

CHAPTER THREE
More than One Way

Four days had passed since Prince Theiandar, his father, and their knights left for Emlyn. Caityn seemed to have adjusted. She'd cried the first night and did not sleep, but the exhaustion which accompanies pregnancy interrupted her ability to stave off the rest her body craved. The next night she'd slept without issue. Out of concern for her well-being, Idra spent each night sleeping on the settee in Caityn's salon.

For some reason, knowing Ahmad's feelings for her only made Idra more restless instead of giving her any sense of peace. She knew she cared for him—a great deal, in fact—but she struggled with a trust over how deep his attachment ran. What if he didn't know his own feelings and only thought he loved her?

She guarded her heart so closely. It was frightening to let anyone in and she rarely had. Other than Caityn and her own younger sisters, Idra had few close friendships.

She'd spent hours each night tossing and turning on the too-short couch in Caityn's salon while she wrestled with serious thoughts of the depth of her fondness for Ahmad. He'd become a regular part of her life and was found moving within her circles at High Castle.

When she closed her eyes, she could picture his brooding brown ones and imagined his warm lips pressed to her hand again. Idra's sensibilities, her devotion to duty and family, were outside her own desires, and they warred against her heart. Her mother would know what to do, but Ketra could not give counsel at a moment's notice since she was back home at Tanfield in Taisce.

It must have been affecting Idra's mood, because on the fourth day of the men's absence, Caityn spoke up while they sat embroidering in the princess's salon.

"Idra, you seem more restless than even I. Will you tell me what bothers you?"

"What? Oh, nothing really. I mean, there is something, but I'm not sure I'm ready to discuss it. I can't quite grasp how I feel, let alone how to put it into words."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, Caity, but thank you for asking. I guess maybe I'm out of sorts because I miss my family. It's been over a year since I saw them at the wedding."

"Idra, that's it! I wish you would have said something sooner. My family came here and will be back again for the baby's birth, but you haven't seen your family at all. You need to go home to Taisce for a visit. I can't believe I've been so selfish. Let's plan a trip for you to leave tomorrow. You can spend a week with them. Or more, if you like."

"Really, Cait? Shouldn't I stay with you while Theiandar is away? He made it very clear. I wouldn't feel right leaving you."

"I insist. You have always been there for me, and I can't think of a better way to show you how much I appreciate you. Besides, I'll have Zoe and Eliya to keep me company and plenty to do, what with preparing for the baby. Tis not even worth mentioning that you can't make Theiandar come home any faster by sleeping on that tiny couch in my salon."

Caityn raised her eyebrows in mock seriousness.

"I was just concerned. You slept so horribly that first night. I didn't want you to be alone."

"Well, knowing you the way I do, I didn't bother to let on that I knew. You'd have just done it again anyway. You're far too good to me. But I insist. You must travel home to see my dear aunt and uncle. My cousins could stand to behold the elegance of their elder sister as well."

Idra laughed, her fancy taking hold of the idea, not to mention it would give her the opportunity to speak with her mother about her feelings for Ahmad and his request of courtship. If she'd been younger he'd have needed to speak to her father first, but twenty-three was old enough to be asked directly.

Now that she knew how he felt, she found it less difficult to admit her overall attraction to him. She'd barely been able to stop thinking about him since the men left. With the hope of distraction in mind and scant effort to suppress a desire to see her family, she was excited to go.

"Thank you, Caity. I will go. Should we go to my room so you can help me pick out what to wear?"

"Now is a good time to start," Caityn said, rising from the chair.

They left the salon and slipped down the hall to Idra's room, both giddy for the distraction from their individual melancholies.

Idra opened the door to her room and was surprised to find a chambermaid, Noreeta, standing next to her bed.

"Noreeta, what are you doing here at this time of day?"

"M'lady Idra, I apologize," she said. Her hands flew behind her back. "I . . . I overslept this morning." There was her odd, stuttering speech. "I'm behind on all my chores. I . . . I decided to take care of the sitting room down the hall first. In order to make sure any rooms that may be used during the day were taken care of . . . first."

"I see." Idra was confused but took the rambling chambermaid at her word. "You're welcome to finish what you were doing. Princess Caityn and I are going to pack some of my belongings for a short trip. Would you find my extra pair of riding boots?"

"Certainly, m'lady."

Noreeta, hands still behind her back, shuffled off to the farthest closet to get the boots Idra requested. Her back was turned to the ladies while she retrieved them. Neither Idra nor Caityn noticed her odd behavior as they spoke openly about Idra's trip.

"I'll have an escort arranged for you after we're done here. Come to think of it, since the chambermaid is here, let's lay everything out, and she can pack it while you come with me to make the rest of the arrangements."

"I'm sure Noreeta wouldn't mind. Would you, Noreeta?"

Noreeta jumped, but was quick to speak. "M—mind what, m'lady?"

"Would you mind packing my things? I'm taking a trip to Taisce tomorrow so I can visit my parents. Princess Caityn and I laid out the clothes I'd like to take. Or, if you're very far behind, you may fetch my lady's maid to do it."

"Oh! Of course. I'd be happy to pack."

"Thank you, Noreeta."

Noreeta stilled her fluttering hands and curtsied low. "Good-bye, Princess, Lady Idra."

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She watched the princess and Lady Idra leave the room and took a deep, calming breath. That had been close. Too close. Noreeta shoved Idra's belongings into a trunk and rushed down the hall to the servant's stairs. An idea was forming. It couldn't be ignored.

Noreeta was cautious enough to avoid running into any of the head housekeeping staff; they'd be sure to stop her and require some task. For now, the only task Noreeta wanted was to find Zaide and relay what she'd learned.

It took what seemed an eternity of dashing through the muddied lanes to reach the street of shops within the castle walls where Zaide's false storefront was located. She didn't care for his business dealings, but he had a way of reassuring her of the necessity for such things.

Noreeta believed in him. She trusted him above anyone else. He told her he loved her, and his touches always implied the same. Noreeta would do anything for him, including help him kill the woman who stood in the way of their marriage.

She swung the door open, out of breath. "Where is your master?"

The man behind the counter stared at her in contempt. She'd never liked him, and he'd never liked her. It was a mutual hatred.

"This is important. Where is he?"

He motioned with his head.

She tried to rein in her hurried breath and smoothed out her rain-damp skirt before she walked with head held high toward the door leading to the back room. Noreeta stepped through without knocking.

Zaide sat at a table with two other men. They all turned to glare.

"What are you doing here, Noreeta?"

"Zaide, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have some news I need to share with you. It's about her."

She felt justified in interrupting his meeting as she witnessed his face brighten up when realization dawned.

"Excuse us, men."

He rose without waiting for a response and motioned for Noreeta to follow him. She did so, ever the obedient woman.

Noreeta's eyes widened upon seeing what was on the other side of the door leading into another adjoining room. Lavish decorations with plush furnishings, expensive drapes, and gold candlesticks were packed in the cramped space. In one corner sprawled a four-poster bed with the most beautiful silk coverlet Noreeta had ever seen; it took up a great deal of the room. Working in the castle, she'd seen many lovely things, but this closet of a room held treasures she'd never imagined. It made her giddy with anticipation.

Zaide pressed the door closed behind them, and Noreeta jumped when she heard the lock click into place. She spun around in time to see him slink toward her as if he were a beast and she his prey. She was content to be devoured by him and stood her ground forgetting for a brief moment why she'd come. His promises, his masculinity, and his charm had all worked their way into her heart.

"Well, my dear, what news do you have to share with me about Idra? Did you make all the preparations and unlock the necessary doors?"

"Not exactly." She squeezed the key in her pocket, her thoughts turning morose.

Noreeta couldn't ignore the storm brewing behind Zaide's glassy stare. She knew it wouldn't be held off for long. She wiggled under his scrutiny.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly?' It shouldn't have been difficult to accomplish. We are prepared to move tonight to finish the job. With Dante and his men well away, it is the best time to act."

"I mean a better option has come along." Noreeta held up her hands in entreaty. "Please don't be angry, Zaide. If you don't like the idea, there is still a chance I can clear the path."

"A chance, woman? I'm listening, but it had better be good."

She swallowed hard. It wasn't exactly that she was worried he would hurt her, but there was this lingering feeling of unease every time he looked at her like that. She didn't know why it frightened her so much.

Noreeta touched her damp hair, fluttering her hands around, unsure where to place them before clutching them in her skirts.

"Well, Zaide my love, Lady Idra hasn't been sleeping in her own room since the king and prince left. She sleeps in Princess Caityn's salon. It would be a terrible risk to break in there. But I have good news." She took a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Idra is to travel with an escort to Taisce. Tomorrow morning. They'll take the main road to her family's estate.

"I heard their whole plan. What I was thinking was that it would be easier to do away with her not in High Castle."

Noreeta's hands flapped while she spoke, her nerves getting the better of her. If only he'd smile at her; it would be reassuring. She cleared her throat.

"It would mean you'd have to . . . do something with her escort. But, my dearest, you'd be better protected and have less chance of discovery not being within the walls."

Noreeta held her breath and waited while he considered her rushed chatter. She wanted to pass out with relief when he nodded.

"I am both surprised and pleased by your forethought, Noreeta. I didn't know you had it in you. Yes, this will be better. Now, you must go back to the keep. They cannot know you were here. My men and I will leave tonight."

"Can't I come with you?"

"No, Noreeta. It will be too dangerous."

"When will you come back for me?"

"When I'm ready."

"You must come for me the day after tomorrow. I'm afraid to stay here without you."

"Noreeta, don't be irrational. You're perfectly safe."

"Promise me you'll come back for me."

"I will. Now go."

The impulse strong, she leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It was quick, and even she was surprised by the outburst. Noreeta knew he was not a demonstrative man, but she tried not to let it bother her when he didn't return her affectionate gesture.

Zaide's mien was stoic as he stared at her before he moved to undo the lock and motioned for her to leave. Not another word was spoken.

Noreeta didn't want to admit it, but she felt like a chastised schoolgirl as she scurried from the room. Her only comfort was in the knowledge that he loved her and would come back for her.

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Idra, a High Castle kitchen maid, and two guards assigned to escort her left the castle early the next morning.

From her mare, Idra looked back at Caityn who stood on the steps. They waved farewell to each other much as they'd done with the men five days before. It was comforting to know Caityn wasn't upset by Idra's desire to see her family and would relay an invitation for Ahmad to visit her family's estate.

The weather had cleared and the day was perfect for travel. Idra enjoyed the start to the trip, watching the early morning fog burn off. The fields along the road were blanketed in the white fluff.

As the golden orb rose higher behind them, its rays cast a magical tint to the fog. The white mist slowly dissipated in the presence of the sun, leaving behind the honeyed glow of autumn wheat fields.

The day passed in affable fashion for Idra and her escort. She didn't know the maid very well but found out the young girl hailed from Taisce. She grew up in a village not far from Tanfield, Idra's home. Idra hoped the girl would be able to see her parents on this journey.

Before long, they would be leaving the open fields for the dense cover of forest. Her enthusiasm grew with each passing mile. The sight of trees dotting the horizon, the sun casting long shadows over the ground, made her wish it wouldn't take days and days to get home. With Tanfield close to the river, it would take only three or four days to arrive, but it was still too far to appease her excitement.

CHAPTER FOUR

Keeper of Fear

Zaide breathed the fresh forest air and sighed in contentment. Today he would get the thing for which he'd been waiting. For more than a year, she'd been an itch he'd longed to scratch. Well, no more waiting. Today was the day Lady Idra would learn her place.

He balanced the weight of the dagger in his hand then tossed the blade up in the air, giving it a good spin, and caught it by the handle. Something about the potential of cutting off his own fingers with the sharp knife always exhilarated him. He threw the blade again, caught it, and without taking careful aim, lobbed it across the forest. The thud of the knife sinking deep into the pine tree was satisfying. He was ready.

Zaide and his cohorts didn't bother with stealth as they approached the camp of Idra and her escort. Her group was outnumbered, and he saw no point in silence when miles from anyone. She had nowhere to run, no river to dive into.

The men he'd brought with him on this personal mission were some of his sailors—pirates, really. While they followed orders, there was still no guarantee of loyalty. For now, they followed him, but if this plan didn't come to fruition, he'd be at the bottom of the sea before long.

The group of confident attackers whooped and hollered as they charged upon the unsuspecting travelers. The hooves of their horses stamped mercilessly through the camp. Though quick to stand, one guard was dead before he'd even pulled his sword from its sheath. The other dived to the side, narrowly escaping a piercing arrow aimed for his heart.

Content with his new plan, Zaide watched the rest of the carnage from the back of his horse as the castle guard fought valiantly against two of his men. Zaide admired their ruthless onslaught and knew the guard wouldn't last much longer.

Zaide's eyes glanced over to scout out Idra. He took note of the escaping maid out of the corner of his eye and motioned to another pirate, the single movement made without an ounce of tension. Still seated on his saddle, the lackey shot an arrow at the maid's retreating back, knocking her to the ground in the midst of a horrifying, agonized scream.

He never wavered in his inspection of Idra's shocked countenance. The look of horror she wore was a beautiful thing and could have made up for the way she'd escaped over a year ago had it not been he needed so much more than her fear.

The repulsed recognition he saw pass over her face promised to bring him endless enjoyment. Zaide's ego was buoyed by the satisfaction of knowing he had filled her dreams; after this day there was no chance she would ever forget him.