

## CHAPTER ONE

*Whitestone Castle, November 1470*

Lady Meiriona watched a tiny, black spider spin silky strands in the doorframe as she waited to betray her bridegroom.

Her slippered foot tapped impatiently against the chapel's red and black tiled floor. If only she could make her father understand the betrothal should be broken by diplomacy instead of force.

From her seat on the front bench, she glanced from her father's hiding place at the front of the church to the chapel's open door and back again. Why did men not understand that violence only begets more violence?

"Promise me you won't kill him, Father. Force him to sign the papers and be done with it."

"I will do what I think is best," her father's voice boomed from behind a wooden screen painted with biblical lore. Bright colors splashed across the partition depicting the image of a woman nailing a man's head to the ground.

The church's incense tinged air burned Meiriona's

nostrils and dread churned in her stomach. Mayhap she was the woman in the painting and the man her bridegroom. She folded her hands together, covering their trembling in the green velvet of her kirtle.

“I hate being bait, Father. Surely the contract can be broken another way.”

“There is no other way.” Her father’s angry voice resounded through the dark, empty sanctuary. Although he hid in shadows, she felt his agitation. “Edward forced the betrothal on us, and by force we will break it. You will sit there until this is over.”

Meiriona stiffened; the metal of her girdle scraped against the pew, biting into her flesh. “I am no longer a child, Father.” Her voice sounded defiant, even to her own ears. She despised being a pawn.

“You are barely fifteen.”

“Old enough to be married,” she countered.

Her father’s tall, gaunt figure emerged from behind the painted screen, hands balled into fists. Chain mail clinked, and his crimson surcoat billowed as he stalked toward her, his bristly gray beard quivering with rage. Gray strands hung in front of his thin face, as though he had jammed on his helmet without bothering to first sweep his hair aside.

“Defy me and I will kill the bastard for certes!” He slammed his armored fist against the white cloth atop the thick wooden altar. A candle stand crashed to the tiles sending unlit tapers skittering across the floor.

Meiriona patted her crisp wimple in a telltale gesture of nervousness, but met his gaze without flinching. Why did men prefer war when diplomacy could accomplish the same goal? Already the graveyards overflowed with casualties from this conflict between the house of Lancaster and the house of York.

Her father stormed across the blood red carpet that ran down the aisle of the cold chapel. He stopped

directly before her. “Lo, daughter, are you a Lancaster or a Yorkist?”

“Father, please. You *know* my loyalty is true.” She stared at him, her fingers running along the edge of the oak bench. “But Henry has regained the throne. Mayhap we can break the betrothal contract *legally*.”

“Legally! Bah!” He shook his gauntlet-clad fist at the air, fighting monstrous unseen demons. “Was your mother raped *legally*?”

Meiriona cringed and set her jaw to dam the tears she never allowed to fall. “I cleaned the blood off Mother’s thighs myself after that Yorkist dog took her. Do *not* doubt my sincerity.”

Her father leaned forward suddenly to kiss her forehead, an expression of fierce love glowing in his eyes. “You are so much like your mother. When I married my Catrin she was fire and flash. Red hair and green eyes. I will not betray her memory by allowing you to marry a Yorkist.”

She tugged at his faded red surcoat, straightening it for him as she often did. “Mayhap King Henry would agree with us that this marriage should not take place, but do not usurp his authority by slaying this man.”

Her father shook his head. The metal of his helmet gleamed and bounced colored lights around the elaborate chapel as morning light shone in through ornate stained glass windows.

“I am too soft with you,” he grumbled.

“You have never been soft,” she assured him. “But Godric of Montgomery is innocent.”

“Ha!” Her father’s shoulders straightened with new life. His eyes bulged like an enraged bull’s. “No Yorkist is innocent. They are murderers and traitors from birth. May they all burn eternally for their betrayal of our pious King Henry and what they did to my Catrin!”

“Father! Please!” She shivered, wishing he would

turn back into the laughing compassionate papa he had been before her mother's rape and subsequent death from childbirth. Since that time, his tempers were all too recurrent.

A trumpet sounded and her father quieted. "The Yorkist bastard will be here in a moment, and all will be over."

Tearing her gaze from her father's, she peered through the open doorway. A tall figure, walking with the arrogant swagger of a man newly knighted, strode toward the chapel.

"Lo, daughter, he comes!"

Blood drained from her face as she looked upon her betrothed for the first time. With a surge of guilt, her heart went out to the man walking alone across the trampled grass. He was a bastard, a man with no family. Her father had summoned him to come posthaste, under the pretense that the wedding must take place immediately. Perhaps her bridegroom had no one to accompany him on short notice, even to his own wedding.

She clutched the sleeve of her father's surcoat. "Promise me you will not kill him or I will warn him."

Her father glared at her. "Fine." He righted the candle stand and kicked the fallen tapers beneath the hem of the altar skirt. A cruel smile crossed his raw-boned features. Like a suffocating mantle, a feeling of impending dread fell over her.

"Do not forget your duty, daughter." He hurried to his hiding place behind the screen, mail jangling as he went.

She perched on the front bench, her raw nerves stretched tight as she composed her face into a mask of blandness. She felt like a quivering rabbit, ensnared for bait while the hunters awaited a hungry predator to approach.

Her betrothed reached the doorway in long measured strides. The spider scampered to avoid him as he ducked beneath the low arched doorframe.

Meiriona gasped, her whole body aware of the crackling shift his presence made in the air. Backlit with the halo of sunshine, he was an archangel: beautiful, masculine, powerful, dangerous.

He stepped into the sanctuary and her mouth went dry.

Dressed in wedding finery, silver knight-spurs gleaming, he was the most striking man she had ever seen. A blue surcoat with yellow embroidery emphasized broad shoulders. His hose and high boots revealed long muscular legs. Near a lean waist, his large callused hands stroked doeskin riding gloves. Guilt pulled at her conscience when she realized he wore no sword.

Blunt-cut, shoulder-length, black hair framed angular features. An aristocratic nose and dark eyebrows gave him a daunting presence, but his eyes danced with intelligence and deep sensuality. Generous full lips softened his features.

*What would it be like to be kissed by those lips?* She swallowed; her heart pounded and she wished she could stop looking at him.

He stared back at her expectantly. “Lady Meiriona?”

Her heart leapt into her throat at the deep, husky timbre of his voice. “Aye.”

He bowed. “Godric of Montgomery.” He indicated the ornately painted chapel with the sweep of one muscled arm. “Why are you alone here in the dark? We are to be married.”

Her hands trembled within the folds of her skirt. “I cannot marry a Yorkist,” she whispered.

“What was that?” He stepped closer, masculine

arrogance dominating the space between them. “I did not hear you.”

She cleared her throat, suppressing the urge to jump and run. Even without a sword, he seemed frightfully capable of ripping one’s heart out.

“My apologies, sir. I am disquieted at being a bride.” She swept her eyes sideways to hide the lie.

When she did, her gaze rested on a large painted statue of Jesus nestled among the shadows. His unblinking stare condemned her, and she sucked in her breath. Did God really need the huge sum her father had bribed the priest with to annul the betrothal?

“Where is the wedding party?” Godric’s deep voice ripped through her thoughts.

Her gaze snapped back to his. Midnight blue eyes fringed with pirate black lashes pierced her.

Heart pounding, she spared a glance at the screen hiding her father. “They will be here shortly.”

The knight nodded, as if satisfied with her simplistic answer. “I had not expected the heiress of Whitestone to be so beautiful.”

Her stomach flipped at the compliment. Surely only the devil himself would be so beguiling. “Sir, I beg you, do not say such things.”

“But it is true.” He extended his hand, the muscles of his sword arm dancing as he reached for her.

She licked her dry lips, fascinated with the size of his muscled limb. It was large, tanned and seductively powerful.

He took her hand and chuckled softly. “You like what you see?” The husky tone of his voice was filled with overconfidence.

“I do not,” she lied, feeling her cheeks on fire. She knew not even the whisper of lead powder could hide her blush. She clamped her lips closed in irritation. She was no overheated milksop who blushed and stammered

when a man paid her a compliment. She wanted to snatch her hand back but she dared not—he might become suspicious.

He winked at her, gave her a roguish grin, and ignored her lie. It was as if they shared some keen secret. He looked as though he could read her inner desires, see right through her modest green gown *and* the yellow shift beneath it.

“My lady,” he murmured, leaning close. “You need not fear the private desires between a man and a woman.”

She shivered. He smelled like fresh rain, wild wind and the comforting smoke of a campfire. She felt a fervid longing for the impossible.

“This is not right between us,” she whispered more to herself than to him.

Godric stroked her fingertips with his callused hand, and her body tingled with traitorous desire. “Nothing could be more right between husband and wife.”

She turned her face away, heart racing as her private emotions warred with logic and loyalty.

“All will be well between us, my lady.” He lifted her hand, and his lips, soft as spring heather, kissed her palm.

She jerked back as if burned, but he held her hand tight.

The faint, metallic scrape of her father’s sword leaving its scabbard echoed through the quiet sanctuary.

Godric glanced over his shoulder.

Shrieking a war cry, her father leapt from his hiding place, sword extended. An instant later, armored soldiers crashed into the church, surrounding them.

She sprang forward as her father lunged at her bridegroom.

Godric pushed her behind his own body, shielding

her from harm. He drew a short dagger from his boot and held it ready. Her father advanced, the point of his sword aimed straight at Godric's heart. Men crowded into the chapel, swords drawn. The scent of leather and sweat overwhelmed the scent of incense.

Sweet Mary! What had she done?

Meiriona slipped between Godric and her father. "Nay, Father! We can accomplish this another way!"

Godric's gaze pinned her. "Accomplish what?"

She glanced from him to her father and back again. "I cannot marry you." Her hand touched Godric's forearm, a silent plea that he would understand.

"My daughter will never marry a bastard!"

Godric's expression turned from confusion to disbelief. "What?"

She shivered under his gaze and turned to her father. "This is not—"

"Silence, daughter!"

Sunlight gleamed off the men's upraised swords causing a rainbow of dancing lights to flicker across the altar.

Godric's gaze turned on her, icy as the tip of Snowdonia. Anger and tension hunched in his shoulders.

"You mean you were here in the dark as *bait*?" The grip on her hand tightened. The civility disappeared from his midnight blue eyes, replaced by the wariness of a cornered wolf.

"I had no choice."

"No choice?" he roared.

She cringed; his blood would be on her hands if he chose to fight. One man did not stand a chance against so many armed knights.

"Please! Just sign the papers!"

"What papers?"

"To break the betrothal. My father has them drawn already."

The force of the hatred in his eyes nearly knocked her to the pew.

“You are mine,” he stated, so quietly it was as though he were shouting. Moving with the lightning reflexes of a warrior, he snagged her waist, yanking her close.

She landed fully against his body, her head not even reaching the top of his broad shoulders.

Her father roared and lunged forward.

The flat of her bridegroom’s dagger, cold and inflexible, dug into her back and held her father at bay. Pressed against Godric’s body, she felt his wrath as their heartbeats thumped against each other. With a defiant glare at her father, he dragged the wimple from her head and kissed her boldly. Her heavy auburn hair spilled around her, over her shoulders and down her back. Logic demanded she resist, but his mouth laid claim on hers, searing her with its touch.

His lips were not soft as they had been on her palm, but challenging and severe. Yet his breath tasted sweet as honeyed mead.

An uncomfortable heat radiated through her limbs when his tongue flicked across her lips, demanding entrance.

Vaguely, she heard her father bellow in the background. Godric’s arm tightened, his knife hard against her back. Then time pitched into a dizzy flurry and she lost awareness of everything but his mouth and the impractical desire it demanded from her soul.

Abruptly he pushed her away.

Breathless, she tried to compose her thoughts, but they seemed as tangled as her hair. Her father’s gaze bore into her, condemning her. Shame burned her cheeks. She had not even struggled to get away from the kiss.

Godric assessed her as though he had just staked

claim.

She stretched her fingers to wipe the ferocity from his face. Fury radiated from him, and her nerve evaporated. Her hand fell lifelessly to her side.

“Get him out of here,” she breathed, wrenching free from his hold. She scurried from the chapel like a coward, brushing the spider in the process. Long strands of web clung to her hair as she ran toward her chamber.

“I will come for you. You are mine!” His voice rang through the courtyard after her. “You will pay for this.”

*Five years later. Turkish prison.*

Pain pulled Godric Montgomery slowly back to consciousness. Throbbing temples and sharp ringing in his ears proved he yet lived. He cursed the thought. Better to face the devil in hell than the life of slavery he now had.

“Get up, you oaf.” A woman’s disembodied voice spoke from the darkness. Meiriona?

Images drifted through his mind: the chapel, his betrothed, her father, the betrayal, then a ship and the slave block. But the thoughts were as impossible to catch as mist. He tried opening his eyes, but one was swollen shut and the other let in only a thin slit of the dim torchlight.

“Awaken, dog.” A foot nudged his ribcage and pain shot through his chest.

Turning his head to the side, he tasted filth from the prison’s floor on his lips. He spat to remove the mingled tastes of grime and blood and struggled to speak.

“Meiriona?” he rasped, his words feeling like gravel in his throat.

Reality flooded back to him. Nay, the woman’s

voice could not belong to the conniving little bitch who had sold him to this life of slavery. His betrothed, curse her dark soul, was an ocean away—likely tucked into a warm feather bed while he rotted on the frigid, unrelenting floor of a Turkish prison.

“Your lady cannot help you.”

Meiriona? *His* lady? Aye, it was true but not in the way this woman supposed. He would repay Meiriona for these last five years he had suffered. The desire for revenge burned stronger than the agony of his body.

He pushed himself to his knees and found he was naked. His back stung, every movement afire with pain.

How many lashes had the slave master given him this time? Forty? Fifty? After thirty he had lost count and passed out under the uncompromising whip.

“Hurry. The guards will return soon.”

He shook his head to clear the cobwebs, wincing at the sting the movement caused. Peering through one eye, he stared at the woman. She was of medium height. A dark veil concealed her hair and obscured her face. A long black garment covered everything but her hands. She hovered above him, a black demon with a lone candle lighting the way to hell.

“Who are you?”

“My name is not your concern. I have been sent by Princess Nadira.”

“Nadira?” A prickle of unease raised the hair on his nape. His affair with Nadira was the cause of these past four months of torture in this underground hellhole.

Before that, he had merely been a slave in the sultan’s palace, a position he abhorred. The princess and her maidens had found him to be a novelty—a distraction from the boredom of too much wealth and leisure. He had been brought to them by stealth in the dead of night. They’d toyed with him until he felt more studhorse than man.

A curse on treacherous women. He had given them pleasure, and they sent him to the rack in payment.

Godric rubbed a hand across his aching chest. The hair had grown back over the past months. Before that time, the women had applied a mixture of sugar and beeswax to rip the hair out by the root before oiling him. It was not much consolation, but at least he was becoming a man again.

“Princess Nadira bids you well.”

He gave a short, bitter laugh. “Does she? Did she bid me well when she accused me of rape and turned me over to those curs for a lashing?”

The woman tsked. “Nadira is a princess. And you” - she pushed aside her veil and spat on the ground - “you are a dog. You had no right to take her like one of your English whores.”

He rose suddenly, his fist closing around her slender wrist. “Watch your tongue ere I rip it out. I have nothing to lose.”

She shuddered and pulled her veil to further conceal her features. “The princess sent me to free you.” She hurled the words at him like a curse. “Harm me and you will die here with your own excrement as your only companion.”

Godric lessened his hold on her wrist. “Nadira sent you to *free* me?”

She nodded as if the very thought was ugly. “I would that your body rot here, but the princess bids otherwise.”

“Where is your princess now?”

“Asleep in her bed. Are you so prideful to think she would come for you herself? You are nothing to her.”

Godric did not doubt the truth of the statement. He had only been a toy for the princess, one easily thrown away when it became inconvenient.

“Why is she freeing me?”

“You are to be executed on the morrow.” Wrenching her hand from Godric’s grasp, she turned abruptly on her heels. “Follow me or die. It matters naught to me.”

She pushed the iron bars of the prison’s door.

Unlocked.

Mayhap the woman spoke the truth. Or mayhap it was a trap. She held the door open, beckoning him to follow, but he eyed her warily. Only a fool trusted women. And he was a fool no longer.

Was some greater hell awaiting him if he followed? He planted his feet on the uneven floor, heedless of his nakedness.

“If Nadira cares naught, why am I being freed?”

“A slave may not question his mistress’s decisions. It will come clear soon enough.”

Clapping a hand onto her slender shoulders, he said, “Betray me, and I will kill you before they capture me.”

“Kill me, and you will never see your cursed England again. Release me, dog. I brought you clothing.”

He had no choice. He would die for certes should he stay here, forgotten in a filthy cell below the sultan’s palace. The devil take him if he was a fool for trusting a woman once again.

He followed her into the musty-smelling hallway beyond the iron bars of the cell. Every movement pained him. She stooped to fetch a bundle that was pushed against the rough stone walls and thrust it at him. “Put these on.”

He swiftly complied. The breeches reached only midcalf on his long limbs, and the shirt fit too snug across his shoulders. The linen stuck to the clotted blood on his back, but he voiced no complaint.

She nodded approval when he was dressed.

Darkness closed around them as they made their way silently along the dank underground corridor. Colorless roaches scampered away as Godric and the woman turned corners. Water dripped from the ceiling, its echo unnaturally loud. The air smelled ancient and fetid.

Scattered along the hallway at intervals, other cells were carved out of stone and barred with iron. Skeletons lay in several of these. Rats nibbled on what flesh remained on the bones.

At last Godric and his silent guide entered a section of hallway where the uneven floor stones sloped upwards and the air smelled fresher. The last bit they crawled on hands and knees but finally worked their way free of the catacombs and into the welcoming moonlit night.

Godric breathed in the night air. Fresh jasmine scented the breeze.

Freedom.

Five years since he last tasted freedom. He wanted to relish it like a starved man would a feast.

A lone man on horseback awaited them. He held the reins in one hand and a wad of rags with the other.

The woman snatched a water bladder from the horse's saddle and hurled it at Godric. "Cleanse your hands, filthy swine."

Godric narrowed his eyes but complied.

She spoke rapidly to the rider in Arabic. He swung down from the steed and handed her the bundle. She thrust it at Godric. "Here is the reason for your freedom."

Godric took it, the package feeling small and warm in his hand. "What is it?"

The top rag slid to one side and a wrinkly, red infant stared up at him. "By God's holy rood." He almost dropped the child in his surprise. "You are giving me a baby?"

“Your daughter,” the woman accused.

“My” - he frowned and kept a tight hold on the baby, fearing it might break - “daughter?”

“Are you an imbecile? Did you not know how the sultan discovered your affair with the princess?”

Godric could not tear his gaze from the infant. It weighed almost nothing. “I have been locked in the catacombs. I was told of Nadira’s accusations, not of pregnancy.”

“You cannot blame the princess for imprisoning you. She only did what she must.”

The bundle squirmed and the infant wrinkled her nose. Her tiny body fit in the palm of his hand. Saints! What if he dropped her?

He clutched her to his chest. But what if he was holding her too roughly? Sweet Mother of God, he had never held a baby before. How was one supposed to do it?

The baby’s eyes dropped closed as a deep sleep came over her—peaceful, trusting. Had he sworn earlier all females were conniving and treacherous? He had been wrong. This one was guileless. Precious. He felt...awed, humbled. The baby was a piece of heaven in the midst of hell.

His gaze snapped back to the woman. “What does this mean?”

“Go back to your cursed England. Take your bastard child.”

Bastard? How many times had he heard himself called by that name? He ached inside, feeling his failure. He had promised ne’er to sire a child out of wedlock for that very reason. And here, cradled in his arms was the proof of his selfish pleasure.

A wave of possession and protection rippled through him. This was his child.

*His child.*

He must take her to England, secure her a place in the world. His chest ached where his heart would have been if he still had one. But his heart had been ripped away long ago.

Nay, he could not take his daughter. He had failed her already with his selfish rutting; he would not fail her again.

“A child belongs with its mother.” He knew he should push the infant into the woman’s hands.

But he did not. Instead, he brought the baby to his face and inhaled her sweet little-girl scent.

The woman shrugged. “Take the brat or leave her here on the ground for the wolves to eat. I care not. A bastard cannot be raised in the palace.” She turned to the man who had been riding the horse. “Come, we have done our duty to the princess.”

Godric watched them walk toward the palace, leaving the horse behind with its reins trailing on the ground. He was free, and yet his heart felt more chained than ever.

“Wait!” he called. “I do not know her name.”

The woman and her companion did not turn around although he was sure they heard him. The horse whinnied softly, nosing him on the shoulder.

He patted the animal, finding comfort in the warm feel of horseflesh. Of all the things he had been without over the last five years, perhaps his stallion was the thing he missed most.

What a merry chase his betrothed had led him on. Slavery, imprisonment, and now freedom. He swung carefully into the saddle, clutching his daughter.

The infant awakened and rooted into his torso, opening her mouth. A fear unlike any he had ever known settled on his heart. “Jesu, I have no breasts for milking.” What would he feed her?

He rubbed the baby’s face. She latched onto one of

his fingers, sucking so hard her tiny cheeks drew inward. He heaved a breath of relief when her eyes drifted shut and the soft weight of her body relaxed in his hand.

Why had Nadira given him the child? He gazed at the outlines of the two figures disappearing toward the peaks of the palace, their forms now shadowy and indistinct.

He turned his mount toward the west, his back against the rising sun. "What think you, horse? Mayhap it is the way of women not to care for anyone but themselves."

The horse snorted an agreement.

"Aye, but it is not my way." He covered his daughter's face with a piece of her blanket and snuggled her into his chest. Kneeing the horse into a trot, he determined to find nourishment for his child.

"I have land in England, daughter," he whispered, tasting the sweetness of the word "daughter" on his tongue. "It was stolen from me by an unfaithful bride, but I will take it back for you, and we will live well."

Nothing would keep him from owning what belonged to him and wreaking retribution on those responsible for his enslavement. He had been born with no future, no family. His daughter would suffer no such fate.