

“The Gift”

CHAPTER 3

By Lauren Rivers

Neither Ethan nor Lydia moved a muscle as their captors inched closer until there was no possibility of escape. They were positioned close enough so as to have clear lines of sight with each other but not so close they would get in each other's way. Their arrangement ensured that no matter which way Ethan or Lydia might move there were at least three archers capable of intercepting them, potentially lethally. The hawk kept his wings lowered and his arms up.

"Ethan?" Lydia asked, tilting her head towards him for his thoughts.

"Stay still," he said. No doubt she knew as well as he did there was no tactical option here. He made no effort to resist as his sword and Lydia's dagger were removed from their persons. The archers were in and out so smoothly Ethan almost hadn't felt the motion. If he hadn't been watching he might not even have noticed other than the shift in weight due to its absence. The avian merchant scanned the group around them in the hopes of identifying their leader. Each of the group who had moved to intercept them was silent and made no attempt to engage them in conversation. Ethan broke the standoff. "My name is Ethan Hargrove. My companion and I came here seeking information about a caravan that was attacked down below."

"I was wondering how long it would take for him to send someone," a female voice said. A female squirrel who Ethan had not noticed earlier stepped out from the group and moved just outside of the perimeter they had established around them. "You're not the type of person I expected," she replied. "I assume you're working for Halliwell?"

"In a manner of speaking," Ethan replied.

"Then I offer you two choices. Either you walk away or you remain here in our custody until such time as I decide what to do with you," she said.

Ethan looked at her. "We can't return without the young master Halliwell."

The squirrel raised her eyebrow. "You don't have a choice," she said.

"Is he here?" Ethan asked.

"That is none of your concern," the squirrel replied. Before she could order her men to do anything else, a young male peacock stepped into the clearing. "You shouldn't be here."

"If my father insists on sending men after me I should like to meet them face to face. My name is Adrian Halliwell." The peacock appeared unharmed, still dressed in the finery associated with the upper class. His shirt was pristine white with a tan vest buttoned on the waist and every feather in perfect order. Ethan suddenly felt very underdressed.

"Ethan Hargrove. This is Lydia." He gestured to his companion.

Adrian stepped closer, and the squirrel moved to stop him. He held up his hand. "It's all right, Elizabeth. You've disarmed them, haven't you?" He looked Ethan in the eyes. "I assume you don't intend to harm me?" he asked.

"No," Ethan replied. "Your father sent us to find you and bring you back. If necessary we were to rescue you."

The young peacock chuckled to himself. He held up a hand to assuage Ethan's confusion. "Oh, don't mind me. I simply find it funny, the idea of being rescued. I'm here of my own free will."

Ethan and Lydia looked to each other, more confused than ever. The hawk relaxed and lowered his arms. "You're not in trouble?" he asked.

“Hardly,” he said. “Unless you count Elizabeth’s cooking.” The comment earned him a harsh slap on the back. Despite his best efforts to hide it, he winced. Once he regained his composure he continued. “Allow me to summarize. My father told you I was taken by one of his rivals or something to that effect and he wanted you to rescue me so he would not be seen as being involved or in any way connected to the incident, and offered you something in return or words to that effect.”

“I take it you’ve heard this story before,” Lydia said.

“A couple of times,” the peacock admitted. “My father no doubt told you about the caravan attack. What he neglected to mention was that caravan returned two months ago.”

Ethan and Lydia looked at each other simultaneously. The hawk turned back to the peacock in an attempt to puzzle out exactly what was going on, but Lydia did not need to wait for him to explain. “Your father knows you’re here.”

“He does, and suffice it to say he does not approve of my life choices. I told him some time ago I had no need of his money or influence and could care less about our family’s legacy, which, truth be told, is not as stellar or impeccable as he would have you believe. Quite simply, I did not want the life he would have for me and so I left.” The peacock motioned for the archers to lower their weapons.

The hawk relaxed slightly. “I know the feeling,” Ethan replied.

“Then you know why I had to leave,” he said. “My father has been sending people to rescue me for some time using their good intentions and greed to his advantage. Every time one of them shows up we disarm them and send them on their way. Most of them are simply innocents who my father has manipulated into doing his errand for him.” He indicated the squirrel, who stepped closer as he wrapped his arm around her. “This is my beloved Elizabeth, whom I care for more than any fortune or treasure. I would no sooner leave her than I would stop breathing. She is everything to me.”

Lydia elbowed Ethan. “You and this guy have a lot in common.”

“Do we?” the peacock asked. “Then I would ask you to turn around and leave as you came.”

“May I ask for the return of our weapons?” Ethan asked. “I am a traveling merchant and it would be unwise to travel without them, not to mention we would need to explain their absence to the rest of our party.”

The squirrel tensed. “Adrian,” she said.

“Oh, come now, Elizabeth, I doubt they intend us any harm. I have a feeling about these two. Return their weapons, though I would ask you keep them sheathed while in our presence.” He gestured for the archers to return the weapons. A moment later, one of them handed Ethan his sword with a fluid bow before retreating just as quickly.

“If I may ask, why does your father keep sending people to, um, save you?” Ethan asked.

“Ah,” he said, gesturing for him to come with him. The archers dispersed, disappearing into the caves and trees as if they had melted away. No wonder no one ever seemed to get close to Adrian Halliwell. “If you’ve time to stay for dinner I can tell you the whole story, though I warn you it is quite the tale. We have enough food and places for you to sleep since I wouldn’t recommend traveling down the valley in the darkness. Trust us, there are measures taken to ensure our relative privacy.”

Ethan nodded, certain he meant traps. "You leave things for people who wander too close?"

"Yes, but nothing lethal and nothing too severe. Nevertheless, if you don't know what you're doing you might end up upside down in a tree," he said.

"Good to know," the hawk replied.

Adrian offered a gracious nod. "Of course we have no desire to see anyone injured, however my father has made it necessary that we take some steps to minimize the number of guests we receive." He walked them into one of the caves and through a number of winding and twisting corridors.

Though Ethan was paying attention he nevertheless found it difficult to keep track of all the various twists and turns in the cave system. Whether by accident or design, had he been wandering in on his own he no doubt would have soon been hopelessly lost. As he observed the people walking through the corridors he noted they appeared to have no trouble navigating their way to where they desired to go. The hawk concluded that they had some system of direction which he could not identify.

Lydia walked behind Adrian on the left. "I've noticed people around here don't seem to be lacking in the essentials."

"We have what we need," Adrian said. "I will answer all of your questions in due time."

Elizabeth grasped her peacock lover's arm with a firm glare. "Perhaps you should not be telling these strangers any more than they need to know." Her tail puffed up to twice its normal size.

Adrian returned the favor with a gentle touch of his hand on her cheek. "I know you only desire to protect me, my beloved, but did you not notice the gold band on the lady's arm?" When she did not seem to understand, he continued. "She is an Oracle." The squirrel shook her head. "Oracles are an order of people well known for good will and honesty, among other things. They would never betray a proffered confidence nor lie under most circumstances. Isn't that correct?" he asked.

"It is," Lydia confirmed. "You have my oath I will not repeat anything said to me here unless you permit it."

Ethan nodded. "As you have mine."

"Well, you're not an Oracle, but I do believe you to be an honest man. However, I should warn you that should you choose to break your oath Elizabeth has been known to ensure such people don't make it back to Valadyne to report to my father," he said without emphasis.

"Duty noted." Ethan smirked at the thought of how much their relationship reminded him of his and Diana's. The hawk smiled at the memory of his lady Doberman and he frowned as he wondered how he would cheer her up without the scroll. He lowered his gaze and continued to follow Adrian as he led them through the caves.

Lydia looked up at the cave ceiling. "This seems to go on for ages," she remarked.

Adrian nodded. "It's quite impressive, to be sure. Elizabeth found this cave system many years ago and has built quite the family, let me tell you." He motioned to one of the others heading in the opposite direction. "Do me a favor and see to it we have an extra two meals and a room set up for tonight, would you?" The tiger nodded and rushed off the way he had come.

"I hope you two are hungry," he said.

“Famished,” Ethan admitted. The journey up the valley had diminished most of his reserves from what he had eaten at lunch, and it was only when he recalled how low the sun had gotten how long the trip up here had actually taken. Ethan felt his stomach rumble and a rather audible growl made itself heard. He touched his hand to his chest and felt his neck feathers puff up in embarrassment.

Adrian offered a sympathetic smile. “You have impeccable timing. We’re all about to sit down for our evening meal.” He stopped for a moment to look them both in the eyes. “We don’t have much, but we share everything we do possess in equal measure.” He led the way through a long passage lit only by torches placed on either side at regular intervals.

It was at this point Ethan observed more and more people heading in the same direction. A few of them were families and several groups of children. Before Ethan could ask where all of these people had come from they emerged into the light. At the top of the valley, concealed from the world around them was a gorgeous oasis of green. Spanning for what seemed like a great distance Ethan’s beak fell open at the sheer beauty of the verdant landscape.

“This is incredible,” Lydia said.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth replied. “This is what we call the Oasis. It’s where we grow most of our food and socialize, eating our meals and enjoying each other’s company. The children often play here given they can do so without too much adult supervision.” The squirrel gave a gentle wink. No doubt even when not being actively watched there were so many adults in the area it was impossible for any of the kids to get into too much trouble. Ethan smiled as a couple of pups ran by giggling all the while as their mother fruitlessly attempted to get them to slow down.

The space here was divided into two main areas, the larger of which was devoted to various types of crops. Corn stalks, tomato plants, lettuce, and other vegetables were growing all across the far side of the space. In the area where they stood long tables were spread out for people to sit with a couple of kiosks on one side where the food was distributed amongst those present. Both a social and work space it was clear this was the epicenter of life here where everyone came at one point or another.

Adrian led them to one of the lines where he was allowed to take them to the front and requested four meals for himself and his guests. Once all of them had been served he directed the party to the nearest of the tables where he sat in the middle, allowing the others to choose their own seating.

Ethan and Lydia sat together on the opposite side, while Elizabeth took her seat beside her beloved. Seeing them together made him wish for Diana’s happiness to return, and he only hoped he could find a way to convince Halliwell to part with the Aldrisian scroll without living up to his end of the bargain. He leaned in to sniff the meal and was immediately surprised with the wonderful freshness of everything on the plate.

“This smells fantastic,” he said, taking a bit of some of the vegetables.

“We take a lot of pride in the food we grow here. We’re more or less self sufficient so everything we need we prepare ourselves from the seed to the finished vegetable. For what we can’t make ourselves we have a few traders who make the trip halfway up from time to time.” The lady squirrel sprinkled some chopped nuts onto her salad and began to eat, savoring the first bite with a pleasant moan.

Adrian smiled. "Perhaps it's just in our heads, but there's nothing quite like fresh food you've prepared from food you've grown yourself."

"We don't often get to enjoy fresh food. My companions and I are often traveling between places," Ethan said. "I'm a clothing and jewelry merchant."

"But that's not all you are," Adrian said. "I can tell there's a lot you keep beneath the surface. Don't worry, I don't intend to pry. Let's just say I like a person with layers." He smiled brightly at him before taking a few bites of his meal.

Ethan did the same, if only to buy himself a few seconds while he considered their host and the man they had been sent to 'rescue'. He was quite different from his father, but then again, so was Ethan. He wondered if fathers and sons ever saw eye to eye. It was not that he disliked his father, far from it. Rather with Ethan it was the simple fact he would never be the bird his father wanted him to be. Perhaps it was similar with Adrian and the elder Halliwell. He did not pretend to understand the family struggle that they found themselves caught within but he understood what it felt like. In any case he hoped that young Halliwell would do as he promised and not pry further into Ethan's personal history. It was something he was not ready to discuss just yet, even with his companions.

Lydia had eaten several pieces of the meat on her plate when she paused to address their hosts. "You promised us an explanation."

"Quite right, I did," Adrian said, taking a few more bites of his meal. "I suppose if I'm going to tell you the whole story I may as well start at the beginning. Many years ago my beloved Elizabeth was not as fortunate as you see her now. She was lost and alone, having no place to call her own nor knowing where she would find her next meal. Her parents had both died leaving her without anyone to look after her and to avoid getting too personal let's suffice it to say she fled her home city and came to this valley. I don't know what she was looking for but in her explorations of the valley she came upon this cave system in which we currently reside. To her surprise within there was this beautiful field and enough space to house countless others. She was the first, and it was here she began to grow her crops and in time, learned to protect and defend it. Rumors of what she was building here began to spread, and eventually, others arrived seeking aid and comfort. Of course my beloved took them in and shared what she had. I don't think she's ever turned anyone away who truly wanted to become part of the community. Over the years the population has grown but the idea has never changed. These people are the misfits, the unwanted, and the individuals no one looked after. I heard of this place and had to see it for myself."

"What you've done here is truly remarkable," Lydia said. "This place is amazing."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said. "We work very hard."

"It shows," Lydia replied. "You've accomplished a great deal. You should be very proud."

"We are," the squirrel said, "though your compliments are appreciated."

Adrian continued. "It took me weeks to find it. The first time I stumbled upon it I was surrounded much as you were when you arrived. I was given a meal and a place to stay and soon became enamored with these people. I met Elizabeth, and we fell in love. I came to visit her as often as I could, keeping the visits secret because I knew my father would never approve of our union. He would be furious if he discovers I was in love

with a common born woman.” He paused. “I’ve never cared about a woman’s breeding. To me, Elizabeth has always been a queen.” The lady squirrel blushed, for the first time since they had met her appearing embarrassed by her lover’s description. “Nevertheless I knew my father would never allow it, and for a year we carried on in secret. One day my father checked up on me and discovered I was not where I was purported to be. He had me followed the next time and learned I was seeing Elizabeth. He forbade me to see her, but I wasn’t about to allow that to stop me so I hatched a plan. I staged the attack on my caravan but left the goods since I knew my father cared more for the business assets and our family name than what I wanted. It was my hope he would take the trade goods and consider me lost.”

“I take it didn’t work,” Lydia said.

“No,” Adrian confirmed. “As there was no body he was certain I had been taken by one of our rivals.”

“He said as much when he sent us after you,” Ethan stated.

“When he discovered I had simply abandoned him to be with my beloved he confirmed what I already suspected to be true. He considered me to be one of his business assets. As his only heir I was to be his legacy and he would not see me abandon the family name. He insisted on sending people to ‘rescue’ me, and on occasion he would send an envoy to convince me to return, but nothing worked. Once he came himself to the site of the attack and requested a meeting, which I provided. Despite his best efforts to convince me to return and my own to change his mind about letting me do as I wished, he simply left and has continued to send potential saviors ever since.”

Lydia looked at him with a curious expression. “Surely he must realize by now it’s not working.”

“No doubt,” Elizabeth said. “But one thing Mister Halliwell does not do is give up. He offers people what they want the most, using his money and influence to send countless people after us in his attempts to wear Adrian down. Each time we turn them away, either with kindness or by force, and each time another arrives with the same story.” The squirrel shrugged. “For the time being we maintain an uneasy stalemate, at least until he finds someone whose greed exceeds their compassion.”

“Or who simply doesn’t care about what they do as long as they’re paid,” Adrian said. “If you don’t mind my asking, what did he offer you?”

Ethan nodded. “Something for my Diana,” he said. “She is far from home and though she doesn’t say it she misses it more than anything perhaps other than our companionship. Though we do all we can to lift her mood I suspect nothing other than a touch of home will alleviate her burden. Your father has something that can help me do that.”

“This Diana of yours, I assume she is someone special?” Adrian asked.

“She is more important to me than my own existence,” Ethan said.

Adrian glanced at Elizabeth before he nodded to her. She shook her head in response. “Then perhaps I can help you.”

Elizabeth touched his arm. “You can’t.”

“Where would any of our people be if we had turned them away when they came to us for help?” he asked. “I can help them, and I will. I’ll be fine, I assure you.” Adrian held up a hand. “We will go to see my father and you will get your reward. My father is

many things but above all he is a man of his word. No doubt he promised you your prize upon my safe return.”

“He did,” Ethan said.

“Than I shall go with you, however, I do not intend to stay. He will have to be satisfied with me making my intentions clear in the place it will have the most impact. He cannot ignore me if I stand in the halls he holds so dear.” The peacock rose and smiled. “We shall go tomorrow, but for now you may feel free to explore as you wish. When you are ready to retire, speak to one of my people and they will show you to your room.”

“Thank you,” Ethan said.

Adrian held his empty food tray. “We shall leave you to speak amongst yourselves. Join me, Elizabeth?” he asked.

“In a moment,” she said, stroking his arm as he moved to go. Her eyes remained on Ethan as he walked away. Once the peacock was out of earshot, she let out a deep breath. “You’re welcome to stay the night, but I ask you to please leave before Adrian wakes in the morning.”

“I don’t understand,” Ethan said.

“He is a kind soul with a gentle heart, and he would do anything to help anyone in this place even if they are a total stranger. It’s one of the things I love about him. However, sometimes he lets his emotions cloud his judgment. I know his father will never let him go, but he believes there is still a part of him he can reach. I am not so convinced. If he goes with you it will just put him in unnecessary danger and I cannot protect him out there.” The squirrel lowered her head. “I don’t know what Eldritch Halliwell offered you but I ask that you relinquish it and protect Adrian when he cannot do so himself.” She turned to see Adrian waiting for her at the entryway. “Promise me that when you leave, you will do so without Adrian.”

In a moment she was gone. Ethan glanced at Lydia and let out a deep breath. “Well this just got a great deal more complicated.”

Lydia nodded. “What do you want to do?” she asked.

The hawk shook his head. “What can we do? I can’t ask Adrian to put himself in danger simply to do something nice for Diana. I’ll have to find something else to cheer her up. We’ll leave once everyone is asleep and make our way back down the valley.”

Lydia touched her hand to his back. “You’re a good man, Ethan Hargrove. If Diana knew what you went through just to make her happy, I know she’d say the same.”

“You are not to tell her,” he said.

“I would never violate your trust,” she replied. The two of them walked out of the common area into the cave system where most of the inhabitants were finishing up their evening meals. Many of them were headed back to their rooms with warm smiles on their faces. A few of them nodded to the pair as they headed in the opposite direction, no doubt eating their meals later than the others. As they walked down the passage he caught sight of Adrian and Elizabeth kissing. Ethan thought of Diana and silently sent his love along to her as they made their way towards the first intersection in search of their lodgings for the night.