

CHAPTER ONE

England, Thornbury Abbey, 1487

The hard, long bulge tenting the priest's scarlet robe caught Lady Ariana's attention. The man paced near the cathedral altar lighting tall stalks of candles. Ornate silk and velvet robes swirled around him in a flurry of red and white ripples, but the projection remained. Right at hip level.

Her heart pounded, and she felt a tiny catch in her throat. Had she been the demure king's chattel she pretended to be, mayhap the stiff bulge would have escaped her attention altogether. But experience as a spy had taught her to notice such things and kneeling here at the altar, 'twas impossible to miss.

This man definitely carried a sword.

Folding her hands in prayer, she bowed her head and debated what she should do. A woman in her circumstances could not afford to make a mistake. She dared not look up lest by some flinch or eye movement, she reveal the true purpose for today's prayer vigil: placing the tiny scroll hidden in her bodice into a secret compartment under the altar. The parchment's message contained notes she had gathered about members of the king's court—immoral secrets of which lords played carnal games with whom.

If she could, she would abandon this tawdry business altogether. But too much was at stake. Her blackmailer was very clear: pass along privileged gossip, or find herself swinging from the gallows with no one to care for her son.

Determination steeled her as she thought of Jason, her seven-year-old. No priest-who-was-not-a-priest would stop her. She would do whatever she must to keep her son safe. Even commit theft. Or treason. Or murder.

Again.

A bell clanged outside the cathedral. The man in the priestly garment strode closer, smelling of outdoors, leather and horses rather than the spicy incense of the abbey. She suppressed a shudder. He might fool men with his disguise, but to her trained eye, 'twas obvious he was no cleric.

But who was he?

He *smelled* of danger.

In front of her, a crack in the floor's mortar pointed toward the hiding place under a loose tile where she was to place the parchment. Prisms of afternoon sunlight from the stained windows danced along the jagged seam. Nervousness skittered up her spine.

Shifting her weight, she drew her veil lower over her forehead and willed the man to leave. Her silk gown gave little protection to her knees grinding into the black stones of the altar steps. The long sleeves of her blue kirtle brushed the marble tile, revealing the lighter blue of her undertunic. The embroidered gold of the dress's trim glinted in the candle glow.

Instead of obeying her unspoken command, the man paced closer. The hem of his garments rustled.

"Bless you, my child," he mumbled, then paused as if unsure of his words. His voice was deep and sensuous, unfit for a place of prayer.

Husky. Veiled. Erotic.

The tone would blend perfectly with the grunts of men and titters of prostitutes in a Rose Street bathhouse.

A flicker of longing—something she had not felt in years—ignited. Quickly, she pushed the unseemly thought aside. Definitely not a priest! No priest's voice could affect her senses in such a way.

She gathered her skirts to flee, but he moved in front of her, striding with lithe, impious grace, too physically confident for one dedicated to books and learning.

She paused, biting the inside of her cheek. A verse from Proverbs turned over and over in her mind like a coveted piece of jewelry being fondled by a thief who is debating whether the bauble is worth stealing: Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent and discerning if he holds his tongue.

No sudden movements, she coached herself. *Wait until good opportunity. 'Twill take cunning, not strength to overcome him.*

The man cleared his throat. “God favors the humble.”

She refolded her hands into prayer position and bowed her head in what she hoped resembled a penitent pose.

Practical black boots with deep, ragged grooves marring the shank peeked from beneath his rich garments. The unadorned leather contrasted with the fussy embroidered hem. A holy man would have worn sandals. Knots tensed under her shoulder blades as she regarded him beneath lowered lashes. His shoes were slightly pointed and scuffed around the heels. She surmised silver knight-spurs usually rested there.

Dear saints.

“It is good that you came,” he said.

She closed her eyes to avoid revealing the apprehension that surely showed in her face. But closing

her eyes focused attention on his deep, throaty voice.

A woman could wrap herself in that voice and sleep warm and comfortable through the night after satisfying forbidden fantasies. Against her will, moist heat pooled betwixt her legs.

Her eyes flew open. She had attended numerous parties—sensual affairs—to get the information her blackmailer demanded. Thrice she'd been married—she was neither young nor virginal—but ne'er had a man's voice affected her thus.

“May your petition be granted.” He drew out every word.

“My petition—” Her hands slipped, suddenly slick with perspiration.

Surely he could not know her untamed thoughts. She pressed her palms together in an effort to compose herself.

“Gramercy,” she said, shoving her carnal musings aside. She had Jason to protect and no reason to desire a man, even one whose voice sent hot chills through her veins.

“Why are you here?” He reached toward her with a large, callused hand. Crisp, dark hair decorated his muscular forearm.

Alarmed, she gathered her skirts to rise. “I have just finished my prayers. I will leave you to your candle lighting.”

“Stay. Allow me to bless you.”

Afore she could stand, he pressed his palm atop the thin gossamer veil covering her hair and forced her back to a kneeling position. Blood pounded in her temples as she willed herself not to flinch.

Heat. Her scalp felt aflame. It did not seem possible a man's hand could be so hot. Calluses snared the delicate fabric in a way a true priest's never would.

“Why did you come here?”

Suppressing a shiver, she recited her formal excuse for coming to the abbey: “I came to pray and give alms for my deaf son. Who knows but that God might have mercy on us and reopen his ears.”

“We welcome you to Thornbury Abbey. Unburden your spirit and soul.” His legs, tall and sturdy, were braced wide apart as if he bestowed knighthood rather than religious blessing.

“Thank you.”

It seemed that he should release her head.

He did not.

“Mayhap you should stay for a meal,” he said.

Mayhap she should run. But over the last five years she’d learned the value of patience, of sizing up an opponent and knowing the players before compromising her or Jason’s safety.

“I am expected home afore nightfall,” she parried, in case he had any thoughts of detaining her. Her castle was only a few miles east of the abbey, an easy ride.

His hand tightened ever-so-slightly on her head. Leashed strength.

Apprehension prickled her nape. She imagined him shedding his imposter’s clothes and holding a knife to her throat. Steadying her breathing, she slid her gaze across the floor to judge the distance to the nearest exit. The checkered tiles created a chessboard-like playing field. She knew herself to be a pawn, but which piece was he?

“I have not seen you afore.” She slanted her head to the side in another attempt to let him know the impropriety of his continued hold on her scalp. “Are you new at the abbey?”

His fingers flinched, but they did not release. “I am here to recover something I have lost.”

Determining to assess whether his quest had anything to do with her, she tilted her head back. “What

is it you have lost?" She shivered as his hand followed the movement of her skull.

"Something precious to me." The veins of his brawny arm danced beneath his bronzed skin. From her kneeling position, he seemed enormous—a column of hard, warrior strength: broad shoulders and long, muscular limbs.

She glanced upward at his face, and icy terror froze her heart. 'Twas her last husband back from the grave?

Coldness balled in the pit of her stomach. For a moment she forgot to breathe. Couldn't breathe. Memories of Ivan wrapping his brutish hands around her throat crashed on her mind.

She blinked and looked again.

Nay, she had been mistaken. This man was *not* her husband. This man who now held her head had the same dark hair and green eyes. The same uncompromising jaw. The same broad, slightly crooked nose, the same widow's peak in his hairline, and the same imposing countenance. But this man had tiny laugh lines that crinkled the corners of his eyes and a puckered scar that ran from a generous lower lip to beneath his chin.

She hastily crossed herself and forced a steadying breath into her lungs. This man was *not* Ivan. That evil monster rotted in the ground, she reminded herself firmly. Buried twice.

Dead by her own hand.

"Who are you?" Her voice echoed across the empty sanctuary. Thank Mary, her words sounded strong.

The man inclined his head in a mock bow as his fingers tightened on her scalp. Rainbows of light from the stained-glass windows gave his features an austere appearance. He wore a mismatch of holy garments, as if he'd stolen various pieces from a storeroom. A tall, white mitre ornamented with heavy gold embroidery perched atop his thick, black hair. It made him seem tall

enough to touch the cathedral's arched ceiling.

"Gabriel of Whitestone at your service, my lady."

She lifted a brow. "The name of an angel." The visage of a devil. She did not recognize his name although she had spent hours memorizing the key players at court and knew more about many of them than any Christian woman should know. Lascivious details about the private lives of earls and dukes and who preferred the company of men instead of women.

Her ability to learn such things had been the main talent her blackmailer exploited while she'd been in London. She filed through her memories. Nothing. Who was this man? And why did he look like the ghost of a monster?

The corners of his full lips lifted. "I have ne'er been mistaken for an angel," he murmured.

Hot perspiration beaded between her breasts. Instinct told her to flee, yet she knew from bitter experience she dared not until she had the advantage. She had no delusions about fighting him.

"Have you any sins to confess?" the man asked. The hand on her head seemed to be measuring her, fondling her like a ripe piece of fruit in the marketplace. Was he weighing her to see if he should pluck her for a taste?

"You are no priest."

He peered at her closely, his dark brows nearly touching in a deep crevice on his forehead. His mitre wobbled.

"And you, my lady, are no lady." His voice was slow, smooth, like velvet over steel.

Her legs tensed in anticipation of jumping to her feet. "Do you know me?"

"Aye. Lady Ariana of Rosebriar."

The heat of his fingers scorched her scalp. Their gazes locked in stalemate. What else did he know?

"How do you know me?" she demanded, her gaze

darting to the exit.

“I was told you had an innocent face, questions too pointed for a mere lady, and”—his gaze flicked to her cheek, a slow grin crossing his face—“three tiny freckles beneath your left eye.”

Panic fluttered in her chest. Betrayed by freckles!

The closest doorway stood to the left thirty paces away. Her pony waited outside, lashed to an iron post. As soon as he released his hold, she would walk to the exit as leisurely as she could, then run like a madwoman. Run from the future and from the past. Just as she had the last five years.

“Release me.” Instinct for survival coursed through her. This man’s eyes told her he knew too much. She rose an inch.

“Release you?” He laughed. His long, blunt fingers flexed, grasped the silk of her blue veil, and ripped it off. Her heavy hair fell around her shoulders; the curly, red tips brushed the checkered tiles. “I came to take you to justice for your activities as The Spy of the Night.”

“Nay!” Her heart lurched. Gathering her skirts, she tucked her chin and butted his legs violently as she leapt to her feet.

He jumped aside to deflect her attack. The priest’s robes entangled him, and he stumbled, falling to one knee.

Heart pounding, she lunged past him and fled toward the arched doorway.

Behind her, his boots thumped and slid against the floor.

To slow his progress, she toppled an iron candleholder as she ran. Wax splattered across oak benches. Burning candles rolled down the tiles.

“Damn these robes,” he cursed. His steps made a hollow echo in the huge cathedral.

Ten feet more, and she would reach the exit. Lacey,

her pony, nickered from the other side of the door.

Hearing the sound of ripping fabric, she spared a glance backward.

The man yanked off his imposter's garments even as he gained on her. His boots squished his fallen mitre. Thorns! He wore all black as if conjured from the depths of hades.

For an instant it registered she had been wrong: he did not have a sword at all. A crossbow nearly two and a half feet in length hung from his belt. An assassin's weapon.

Her breath came in short gasps as she closed the final steps to the church's exit. Her mare nickered again. Clutching the iron handle, she yanked the heavy wooden door open.

Freedom.

The man's large hands snared her about the waist and pulled her back. The door slammed, whooshing air around her face and blowing out nearby candles. She kicked backward and connected with something solid.

Unyielding masculine arms closed around her torso. His breath tickled her ear. He grunted and forced her forward, pushing her ribs against the door. His knee nudged her thighs apart until she straddled one of his legs and could no longer kick at him.

"Let me go!" Her throat threatened to close.

"Nay." His body pressed the length of hers, holding her captive against the dark oak. Dear sweet Jesu, he was big. Taller even than Ivan had been.

Her underarms stung, and her knees began to buckle. His muscular thigh pushed further between her legs, upsetting her balance and forcing her to totter on her tiptoes. Heat from his body filtered through her skirt. His thigh grazed the vee between her legs and pressed against her woman's core. The moisture that had gathered there with her earlier musings pushed

shamefully outward.

“Leave be!” She shoved against him, trying to straighten her arms and hoist him off. Damn her own soul! Why had she not run when she’d first seen his boots?

“Surrender, lady.” His arms and chest were formidable as any iron prison.

“Let me go!”

“Nay.” His breath mingled with hers. It caressed her skin exactly as she had imagined only moments earlier.

“Please!”

“Nay.”

Shivers ran the length of her spine. She squirmed, and his large frame pressed her harder against the cool oak door. The fine linen of his tunic brushed the bare skin of her neck. Her hair caught between them, forcing her head back and exposing her throat. From only a handbreadth away, he looked down on her with uncompromising green eyes.

“Cease your struggles, girl. You are well caught.”

Mary, Jesu, please help me. “What do you want from me?”

His breath tickled her ear. “To see you punished for your rebellion.”

“Punished?”

“The king has need to question you.”

Ice froze her veins. King Henry beheaded those who crossed him. Enemies were slain with the regularity of chickens for a feast. ‘Twas why she had retreated to Rosebriar for a time.

“Why? I have done naught.” Naught save slay a man and spy against the nobles of the court. The church claimed that if a woman killed her lord, ‘twas the same as slaying the king—a crime of treason. And if the nobles of London knew she was The Spy, they would

likely have her burned as a witch ere she set foot inside the town gates. “Prithee, my son is deaf. He needs me.”

Gabriel glanced around. “Why are you not with him then?”

“He is with his nanny. I beg you, sir, allow me to go home to him.”

“His nanny will care for him. You will come with me.” Holding her against the door with his body, he pulled a cord of rope from a pouch on his belt. The wool of his tunic scratched her arms.

“Nay! Release me!” She pushed against him, only to be forced motionless. The cold oak of the door cooled her cheek. Sharp, bitter anger born of frustration ate at her. “You filthy barbaric peasant! I will not go with you!”

His body tensed, and he snagged one of her wrists. “You will.”

She wrenched away. “How much were you paid to accost a lady of the realm?”

“Enough,” he answered gruffly, wrapping his long fingers around her forearm.

Allowing her voice to trail to a husky whisper, she said, “I can pay you more.”

He did not answer.

Ariana brought her foot up, then crunched it down upon his instep.

Grunting, he jostled his weight and pressed her further into the door. She felt cold steel against her neck. “Careful, lady.”

Head back, throat exposed, she lowered her gaze. A thin dagger glistened in the flickering candle glow, its silver blade as long as a man’s hand. Her throat constricted, the air too thick to breathe.

“Let me go. I will pay you handsomely.”

“You are in no position to negotiate.” The knife’s point pressed her flesh, causing a tiny prick of pain. His

hand held steady, and time seemed to slow. The knife neither broke the skin nor eased from her neck.

“How dare you!” she gritted out, balling her fists.

“Cease. I will take you to London trussed like a May Day pheasant if need be.”

Sweat beaded her brow, and the air she sucked into her burning lungs choked her throat. She tilted her head to the side, searching for an alternate escape path.

A yellow and orange glow flickered across the ceiling. She gasped. Large sheets of red and yellow flame burned in the balcony. One of the tapers had fallen against the long silk banners. Fire leapt across the linen hangings and spread from silk to silk at an alarming rate.

Merciful Mary!

Whether from God or the devil, the fire would be her salvation. Now was her chance.

“Fire!” she yelled, hoping the momentary distraction would cause an instant of surprise.

Gabriel turned as she expected. The dagger eased slightly from her throat. Rounding to the side, she forced his fingers from her torso with her momentum, then elbowed him hard in the ribs and sprang for the exit.

Unbalanced, he fell backward. The crossbow clattered against the door. “You little wench!”

Pulling the door open, she leapt forward. A surge of victory rushed through her. No common mercenary would catch The Spy of the Night today.

His hand seized her wrist. “Not so fast, girl!”