

Knowing Yourself

A Medieval Romance

Lisa Shea

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*Follow your heart.
Let your actions speak louder than words.
Every day,
Express your love for those you care for.*

Knowing Yourself

Chapter 1

England, 1174

*If you cannot find the truth right where you are,
where else do you expect to find it?*

~Dogen

Kay's mouth fell open at the deliciously sinful display of stunning male physiques, her eyes thoroughly examining each man in turn, admiring the thick, corded muscles of their arms; the finely chiseled lines of their jaws; the finger-twinningly-dense hair dancing in the autumn wind - red, blond, brunette, black, tawny gold. A sensual thrill coursed through her, flushing her with tingling warmth. She could choose any man in that group to be her husband and he would instantly, willingly, loyally come to her side. The awesome power intoxicated her to her very core.

She turned to Em, nudging her blonde sister with playful delight as they peered through the thick tapestry curtains of the coach window. "Are you sure I can only keep *one* of them?" Kay joked in a low voice. "It might be useful to have a spare husband around, in case of trouble." Her eyes were drawn to the tawny mane of hair a second time, her gaze sliding down from his shoulders; her breath caught as she sized up the thickness of his biceps.

Her voice grew hoarse. "I am sure I could find *all* sorts of uses for a back-up knight with *that* kind of build."

Em put a hand over her mouth to muffle the flurry of giggles that began to erupt. She adjusted her position slightly to account for her large, round abdomen, visible evidence of the child she had been carrying for the past six months. "It took our father

long enough to convince you to use this process in the first place,” she chuckled in merriment. “If he realized you were now enjoying it, I am sure it would put his mind at ease.”

Kay shook her head. “I still do not agree with the principle of it,” she commented more quietly. Her eyes drew slowly along each man who stood on the keep steps, the group being presented with a final set of instructions by an elderly man with sparse grey hair, his elegant brown cloak concealing a frail frame. She knew her father, Lord Weston, was doing his best to present a strong front to his future sons-in-law.

Kay kept her eyes on his slowly moving figure. “I turned down the previous suitors because I found them sadly lacking. For father to force me to choose from one of these five men seems outrageous. What if *none* of them end up being what we need to defend Serenor Keep?”

Em’s mouth grew into a wide smile. “Surely, sis, you have to believe *one* of those men would be suitable to stand by your side?”

Kay had to admit that the group had far exceeded her expectations. Her father had sent word the length and breadth of England in his search, bringing in five worthy, eligible bachelors who were interested in control of the seaside tower. All five men had agreed up front to put themselves in the hands of this selection process – to vie against each other for Kay’s hand in marriage. Now they were being told the particular rules of the game.

Suddenly all five men’s heads turned sharply to stare at the coach, and both women instantly pulled back into the dark interior, their hearts pounding, looking at each other before bursting into a fresh round of laughter. Kay had to take several deep breaths before she could bring herself to speak again.

“I think they have just been told they cannot see what I look like until I have made my final decision,” she chortled merrily. “By their reactions, they were none too pleased at that little tidbit!”

Em’s shoulders were shaking with mirth as she leant back against the embroidered seat. “Still, you have to admit Father hit

on a stroke of genius there,” she countered. “By having me play at the shy target of their attentions, you can roam free as my maid servant, watching the men close up, seeing how they talk about the keep and each other behind my back.”

“Are you sure you are ready for this, to be sequestered in the top level of the keep for perhaps several weeks?” asked Kay, her voice becoming more somber. “If none of the men can see you, but they need to occasionally speak with you, it is the only way to maintain the charade. Surely you will get claustrophobic after a few days in that tiny apartment.”

Em shook her head. “I am looking forward to it,” she confided to her younger sister. “Between Eric’s whirlwind courtship, and our wedding, I have not had five minutes by myself. I am about to become a mother - a full time job if ever there was one.” She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “This may be the only vacation I get for decades; the only time to be by myself, to luxuriate in quiet, to sit, to read, to just think. I am going to enjoy every second of it.”

“Will you miss Eric?” asked Kay, pressing.

A wistful look came over Em’s face, and she looked toward the thick, dark curtains which shaded the window, laying a hand against them for a moment. “Yes,” she admitted quietly. “He has been my rock, been by my side for so long now that it was extremely hard to part from him.” A faint smile lit her face. “Still, it is only for a few weeks, and as they say, absence makes the heart grow more fond. I will keep a journal for him, and he is doing the same for me. It will be interesting to share those once we are reunited.”

She drew her gaze tenderly to her sister. “Besides, this looks to be our final outing as siblings. I will have my home here, with Eric, and you will have yours out at Serenor. I am going to enjoy spending time with you for these next few weeks and will find it hard to be separated when the time comes.”

Kay gave her a nudge. “I am sure we can visit, once we are both old, married women, but I agree completely. This will be our chance to play at dice, to share confidences, and to have one last gasp of freedom before we are both chasing after children.”

Em offered a wink, then reached beneath her seat, drawing out a stoppered, blue glass bottle. "Then, I think it is time for us to celebrate," she chuckled, pulling out the cork and handing it over to her sister. "A toast to our futures!"

Kay took a long pull, and suddenly the coach gave a gentle jerk as it moved into a quiet rhythm. The sound of numerous men on horseback swelled around them, and a sudden tremor of nervousness shot through her. It was all in motion now. There was no turning back, no second thoughts. By nightfall they would be at the keep, and the games would begin. She would have to give herself over to one of these men.

She thought back to the line of strong shoulders she had examined. Perhaps things were not so bad. She took another swig and smiled. Not so bad at all.

* * *

The hours drifted by in a lethargic haze of merry expectations and teasing. By the time the coach pulled in for an afternoon stop, the women were flushed with laughter. A familiar low growl sounded by their window.

"Ladies, it is Leland," he called through the curtain. "I have sent my lad, Eli, to escort the five gentlemen over the ridge and a ways up the road. He will ensure they stay there until we catch up with them. You will have a chance to stretch your legs unseen."

Before he had finished speaking, Em was up and moving, throwing open the door of the coach, taking his proffered hand and stepping out into the sunlight. Kay was only a moment behind her, and they stretched with relish, looking around them at the rolling meadows, at the blue-grey mountains in the distance.

Kay smiled in amusement as she turned and looked over Leland. He was wearing a priest's restrained habit – a long, black, simple tunic without any adornments. His ever-present sword was nowhere to be seen. She shook her head in merriment.

“How are you going to survive the weeks up at that small chapel, Leland?” she asked, her eyes sparkling. “This is quite a demotion from captain of the guard!”

Leland’s thick brown brows came together over a well-weathered face. “I consider it a duty of the highest order to look after you two,” he responded, his eyes moving between the two women. “Serenor will have only a skeleton staff on hand. Your father wants the potential lords to be able to settle in without having many there to contest their orders and ways. We need to see how they will act when they feel like the ‘man in charge.’” He smiled fondly at the two women. “Still, I will be glad to be watching from the hill, keeping an eye on things.”

Kay found her eyes scanning forward, over the rise to where the men were waiting. “They will be like five stallions, fighting for control of the herd,” she mused with a chuckle. “It will certainly be something to see.”

The women spent another few minutes stretching and enjoying the fresh air, then Em gave a long, loud yawn. “I think I am about ready for an afternoon nap,” she admitted. “How are you feeling?”

Kay rolled her shoulders. “Like I want to meet these men for myself,” she grinned. She moved to the back of the coach, unhitching her horse and throwing the reins over his head. She mounted with smooth ease, drawing up alongside the vehicle. “Rest well, sis.”

“You behave yourself,” smiled Em back at her. “Remember, you are a maid servant now. None of that sassy backtalk, or I shall have to punish you.”

Kay grinned widely. “I will be the epitome of quiet grace,” she promised serenely. Both sisters burst into peals of laughter, and then Em climbed into the coach, drawing the small wooden door shut with a solid *thunk*. Leland pulled up alongside Kay, and with a nod the coachman shook out the reins, getting the horses into motion again. The group slowly made its way along the peaceful dirt road, the hoofbeats keeping time with the warbling of birds and the gentle whisper of the autumn breeze.

Kay found herself unconsciously smoothing down her simple burgundy dress, and she wondered if the dark braids of her hair were still neatly in place. She grinned wryly as they crested the hill. It did not matter, of course. To the five men waiting down in the valley she was naught but a serving girl. They were anxiously awaiting the woman in the coach, not this slender horsewoman who rode with the middle-aged priest. Still, she had her pride, and she wanted to make a good impression. It would serve her best if the men tolerated her presence so that she could overhear their conversations, learn more about them in their unguarded moments.

The men had remained mounted and were lined up along the side of the road, watching her approach with interest. She nudged her horse with her calves, moving into a trot, and Leland matched her action, staying at her side until they reached the quintet.

Leland nodded to the group. "Gentlemen," he rumbled, "This is Kay, the lady-in-waiting to Keren-happuch. As Lord Weston has indicated, Kay here will be your main means of contact with Keren-happuch other than your allotted daily half-hour of conversation with his daughter through a curtain."

Leland turned to face the woman at his side. "Kay, let me introduce you to the men vying for your lady's hand."

The red-head spoke up immediately. "I am Uther," he announced, sweeping himself down into a flourishing bow. He wore a flamboyant turquoise tunic with yellow piping along its edges, and his emerald cloak was pinned at his massive neck with a broach with five different colors of gems. His eyes slid down her form with interest, and his grin had widened by the time he met her gaze again. "I am looking forward to spending time with you."

"I am sure you are," agreed Kay with a gracious smile, turning her gaze easily to the next man in line.

"Alistair is my name," stammered the brown-haired man, nervously brushing down his neatly tailored grey tunic. Kay wondered if he had spent time in front of a mirror with a ruler, his creases were so sharp and perfectly aligned. He sat up

straight in his saddle, holding his reins at an exact right angle. "I heard from the soldiers at the keep that you will be taking daily prayer with Father Leland each morning at the chapel?"

Kay's eyes flashed to Leland's, and she bit back a smile. She would certainly be visiting him each morning to bring news, as well as to get in some sword training away from prying eyes. The prayer story seemed a perfect cover for her activities.

"Yes," she confirmed, her eyes dropping in demure propriety. "Rest assured that I will be back in ample time to chaperone the morning talks you each have with Kerenhappuch. I would not let my personal time interfere with that."

"I find it admirable that you set aside time for prayer," continued Alistair, color rising to his cheeks. "It is a mark of quality in you, and reflects well on your Lady."

"I will be sure to let her know that," promised Kay with a quick nod, desperately holding in her merriment at the likely reaction her sister would have to the news.

"I am Jack," stated the third man sharply, his eyes moving from Kay up to the coach which was slowly drawing close to them. He wore a well-tailored white tunic, and the crisp cut of his blond hair matched the frosty gaze in his eyes. "I am not sure I like the rules of this game. I like to know exactly what the prize is I am playing for."

The man at his side grinned. "You are welcome to resign, if you do not enjoy the odds," he suggested. "Galeron here," he added to Kay, his eyes twinkling. His black hair lay in curls against his head and his bright crimson tunic was matched by a long, flowing cloak of the same color. He gave a gentle bow to her. "I, for one, am intrigued by the conditions, and look forward to our contest."

"Glad to meet you," welcomed Kay with a smile. She turned her gaze to the final man.

He waited quietly, patiently, his green-grey eyes a peaceful pool, and yet she could see the strength in his arms, the firmness in his thighs where they pressed against his horse's flank. His tawny hair fell to his shoulders in thick waves, and the sword on

his left hip seemed well used, well cared for. He wore a leather tunic, a simple design tracing along the edges.

She found herself speaking first. "I am Kay," she murmured, subdued by his presence, by the calm way he held himself. It was as if he had all the time in the world, and speaking with her was the only thing on his mind.

"I am pleased to meet you," offered the man with a smooth bow. "My name is Reese."

The coach had reached them, and the men automatically fell in before it, setting into easy motion. Kay and Leland tucked in behind them, with Eli moving to Kay's other side, his fresh blond curls bouncing lightly around his young face.

Kay turned to the lad with a smile. "So, what do you think of our adventure?" She had known the page all her life, and while he was a few years younger than her, they had spent many enjoyable hours sparring together.

"Are you kidding?" he responded in incredulous glee, his wiry frame tense with excitement. "To spend several weeks as the sole pupil of Leland? I could not have dreamt up a better assignment!"

Alistair's quiet voice echoed faintly back from the group ahead. "Now there is a lad with his priorities straight," he intoned with relish. "You hold with your religious ideals, boy, and you can achieve great heights."

"Absolutely," agreed Eli, giving Kay a wink. "I will do my very best."

"More boys should be like him," continued Alistair, turning to Uther, his voice growing slightly louder. "Too many waste all day solely on physical achievements; they neglect their mind and their spirit." He glanced on either side of him. "Not only the men. I hear tell that some women in this region are familiar with the use of a blade. Can you imagine?"

Uther gave out a loud, guffawing chortle, throwing his head back, his red hair shining in the autumn sun. "A woman, using a blade?" He glanced down the line of men, his smile wide. "There is one use for a woman in regards to a man's blade, and she would be the sheath!"

The line of men chuckled at the joke, and Kay saw a twinkle even in Reese's quiet calm. Her spine stiffened. She and her sister had been training in both dagger and short sword since they were young, and were quite able to defend themselves if necessary. The skill had been expected of them, between the bandits roaming the mountains and the nearness of their rivals, the MacDougals. A dozen retorts sprang to her lips, and she cut them back with sharp effort. She was a maid servant now, not one to be reprimanding the men.

Her head snapped to the side. "Leland, I am going to ride ahead. I feel the need for some fresh air."

Leland nodded across her to Eli, and in a moment she and the blond were cantering down the road, then stretching into a liberating gallop. The wind rushed through her hair, pulling the braids loose, and she was swept away in the motion, in the sure reaching of her steed's muscles beneath her, feeling his joy in the race. Beside her, Eli's face was wreathed in smiles, and they thundered toward the horizon, toward the meeting of the pale blue sky and fresh green carpet beneath.

She was going home. Not the home where she had been born, not the sturdy, large, noisy castle of her youth. She was heading toward the final outpost against the tossing waves, where she had been conceived, where she had spent every spare vacation, holiday, chance of escape. The round tower high over the ocean, the sturdy encompassing walls with their walk, the quiet bailey within, holding all one could need during a snowy winter or a languorous summer. She loved every season there, every time of day, every second. It was waiting for her, up ahead, if only she could ride more quickly.

Eli reined in alongside her, and she reluctantly pulled in to match.

He looked back over his shoulder. "We really should not get too far from the main party," he pointed out quietly. "You know as well as I do -"

Kay nodded in understanding, wheeling her horse in a circle, heading back toward the caravan at a gentle canter. Time drifted by as they rode, and it seemed too soon when they saw the

group ahead, pulled up into a trot, moved past the five men to wheel easily in place alongside Leland.

Leland looked over their flushed faces. "Have a nice ride?" he asked Kay with mild curiosity. "See anything interesting?"

"No bandits, no MacDougals," reported Kay with a wide smile, giving her steed's neck a pat. "Just a nice chance to stretch the legs."

Jack's sharp voice came back to her. "You rode well, for a girl," he snapped, turning his head with a crisp motion, his blond hair ruffling in the wind. "It is important for women to handle themselves rationally in case of trouble. I assume your lady can ride as ably?"

"She rides just as well as most men I know," retorted Kay, piqued by the tone of the comment. "My lady is an avid horsewoman."

"Good for her," agreed Jack, nonplussed by her reaction. "Unfortunately, I will not have a chance to see her in action myself before this little game has played out. I will have to rely on your word for it, assuming you speak truly."

Kay's throat tightened in outrage. "My word is my honor," she growled, her spine stiffening. "You would dare imply -"

Galeron shook his head, his black curls dancing. "My, you are feisty for a maid servant," he interrupted, glancing back at her. "It speaks well for Keren-happuch's nature, that she has such an able companion at her side."

Kay pursed her lips, taking in a long, deep breath, settling back into her saddle. Galerón was right. She had to draw a tighter rein on her feelings and emotions if she were to get through this ordeal. She glanced at Eli and saw the twinkle of amusement in his young eyes. She nodded with a quick movement to the left, and in a moment the two had drawn their horses aside, circled them around and come up behind the coach, where they could no longer hear the men talking.

Eli flashed a bright smile at her. "Before we left, Leland wagered that you would not last ten minutes with them before one of the men riled you," he teased. "They certainly seem an arrogant bunch."

“Not all of them,” pondered Kay. “They do seem to be quite different from each other. I suppose I will have to see, over time, what their strengths and weaknesses are.”

“Maybe, if you do not spend the weeks in shouting matches,” smiled Eli. His eyes sparkled. “You may yet find yourself spending more and more time in ‘prayer’ with us up at the chapel.”

“I may at that,” agreed Kay, her face brightening. “I suppose there is always that option, to hide out with you and Leland.”

Eli shook his head in merriment. “If your father heard about that, he would tan all of our hides for stretching this process out longer than it needed.”

“He made the rules, not me,” countered Kay with a laugh. “I can take as long as I wish – and my decision is final.”

“Well then,” mused Eli, giving his steed’s mane a fond pat, “I will enjoy every moment of this vacation!”

Kay found herself relaxing into the ride. She and Eli stretched out into a canter several more times over the afternoon, racing ahead with the hawks, returning reluctantly to the slow-moving group.

Soon the road came up along the cliffs against the ocean. She took in a lung-filling breath, relishing the salt air, the crisp freshness, the even rhythm of the swells as they moved out as far as the eye could see. She could not hold back – she spun out into a gallop, Eli at her side. Together they rode until she drew that familiar jolt of pleasure, coming over the ridge, seeing the keep’s tower in the distance, the protective curtain wall, secure and strong and safe.

Home. She was home.

She thundered ahead, her heart soaring, an absolute sense of peace filling her with every hoofbeat. A lone white birch came into view, planted to the right side of the path, and she drew in, slowing to a canter, then finally a walk. She settled into a stop by the tree’s side. Her horse edged alongside the slender trunk, nibbling at the grass tufting at its base. She patted the birch’s bark fondly, her hand tracing the numerous small indents in its leathery skin, her eyes looking forward to the keep before her.

Several men were on the walls now, and one swept his hand in a long wave. She put both hands up above her head, returning the welcome, her heart filling with joy.

She sat gazing at the keep for a long while, a sense of calm filling her while slowly the sound of hoofbeats grew behind her, infiltrating into her being. She waited patiently as the group drew up alongside her.

“Serenor,” she stated simply, gazing at the keep with love. She drew her eyes reluctantly from its grey walls, turning to look across the men at her side.

Uther’s eyes lit up with delight, his red face flushed, and Kay’s breast sparked with hope. Maybe the men would adore the land as much as she did!

The red-head licked his lips with relish. “They have a feast laid out for us, surely,” he commented with growing interest. “I am starved!” He spun his eyes to meet Kay’s. “Tell me that all the serving wenches are as comely as you, and I shall be forever in your debt.”

“They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, so you should be all set,” she snapped in disappointment, her eyes moving toward his protruding belly.

Uther guffawed, patting the roll with a smile. “A pillow for the head, my lass,” he teased, giving her a sly wink.

Alistair nodded in approval. “The keep,” he observed in a thin voice, “is much like the monastery in Aird Mhór, Ireland where I spent many years in training. Aloof, isolated. I like that.”

Kay relaxed slightly, her eyes moving along the line of men. She did enjoy the quiet here, although ... aloof? She found her home to be well settled in its landscape, not held apart from it. She would have called it snug ... safe ...

Jack’s icy eyes swept the rolling hills which surrounded the keep, his eyes resting on the white birch trees which lay ringed in a loose semi-circle every few hundred yards. “Good defensive layout, and these trees ...” He rode over to the one Kay had stopped at, eyeing its trunk. He nodded in satisfaction. “About two hundred yards.”

Alistair looked more carefully at its bark. “The tree is diseased,” he scoffed. “It should be taken down immediately, before it can infect the others with its wasting.”

Galeron chuckled in amusement. “No, my dear monkish friend,” he corrected gently. “Those are arrow marks.”

Alistair looked back at the keep again, shaking his head. “An arrow, from that distance? Unlikely.” His eyes came back to the trunk again. “Besides, those are not simply gouges in the bark. They look like black mildew.”

Reese had been staring at the keep, a distant look in his eyes, and only now did he turn his head to gaze at the birch. “Flame arrow,” he remarked easily, glancing at the marks. “Someone enjoys night shooting, I imagine.”

Uther rolled his eyes. “It matters not,” he grumbled, turning away. “Let us get going, dinner is waiting!”

The group ambled into motion again, and Kay’s eyes were glued on the keep; she could see nothing else as they rode down the slope, the structure growing ever larger in her vision. There were the top floor windows, looking into the private chambers which would be Em’s only world for the coming weeks. Below that were the public rooms – the main hall, the study, the sitting room. The ground floor held the barracks, the pantries, the rooms the men would be occupying. Then down below ground, the storage chambers, the cell or two where drunks would sleep off their intoxication.

As they drew near the moat, Leland waved the men back, and they pulled aside, allowing the coach to move forward with Kay on one side, Eli on the other. The main doors of the curtain wall were pulled closed behind them as they passed into the bailey, and Kay was off her horse in a moment, running lightly up to the coach, pulling open its door.

Em blinked sleepily at the evening light, stretching wearily before taking Kay’s hand and descending out from the coach. “That was blissful,” she sighed with a smile. “The gentle rocking, the peace and quiet, I could not have asked for better.” She rolled her shoulders and looked around her. “Now I am starving,” she admitted.

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