

Chapter 1

Marie Anne pounded furiously on the solid oak door. The sound of the blows echoed hollowly along the stone passage, but in her anger, the girl was unaware of the noise.

“Conrad, get your sorry arse out of bed and tell me exactly what you’ve dropped me into.” Her shout added to the reverberating din.

She stopped her hammering on the oak and cocked her blonde head to one side while she listened.

There was a rustle of movement from within the room, the metallic thump of a bolt sliding back, and the door opened to reveal a well-built, fully-dressed man with quizzical eyes and a lazy grin.

The grin didn’t help the girl’s temper. She took breath to speak, but paused when he held up a hand.

“I deny I dropped you into anything,” he said mildly. “Are you going to cool your anger and come in to discuss whatever’s bothering you in a civilised manner, or do you prefer to raise the whole castle?”

Marie Anne glared at the man, then pushed passed him into the room.

“How could you?” she demanded.

“How could I what?” he said as he gently closed the door.

“Lumber me with babysitting that youth who arrived yesterday.”

“Oh!” Realisation came to the man. “Is that what all the screaming and shouting’s about? You must admit he’s about you own age. Sixteen isn’t it?”

“Seventeen, last week,” she corrected, “as you damn well know as you were present at the celebrations.” She glanced at the man warily, her anger cooling slightly when faced with his calm demeanour. “You didn’t nudge Sir Arturo into hoisting this on me?”

“I only pointed out to him that, as my stomach protests at even the thought of a river crossing, a sea trip wasn’t the best thing for me.” The

big man lied easily, without a muscle of his face betraying him.

“Sea trip?”

“So I believe.”

Marie Anne studied him closely, her grey eyes frosting over. “You bastard! You’re never sick on a boat.” Her anger started to rise once more.

“I could be.”

“Go on. What other lies have you told?” she demanded. “I know, and I’m certain Sir Arturo knows, your stomach is remarkable only for the quantity of wine it will hold.”

“I might have mentioned that I considered you were looking a little pale and wan, and that some sea and sun might put the bloom back in your complexion.”

“You two-faced oaf! I look perfectly well, and you know it.”

“And,” continued Conrad, unperturbed by the outburst, “I suggested you were getting too attached to the castle, and an assignment out would be beneficial for you.”

Marie Anne pounced on one word. “Attached? What exactly do you mean by 'attached'?”

He ignored the question and added, “And I did drop the hint I had Janette to take care of.”

“Janette is fully capable of taking care of herself. She has Lucy, her maid, to aid her, and has no need of a buffoon like you.”

“Do I hear my name?” asked a slim, dark haired girl of about the same age as Marie Anne, who had silently opened the door and was standing in the doorway.

Marie Anne whirled to face the girl, who’d she’d only met a few weeks previously when Conrad returned from a mission, but was already a close friend. “Janette, this slimy toad you’ve promised to marry has dropped me into the shit.”

“Oh? He’s very good at that. What’s he done now?” The girl

sedately glided into the room, closing the solid door behind her. “And a good morning to you, lover,” she said to Conrad, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. “Would you mind telling me just why Marie Anne is so upset?”

“Upset? I’m more than bloody upset. I’m ready to cut his cock off.” There was determination in her tone of righteous anger.

Conrad flinched.

Janette said calmly, “Please Marie Anne, do so after we marry. Allow me to get a few months work out of it first. Later, when he’s all worn out, you are welcome to do as you wish.”

“Only a few months?” asked Conrad, who’d regained his composure.

Marie Anne took a deep, calming breath. “All right. I’ll be good. Sorry Conrad. I was a trifle out of countenance.”

“A trifle?” He would have added more by was silenced by a warning glance from Janette.

“But what caused it?” enquired Janette.

“You know about the youth who arrived yesterday with news of an attack by pirates?” asked Marie Anne.

“I’ve heard something of the matter.”

“I was stopped by Sir Arturo this morning, after I had broken my fast. He told me he had an assignment, one that Conrad wasn’t able to do. It appears that Sir Arturo wants me to go off with this lad and discover the whereabouts of the pirates. I’m to pose as his sister.”

“Well, I could hardly pose as his sister,” said Conrad reasonably.

Marie Anne consider him coldly. “You might have tried. And I am prepared to make you fit for the part.”

Conrad shuddered theatrically. “Don’t remind me.”

“It sounds an interesting assignment,” commented Janette.

“Yes. But I ...” The girl’s voice faded out, and she looked as young as she was.

“But?” encouraged Janette.

“It’s just that I rather wanted to stay around here at present.” Marie Anne mumbled the words in an undertone.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I . . .,” her voice once more trailed into silence.

“Getting attached?” asked Conrad, and this time the lazy humour was missing.

Marie Anne stared at him, her eyes narrowing as realization that his words meant more than they indicated came to her. “What do you know?” Her tone was as sharp as the edge of her sword.

“It’s not what I know, it’s what I’ve heard and don’t believe.” His voice had lost its lazy bantering tone.

“Heard?” asked Marie Anne. There was now cold steel in the timbre of her voice as she spoke the one word.

Janette crossed the few paces that separated them, and linked her arm through Marie Anne’s. “The whole castle’s heard rumours that a certain dark-haired boy kissed you. And more. He’s boasting of his conquest, and going into quite graphic detail.”

“I’ll cut the bastard’s balls off,” muttered Marie Anne through clenched teeth, this time meaning it.

“Marie Anne!” warned Janette alarmed by the girl’s reaction to the news.

“No!” She unlinked herself from Janette’s arm. “I’ll make him eat them. Raw.”

“Did you kiss him?” asked Conrad in a calm tone of voice.

“Yes, I did,” Marie Anne admitted quietly, almost guiltily.

“And give him more?” he pressed.

“Of course not,” she flared. “Do you think I’m a whore?”

“No, Marie Anne. Not for one instant.” His voice was grave and no smile crossed his lips.

“But he wanted more, and you refused,” pressed Janette in her soft voice. There was a compassion there that Marie Anne hadn’t heard before.

“Of course I refused. I pushed him away, rather forcefully, and told him not to bother me for a few days. I wanted him to back off. I don’t like being pressured into things.” Marie Anne’s face had frozen into hard angular lines and she suddenly looked much older than her years: a change from innocence to hard reality. She shook her head and her eyes moistened.

“You thought he would hold his tongue?” asked Janette quietly.

“Naturally. He is a squire, approaching knighthood. I expected him to have the manners of a gentleman, even if he was more than a little free with his hands.” This last in an undertone.

Janette’s arm encircled the girl’s waist and pulled her into a hug. For some reason the action calmed Marie Anne more than mere words had done.

“I really thought he was more than a loud-mouthed braggart,” Marie Anne lamented softly.

“You liked him?”

“Yes, I did. But no longer.” Tears came to Marie Anne’s eyes and suddenly the hardness of her face dissolved into youthful sadness. She twisted free from Janette and crossed the room to gaze out of the window at the rising sun.

“Damn his black heart!” she exclaimed loudly.

“Don’t blame him too much, Marie Anne,” said Janette. “He’s just a boy.”

“He’ll be lucky to be that by this afternoon,” muttered Marie Anne as she turned from the window. “Is this why Arturo is so keen to get me out of the castle?”

“It might be. He will, undoubtedly, have heard the rumours,” said Conrad. “I do not know exactly what is in his mind.”

“I’m sure that one of Sir Arturo’s intentions is to place you

somewhere you cannot hurt Steven,” said Janette gently, her words soothing the agitated girl. “Although you certainly have the right to be angry. You must remember Sir Arturo is responsible for both of you.”

Marie Anne nodded, glanced out of the window at the sun, and calculated the time. “I still have some minutes in which to chastise the rat before my meeting with Sir Arturo. It’s set for the tenth hour.” She made purposely toward the door.

“By the way, Marie Anne,” called Conrad.

“Yes?” The girl paused, her hand on the latch.

“Did you enjoy the kisses?”

“Conrad!” rebuked Janette.

Marie Anne made a gesture that was most unladylike and stormed out of the room.

Conrad’s chuckles followed her.