

Chapter One

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.

Luke 12:2

*April 5, 1199, Châlus, France
Close to midnight*

Large black clouds filled the air, hiding the moon's soft glow. The camp lay quiet, all waiting to hear word of their leader's fate. Not wearing his chain mail, King Richard had taken an arrow between the neck and his left shoulder nine days earlier while foolishly walking the perimeter of Château de Châlus-Chabrol. A barber was called to remove the arrow, but his skills were not adequate and the wound festered until the skin oozed puss and turned black. Some prayed for a miracle, so the king could live on. Others counted the days and hours, certain His Majesty would shortly meet God.

Casting his eyes to the dark, brooding heavens, Darrin Longbeard waited outside his king's tent. A sentinel gave a curt nod and Darrin raised the flap and entered the modest shelter. A foul odor of urine, sweat and blood greeted his presence; he struggled not to cover his nose and mouth as he edged forward to his king's pallet. The strong and virile man who had taunted and marched over the French no longer existed. Instead, on a soiled bed lay a withered soul with a plum-black hue stretching down the skin of his arm and traveling up his neck. Sir Theo had not lied; the king was dying.

"Longbeard, are you here?" King Richard whispered, waving a shaking hand toward the entrance.

"Aye, Your Majesty." Darrin rushed toward the bed and dropped to one knee, taking the king's wavering hand. "I am next to you."

Richard gave out a long, raspy gasp followed by a pause. The hair on Darrin's neck rose, as he feared this could be the Lionheart's last breath. But then the cracked lips moved and the king inhaled sharply. "Are we alone?"

Though the room possessed a single tallow, the light cast no doubt they were the only occupants. "Aye, we are alone."

"Good. Good." The king took another rough breath and then turned his glassy grey gaze toward Darrin. "It is time."

"Time for what, my lord?"

A rattle grew in Richard's chest, his eyes closed and his grip on Darrin's hand softened.

Was this it, then? Was his king leaving this earth? Darrin leaned closer. Short, shallow breaths escaped Richard's lips. "Your Majesty, time for what?"

The crusty eyes opened again and gazed into Darrin's. "You must claim Château du Vent Doux. You must return home."

For a moment, Darrin stilled and a short flutter of elation rose in his chest. He feared to give voice to the desire he had held deep in his heart for ten years. "Are you sure?" he whispered, fearing the king might have spoken the phrase in his delirium. "You may still need me."

"Needed you." A hoarse cough rose in Richard's throat. "I'm dying. I fear I will not live past the morrow."

"Your Majesty—"

Richard raised his hand. "We all know what is to come." Again the king paused, his eyelids growing heavy, but then he rallied and tried to rise up on his elbows.

Quickly Darrin placed a strong arm of support at his king's back. "Here, lord. Rest easy."

Richard shook his head, then motioned with his chin. “See there. On the table.” Another gravelly cough left his lungs and a spittle of blood appeared on his lips. “That is my missive giving you back your lands.”

Temptation grew within Darrin to let his king’s head fall on the bed and rush to see if, indeed, the words were written on the parchment. But Richard seemed all the more urgent, as if he still had more to say.

“You must promise me...”

A violent fit of coughing seized the king, every gasp of air a struggle, and Darrin worried each one would signal the end...of life. He eased the king’s neck and head down until they gently touched the pallet. “Sleep now, Your Majesty.”

Richard’s eyes closed as his breathing labored until it slowed and became steady. Seconds dragged by and Darrin inched away, not wanting to disturb the king’s much-needed rest. A small twig snapped beneath Darrin’s boot as he made to stand. Richard’s eyes flew open and he reached out and grabbed Darrin’s hand with a mighty strength.

“Promise me...promise me...”

“Anything, lord.” Darrin gripped the king’s hand with equal strength and bent down again. “You only have to ask. You fulfilled your half of the bargain—I will have my lands.” He nodded to the document on the table. “I am your man. Your will is all I desire.”

The king’s shadowy grey eyes held Darrin; the monarch struggled to speak. “There is one more thing. Faith...Faith... You must marry her.”

Darrin had to resist the urge to pull his fingers away from the king’s hand. Faith who? Slowly his memory gelled and he realized what the king was asking of him. They had been talking about his home, Château du Vent Doux. There resided the only Faith he knew—Faith de

Saint-Marie. Why would the king want him to marry the very woman who helped steal his home? Nay, this could not be true. King Richard asked too much.

“Do you speak of Lady Faith de Saint-Marie? If so, I cannot.” Darrin shifted his gaze to the ground.

Richard’s body began to shake and another series of coughs rumbled and reverberated around the small tent.

Gently, Darrin placed a hand on the king’s good shoulder. “Ease, Your Majesty, we can talk about this tomorrow.”

A thunderous “No!” filled the air, followed by choking and retching. Again, slowly, Richard’s breathing became normal. “Now.”

Not wanting to upset him further, Darrin settled with both knees in the dirt. “Speak then. I will listen.”

“The château is yours only if you marry Faith.”

What cruel joke was this? This had never been part of the bargain when they left England. Ten years earlier, Darrin fled his home all because that girl and his uncle falsely accused him of murdering his father. All done to seize control of Château du Vent Doux. Now Richard wanted him to marry the liar?

“My king, I am certain she is the one responsible for my father’s death. How can you ask such a thing of me?”

Richard’s face scrunched up in an angry twist. “She did not. She could not. She is my daughter.”

By all that was holy, this could not be true! The pain must have made the king mad. All knew he had an illegitimate son, but a daughter as well? Again Darrin’s mind tripped back, more

than twenty years ago. It could be true. Faith had come to their keep when she was four summers old with a young nun and a letter from King Richard. His father had been ordered to take the girl in as his ward. But his father had always claimed she was a distant cousin of the king, nothing more. Could his father have lied to protect Faith?

A gurgle came from the king's throat and fresh blood dripped from his lips. Darrin quickly reached for the basin next to the bed and wiped Richard's face with a cool cloth.

Like a strike from a snake, Richard grabbed Darrin's hand. "She is legitimate."

He hesitated and stared at the man lying on the pallet. Surely the poison from the king's wound must be destroying his brain. Darrin shook his head. Faith, the girl who sang off tune and helped him catch frogs, who had almost been like a cousin until she betrayed him, was King Richard's legitimate heir?

Ridiculous.

"Your Majesty, you are confused. Rest now. We will talk later," Darrin said, easing his hand from the king's grip.

"No. No. Listen to me." Richard took a heavy breath. "When I was young, I fought with my brothers..." More coughing, more choking.

Darrin could not watch the struggle. "Aye, all know when you were sixteen summers you fought with your brothers against your father. Do not tax yourself with the past. Your father forgave you. 'Tis all forgotten."

The king gave a weak wave. "My troops were destroyed. I ran to Château de Taillebourg while my brothers fought on."

"Your Majesty—"

Color flushed the king's face. "Speak again and I'll take your head."

Some of the old fiery monarch clearly still remained. Wishing to keep his head intact, Darrin ceased his speech.

Again Richard pointed to the table. "There is another document I just had completed. Go read it."

Darrin made his way to the small table and indeed there were two parchments. One addressed to his uncle and another addressed to that very vile woman, Lady Faith de Saint-Marie. The letter to Faith gave an extraordinary account of Richard's time at Château de Taillebourg. If true, while there, Richard had become enamored with a peasant girl who tightly held on to her virtue. In his lustful desire, he badgered a priest, Father Dubois, to marry them. The priest, having strong ties to Richard's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and King Louis VII of France, agreed to the union. After the war was lost, Richard crawled back to his father's side and confessed all. Being a second son, Richard hoped King Henry II would approve the marriage and would seek sanction from the pope.

But that did not happen. One night while Richard slept, his father sent mercenaries to find and kill the priest and Richard's bride. According to this letter, a fire was set and all documentation of the marriage was destroyed. The mission had been a complete success.

Darrin turned back to his king. "Your Majesty, if the records were destroyed, there is no proof of this union. And if your wife was killed, how could Lady Faith be your child?"

"Read all of it," Richard choked out.

Again Darrin focused on the missive. The priest got wind of the situation ahead of time and had a servant switch clothes with Richard's wife, whom he sent with a monk by the name of Klein to the Abbey of Sainte-Marie-des-Dames. There the woman gave birth to a girl. The girl was given the name Faith de Saint-Marie.

By the holy cross, if this was true and it could be proven, then...

“I did not know of the child,” Richard rasped, “until four years later.”

“You have proof of this?”

Richard slightly shook his head. “Nay, lost in the fire.”

“Then this still could be a ruse.”

“Come here and look at me.”

Darrin made his way back to the bed and looked down at his king.

“My eyes, her eyes—the same. My temper, her temper—the same. Brother Klein would not lie.”

Darrin looked down at the document in his hand. “Your Majesty, according to this, you only saw her once before you sent her to my father. How could you know of her temperament?”

Richard held up a feeble hand and tried to make a fist. “She met me with this. When I was little, I greeted strangers the same way.”

A flash of remembrance surfaced in Darrin’s mind. Indeed Faith could be stubborn at times and she did hold her hand tightly in a fist when upset. He could still see her standing in front of the magistrate declaring his guilt—chin held high, eyes chipped like grey granite, her pale hair cascading down her back and her right hand firmly fisted. But none of this was evidence that she was Richard’s heir.

“This letter will give some proof if she wishes to pursue the throne. You will marry her. Be her protector. It is so written,” the king whispered.

Surely Richard had lost his mind. If Faith went to Prince John with this paper in hand, her head, along with her husband—her protector—would be rolling around in a basket. “This is foolish. I cannot. Let my uncle be her defender. For I hate her.”

Richard's eyes grew heavy and filled with sadness. "Aye. I know. I wish there was another choice. Your uncle has been shifting his allegiance to the French."

Not surprising, Darrin thought. King Phillip had a way of winning more hearts than his father, King Louis, had before him. And Darrin's uncle, Adrien de Gascon, always managed to worm into any court where he could hold the most power. What would his uncle do if he learned of Lady Faith's heritage? No wonder King Richard was worried.

"I can't be there to protect her. You must. To rule or not is her choice. You will stand by her side. Those are my terms. Look, there is more." The king closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Going back to the table, Darrin picked up the other parchment. Indeed, to reclaim his lands and have his name restored, he must marry Lady Faith de Saint-Marie. And make sure she conceived within a year's time. *Was Richard out of his mind?* "Not only do you want me to marry her, but you want me to get her with child? You ask too much. Why me? Why not Sir Theo or some other trusted knight? Find another. Why did you not seek a royal union earlier if this is what you wanted?" Darrin knew the answer to the last question without the king's reply. Richard had still hoped for a male heir, and if that did not happen, he would have fought on until he broke the French backs. After regaining the peace, he would have bullied King Phillip into accepting Lady Faith as his heir and, if God willing, her son as the future king of England.

"Enough. Time is running out. You will keep her safe. You will protect her. You will marry her. You will impregnate her. If this does not happen, your land will be given to another. You gave me your vow to be my man," the king sputtered.

Darrin gritted his teeth. Aye. He had. And he could not deny a dying man's wish.

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