

Chapter One

“Elyse, come here to your papa,” Alfred of Ainsworth crowed as he stretched out his arms to his little daughter. She ran eagerly to him as she brandished a little wooden sword. She was a tiny little thing of four. Her hair was platted in two long braids and tied at the ends with blue ribbon. What a sight she made, wearing a shirt of dull brown, and little fawn colored breeches. Her petite russet boots were made of soft, supple, leather which molded to her feet.

A squeal of delight could be heard throughout the practice yard. In one hand she grasped a toy sword and in the other, a matching shield. Jumping for all she was worth into the open arms of her father, she proclaimed in a high pitched voice, “Loookie, Papa, did you see me? Did you see me wif my sword?”

Alfred tossed her into the air, and as Elyse whooped her delight, he shouted, “Indeed, my beauty. I did see you in the practice field. You have become quite the soldier! Do be careful, my dear, not to injure my knights.”

With that, he put her down and she ran back to the practice block calling, “I’ll be careful, Papa, I weel, I weel, watch out for me, watch out!”

Ainsworth Keep in the south of England, was home to a thriving village. Lord Alfred ruled alone as liege, his beautiful young wife, long dead. They had only one daughter, Elyse, and she was the apple of her father’s eye. Though Elyse had a sweet and endearing personality, she was possessed of a fierce temper. She also had a stubborn streak inherited from her father, which ran deep in her bones. That stubborn, determined streak got her playmates in trouble as much as it did Elyse.

Sir Thomas and his family had come to live at Ainsworth ten years before. His little girl, Eselda was nearly the same age as Elyse. They grew up together and were fast friends. Though she and Eselda played the usual games of childhood, Eselda’s father was not quite as indulgent as Alfred.

“Eselda,” Sir Thomas frowned, “you may not wear boys’ breeches anymore. Your mother told me she caught you today after I expressly forbade it. What say you?”

“Yes, Papa,” Eselda answered, looking at the ground and scraping her foot in the rushes. “I wasn’t wearing the breeches, but Elyse told me I could not play soldiers and knights unless I put them on.”

“Eselda, what have I told you?” Thomas continued. “You must not do as Elyse says, you must do as your papa and mama say. Let Lord Alfred deal with Elyse, is that understood?”

Eselda nodded. “I’m so sorry, Papa, I won’t disobey you again.” Eselda walked toward her father who had eased himself into a chair by the hearth and climbed up on his lap.

Thomas gently wrapped his arms around her and pulled her head to his shoulder. “Eselda, I do not wish to punish you. See that you obey me in this in the future. Tell Elyse to come and talk to me if she does not like it.”

“Yes, Papa, I promise.”

When Eselda informed Elyse the next day of the talk she had with her father, Elyse resentfully agreed. “All right then, I guess we can still play soldier and knights. You can be the girl, and I can rescue you if you want.” Though headstrong, Elyse was wise enough to know not to question Sir Thomas about anything. She knew she could not get her way with him. She also knew better than to encourage Eselda to disobey.

Elyse herself, however, continued to think she should be allowed to do whatever she felt like doing. Including, following the boys and knights. The greatest object of her single-minded devotion was her cousin Charles. He arrived to foster with Lord Alfred when Elyse was seven and he, eleven. Elyse followed Charles’ every move and aspired to be just like him. Naturally good-natured, Charles tolerated Elyse’s presence and would even encourage her in a game or two whenever he had the time. Though Elyse could be annoying, Charles became attached to her and treated her as a little sister.

One day on her way to the kitchens to beg for a treat, Elyse was hit squarely on her leg with a hard smack. Startled, she arched her back and looked at the still stinging spot. A big wad of oozing mud fell off her pants and lay on the ground. She quickly turned around to see where the projectile had originated. Before she could move, another plop hit her right in the stomach. As she wiped it away, she smelled her hands. The mud was mixed with dung from the horses.

Only one person could be responsible for this, that nit wit Efrain. Looking up, she spotted him along the low stone wall around the side of the building. She could see his bright red hair and skinny neck. He snickered into his hands. “I’ll get you, Efrain,” she shouted, and took off

running straight toward him. Her braids flew in the wind. She jumped up on Efrain and began to pummel him with her little fists.

Efrain started to laugh and called out. "What's that on me then? A little bitty bee I think. A bee wi' no sting, ha ha ha."

The more he teased the madder she got, but she was too small to properly punish Efrain. She did manage to cover herself and Efrain in mud as they rolled around on the ground. Suddenly, Elyse was jerked up by the back of her shirt. "Let me go, let me go," she screeched. "I'm going to kill him."

Before she could twist out of his hands, Charles grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a shake. "Elyse, stop it, what is going on?"

Efrain sat up, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Nah, nah, look who stinks, you're just a girl dressed in pink."

Elyse struggled to free herself from Charles as she screamed, "I do NOT have pink on!"

Efrain retorted, "Do too, do too nah nah."

Elyse was beginning to spread the mud all over Charles as she wrestled to get away from him. She felt angry tears slipping down her cheeks. Her hair was falling out of its braids, and she had lost a ribbon.

Charles grabbed her upper arms and put his face in hers. "Stop this right now, Elyse. Right now, I mean it. Stand still." With little other option available to her, she stilled her movements and looked up into Charles' face. He stuck out his chin and growled, "I shall tend to Efrain." Not anticipating this, Efrain did not move quickly enough. Charles strode up to him, balled up his fist, and punched him in the nose.

Efrain let out a loud wail. He covered his nose, now beginning to bleed, with his hand. "I'll get you, Charles, she's nuthin but a dumb ole girl, owwww."

"Be quiet, Efrain," Charles ordered, "or I'll give you worse than that. Get out of here and go home and leave Elyse alone." Efrain ran down the lane to his cottage still holding his nose and howling all the way. Charles turned to Elyse. "What do you think you're doing, Elyse? Fighting with a common urchin right out here in front of the whole of Ainsworth, and you the daughter of the lord!"

Elyse exploded into a full blown tantrum and cried, "He threw stinky mud at me, Charles." She could barely get the words out as she stuttered between sobs. "I didn't do

anything.” Elyse took a heaving breath. Before she could continue, Charles took her by the arm and patted her hand.

“Now, now, Elyse, calm down. It’s okay, now. Efrain is gone and he won’t bother you again. He’s afraid of me. Stop crying.”

Elyse came to a shuddering stop. She hiccupped and nodded her head at Charles. He looked at the rivulets of tears running through the mud on her face and took a bit of the clean tail of his shirt to wipe her eyes. “Are you hurt?” He bent over to peer into her face. Elyse slowly shook her head and wiped her nose with her hand. “All right.” Straightening, Charles tugged her arm and led her toward the keep. “Let’s go find Ingrid and get you a bath before your papa finds you like this.” Ever her champion, Elyse smiled inside and out, she could always depend on Charles. She skipped in a circle around him as he walked her to the keep.

Elyse would be ten years old in a few weeks. She continued to obstinately hold on to the belief that she might become one of her father’s greatest knights. She was growing, but was still smaller than most children her age. She did not appear sickly, but was well formed with bright blue eyes and softly curling hair. Her pug nose turned just so and her lips formed a perpetually sweet pout. Thinking some good armaments might help even the score between her and the bigger boys, she begged her father for a special present to mark her tenth year. “Please, Papa, Papa, please can I have a sword and armor just like Charles?”

Overhearing the request, Charles felt highly aggravated. Charles loved her and indulged her every bit as much as her father, but he drew the line at pretending Elyse would become a knight. He felt she was getting too old to be running with the boys in training. Waiting to catch her alone, Charles spied her in the kitchen yard and pulled her aside. “Elyse,” Charles cajoled, trying his best to appeal to her common sense. “You cannot possibly have boy’s armor fitted for you or weaponry. It is unseemly. What will the men think? What will your people think? It is ridiculous, I will not allow it.” Although Charles knew Elyse was prone to stubbornness, he continued to believe that someday, Elyse would honor his greater maturity and wisdom. Today would not be the day.

Elyse drew her brows into a deep frown and mulishly stuck out a pointed finger. “Charles, you beast, don’t you dare tell me what to do. It isn’t for you to decide. I can hold my own in a fight and can do as well as most of the boys my size. I have trained as hard as you. It will help me defend the keep.”

Charles looked at her with undisguised aggravation. He lectured as he crossed his arms over his chest. “In case you haven’t noticed, Miss Bossy, the boys your size are not your age anymore. It’s only going to get worse. It is time you began to dress and act like a girl, Elyse. No decent man will have you for a wife if you continue to behave this way.”

Elyse screwed her face up and turned red as she always did when cross. She screeched, “I will not be anyone’s wife! I will live here forever with you and Papa! I will pledge my sword for his cause and my allegiance to the house of Ainsworth forever!”

Charles began his reply, but Elyse stuck her fingers in her ears and began to sing loudly. Rolling his eyes, Charles walked away knowing it would be useless to argue with her. He muttered under his breath, “We’ll see, Miss Bossy, we’ll see.”

To Charles’ great horror, the next day he spied Elyse standing beside the village blacksmith near the armory. As he drew closer, he could hear her chattering away while the blacksmith pumped the bellows. “Papa says I can have armor made just like Charles, and I want a little sword to match. Do you think you can hammer a dragon on the front? I want all the boys to be scared of me and then I think I want bracelets to go with the armor and maybe a hat...” The blacksmith just nodded his head and didn’t say a word.

That’s it, thought Charles. He made his way quickly to the keep and through the bailey. He crossed around the kitchen yard where the kitchen maids were on their way to toss out the garbage from the previous day.

Charles found his uncle in the solar of the keep speaking with his overseer about the season’s harvest to come. “Uncle Alfred, may I have a word with you?”

Lord Alfred held up a hand as he listened intently to the overseer. “Just a moment, Charles.” Impatiently Charles waited, noticing the dust motes dancing in the air as the autumn sun streamed through the small windows in the wall. “What is it, Charles? I am very pressed to be done with this assessment of the coming harvest. We must go to Manchester to get extra workers. It promises to be a bountiful year. Speak quickly my boy.”

Charles swallowed hard and began his plea. “Uncle Alfred, Elyse is outside in the armory speaking to the blacksmith and ordering him about. She keeps telling him what kind of armor and weapons she wants. I thought you should know. I have tried to intervene, but she will not listen to anything I say.”

Alfred chuckled. "She will not listen to anyone, my dear Charles. I will tend to Elyse. Remember, she is just a child and will soon be too old for such foolishness. Let her enjoy such pleasures while she can."

"But Uncle," Charles groaned.

Alfred held up a hand to stop Charles mid-sentence. "Charles, I will tend to Elyse. Do not concern yourself with her." And with that, Lord Alfred turned back toward his overseer to finish their harvest plans.

As Charles left the solar, he huffed under his breath and talked to himself. "Saints preserve us, that girl is going to be the death of me yet. Okay, Miss Bossy. Go ahead and do as you please, but don't expect me to go along with this game anymore." Charles noticed Eselda walking to the buttery, basket in hand. He thought it unusual because where one saw Eselda one usually saw Elyse. "So, Eselda, what are you doing?" Charles jeered. "I just saw Elyse ordering up her armor and I expected you to be alongside her like a good squire should."

Eselda stuck her tongue out at Charles. "A lot you know. Gerta sent me to the buttery and I haven't seen Elyse today."

Eselda stomped off without another word to Charles. Before he had gone too far, he heard Elyse come skipping up behind him humming a happy tune. "It's my birthday in two weeks, Charles. Papa says I may have armor and a real sword to use for practice in the bailey. I bet I shall be able to beat you, Charles. If I practice hard enough." She swung her arms and grabbed his hand and held it fast.

Charles looked down at her. She was absolutely irresistible. Even when it came to doing things he disagreed with. "You may be able to beat me at that," he murmured. He put his arm around her little shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

The innocent days of childhood passed quickly and no amount of boy's clothing or pretending could hide Elyse's exquisite features and her growing beauty. The lovely child that she had been was growing into a beautiful young woman. She had given up her "knight in training" game years before, yet, she still remained stubborn with a temper that could quickly flare when provoked. She continued to harbor the belief that push came to shove, she could pretty much best any man out there. No matter their size or strength. She was small, but she was fast, she reasoned, and therefore presumed an air of confidence that was not justified. The overindulgence of her father had not prepared Elyse for the reality of a true conflict of arms.

Her role in the village changed as she grew older and she went from being a pampered pet to chatelaine in training. Elyse enjoyed organizing meals and keeping the household in order. She always performed her duties with respect and deference to those around her. Gerta, the cook, had served Ainsworth for so long she needed no direction from Elyse. This was true for most of the servants and the town folk. Elyse had known most of them her whole life and depended upon them even more than they did her. Ingrid, her maid, had served her mother and was more like a mother to her than a servant.

Sir Edward, captain of the guard, began his service with the old lord as a young man and continued as the years went by. Edward tolerated Elyse's behavior, but was not always taken in by those big blue eyes. "Elyse!" he shouted one day when Elyse was fourteen. "Ye shall not be about the horses! Keep to yer own mare and do nay feed carrots to horses meant for knights! I shall not have it. Ye shall ruin them for any good work. If I see ye do it again, I shall take the matter to Lord Alfred and let him do as he likes wi ye."

Elyse's big eyes grew even rounder as she took Sir Edward's threat seriously. "Aye, Sir Edward, I beg pardon. I shall not be about the horses again."

As she quickly walked away, she heard Sir Edward retort, "See that ye are not." Elyse might be able to get away with a lot of things, but being reported to her father by a commanding knight was not one of them. Edward was never harsh with her, but he was also never fooled by her antics.

Her sisterly relationship with Charles continued, though at times he tried to be the voice of reason when Elyse's actions proved foolhardy. As Elyse grew old enough to be betrothed, Charles, ever concerned for her welfare, pleaded, "Elyse, you must begin to think of the future. Your father has been trying to get you to choose a husband. You've had many offers, why will you not give it serious consideration?"

Elyse sighed for what seemed like the hundredth time. "Do we really have to have this conversation again, Charles?"

Charles was walking to the keep for the evening meal after a hard day patrolling Ainsworth lands. He was tired and happened to see Elyse helping in the kitchens on his way to sup. "Yes, Elyse." Charles drew himself up. "It seems we do need to have this conversation yet again as you have not paid me any mind since the last time we spoke. Your father does not fare well and..."

Elyse turned her back to Charles. “Papa will be fine. I do not want to hear this. He will get better. He just needs more time.”

Lord Alfred had been ailing for some months. He had begun to slow down over the years, but maintained most of his vibrant energy. The last few months had seen him unable to catch his breath. His walk slowed to a crawl. He stopped riding his mount and gave up many of his former duties. Sir Edward and Sir Thomas had taken over the direction of the men in the last year or so and the keep, due to Elyse’s hard work, was in good shape.

Alfred was worried though, Elyse was of marriageable age, yet she seemed not the least bit interested. He had no son to entrust his estate. He knew that Elyse would never be allowed to hold the keep unless she was married. He felt himself aging, his eyes growing weak. He knew if he did not assure a good marriage for her, she would be left at the mercy of others who might not love her as he did. It was hard to talk to Elyse. She was so headstrong. He was beginning to regret that he had not been more demanding of her obedience as a child.