



Dear Reader,

Thanks for checking out a bit of the third Eddie LaCrosse novel, *Dark Jenny*. This time around, I wanted to put Eddie completely on his own. He's in a strange place, he's the prime suspect in a murder, and he can rely on no one but himself. It's also--and this is no secret--based on Arthurian lore, something I've always loved and wanted to write about. In combining the two, I was able to show sides of Eddie that I hadn't before, and to bring out aspects of the Camelot legend that always fascinated me.

I hope you enjoy this sneak peek. Please feel free to share it with your friends! If you have any questions or comments, stop by my website and drop me a line. I love hearing from readers!

Cheers!

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CHAPTER ONE

Gary Bunson, Neceda's slightly-honest-but-mostly-not magistrate, came into Angelina's Tavern accompanied by a blast of winter air. Immediately an irate chorus erupted, some with language that implied Gary had carnal relations with livestock. Gary was used to that sort of response so he paid it no mind, and it stopped when he closed the door behind him. He shook snow from his long coat and looked around until he spotted me sitting with Liz at the bar.

"LaCrosse," he said. "There's somebody outside looking for you."

"Me? Must be a mistake."

"No mistake. He knew your name, and knew to find you here."

As a private sword jockey who either helped find the skeletons or made sure they stayed in the closet, I got my share of visitors, but not on a day like this. It was the worst winter in Muscodian history, and Neceda had it harder than most, being right on the frozen Gusay River where the wind had room for a running start.

Liz Dumont, my girlfriend, said, "Expecting someone?"

I shook my head and asked Gary, "Who is it?"

"What am I, your secretary?" Gary snapped. He straddled the empty barstool on the other side of Liz. "He's outside, go find out for yourself. Angie, get me something hot to drink, will you?"

Angelina, the tavern's owner as well as its main hostess, said to me, "You must owe someone a lot of money if they'd come out in this weather."

"I owe you more than I do anyone," I pointed out.

"That's true. But I always know where to find you."

"Maybe it's someone coming to hire you," Callie the waitress said. Even dressed in winter clothes that covered her from chin to ankle, Callie's beauty could melt icicles at ten paces. It was a shame those same icicles could probably outthink her.

Gary put both hands around the mug of hot tea Angelina placed in front of him. I watched the door expectantly. When nothing happened, I asked Gary, "So is he coming in?"

"Hell, I don't know, the snow's blowing so hard I could barely see him. He's got some kind of box with him."

"Box?"

"Yeah, you know, a box. Like a coffin or something."

He was wrong, though. It wasn't "like" a coffin, it was a coffin. It rested in the middle of the snowbound street. The horse that pulled it stood knee-deep in a drift. The animal had a thick winter coat and a heavy blanket draped over it from neck to tail, but still looked pretty put-out.

The blizzard had subsided to a steady flurry of flakes by the time I went outside. The figure seated expectantly atop the coffin was a small old man with a white beard, huddled beneath a cloak and heavy cap. His bright eyes peered from under the brim. He seemed unconcerned with the weather, puffing serenely on a long-stemmed pipe. The smoke vanished in the wind as soon as it appeared.

"You looking for me?" I said.

The old man looked me up and down. “Depends. Eddie LaCrosse?”

“Yeah.”

He hopped to his feet, slogged to me, and reached inside his clothes. Beneath my own coat I closed my hand around my sword’s hilt; a single twist would make a hidden dagger spring into my hand. To any opponent, I’d look as if I were idly scratching myself.

But the old man withdrew only a folded document with a red wax seal. “This is the paperwork.” His voice was high-pitched, almost girlish, and this close his eyes looked a lot younger than his white beard implied. He gestured at the coffin. “And this is the delivery.”

I tucked the document inside my coat. “Who’s in there?”

He shrugged. “Beats me, pal. I was just told to deliver it.”

Skids were nailed to the bottom of the coffin to ease its passage through the snow. As the man unhitched this sled of the dead from his horse, I examined it for a sign of its origin.

The first clue was its size: whoever was inside would be well over six feet tall. I’d crossed paths with a lot of big men over the years and mentally went down the list. I couldn’t imagine any of them sending me their mortal remains.

When the old man finished, I dug out what seemed like a respectable tip, but he declined. “I got paid enough already. Keep your money.” He swung easily into the saddle, looking even tinier on the huge horse. “Tell me, is there a whorehouse in this town?”

“Closed until the blizzard passes. Being seductive in this weather is heavy going.”

“Being horny in this weather ain’t that easy, either, but I’m doing my part.” He looked around as if determining which way to proceed. “Oh, well. Best of luck to you, Mr. LaCrosse.”

I watched him disappear into the snow. A few Necedans, bundled up so that only their eyes showed, had emerged to see what the commotion was about. It only then occurred to me that the old man had left the coffin in the middle of the street. I got behind it and, once I broke it free of the latest snow, pushed it with surprising ease over to the tavern. I left it outside the door and went back in.

“A coffin?” Callie said as I waited for my fingers to warm up. “Who would send you a coffin?”

“I think the point is who’s inside it,” Liz said.

“So who is it?” Gary asked.

I withdrew the document. “Don’t know. Supposedly this will tell me.”

Liz, Angelina, Callie, Gary, and at least half a dozen other people gathered around as I broke the seal. I glared at them until they backed off enough for me to read the message in private. It was brief, explained the coffin’s contents, and made it perfectly clear why it had come to me.

It also opened a pit in my stomach big enough to swallow the coffin, the tavern, and most of the town.

I put away the document and took a long drink of my ale. Everyone watched me expectantly. At last I said, “I’m not reading it to you.”

The air filled with their moans and complaints.

I held up one hand. “But I will tell you about it. I just need to go up to my office for a minute.”

“Why?” Angelina asked.

“I need to find a file. Refresh my memory on some things. I’ll be right back.” I kissed Liz on the cheek and went up the short flight of stairs.

My office was in the attic above the tavern’s kitchen. I hadn’t used it in a month because it had no independent source of heat and the kitchen’s warmth didn’t rise that far in this kind of weather. The shutters were closed, and ice around the edges assured me they’d stay that way until spring.

I lit a lamp, then bolted the door behind me. It felt a little weird locking Liz out with everyone else, but this had nothing to do with her. It started long before she and I met.

My “files” consisted of rolled-up vellum sheets kept in a large freestanding cupboard beside my sword rack.

They contained details about cases that I suspected might one day come back to bite me. They weren't the kind of notes the Society of Scribes kept; these were brief accounts designed to jog my memory. To anyone else they'd be mostly gibberish.

I opened the cabinet and searched through the scrolls. They were organized, but not so anyone else could tell it. I knew the pattern and quickly retrieved what I sought. I took it to my desk, untied the ribbon, and unrolled it. I used four rocks to hold down the corners.

There they were, the names I hadn't thought about in months, in some cases years. I'd sketched a map of my travels as well, since geography had been so crucial to this case. But none of the words or drawings captured the scale of what happened during those long-ago days. In the blink of an eye the mightiest king in the world had lost everything. And I was there.

I didn't need the scroll to remind me about it, though. What I needed was time to choke down the emotions it brought up. I knew I'd have to tell the folks downstairs something, and it might as well be the truth. There was no one left to benefit from secrecy now. But some things always felt immediate, and some wounds, while they healed, nevertheless always ached.

At last I replaced the scroll, relocked my office, and returned to the tavern. By then even more people waited for me. Not much happened in Neceda on its best day, and there had been little entertainment during this brutal winter. The coffin made me the main attraction.

As I settled back onto my stool, Liz leaned close and said, "You don't have to tell anyone, you know. Not even me."

"I know. But what the hell, it beats more talk about the weather." To Angelina I said loudly, "A round for the house first, Angie. On me."

A grateful cheer went up. Angelina scowled, knowing she'd have to add it to my already-lengthy tab. But she poured the drinks, and Callie distributed them.

I faced the room with my back against the bar. I said, "This all happened seven years ago, before I came to Neceda. Before," I said to Liz, "I met you."

"Oho," Angelina said knowingly. "So there's a girl in this story."

"I knew somebody had to teach him what he knows," Liz said teasingly. "He's not a natural talent."

I winked at her, then continued, "I hadn't officially been a sword jockey for very long, so I was still building my reputation. I'd go somewhere for a client, and when I finished, I'd look around for another one that would take me somewhere else. That's how I got word that my services were needed in Grand Bruan."

My listeners exchanged looks. These days the island kingdom of Grand Bruan was primarily known as the site of the most vicious ongoing civil war in the world. Unofficial estimates said more than half its population had fled or been killed, and the land was overrun with invaders, mercenaries and pirates. But it hadn't always been that way, and they knew the story behind that, too. Hell, everyone did.

The tale of King Marcus Drake and the Knights of the Double Tarn had passed into legend almost before the great ruler's corpse was cold. Thirty years earlier the island of Grand Bruan, a chaotic place of warring petty kingdoms, was on the verge of total chaos when a young boy did something no grown man had ever been able to do: he withdrew the magical sword Belacrux from the ancient tree where it was embedded. This signified that he was the true, rightful ruler of all the land.

Naturally there were those who disagreed, but they hadn't reckoned with young Marcus's determination, and his core allies: the wise adviser Cameron Kern, the great knight Elliot Spears, and the brotherhood of warriors known as the Knights of the Double Tarn. Every child could recite their great deeds of arms in unifying the island.

Then came the golden time, when Drake and his queen, Jennifer, naturally the most beautiful woman who ever lived, ruled in fairness and grace. Laws were passed to protect the common folk, and peace reigned for a generation.

But the brightest light casts the darkest shadow, and in that shade dwelled Ted Medraft, bitter knight and jealous nephew of the king. He fomented a rebellion and forced a final great battle. Drake killed him, but Medraft mortally wounded the king. Drake died, the land returned to chaos, and the great sword Belacrux disappeared, awaiting the hand of the next destined ruler, who had so far not appeared.

The ballads and broadsheets kept coming, though, embellishing the tale until it was an epic of how hubris and

fate brought down even the loftiest men. In the seven years since Drake's death, he'd become such a literary figure that some people believed he'd never existed. In another ten years, he'd be a full-fledged myth.

But he had existed, and the truth was a little different from how the ballads told it. I might be the last man living who knew it.

I continued, "My client was a Grand Bruan noblewoman named Fiona, and she had connections. As a result I found myself at a party given by Queen Jennifer Drake at Nodlon Castle on the island's west coast."

I paused long enough to take a long draft of my own ale. A lot of things in my past had grown hazy with the passage of time, but not this. The details all came back in a rush, from the odor of the banquet hall to the unmistakable coppery smell of blood thick on the wind. And the look on a king's face as a woman rose from the dead before him . . .