

CHAPTER ONE

First of June

Narborough Castle, Norfolk

Bric was trying to make it to the stables to escape, but he knew he'd be caught. He knew there was no real escape for him, but he was going to do it or die trying.

Woe to those who would try and stop him.

I have a gift for you, Bric, Daveigh had said. Only it hadn't been a gift. It had been a burden. A trap of the most heinous kind. Bric knew who was behind it; God help him, he knew. A man he considered one of his closest friends, but a man who was clearly trying to offend him. When he left Narborough, he was going to ride all the way to Ramsbury Castle in Wiltshire and shove his fist right into Dashiell du Reims' face.

He was going to flatten the man.

But he had to get out of Narborough first, which would be no simple feat. Narborough was, perhaps, one of the best fortified castles in all of England, with a massive keep of many rooms, great earthworks surrounding it, creating something of a maze when it came to actually entering the inner bailey where the keep was, and then an outer bailey that was full of men and animals, stables, outbuildings, and even stone-built residences for the army. Certainly, Bric could make it out to the bailey – or so he hoped- but making it through that outer bailey and to the gatehouse without being snared would be the trick.

Men were after him and he wasn't about to surrender.

Now, he was trying to leave the keep without being seen. He had his own chamber in the keep, right next to the entry. It was simply a place to sleep, for a man like Bric had no real home or comforts. He could carry everything he owned with him and, at the moment, he was weighted down with heavy saddlebags that literally carried everything he owned. He didn't want to leave anything behind because he was going to ride off and not come back for a very long time, at least until de Winter came to his senses. Bric was prepared to wait it out.

He didn't want to be part of Daveigh, or Dashiell's, political games.

It was dark at this ungodly hour as the night neared the morning. Bric was silently making his way from his chamber towards the keep entry, plastering himself against the cold, stone walls, trying to stay out of any light. He was keeping to the shadows, something he was good at, but the unfortunate part of that plan was that he'd taught every man in his command the same technique. His men were good at it, too. They could remain unseen if they wanted to. As he neared the bolted entry doors, two of his men proved it.

They stepped from the shadows to greet him.

"Where are you going so early, Bric?" Pearce asked, his eyes glittering in the weak light of distant torches. "We thought you might be coming this way."

He gestured to his companion, another knight serving under Bric. Sir Mylo de Chevington was a troll of a man, short and stocky, but as strong as an ox. With his big smile and curly, dark hair, he had an impish look about him, which made Bric want to punch the man in the teeth because he could see a smile playing on his lips.

He glared at the pair.

“Get out of my way,” he growled. With his thick Irish accent, the threat sounded most deadly.

Pearce shook his head. “Alas, we cannot,” he said. “You know we cannot. De Winter thought you might try to run, so he posted us at these doors. We’ve been here all night because we knew, at some point, that you would make a break for them.”

Bric’s eyes narrowed, which was never a good thing. “If you value your life, then you will get out of my way.”

Pearce was still smiling as he lifted his sword. Mylo mimicked the movement a split second later.

“I love you, Bric, you know I do,” he said, “but de Winter was specific in his orders. We are not to let you leave this keep.”

Bric was growing increasingly furious. “You are *my* knights,” he said flatly. “You are sworn to obey me, as your commander, and your commander is telling you to get out of his way.”

Pearce and Mylo took a defensive stance, swords leveled. They knew what was about to happen and they wanted to be prepared.

“De Winter has ordered us to hold the line,” Pearce said, bracing himself. “That is what we shall do, Bric. I am sorry.”

Bric’s silver eyes were fixed on Pearce. “Nay, you are not,” he said. “But you will be if you do not move.”

“Bric, have pity,” Mylo said. “Would you have de Winter angry with us instead? We took our oath to him, as did you. If you stop to think about this situation, you are disobeying the wishes of your liege by trying to leave Narborough and...”

“And you shall shut your nasty little face, Mylo,” Bric snapped, turning his venom on the younger knight. When Mylo’s eyes widened with a flash of fear, Bric was pleased. At least he’d get some pleasure out of this event by scaring the fresh young knight. “Now, move aside, de Chevington. Be a good lad.”

Mylo was far more pliable to Bric’s will than Pearce was but, surprisingly, he didn’t move away. He did shift a little, but not enough. That gave Bric the opening he needed to whack the knight’s broadsword away and throw a shoulder into him, shoving Mylo right into the wall. As the knight grunted with the force of the blow, Bric made a break for the bolt on the door.

After that, the fight was on.

Somehow, he’d managed to throw the bolt and yank at the door before Pearce and Mylo could stop him, but he couldn’t get the door open wide enough to escape before Pearce threw his body at the door to slam it shut again. Swords were up and flying, and Bric had to fend off two good strokes from Mylo, meant to disarm him and nothing more. They weren’t trying to hurt him, but they were attempting to disarm him. Bric would die before he let that happen.

The little whelps were going to pay dearly.

The sounds of swords could be heard throughout the keep. On the top floor, Daveigh was roused from a deep sleep by his manservant, who announced that the knights were fighting down in the keep entry. With a smirk, Daveigh tossed off the coverlets and hurried to dress, as did his wife beside him.

Keeva de Winter knew what was happening. This was something that had been building for two days, ever since Bric MacRohan had been informed that he was to be a bridegroom,

courtesy of an offer from Dashiell du Reims, heir to East Anglia's earldom. That didn't sit well with the big Irish knight, and he'd locked himself in his chambers for two days. No amount of pleading or shouting from Daveigh could get him to come out. But Daveigh knew, at some point, that Bric would attempt an escape. He'd prepared for that eventuality.

It seemed that he'd been right.

When Daveigh saw that his wife was dressing, he waved her off. "I do not want you downstairs right now," he told her. "If Bric is in battle mode, then you could be injured. You know the man stops for nothing when he is in a fight and I do not want you in his line of sight."

Keeva, pretty and pale, with deep red hair in long spirals down her back, waved him off. "Don't be stupid." Her Irish accent was strong as she pulled on a long, heavy robe that was warm against the cold morning temperatures. "Bric would not turn against me."

"He may not even know it is you until it is too late."

Keeva tied off her robe and headed for the chamber door as her husband hurried to follow, pulling on his boots. She wasn't about to take any foolishness from her husband's premier knight, a man who happened to be her cousin.

"I will stop this right now," she said. "You and your knights have coddled Bric too much. This is ridiculous that you'd let a grown man rebel like this."

Fiery was a word to describe the woman. She was stronger than most men. Keeva charged out of the bedchamber as Daveigh followed, both of them racing for the narrow spiral stairs that led to the level below. Once they entered the darkened first level, where the great hall and several smaller chambers were, they could immediately see the fighting near the massive, double-doored entry.

Instead of two knights against one, several soldiers were now involved, too. They'd been summoned through the kitchens by frightened servants and now a line of armed soldiers stood around the three knights doing battle. There was some shouting going on, mostly shouting encouragement at Bric, who had disarmed Mylo and had the man in a chokehold around the neck, using him as a shield against Pearce, who was genuinely trying not to hurt anyone. All he wanted to do was disarm Bric, but now it had turned into a hostage situation.

But Bric was having no part of Pearce's attempts. As Daveigh and Keeva approached, Bric lashed out a big foot at a soldier who got too close, smashing the man in the knee. As the soldier went down in pain, Keeva's shout brought everything to a halt.

"Bric MacRohan!" she yelled. "If you don't cease your fighting and release Mylo, I will enter the fight and you'll not like it in the least. Do you understand me?"

Odd how one angry woman could stop what dozens of men couldn't. Bric came to an immediate halt at the sound of her voice and released Mylo, shoving the man far away from him. Back against the wall, he stood there with his sword raised as Keeva and Daveigh broke up the ring of soldiers, sending them all back the way they'd came.

But Keeva was genuinely angry. As Pearce and Mylo backed away, she came up to Bric and pointed to his sword.

"Put it away," she grumbled. "How dare you embarrass me. How dare you behave like this."

Bric eyed the woman; she was his cousin, and he had been part of her dowry when she'd come to marry Daveigh de Winter. That was how the bred-and-bled Irish knight had ended up in the service of the English de Winter war machine. But she was also foul-tempered at

times, and bold, and she wasn't beyond taking him on in a fight if she was mad enough. Bric wanted to avoid that, but he also wouldn't let himself be pushed around by a slip of a woman.

Even if she was his liege's wife.

"Lady de Winter," he said deliberately. "I am defending myself. It would have done you greater embarrassment had I allowed myself to be captured like a fool."

Keeva scowled. "Go over there and sit down," she said, pointing into the great hall and the nearest table. "Sit yourself down, Bric, and keep your lips shut until I have had my say in all of this."

Bric sighed heavily, eyeing her unhappily before complying. It wouldn't do any good to argue with her if he was attempting to avoid a physical altercation with the woman, so he lumbered over to the table she was indicating and planted himself on the end of the bench. He could see from his periphery that Daveigh, Pearce, and Mylo had followed, hiding behind Keeva because they, too, were fearful of her spitfire Irish temper.

They would let her take the lead. Between two Irish hotheads, that was all they could do.

"Now," Keeva said as she faced off against her cousin. "I have been listening to this foolishness for two days, ever since my husband informed you of your bride. Clearly, you have no understanding of how important this is, so I will explain it to you."

Bric started to open his mouth, but she put up a hand. "Silence!"

He shut his mouth.

Keeva continued. "When I wed my husband, you were part of my dowry," she said. "That meant that you became Daveigh's property. Do you understand that?"

Begrudgingly, Bric nodded.

“Good,” Keeva said. “And, as his property, he has the right to do anything he wishes with you. Are we still clear?”

Bric rolled his eyes and looked away. That made Keeva move closer to him to ensure he heard everything she was going to say.

“The House of de Winter is linked by blood to the Earls of Norfolk,” she said. “It is a strong alliance. But it is not linked by anything other than an oath to the Earls of East Anglia. Oath alliances can be broken, but alliances by blood or marriage are much harder to break. Dashiell du Reims, your very good and true friend, is the next Earl of East Anglia. Is this a true statement?”

Bric knew where she was going with all of this and he was resisting her with every cell in his body. But he knew he couldn’t deny her much longer. In the end, she would have her way, and he was well aware of that.

But he was going to go kicking and screaming all the way.

“It is,” he said through clenched teeth.

Keeva was standing over him. “Dash wishes for the Earls of East Anglia, and the House of du Reims, to be joined to the House of de Winter by marriage. His missive to my husband explained this. A marriage to the House of du Reims would make the most powerful alliance in all of eastern England, Bric. Norfolk, de Winter, and East Anglia will be a legendary alliance and you are to be a key part of that by marrying Dash’s cousin. *You*, Bric. You play a vital role in all of this. You understand how allegiances work and how important they are. How can you turn your nose up at such an opportunity?”

Bric knew all of this, but when she put it that way, it made him look like a bloody ingrate. “Dash mentioned this alliance two months ago, in Lincoln,” he muttered. “We were in the

midst of battle when the subject came up about his cousin. But I did not believe he was serious.”

“He was,” Keeva said. “And I am sure he did not suggest a marriage between you and his cousin simply to make you miserable. I am sure he did it because he loves you.”

Bric had nothing to say to that; any man who loved him as a brother would know his views on marriage, as Dashiell did. But Dashiell evidently didn’t care. As Bric sat there and fumed, knowing he was on the losing end of this discussion, Daveigh summoned his bravery and stepped forward.

“Bric,” he said. Seeing how miserable the man was, he sighed heavily. “I did not agree to Dash’s proposal to shame you or punish you. Surely you can see that. I did it because it was important and because I think enough of you to wed you to the cousin of the future Earl of East Anglia. Do you truly think I did this to make you miserable?”

Bric knew he hadn’t, but he wasn’t ready to concede anything. Everyone knew he was staunchly against marriage, so it wouldn’t do any good to reiterate that stance. It didn’t matter now, not when Daveigh was determined to make an alliance. Still... he was so damned frustrated.

“But why me?” he finally asked, turning to look at Keeva and Daveigh. “Why must it be me?”

Daveigh sat down on the bench next to him. “Because Dashiell mentioned you by name,” he said. “And because I have no sons or daughters to offer. But I do have you, and you are my relation since you are my wife’s cousin. *We* are cousins. Bric, I come from one of the ten great ruling families that came to these shores with Gaetan de Wolfe, the Duke of Normandy’s Warwolfe, those years ago. My ancestor was so important that he was charged

with the security of the great River Ouse and the wash that led to the sea, protecting it from the Northmen invaders, among others. That is why I now hold the Honor of Narborough, and my properties all along the river. You are in command of my army, one of the greatest armies in all of England. You are an important and great man in England – but you remain unmarried.”

Bric began to chew his lip, a habit he had when frustrated. “For good reason,” he said. “I do not want to be.”

“No man does,” Daveigh said with a smirk, a smirk that quickly vanished when Keeva shot him a nasty look. “But you are too valuable to remain unmarried. I have no sons to give, so in matters such as these – with marital alliances – I must use other relatives to ensure my empire survives. It is a great honor you have been given, Bric. Not only will your marriage bind de Winter to East Anglia, but you will also be related to the House of du Reims by marriage. Your friend, Dash, becomes your cousin. Is this so unattractive to you that you would shame me by running from it?”

Daveigh was hitting him hard with facts that he could not deny, and Bric could feel himself folding. He was feeling increasingly unsettled and foolish for trying to run from what any sane man would consider a great honor. Bric was more than happy to accept any honor, but he just wished that marriage wasn’t involved. With a heavy sigh, he rubbed a hand wearily over his face.

“I am not trying to shame anyone,” he said. “But you have many knights under your service. You could use any one of them for a marital contract if an alliance is what you seek.”

“True,” Daveigh said. “But I only have one knight who is related to my wife, and only one knight who is descended from the O’Briens, the high kings of Ireland. Royal blood runs through your veins, Bric. You are unique and valuable, in so many ways. Do you not understand this?”

Bric did. He was simply trying to find some argument to get him out of this mess, but he realized with sickening certainty that nothing would. He was going to find himself with a wife no matter how badly he didn’t want one. In looking at Daveigh, and then to Keeva, he realized that his fight was over.

They’d won.

Bric hadn’t lost a battle in his entire life, except the most important battle of all – the battle against having a wife. Grunting miserably, he sat back against the table.

“I understand,” he said. “I understand all of it. I understand why you would make such an alliance, but I also understand that you have no consideration for my feelings in this.”

“That is because it is a command,” Keeva said firmly. “You are a knight, Bric. You have no feelings when your liege gives you a command. You simply do as you are told.”

Bric realized that he had to look at it that way, because it was the truth. Keeva was correct. Frustrated, and grossly unhappy, he stood up and sheathed his sword. He’d been holding it in his left hand the entire time.

“I will do as I am told,” he agreed. “But in this case, there is something more involved than a simple command. This is a command that will change my life and I do not have to be happy about it. I will do as you wish and marry this girl, but the marriage will be in name only. I draw the line at being ordered how to conduct my marriage, so I will conduct it as I see fit.”

It was a defiant statement. "I will respect that," Daveigh said, "but remember this – the woman you are marrying is also Dashiell du Reims' cousin. Offend and hurt the girl, and I have a feeling Dash will not take kindly to that. If you wish to damage your relationship with him then, by all means, be unfeeling and cruel to your wife. If I were you, I would think carefully about that."

Bric looked at him. "I never said I would be cruel and unfeeling towards her," he said. "All I said was that I will conduct my marriage in my own way."

Daveigh still didn't like the sound of that. He looked at Keeva to see if his wife had anything more to say. Her gaze was fixed on Bric.

"I will say this once and I will say no more," she said. "You will behave as a member of the House of de Winter and the House of O'Brien. You will conduct yourself with honor in this marriage, for it is no different than any other task or assignment that has been bestowed upon you. I know you do not wish to be married, but this is beyond your control and you will accept it with dignity. Shame me, or my husband, I will send you back to Ireland with dishonor. Do you understand me, Bric?"

He looked at her. "Have I ever dishonored you?"

"Nay."

"I do not intend to start now. But know this; as you mentioned damaging my relationship to Dash should I be cruel to his cousin, know that forcing me to marry this woman has damaged my relationship with you. Do not expect me to be the loving, kind cousin any longer. If my feelings in the matter are of no concern to you, then I am clear on your regard of me. I understand now that I am only a tool, something to be used, and I will behave accordingly."

With that, he bowed his head slightly, begging his leave, and headed back to the chamber he slept in, just off the entry.

When they heard the chamber door shut, quietly, Keeva and Daveigh turned to each other. Daveigh was more emotional and empathetic than his wife, who tended to be nonsense in most things. Keeva was a tough woman but, deep down, she had a tender heart. That's what made Daveigh love her so. Reaching out, he put a gentle hand on her arm.

"He does not mean what he said," he told her quietly. "I would not worry."

Keeva didn't share her husband's opinion. "He means it," she said, turning once more to look at the closed chamber door. "Bric MacRohan never says anything he does not mean. But he must accept that this is his destiny. I cannot help him with that."

Daveigh squeezed her arm and released her. "Then, mayhap, we can only pray that the girl is somewhat attractive," he said. "If we saddle him with a hag, he'll truly never forgive us."

Keeva didn't reply right away. Truly, she didn't know what to say. It was sad to think that her relationship with her favorite cousin hinged on the quality of the bride he didn't want. If the woman was a dog, then the damage would be done. But if she was pretty and accomplished, then at least there might be a chance Bric could be happy in his marriage.

But it was done. None of them could change it. Keeva turned to her husband.

"Tell Dashiell we will send for the lass," she said. "We shall ensure the marriage happens."

Daveigh simply nodded. The marriage would indeed happen, but at what price?

He wondered.