

CHAPTER 1

Lady Brenna enjoyed her banishment to the musty North tower.

Shivering with the thrill of rebellion, she tossed her kirtle onto the floor planks, perched naked on a three-legged stool, and lifted one of her many paintbrushes to capture what she saw in the looking glass.

Alone, isolated from the rest of the castlefolk, she reveled that she could shun the very garments that defined her lot as a pawn in men's war. Her refusal to marry and insistence on entering a convent had not set well with Papa.

The scent of spike lavender oil curled into the air as she stroked her brush across parchment, transforming her chamber from prison to sanctuary. Here she could paint. Here she could dream. Here she was free from society's demands and duties.

A crimson trail unfurled from the tip of her paintbrush: the tongue of passion that drew a spread-legged view of a young noblewoman with springy copper colored hair on both her head and nether lips. A nude of herself, painted as she gazed into the looking glass. So much more lush and naughty than the many proper paintings of saints and angels propped haphazardly about the chamber.

The crossbar scraped against the bedchamber door, and she jumped, smearing a brushstroke.

“Devil take it!” she cursed, launching into a mad rush to cover the parchment and snatch her kirtle over her body before the intruder discovered the subject matter of this painting.

Her skirt swirled around her ankles just as the door banged open. The three-legged stool clattered and tipped over.

“Brenna, you must help us!” Her sister Gwyneth rushed inside, wearing a disheveled silver-blue wedding houpelande. An enormous butterfly headdress covered with a rich veil propped precariously on her head. Curly strands of her golden hair bounced around her like a flailing mop, and tuffs of ermine trim floated into the air.

Heart pounding, Brenna shielded her miniature like a mother protecting a child. She’d been banished to this tower a year ago because she wanted a life of her own, a chance to make her own way in the world.

She’d defied her father—refused to marry and had boldly told him she would run away and join a convent. If Papa found her erotic works, he’d burn her painting supplies. If the town’s head churchman, Bishop Humphrey found them she would be burned.

“My bridegroom—James—the wedding—” Gwyneth’s words tumbled over one another, each one rising in pitch. Tendrils of golden hair escaped from her curled and coifed arrangement as if she’d been tearing at the strands in panicked worry. The butterfly headdress slid to one side, and her veil

hung haphazardly in her hair, clinging half way down the length by one hairpin.

Thrusting her brush into a jar of spike lavender oil, Brenna composed her features as her sister closed in on her. “The wedding took place this morn, did it not?” She’d listened for the shouts of jubilation that should have filled the great hall hours ago, then decided perhaps the guests had been too few for the sound to carry to her tower.

“—Papa—the woods—sunrise—” Hand shaking, Gwyneth rattled across the floor planks like a skeleton quivering in the breeze. She nearly tripped over a large board painting of the birth of Christ that lay drying on the floor planks. “—the men—the weapons—”

Brenna pursed her lips; her worry about the erotic paintings evaporated. Gwyneth was too wrapped in her own issues to notice the nature of artwork.

“Take a deep breath, sister.”

Sucking in several gulps of air, Gwyneth tugged the sleeve of Brenna’s simple kirtle. Her soft fingers looked out of place against the paint-splotched and threadbare garment.

“Papa’s been captured!” Gwyneth finally gasped out.

Fear iced Brenna’s stomach. “Dear stars! What happened?”

“Papa ambushed the wedding party as they traveled here, and The Enforcer took him hostage.”

The Enforcer.

James Vaughn, Earl of Montgomery. A privateer commanded by the king to annihilate smugglers and rebels.

Her sister's fiancé.

"Bloody hell," Brenna cursed, then winced remembering the beating Papa had given her last time she'd spoken bad language aloud.

She squeezed her sister's shoulders. The Enforcer punished any who dared question King Edward's ultimate authority. It was said he killed whole crews of ship's men and confiscated honest cargo, murdering and stealing all in the name of the crown.

She and her father had issues, but he was still her papa. And she did not want him destroyed at the hand of some monster.

"Papa tried to stop the wedding."

Ice turned to fury. Brenna felt a wave of frustration that she'd been locked in her chamber and knew so little of the comings and goings of the household. "Of all the idiotic—Papa's a dunderhead, I tell you! Why the devil did he ambush the Earl? I thought he wanted you to marry him." And you always do as you are told.

"He did. But I-I-I—" Tears leaked down Gwyneth's pale heart-shaped face and dripped off her pert little chin.

Brenna resisted the urge to shake her sister. "Tell me."

"James of Montgomery is a b-beast! He killed his last wife in cold blood." Gwyneth covered her eyes with her hands and began to cry loud, moaning

wails. “I didn’t want to marry him—and I told Father—and—”

“Tsk, tsk.” Turning her sister by the shoulders, Brenna led her toward the large four-poster bed, sat and hugged her while Gwyneth blubbered incoherently. Her brows had been freshly plucked, and she smelled of wedding scents—fresh lavender, silk and wildflowers.

A sting of jealousy catapulted into Brenna’s heart. Both of them had refused marriage. But her father had declared imprisonment for her and a war party to defend Gwyneth!

She shoved her envy aside and stared at the vase of purple foxglove on her painting desk. Where others had forgotten her, Gwyneth brought her flowers.

‘Twas not her sister’s fault that their father loved her more.

Gwyneth sniveled into her hands, sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

From her seat on the bed, Brenna peered out the open door and wrapped her arms tighter around her sister. Now would be a good time to escape. She was ready: gold and food were packed in a small parcel beneath her bed along with pots of pigment and her favorite paintbrush, the tiny hog’s hair one. She had a letter from Mother Isabella, the abbess of La Signora del Lago, a nunnery in Italy along the coast.

Brother Giffard, the traveling monk, had arranged for her passage on a ship leaving for Italy at week’s end. ‘Twas a voyage fraught with danger, but an escort was set to meet her and she had plans

to take shelter at her brother's home until she could make it to La Signora del Lago. If Nathan knew she was coming, he would try to stop her, but he would not turn her away if she showed up on his doorstep. For months she'd been practicing with a knife to be able to protect herself if needs be.

Snatching her pack and leaving while the door was unbolted and the castle was in chaos would make her getaway easy. Her sister would marry Montgomery, her father would be set free, and she would be gone afore anyone realized what had happened.

After a few moments of hysteria, Gwyneth lifted her tear-stained face toward Brenna and began fumbling with the mother-of-pearl buttons on her houpelande. Around her, the bedcurtains shivered.

“Gwyneth! What are you doing?”

“Montgomery plans to hang Father at sunset unless I agree to marry him. But I cannot. You have to help me.”

Oh, for heaven's sake. Pulling Gwyneth's fingers from her buttons, Brenna stroked the back of her hand. “Peace, sister. Montgomery is an Earl, a wealthy one at that. 'Tis no sacrifice to marry him.”

“Brenna,” Gwyneth choked out through tears, “I-I saw him at the faire. He's the spawn of Satan. He nigh beat a man to death with his bare hands. He's huge and strong. It took three large men to pull him off of the wretch.”

“Surely he had reason—”

“Nay, sister, he did not. 'Twas because the man spilt a few drops of ale on his new paltock. Adele and I followed him from the tournament field to see

him without his armor and helm. He's a hideous scarred monster—his face full of white, puckered skin instead of a man's features. Children ran from his pathway.”

With a hearty tug, Gwyneth yanked a wicked-looking dagger from the bodice of her voluptuous gown. The blade was short, only as long as a woman's palm, but it gleamed sharply. It had a small pommel and a red ruby winked in its hilt.

“Our family will ne'er be safe if I marry him. He must die!”

Her sister had gone mad! “Cease, Gwyneth. This is daftness. You cannot murder anyone.”

“Nay, sister, not me—you!”

“Me?”

Gwyneth waved the blade in the air, pointing to a painted wooden target that was half-hidden behind an enormous canvas containing a scene with a glowing risen Christ and his worshipful followers gazing into the heavens. Using canvas, a gift from Brother Giffard, instead of boards or parchment was new to her, so Brenna was especially pleased with the piece.

“I know of your skill with a knife,” Gwyneth said pointedly, not even noticing the new painting. “Of your practice with a blade.”

Brenna blinked at the charge, and tamped down the small disappointment that her sister did not notice the canvas. 'Twas true she'd spent hours plunging daggers into that scrap of wood in preparation for her trip to Italy, but she was no murderess. “My knives are for protection!”

“Then protect us.” Gwyneth held the dagger high in the air. The sharp blade shook in her fingers as if ‘twas possessed by Lucifer himself. “Kill The Enforcer. This is a special blade—l’occhio del diavolo.”

Italian, the language Brenna had been studying. L’occhio del diavolo: The Devil’s Eye. What an odd name for a dagger.

Brenna lurched to her feet; her paint-splattered kirtle swirled about her ankles. Best to get this situation under control afore her sister cut herself.

“Give me that, you ninny! No one is going to kill anyone.”

She grabbed the weapon, stalked to her table, swiped back the mortars she used to mix her paints, and set l’occhio del diavolo on the far side of the cluttered surface. Brushes scattered onto the floor. The scent of turpentine and oil of spike lavender floated around them.

In a quick slight of hand, she covered the nude self-portrait with a rag.

At Gwyneth’s downtrodden look, Brenna quickly added, “You will mar your lovely hands, sister.”

“Devil rot my hands.”

At that moment Duncan, a scrappy black-and-tan terrier, and the slight figure of Adele, Brenna’s younger sister, burst into the room. She, too, wore wedding finery: a heavy blue velvet gown with fanciful dagged sleeves and a steepled hennin on her head. She held St. Paul, her grey cat, in one hand and her staff in the other. Her frothy black hair fluffed around her shoulders and down her back

past an embroidered gold girdle at her hips. Panthos, her large mastiff flanked her, panting his rethed breath into the chamber.

Leaning heavily on her cane, Adele wended through the scattered maze of painted boards as heedless of her artwork as Gwyneth had been. “Montgomery has reached the castle! Father is tied and being dragged across the courtyard on his knees. Make haste! You must stand in Gwyneth’s stead for the marriage ceremony and kill Montgomery tonight.”

Brenna looked from one of her sisters to the other. How could they ask this of her, after all she’d gone through without asking help from either of them? She glanced around at the paintings of saints and angels that had been her companions these past months during her confinement.

“I am not going to kill anyone.”

“You must,” Gwyneth insisted. “You are the only one who stands a chance.”

The mastiff barked, and Adele held her hand out to calm him. Her oval face looked pensive. “Victory starts with Montgomery’s death. We will inform Father Peter of the bride change. You must slay The Enforcer in the bridal chamber when you see the snuffing of the candle in the chamber across the bailey. That will be the signal that the men are in place and ready to retake the castle and free our father.”

And then your father would love you, a dark voice whispered inside her mind. You would be a heroine instead of a burden.

“This is lunacy.” Out of habit, Brenna reached for the fat, wooden cross that usually hung around her neck. When she realized it wasn’t there, she picked up a paintbrush and turned it over and over in her fingers. “I am to be a bride of Christ. I cannot harm anyone.”

Gwyneth rolled her eyes. “As father says, you are ill suited for a nunnery.”

“Ne’ertheless, I intend to give my life to God.” She indicated the myriad of religious paintings strewn about the chamber, hoping to further her claim. She would be damned if she was going to end up like her mother, waiting hand and foot on an inattentive man with a passel of brats to care for until she collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Better to live in a convent.

The fact that Bishop Humphrey refused to consider hanging her art even in one of the cathedral’s privies was one more proof why she needed to leave England and head to Italy where she could join a nunnery and become powerful in her own right.

“I have seen your targets. You wield a dagger and paintbrush with equal aplomb,” Adele insisted. “You can do this deed.”

“A few months of practice hardly equals master—”

“You can do it!” Gwyneth swirled toward her, ermine trim flying. “You defended me against Lord Brice. And set Sir Edward’s breeches on fire. And shot Thomas in the arse with an arr—”

“Zwounds, sister, hush your babble.” Brenna clapped her hands over her ears, not wanting to hear

any more of her supposed sins listed. Her father railed at her enough. “Those men deserved it. And”—she glanced around at her prison of a bedchamber—“I’m still paying penance.”

Gwyneth slid next to her, touching her on the arm. “I know of your plans to go to Italy. That you have been exchanging letters with the abbess of La Signora del Lago.”

Brenna winced at the discovery. But of course, Gwyneth would know. Adored by the servants and brightly sociable, her sister knew all the workings of the castle. She’d probably crafted some damn needlework to mark the event.

“Just do this one last deed, and we will help you on your journey. For certes, Father would grant you permission to enter the convent.”

Permission. The one thing she needed to be accepted into the holy order.

Adele rapped her cane on the planks, causing her raven hair to bounce. Duncan barked and scurried atop a trunk. “We will have men ready to whisk you away as soon as Montgomery is dead. They will be outside this door when we give the signal, and Panthos will lead you out the back tunnel to a safe cottage by the river.”

“Panthos?” The mastiff. “I’m to commit murder, then be lead by a dog to escape the wrath of The Enforcer’s men?” Both of her sisters had turned lunatic.

“Aye,” Adele said calmly. Her intense, dark eyes shone with intelligence, not fever. St. Paul stretched languidly in her arms and let out a loud purr. “I have told Panthos of your danger, and he

has agreed to protect you. Duncan will go with you as well; he is good at catching rabbits.”

Brenna perused her dark-haired sister who was composed and serene, floating as always in her secret ethereal haze above the pain of her deformed leg and the chaos of the earth. Of a truth, she had uncanny kindred with the beasts of nature, but—to be led by one dog and fed by the other?

“You are both daft.”

Panthos sat on his haunches and cocked his head at her.

“You too,” she told him.

“Prithee, Brenna.” Gwyneth shuddered, and the stiff silvery-blue houpelande rustled with the motion.

Gwyneth’s silky skirt contrasted with Brenna’s own shabby, faded wool one. More proof of their father’s love toward his favored daughter. She tamped down the ache in her chest. If only she could have won even half as much of his love. Her father had taken all of her beautiful clothing away years ago. As a nun, she would have to give them up anyway, but her chest still ached from the memory.

Gwyneth plucked the falling headdress and veil from her blond hair and set it on Brenna’s head. The veil was a thick material sewed with tiny pearls. The heavy frame that fashioned the hat into a butterfly shape felt awkward and foreign.

“We are nigh the same height, and if we cover your red hair, he will not suspect,” Gwyneth said.

Brenna snorted. The elaborate hat looked bizarre against her simple clothing. Save for the

height, she and Gwyneth looked naught alike. Especially not since she'd hacked off her thigh length curls. Gwyneth's hair, when loose, was a mass of shimmering gold that hung past her hips; her own was a close cropped mess.

Reaching up, Brenna touched the scar on her cheek that ran from her ear to the bridge of her nose and lifted a strand of her copper hair. 'Twas shorter than *l'occhio del diavolo* and not nearly as symmetrical.

"Surely Montgomery has heard you are the fairest lady in all of England," Brenna said to Gwyneth.

Gwyneth shot her a sympathetic look, but did not deny the charge. Both of them knew Gwyneth's beauty was a possession most prized by their father—'twas the thing that would catch the eye of a wealthy man so he would have more gold to pump into his cause of ridding England's throne of its king.

"I am sorry about your hair," Gwyneth said gently. "I truly appreciate your sacrifice to save me from Lord Brice. It was so brave of you to shear it and pretend you were me so I could be rid of him."

Brave? Bloody hell. All she'd had to do was introduce herself as Gwyneth. Without her long beauteous locks to soften her features, her face had frightened him into running like the very devil chased him. As if she was plagued. No man wanted a scarred, ugly, shorn woman as wife. Another reason her father should have allowed her to enter the convent. Silently, she cursed his stubbornness. Why did he have to be so obstinate?

“What’s done is done,” Brenna said, refusing to allow herself to dwell on her missing locks. What need did an artist and a nun have for vanity?

Gwyneth reached up and patted Brenna’s short curls. “But I know you miss your hair. I’ve seen you tug at the strands.”

Adele rapped her cane again, causing the terrier to run around in tight circles. “There is no time to talk of hair! Get dressed, Brenna. Use the veil to cover your scar—there is enough fabric to obscure your face. I swear, I’d kill Montgomery myself, but for this lame foot of mine. I do not look enough like Gwyneth to pass, and only a bride will be able to get close enough to slay him.”

Before Brenna could open her mouth to insist that she did not look like the beautiful Gwyneth either, Gwyneth scrambled from her wedding gown and held it out. “You have pretended to be me before; you can do it again.”

Clad only in her shift, Gwyneth reminded Brenna of a specter. A specter of her past.

Brenna had a new life awaiting her in Italy. Glancing at the open door, she thought of her satchel beneath the bed.

“Oh, curse it all to the devil. This battle is not my concern,” she said. She needed to leave. She could not spend her life rescuing her sister from one suitor or the next. “Marry the man and he’ll set Father free. With your looks, you’ll be able to bend him to your will.”

At that moment, thunderous footsteps clamored up the stairs of the tower.

The chamber door banged open.

The three sisters gasped. The dogs barked, and St. Paul bolted beneath the bed.

The largest pair of men Brenna had ever seen stepped inside the room. They were fully clad in chain mail and armor and seemed to be at least seven feet in height.

One had eyes so blue they glowed like the coals of hell beneath his full-face helm. He carried a large broadsword. The other held a crossbow at the ready. They seemed to scrutinize the bed, the trunks, the table desk, and the paintings before gazing intently at Brenna and her sisters.

Gwyneth, still in her shift, tried to hide behind Brenna and Adele.

The mastiff barked wildly, rearing upward. Adele held him by the collar, bracing her booted feet against the floor. Her hennin bobbed. The terrier leapt into the window embrasure seat and growled low.

“Call him off,” the crossbow-man commanded, swinging his weapon around to the mastiff. He was a tall, dangerous looking brute with a missing finger.

Gwyneth grasped Brenna’s hand in a clammy grip.

With a few whispered words, Adele calmed Panthos. Duncan tucked his tail and bolted beneath the bed with St. Paul.

“I am here to collect my bride. Which of you is she?” the man with the wicked blue eyes asked. He swung around to Gwyneth, seeming to take in her sunshine-like beauty.

Chain mail clinked as he reached for her, more beast than man. Huge hands. Brawny shoulders. An arrogant masculine presence. Bloody hell.

He was worse even than Lord Brice.

He'd eat her sister alive.

Gwyneth gave Brenna a look of pleading desperation as the man's brutish hand touched the pristine linen of her shift. Her pulse fluttered in her neck.

With one last glance at the satchel under the bed, Brenna stepped forward, pushed Gwyneth firmly behind herself, and faced off the monster. She could not leave her sister to be raped and ravished by this fiend. Her skill with a knife would have to be enough.

She said a silent prayer of thanksgiving that Gwyneth had shoved the veil on her head so that her scar was partially hidden and the man would not see her unevenly chopped locks.

"I am your bride, my lord. Just give me a moment to change into my wedding gown." And hide the dagger.