

Chapter One

*Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man: preserve me from the
violent man.*

Psalm 140:1

England, September, 1193

"Please, Father, help me. Save me!"

"I'm not a priest," Guy hissed. "Who are you lad? What have you done?"

Guy Ashton tried to dislodge the boy's grip, but the lad squeezed Guy's leg to the point he could do naught but throw his arms about his mule's neck to keep from crashing to the ground.

"Let go, boy, or we both will die beneath the animal's hooves," Guy shouted.

"Better to die here than be dragged back to feel the lash on me back."

Guy wiggled his leg free then pushed his foot against the boy's shoulder. The lad stumbled backward and grabbed at his

grimy hood, pulling it low over his forehead. Catching his balance, the boy crouched down with one hand extended outward.

"Please, I beg you. Do not let them take me back."

"Again I ask, who wishes to hurt you?"

The lad remained mute, still crouched low to the ground, almost cowering. Guy knew what fear could do. He had seen it often enough on the faces of Crusaders during the ten years he had spent in the Holy Land. Some, half-crazed, charged the enemy to their deaths while others stood still like marble statues. This lad hunkered down in fear.

Guy decided to change tactics. "My child, I will not harm you. I seek only to learn the truth."

The boy dropped to his knees and folded his hands. "I swear, on the holy words of God, I did nothing. My master is cruel and I cannot bear the lash any longer."

A rumbling as loud as thunder turned Guy's attention. Horses. At least four, maybe more. The boy gave out a chilling cry and rose to his feet.

"Listen. Less than a furlong ahead of you is a fallen tree. 'Tis hollowed out near the ground. Big enough for you to hide within. Go!"

The boy took off like a frightened deer. Guy reached inside his pack on the mule's back until his hand gripped the hilt of his sword, but before he could withdraw the weapon he found himself circled by six well-armed knights, wearing Prince John's

colors. Guy's gut took a twist. For six months he had kept himself hidden. He should have gone straight for the Benedictine monastery as planned. There he would have been safe, cloistered away. But clearly his charade had been discovered. He relaxed his fingers and withdrew his hand, raising his arms in submission.

"Monk," one of the knights shouted. "Have you seen a skinny lad slip by here?"

Guy let out his breath. He had been smart to grow the thick beard; they did not recognize him. "Nay, but I did hear the leaves rustle not more than a stone's throw or two back from here." Guy pointed to the right, in the opposite direction from where the boy had run. "I thought 'twas only a deer, but I could have been wrong."

"Heaven's gate," the knight cursed. "The scamp has doubled back on us. My thanks, monk."

The knight nodded to another who threw a handful of coins at the mule's hooves. Within moments Guy found himself alone in a cloud of dust. A close call. Had any of the knights recognized him, the bony boy would have been forgotten in a trice.

A chuckle of relief escaped Guy's throat. This very eve he could have been in John's court, explaining why his body still drew breath when he should be buried in the grave that bore his name. Thanks be to God, who once in a while still showed favor to the damned.

Quickly Guy dismounted, brushed his foot over one of the shiny coins, and shook his head. Only Prince John had enough gold to throw about. He bent down, picked up the gleaming pieces, and dropped them one by one into the small purse he had concealed in his robe. The last coin he flipped between his fingers. This one he would give to the lad, after he put the fear of Jesus into him. The boy was either a ninny or full of courage for thinking he could outsmart John's men.

"Moses, I think 'tis time we end this journey before both of us become a meal for Prince John's dogs."

The mule lifted his muzzle and pushed against Guy's worn brown robe. He gave his agreement by letting out a loud snort.

"By the saints!" Guy picked up a few fallen leaves and quickly wiped his shoulder. "How many times do I have to tell you I am not your personal nose kerchief?" He threw the leaves away and patted the animal's neck.

"You can come out now. They are gone," Guy called.

The boy crawled out and brushed decaying leaves from his clothing. "My thanks, Father, for certain they would have nabbed me. I never knew a priest could tell a lie."

Guy grabbed the lad by the arm. "Why did you not tell me, 'twas Prince John's men you fled? By the cross, I should whip you myself."

The boy twisted against Guy's grip. "I never knew a priest to swear before."

Guy shook the lad until his hood fell away. "I told you. I am not a priest. Why would the prince send six knights to capture one scrawny whelp?"

The boy raised his head. The coin slid from Guy's fingers and thudded onto the hard ground.

He had his answer. Two of the deepest azure eyes and a face framed in short midnight curls gazed up at him.

"May the Lord save me, you're a woman."

Guy released her immediately and stepped back. "And just who might you be? Someone of great importance, I wager, if Prince John is interested in you."

"Good sir, I thank thee for saving me."

Gone was the garbled talk of a peasant. Her speech was clear and soft like a lady's. Guy shuddered and ran a hand through his hair. What had he done? He must have meddled in something much bigger than he'd thought, something that wasn't his concern. He needed time to think. He fixed his gaze on the satchel on Moses' back. "Are you hungry?"

She looked at him as if he were thicker than a piece of wood. "Should we not keep going? The knights could return."

Oh that they would. He'd hand her over without another thought for surely she must be valuable otherwise John would not have sent six knights to find her. "I doubt it. They have no cause to believe a monk would lie to them."

Guy pulled out a loaf of bread and a wine skin from the

pouch, carefully adjusting the pack afterwards, making sure his sword and his Templar tunic were concealed. He made his way over to the hollow tree and sat. After taking a healthy swig from the skin, he offered her some.

"I've never seen a monk drink spirits openly before."

Maybe he could make her run if he acted like a drunken fool. 'Twould solve a lot of problems.

Sara. His sister's face floated before him. *Would you abandon another defenseless maid?* Would he? Was he that low?

He offered the girl the wine again. "Mayhap I am not a monk."

With caution she accepted the offered wineskin and took a small drink. She patted her lips with a delicate finger. "This I believe. Forgive me, but you look more like your mule's tail than a man, let alone a monk."

Guy glanced at the donkey's backside and laughed. She had wit. "I guess Moses and I have a few things in common." He held out the loaf to her.

She smiled and took the loaf from his fingers.

"What is your name?"

She sat down across from him and began to eat. "I'm not telling you," she said between mouthfuls. "You might ransom me."

Guy rolled the thought through his mind. He could use the coin. What was he thinking? He must remember he was supposed to be dead and dead men do not ransom damsels.

"My lady, if you do not tell me your name I will never be able to help you. I will be forced to leave you in these woods to be devoured by wild beasts."

"Like you," she said with a smile.

"My lady, I am no beast."

She wrinkled her nose. "You smell and look like one."

Her insult wounded him. He had always considered himself a handsome man. Women used to love him.

"I am sorry," she said with no remorse. "But 'tis a sin to lie."

She must have seen the concern on his face, but her words did little to placate him.

"I am sure you are not ugly at all."

Ugly! No woman had ever thought him ugly. Had not at least a dozen women weep for him when he left Palestine? But that was a different time. Now...he was but a shadow of that man. He stood. "This nonsense gets us nowhere. Your name, lady, or I will leave you here alone this very moment."

She gave out a long sigh. "Very well. If I do not trust you, I am sure I will be caught before the sun sets. My name is Lady Grace de Melan and I was traveling to be wed."

Guy shook his head. An angry bridegroom would not stop the chase for his betrothed. Things could not get any worse.

"I guess I should give you yet another thanks. I truly did not want to wed the man." She took a bite out of the bread. "But Prince John decreed that I should."

He stood corrected; things could get worse. Once again he had saved a damsel from marrying a royal's choice. Not just any royal, but Prince John. The one man he needed to avoid most of all. Mayhap his hearing was failing him. "Prince John is interested in your marriage?"

"He was going to be at the ceremony."

Guy groaned. He had to get rid of her quickly.

"I have heard he enjoys attending wedding ceremonies."

Guy raised his hand. "No more, Lady Grace. I wish to hear no more. I will take you to the nearest town and be done with you. I do not need Prince John's men on my back."

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "Mayhap I will wait for the knights to return and tell them you had your way with me. Then no lord will take me to wife and I would be free to find and marry Edmund."

"Now see here. I will not have my neck stretched for something I did not do. Besides, did you not say it is a sin to tell a lie? Think of your sou--"

Before he knew it, she had jumped to her feet, raced to the mule's side, and drew his sword. Her hands shook as she tried to steady the blade.

"How the devil did you know..."

"I knew you would not travel unarmed. In truth, I thought you had a dagger, but this is even better. Now, you will see me safely away from Prince John's men."

The way Grace kept whipping the weapon about, she was more

likely to kill herself than him. Yet another sin he had no wish to bear. He moved slowly to the left of her.

She stumbled forward. "Do not move. I swear I will kill you if you try to disarm me."

Guy stopped and raised one hand. "My lady, let us be cautious. That is not a sewing needle you hold."

"Aye, I am well aware of that." She wobbled backward, yet her gaze never dropped from Guy's. "I know not who you are, but I can tell you are a very dangerous man. Mayhap a renegade knight."

He wondered if she realized how close she was to the truth. Not many men, let alone a woman, would draw a sword against him. For one so young she had a lot of courage. Most women would be weeping and wailing, but not this one.

Grace moved forward, then veered to her left and bumped into Moses, who brayed and kicked the air until the bundle fell from his back. She twisted right, the sword pointed straight up. Then she tripped over his pack and the blade slipped from her fingers. It curved up in an arc above her head. Guy's heart froze. He dove forward, knocking her sideways to the ground. The sword slammed into the dirt less than a hand's width from her shoulder.

"Get off of me, you hairy oaf."

Guy rolled to his side and gasped for air. "Your thanks would have been enough."

She scrambled to her feet, but Guy was faster. He grabbed

the sword before she could steady her stance. The look of defeat on her face tugged at his insides. "You fought well, little warrior."

She crumbled in a heap next to his bundle. Tears flooded her eyes and spilled over her cheeks. "'Tis no use. You will return me to Prince John, who will force me to wed a man I do not love and Edmund will be lost to me forever."

Her sobs rang to the heavens. Guy dug the tip of his sword into the earth. "Surely it is not that bad. I am sure Prince John has made a very good choice for you. In a few years this Edmund will be forgotten."

She shook her head. "You sound like Papa. I have never forgotten Edmund and he has been gone for nearly five years. My father says he is gone forever, but I know he will come back."

Guy shook his head and leaned on the hilt of his sword. Why were women so naïve when it came to men? Edmund probably had a new love by now. "You would waste away your life on a man you have not seen for five years?"

She lifted her chin and wiped her eyes with her fingers. "He fights in the Holy Land. He is a Knight Templar."

Guy's pulse quickened. He did not like where this tale was going and he did not care to hear the end of it. Mayhap he even knew her precious Edmund. The last thing he needed was to become entwined in this woman's love dreams. Especially when they involved a Templar.

He looked up into the sky; heading west would take them out

of the forest. There had to be a village close by. "Come. We must go. The sooner we find your father the happier both of us will be."

The tears washed over her cheeks in earnest again.

"My lady, stop your weeping. I am sure all will be well."

She placed an elbow on top of Guy's sack and began to play with a white cloth protruding from the side. Before Guy could stop her, she pulled the garment out and dried her eyes.

She gasped as the tunic marked with a red cross floated freely from her fingers. Her tears stopped instantly, a bright smile swept across her face. "You are a Templar. You can help me find Edmund."

Guy raised his eyes heavenward. Nay, he had been wrong before. The damned were never favored.