CHAPTER ONE

EDINBURGH CASTLE
10 June 1560

I hated the queen, hated her down to the deepest marrow of my bones.

I was a fierce and graceless fourteen when my grannie died and the queen took me away from Granmuir, kicking and crying, to shut me up at court. She gave me three years of luxury and learning, I will give her that, music and poetry and polish, but no fresh salt-scented air, no wheeling guillemots, no Aberdeenshire flowers, and no huge silver sky stretching down to meet the sea. She took me away from my home. She took me away from Alexander Gordon, my soul and my heart. She ruined my life. By the Green Lady of Granmuir, I hated her.

How could I hate her so, and love her, too, with all my heart?

Now she was dying, Mary of Guise, queen regent of Scotland, my *belle-tante*, my foster mother, my liege lady, my adversary, dying in the night under a waning moon. And everyone in Edinburgh, everyone in the castle, everyone in the queen's own bedchamber was waiting for the queen to die.

My knees hurt. The stone floor was hard; older and more impor-

tant folk had claimed all the places on the carpet. In unison with the ladies in front of me I prayed, half-drowned in a haze of beeswax and perfume, sweat and sickness, my Latin phrases perfect but meaningless. In my heart I was praying hard for Alexander Gordon, my own darling dear, my golden love, to come for me. We would go home, the two of us, be married at last, and be happy forever.

The queen's French-born ladies knelt close around her; the truly brave ones told their rosaries, bead by defiant bead, under the narrow eyes of the Protestant Lords of the Congregation. Lord Erskine and young Lord Seton kept close, as did the half-outlaw Earl of Bothwell and the queen's inscrutable French secretary, Monsieur Nicolas de Clerac. Lord James Stewart was in and out of the room, the bastard son of the queen's dead husband—when I looked at him I saw narcissus for self-interest and snapdragon for deceit.

Why flowers? I always saw flowers in people's faces and eyes, and the flowers told me what was inside the person, what they had done, what they would do. When I touched a flower or breathed its scent, I saw things. It was an old, old trait in the Leslies of Granmuir, and my great-aunt, whose name had been Marina Leslie just like mine, had taught me to use it when I was a wee bairnie. People said I looked like her—my dark brown hair that caught tortoiseshell gold streaks from the sun, my sea-colored Leslie eyes. People also said she was mad. She never married, Gran'auntie, and lived alone in Granmuir's northeast tower, which we called the Mermaid Tower. She fought a running war with my grannie, my father's mother, who was practical as iron nails, managed Granmuir single-handedly, and did not believe in flower reading.

"Rinette."

Surprise rippled through the people packed into the chamber. How could it be the queen's voice, when she had not spoken for days?

"She is asking for her daughter," said Lady Bryant. She was one of the dearest of the queen's friends, a lady who had come with her from France and married two Scots lords in succession. "The little queen, *la reinette*."

"Rinette," the queen said, a second time. "*La jeune floromancière.* To me."

I did not move. If I am very still, I thought, they will not see me here.

"No, it is the Leslie girl she wants, I think." Lady Bryant put her ear down close to the queen's lips. "That *farouche* child who sees fortunes in flowers."

"Yes," the queen said. Her voice was faint and labored. "Rinette Leslie. I would speak with her. *Vite.*"

Lady Bryant looked straight at me. So much for invisibility. "Come here, my girl," she said. "The queen is asking for you."

I stood up, my knees stiff and aching. Could I run? Would they stop me?

Of course they would.

I walked across the chamber, feeling the blood rush up hotly in my cheeks as people stood aside to make way for me. Their faces were like moonflowers in the dark, turning toward me, round and white, with the black anthers and stamens of their features in the center. Moonflowers, harbingers of dreams and prophecies and madness. What madness was coming, what prophecies, what dreams?

"Madame," said Lady Bryant. *"Voici la petite Leslie."*

The queen opened her eyes. Guise eyes, designing and subtle. They saw into my soul: *I know you want me gone.*

You have held me captive for three years, for the sake of your statecraft. I want to be free.

You will be free soon enough. Until then, I am still your queen.

I curtsied and said aloud, "What is your wish, madame?"

"I wish you to read the future."

Holy Saint Ninian, did she not realize everyone in the room could hear? The room was packed with Protestants who saw witches in every corner, and even the Catholics were quick to see heresies.

"The flowers are only an amusement, madame."

"Even so, I wish you to prophesy."

It was impossible to disobey. "I will need flowers, madame."

"Fetch them."

"Yes, madame." I curtsied again but could not find the will to move. Lady Bryant gave me a push and I stumbled back; that broke the spell of royalty and death. I made my way toward the door through close-packed bodies dressed in fur despite the heat, silk and gold and jewels, with avid eyes and whispering mouths behind their hands. I could hear words, random, sibilant. *Superstition. Sorcery. Heresy.* Once I was out of the bedchamber I gathered up my gray camlet skirts and ran like a wild thing, down the staircase, out of the palace, and into the clean silver moonlight, through the quadrangle and across the upper ward to the hedgerow beside Saint Margaret's ancient chapel. There I threw myself to my knees—I felt no pain this time—and gulped in fresh air, the scents of woodbine and hawthorn and sweet briar rose. Far far off, down the firth, the sea.

I breathed. The moon climbed higher. I broke a branch of hawthorn and brushed the velvety blossoms back and forth over my face. It calmed me, as the touch of flower petals always did. I would not go back inside. I could not go back inside. The queen regent was the last link with my childhood; Grannie was dead, Gran'auntie Marina was dead, my father was dead. My mother might as well have been dead, immured as she was in her convent in Paris.

But I did not want to think about that.

"Mademoiselle Leslie."

I started round, clutching the branch of hawthorn. One of the thorns pricked my finger. It stung.

The queen's French secretary, Nicolas de Clerac, stood there in the moonlight. He was all in black and white, attenuated, long legged and graceful as a heron; the only colors about him were the sapphire in his ear and his shock of russet hair.

"The queen wishes to know why you are taking so long," he said.

"Can you not guess?"

"I can." He stepped closer and held out his hand, as if to help me to my feet. Rings glinted, more colors—blue and green and deep purple. How Alexander would laugh at the rings, at the courtier's

refinement, the French-style maquillage of kohl and silver around his eyes. "It is hard to see her dying. But there is not much time. Gather your flowers and come back inside."

I did not take his hand. After a moment he withdrew it.

"I must choose the ones that speak to me," I said. I held out my finger over the hawthorn; a drop of blood fell, black in the moonlight. Hawthorn meant death, but there was no blood in the queen's dying; was someone else to die as well? "Why do you think she asked for this? She has never asked me to read the flowers for her before, not once in three years."

"I do not know," he said. "But she has a reason. Even dying, she is more subtle than all the Lords of the Congregation at once."

Subtle knows subtle, I thought. I did not like him. No, it was not that, not exactly; I did not trust him. If I were to choose a flower for him, it would be trailing nightshade, with its bell-shaped flowers of tyrian purple, its sweet showy berries—and the contradictory deadly danger within.

I gathered up a fold of my skirt and filled it with honey-scented woodbine and the cup-shaped pink-and-gold roses of sweetbriar. I tried to leave the hawthorn behind but it called to me so insistently I felt thorns pricking me all over. Reluctantly I took a branch, then another, then more, until my skirt was filled with masses of the foamy white blossoms. The pricking sensation stopped. I said, "I am coming."

He did not offer his hand again. We went back to the queen's chamber. It was not so crowded now; both Protestants and Catholics had withdrawn, offended by the queen's request and unwilling to be in the same room with a foreseeing.

"A moment of solitude, if you please," Mary of Guise whispered. "Rinette, you will stay."

I felt like a fawn in a snare, afraid to breathe. Monsieur de Clerac and the ladies withdrew, murmuring the queen's request to those who remained. There were coughs and more disapproving whispers. Silks and velvets rustled. The door creaked on its hinges. Finally it

creaked again as it closed. I knelt beside the queen's chair, the flowers heaped in my lap.

"Madame," I said. "I am here."

"This happened . . . so quickly," the queen said. Her face and hands and legs were grotesquely swollen. "I did not have a chance to prepare."

"I am sorry, madame," I said. What else was there to say? "I will tell you what the flowers say to me, if that will give you peace."

"No. That was only a ruse, to frighten people out of the room. I want you to help me, and it must be a secret."

My breath stopped again. Fear squeezed my throat and melted my heart and made my legs tremble. "But Lady Bryant, Lady Drummond—Lord Erskine, Lord Bothwell, Monsieur de Clerac—they are your friends; they have been your friends through the years; surely they would be better to confide in than I. I am no good with secrets."

"That is why I chose you. The others, they would be questioned. No one will think of you, *ma fille précieuse*. Come closer."

I crept closer and put my forehead down against her hands. The doctors had ordered her rings cut off, the beautiful rings she cherished—her wedding ring with its royal Scots lions engraved on either side of a fine diamond; mourning rings in silver for each of her four dead sons, the two Longueville boys resting at Châteaudun and the two Stewart princes in Holyrood Abbey; a magnificent table-cut ruby on a band enameled in the Guise colors of red and yellow; her signet ring with its crown and rock cut deeply into the gold. Now her only jewels were onyx and ivory rosary beads, looped and sunk deep in translucent dropsical flesh.

"There is a casket," she whispered. "I have had no chance to put it away. Swear on your life you will take it out of the palace and put it in its proper place."

"I want to go home." I knew I sounded stupid and childish but I could not stop myself. "Madame, I do not want your casket. I do not want your secrets. I only want to go home to Granmuir."

"You still hate me so, *ma petite*, for bringing you to court?" The queen lifted one hand, groaning softly with the effort, and gently stroked my hair. "You were like a bone between two dogs, Rothes and Huntly, Leslies and Gordons. They both have claims—you are a Leslie, of course, but your grandmother was a Gordon, and your Alexander was Huntly's ward, before he came of age."

"You yourself granted Granmuir to me as a royal fief." I hated myself for arguing with her as she lay dying, but I could not help it. "As the king, your husband, granted it to my father, and James the Fourth to my father's father, and back a thousand years."

The queen's mouth twitched. "Not quite that long," she said. "And with your grandmother dead, you were safer here."

"Alexander would have protected me. I would have protected myself. I know you meant well, madame, but I have hated it, being here at court."

"I will keep you no longer. I ask you for this one thing; then you may go and fight your own battles—although I warn you, you will fall into Rothes's power the moment I am dead, and he will never allow you to marry the Gordon boy."

"I will escape him. I will refuse any other marriage."

"May God give you strength. Rinette, *écoute*—time is short. I am your queen. By my first marriage I am your aunt, and you know I loved your mother as my true sister. You must do as I ask you. Swear it on the cross."

I bowed my head and looked at the flowers I had gathered under the moonlight. Hawthorn for death, dappled with blood, with woodbine curling around it. Woodbine, a twining, a net, a snare. Woodbine whispering, *You are meant to be here in these bonds and you must do as she says.* The briar rose, so sweet, lying beside the others. Not entangled. There was freedom and sweetness to come, if I did as the flowers instructed me: endure the death—*do not think about the blood; there is no blood here, so what death is the hawthorn foreseeing?*—accept the bonds, and embrace the sweetness to come.

I kissed the queen's crucifix. In a shaky voice I said, "I swear it, madame."

"In my oratory." The queen turned her head slightly. "The prie-dieu. There is a cupboard, and the casket is in it."

I lifted my head and looked. The prie-dieu did indeed have a cupboard under its shelf, two doors carved with the double-barred crosses of the house of Lorraine. Dread prickled over my skin, but the promise was made. I rose to my feet, stepped over and knelt down before the prie-dieu, reached under the shelf. The cupboard was held fast with gilded latches. I opened them.

Inside I felt an oblong box of polished metal, its top slightly domed, textured with repoussé metalwork in rows like ornately embroidered ribbons. By touch I determined it was perhaps a foot in length, perhaps a little less, with two small handles on either long side, hinges on one short side, and a lock on the other. When I drew it out I could see it was fashioned of silver with the edges and decorations picked out in gilt. Engraved on all four sides was the letter *F* in the Roman style, under a crown.

"I have it, madame." I carried the casket to the queen's chair, knelt down again, and put it into her hands. "Is it a holy relic to comfort you?"

"It is not a relic, *ma petite*, but it comforts me to have it safely in my hands while I am still alive to protect it, and to know you will take it to its proper place."

I ran my fingertips over the pounced silver designs of hunting scenes on the side of the casket. In the flickering candlelight the figures almost seemed to move. "Do you have a key, madame? Do you wish me to open it for you?"

The queen's voice was weaker. "I have a key, yes, but I do not want you to open it. What is inside is for my daughter alone. They have all tried to steal it away—James Stewart and the Lords of the Congregation, Huntly and his Catholics, the English, French agents of the Médicis woman, so many. You must hide it, *ma petite*, as I will instruct you, because they will try to steal it again. And if the day

ever comes that my daughter returns to Scotland, you must give it to her the very day she sets foot on Scottish soil."

"You are frightening me, madame."

The queen grasped my wrist. Weak as she was, her grip was hard; the rosary beads felt as if they were cutting into my skin. "You are clever; I know that. You can outwit them. No one will suspect you, and in the eyes of the world the casket will simply disappear. The key, it is on a chain at my belt, in a jeweled box like a reliquary. Take it. Put it with the casket."

The passion of her words seemed to use up all her strength and breath, and she fell back, gasping. I fumbled among the scissors and needle-cases and pomanders at her waist and found the golden box, as long as my forefinger and knobbled with jewels. I detached it from its chain and pried its halves apart; inside there was a silver key, wedged tightly so it would not rattle.

"I have the key, madame."

"*Bon.* The casket's proper place—Saint Margaret's Chapel—where blessed Margaret herself prayed. There is a hidden vault—underneath—no one knows—the abbot of Dunfermline, where Saint Margaret is buried, always kept the secret."

She gasped for breath again and stopped.

"A hidden vault?" I said. I did not want to feel curiosity but could not help myself. "How can I enter it?"

"A passageway," the queen said, very faintly. "From the vaults under the great hall here in the castle. The fireplace there—the paneling on the left—count up from the floor twelve, and from the side four, and look for the cross—go down—follow the crosses. Never tell anyone, Rinette. Never tell anyone—"

Her voice failed. She struggled for breath and found none. Her hands fell away from the casket. In a panic I thought, What can I do? I have to call them, and they will all come rushing in. How can I take the casket out of the chamber when they all want it and will be looking for it? It is too big to hide in my sleeves or skirt.

The queen did not breathe again. She remained sitting upright,

her eyes half-closed. Her lips were parted, as if to say one more word. But there were no more words for Mary of Guise, queen and queen mother, regent of Scotland. No more words ever.

I had not thought I would cry, but I could feel tears filling my eyes and streaking down over my cheeks. Think, think. There had to be a way.

They would be looking for a casket closed and locked and hidden away—but open and filled with flowers—overflowing with the flowers of sorcery and carried before their eyes—

I do not want you to open it. What is inside is for my daughter alone.

You are clever; I know that. You can outwit them.

I unlocked the casket. Even with my hands shaking, it was easy to turn the key, so easy—the queen herself must have unlocked it often. The lid swung back. I gathered up all the flowers, the hawthorn and sweetbriar, and stuffed them in on top of . . . I caught only a glimpse, a book of pages sewn together with black thread, a packet of folded papers bound with a net of scarlet cords, sealed with scarlet wax, with writing in rusty-looking ink. The flowers covered it all. I filled the hollow of the lid as well, and pushed the jeweled box and the key in among the blossoms. Then I wrapped the woodbine recklessly around it all and let the ends trail down.

I pushed myself to my feet. "The queen is dying!" I cried.

The women and the lords and the Protestant minister Mr. Willock flocked in like gannets, sharp-eyed and gluttonous for news. I stood fast, holding the casket filled with flowers as if it were a shield. Surely it was only the stir in the air from all the people running into the room that made the flowers move, made the woodbine vines float and curl. Surely it was nothing but the heat in the room that made the pink buds of the hawthorn seem to open before my eyes into starry white flowers.

Mr. Willock passed close and one of the trails of woodbine caught on his sleeve. He slapped it away as if it were a serpent.

"Get away, girl," he said. "You have no business here with your mummery."

I kept my head down and curtsied humbly. Lady Bryant and Lady Drummond had begun to cry. Lord James Stewart came in with the earls of Argyll and Rothes close behind him. They made no pretense of grieving for the queen, but went straight to the oratory and began to rifle through the prie-dieu. So for the moment, at least, the Earl of Rothes had more important things to think of than one unmarried Leslie girl and her castle by the sea.

I began to edge toward the door. People pressed away from me so as not to touch the flowers. I caught a glimpse of Lord Bothwell and Nicolas de Clerac speaking to Lord James and the earls, over by the poor queen's prie-dieu. Voices were raised. Bothwell was swearing at Lord James in both Scots and French. It made a good distraction.

"The queen is dead," Mr. Willock said. "Idolatry is dead in Scotland."

I pressed the silver casket close to my body. God speed you, madame, I thought. I will see your casket safe under Saint Margaret's and then I will be away from the court forever. No one paid any more attention to me. I walked out of the room with the silver casket and the masses of flowers in my arms.