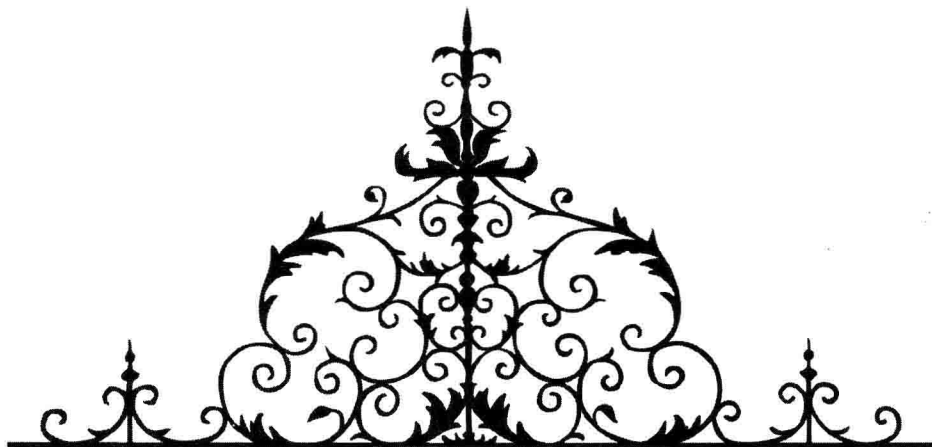


New York Times Bestselling Author of Come the Spring

JULIE GARWOOD RANSOM

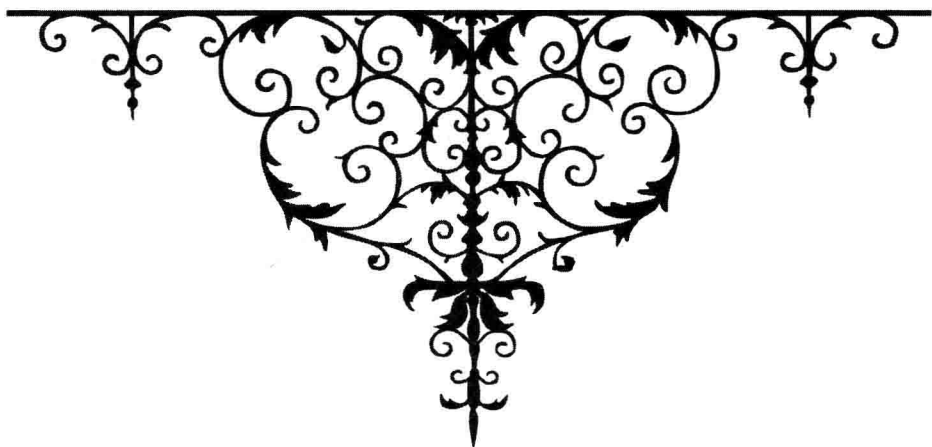




JULIE GARWOOD



RANSOM



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R A N S O M

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Come the Spring
Ransom

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For Bryan Michael Garwood,
business and law graduate extraordinaire—

With your keen mind, your passionate soul, and your merciful heart,
there's no stopping you.

As you embark on this most noble career, remember:

“Justice is a machine that, when someone has
given it a starting push, rolls of itself.”

Galsworthy, *Justice II*

Start pushing, Bryan

R A N S O M

PROLOGUE

England, in the reign of King Richard I

Bad things always happen during the night.

In the dark hours of the night Gillian's mother died struggling to bring a new life into the world, and a young, unthinking servant, wishing to be the first to impart the sorrowful news, awakened the two little girls to tell them their dear mama was dead. Two nights later, they were once again shaken awake to hear that their infant brother, Ranulf, named in honor of their father, had also passed on. His frail body hadn't been able to take the strain of being born a full two months early.

Gillian was afraid of the dark. She waited until the servant had left her bedroom, then slid down from the big bed on her stomach to the cold stone floor. Barefoot, she ran to the forbidden passage, a secret hallway that led to her sister's chamber and also to the steep steps that ended in the tunnels below the kitchens. She barely squeezed behind the chest her papa had placed in front of the

narrow door in the wall to discourage his daughters from going back and forth. He had warned over and over again that it was a secret, for the love of God, only to be used under the most dire of circumstances, and certainly not for play. Why, even his loyal servants didn't know about the passageways built into three of the bedchambers, and he was determined to keep it that way. He was also extremely concerned that his daughters would fall down the steps and break their pretty little necks, and he often threatened to paddle their backsides if he ever caught them there. It was dangerous, and it was forbidden.

But on that terrible night of loss and sorrow, Gillian didn't care if she got into trouble. She was scared, and whenever she got scared, she ran to her older sister, Christen, for comfort. Managing to get the door open only a crack, Gillian cried out for Christen and waited for her to come. Her sister reached in, latched onto Gillian's hand and pulled her through, then helped her climb up into her bed. The little girls clung to each other under the thick blankets and cried while their papa's tormented screams of anguish and desolation echoed throughout the halls. They could hear him shouting their mama's name over and over and over again. Death had entered their peaceful home and filled it with grief.

The family wasn't given time to heal, for the monsters of the night weren't through preying on them. It was in the dead of night that the infidels invaded their home and Gillian's family was destroyed.

Papa woke her up when he came rushing into her chamber carrying Christen in his arms. His faithful soldiers William—Gillian's favorite because he gave her honeyed treats when her papa wasn't watching—and Lawrence and Tom and Spencer followed behind him. Their expressions were grim. Gillian sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands as her father handed Christen to Lawrence and hurried to her. He placed the glowing candle on the chest next to her bed, then sat down beside her and with a trembling hand gently brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Her father looked terribly sad, and Gillian thought she knew the reason why.

“Did Mama die again, Papa?” she asked worriedly.

“For the love of . . . no, Gillian,” he answered, his voice weary.

“Did she come back home, then?”

“Ah, my sweet lamb, we’ve been over this again and again. Your mama isn’t ever going to come home. The dead can’t come back. She’s in heaven now. Try to understand.”

“Yes, Papa,” she whispered.

She heard the faint echo of shouts coming from the floor below and then noticed that her father was wearing his chain mail.

“Are you going to battle now, for the love of God, Papa?”

“Yes,” he answered. “But first I must get you and your sister to safety.”

He reached for the clothes Gillian’s maid, Liese, had laid out for tomorrow and hastily dressed his daughter. William moved forward and knelt on one knee to put Gillian’s shoes on her.

Her papa had never dressed her before, and she didn’t know what to make of it. “Papa, I got to take my sleeping gown off before I put my clothes on, and I got to let Liese brush my hair.”

“We won’t worry about your hair tonight.”

“Papa, is it dark outside?” she asked as he slipped the bliaut over her head.

“Yes, Gillian, it’s dark.”

“Do I got to go outside in the dark?”

He could hear the fear in her voice and tried to calm her. “There will be torches to light the way and you won’t be alone.”

“Are you going with Christen and me?”

Her sister answered. “No, Gillian,” she shouted from across the room. “’Cause Papa has to stay here and fight the battle, for the love of God,” she said, repeating her father’s often used expression. “Don’t you, Papa?”

Lawrence told Christen to hush. “We don’t want anyone to know you’re leaving,” he explained in a whisper. “Can you be real quiet now?”

Christen eagerly nodded. "I can," she whispered back. "I can be awful quiet when I got to, and when I..."

Lawrence put his hand over her mouth. "Hush, golden girl."

William lifted Gillian into his arms and carried her out of the chamber and down the dark hallway to her father's room. Spencer and Tom guided the way, carrying bright candles to light the corridor. Giant shadows danced along the stone walls keeping pace with them, the only sound the hard clicking of their boots against the cobbled floor. Gillian became fearful and put her arms around the soldier's neck, then tucked her head under his chin.

"I don't like the shadows," she whimpered.

"They won't harm you," he soothed.

"I want my mama, William."

"I know you do, honey bear."

His silly nickname for her always made her smile, and she suddenly wasn't afraid any longer. She saw her papa rush past her to lead the way into his chamber, and she would have called out to him, but William put his finger to his lips, reminding her that she was to be quiet.

As soon as they were all inside the bedroom, Tom and Spencer began to slide a low chest along the wall so that they could open the secret door. The rusty hinges groaned and squealed like an angry boar whose mouth was being pried open.

Lawrence and William had to put the little girls down in order to soak and light the torches. The second their backs were turned, both Christen and Gillian ran to their father who was down on his knees leaning over another chest at the foot of the bed and sorting through his belongings. They flanked his sides and stretched up on tiptoes, their hands on the rim of the chest so they too could peer inside.

"What are you looking for, Papa?" Christen asked.

"This," he answered as he lifted the sparkling jeweled box.

"It's awful pretty, Papa," Christen said. "Can I have it?"

"Can I have it too?" Gillian chimed in.

"No," he answered. "The box belongs to Prince John, and I mean to see that he gets it back."

Still down on his knees, their father turned toward Christen and grabbed her arm, pulling her close as she tried to wiggle away.

"You're hurting me, Papa."

"I'm sorry, love," he said, immediately lessening his grip. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but I do need you to pay attention to what I'm going to tell you. Can you do that, Christen?"

"Yes, Papa, I can pay attention."

"That's good," he praised. "I want you to take this box with you when you leave. Lawrence will protect you from harm and take you to a safe place far away from here, and he'll help you hide this evil treasure until the time is right and I can come for you and take the box to Prince John. You mustn't tell anyone about this treasure, Christen."

Gillian ran around her father to stand next to Christen. "Can she tell me, Papa?"

Her father ignored her question and waited for Christen to answer.

"I won't tell," she promised.

"I won't tell no one neither." Gillian vehemently nodded to prove she meant what she said.

Their father continued to ignore his younger daughter for the moment because he was intent on making Christen understand the importance of what he was telling her. "No one must ever know you have the box, child. Now watch what I'm doing," he ordered. "I'm going to wrap the box in this tunic."

"So no one will see it?" Christen asked.

"That's right," he whispered. "So no one will see it."

"But I already seen it, Papa," Gillian blurted out.

"I know you did," he agreed. He looked up at Lawrence then. "She's too young . . . I'm asking too much of her. Dear God, how can I let my babies go?"

Lawrence stepped forward. "I'm going to protect Christen with my life, and I'll make certain no one sees the box."

William also rushed to offer his pledge. "No harm will come to Lady Gillian," he vowed. "I give you my word, Baron Ranulf. My life to keep her safe."

The vehemence in his voice was a comfort to the baron and he nodded to let both soldiers know that his trust in them was absolute.

Gillian tugged on her father's elbow to get his attention. She wasn't about to be left out. When her papa wrapped the pretty box in one of his tunics and gave it to Christen, Gillian clasped her hands together in anticipation, for she assumed that since her sister had been given a present, she would be getting one too. Even though Christen was the firstborn and three years older than Gillian, their father had never shown favoritism for one over the other.

It was difficult for her to be patient, but Gillian tried. She watched as her father pulled Christen into his arms and kissed her forehead and hugged her tight. "Don't forget your papa," he whispered. "Don't forget me."

He reached for Gillian next. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him soundly on his whiskered cheek.

"Papa, don't you have a pretty box for me?"

"No, my sweet. You're going to go with William now. Take hold of his hand—"

"But Papa, I got to have a box too. Don't you have one for me to carry?"

"The box isn't a present, Gillian."

"But, Papa—"

"I love you," he said, blinking back the tears as he fiercely clasped her against the cold chain mail of his hauberk. "God keep you safe."

"You're squishing me, Papa. Can I have a turn holding the box? Please, Papa?"

Ector, her father's chief reeve, barged into the room. His shout so startled Christen she dropped the treasure. The box rolled out of the tunic onto the floor and clattered across the stones. In the fire-light from the flaming torches, the rubies and sapphires and emeralds imbedded in the case came to life, glistening and twinkling brightly like sparkling stars that had fallen from the sky.

Ector stopped short, startled by the dazzling beauty that tumbled before him.

"What is it, Ector?" her father said.

Intent on giving his baron the urgent message from Bryant, the baron's commander in arms, Ector seemed barely to be paying attention to what he was doing as he scooped up the box and handed it to Lawrence. His focus returned to his leader. "Milord, Bryant bade me to come and tell you that young Alford the Red and his soldiers have breached the inner bailey."

"Was Baron Alford seen?" William blurted out the question. "Or does he continue to hide from us?"

Ector glanced back at the soldier. "I don't know," he confessed before turning to the baron once again. "Bryant also bade me tell you that your men are calling for you, milord."

"I shall go at once," the baron announced as he gained his feet. He motioned for Ector to leave the chamber, then followed him, pausing in the doorway to gaze upon his beautiful daughters one last time. Christen, with her golden curls and cherub cheeks, and little Gillian, with her mother's brilliant green eyes and pale skin, looked in jeopardy of bursting into tears.

"Go now, and God keep you safe," the baron ordered harshly.

And then he was gone. The soldiers hurried to the passage. Tom went ahead to unlatch the door at the end of the tunnel and make certain the area hadn't been breached by the enemy. Lawrence held Christen's hand and led the way into the dark corridor with his fiery torch. Gillian was right behind her sister, clinging to William's hand. Spencer followed them, then reached through the opening to drag the chest back before he closed the door.

"Papa didn't tell me he had a secret door," Gillian whispered to Christen.

"He didn't tell me neither," her sister whispered back. "Maybe he forgot."

Gillian tugged on William's hand to get his attention. "Me and Christen got a secret door too, but it's in our bedrooms. We can't tell nobody about it though 'cause it's a secret. Papa says he'll paddle us good if we tell. Did you know it was a secret, William?" The soldier didn't answer her, but she wasn't deterred by his silence. "You know where our passage goes? Papa says when we come out of our tunnel, we can see the fish in his pond. Is that where we're going?"

"No," William answered. "This tunnel will take us underneath the wine cellar. We're getting close to the steps now, and I want you to be real quiet."

Gillian kept a worried eye on the shadows following her along the wall. She moved closer to William and then turned her attention to her sister. Christen was clasping the jeweled box against her chest, but an edge of the tunic was dangling down below her elbow, and Gillian couldn't resist reaching for it.

"I got to have a turn holding the box. Papa said."

Christen was outraged. "No, he didn't say," she cried. She twisted toward Lawrence so Gillian couldn't get near the box, and then tattled on her. "Lawrence, Gillian told a lie. Papa said I was supposed to have the box, not her."

Gillian was determined. "But I got to have a turn," she told her sister as she once again tried to grab hold of the tunic. She pulled back when she thought she heard a sound behind her. She turned to look. The stairway was pitch-black, and she couldn't see anything, but she was certain that there were monsters lurking in the shadows waiting to grab her, maybe even a fiery dragon. Frightened, she held tight to the soldier's hand and squeezed up against his side.

"I don't like it here," she cried. "Carry me, William."

Just as the soldier bent down to lift her up with his free arm, one of the shadows against the wall leapt out at her. Gillian screamed in terror, stumbled, and fell into Christen.

Her sister shouted, "No, it's mine," and swung toward Gillian as the shadow barreled into William. The blow struck William behind his knees and threw him into Lawrence. The steps were slick with moisture dripping down from the walls, and the men were too close to the edge to brace themselves. They plunged head-first into the black hole with the girls. Sparks from the torches flew about them as the fiery balls cascaded down the stairs ahead of them.

William desperately tried to enfold the child as their bodies plummeted down the jagged steps, but he couldn't shield her completely, and Gillian's chin struck the sharp stone.

Stunned by the blow, she slowly sat up and looked about her. Blood poured onto her gown, and when she saw the blood on her hands, she began to scream. Her sister lay beside her, facedown on the floor, not making a sound.

"Christen, help me," Gillian sobbed. "Wake up. I don't like it here. Wake up."

William struggled to his feet with the hysterical child and, holding her tight against his chest, ran through the tunnel. "Hush, child, hush," he whispered over and over again.

Lawrence followed with Christen. Blood trickled down from the cut high on her forehead.

"Lawrence, you and Tom take Christen on to the creek. Spencer and I will meet you there," William shouted.

"Come with us now," Lawrence urged over Gillian's screams.

"The child's in a bad way. She needs stitches," William called back. "Go now. We'll catch up with you. God's speed," he added as he rushed ahead.

"Christen," Gillian screamed. "Christen, don't leave me."

When they neared the door, William cupped his hand over Gillian's mouth and pleaded with her to be quiet. He and Spencer

took her to the tanner's cottage on the edge of the outer bailey so that Maude, the tanner's wife, could sew the injury. The underside of Gillian's chin was completely flayed open.

Both soldiers held the child down while Maude worked on her. The battle raged dangerously close, and the noise became so deafening they had to shout to be heard.

"Finish with the child," William ordered the woman. "We must get her to safety before it's too late. Hurry," he shouted as he rushed outside to stand guard.

Maude tied a knot in the string, then clipped the threads. As quickly as she could manage, she wrapped a thick bandage around Gillian's neck and chin.

Spencer lifted the little girl and followed William outside. The enemy had set fire to the thatched roofs of several of the huts with their flaming arrows, and in the bright light, the three ran toward the hill where their mounts waited.

They were halfway up the incline when a troop of soldiers came swarming over the crest. More of the enemy cut off their retreat at the bottom. Escape was impossible, but the two valiant men still held steadfast to their duty. With Gillian on the ground between them, their legs the only barrier shielding her from the attack, they stood with their backs to each other, raised their swords high, and rendered their final battle cry. The two noble soldiers died as they had lived, with honor and courage protecting the innocent.

One of Alford's commanders, recognizing the child, carried her back to the great hall. Liese, Gillian's maid, spotted her when she came inside with the soldier and boldly broke away from the group of servants huddled together in the corner under the watchful eye of the enemy's guard. She pleaded with the soldier to let her take over the care of the little girl. Fortunately, the commander considered Gillian a nuisance and was happy to be rid of her. He ordered Liese to take Gillian upstairs and then ran back outside to join in the fight.

Gillian appeared to be in a stupor. Liese grabbed her and raced