

Chapter One

March 1559

Outside of London

The crisp spring air entered Audrey's lungs and lifted her spirits. So fresh compared to the foul stench found in London. Even the brown earth had given up its winter chill; delicate wildflowers were starting to dot the meadows. She chuckled as birds flitted and fluttered from tree to tree and branch to branch. Now she was like them, free from the bonds of Queen Mary's court. Thankfully, the new Queen Elizabeth did not want Mary's ladies tending to her needs. God had been merciful and returned her to her family.

Her family. That wasn't exactly true. A tinge of sadness entered her heart and troubled her thoughts, chasing away her jolly mood. Her mother was here, but her father had died over a year ago. Born a merchant, he could not fathom working the land; nevertheless, that became his life since his release from debtors' prison. Now he was gone and her brother Asher, who had bought the land and built this fine cottage, was living somewhere in a distant eastern country with his wife. Though he promised to return someday, Audrey knew she would never see him again. She shook off the melancholy thought; he deserved to be happy for he had paid his dues to Queen Mary, and now he too was free of her. Audrey pulled a shawl tight around her shoulders to ward

off the morning's brisk wind before she picked up the basket at her feet. She strode down the hill to where her stepfather and stepbrother had begun to plow the fields. Neither stopped to give her a look, so intent they were at their task. "Bout time ye got here, girl," her stepfather chided. "Place the basket on yonder rock and we will eat when this row is done."

Her stepbrother Jacob gazed longingly at the basket but did not gainsay his father. At six and ten, you would think he would have grown a backbone, but no, he was as weak as the rest living at the cottage.

"What ye standin' like a limp saplin'? Do as I say and then fetch us a cool drink from the river." Her stepfather spat on the ground before putting his shoulder to the plow.

Audrey shook her head and stared at his round back as he struggled on. The man never had a pleasant word. Truly, what prompted her mother to marry such a person? Leaving the basket, Audrey picked up the empty jug her stepfather and Jacob had discarded. What freedom was this, doing the same thing over and over every morn? 'Twas not much different than attending to Queen Mary's needs.

With a heavy sigh, Audrey made her way to the river. Her brooding would serve no purpose. She had a roof over her head and food in her belly, what matter if the tasks were mundane and the company chafed? Things could be far worse. "At least I am far away from the deadly games of the court."

"Agreed. They can be bad." A crow cawed and flew away when a woman wearing a black cloak and heavily veiled stepped out of the foliage.

The hairs on Audrey's neck rose as a band of men dressed like peasants but carrying swords common with the royal guard circled around her. She straightened her spine. "What do you want? I have no coin or goods except this empty jug. If you think it is of worth, then it is yours." Her heart racing, Audrey hefted the jug above her head and threw it at the woman, who deftly stepped out of the way. The jug hit a rock, fracturing into pieces, shattering her confidence as well. The guard charged forward while Audrey dodged left, desperately seeking an escape route.

"Stop." The cloaked woman waved a dark-gloved hand in the air. "Cannot you see? You are scaring the girl."

The men halted, not taking a step closer nor retreating. Audrey's feet stalled. How fast would it take Jacob to come if she called out? But what would his presence do against these armed men?

The veiled woman moved to the edge of the circle and held out her hand. "Come walk with me. I promise no harm will befall you."

Audrey folded her arms across her chest. "Nay. I shall not. You wish me ill. There is nothing I can give you. Leave me be."

The woman huffed. "Good heavens. If I wanted you dead, you would not be drawing breath. I just wish to have a private word with you."

This woman was not a leader of a band of thieves. No indeed. Her speech was that of a lady's. Her gait and straight back bespoke of noble breeding. There had been many such women

at court. Why this one would create such an elaborate disguise was a bafflement. Unfortunately, the curse of being curious was starting to get the better of Audrey. “What do we have to talk about?”

“Why, your family, of course.”

The lady knew how to set a hook. “My past family or my present one?”

The woman laughed. “Come walk with me and find out. The others will stay here.”

One of the men rushed forward, clutching his sword in a tight fist. “But my—”

“Stay here and say not another word.” The woman then motioned to Audrey. “There is a smooth path up ahead. Let us take a stroll.”

A circle of men formed around her. What choice did she really have? The woman was going to have her way. Besides, it would be easier to escape one female than a band of armed cutthroats. Audrey acquiesced with a quick nod.

Her mind racing, she walked on in silence surveying the woods around her, wondering if there were other hidden attackers. Her feet stomped on the dirt path. Could she strike the woman before she alerted her men?

“So, tell me, have you heard much from your brother recently?” The woman did not break her stride and carried on as if they had been acquaintances for some time.

Audrey’s stomach toppled and rolled over. This was about Asher. Being a spy for the late Queen Mary, who else lived a life of such intrigue? To steady her jumbled thoughts, Audrey took a deep breath. “Mistress, I have not seen my brother in years, and I rarely receive word from

him. I cannot help you find him for I know not where he is.”

The path widened to a small opening; rays of sunlight filtered through the leafy canopy. Hardy wildflowers peeked between the lush green foliage. The woman stopped and sat down on a large boulder that graced the side of the path. “Where he is does not concern me. That is not why I have sought you out.”

With slim hands, the woman raised her veil. ’Twas a face Audrey had seen only once before she left court. Her blood turned to ice. She curtsied deep and reverently. “Your Majesty.”

A layer of fine sweat rested on Queen Elizabeth’s pronounced cheekbones. A brightness shone in her brilliant brown eyes. She seemed so much wiser than a woman of five and twenty. “Hush. Do not use such titles here. And do stand up straight. Do you wish to alert the whole of England where I am?”

They were alone on a forest path with no one present except for a few twittering birds and a rabbit or two. “Your . . . um . . . What could you possibly want with me, if not to seek out my brother?” Audrey wiped her sweaty hands on her skirt, knowing her bold words might send her to the Tower.

“I know you were one of my sister’s ladies. And I know you were one of the first to leave court after she died. So eager you were to return to your family. But what I do not know is are you as astute as your brother?”

A small creature rustled in the thickness of last year’s leaves that covered the forest floor. Perspiration slithered down Audrey’s back. Oh, how she wished she could as easily slip away. “I

do not know what you mean.”

“Come, come. We both know he was a spy who helped my sister root out Protestants. I hear he was considerably sneaky and crafty, but all that changed a few years back. He just up and left with my sister’s blessing. I thought nothing of it until I came across some of Mary’s scribblings. My, my, they were a busy pair—my sister and your brother.”

What she spoke of was a mystery to Audrey. Uneasiness knotted her shoulders. One thing she did learn at court: If a royal fumed, best to keep silent. She dropped her gaze to her feet and clenched her jaw.

“But none of that matters now. What I want to know is do you have the same talents as he?”

“Talents? What talents do you mean?”

Queen Elizabeth rose and put her hands on her hips. “Are you dull, or are you being shrewd?”

Audrey’s hands curled into fists, and she fought not to glare at her queen.

“I think you are the latter. Do not think I hold that against you. Before I became queen, there was many a time I had to hold my tongue and play the dull maid in order to keep my head upon my neck.”

Audrey lifted her chin and saw a merry twinkle in the queen’s eye. The royal just nodded.

“You and I are not that different. Our survival is due to our wits.” The queen circled the clearing and seemed to be distracted by a wren’s sweet song. But then she leveled Audrey with a

sharp eye. "Are you happy here, living as a peasant?"

A wave of wariness weaved through Audrey's chest. Surely she was not being summoned back to court? "This is where my family lives."

Queen Elizabeth sniffed. "Not true."

"My mother needs me," Audrey snapped.

"Does she? She has a new husband and three new children. Must be crowded in that little cottage, especially since you are used to the comforts at court."

A cool breeze swept up Audrey's back, sending a shiver to her spine. The queen must have had her spies about to know so much. Whatever she wanted, Audrey refused to be trapped in a royal cage again. "What would a Protestant queen want with a maid of the True Faith at court?"

"Shush, girl. Keep your voice down." Queen Elizabeth's gaze darted around the forest. "Good heavens, the last thing I want is a papist around me. I have enough of those lurking about already."

The unease that had whirled around Audrey's insides receded like a wave at low tide. "Then why do you seek me out?"

The queen let out a heavy sigh and sat upon the boulder once again. She glanced upward as if contemplating how to proceed. Settling on her course, she stared at Audrey. "I told you of my sister's writings. They were most disturbing. One in particular. There is a lord, near the northern English border, who seems to be quite aggressive in his thinking. His English wife has

just recently passed away, leaving him with two sons and an aging mother.”

Aggressive? Disquiet began to creep up Audrey’s spine once again. The intrigue and lies of court began to suffocate again. “If all of this just happened, then how could this information be in Queen Mary’s writings? She has been dead for some time.”

Queen Elizabeth glared. “Do not contradict me. Just listen.”

Audrey rolled her tongue in her mouth and tightened her lips. She was never good at being silent before her betters. “Forgive me, Your—”

The queen cleared her throat. “This man, Gavin Armstrong of Warring, a lesser laird, has an interesting heritage. He has an English mother who clings to the Reformed Faith and a Scottish father who, when he was alive, claimed to accept of his wife’s beliefs.” The queen’s skeptical tone relayed a different thinking. She rose and strolled around the boulder. “I came to the throne with the goal to be tolerant of those who practiced the Roman faith, but there are some who still do not view me as a legitimate queen and the head of England.”

She spoke of the marriage of her mother with King Henry VIII. Some in England, mostly those of the True Faith, did not recognize Elizabeth as the real queen. They would prefer to see Mary Queen of Scots, a good Catholic, who was married to the French Dauphin, sitting on the English throne.

As was her way, Queen Elizabeth got right to the point. “I cannot trust the Scots. Some English near the border claim to be my loyal servants and others do not. The borderlands are in constant disruption. That is why I need you.”

“Me?” Audrey regretted her outburst the moment the syllable left her lips. The queen’s brow wrinkled. “Forgive me. I just do not understand how I would be of help.”

“Do you not?”

Audrey met the queen’s steady eyes.

“You served my sister. If Armstrong carries your faith and wishes to put Mary of Scots on the English throne, who better would he confide in than another of the same beliefs. Who has been oppressed by the illegitimate Queen Elizabeth.”

Audrey lifted her chin. “I have never thought such or been disloyal to you.”

“I know. That is why I am sending you. I know you will be loyal to me, and I will reward that loyalty by protecting your mother and her brood of stepchildren.”

The lashing, though heavily coated with sweetness, was well taken. Audrey could not imagine that this Laird Armstrong would tell her all his secrets. Nonetheless, she had to accept the queen’s offer. “My Queen, you give me more honor than I deserve. I am neither noble nor a man, why would this Gavin Armstrong of Warring confide in me?”

Elizabeth raised a well-manicured brow. “An act of birth nor one’s sex makes someone loyal. I would rather sup with an honorable digger of ditches than a prince who would sell his devotion for a bauble. It has all been arranged. You are to go to Liddesdale, in the northern marches of my realm. Those who live there honor neither my throne nor that of my cousin Mary of Scots. You will go in the guise of a companion to Laird Armstrong’s mother. There you are to keep your ears and eyes open. You shall relate to me any threats to my Crown. I want to know

who the man corresponds with, where he goes, whom he confides in. I want to know everything that is going on with that family.”

Audrey’s stomach sank. She shouldn’t have complained earlier of living a mundane life for now that life seemed sublime. However, one question remained in her mind. Why this Scot and not another? Surely there was more to this story than the queen was willing to share. “And if there is nothing out of the ordinary, would you like me to talk about the weather?”

The queen narrowed her eyes and pointed a thin finger in Audrey’s face. “Do not taunt me. Your very life and of those you love are in my hands.”

The heat in Audrey’s belly and her saucy tongue had gotten the better of her. Why could she not be cool and calm like Asher? Why did she spout off when she should not speak? No good ever came from insulting a queen. Audrey tightly folded her hands. “Forgive me. My words were vile.”

A soft smile curled the queen’s lips. “Your speech is forthright, and you have a strong spirit. You have just forgotten to choose your words wisely as you did at court. A few weeks at Hampton Court should cure that.”

The Tower would be more preferable. But this was not about her, it involved her mother, and Jacob, and her stepsisters. Audrey tempered her words. “I am sure it will.”

“You have the ability to write?” the queen questioned.

Audrey nodded her head, but briefly she thought to deny the skill. Without a doubt, the queen already knew the answer and the query was given as a test of loyalty.

“Good. It has been all arranged. Once you are in Liddesdale, you will write weekly and send your missives to a Mistress Pittman on Little Lane.”

“Little Lane? I have never heard of such a place. Would not the message get lost?”

“That is not your concern. Just try to gain Gavin Armstrong’s confidence. Learn and report everything he does. Even if it seems of no consequence. This might be done by keeping an eye on his son.”

The last request was thrown in as an afterthought, but the queen’s cryptic manner told Audrey it was not. “You want me to watch the children as well?”

“Just the oldest, the flamed-haired boy, Thomas, who likes to go fishing and has a sharp mind with numbers.”

Queen Elizabeth clearly had spies watching Laird Armstrong and his family already. The hairs rose again on Audrey’s neck. Then why was she needed? Once more her curiosity took root, but she was wise enough not to broach the subject. “As you wish, my lady. I will do your bidding, but if Laird Armstrong and the family are no threat to you, I want your promise that I will be returned to my mother within a year’s time.”

Queen Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot upward as her jaw worked back and forth. Audrey could already feel the Tower chains biting into her hands and feet for her insolence. The queen opened her mouth. “If there is nothing there, why would I leave you in such a godforsaken place?”

