

BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS



Burn it all.

IGNITING
DARKNESS

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By Robin LaFevers

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
Boston New York

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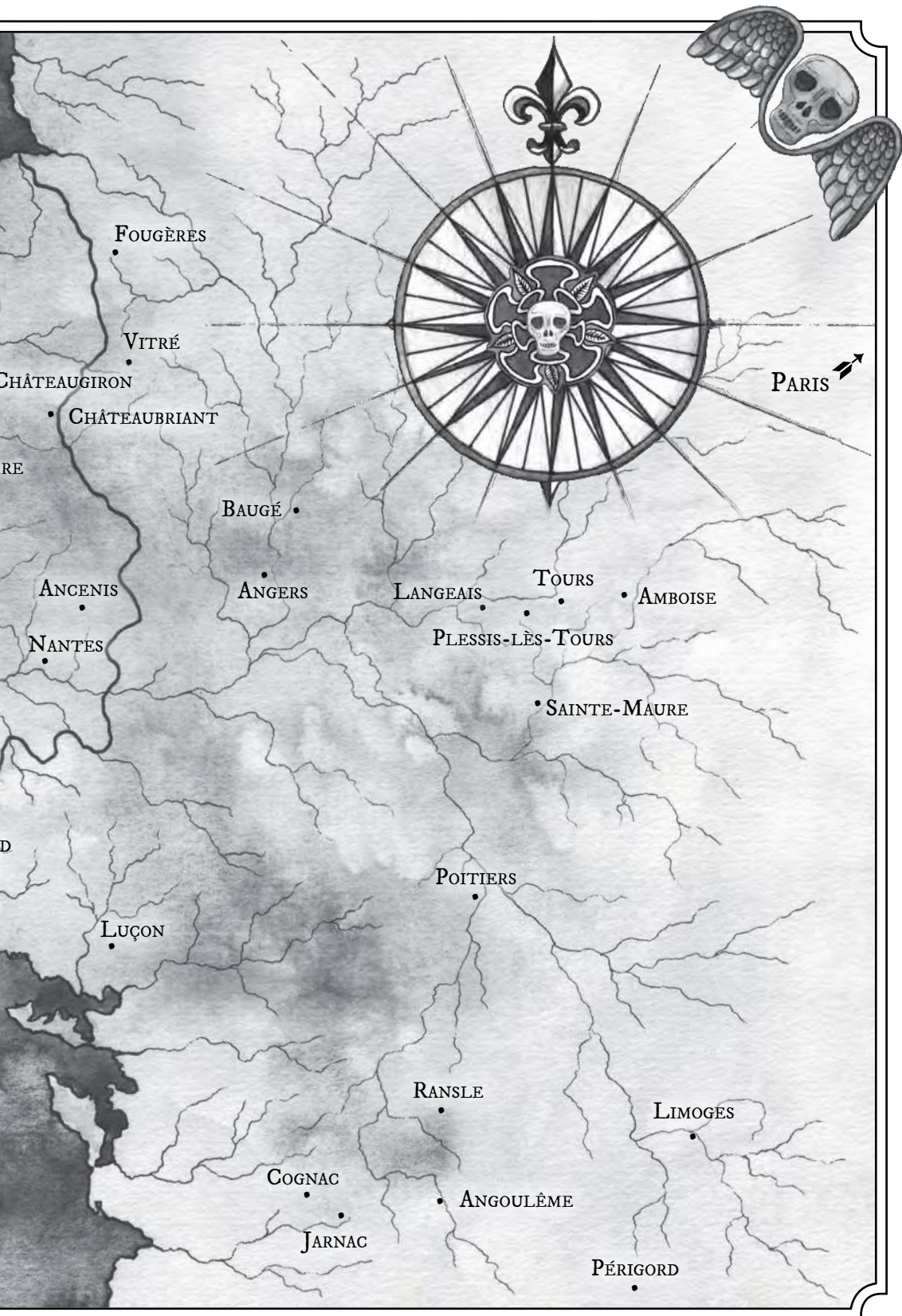
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For Nysa and silver linings,
without which this book would not have been written



FOUGÈRES

VITRÉ

CHATEAUGIRON

• CHATEAUBRIANT

RE

BAUGÉ

ANCENIS

ANGERS

LANGEAIS

TOURS

• AMBOISE

NANTES

PLESSIS-LÈS-TOURS

• SAINTE-MAURE

D

LUÇON

POITIERS

RANSLE

LIMOGES

COGNAC

• ANGOULÊME

JARNAC

PÉRIGORD

PARIS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

From the Convent of Saint Mortain, Patron Saint of Death

SYBELLA D'ALBRET, Death's daughter, lady in waiting to the queen

LADY GENEVIEVE, Death's daughter, former lady in waiting to the countess of
Angoulême

ISMAE RIENNE, Death's daughter, former lady in waiting to the duchess of
Brittany

ANNITH, handmaiden to Death, acting abbess of the convent

BALTHAZAAR, Annith's consort

LADY MARGOT, Death's daughter, lady in waiting to the countess of
Angoulême (deceased)

The French Court

CHARLES VIII, king of France

ANNE, queen of France, duchess of Brittany, countess of Nantes, Montfort,
and Richmond

ANNE DE BEAUJEU, sister to the king, regent of France

PIERRE DE BEAUJEU, Duke of Bourbon, husband to Anne

LOUIS, Duke of Orléans

SIMON DE FREMIN, a lawyer

SEGUIN DE CASSEL, general in the king's army

CAPTAIN STUART, captain of the king's guard

THE BISHOP OF ALBI

THE BISHOP OF NARBONNE

FATHER EFFRAM, follower of Saint Salonius

COUNT CHARLES ANGOULÊME

The Breton Court

GAVRIEL DUVAL, a Breton noble, half brother to the queen

ISABEAU, Anne's sister (deceased)

DUKE FRANCIS II, Anne's father (deceased)

Breton Nobility

BENEBIC DE WAROCH, "Beast," knight of the realm, captain of the queen's guard

VISCOUNT MAURICE CRUNARD, former chancellor of Brittany

ANTON CRUNARD, last surviving son of the former chancellor

JEAN DE ROHAN, viscount of Rohan, lord of Léon and count of Porhoët, uncle to the queen

JEAN DE RIEUX, former marshal of Brittany

JEAN DE CHÂLONS, prince of Orange

PHILIPPE DE MONTAUBAN, chancellor of Brittany

CAPTAIN DUNOIS, captain of the Breton army (deceased)

The d'Albret Family

ALAIN D'ALBRET, lord of Albret, viscount of Tartas, second count of Graves (deceased)

SYBELLA D'ALBRET, Death's daughter, lady in waiting to the queen

PIERRE D'ALBRET, second son of Alain d'Albret, viscount of Périgord and Limoges

JULIAN D'ALBRET, third son of Alain d'Albret (deceased)

CHARLOTTE, daughter of Alain d'Albret

LOUISE, youngest daughter of Alain d'Albret

Followers of Saint Arduinna

AEVA, Arduinnite, lady in waiting to the queen

TOLA, Arduinnite, lady in waiting to the queen

Men-at-Arms

YANNIC, squire to Benebic de Waroch

LAZARE, charbonnerie, member of the queen's guard

POULET, member of the queen's guard

JASPAR, a mercenary

VALINE, a mercenary

ANDRY, a mercenary

TASSIN, a mercenary

The Nine

MORTAIN, god of death

DEA MATRONA, mother goddess

ARDUINNA, goddess of love's sharp bite, daughter of Matrona, twin sister of

Amourna

AMOURNA, goddess of love's first blush, daughter of Matrona, twin sister of

Arduinna

BRIGANTIA, goddess of knowledge and wisdom

CAMULOS, god of battle and war

MER, goddess of the sea

SALONIUS, god of mistakes

CISSONIUS, god of travel and crossroads

PROLOGUE

Maraud

France 1490

M

araud awoke to the sound of retching — a retching so violent his own stomach clenched into a fist and tried to punch its way out of his throat.

That's when he realized the retching noises were his.

"That's right, big guy. Let it all out."

A woman's voice. "Lucinda?" he croaked.

"What kind of fool asks for the woman who just tried to poison him?"

He knew that voice.

"A straw-headed fool, that's who."

That one, too. Should be able to place them both. Saints! Why was he so disoriented? He cracked open an eye, only to find the world bobbing up and down, furthering his stomach's revolt. He shut his eye again.

"She didn't poison him," a third voice grunted.

Tassin. The name came to him so easily he almost wept.

"She most certainly did." Andry.

"Tassin's right." The woman again — Valine. "She wouldn't save him, then poison him."

"I disagree."

Maraud considered it a major victory that he recognized Jaspar's voice right away.

"Maybe she wanted the pleasure of killing him herself. She would not be the first to do so."

As he tried to sit up, Valine said something, but her words were lost as he struggled to keep from puking up his liver.

Hell. He was sitting up — more or less. On his horse. He shifted, which caused a tug around his middle. Not sitting on his horse. Tied.

"Whoa, there!" Valine drew her mount close to his. "Not so sure that's a good idea."

"I'm fine," Maraud gritted out between clenched teeth, afraid if he opened his mouth too far, he'd spew all over her.

"If you think you can stay in your saddle, I can untie you."

"In a minute." He willed the world to stop swooping around like a drunken stable boy. "On second thought, leave it. This way I can doze off again if I need to."

Valine arched one dark brow in amusement, and a strange, strangled sound came from his right, like a goose stuck in a trumpet. He turned — slowly! — to find Tassin . . . laughing? Maraud hadn't seen him laugh in — Christ. Had he ever seen him laugh?

"So." Andry got back to the business at hand. "Do we follow her?"

Follow her. The woman who tried to poison him three times. And outright lied to his face ten times that. Not to mention she'd planned to trade him as if he were a pig at a fair.

"No." Lucinda made her bed, now she could lie in it. He put his heels to his horse's flanks. A good bracing gallop should clear his head.

Or cause him to dump the contents of his stomach. Only time would tell.

CHAPTER I

Genevieve

Plessis-lès-Tours

France 1490



Whether one is raised at a convent that serves Death or in a tavern room filled with whores, there is one lesson that always applies: There is no room for mistakes. The wrong amount of poison, the incorrect angle of the knife, poor aim, or a false gesture when pretending to be someone else can result in disaster, if not death.

It was the same at the tavern where I spent my earliest years. How many of my aunts would have had other lives, but for one mistake? Some, like my mother, chose their path. But for others, it was too many years of poor harvests, or crossing the tanner's guild, which was always looking for excuses to remove its female members. Being alone at the wrong moment, catching the eye of the wrong man might send one's life skidding down the slope of destiny into a midden heap.

Which is precisely where I have landed.

The shadows in my darkened room loom large as I run my fingers along the silky edges of the crow feather. The good news is the convent did not abandon me. The bad news: They might, once they learn what I have done.

And what will the king do with this knowledge of the convent I so foolishly handed him? He knew nothing about it until I spoke of

its existence. Will his anger pass like a sudden summer shower, or will it fester and grow?

Far off in the distance, a cock crows. Morning comes, but no answers with it. I have spent the night trying to convince myself that, after five years of their silence, I owe them nothing. But the sick shaking that has kept me awake all night tells me my heart believes something else.

Which do I listen to?

Once before, I did not listen to my heart. *Come with us*, Maraud said. *We can help.*

Maraud. Even though he did not know what I was facing, he offered his help. His friendship. And so much more.

I have stood at only five crossroads in my life, and of all of them, that is the one I regret the most. Not trusting Maraud and accepting that help. Indeed, I have ensured he will loathe me as much as the king does. My name will be a curse upon the convent's lips and reviled for generations. Truly, the wreckage I have left in my wake is breathtaking.

Thinking of Maraud is like rubbing my heart against broken glass, so I shove all thoughts of him aside. I must find a way to fix this — to unsay those words to the king. Or at the very least, convince him they are far less important than he thinks they are. But he may not ever call for me again or may decide to have me thrown into the dungeon.

Something deep inside warns me that it is possible this cannot be fixed. Have I broken a piece of crockery that can be glued back together, or shattered a crystal goblet that is irreplaceable? As if in answer, the fine hairs at the nape of my neck lift in warning, and I realize I am not alone.

I shift my hand toward the knife I keep under my pillow.

"Good morning." It is a woman's voice, low and melodious. Surely someone sent by the convent to punish me would not use such a cheerful greeting.

I peer into the shadows for the source of the voice.

It laughs, a note of earthiness among the lilting sounds. "You do not need your knife for me, little sister. Did you not see the feather I left you?"

Keeping the knife hidden in the folds of my gown, I sit up. "I saw a crow

feather." My words are as carefully measured as pennies from a beggar's purse. "But crows are a most common bird." The young woman — mayhap a year or two older than myself — sits in the room's lone chair. Even though she is cast in shadow, it is clear that she is impossibly beautiful — the contours of her face so elegantly constructed that it borders on being a weapon in its own right. While I cannot see if she is smiling, I sense her amusement, all the same.

"Who else would leave you such a thing?"

I shrug one shoulder. "The French court is a complex and devious place, my lady. Messages can be intercepted and twisted to suit any number of intentions."

"You are wise to be cautious. But have no fear, I am well and truly convent sent — and your sister, besides."

My sister. The words throw me off balance as surely as a well-placed kick. This woman. Margot. All of us at the convent are sisters. And I have betrayed them.

They betrayed me first.

I shove my hair out of my face. "If that is the case, if you are well and truly my sister . . ." Weeks — nay, months — of anger swell up, as unstoppable as the tide. "Then I have to ask, what in the *rutting hell* took you so long?"

She blinks, the only hint this might not be the greeting she was expecting. "You only just arrived, what, three — four — days ago?"

Heat rises in my gorge, making my words harsh. "I'm not talking about the last three days. I've been waiting for *five years*."

A flash of vexation distorts her face, but her voice remains calm. "The convent has been in disarray these last few months. No one was aware you had been removed from the regent's household."

The words dangle like bait. I want to believe them, but to do so means that I fell into a trap of Count Angoulême's making. "Surely they knew of my change in residence, else why was my patron receiving letters of instructions regarding me?"

The woman grimaces — the grimace giving me more hope than any words she has spoken. "There have been many changes at the convent. The details of your and Margot's location were missing."

Missing. “We were not a pair of boots or a prayer book to be lost. We were two young girls left with no means of communication, no direction nor orders, nothing for nearly a third of our lives.”

Her earlier warmth cools somewhat. “We have been rather distracted by France’s invasion, the warring amongst the duchess’s betrothed, and the matter of securing both her and our country’s safety,” she says dryly. “Surely the nature of your assignment was explained to you?”

“That was no assignment, but abandonment. We assumed you’d forgotten about us.”

“You could certainly be forgiven for thinking that.”

I don’t want compassion, but answers. No, what I truly want is to slog back through time and unsay the words I spoke to the king. To undo my grievous mistake. But since she cannot give me that, answers I shall have. “*Had* you forgotten about us?”

She studies me, weighing how much to say. For all of her sympathetic manner, I must not underestimate this woman.

“I only learned of your existence two months ago,” she says at last. “When I was assigned to accompany the duchess to France.”

While her words bear the weight of truth, I also sense there is more to it than that. Frustration hums through my veins. “There are others at the convent besides yourself. Why not send someone sooner?”

Just as the convent taught us, she pivots, going on the offense. “Why?” she demands. “Are you indulging in a fit of temper, or has something happened to make timing of the essence?”

Because everything inside me wishes to avoid her question, I lean forward instead, not caring that it brings my dagger out into the open. “If you want to come back into my life after five years of nothing, you’ll have to start with some explanations. Something far more satisfactory than ‘we were busy.’”

She does not so much as spare my weapon a glance, but inclines her head, imbuing the movement with feline grace. “Very well. You are owed that at least.” For some reason, the sympathy in her voice infuriates me. She *knows* why we were left to molder.

“The abbess who sent you and Margot to France was an impostor.” Although she speaks clearly enough, the words scarcely make sense. “She was not a daughter of Mortain. Was not sired by the god of death. The person controlling all of our lives was not interested in the well-being of his daughters. Only her own.”

Her words hit me like a blow, and I struggle to grasp the enormity of what she claims. “How could such a thing happen?”

For the first time, she looks away, toward the window. “Sometimes the sheer scope and daring of a plan make it impossible to see it for the lie that it is.” Her gaze shifts back to me. “I am sorry that you were abandoned. Sorry that even now, you feel you must protect yourself with that knife.”

The sincerity of her words permeates my fog of anger, and for a moment, I want to throw myself into the comfort she is offering. Until I remember that she would never offer such comfort if she knew what I have done. Would possibly kill me on the spot.

“Many of the decisions the abbess made were designed to keep her own secrets.” The note of bitterness in her voice is personal, hiding closely held pain. She, too, has been hurt by this woman.

“Is the abbess going to be punished for what she’s done?”

The woman studies me a moment before answering. “A convocation of the Nine was called. She was put on trial, stripped of her position, and is now serving the crones of Dea Matrona, making amends for those she should have mothered but failed.”

I nod, but it is not enough. Not for the enormity of what her crimes have cost me. Cost Margot. Will have cost this entire convent when the truth of what I have done is laid bare. “When did that happen?”

“The abbess was removed nearly two months ago.”

“What day *precisely*?” Two months was before Angoulême claimed to have received the fateful letter, but letters take time to reach their destination. Could she have sent it, or was it truly a deception on Angoulême’s part?

“The convocation was called on the eighteenth of November. The abbess was relieved of her duties two days prior to that.”

This answer is as helpful as a knife made of sheep's wool. It is possible that the abbess sent the letter.

"That does not explain where you have been for the last two months." Margot was still alive two months ago. Not that this woman could have saved her, but the red, angry part of my soul does not care.

"The convent records were woefully inadequate and provided nothing to help us find you."

"But I have been in Plessis for four days!" If she had found me even a single day earlier, I would not have exposed the convent to the king.

"It is a big palace with a large number of retainers. With my duties to the queen, I do not always know the moment a new person arrives. Especially if they are not formally announced." She grows still, her head cocking to one side as she studies me anew. I can practically see the rash of questions she is forming.

Since I've no wish to answer any of them, I toss another one of my own at her. "How did you learn I was here?"

"I came upon you praying in the chapel. It wasn't until you placed an offering in one of the niches on the wall that I guessed." She opens her hand. The bright red of my holly berry makes her skin look unnaturally white. "I couldn't see what it was, nor understand the significance of it, until you had already left. And then there were pressing matters I had to attend to." A cold, hard look flashes briefly across her face. A look that sends goose bumps down my spine and warns me that she would not hesitate to shove a knife in my back if my actions warranted it.

But even that knowledge doesn't temper the anger lapping along my skin like flames. *Pressing matters*. But for a hand span of hours, I would not have ruined everything. "You should have come sooner." The words are empty, those of a desperate child, but I utter them nonetheless, as if by repeating them often enough, I can make the fault hers, not mine.

"I came last night, as soon as I was certain. You weren't here. Where were you?"

"I was at dinner, with the rest of the court."

"It was later than that. When everyone else was abed."

As I consider what to tell her, the silence between us lengthens. Her fingers are drifting to the edge of her sleeve when a sharp rap on the door stills her hand.

“Demoiselle Genevieve?” a voice calls out.

Relief surges through me. “Coming!” I hop from the bed and straighten my skirts and bodice.

“Why are you being summoned?” The question is as sharp as I imagine her knives to be.

“We shall find out,” I snap, shoving my hair into some semblance of order. When I reach the door, I am surprised to find the steward standing in the hallway. I curtsy. “My lord, how may I serve?”

“I am sorry to disturb you, demoiselle, but the king is looking for Lady Sybella. One of the other ladies said she thought she saw her heading toward your chambers.”

Sybella. I roll the name across my tongue. Grateful for this reprieve, for a chance to digest what little she has told me, I turn to her. “Apparently, you are the one being summoned.”



CHAPTER 2

Sybella



As I step out of Genevieve's room into the hallway, I wonder if she knows just how much she owes the king's steward. I was within a hair's breadth of grabbing her by the shoulders, giving her a hard shake, and ordering her to pull herself together. There are far larger problems than hurt feelings and wounded pride to deal with right now.

Perhaps that is the darkness in me — once embraced, it continues to push and prod until I do its infernal bidding. Or perhaps it is simply that between the regent's plotting, the king's indifference, my sisters' danger, and the queen's illness, I have no patience for such indulgences.

"This way, my lady." As the steward steps in front of me, I hear Genevieve slip into the hallway behind us. Not her footsteps, for they are as light as any assassin's should be. It is her heart I hear, beating the slightly too rapid rhythm it has had since she first discovered me in her room.

For so long I've held out hope of finding one of the convent's elusive moles, but instead of gaining an ally, I have found an angry and sullen girl. One who is hiding something. But what — and why — elude me. Why is nothing in this benighted court ever simple?

I resist the urge to scowl in annoyance, and keep my face carefully blank. Why does the king wish to see me? I can think of no good reason for the request — and many disastrous ones. My mind sorts





through possible plans and explanations, devising lies I can tell convincingly, and truths I can share without exposing myself.

When the steward speaks to the sentries at the king's door, I fall back beside Genevieve. "Where is Margot?" I ask, my attention firmly fixed on the steward. "I fear we may need her shortly." Because of Genevieve's evasiveness, I am no longer certain she can be trusted.

"Margot will not be coming."

At the note of finality in her voice, I tear my gaze from the steward. "Why not?"

She meets my eyes coolly. "Because she is dead."

Her words barely have time to register before the steward announces me to the king. "The Lady Sybella, Your Majesty. As you requested." With my mind still reeling from Genevieve's news, I am ushered into the room. There is a faint rustle of silk as Genevieve slips in behind me and drifts — as silent and unobtrusive as a ghost — to stand among the other courtiers at the fringes of the room.

But I can spare her no more thought. The king sits on his throne with a cluster of military men and bishops behind him. Something about his manner has shifted since yesterday, although I cannot put my finger on it. The queen is not present, but the regent stands to his right. It is not until she steps away from the man she is speaking with — my brother's lawyer, Monsieur Fremin — that my worst fears are awakened.

I force a placid, bemused smile upon my face. When Fremin sees me, he takes three steps forward. Only the formality of our surroundings keeps him from launching himself at me. "What have you done with my men?"

I halt, recoiling slightly, as if his abrasive behavior is threatening to me.

"Monsieur Fremin," the king remonstrates. "I did not give you leave to assault the women of the court."

Fremin fumes like a pot on a raging boil, but clamps his mouth shut and tries to collect himself. I alter my stride, imbuing my movement with hesitation. When I am in front of the throne, I sink into a deep curtsy. "Your Majesty. How may I serve you?"



When I rise, the king's gaze rests upon me. It is far less friendly and approving than it was just two days before. "Monsieur Fremin's attendants have gone missing. He thinks you know something about their disappearance."

Unable to contain himself any longer, Fremin steps closer, attempting to tower over me. "What happened to them?" He is nearly rigid with rage.

And fear. I do not envy him having to report his failure back to Pierre. "What happened to whom?" I ask bemusedly.

He takes another step closer. "My men are missing, and you are behind it."

"Me?" I fill my voice with incredulity, trying to draw the king into the absurdity of such an accusation, but the way he studies me sends a ripple of apprehension across my shoulders. "How could I have caused your men to go missing?" I glance again at the king. He can't possibly believe Fremin. I have given him no cause to do so. "Mayhap they simply headed home early?" I suggest.

"They would never do that."

"Then mayhap they went wining and dicing, and have not yet come back? They would not be the first men to do so."

The king ignores my suggestion, and my unease grows. "When we had someone sent to your room to fetch you here, the woman told us your room was empty. Your sisters weren't there, nor your attendants."

My heart plummets like a stone. Before it has reached the bottom of my stomach, I know what I must do, and allow pure terror to show on my face. "Your Majesty, that cannot be true! They were happily playing with their nurse when I left this morning to attend upon the queen!"

"And yet we did not find you with the queen when we went looking for you," the regent points out.

I do not so much as look at her. It is the king my performance must convince. "And now you say they aren't there?" I color my voice with distress and clasp my hands together tightly — as if only just barely managing not to wring them. "Who was sent?"

The regent answers. "Martine."



My gaze frantically searches out Martine's short figure. I take a step in her direction. "Are you certain? Could they not be outside, taking in some air?"

Martine shakes her head primly.

"We sent men to check precisely that," says the regent, "once Martine returned with her report."

Casting all conventions aside, I whirl back to face the king and throw myself onto the floor at his feet. "Please, Your Majesty! This is most alarming news. May I have leave to go see for myself? Perhaps they are playing some game or hiding from each other?"

"But of course. Your concern is understandable." At least he is not so convinced of Fremin's claims that he dismisses my request outright.

"You can't let her go alone," Fremin protests. "She might try to run."

The king casts an aggrieved look at the lawyer. "She will not run without her sisters, Monsieur Fremin. Nevertheless, she will have an escort." He waves his hand, and the regent and Martine step forward. As they take up position on either side of me, I head for the door. When the king turns to speak with his bishops, I feel Genevieve fall into step behind me. I wish that our first meeting had gone better so I could know whether she is simply curious or intends to guard my back.



As soon as we have cleared the fourth flight of stairs, I lift my skirts and break into a run. I throw the door to my room open and race inside. It is, indeed, empty. My hand flies to my mouth, as if to prevent a cry of alarm from escaping. I hurry toward the bed, yanking aside the canopies, tossing the bolsters to the floor, and pulling the counterpane from the mattress. Widening my eyes as if panicked, I call out, "Charlotte! Louise! Come out now, this is not funny!"

As the others watch, I drop to my knees and look under the bed, then rise and hurry to the window. I pull back the drapes and press my face against the glass, as if checking to see if they have fallen. It is easy enough to convey a



mounting sense of alarm. I do not even have to pretend. What could have so emboldened Fremin that he would take this matter to the king?

I check the fireplace next, even looking up the chimney. "They're gone," I finally say, my voice small and hollow. "Not just them, but everything. Their clothes, their sewing, their dolls. All gone."

It is a testament to my acting abilities that both Martine and the regent look discomfited. In the awkward silence that fills the room, Genevieve steps forward to take my elbow and help me rise from the hearth. "My lady, calm yourself. You did not know your sisters were leaving?"

I cannot tell what role she is playing, but use it for my own purposes. "No. There were no plans for them to go anywhere. Both had been ill recently and were being kept to their rooms."

"Well," the regent says briskly. "You've seen for yourself that they're gone. The king has indulged you in this. Let us not make him wait any longer."



I head directly toward Fremin once we reach the audience chamber. "You!" The word is so forceful he rocks back on his heels. "You did this. Where have you taken my sisters?"

"What are you blathering about? It is my men who are missing."

"As are my sisters." I take another step toward him. "You were most displeased with the king's ruling. You even asked to see Charlotte and Louise afterward." Although I long to back him up against the wall, I force myself to maintain my decorum. "When you could not get what you wanted by legitimate means, you took matters into your own hands."

His face drains of some of its florid color as I publicly name the very thing he had been planning. "D-don't be absurd. You only say that to cover your own actions."

"Enough." The king's voice is as effective as a bucket of cold water on snarling dogs.

I am immediately contrite. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. My distress has caused me to forget myself.”

“It is understandable, Lady Sybella. The news of your sisters complicates things a great deal.” He gazes at Fremin, annoyed that the lawyer did not share this piece of the puzzle.

“Your Majesty! How was I to know the girls were not there?”

“How indeed,” a male voice muses, but I dare not look to see who it is.

There are few choices available to me on how best to play this, so I plunge ahead, using the truth to bolster my lies. “Your Majesty, I saw Monsieur’s attendants sitting in the antechamber the day he arrived. They are not mere attendants, or men-at-arms or even a simple escort. I know those men from the years I spent in my father’s household. They are the worst cutthroats among the men that serve my family. Men the d’Albrets have used to do their most unsavory deeds.

“At the time, I thought it unusual for a lawyer to have such an escort, but I assumed it was because the war was over and they had to find something for such men to do. But now, now their purpose is made clear. He would not need those sorts of men if he intended only to escort two young girls back to their family.”

The king whips his head around to spear Fremin with a look. “Who were these men who accompanied you?”

The lawyer swallows before speaking. “Their names do not matter, Your Majesty. What matters is that they are missing.”

“Oh, but their names do matter,” I continue, committing fully to this course of action. “I’ve no doubt some of your own men will have heard of Yann le Poison.” There is an audible intake of breath. “Or of Maldon the Pious.” That name is followed by another susurrant of whispers. “I know his exploits and strange taste for self-punishment have long been the source of rumor and gossip. And the Marquis? How many Frenchmen have been betrayed by him?”

From somewhere behind the king, a large man steps forward. “I have heard of these men.” His deep rumbling voice is so very familiar that I wrench my gaze



from the king to look at him. “They are precisely as she claims.” He is uncommonly large — his nose, his jowls — everything but his eyes, which are small and narrow set. He has eschewed the more distinguished long robes of the king’s other advisors and instead wears a shorter military style, complete with vambraces. His deep blue mantle is held in place by two gold brooches.

By his sheer size and ugliness, he can only be Beast’s father, although his face has none of the charm or good humor that Beast’s possesses. I drop my eyes quickly lest he see the spark of recognition in them. *Merde*. Can the gods lob any more disasters at me this morning?

A new suspicion glints in the king’s eyes as he stares at Fremin. “What say you, lawyer? General Cassel has corroborated Lady Sybella’s claims.”

Cassel. The name goes off in my head like an alarm bell. *Look . . . to . . . cas . . . tle* were Captain Dunois’s — oh, how I miss his stolid presence! — words to me. Was he warning me of this man? But I cannot think about that now. Not with the king and Cassel himself watching me with coolly assessing eyes.

Fremin swallows again — a nervous habit I am quickly learning to recognize. “The road is a dangerous place, Your Majesty. Especially with so many mercenaries recently released from service. With such valuable cargo, of course Lord d’Albret would send his most skilled men.”

“There is skill, and then there is brutality,” I point out.

“Are you saying your brother would put your sisters in danger by sending brutish men to accompany them, Lady Sybella?” It is the first time the regent has spoken since we returned from my room.

Yes, I want to scream at her. They will always be in danger from him and their family. “I am saying he would send brutish men to retrieve them through unofficial channels should official channels not rule in his favor.”

With his eyes still on me, General Cassel leans down and speaks directly into the king’s ear. A flicker of annoyance crosses the regent’s face, and she leans ever so slightly closer in an attempt to hear.

When Cassel is finished, the king nods in agreement. “I must think upon this, for it is not as straightforward as first presented. Monsieur Fremin, you are excused for now. But do not leave the palace without consulting my marshal



or General Cassel.” Fremin starts to protest. “I have not said I am putting the matter aside. You may rest assured that I will get to the bottom of this. Unless you doubt me?”

Fremin swallows the rest of his protestation and bows. “Never, Your Majesty.”

“Then leave. All of you,” the king growls.

Relieved at the dismissal, I sink into another deep curtsy. But as I move to disperse with the others, he stops me. “Stay a moment, Lady Sybella.” My brief hope of an easy victory crumples. He waves at the regent, Cassel, and the two bishops to stay, then studies me, mouth pursed in thought. “I am told that when they searched for you this morning, they found you in a chamber that . . . wasn’t your own.”

“That is true, Your Majesty.”

Since he is careful not to declare Genevieve’s identity, I do not either. He falls quiet again, and I can practically hear the wheels of his mind churning.

“So tell me, are you from the convent of Saint Mortain?”

The ground at my feet shifts and lurches, dread seeping into my bones. In the utter silence of the room, the regent looks sharply at the king. One of the bishops crosses himself, while the other clutches the thick gold crucifix that hangs at his neck. For a brief moment, I consider denying it, but since it is clear he knows — or suspects — lying would only make it worse.

“It is true that I was raised at the convent of Saint Mortain, Your Majesty, as are a number of the women of Brittany.”

“Have you been trained in the arts of death as an assassin?”

While it is the king who speaks, the regent’s eyes bore into me, hungrier for the answer than even the king. “I have been trained in the art of weaponry, Your Majesty, for protecting those I serve. I have also studied poisons so that I may detect them when the need arises. But surely you know all manner of things may be used for good or ill.”

“Answer the question.” Although General Cassel does not raise his voice, it cracks through the room like a whip.

“Yes. That was one of the many things we learned at the convent. We also



trained in the care and anointing of the dead, the departing of souls, and how to ease the pain of the dying.”

The king leans back in his chair, satisfied. “Two days ago, I would have believed everything you said here this morning unequivocally, for who would accuse such an obedient and humble demoiselle of what Monsieur Fremin suggested? But surely you can see how your true background gives much credence to his claim.”

“Your Majesty, I am still precisely who I was two days ago — a woman who loves her queen and her sisters and wishes only to serve their best interests. I serve you, as her lord and husband and my king, as well.”

“Even so, I must consider Monsieur Fremin’s accusations carefully. Unlike most ladies, you have the wherewithal to carry them out. You, too, are dismissed. And like Fremin, you are not to leave the palace without permission. If you’d like to prove your innocence, you’d best find those men-at-arms.”

It is all I can do to keep my feet firmly under me and not stumble out of the chambers.

The king knows of the convent. He knows I am an assassin. We have, all of us, been exposed to our enemies.

The question is, how?

Of a certainty the queen did not tell him.

Could Rohan have sent word? I wince, remembering how boldly I taunted the man with my connection to the convent when he first arrived in Rennes with the news that he was to replace Lord Montauban as governor of Brittany. But surely if Rohan had informed the king, his message would have arrived long ago. And the king did not know two days ago, else he would never have ruled in my favor over Fremin.

It takes but the span of two heartbeats before the answer crashes into me.

Genevieve.

CHAPTER 3

Genevieve



estled among the thick folds of a Flemish tapestry, I watch the others emerge from the audience chamber, my head reeling with all I have just witnessed. Fremin storms from the room like a bull through a field. He is not only angry, but scared. And if he works for Pierre d'Albret, he should be. I think back to Sybella's words this morning, her face as she talked about the "pressing matter," and feel certain it is related to this man and his accusations.

I am half tempted to follow him so I may report back to Sybella, but have too recently learned how awry well-intentioned interference can go. Not to mention that, if what I understood is correct, Sybella herself is a d'Albret.

I can scarcely credit it. There is no family resemblance between her and Pierre. The only point of commonality was the cold, hard look that was on her face earlier for the briefest of seconds.

And who are these sisters of hers? Are they from the convent as well? Pierre d'Albret's household?

While I do not fully understand what just transpired in that room, Sybella's ability to maintain her composure in front of the king and his court, then pivot to the role of a distressed sister with such believability that it nearly brought a tear to my own eye was a wonder to behold.

She comes striding out of the salon just then, her mask still firmly in place, her hands clenched, her face white. I wait long enough to be certain she is not followed, then slip unobtrusively behind her as she passes the tapestry. She continues in silence until she reaches the stairway. Once there, she climbs three steps, glances to either side to be certain no one is about, then looks down at me. That is when I can see that the paleness of her face is due to fury rather than fear. “What did you say to the king to sour him against me?”

“You are a d’Albret. Is that not enough?”

“He has known I was a d’Albret since I first arrived and has not held me in suspicion before.” She grasps the iron railing. “Where were you last night when I came looking for you? You weren’t on a mission for the convent, since you had not heard from them.” She takes a step toward me. “And so I ask myself, why were you not announced, if not on an assignment? And I will tell you, I do not like the answer.” She stares at me, her breathing fast and hard. I open my mouth to answer, but she talks over me. “Where. Were. You.”

I have no choice but to tell her. The entire court will find out soon enough. “With the king.”

She glares at me. “You were sleeping with the king.”

I shrug. “Not sleeping exactly.”

She grits her teeth. “So you were bedding him?”

Sleeping sounded so much better. I nod.

Quicker than an arrow released from a bowstring, she is upon me, her hand grabbing my chin and bringing it close to hers. “You betrayed us.” Her voice is a low, furious hum, her anger a solid wall that has me wanting to take a step back, but her fingers are like a vise. “You aren’t here hoping for a be-damned crow feather. You have some hidden agenda of your own. One that involves destroying the queen.” She shoves my face away from her. “You have exposed us all to the king.”

And there it is, the ugly, brutal kick I have waited for, all the more painful for being delayed long enough to allow hope to take root. As I struggle to find words to explain, she descends another step toward me. “Was it to get even with the

convent for ignoring you longer than you liked? Or has your loyalty to Brittany been eroded by your years in France?"

"Disloyalty was never my intention!" Desperately needing a moment to regain my footing, I glance at the deserted landing. "Surely we do not need to discuss this where any wandering ears can hear."

In answer, she turns and strides up the stairs. Something hot and ugly uncurls inside me, filling my skin so that I fear it will burst. At first I think that it is my own temper flaring to match Sybella's, but it is more corrosive than that. Shame, I realize with a shock. This thick, suffocating feeling is shame.

When she reaches the landing, she whirls around to face me again, blocking my ascent. "Is that why Margot died? Did she discover your plans for treachery?"

Her words slam against my chest and send me reeling backwards. I grip the bannister. "No!"

"Your word is meaningless to me," she says, but something in my manner must convince her, for some of the reckless fury fades from her face. "What are you doing here, Genevieve?"

"Must we discuss this in the hallway?" It takes all my training to keep the pleading note from my voice.

She gives a brusque nod, then strides to the fourth chamber on the right and motions me inside. The door closes behind us with a click of foreboding. "Very well. We are alone. Now you can explain this treachery of yours."

That she would leap to such a conclusion hurts deeply. "Why are you so certain that I betrayed you?"

"Because the king knows I am from the convent of Saint Mortain and what we do there. He did not know that two days ago." Her expression hardens as the threads she has grabbed hold of begin to form a pattern. "You said you were with the king last night. Is that why you are poisoning the queen?"

Her accusation knocks all the air from my lungs. "No! Not the queen!"

Her eyes grow so frigid that I feel an actual chill scuttle across my arms. "But you are poisoning somebody."

"No! Not now."

She tilts her head. "But . . . ?"

"It had nothing to do with any of this. It was when I left Cognac, the only way I could escape." There. I said I had to escape. Surely she'll begin to understand now.

"Or was it the only way you could worm your way into the king's bed and betray everything the convent stands for? Do you have any idea how much you've put at risk? Any idea whose lives might be ruined?" For one heart-stopping moment, I am certain she is considering killing me where I stand. "How much danger complete innocents will be in because of you?"

Her words pour over me like acid, the burn of it mixing with the searing shame I already feel. "I was trying to save them, you rutting sow, if you would only let me explain."

She folds her arms and raises her eyebrows. "I am listening."

I force myself to draw a full breath. "I told you, we had not heard from the convent for five years. Nothing."

As I talk, she crouches down to peer at the rug, tilting her head sideways as if examining the surface. When I pause, she looks up at me. "Continue," she says curtly.

"Margot . . . Margot got tired of waiting and entered into a liaison with Count Angoulême. That is how she died."

The hand she had been running over the rug stills. "He killed her?"

"Not with his bare hands, no, but she became pregnant and died giving birth to his bastard."

"*Merde.*" She shoves to her feet, her gaze flitting briefly to me before she goes to the window. "Go on." She yanks the curtains aside.

"When the count told me that the duchess and king were to be married, I didn't believe it. France consuming Brittany was everything we'd been fighting against."

"She was out of choices," Sybella mutters as she examines the latch closely.

"That's what the count said. I took comfort in the fact that I would be in a perfect position to help her now, with all my connections at court and the

knowledge I'd gathered over the years about all the courtiers, not to mention the king and the regent."

She pauses long enough to stare at me. "That was precisely the sort of aid we were hoping for." In disgust, she looks back at the window and runs her fingers over the casing, wincing at something.

"What is it?"

"A nick in the wood." She begins rubbing her finger over it, as if trying to smooth it away. "Keep talking."

"But much to my dismay, I still received no call from the convent. When Count Angoulême left for the wedding, I demanded he take me with him."

The corner of her mouth quirks. "I wager he loved that. Princes of the Blood do so enjoy being ordered about."

"I told him I needed to be somewhere the convent could find me, but he refused."

"You could have just followed him."

"I would have, but he had other news as well. News he claimed was from the convent." She stops rubbing the wood and looks at me. "The news was that, by order of the king, the convent of Saint Mortain was being disbanded." For the first time since I have begun talking, she gives me her full attention. "His followers were to be farmed out to other convents or married off to willing husbands. I was now Angoulême's legal ward, and he was to find a suitable husband for me."

"But no such thing has happened! How could you not know he was tricking you?"

"Of course that was my first thought," I snap. But how to explain the many signs that seemed to point to the same conclusion. "I considered such a possibility carefully, but he had a message bearing the wax seal of the convent. It was signed by the abbess. And he had never lied to me before. I could not discern a reason he would do so now. And believe me, I considered it thoroughly. But I could never see what he would gain, except the animosity of the convent, and he has always struck me as too self-serving to incur such wrath without good reason."

Sybella opens the windows and runs her hand carefully along the windowsill. “And so you left.”

“Not right away, no.” How do I explain to her the utter betrayal I felt? The sense of aloneness. “Margot had died but three days earlier,” I say softly. “We had been like sisters, and I . . .” Her fingers still, and she frowns before retrieving a tiny scrap of cloth. She holds it up for closer inspection.

How to explain the enormity of what I’d lost? Not just with Margot’s death, but in the year preceding it? “And there was her babe. I wanted to stay long enough to see if it lived.”

Sybella shoves the scrap into the pocket of her gown. “And did it?”

“Yes. She did.”

“That’s good news, then,” she says softly. “We must see that the babe is well cared for.” She moves away from the window toward the bed, then drops to her knees to peer under it. “So then you left,” she prompts.

“Eventually. I needed time to study the situation. To consider all my options carefully. I also needed to ensure they didn’t come immediately after me. So I waited and I plotted, and when the time was right, I left.”

She remains on the floor a few more moments before finally pushing to her feet. She looks up to meet my eyes. “Did you leave with the intention of bedding the king?”

Something in her eyes, her face — mayhap her soul — forces the truth from me. “Yes.”

She looks down and concentrates on brushing off her hands. “And how was that supposed to save us? Here —” She motions toward the rich coverlet on the bed. “You grab one end, I’ll take the other.”

Grateful to have something to do with my hands, as well as something to look at besides her scornful countenance, I grab the corners and help her carry the entire thing over to the window. “I’m listening,” she says sharply.

It is easier to talk with her attention focused on the richly embroidered coverlet rather than me. “When I was last at court, the king took a fancy to me. There was no reason to act on it at the time — the convent had not ordered me to, and there was nothing to be gained. But he did promise to grant me any favor

I should wish if I would grace his bed. In spite of my assurances to the regent that I had no intention of bedding the king, she had Margot and me sent to Cognac. When I heard that it was by the king's orders that the convent had been disbanded, I realized I did, at last, have something I truly wished from him."

I stare out the window, remembering the absolute certainty I felt in that moment, as if a long-missing piece of my life had finally clicked into place — that I had found my destiny. The memory sears my throat.

"Since he had already disbanded the convent, there was no reason for me to think he didn't know about us. And to be honest, I would have assumed the French crown's own spies would have at least caught wind of us and reported it to him. Especially with the former chancellor Crunard working so closely with both the regent and the convent."

I shift my attention from the window and raise my chin slightly. "So that was my intent, to receive clemency for the convent and prevent unwanted fates for the other girls there."

Sybella stops rubbing at a spot she's found on the quilt and lifts her eyes to mine, her brief flicker of understanding quickly shuttered. "So that was your plan. Galloping in on a destrier, fulfilling the king's carnal desires, then requesting a dispensation for the convent because of it."

Under the weight of her scorn, all of my careful considerations and deliberations seem as thin and tattered as a beggar's cloak. It was a good plan. Would have been if any of what Angoulême had told me was true.

At last she lifts one shoulder. "I have heard worse." Although her words are begrudging, they feel like a rousing approval.

I return my attention to the coverlet. "What are we looking for?"

"Any signs that Monsieur Fremin's men were in here."

"You think that they were?"

A chilling smile plays about her lips. "I know they were. This is where I killed them."

I do not think she means the explanation to be a threat, but it feels like one, all the same.