

Chapter I

*Autumn 1561*

An ominous cloud hung stubbornly above, threatening to unleash its fury again on any who dared to sit beneath its cover. The incessant pouring of rain that had converged on Leith for the whole of the night prior had finally given way to a fine mist that was slightly more tolerable. The jagged rocks that marked the shoreline of the River Forth still bore the evidence of the late summer's storm, leaving a mixture of sediment and foam that stank of the ocean life that lived just beyond the firth's reach. Yet it was here that I chose to sit and wait every morning for the past two months. Aye, for two months I had faithfully come, not knowing the day or the hour of her arrival. *My bonnie lass*, the secret name I affectionately called her when we were children. However, I had to keep reminding myself that she wasn't little anymore. She was a woman now and although still young, she had already experienced widowhood.

Mary had been five years old when I last saw her. I was six years older than she, but I looked after her with as much love and care as I was sure her father would have done had he still been alive. From the day her father died when Mary was six days old, I took it upon myself to be her protector, if it was within my power to do so. I think her father, the fifth King James, would have wanted it that way. For he had done the same for me when my father died. James took an interest in me and bestowed on me a good living and provisions for me to be well taken care of. He also personally saw to the arrangements for me to become an almoner, a clergyman responsible for dispersing alms to the poor, when I reached adulthood, for it was my father's wish that I follow in his footsteps.

Mary's last letter brought me home. Her husband, the king of France had died, and she was returning to Scotland. I could not allow the homecoming to pass unmarked without my

acknowledgement. I requested a leave of my position from the church in Glasgow with a promise that I would put myself to work upon my arrival in Leith. I then left immediately. However, two months had passed before I received word that her journey was almost complete, and she would be in Scotland sometime within the fortnight. I sat watching the young gannets dancing about on the water when in the distance something caught my eye. It was the boat that carried Mary and her processional of maidens and courtiers. If I couldn't tell that it was her boat by the bright purple banners fluttering wildly in the wind, then I would have been able to tell by the sound it gave off. Lively music penetrated the solace of the gannets' dance and laughter echoed across the water. The sounds of flutes and recorders blended with the merrymaking and occasionally you could hear the high-pitched shriek of a lady followed by the booming laughter of young men.

My heart began to beat rapidly. I wondered if Mary would recognize me. We had written to each other throughout our childhoods but once she married the Dauphin her letters became scarce. It wasn't because she no longer took an interest in our friendship, but her duties as the Queen Consort of France monopolized quite a bit of her time. She had written to me two months earlier and pledged her devotion to me, her brother, more than ever and told me how much she looked forward to renewing our friendship upon her return to Scotland.

When the boat finally docked on the shore the happy party disembarked noisily. At least five and twenty people lighted off the boat, each one of them bringing their own flare and vitality ashore to liven up the countryside of Leith. Lords and ladies dressed in the finest garments that France could produce began to mingle with the people that greeted them on land. The crowd was not as large as it could have been, or even should have been. For, in an effort to elude Mary's cousin, the queen of England, a great bit of secrecy surrounded Mary's place and time of arrival.

As the royal guards rushed closer, I held back for I knew my place and dared not show such impertinence as to approach the Queen uninvited.

Mary's rosy cheeks shaded her alabaster skin and complimented her auburn hair. She wore a burgundy attifet trimmed in gold on her head that still allowed the display of the curls that spilled from beneath its cover. Her slender neck was enshrouded in a puff of crinkled lace and was adorned with a large gold crucifix that hung to her waist. She had grown quite tall and her slender waist was accentuated by a heavy brocade bodice that flattered her fine figure of 18 years. In all her pomp, she still greeted the excited crowd that had gathered. She touched those who cried out to her and tried to make contact with as many of her patrons as possible. Since the crowd was not large Mary was able to take in the faces that she saw as she tried to store in her memory the people that surrounded her. This display went on for nearly three quarters of an hour. The vigor that flooded her as she stepped upon the soil of her beloved Scotland energized her and brought even more color to her cheeks. She drew in a deep breath, as if she could consume the spirit of this land and these people by the simple task of filling her lungs. As she looked about her, she caught a glimpse of me. Her shoulders straightened and her chin lifted as her eyes fastened onto mine. We were in a trance for an instant, but the phantasm was broken by recognition and she immediately called out to me.

"Thomas!" Mary ran to me and threw her arms around my neck. If anyone thought it was improper, they did not voice it.

"I dared to hope that you would know me. It has been so long," I confessed.

"Nonsense," Mary scolded. "I would know you anywhere. You have not changed so much. I mean, your frame is taller, and your shoulders broader, but that is about it. Your eyes are still as pierce blue as I remember, and your hair is just as dark. You are the same boy I

envision each time I put ink to paper to pen you a letter and the same kind face I see when your penned words come back to me. Only, you're not a boy anymore. But yes, I have determined: you have not changed."

"I cannot say the same for you, Your Highness. I tried to prepare myself for what to expect, but I must admit that my imagination did you no justice."

"Yes, well, it seems we have both grown up, Thomas Broune. I can only hope you like what you see," Mary teased.

I felt the color burn instantly on my cheeks. Mary must have remembered that I was an almoner now and chided herself for speaking so freely to me; for although we were old friends, I sensed that she felt a little ashamed that she had shown such impropriety.

"Forgive me," she whispered and then placing her arm inside mine she drew me nearer and turned to walk with me. We walked together for several paces as Mary continued to touch people and speak to those that had come to greet her.

After about an hour the crowd had waned, and Mary was able to give instructions to the porter as to where she wanted her possessions placed. "I want you to dine with us this evening, Thomas. I have so much to talk to you about."

I had promised to visit a widow that evening and try to help her in a business matter concerning her late husband's property. Although I knew I couldn't decline the Queen's invitation so easily, I felt I at least needed to expound to her the nature of my business that evening and beg her pardon. But as I opened my mouth to speak, she pulled away from me and rushed to greet a familiar acquaintance.

I slipped away quietly. My curiosity had been satisfied at the sight of her, and I could rest at ease now, knowing that she had arrived safely home again. Perhaps I could fulfill my obligations now and be back in time to grant my queen's request.