



Dear Reader,

Thanks for checking out a bit of the first Eddie LaCrosse novel, *The Sword-Edged Blonde*. 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

Spring came down hard that year. And I do mean hard, like the fist of some drunken pike poker with too much fury and not enough ale, whose wife just left him for some wandering minstrel and whose commanding officer absconded with his pay. The thunderstorms alone would be talked about for years, and the floods that followed erased whole towns along the Gusay River. Nature, as always, had the last word.

I worked in a small town in Muscodia back then, out of an office above a dockside tavern. Located on the Gusay midway between the capital city of Sevlow and the border town Pema, Neceda was a place you stopped when you weren't in a hurry, for a drink, dinner or quick companionship. Only about three hundred people lived there, but at any one time the transients tended to double that population. The money that flowed into town didn't stay there, though, so Neceda always looked rundown and disreputable. It was a good place for someone like me, a private sword jockey with a talent for discretion, to quietly ply his trade. Clients liked coming to a small town where they could pass unrecognized. Some days were lucrative, most were not, but it all evened out at the end.

The flood and its aftermath had essentially shut Neceda down, and that had created a crisis of conscience among the population. Suddenly a bunch of bottom-feeding strangers had to act like an actual community, and it was amusing to watch people interact who normally wouldn't: whores and moon priestesses did laundry together, blacksmiths and cardsharps repaired buildings, soldiers and beggars rounded up stray animals and children. I helped sandbag the tavern below, and we'd gotten off pretty light; except for the smell, there wasn't much damage, which said more about the place than the flood. The river was now mostly back within its banks, and soon would subside enough for normal transportation to resume. Then Neceda would be back to its old rapacious self.

My "office" consisted of two rooms in the attic over the kitchen, one always open with a bench against the wall in case anyone decided they needed to wait. I kept the inner office locked, but there was really no reason for it; it merely gave an illusion of confidentiality, which on most days was enough.

That illusion was definitely enough for the well-worn emissary from King Felix of Balaton now seated across from me explaining his master's needs. I wasn't surprised that the king himself hadn't come, but at first it amused me that he'd trusted this tired old man with something of, shall we say, such surpassing delicacy. Still, as he related the situation, I understood why he'd been chosen. The very thought of describing the way Princess Lila had gone off to be a girl-toy for a bunch of randy border raiders left him too embarrassed to even meet my eyes. Any other man might've been too tempted to make bad jokes, but not this one. He'd been trusted with a job, and he was going to carry it out as best he could.

"So as you can see, Mr. LaCrosse, the princess could not possibly have had any intention of, ahem, joining these young men, so she must have been taken against her will. A noble daughter of the house of Balaton would never simply take up with vermin of this sort." He took a long pull on the drink I'd poured from my office bottle.

Behind my desk, I kept my face neutral and said nothing. Nervous people hate silence, so I knew eventually he'd start talking again. In the meantime, I studied him: about sixty, thin and frail-looking, but with traces of a much larger, stronger man left in the set of his jaw and the way he sat up sharply each time he caught himself slumping. A soldier once, maybe even a high-ranking officer, now reduced to an errand boy.

I took pity on him and broke the silence. "So what did the guys in the pointy hats have to say about it?" I asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The king’s wizards.” I’d only known two or three kings who didn’t rely on wizards for decisions. Some couldn’t put on their royal slippers without checking the stars’ alignment, and rumor claimed that our own King Archibald, the ruler of Muscodia, had one who read the pattern of mucous in his handkerchief each time he sneezed. I’d heard that King Felix kept three wizards and a moon priestess on retainer for emergencies, and the disappearance of the princess certainly qualified. “They’re supposed to see the future. Didn’t they see it coming?”

“They claim,” he said without looking at me, “that the future is murky at this time, and beyond their power to envision.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes. Their failure is one reason I’ve been sent to hire you.” He shifted nervously in his chair. “We’ve had no demands for ransom, nor any threats if royal policy isn’t changed, so I don’t believe it was a politically motivated crime. Still, King Felix doesn’t wish word to get out that his family is so, uhm . . . easily swayed, whether by force or, uh, conversion. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“Would be kind of hard to hold your head up around all the other kings,” I agreed. If he caught my sarcasm, he didn’t mention it.

He finally raised his eyes to mine and said, “Then I hope I -- I mean, we -- can trust your discretion on this.”

“The royal ‘we?’” I asked, and this time the irony stuck.

“This is a serious matter, Mr. LaCrosse.” His voice grew stronger now that he wasn’t talking about the exploits of sex-crazed fifteen-year-old princesses. “I was told that you understood these things, and could be trusted.”

“Yeah?” I leaned back and laced my fingers together over my stomach, which seemed larger than the last time I’d done so. “Who by?”

“Commander Bernard Teller of the Civil Security Force of Boscobel.”

I smiled. “So Bernie made commander, huh?” Bernie was no-nonsense, tough as nails and way too honest to ever get promoted so high. If he had, then things in Boscobel had changed for the better. “Well, did he also tell you I get twenty-five gold pieces a day, plus expenses?”

He produced a small pouch that jingled distinctively. “I have been instructed to give you 200 gold pieces now, with another 200 upon successful completion of the job.”

I leaned over and took the pouch, which was too heavy not to be genuine. “Let’s be clear on exactly what constitutes ‘successful completion.’”

“The return of the Princess to her father.”

“Intact?” I pressed. We both knew what I meant.

“In any condition. He just wants her back before anyone finds out about this.”

I opened the pouch and took out 50 of the small gold coins, then pushed the bag back across my desk to him. “I don’t need the whole amount now, just enough for a couple of day’s travel to the border to look for these guys you say she ran off with. Pay me the balance when she’s back in her own canopied bed.”

He looked at me oddly for a moment, but didn’t argue. As he stood, I asked suddenly, “So tell me -- why’d she leave?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Princess Lila. There must’ve been a reason. Spoiled rich girls don’t usually go to that much trouble to get away from home.”

“As I told you -- “

“You told me she ran off to get laid by some rough boys. In my experience, rich girls don’t have much trouble with that, and they don’t throw away their meal tickets just for a night of slap-and-tickle. So why’d she leave?”

“The Princess is . . . headstrong. As was her late mother.” He seemed to feel that this was enough explanation.

“Do you have a picture? I’d hate to show up with the wrong girl.”

The old man produced a small engraved image of a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty. She wore a low-cut court gown that revealed her assets quite nicely; her liabilities were less obvious. She had a pronounced, sharp nose that gave her an earthy air at odds with her finery. “Kids these days,” I said, and pocketed the picture.

After the old man had gone, I swung my chair around and looked out the window toward the river. The odor of

drying mud and dead fish filled the air. It would take several normal rains to get all the crap off the streets, and in the meantime the thought of a little time away from home, even if it meant tangling with border raiders, seemed like a good idea.

I studied the girl's picture. This missing princess could be one of two types. The first kind, protected and sheltered from the harsh realities of the world, retained their childhood innocence throughout their lives, and were unconditionally honest, kind and loving no matter what the world threw at them. I'd known at least one princess like that.

The other kind, much more common, grew up spoiled, selfish and arrogant. Where I needed to look for this one depended on which type she was.

I knew King Felix's elderly messenger hadn't told me everything; clients like him never do. But I suspected the pieces of the truth were there in the information he'd given, and I'd have the whole trip downriver to put them together. It was another reason I didn't take all his money; I'd agreed to find the girl, and I would, but I wasn't ready to promise what would happen after that.

I opened the sword cabinet and took out my old Fireblade Warrior three-footer, the one with the narrow dagger hidden in the hilt. I had bigger swords, but this one wouldn't attract attention and, since I'd filed the distinctive Fireblade monogram off the blade, it looked a lot more fragile and decrepit than it actually was. I slipped it into the shoulder scabbard and strapped it across my back, outside my jacket.

I grabbed the basics for a short overnight trip and threw them into a saddlebag. I put five pieces of gold in my pocket and the remainder in the hollow heel of my right boot. Then I locked up the inner office and went downstairs.

Angelina looked up from washing the mugs. It was just after lunch, so there were only a couple of men drinking, and neither of them seemed to require much of her attention. Angelina was not young, although she was beautiful in a way that only grew stronger the more time you spent with her. She could've done much better for herself than owning this ratty tavern where she endured the occasional gropes and rudeness in return for respectable tips. I knew she was hiding out from something, but it was none of my business. We all have secrets.

Callie, her teenage waitress, stood at the end of the bar carefully arranging a small ring of pebbles around a tiny metal cup. When she finished that, she cautiously measured powder into it. She kept referring to a scrap of vellum covered in red lettering beside it. Her lips moved as she read.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Callie was a beautiful girl, but I'd seen elderly glowworms that were brighter.

"A spell for no more rain," she said as she worked. "I'm tired of cleaning the mud out from between my toes every night."

"A spell?" I repeated. "So are you studying to be a moon priestess now, Callie?"

"No, but I got this from one. It only cost me three pieces of gold, too."

"Bought spells aren't worth the blood they're written in," Angelina said disdainfully.

Callie looked up, annoyed. "Yeah, well, I bought it to stop the rain, and it hasn't rained since."

"So a teenage barmaid can now control the weather," Angelina snorted. "What will they think of next?"

"Everyone knows you're bitter, Angie, but it gets tired after awhile," Callie snapped. "I'm trying to make a difference in the world, not just bitch about it."

Angelina wasn't impressed. "Make a difference at the corner booth, why don't you? Those plates won't collect themselves. Oh, unless you bought a spell for that, too. Maybe I'm paying you too much, if you can throw money around like that."

Callie's eyes filled with tears. "Angie, you're just mean," she said. She gathered her little spell and stomped off into the kitchen.

I looked at Angelina. "That was mean."

For an instant regret flashed in her eyes, then they hardened over. "I don't need waitresses who still believe in magic. Their religion should be tips and serving customers."

"You don't believe in magic?"

She snorted. "And you do?"

"I believe in possibility."

"Name one magical thing you've ever seen."

"Why, you in the firelight, Angel."

She barked a laugh at me, then turned back to washing. “So are you going out of town?” she asked.

“Yeah. Should be back day after tomorrow at the latest.”

“Have something to do with that old rattletrap who came down a little while ago?”

“Where you from, Angel?”

She grinned and winked over her shoulder. “Right. No questions, no lies. Well, watch yourself. You’re ugly enough without more scars.”

“And you be nicer to Callie. A lot of people come in here just to watch her bend over and pick things up.”