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THE THIEF'S
+
KEEPER
AN ENEMY'S KEEPER PREQUEL

SYNOPSIS

Bound by fate, forged in friendship. Together, two orphans will defy destiny or fall trying.

AD 1070, England. Four years after the Norman Conquest.

In the aftermath of a rebellion against William the Conqueror, northern England lies in ruins, its people scattered and starved.

Aelfric, a 14-year-old thrall, flees from his master and stumbles upon a cache of stolen laundry. The thief? Aliwyn, a girl around his age ostracized for being “cursed.” In her care is a lost toddler she has rescued from the clutch of greedy thrall traders.

Forced to cover each other’s secrets, Aelfric and Aliwyn form an unlikely friendship...and maybe something more. They embark on a perilous journey to reunite the child with his family and seek a cure for Aliwyn’s mysterious condition.

But time is running out. Aelfric’s master is on the hunt, and the shadows of death loom ever closer over Aliwyn. Will they find the courage to press on and defy fate, or will their quest end in capture and ruin?

Immerse yourself in a fast-paced tale of unexpected encounters and heart-stopping challenges. *The Thief’s Keeper* is a thrilling YA novel that transports you to a world full of adventure, where friendship and resilience shine in the face of all odds.

DEDICATION

In memory of John Zwaagstra

Friend, father, and musician

Most of all, he loved and was loved in return.

“Kindness is a language the dumb can speak and the deaf can hear and understand.”

— **Christian Nestell Bovee**

CHAPTER I

AD 1070, England

Four years after the Norman Conquest

Aelfric

Master Cuthbert Staddon proved not to be dead as Aelfric had hoped. The balding merchant threw open the church doors, letting in a blast of cold air. It had only been two weeks since Aelfric and the other thralls had escaped.

“Aelfric!”

Aelfric gulped. He had been playing his recorder inside to collect alms, but the show was over. Swinging his knapsack over his shoulder, he bolted for the church’s back door as Cuthbert shoved through the sanctuary seekers. The shadows and lights from the parchment windows flickered over Aelfric like a hundred eyes. He pushed open the rear door and leaped into the sunlight of Mablethorpe’s port.

Peasants and carts were milling through the cobblestone streets. Aelfric gritted his teeth and darted in between them.

Why was he still thinking of the man who used to beat his grandmother as “master?” From now on, Cuthbert was only Cuthbert.

The Englishman hadn’t returned to his carpentry workshop for three months. All his thralls had assumed the Norman army had killed him while crushing an English revolt, but so much for those hopes. Cuthbert Staddon was back to hunt down the escapees.

“Stop that boy!” Cuthbert shouted behind Aelfric. “He’s a runaway!”

Aelfric wanted to slap himself. He shouldn’t have embellished his music with trills even those he hated would recognize. Cuthbert couldn’t see well, but he must’ve heard the lively music from the docks.

The man continued to yell on the open streets. No one had grabbed Aelfric—yet. He turned left at a pungent spice booth, his worn leather shoes sliding down the muddy slope. Pebbles jammed into the hole of his right sole until he hit the slimy wooden planks of the docks.

His toes curled against the irritating pebbles as he hobbled past fishing boats and ferries, all moored to the pier. These vessels were too barren to hide on, but the square-sailed cogs further

ahead were cluttered enough for him to sneak on board. Aelfric kicked the pebbles out of his shoe and kept running.

He'd never reach the first cog.

Cuthbert's oldest son, Edgar Staddon, emerged from a ferryboat. His wavy hair blew about his shoulders as he squinted in the blinding sunlight.

"Grab that boy!" Cuthbert hollered. "He's the thrall!"

Edgar's eyes widened with recognition, and Aelfric yelped. He swerved right and dodged Edgar's burly arms just in time.

Stomping over the wooden dock, Aelfric returned to the bustling dirt road parallel to the waterfront.

The two Staddons continued to shout for his capture. Aelfric pulled up the large hood of his cloak to hide more of his face. As he pushed through the streets, merchants grunted and milkmaids spilled their milk. Chickens screeched and flapped their wings on either side of his pounding feet. Thankfully, no one had joined the Staddons in their wild pursuit, at least not yet.

All the escapees had stolen tools or money from Cuthbert's workshop as they'd fled, but Aelfric had focused on running and hadn't swiped anything. Now he regretted it. For all the trouble he was going through, he should've at least gotten rich!

His calves burning, Aelfric dashed toward a flock of sheep roaming down an adjacent street. He wove between the ambling animals, his elbows bumping into wool on either side. Bleating erupted in his ears. The disturbed beasts rammed into each other to avoid him. At the rear of the flock, the shepherd waved his staff.

"You, boy! Get out!"

But joining a sheep stampede was a great way to get around.

Aelfric shoved toward the front, following the lambs who darted between the larger sheep. He coughed from the dust kicked up by a hundred hooves as they squeezed between taverns and workshops. A glance behind confirmed neither Cuthbert nor his son had the agility to follow. The flock trotted into a section of the town dotted with blackened homes and collapsed straw roofs. Charred wood and clay shards littered the ground, and the stench of rotten waste lingered in the air.

Aelfric darted around the sharp debris as he followed the sheep into the wasteland. The memory of Cuthbert's workshop burning in Hull flashed in his mind, and a chill rattled him back to the present.

One building remained standing up ahead by the main road—a smokehouse built of stone. A ragged defect in its conical roof revealed a dark interior with no joints of meat suspended for smoking. Abandoned? The door was shut, but there was a hole along the wall's lower edge like a vigilant eye watching the burned buildings. Someone had removed a stone from that area.

Aelfric's ears swelled from the loud bleating. The hole along the building's foundation enticed him with its darkness and silence. Further ahead on a hill rose the marketplace and its display of colorful tapestries. Aelfric prayed the Cuthberts would storm into that crowded area and never find him.

The flock began to scatter without buildings on either side to guide them. A sea of sheep divided on either side of the smokehouse, and Aelfric dashed for the opening in the wall.

Falling to his hands and knees, he poked his head through the hole rimmed by stone and dirt. The dank scent of earth filled his nostrils, and the bleating and screaming outside grew muffled.

Space was tight. His fingernails filled with dirt as he clawed and wriggled through. For once, he was glad to be small for a fourteen-year-old boy. His shoulders squeezed out of the opening, and the rest of him slid through like a fish.

Never mind that the jagged edge of mortar and stone had scraped the length of his back. Aelfric lay on his belly, his chest heaving with triumph. Neither Cuthbert nor his son could squeeze through that. His eyes watered from the dirt cloud of the stampede outside, and he wiped them as he sat up. Now, he had to secure the smokehouse's door in case it wasn't already locked.

But as his eyes refocused in the dimness, he froze. A pair of scissors floated not far from his head. Its sharp end pointed at his face.

He wasn't alone. It took all of his self-control not to scream.

But the scissor bearer was a youngster about his age, not some brute ready to bash in his head. Aelfric studied her ragged, slender frame and took a steadying breath. He could handle a girl. She stood glaring at him, but the tremor of her hand gave away her fear.

Aelfric eyed her scissors and put up his hands. "Don't hurt me. I have no weapons. Please, just let me stay a while."

He wasn't about to admit he possessed an eating knife.

Her eyes seemed to dart to the side of his neck, and Aelfric stiffened. The fall had flung the hood off his head, exposing the beefy whip's lash Cuthbert had left running from his earlobe to his shoulder blade. Who would be whipped like that, other than a thrall or criminal? Aelfric slapped his hand over the telltale mark, but it was too late.

The girl narrowed her eyes. "Who are you?"

The answer came soon enough.

"Aelfric, you flea-bitten churl!" Cuthbert thundered from outside. "I'm going to smack you with a hot iron!"

The menacing merchant must've caught up with his son, Edgar. Aelfric had seen other runaways get pinned down and branded on their torsos as punishment. It was another reason he had to avoid capture at all costs. He stared at the girl pleadingly and licked his lips, keeping his hands up.

"I'll pay you a lot if you keep me a secret," he stammered.

He dared to scoot backward and distance himself from her scissors. His back soon slid up the frigid stone wall, as the rounded smokehouse was only wide enough for two men to lie end-to-end. Maybe it was because his eyes were watering, but her scowl softened. Her weapon, however, remained raised. Outside, the bleating rose to a crescendo and died down, and Aelfric's heart drummed a double rhythm.

Had the Staddons missed his hiding spot after all?

Even if they had passed, this girl could burst outside and declare his presence. Cuthbert would likely pay her handsomely in return. Could he tackle her if she ran for the door? He had always avoided picking fights with the other thralls, and now he might have to hurt a girl. Chills rained down his chest.

To his amazement, what sounded like a toddler babbled behind the girl. The girl flinched, the tattered hem of her dress brushing over her shoes. She straightened again and adjusted the grip on her scissors.

"Hide behind those." She pointed at two barrels standing against the wall to her left. Both barrels had a stack of dresses on top in various stages of being cut to pieces.

Aelfric scrambled to his feet and side-stepped toward the barrels, always facing the girl and raising his hands. She watched him with a blank expression, her face dim in the light streaming through the hole above them. As he circled partway around her, the sight of a child lying on a small hay mattress came into view. Blankets wrapped around his little body, and tendrils of wavy blond hair peaked from beneath his sackcloth hat. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Unlike the scrawny girl, this child's cheeks were ruddy and full.

What were the two of them doing in an abandoned smokehouse? Not that it was time to ask. Aelfric pressed his lips together and scurried into the dark space between the barrels and the stone walls.

He had just sat and hugged his knees when someone pounded on the door. Aelfric stiffened all over.

His life was at the mercy of a stranger. Crawling into the smokehouse had been a mistake, but he couldn't have known someone was inside. He stared at the hole he had just crawled through. If he dared to crawl back out, Cuthbert and Edgar might hear his movements and yank him out themselves.

From the slit between the two barrels, he watched the girl sit by the toddler and hold a corner of a blanket to the child's mouth. The toddler chewed silently on the cloth.

The banging on the door grew louder. Aelfric's head gave a dizzying spin, and he wiped his sweaty hands on his thighs. Whoever the girl was, she kept him in her peripheral view and embraced the younger child in her lap. Her face was blank.

"Father," Edgar panted from outside. "The tanner said he saw a boy, black hair like Aelfric, running that way."

"Howling fiends," Cuthbert grumbled. "I'll find him if it's the last thing I do. That maggot stole all my tools!"

The other thralls in Hull had done it. Aelfric curled his upper lip. Those two dozen men had also beaten up merchants, thrown one down a well, and sailed away on a stolen cog ship. Aelfric had been too horrified to participate in the violence, and the others had departed for Scotland without him. Aelfric had been left behind to bear the blame for their theft.

Outside, Cuthbert and Edgar muttered some more before their footsteps departed.

Aelfric sighed and lowered his forehead to his bent knees. That was close. But with Cuthbert Staddon still alive, he would need to leave England by ship as soon as possible. It was too

bad, because he had made a handsome profit as a piper. In three weeks, he had earned enough to sail for Scotland but had stayed in Mablethorpe to earn more during Easter.

He could no longer stay. The ships leaving for Scotland sailed again tomorrow, Monday. Could he avoid detection until then?

Aelfric rubbed his eyes. Everything outside had fallen silent.

He crawled from behind the barrels, shivering with cold sweat, and stared at the girl. She didn't wear a head covering like other peasant women, and her messy brown hair fell to her shoulders. Aelfric had never seen anyone scagglier looking. His stomach twisted at the thought of being trapped with her for hours.

She turned to face him fully.

"You're a runaway?" She smiled.

As if this was something to ask casually. Aelfric's lips twitched. "I'm not a runaway. I'm...that man has a grudge against me."

"Oh, I see." She raised an eyebrow and extended an upturned hand. "Payment for keeping you a secret?"

Aelfric hung his head, still panting. He reached into a belt pouch and fingered the quarter pennies inside. Most came from hours of playing at the harbor and charming the merchants as they'd returned from sea. Or rather, charming their wives.

He needed thirty pennies for a fare to Scotland, and he had counted thirty-three that morning. Chewing on his lip, Aelfric eyed the starved girl with sunken eyes and decided to be generous. He carefully withdrew the only whole penny he had, a full day's worth of wages for youngsters their size.

Her face lit up. She snatched the coin from his hand. The toddler in her arms squealed and tried to grab the shiny object, but she dodged him and pocketed the penny.

"Another penny if you want to stay here." She grinned.

Aelfric's eyes rounded. He crossed his arms and widened his stance. "I don't have much. And I don't want to stay."

But could he safely leave the smokehouse right now? The whole harbor had heard their beloved piper was a runaway thrall, and he'd have to hide in broad daylight. Aelfric's breath hitched. His eyes fell on her cut-up dresses piled over the two barrels.

Inspiration struck.

"I...uh...want to buy a headscarf and a dress," he said. "Got any that fit me?"

She giggled, the sound annoyingly cheerful. "What are you going to do? Wear a dress?"

"Shhh! Just give me the clothes."

He reached into his belt pocket again, intending to pick out two quarter pennies, but his jittery fingers hooked onto the pouch and inverted it as he withdrew. Out came a downpour of quarter and half pennies, tinkling softly as they fell like shiny raindrops.

Aelfric gasped. So did the girl. He had just displayed a month's worth of wages, all painstakingly saved for the ship's fare, a pair of new shoes, and any emergency needs. So much for saying he didn't have much.

With fire dancing on his scalp, Aelfric fell to his knees and rasped the coins back into his hands. He glared at the girl in case she should try to swipe a few, but she only sat with the toddler on her lap and a bewildered stare on her face.

Finally, she picked up a mitten from a pile by the toddler's mattress. Pulling at the seams, she displayed her neat stitches. Her voice changed to one of pleading.

"Is your family looking for anyone to mend clothing? I work quickly and—"

"I have no family."

Aelfric tossed the last of his money into his belt pouch as a lump settled in his throat. Cuthbert had sold his father, mother, and sister to another merchant in Durham two years ago. He never saw them again.

"What happened to them?" she asked.

"They're dead."

Normans had ransacked Durham last winter, killing his loved ones. Had his family been free and wealthy, they would've escaped the deadly rebellion by ship and survived. Aelfric wanted to earn the freedom and prosperity they'd never had or die trying.

The girl lowered her eyes. She said something apologetic that Aelfric didn't register.

"I want to buy a dress and headscarf," he repeated, his voice foggy. He turned to flip through the girl's piles of clothing.

Pulling out several dresses, he threw them open to assess their lengths. The soft wool unrolled over his feet. Their yellow and pink hems, embroidered with roses, were quite a pretty sight. But what was this? All the dresses had squares or rectangles cut out of them. Perfectly fine clothing, destroyed.

He glowered at the girl. "Why are you carving these up?"

She blinked several times before sliding the toddler off her lap. Standing, she approached him and withdrew one dress at the bottom of one heap.

"You should fit in this one. But this is fine wool, high quality." She stroked the blue cloth, her eyes gleaming in the tangential light. "And if you want hair covering to complete the outfit, I'll charge you another penny."

She hadn't answered his question, and paying another penny was out of the question. Aelfric gritted his teeth at the way she cocked her head.

"Well?" she asked. "Do you want it or not?"

He needed a dress. Disguising himself as a girl was a better solution than hiding in this smokehouse. After all, he had to exit at some point and board a ship.

The toddler sitting on the ground smiled at him, and Aelfric swallowed his frustration.

"Let me try on the dress first," he grumbled.