, the ancient modem finally retrieved twenty-eight references to "piebaldism," the topic I'd chosen for my research project. Only *twenty-eight*? Just a few minutes earlier I had typed in my name, "Kathleen O'Connor," and the Internet search engine had pulled up over sixty-six *thousand* references to "O'Connor" and/or "Kathleen." It would be nothing short of a miracle if I managed to come up with enough information to keep my writing prof happy on just twenty-eight references.

"Excuse me. Miss O'Connor?" I looked up, struggling to contain my impatience. The strange man stood beside me now, his shoulders hunched in a touching sort of dignity, his wool hat in his hand. A thin, carefully clipped mustache rode his upper lip, and his face seemed firmly set in deep thought.

"Yes?" I forced a polite smile. No use in letting him know I was ready to scream for security if he turned out to be some kind of kook.

"I pray you will pardon what must certainly be an untimely

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intrusion,” the man said, a note of apology in his voice. “Let me introduce myself. I am Henry Howard, a professor of European history here at the college. And though you must pardon my inquisitiveness, I asked the librarian for your name. She said you come here often.”

Didn’t all English majors live in the library? I nodded. “Nice to meet you, Professor Howard,” I said, glancing back toward the computer screen. “But I’m in the middle of researching my semester project, and there are others waiting to use the computer.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt.” He tightened his hold on his hat. “But I couldn’t help noticing your hair. It is quite lovely. And quite . . . unusual.”

Was that some sort of pickup line? “Thank you.” I turned back toward the computer and typed my name, hoping to convince him I had things to do. I’ve heard comments about my hair for most of my life, and if this man had some sort of hair fetish, I didn’t want to encourage him. Most people either love my hair or hate it, depending upon whether they consider redheads temperamental or spirited.

Professor Howard had not taken the hint. “That streak near your temple—”

I cut my gaze back to him, ready to blast him with a withering stare.

With one hand he pointed toward my head in a tentative gesture. “I know this may be a bold question, but is that discoloration natural? It appears to be, and it is quite distinctive, but you never can tell with young girls these days. One of my nieces has painted a black stripe down the center of her head.” He shrugged helplessly as his voice drifted away, but his gaze remained locked with mine. Didn’t he have sense enough to be embarrassed by his bad manners?

“The streak is natural,” I answered quickly, determined to be done with him. “I’ve had it since childhood.”

“Did your mother . . .” “The professor hesitated and gripped his hat again. Maybe he did realize he was being nosy. “Did either of your parents have such a discoloration? Or one of your grandparents?”

“I don’t think so,” I answered. In spite of my annoyance, my

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confounded curiosity—the character flaw my mother always predicted would get me into trouble—rose up like a kite. Did he want to interview me for some kind of genetics study? No, he had said he taught in the history department, not the college of sciences.

“I wondered.” A smile found its way through the mask of uncertainty on his face. “You must think me terribly rude, badgering you with questions of such a personal nature, but I couldn’t stop myself when the librarian told me your name. The O’Connor clan of Ireland has a bit of lore attached to it—mythological lore, really—but when I saw you and heard your name—well, I thought it would be lovely if the story were true.”

I leaned back and crossed my arms, still studying his face. I had far too much to do to be listening to such nonsense, but this rambling professor had really intrigued me. I had always been interested in genealogy, but since returning to college I stayed so busy trying to juggle my part-time job with writing assignments that I scarcely had time to read a newspaper, much less research my family tree.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to indulge the professor for a moment or two. “What lore?” I rested my elbow on the table and propped my chin on my hand. “I know very little about my family tree.”

“Ah. If you’ll permit me—” The professor pulled a chair from the empty carrel next to mine, then sat down, resting his hat on his knees. “The O’Connors ruled over medieval Ireland as warrior kings of Connacht. From the day the Normans first entered Ireland, the O’Connors served as faithful allies of the English sovereigns, but in 1235, treacherous Norman foot soldiers and archers crossed the Shannon River and killed the ruling O’Connors in their ancestral home. That much we know as fact. But it’s what we don’t know for certain that fascinates me.”

He lowered his voice and leaned forward as if he were divulging a great secret. “It is said that Cahira, daughter of the great king Rory O’Connor, lay in childbirth as the attack began. She was delivered of a son on that fateful day, and as the murdering Normans entered the castle, a serving maid spirited the baby away. The men had been dispatched to the towers and defensive positions; most were dead or

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dying. Cahira, still weak from childbirth, chose to defend her home rather than flee with her child.”

Slowly and deliberately, the professor removed his glasses and began to wipe them with a handkerchief from his jacket pocket. “According to legend, Cahira picked up a sword to defend the chamber in which she and her ladies had taken refuge,” he said, critically examining the lenses of his glasses before returning them to the bridge of his nose. “They resisted in a valiant display of courage, but the women were no match for the professional knights. And as Cahira lay dying of a wound from a Norman blade, she lifted her hand toward heaven and besought God that others would follow after her—in her words, ‘bright stars who would break forth from the courses to which they are bound and restore right in this murderous world of men.’”

The professor told the story in a smooth, almost soothing voice, but I felt my heart rate increasing with every word. Why did the story move me? And why was I sitting here listening to this fanciful and melodramatic professor when I had a project to begin? This warrior princess and I had the same last name, but surely we had about as much in common as an apple and an oyster.

“That’s an interesting story.” I smiled at Professor Howard and pointed toward the computer screen. “But I really need to get back to work.”

Apparently not one to be easily dissuaded, Professor Howard straightened himself in his chair. “There is more to the tale, Miss O’Connor. Cahira had red hair, too. In fact, seeing you made me think of her.” He gave me a slightly reproachful look. “I had hoped you might be acquainted with her story.”

Did he think all redheads pledged themselves to some kind of secret club? “No, I don’t know much about Irish history,” I answered, fingering the mouse and hoping he’d take the hint. “I’m an English major. And I have this project to do—”

“Cahira also had a streak of white hair near her left temple.” His eyes gleamed with a curious intensity. “I have seen an artist’s render-

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ing of the princess. If I believed in such possibilities, I would think you could be her sister.”

The remark left me speechless. All my life I have been teased about the sprout of white hair that grows from my left temple. As a kid, I was called names ranging from “skunk head” to “Cruella De-Ville.” As a teenager, I tried dying it, and once or twice even lightened the rest of my hair to match the streak, but that area of my scalp had a will of its own. Lately I’d learned to leave it alone. I could finally just roll my eyes at what the world thought of my looks; too many other things demanded my attention. Sometimes I almost forgot I had a freakish white sprout growing from the side of my head.

But people like Professor Howard were always reminding me. Now he wanted me to believe I might be related to some Irish princess who apparently cursed her descendants to roam in the stars or some such thing.

I shook my head and protectively tucked the strand of white hair behind my ear. “Thanks for sharing that story, Professor, but this streak is a result of piebaldism. That area of my scalp doesn’t produce pigment. My situation isn’t as pronounced as someone with albinism, but the condition is similar.”

“I know,” Professor Howard answered, a small, fixed smile on his face. “Piebaldism is inherited. And yet you say neither your parents nor your grandparents share this condition. Is there, perhaps, an aunt or an uncle, probably on your father’s side—”

I held up my hand, cutting him off. “No one. But the gene could have come from some great aunt, for all I know. O’Connors are everywhere.”

“As scattered as the Irish.” He stared at me in silence for a moment, his eyes gleaming with interest, then pulled a card from his coat pocket. “I believe, my dear, that you may be directly descended from Cahira O’Connor. I know it sounds unlikely, but what’s the harm in a little investigation? If you’d like some guidance, here’s my office number. If I’m not in the office, one of my student aides will take a message.” He leaned forward and clapped his hands to his

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knees. "Call me if you have any inclination to learn more, Miss O'Connor. I have several books which should interest you."

Not knowing what else to do, I took the card. Professor Howard stood, nodded regally, then threaded his way through the carrels until he disappeared from sight.

The card he had placed in my hand was simple and direct:

Henry Howard, Ph.D.
Professor of Medieval European History
New York City College
212-555-2947

I stared at it for a moment, then felt a blush burn my cheeks. If this was Professor Howard's technique for introducing himself to young women, I had to admit his approach was unique. Of course I had no intention of contacting him again, but in the space of a few moments he had spun a story that brought me from complete lack of interest to fascination.

"Excuse me, but are you about finished here? I need to use the computer."

A grungy-looking guy in a tee shirt and jeans spoke up behind me, and his question caught me off guard. "Um, I'm just starting," I said, glancing at my watch. "And I'm signed on for another fifteen minutes. Check the reservation sheet at the reference desk."

The guy snorted and moved away, but I knew he'd be back, circling like a vulture. I had to get to work.

I was about to crumple the professor's card and toss it toward the nearest trash can when a sudden thought struck me. Since I was researching piebaldism, why not focus my topic a little? What could it hurt? Almost without thinking, I entered the command for a new search. "Find piebaldism and O'Connor," I murmured as I typed. If the gene really did run in the O'Connor family, there might be some record of other O'Connors with piebaldism.

Searching . . .

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I drummed my fingers on the desk, waiting for the glacial modem to search and report. The professor had made Cahira's story sound romantic and dashing, but her curse or prophecy or whatever you want to call it hadn't made a bit of sense. Bright stars in their courses? Total drivel. Poetic, yes, but drivel nonetheless. Maybe the professor had overdosed on his morning coffee and caffeine had kicked his imagination into high gear.

Search results . . . four.

I took a quick, sharp breath as the computer screen flashed again:

Piebaldism and O'Connor:

Rory O'Connor, the last king of Ireland, killed in the Norman Invasion in 1235 . . . Survivors in that bloody attack included a grandson, who was spirited away from his mother's arms as the Normans attacked. According to legend, the child's mother, Cahira O'Connor, rose up from her bed of travail to wield a sword against the enemy, but scholars believe this may be an anecdotal myth fabricated to ennoble the sufferings of a murdered Irish princess. Cahira was noted for her exceptional beauty and a bold white streak through her red hair, one of the earliest recorded instances of piebaldism. . . .

The Hussite Crusades: holy wars, against the followers of Bohemian reformer Jan Hus, launched by Pope Martin V, successor in 1417 to the antipope John XXIII (not to be confused with the modern pope who took the same name in 1958). Among Hus's more influential followers was Anika of Prague, a fifteenth-century woman who fought as a knight prior to the Hussite Crusades. Annals of that time record an unusual white streak through the hair over her left ear, probably the result of piebaldism. Several chroniclers report that she claimed to spring from the ancestral throne of the O'Connors, ancient kings of Ireland.

Explorers and Seafaring, women at sea: Aidan O'Connor, a seventeenth-century artist described by her contemporaries as a "spirited lass with flaming hair marked by spout of gold," undoubtedly a case of piebaldism. The apprentice of a cartographer, she disguised herself as a

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common sailor to go exploring. While sailing with the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, Aidan O'Connor fought hostile natives, studied the flora and fauna of several Pacific islands, and later published a volume of engravings described by her contemporaries as "amazing."

Civil War, women in battle: Flanna O'Connor, a nineteenth-century Charleston woman who disguised herself as a soldier and fought in the Civil War at her brother's side. Commonly known as the Velvet Shadow, she was as well known for her ability to rescue wounded comrades from behind enemy lines as for the singular pale streak which ran through her red hair. See "piebaldism."

All my previous plans faded like a bad radio signal. Could Professor Howard's story be true? Could there really be a link between these O'Connor women and the unusual physical characteristic we all shared? What were the odds that three women—four, counting Cahira herself—would share the same physical characteristic and risk their lives pretending to be men.

The idea was extremely far-fetched, and yet there was a certain symmetry to it. What had the professor told me? A dying woman had begged God to allow bright stars to break forth from the courses to which they were bound and restore right in the murderous world of men—

My thoughts halted as abruptly as if they'd hit a brick wall. Of course! The bright stars were the women! Cahira had barricaded herself in that chamber with the women of the castle. And, knowing that the men had gone to defend the fortress, she had stepped out of her roles as mother and daughter and princess in order to pick up a sword and fight. In that hour of weakness and fear, she may have regretted her feebleness and femininity.

My imagination caught the image. I could almost see this woman, drenched in sweat, her limbs still trembling from the exertions of labor and childbirth, her husband's heavy sword in her hand. Her maidservants were doubtless around her, some crying, some cowering, a few helping the nurse and infant escape through a tun-

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nel or window. And Cahira, knowing that her situation was hopeless, begging God to allow her descendants to live and grow strong in order to restore right in a savage world.

And they had! Or had they?

The back of my neck burned with excitement, and a curious, tingling shock numbed both my brain and my fingertips on the keyboard. Professor Howard had slipped his little story into my imagination, and now I was delirious with discovery, having validated his so-called myth.

But it was too easy, far too simple. Had I really stumbled onto something the professor did not know—or had I been set up?

I cleared the computer screen and reran the search through a different search engine, this time reversing the order. “Search for O’Connor and piebaldism,” I muttered, typing. I hit the enter key and clicked my nails on the desk in a flood of anticipatory adrenaline.

There was no way Professor Howard could know that I would actually run a computer search to test his little story. And if I had searched only for O’Connors, I would have pulled up thousands of references, too many to fully investigate. Maybe the link of piebaldism had never occurred to anyone else. I did have a special interest in the subject, after all.

Searching . . .

The computer beeped as the screen filled with the same four references I had seen earlier. Cahira of the thirteenth century, Anika of the fifteenth, Aidan of the seventeenth, Flanna of the nineteenth. All warrior women descended from the O’Connors, and all similar in appearance.

The possibility of a link between them seemed crazy, absolutely fantastic, but what if my hypothesis were true? These four women had each lived two hundred years apart, in different countries, under vastly different conditions. None of them would have known the

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others existed. And yet they were all O'Connors. They had all fought as men, for at least a brief span of time. And all of them had red hair marked by a streak of white—

Just like me. My mouth flew open in numb astonishment. I was about to enter the twenty-first century, two hundred years after Cahira's last warrior descendant. Could I be . . . the next one?

The thought was too incredible to comprehend. My fingers began to tremble as fearful images took root in my imagination. Were the histories of these women somehow tied into my own future? I was a student, not a soldier, but did some global tragedy or struggle lie beyond tomorrow's sunset? The idea seemed ridiculous, totally implausible. Yet I would still be in my twenties at the turn of the century, young enough to bear the blessing—or curse—of Cahira O'Connor, if such a thing really existed.

My logic kicked in. *It has to be a coincidence,* I told myself. *You've read too many books, seen too many far-out movies. You asked the computer for entries with two terms in common. Out of thousands, no, millions of web pages on the Internet, you shouldn't be surprised that something surfaced. Professor Howard's odd devotion to that myth spooked you, that's all. And it's late. You're tired. And you're facing a deadline...*

I put my hand on the mouse and cleared the screen, but thoughts of Cahira and her descendants persisted. How could the strange timing—every two hundred years—be explained by mere chance? And how could four women have the piebald patch in exactly the same place? And I hadn't searched for links about women who lived as men; that fact had simply come out of nowhere.

I whipped open my spiral notebook and turned to a clean page. If I couldn't let it go, I could investigate. I'd change my topic for my semester project, and instead of researching piebaldism, I'd explore the histories of Anika of Prague, Aidan of the O'Connors, and Flanna the Velvet Shadow. And maybe, if I had time and my professor approved, I'd do a background check on Cahira herself.

And if by chance I discovered that Professor Howard was a lonely man pulling some sort of academic scam, I'd publish my findings in

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the college newspaper and expose the creep. But if he had told the truth, he might have just changed my life.

The first red-headed wonder was Anika of Prague, the woman who fought as a knight—in an actual suit of armor?—in Bohemia.

Bohemia? In my adolescent days, my mother had often accused me of being bohemian, but I don't think she meant it as a compliment.

I entered "Bohemia" into the computer's reference book program and pressed the enter key.

Thirty seconds later, there it was:

Bohemia (Bo-HEE-mee-ah), a historic region of 20,368 square miles bordered by Austria (SE), Germany (W, NW), Poland (N, NE), and Moravia (E). The traditional capital is Prague. With the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1993), the region became part of the Czech Republic. In the 15th century Bohemia was the scene of the Hussite religious movement. . . .

Bingo. According to the other search, my girl Anika followed a man called Hus. I hit the "print" button and skimmed the entry again. I could look up "Hus" and do a bit of checking on this Hussite movement. And maybe there'd be something under "Czechoslovakia" about this Anika of Prague.

Was all of this a quirk of fate or a divine appointment? I wasn't sure. In that moment I only knew I had to find all I could about Anika . . . because in learning about her past, I just might learn something about my own future.

I typed her name into another search program and snapped the enter key.

Searching . . .

Mama?" Anika was six again, small and helpless, alone in the upstairs room of an inn outside Prague. Father had gone out to the stable to meet with a man who had promised to find them a horse. Anika moved through the musty chamber. It felt like pushing aside curtains of black velvet, perfumed with the odors of unwashed bodies and the scent of sour hay. In the silence of the darkened chamber she felt her mouth go dry as fear rushed in. "Mama?"

"Hush, love, I'm here." The straw mattress rustled in the dark, then Mother's warm hand found its way to Anika's elbow and pulled her down onto the mattress beside her. Anika curled against her mother and hugged her knees, blinking as her night eyes adjusted to the dim light. Two other women slept on the far side of the room, the heavy sounds of their breathing blending with the snores of the innkeeper's dogs. The two huge mastiffs slept near the door, alert to any newcomer.

Mother's own breathing deepened and slowed; she had fallen asleep again. But Anika was not tired; she had slept in her mother's arms on the long walk and awakened in this room. She was never tired these days; there was too much to see. Father was moving the family from a farm out in the mountains to Prague.

"The University is in Prague," he had told Anika, "and people from all over the world go there to learn. They will need books, and they will bring books, and we will be prosperous in our little house. Wait and see, me wee bird, wait and see."

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Anika sat up and crinkled her nose at the odors in the room. The strong scent of hay that covered the floor and filled the mattresses. The warm, comforting smell of the dogs. Anika liked that smell. One of the mastiffs sensed her gaze and lifted his head, rewarding her with a calm, droopy smile. Anika raised her chubby hands and clapped them to keep the dog's attention, but the huge animal simply lowered its head back to its paws and sighed loudly.

Anika clapped again, then giggled when the animal abruptly lifted its head. But it did not look at her this time. The dog stared at the window, where the black sky had brightened to the color of sunrise.

Anika clapped once more, willing the dog to look at her. But instead it nudged its mate, who woke instantly and whimpered. Restless, the mastiffs stood and paced between the window and the doorway, then began to growl.

"What's wrong?" Anika swung her legs from the prickly mattress. "What's wrong, dogs?"

The biggest dog, the male, darted toward the staircase. The female whined for an instant, then gently took the hem of Anika's garment between her teeth and pulled her toward the dark hallway.

Anika laughed. What sort of game was this? She followed the dog, allowing the shuffling giant to gently lead her down the stairs.

In the big room below, wisps of gray smoke drifted over tables and chairs. A few red-eyed men slouched over a table in the corner while the innkeeper sat at his stool, his head propped on his hand, his eyes closed. As the whining dogs scratched at the door, Anika sat on the bottom step, content to wait on her father.

One of the men at the table suddenly lifted his head, like a cat scenting the breeze. "Is that smoke?" He stared out the window, then elbowed his companion. "Fire! There's fire outside! The barn!"

Anika shrank back against the wall, watching in confusion as the men leaped up from their tables. The innkeeper awoke and fumbled for a leather pouch inside his desk. Two of the men who had been sitting at the table ran toward the door, crashing into one another in

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an effort to reach it. The third man rushed for the stairs, nearly tripping over Anika in his headlong dash.

“Fire!” The cry echoed now from the courtyard outside, and the air vibrated with shouts, cries, and the sound of screaming horses. Some big person—Anika could not see clearly in the confusion—jerked her from her place, slung her over a shoulder, and carried her outside.

The barn and the inn were a mass of flame, their thatched roofs blazing like hay in a parched field. The sodden men who had been sitting inside now stumbled over themselves to fetch water and buckets, and through the noise Anika heard her father’s voice: “Let me pass, you eejits; me wife and child are inside!”

“Papa!” Anika turned, throwing herself into her father’s arms, but his eager embrace was entirely too brief. “Where’s your mother, lass?” He bent down to look her in the eye, his hands tight on her arms. “Came your mama downstairs with you?”

Anika put her finger in her mouth and shook her head. “The doggie brought me,” she said simply, pointing toward the mastiff that stood howling outside the flaming barn.

Her father rushed toward the building, but a line of men threw up their arms and held him back. “Too late, man,” one of them said. “You can’t go in there now. ’Tis a tinderbox.”

And then, like a sound from heaven, Anika heard Mother’s voice and looked up. With the two other women, Anika’s mother leaned out the window toward safety and the rescuers below.

“Help them!” Ernan O’Connor shouted, pointing to the women. He ran up to the burly innkeeper and clapped his hand on the man’s shoulder, whirling him around. “By all the saints, lend a hand, man! Have you a ladder?”

“Look yonder.” The innkeeper pointed to the far end of the house. And there, in the devilish glow of the fire, Anika saw two black-robed men steadying a ladder for a plump, balding man in red who moved slowly and carefully downward, as if he had all the time in the world.

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Ernan O'Connor rushed forward, and Anika ran to keep up.

"Let me use this ladder." Anika's father grabbed one of the black-robed men and tugged on his sleeve. "There are women still in the building, at the south end."

"Would you take the ladder while the cardinal is still upon it?" The man's eyes went wide with surprise. "Patience, fellow. He is nearly down, thank God."

The man in the red robe landed heavily on the ground, and the two men in black sighed in relief. Anika's father grabbed the ladder, but the man in red shook his head and pointed up toward the window he had just vacated. "My vestments," he said simply, staring at one of the black-robed ones. "You must get my vestments and the satchel with the parchments."

"But, Your Eminence—" one of the men protested.

"What sort of amadons and eejits are you?" Anika heard her father roar. With the strength of two men he laid hold of the ladder and pulled it from the window, but the black-robed ones stopped him.

"I'll go." After tossing a single guilty glance toward Anika's father, the tallest man sprinted up the ladder. As black smoke billowed overhead, he crawled through the window, then a moment later a pair of bundles flew out the opening and landed at Anika's feet.

The man in red nodded soberly and turned away, not even waiting to see if his servant would return. Other men had gathered about now. Pushing Anika back, they pounded on the ladder, urging the man upstairs to hurry down while at the far end of the building the women wept and screamed and tore their hair.

"Papa!" Anika stood on tiptoe, but she could no longer see her father. She slipped away from the crowd and found him beneath the window where the women waited. Dense clouds of black smoke rolled out the window above the women's heads, and Anika could hear a whispering, crackling noise, as though the fire contained a horde of gremlins who laughed and cackled to themselves.

"Jump, me darling, and I'll catch you." Father's voice broke with terrible sadness as he lifted his arms to Mother. "Don't wait a minute more; just jump!"

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Anika watched her mother move out onto the edge of the window ledge, ready to leap into Father's arms. A cloud of smoke rolled out the window and hugged Mother like an old friend. Anika felt the heat slap her face; it was like the rare days when her father had money enough for two logs in the fireplace and set them to burning at once.

"Jump, love!" Mother nodded and leaned forward, but in the instant before she could slip off her perch, the roof roared like the sea and rushed downward. Amid a flood of flames and cinders and sparks the other waiting women flung themselves toward the open window.

For a moment Anika thought it had begun to rain bodies, timber, and ashes. Father was knocked off his feet as a falling beam hit him on the head. He lay sprawled on the ground, his hands extended in front of him, his eyes closed as if he slept.

As Anika whimpered softly, the innkeeper and his friends began to untangle the other bodies. Of the three women, the first was scarcely hurt at all, and the second suffered only a broken leg and some singed hair.

But Mother lay quiet and still, her head bent to the side as if she were laughing. She wasn't burnt at all; she lay asleep on the ground. "Mama, wake up," Anika urged. She squatted low to whisper in her mother's ear and could smell smoke on her mother's skin. She reached out and shook Mother's arm; the skin was still warm and soft as a rose petal. "Mama! Why won't you wake up?"

"Come away, child." The innkeeper's wife, a matronly woman with an ample bosom and lap, pulled Anika up and moved her away from the heat of the burning building. "Your mama has gone to heaven."

Anika shook her head. "My mama is asleep."

"No, child, her neck's broke." The woman dashed a tear from her soot-streaked cheek, then knelt and clasped Anika's hands in her own. Her eyes darkened and shone with an unpleasant light as her sweaty hands squeezed Anika's knuckles. "Your mama's dead, child, and it's all that cardinal's fault. Don't you ever forget it, you hear? As

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God is my witness, the Roman church and her meddling priests will be the death of us all.”

Anika did not understand, but she nodded obediently until the woman released her hands. Not knowing what else to do, she stood silent as the woman rose to watch her home burn to the ground. From somewhere in the distance Anika heard the hoarse cry of her father’s weeping.

And when the man in the red robe gathered his bundles and turned from the ghastly scene, Anika clamped her eyes shut, afraid to look upon the man who would not give her mother the ladder.

“Go away,” she murmured, afraid to open her eyes lest he still be there, mocking her with his smug little smile. “Go away, please.” The words hurt her throat, as though she’d swallowed some sharp and jagged object. “Go away, go away, *go away!*”

“Anika! Open your eyes, wake up!”

Her eyes flew open even as her heart congealed into a small lump of terror. But the face staring at her was not the cardinal’s. Her father sat on the edge of her bed; his hands gripping her arms and the corners of his mouth tight with distress.

“Papa?” The word was hoarse, forced through her constricted throat.

“Anika, you’re having a nightmare.” His eyes searched her face. “Are you all right?”

She took a quick, wincing breath. She was home, safe in bed. Not six anymore, but sixteen.

“Are you all right then, or shall I be having to leave a light burning for such a big lass as you?” Her father smiled at her now, but she saw the dark memories at the back of his eyes, under the mocking humor. He knew what she’d dreamed—she’d had these dreams off and on for years. He probably dreamed of the fire, too, but he wouldn’t want her to worry about him. He was an unselfish man, Ernan O’Connor.

“Thank you, Papa,” she whispered, slipping her arms around his neck. Relaxing in his embrace, she closed her eyes, but the vague

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shadows of her dream still drifted across her eyelids. She snapped her eyes open again and stared over his shoulder at the flickering candle's light as her father rocked her slowly and crooned an Irish lullaby.

A beautiful figure wins love with very little effort, especially when the lover who is sought is simple, for a simple lover thinks that there is nothing to look for in one's beloved besides a beautiful figure and face and a body well cared for. I do not particularly blame the love of such people, but neither do I have much approval for it, because love—

“Anika!”

More surprised than frightened, Anika looked up from the book she kept hidden under her parchments. Her father stood in front of the door, his face pressed to the tiny shuttered opening.

“Quickly, me girl! Hide Hus's tablet and the parchments! The archbishop comes.”

The worried tone in her father's voice sparked Anika's fear. She slammed her book shut and, with the ease that comes from long practice, dropped Master Hus's wax tablet to her lap and shuffled the uppermost sheet of parchment beneath the others on her writing board. Archbishop Albik was not her favorite clergyman—if truth be told, Anika liked him little. But as the archbishop of Prague, in Bohemia his influential voice was second only to that of King Wenceslas.

Her father opened the door, and the archbishop's coolly impersonal tone broke the stillness of the copyist's shop: “Grace and peace to all who dwell herein.” Anika took one quick look downward to be certain Master Hus's tablet *and* her book were safely hidden, then pasted on an innocent smile as her father stepped aside and bid the archbishop enter.

Anika fought inward revulsion every time she saw the stiff and starched Archbishop Albik in her father's bookshop. Some high personage in Rome had appointed him to serve the city of Prague, and, like his predecessor, Albik seemed more intent upon solidifying his position and power than serving God's people. Lately, in fact, he had

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proved himself a devout enemy of all who loved and sought the truth of the gospel.

“Good day to you, my children,” Albik said, regally inclining his tonsured head as he entered the room. He extended his bulky gold ring for her father’s kiss, and Anika glanced down at her desk so she wouldn’t have to watch her father kneel and genuflect. Why wouldn’t the archbishop leave them alone? Weren’t there other copyists in the city for him to harass? But none of the others were close to Jan Hus.

The archbishop glanced about the small work space as her father stood and politely clasped his hands before him. “To what happy occasion do we owe this honor, Your Grace?”

“What use would I be if I did not see to the welfare of the souls in my care?” the archbishop answered, his countenance completely immobile. His eyes flashed over the room, taking note of the rolled parchments, the bottles of ink, the precious books safely stored in chests at the back of the small shop. “I see you are busy.” The holy hand lifted in a limp gesture and indicated the collection of wax tablets in a basket near Anika’s writing table. “I did not know our fair city housed so many writers. Of all the copyists on this street, your shop is by far the busiest.”

“Well, naturally, the students and teachers at the university keep us occupied, thank God,” her father answered, bowing his head in respect. “And me daughter is skilled with a pen and ink. By the grace of God and with her help, we are quick, and we are pleased to present our customers with fine work. They bring us their books and lessons, don’t you see, and we are also able to rent out several of the books we keep in our library—”

“What are you inscribing here, Ernan O’Connor?” The archbishop walked over to the writing board where Anika’s father had been working. His quill lay on the desk, the ink-filled ox horn remained uncovered. A large parchment lay flat on the board, a pumice stone holding it in place.

“Ah, I was readying this parchment for writing,” her father ex-

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plained, a gleam of relief in his eye. "I had not yet begun to copy anything."

"But you were ready to begin." Archbishop Albik gestured toward the wax tablet near the edge of her father's writing table. "What will you copy today? More scribblings from students at the university? Or perhaps one of the masters' lessons." He casually stroked his chin. "None of these tablets would contain a sermon from the preacher at Bethlehem Chapel, would they? Or the words of the heretic Wyclif?"

"I would not allow heresy over the threshold of me house." Anika's father straightened his shoulders. "I am ever mindful of me daughter, Your Grace, and would not endanger her immortal soul by allowing heresy to enter her thoughts. We are a God-fearing household; haven't I said so?"

Albik gave him a brief nod. "See that you remain so, Ernán O'Connor." When the archbishop lifted his hand, Anika lowered her head, more to duck the blessing than to humbly receive it. She felt no love and little tolerance for Prague's newest prelate. She and her father had dutifully attended several services at his church and left spiritually dissatisfied. The archbishop led the service in a manner so dull and dry the words seemed to be coming from him after a lengthy journey through a barren wilderness. His words, moreover, were Latin, and though Anika understood the tongue, not many of her fellow Bohemians did.

Fortunately, the archbishop seemed more intent today upon spying out the bookshop than in gauging the depth of reverence in her glance. Albik looked around the shop one final time, then turned on his heel and moved with stiff dignity through the doorway. One by one, the archbishop's attendants—an odd assortment of priests, scribes, and other clerics—momentarily peered into the bookshop as if checking to see if their master had left some ray of holiness behind, then whirled and hurried after His Grace.

Without speaking, her father sank into his chair. When she was certain the archbishop and his cronies had gone, Anika retrieved the

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wax tablet she had dropped into her lap. "He would never suspect that you would allow me to copy such important work, Father," she murmured in a low voice, her eyes intent upon the doorway lest some spying monk suddenly materialize. "He would never believe I am copying Master Hus's sermons."

"He fears more than the copying, me wee dove," her father answered, spreading his ink-stained hands over the blank parchment on the board before him. "He fears the words that you copy. Certain men, armed with naught but a pen, have successfully stormed bulwarks others could not take with either sword or excommunication." He sat very still, his eyes narrowing. "Truth to tell, I think Albik and those like him fear for the Church itself. Their positions, their power, perhaps even their immortal souls are at stake. For if Jan Hus is true, and everything I read in Holy Scripture tells me he is, then the priests and bishops will be wanting to be rid of him . . . and anyone who has aught to do with him."

Fear clamped down on Anika's throat. She had heard rumors in the street, rumors of war that would surely come, a holy crusade to wipe out words like those she penned every day.

Her father's eyes met hers then, and he smiled, chasing her apprehensions away. "But now, Daughter, I'm perishing with the hunger of a dozen men. Why don't you see if there's any bread and cheese in the larder?"

"Yes, Father," she whispered. As she slid out of her chair, *The Art of Courtly Love* slipped from beneath her apron and fell to the floor with a thud. With a surge of guilt Anika gathered it up, ashamed at having taken advantage of her father's trusting nature and more than a little embarrassed by the book itself.

But her father had turned his attention to marking the blank parchment before him. Anika held the book to her pounding heart, ready to explain that she was only dreaming, that she wasn't ready to fall in love and marry just yet, but her father seemed blissfully unaware of what had happened behind him.

Anika paused a moment, then found it impossible not to grin at

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her father's broad back. He knew what she was reading; he knew everything that went on in their tiny house.

She slid *The Art of Courty Love* back into the wooden chest from which she'd taken it, then climbed the stairs, humming as she went.

“Aye, Ernan, I'll expect you'll be showing the likes of me to the street, after such august company as you've had this morning.”

Anika felt a rush of pleasure as she recognized the voice. She hurried down the stairs with her tray and turned the corner in time to see Sir Petrov, her father's best friend and their closest neighbor, momentarily dwarf the doorway with his massive height. Though he had undoubtedly seen more than sixty summers, age had not diminished the man's size or the strength of his voice. His shoulders had shed the corded muscles he wore when he carried arms for Lord Honza of Chlum, but his presence was still imposing. Upon his forehead a swath of wavy white hair fell in a series of commas over skin toughened like a dry hide, and his eyes were startlingly dark against his tanned skin and white hair.

Petrov's thin mouth quirked with a cynical twist when he saw Anika. “Having your dinner, are you, and not offering an old friend a bite?”

“'Tis a bit strange, don't you think, Anika,” her father said, winking at her, “that Sir Petrov comes always at dinner?” He wiped his hands on a scrap of linen and stood to greet his friend. “Petrov, welcome, and partake of whatever you please. We have only bread and cheese today, nothing grand, but you are always welcome at our table—”

“I thank you, but I am not hungry.” Petrov shut the door behind him, stomped his boots on the floor, and shook his dusty mantle from his shoulders. Without ceremony, he hung his cloak on a peg near the door, then propped his lanky frame upon a stool and clasped his hands. “So tell me.” His seamed face tilted from Anika to Ernan. “What auspicious occasion brought the archbishop of Prague to your house this morning? Yours was the only shop blessed

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with his presence, you know. The entire street has done nothing but buzz about it, and I'm only sorry I wasn't here to greet His Pompousness myself."

"In truth, it was nothing," the copyist answered, sitting again at his worktable while Anika spread a napkin before him. "A cordial visit at best, and a fruitless spy mission at worst. He asked how our business was and wondered why we had so many tablets to copy. I assured him that our proximity to the university and me daughter's skilled hand account for our busy shop."

The older man lifted a bushy brow. "He said nothing of Master Hus?"

Humor sparkled in Ernan's eyes. "Ah, sure, he asked if we ever copied heresy, and I assured him that we did not. And I still stand before God as an honest man."

Petrov tilted back his head and laughed. "You are, Ernan, until the archbishop brings you one of *his* sermons to publish. What will you do then? Refuse him, or declare yourself a hypocrite?"

"If the archbishop should ever bring me a tablet to be copied," Ernan answered, the beginning of a smile twisting the corners of his mouth, "I fear I shall be too busy to serve him. Look around, you see that we have more than our share of work."

Anika gave her father a generous portion of bread and cheese, then settled back at her worktable. Breaking off a bite of bread, she shot the old knight a shy smile. "Have you nothing to do today, Sir Petrov? No ladies to rescue? No dragons to slay?"

"Ah," the knight said, loosening the button at his high collar, "I can tell you are your father's daughter, Anika. Wit alone would not put such a cynical tongue in your head."

"But I'm not being cynical, dear Petrov," Anika answered, clasping her hands as she looked up at him. She really did adore the aged knight and knew he liked nothing better than sharing tales of his adventures. The few knights who reached Petrov's age usually retired in quiet houses on their masters' estates, but Petrov's beloved master had died before bestowing such an award upon his loyal captain. He could have remained in service to the nobleman's son, but Petrov had

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chosen to retreat to the city rather than spend his remaining lifetime again proving himself in a vocation more suited for young men. Now he lived in the small house across the street from Ernán O'Connor's bookshop and earned his daily bread delivering books and occasionally sharpening the dueling skills of the sons of great lords who were too embarrassed to display their incompetence before their own households.

Anika suspected that beneath Petrov's bluster and booming voice lay a very lonely man. Now she gave him her most charming smile. "If you have time, Sir Petrov, I would like to hear about the day you escorted your lady to church and the jealous suitor tried to kidnap her. I never tire of that tale."

"I do," her father objected good-naturedly, but he crossed his arms and settled back to listen. Both of them knew Petrov couldn't be stopped once he launched into a story.

Anika nibbled at her cheese and bread, momentarily forgetting about her waiting work as Petrov told of a bold attempt to snatch a noblewoman and his valiant assault upon her pursuer. He had almost reached the point where the lady fell off the horse and into a stream when the bookshop door creaked again. A different priest entered, and at the sight of this man Petrov halted his story in midsentence.

"Master Hus!" Anika's father uncrossed his arms and immediately stood to greet his visitor. "Faith, it's good to see you. How are you faring today?"

In appearance and manner, Jan Hus differed from the archbishop as much as a lamb differs from a wolf. Shunning the trappings and robes of a learned clergyman, Hus preferred a simple brown cassock like those of the lowliest monks. He wore a priest's tonsure cut into the crown of his thick brown hair, and a severely pointed beard jutted forth from his chin with the impertinence of a scolding finger. He was an important man—a master at the University of Prague and Father Confessor to Queen Sophia—but he welcomed everyone he met with disarming friendliness. Touches of humor lined his mouth and edged his eyes, which shone with merriment, a hint of mischief, and a quick intellect. In his dress and

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posture, Jan Hus seemed a simple monk, but the eyes, Anika thought, revealed the rich complexity of the man beneath the cowed robe.

Even Petrov stood to acknowledge the worth of the bookshop's most recent visitor. "Master Hus, I am honored." The old knight doffed the shapeless sugar-bag hat he wore and greeted the priest with a ceremonial bow. "If ever you have need of a willing heart or a sharp sword, you have but to call on me."

"Thank you, Sir Petrov." Hus acknowledged the knight's offer with touching dignity, then turned to Anika's father and eased into a smile. "Well met, Ernan! I hope I have not come at an inconvenient time, but I thought I would check on the progress of my sermon against the selling of indulgences. Brother William has just informed me that a papal legate is on his way to Prague. Unless I am mistaken, the pope has taken action against us."

"Has he published a bull?" Ernan's brows knitted in a frown.

Anika watched her father and took note of the worried tone in his voice. The neglect and indifference of the church might have been indirectly responsible for her mother's death, but her father had responded to the church with an equal indifference of his own until he began writing for Jan Hus. Now papal decisions and the abuses of power that Hus preached against seemed to affect her father personally.

The master glanced back at Petrov. "I'm certain my friend the knight will understand the implications. Ever since the Great Schism, when the church ended up with three popes, all claiming to be God's anointed head of the church, the papacy has been in chaos. No one of them would relinquish power to any of the others. And now Pope John is intent upon consolidating his empire and broadening his base of support. Ladislas, king of Naples, has threatened Rome, so our Pope John has decided to proclaim a holy crusade against him. To any who will take part in his war the pope will grant plenary indulgence and the forgiveness of sins."

A glaze seemed to come down over Hus's eyes. "The bull says those who contribute toward the expenses of the campaign are guar-

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anted a place in heaven. The bull is to be read every Sunday in every church, but I have not obeyed the order. How can I read a declaration of war when I am trying to lead men to peace?”

“We will not tolerate this illegitimate pope!” Petrov’s voice slammed into the conversation. “We are Bohemians, and we are wise enough to see through this pope’s selfish schemes. We will not be drawn into his little vengeance and petty wars—”

“Unfortunately, my brave friend, there are many who believe the pope has these powers, even the authority to forgive sin before it is committed,” Jan Hus interrupted. “And I fear they will be drawn into his trap.”

“Now I understand why the archbishop was so interested in me work today,” Ernan said, stroking his beard. “Are you saying, Master Hus, that Pope John is *not* the representative of Christ on earth? Are you prepared to publish this statement? There would be dire consequences—”

“I’ll say it privately here, and I will even proclaim it before my classes at the university,” Master Hus answered, his cheeks brightening with color. “But I have learned, Ernan, that discretion and mercy must be intertwined. I cannot proclaim the truth to people not ready to receive it. If they lose faith in the pope, how am I to be certain they will not lose faith in the Church? In Christ himself? They must know in whom they have believed, and too many of them are yet strangers to the gospel.”

Even in the shadowed light of the room, Anika saw the preacher’s face heat to red. “But know this, my friends—this Pope John has nothing to do with Christ. Before he took that name he was known as Baldassarre Cossa, a murderer, pirate, and soldier, not an honorable knight like you, friend Petrov. He holds nothing but contempt for good while he cleaves to that which is evil. I have heard it reported, on good authority, that he is given to almost every form of vice. His vile character is no secret, but by shrewdness, audacity, and treachery he has risen from lowly thief to sovereign head of the Church.”

Master Hus stopped suddenly and threw a guilty glance in Anika’s direction. As a blush burned her cheek, she lowered her eyes.

“Do not fear to speak plainly around me, Master Hus,” she said simply. “My father has withheld nothing that is truthful from me, and I have read of the many evils that occupy the world. There is little you could describe that I have not read about.”

“The lass speaks the truth,” her father asserted, nodding vigorously. “She is not like any other sixteen-year-old girl you would meet in Prague. Anika is far wiser than her years.”

“Would that I had learned so much at her age.” The minister’s eyes clouded with some sort of misgiving for a moment as he looked toward Anika, then he returned his gaze to her father. “I fear I have forgotten the point of my story.”

“The pope,” Petrov provided helpfully. “You said he was a knave and a cutthroat.”

“Ah, yes.” A rueful smile flickered across the priest’s face. “Well, God works in ways we cannot fathom. In any case, Ernan, I shall need as many copies of my sermon as possible. My students will be pressed to compare my stand on the selling of indulgences against the pope’s bull. And the papal emissary will soon be among us.”

“I have completed the first copy.” Anika’s father shuffled among the rolled parchments on the table behind him. “And Anika will soon be hard at work on the second. We could have ten copies within two days, if that pleases you.”

Her father’s words pierced Anika’s conscience. She *should* have been hard at work on Master Hus’s sermon, but she had been enthralled with *The Art of Courtly Love*. Not that she expected to be courted by a nobleman, but she enjoyed reading about a way of life she would never experience.

A thoughtful smile curved the priest’s mouth. “Ah, you are too good to me, Ernan O’Connor. I know you will work hard on my sermon while other work goes begging, and I cannot pay what you need to provide for your daughter—”

“God smiles upon us, and we have not gone hungry,” Ernan answered, pushing sweat from his forehead up into his mop of auburn hair. “And if the truth is to be told in this troubled time, a book is far more willing to speak than many a man.”

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“Well said.” Hus lifted a hand toward Anika, then turned to her father and lowered his voice. “In fact, Ernan, I have also come today to speak a private word in your ear. If there is some errand your daughter could run—”

Anika felt a blush run like a shadow over her cheeks. When would they stop treating her like some sort of fragile flower? Only a moment ago the preacher had noted her sophistication, yet now he was willing to send her away as if she were only a simple child. What news could he bring that she could not understand or imagine?

“Sure, and I was just wanting to send Anika out with these books,” her father said, pointing to a wrapped parcel on a stand near her desk. He turned to her and gestured toward the door. “Anika, me wee bird, those books are to be delivered to the new rector at the university.” Standing, her father laced his fingers behind his neck. “Be sure to place the books directly into the rector’s hands. They are too valuable to be entrusted to anyone else.”

“Yes, Father,” she murmured, hoping the discontent in her voice would not spoil the preacher’s opinion of her.

Hus winked at her as she stood and tied her cloak around her neck. “I apologize for sending you away,” he said, his mahogany-colored eyes softening.

“I understand,” she said, trying to force a smile. “You have something to discuss that has nothing to do with me, so it is best that I am out of the room.”

“On the contrary, my dear, the news I bring has everything to do with you,” Jan Hus answered, the smile suddenly leaving his eyes. “And for your safety, I think you should allow our friend Sir Petrov to escort you to the university. I will see you later, perhaps when you have returned.”

Petrov rose stiffly from his stool and gathered the bundled books into his arms. “I will finish the story I began for you,” he said, opening the door for her with one hand as he balanced the books with the other. “As I recall, the lady had just tumbled into the stream, and I stood there with only a broadsword to protect her honor.”

Anika gave Petrov a fleeting smile, then turned and curtseyed to

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Master Hus. She lingered near the doorway as long as she dared, hoping to catch some clue of what he intended to discuss with her father, but he picked up one of the wax tablets and pretended to read it, clearly indicating that he would not speak until she was well away.

With a heart burdened by care and curiosity, she reluctantly moved through the doorway, allowing Petrov to take her arm and lead her along the slanting streets of Prague.

Though he was happy to serve as Anika's escort, Petrov had no inclination to wait with her for the rector. Naturally impatient and burning to know what matter had compelled Master Hus to seek privacy, Petrov asked the rector's housekeeper to send the girl home with a trusted chaperone, then took his leave of the two women. He quickly retraced his steps and entered the bookshop without knocking. Ernan O'Connor and Jan Hus were deep in conversation over the copyist's worktable, and neither man even seemed to notice that Petrov had reentered the room.

"So you see how it is, then," Hus was saying, all traces of humor gone from his eyes. "Your daughter is old enough to marry, and more than a few men have noticed that she is pleasant and comely. You have done well to raise her alone, Ernan, but what plans have you made for her future?"

"Why shouldn't she spend her future here with me?" Ernan's face brightened to a tomato hue. "I've taught her to read and write four different languages. There's not a lass within a hundred miles of Prague who has read as many books! And she can quote the Scriptures in Bohemian, French, or even English. I would have taught her Gaelic as well, but there's not much call for me mother tongue around these parts. I had planned that we should continue together in the business—"

"You have done a fine job, and I'm not disputing her virtues," Hus interrupted, putting out a soothing hand. "But the idea of a woman in trade is absurd. She will need to marry, and what womanly skills have you taught her? The bread you ate for lunch today—"

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did she bake it? Does she know the least bit of what a woman should know in order to become a wife?"

Twin stains of scarlet appeared on the copyist's cheeks. "She can read a book as well as you, Master Hus, and translate it, too."

"Be honest, Ernan." The preacher looked up and shot Petrov a glance that clearly said, *Help me out*. Uncertain which end of the debate he should support, Petrov lowered himself to the corner stool and crossed his arms, waiting to see whose was the stronger argument.

"Anika will work with me." Ernan gave the minister a forced smile and a tense nod. "She has no need to marry. Together we make a good income, and no scribe in Prague does a better job of book copying. The university students pay her by the column—sixteen columns of sixty-two lines for a penny, what an income! And Anika handles the book rentals—soon the rentals will bring in as much as the copying. As long as me daughter has her books, she will not starve."

"What if she *wants* to marry?" the preacher countered.

The copyist's steel-blue eyes widened with astonishment. "Why would she? She has a home here, and a father to provide for her."

"She may want a home of her own. She reads the romances; your daughter may even yearn for a husband . . . and love."

Surprise siphoned the blood from Ernan O'Connor's face. Petrov sat still, his heart contracting in pity for a loving father who had suddenly realized that his daughter was no longer a child. In truth, Petrov himself had been dreading the day when Anika would leave them, but he had not dared think that time might be fast approaching.

"I respect you, Master Hus," Ernan said, his voice trembling with suppressed emotion, "but I cannot thank you for bringing this notion to me house. Anika has no need to marry; she needs nothing. She has been provided for—each book in those chests yonder is worth its weight in silver. I spent fifteen months copying the Scriptures in the engraved chest; the book is mounted on wood and overlaid with gold leaf—"

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“Ernan, I can see that I’ve upset you, and it was not my intent to do so.” Hus paused to look at Petrov. “And I am glad that you have returned, my chivalrous friend. Though you no longer use your sword, your knowledge of the nobility may help us in certain days ahead.”

Petrov nodded silently, aware that his pulse had quickened.

Hus squared his shoulders, then turned to face Ernan again. “I did not come to you about Anika, Ernan, because I want you to find her a husband. If you want to enjoy her sweet presence in your home for a few more months, who am I to tell you that you should not? But do not let your eyes deceive you. You may see your daughter as a child, but others see her as a grown woman, and a most lovely one.”

“Priests—” Ernan spat out the word, “are not supposed to notice such things.”

The preacher’s mouth twitched with amusement. “Priests are men, too, Ernan. But I did not come today to warn you of a priest. I came to tell you that unless you consider marriage for your daughter and see her safely betrothed to a husband, other men may be inclined to consider her for less honorable purposes. I have overheard—how, I cannot say—that a certain youth of Bohemia has noticed your daughter’s beauty. He has even taken to following her in the streets.”

“What?” Petrov’s pensive mood veered sharply to anger. “By the hounds of hell, I will discover this youth and pull out his spying eyes!”

The preacher lifted his hand. “That would not do, brave Petrov, though we appreciate your courage and devotion to our Anika. No, what is needed here is not violence, but knowledge. Ernan, you must make a plan for your daughter. If she is willing to be wed, you should set about finding her a suitable husband of whom you approve. The knave I spoke of is of noble birth, and while he would not be likely to take your daughter as his wife, he would not hesitate . . .” the preacher’s eyes slid down to the table top, “to use her in an ignoble fashion.”

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Petrov glanced at his friend; Ernan's face had become a glowering mask of rage. "Who is this who dares to think of me daughter in such a way?"

"You do not have the power to control young men's thoughts, Ernan, any more than our fathers could control ours when we were young and unsettled." Hus pressed his slender fingertips to the table. "But you must do your part to keep your daughter safe. Make it known that she is betrothed, even if the marriage is two or three years hence. Make it clear to any who would ask that she lacks neither purpose nor protection. Men are less likely to steal an innocent lamb if they know both the herdsman and the owner are standing guard."

Comprehension broke upon Ernan's face like a spring breaking forth from under a sheet of ice. "I will heed your words," he said simply, gripping the edge of his worktable. "I will begin—tomorrow—to find a suitable match. But this must not be rushed. Anika herself must be consulted." He pushed himself up from the table, his muscular arms trembling. "I love my daughter, gentlemen, and won't be marrying her off to just anyone. And if you will excuse me, I must fetch a cup of water from the bucket upstairs. There is much I need to consider."

"We will leave you to your thoughts," Hus answered, rising. As Ernan turned toward the back staircase, Master Hus looked at Petrov and gestured toward the doorway. Without speaking, Petrov stood and turned to follow the minister.

"Grace be with you until we meet again, Ernan, my friend," Hus called, opening the door. "Do not hesitate to send word if you need me."

The copyist waved a hand and muttered as he moved up the stairs, but Petrov did not hear his reply. With surprising force for so slender a man, the preacher propelled Petrov through the doorway.

When they were safely within the camouflaging noise of the bustling street, Hus took Petrov's elbow and pulled him away from the copyist's shop.

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“Where did you leave the girl?”

Petrov blanched. “With the rector’s housekeeper. I did not know she was being followed.”

“Go there at once, and personally escort Anika home.” Lines of concentration deepened along the preacher’s brows and under his eyes.

Petrov felt his pulse quicken. Was the threat really so great?

“If she is truly in danger,” he said, one hand automatically going to the silver sword hanging at his waist, “will you tell me who this wayward lout is? A hunter warned is a hunter forearmed.”

The minister’s eyes clouded with hazy sadness. “I did not want to tell Ernan, lest he confront the youth or the youth’s father at an inopportune time.” Hus lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. “And you know fathers, Sir Petrov. Wisdom often flies out the window when a daughter’s safety and honor are concerned.”

Petrov did not know much about fathers, having never been one or known his own, but he warmed to the implied compliment in the preacher’s words. “You can tell me the lad’s name,” he answered, nodding. “And I will guard Anika and her father with my life, if necessary. The loyalty I once swore to Lord Honza I yield now to you. May God strike me if I fail in my duties to either the girl or Ernan O’Connor.”

The preacher clapped his hand on Petrov’s shoulder. “You are a good man, Sir Knight, and I knew I could confide in you. The youth who concerns me is Miloslav, son to Lord Laco of Lidice.”

“Lord Laco?” Petrov’s breath caught in his throat. The previous Lord of Lidice had been a foe of Lord Honza’s, and the name still made Petrov’s heart pound. The present Lord of Lidice had to be descended from Petrov’s old enemy, and apparently this Miloslav was cut from the same traitorous cloth.

“I have heard it suggested,” Hus went on, his brows drawing downward in a frown, “that the youth fancies our Anika. He has been told that Ernan has no great fortune, therefore the daughter might be compelled to seek employment as a serving maid.” His eyes caught and held Petrov’s. “I do not need to tell you what sort of ser-

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vice Miloslav has in mind. Unfortunately, the nobility think that lesser folk have neither brains nor morals, and they are not above taking whatever they desire.”

“Do not fear.” Petrov spread his feet and stood before the minister with the solidity of a fortress. “Anika will not be harmed. I will not let the young man within twenty paces of her.”

“But we must guard against Anika, too,” Hus warned, lifting his hand. “She is a romantic. She yearns for the love she reads about in books, and Miloslav may know the words to win a girl’s heart. He is a handsome lad, and if she were won with lies and flattery, even so virtuous a girl as Anika might be brought to ruin and despair.”

“I would die before I would allow her to be hurt, Master Hus.” Petrov placed one hand across his chest and rested the other upon the priest’s arm. “I have known the girl since she was a wee child of six or seven, and upon my oath as a knight, I promise both you and God that I shall protect our Anika.”

“Do not forget to guard your tongue,” Hus warned, nodding. “Do not reveal to Ernan O’Connor the names of either Lord Laco or Miloslav. Members of the nobility often visit his shop, and with one slip of the tongue he might place his life and his daughter’s virtue in danger. If he were to erupt in anger . . .” Hus let the sentence trail off.

“Ernan O’Connor shall never know the lad’s identity,” Petrov answered, his heart swelling with a feeling of purpose he had thought long dead. “As you trust in God, Jan Hus, you may trust in me.”



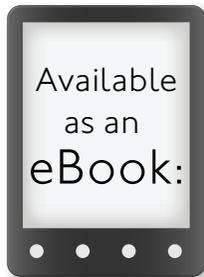
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