

Chapter 1 – Sevilla, December 1332

The first time Alma saw Doña Leonor de Guzmán, the woman was half-naked and screaming invectives to the high heavens.

“Normal,” Cesaria, Alma’s mother, said. “It hurts to give birth.”

Alma stared at the woman squirming on the bed and decided there and then to never, ever have any children.

“Make yourself useful,” Mamá said. Even if Alma had not been in a birthing chamber before, she knew a lot about births. With Mamá and Abuela being the Sevillian nobility’s most sought-after midwives, there was no possibility of avoiding the conversations about what herbs and methods could facilitate the arduous labour of pushing a new child into the world. To judge from Doña Leonor’s loud complaints, neither the fragrant possets nor Mamá’s massages had any effect.

“Pfff! It’s not the noisy ones you need to worry about,” Abuela said when Alma expressed a concern about Doña Leonor’s survival. “It’s when they go all quiet that things can go truly wrong.” Abuela patted Alma’s hand. “Woman births her children in pain—that is how God has ordained it.”

That seemed most unfair of God, but Alma was old enough to know such opinions were best not expressed, not when you were of Morisco blood. By now, quite diluted, as Abuela’s mother—Alma’s great-grandmother—had wed a Castilian knight. Mamá had done even better—or so Abuela said—when she wed Jaime Ponce de León. “A wealthy family, a powerful name,” Abuela always said, but Alma’s father had been the fourth son of a fifth son and thereby far from either fortune or power. Still, his name served to open the doors to the abodes of the richest people in Sevilla—like that of Doña Leonor de Guzmán.

According to Mamá, there were blood ties between them and the woman who was now cursing everyone in the room to hell and back. “Get it out of me! Get it out!” Doña Leonor shrieked as her women helped her move from the bed to the birthing chair.

“Almost there,” Mamá soothed. There was a flurry of activity. One of Doña Leonor’s women settled behind her on the birthing chair and held her upright while Mamá knelt on the floor, peering between Doña Leonor’s thighs.

“Now push!” Mamá ordered. Doña Leonor roared, hands fisting until her knuckles stood stark against her skin. Alma forgot all about tearing rags and boiling water, tiptoeing forward to peek as a slimy, dark-haired baby, liberally streaked in blood, was expelled from the womb. *Never*, she promised herself, staring at the naked infant. But then the babe opened its mouth and wailed, and to her surprise, tears stung her eyes.

“Here.” Mamá severed the umbilical and handed the babe to Abuela, who beckoned for Alma to come and help. Warm water, soft, worn linen rags to use for clouts, and the child was made presentable, big dark eyes blinking up at Alma. It was as if the entire shadowed future of the world lay trapped in those eyes, and instinctively she shushed, telling the babe that things would be all right.

Behind them, Mamá was still busy with the lady. “An easy birth,” Mamá concluded a while later.

“Easy?” Doña Leonor croaked. “It is never easy, is it?” She had been transferred back to the bed and reclined against a mound of pillows. “But I have a strong, healthy son, while poor María

went through all this pain for a babe the size of a skinned rabbit, and about as weak.” She shook her head. “Poor María.”

Alma bit back a little snort. Everyone knew there was little love lost between King Alfonso’s wedded wife and his beloved mistress. Queen María resented the woman who held her husband’s heart; Doña Leonor hated that the queen was the mother of the future king, while the children she gave the king would forever carry the stigma of being bastards.

“What will you name him?” Mamá asked later. The bed linens had been changed, Doña Leonor was in a clean chemise, and the entire room was suffused in a golden light, courtesy of a veritable forest of lit candles.

“His father will name him.” Doña Leonor stroked the downy cheek of the babe. “But I do believe he looks like a Sancho.”

He looked like a piglet. But Alma was wise enough to keep that to herself.

There was a commotion downstairs. Loud male voices, laughter, and then the hasty footsteps of someone leaping up the stairs. The door banged open, and there stood their king, young and handsome, broad and strong. Alma and the other women present bowed deeply. He made a dismissive sound and waved them upright, crossing the room in great strides.

The smile he gave Doña Leonor had something twisting in Alma’s belly. Would someone look at her like that some day? Would strong male fingers gently stroke an escaped tendril of hair off her forehead and then stoop to kiss her there?

Doña Leonor’s hand came up to encircle his wrist. “My love.”

“*Tesoro*.” There was a husky sound to his voice that had Alma suspecting he was close to weeping. “A son, I have another son!”

“You do.” Doña Leonor held out the babe to him. Big hands expertly cupped the little head, steadied the small swaddled body.

“Look at you,” the king crooned, “so big, so strong.” He grinned, beaming at them all. “Three sons in less than two years!” he exclaimed, and Alma wondered if she was the only one who saw how Doña Leonor’s features hardened, her mouth setting in a grim line.

One of those three sons was the trueborn heir, Infante Fernando, mere weeks old. Alma knew this because Mamá had commented to Abuela that their king clearly went from the bed of one woman to the other, eager to fornicate with his lady love after doing his duty in the marital bed. “One son born in Burgos just after the feast of San Martín,” she’d said on their way here. “I dare say it does not please the queen that he is now here, in Sevilla, to await Doña Leonor’s babe.”

Just as it did not please Doña Leonor to have the king mention the son he had with another woman while cradling the son she had just birthed. Alma did not understand any of this. The king acted as if he had two wives, and while everyone knew the infidel often took more than one wife, a good Christian did not. She peeked at Doña Leonor, who was leaning back against the pillows, watching the king with his son.

The king handed over the babe to one of the many women present and knelt beside the bed. “Thank you,” he said, leaning his forehead against Doña Leonor’s.

She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and—

“Out.” Mamá grabbed hold of Alma’s arm. “This is not for us to see.”

Five days later, Mamá shook Alma awake. “You are expected at the *alcázar* within the hour.”

“The *alcázar*?” Alma wiggled out from under her younger sister’s arm—Nuria slept like the dead—and got out of bed.

Mamá beamed. “Doña Leonor has requested you join her household.”

“Me?” Alma glanced at her other sister, now wide awake. “Shouldn’t it be Ramona who joins her household? She’s the eldest.”

“She has asked for you,” Mamá repeated, and Ramona scowled. “She appreciated your kindness,” Mamá continued.

All she’d done was place a blanket round Doña Leonor’s shoulders as she’d sat looking grey and frail on a stool while her women changed the bloodied linen and arranged for hot water and clean garments. Their eyes had met for an instant before Doña Leonor had licked her dry, chapped lips and croaked out a “thank you”. All that screaming during the birth had stolen her voice.

“It’s not fair,” Ramona said.

“It is what it is,” Mamá replied. “And instead of sulking, help your sister pack her belongings together.”

After breaking her fast with some dried figs and the crumbly goat’s cheese Mamá so loved, Alma followed her mother out into the street. Theirs was not a grand residence, a mere two storeys with a small patio. Downstairs were the kitchen, the room Mamá used to meet her clients—the only room decorated with rich silks and Mozarabic tiles exploding with colour—and the large room where the family ate, worked and received their guests. Upstairs were three rooms. One for Abuela, one for Mamá and one for Alma and her sisters. At the back were the servants’ quarters and a small garden where Mamá and Abuela grew herbs and vegetables.

Their street was a winding, narrow thing, a stone’s throw from the walled Judería. Mamá was rarely called on to help Jewish women in labour—the Jews had their own physicians and midwives—but on a couple of occasions, Alma had accompanied Mamá into the Jewish quarter, a warren of streets as narrow as their own, the buildings rising into three or even four storeys, blocking out most of the sky.

It did not take them long to reach the *alcázar*, its golden stone gleaming in the morning light. Mamá directed them to the gate leading to the royal quarters. A couple of guards stood aside with curt nods when she told them her business. The younger eyed Alma with interest, his tongue wetting his lips. Alma shrank back against Mamá.

“He looked at me,” she whispered as they hurried along the stables. So many stables, so many kennels, and likely there were mews as well—their king was an avid hunter.

“I’m sure you mistook; you’re still a child,” Mamá said. “But if he does more than look, you know what to do.”

Alma slid her hand through the hidden slit in her skirts and gripped the handle of her dagger. Mamá had ensured they’d all been taught to use them, saying a woman’s best defence was surprise. “Most men will never expect a woman to fight back. But we must. We must.”

They reached the royal apartments. Rightfully, it should be Queen María who resided here, but the king did not like his wife—well, so Alma supposed—banishing her to live in the convent of San Clemente whenever she was in Sevilla, while Doña Leonor enjoyed the splendour of the palace built by their king’s great-grandfather within the walls of the old Moorish castle.

A young woman came to meet them. She smiled warmly at Alma, assured Mamá she’d see her daughter safe, and just like that, Mamá was gone, having done no more than squeeze Alma’s arm in farewell, admonishing her to be good and make her family proud.

"Come on." The woman extended her hand. "I'm Blanca Pérez de Limia, one of Doña Leonor's most trusted companions." She kept on talking as they walked along the arched passage that gave onto a large courtyard, divided into four by two neat stone-flagged paths. A fountain bubbled, and Alma listened with half an ear as Blanca gossiped about her mistress, the other women, the king's new son. Most trusted companion indeed; if Doña Leonor entrusted this word-spouting woman with anything truly important, she was a fool. But Blanca was sweet and smelled faintly of honey and mint, her hand surprisingly soft as it held Alma's much smaller hand firmly.

From somewhere to their right came the sound of hammering, scaffolding rising towards the sky.

Blanca made a dismissive sound. "The king," she said. "He enjoys building things."

"Oh." Alma had a vision of King Alfonso wielding mallet and chisel in only a shirt. So distracted was she by this she almost stumbled when they reached one of the towers and began ascending the short stairs.

They emerged in a space that had Alma inhaling. She'd only seen this huge hall lit by torches, and besides, she'd been too busy carrying the basket containing Mamá's precious tinctures and creams to see much more than her own feet, but now, with the sun pouring in from the courtyard, the exquisite tiling of the floor, the decorated walls and ceilings—it had her gaping. Blanca did not seem to notice. Perhaps one got accustomed to being surrounded by beauty. She tugged Alma along.

"The nursery," Blanca announced, stopping at a door that stood slightly ajar. Alma peeked. Inside, two maids were busy with the babe.

"Where is his brother?" Alma asked. She knew Doña Leonor's eldest was about a year old.

Blanca's plucked brows rose. "Not here, of course. The sons of a king are raised by their *ayos*." She waved her hand at the babe. "In some months, this one will also be sent off, to grow up under the tutelage of whoever the king chooses to entrust with his upbringing."

How sad. "And his mother? Will she not miss him?"

"Doña Leonor knows what's best for her sons. Besides, boys need to grow up with strong men."

"The king is strong," Alma protested.

Blanca almost glowed, a pink blush staining her round cheeks. "Oh yes, that he is. But he has other burdens, other responsibilities."

"It has always been thus," a soft voice said from behind them. "Boys of noble birth are sent to be raised by other noble families, thereby strengthening ties of loyalty."

Alma almost fell over in her haste to offer the speaker her reverence.

"Steady, child." Doña Leonor had hold of her elbow. "Alma, is it not?"

"Yes, mistress," Alma whispered.

"Hmm." Doña Leonor took hold of her chin and raised her face. "As I remembered," she said with a smile. "Such wondrous eyes."

Alma blinked up at her, meeting eyes as golden as her own. "Like yours, mistress," she said.

"Yes." Doña Leonor released her. "But then, we're distantly related."

Other than the odd colour of their eyes, there were no other similarities. Doña Leonor had skin so fair Alma suspected she rarely ventured outside without shading her countenance, while Alma had inherited an olive tint from her distant Moorish ancestors. Where Alma had a straight

and somewhat longish nose, Doña Leonor had been gifted with a small and perfectly proportioned nose. Her chin was delicately pointed, Alma's more square, and even if Alma was only eleven, she was almost as tall as her new mistress, taking after her father who, according to Abuela, had stork legs.

The babe wailed. Doña Leonor sighed. "Always so hungry. Always!" She beckoned for Alma to follow her and swished her way down the passage to the large solar she'd given birth in some days ago. There she settled herself in the bed and held out her arms to receive the swaddled child. She winced as the babe affixed itself to her nipple. A couple of deep breaths and she relaxed against the pillows.

Alma wasn't sure if she should sit on one of the stools or if she should remain standing. She twisted her hands together. "What should I do, mistress?"

"Pour me a drink." Doña Leonor licked her lips. "Nursing has me constantly thirsty."

A large jug stood on a small table, wisps of steam perfuming the air with the scents of lemon, honey and mint. "Blanca makes that for me every morning," Doña Leonor said.

"Mamá says a nursing mother should drink ale."

"Ale?" Doña Leonor shuddered. "Isn't that some barbaric brew those that live far to the north enjoy?"

"It is good for a nursing mother. Helps the milk production," Alma said, parroting what Mamá had taught her. In this, Mamá and Abuela were in total disagreement, Abuela being of the opinion that only uncouth heathens drank beer, Mamá pointing out that some monasteries still brewed ale and that her husband's sainted mother—who hailed from Galicia—had sworn by the valuable properties of ale.

"You'll not find ale in Sevilla," Blanca said. "Besides, should our mistress need to be invigorated, she has good wine to drink."

Alma held her tongue and concentrated on pouring the fragrant drink into a heavy glass goblet. Carefully, she carried it across to Doña Leonor.

"Thank you, child. Here, hold him for me while I drink."

Alma found herself with a child in her arms, wide eyes gazing up at her. She glanced at her mistress, flushed and looked away at the sight of the bared breasts, the dark nipples. Gently, she jiggled the babe. "He has your nose, mistress."

"Yes, he does." Doña Leonor set down the goblet. "May he have inherited my wits as well. If so," she crooned, taking the babe back, "if so, little man, nothing will stop you from achieving your heart's desire. Nothing."

She sounded sad. It struck Alma that Doña Leonor's heart's desire was to be the king's lawful wife—but that would never happen, not unless Queen María dropped dead. Discreetly, Alma crossed herself. *Keep her safe*, she thought, not quite sure which of the women she was referring to.

Chapter 2 – Valladolid, Early in 1333

Leonor de Guzmán stretched and held out her arms for her babe. Sancho blinked up at her, mouth twisting into what she thought might be a smile until it converted into an affronted wail.

“Shush, little master,” she said, settling him at her breast. Sancho expelled a deep sigh and latched on, little hands softening from tight fists. She alternated with the wet nurse, feeding him twice a day. Cesaria was adamant: Nothing was as good for a newborn child as its mother’s milk, and Leonor had every intention of ensuring her precious sons had the best of everything. Her sons: her future.

She stroked Sancho’s cheek. A few more weeks and then she’d stop nursing him. Hopefully, she’d conceive as quickly as she’d done last time. With every child, she tightened the bonds between herself and the man who legally belonged to another, and she had every intention of birthing him many, many sons.

Alfonso was generous with her—she amassed manors at a satisfying speed—and also with their sons, endowing them with lands and titles that had some of the nobles grumbling, stating that the king had no right to fritter away the royal lands to enrich his little bastards. That land, they muttered, belonged to the king and his future true heirs.

Alfonso just shrugged when such grumblings reached him. The royal dominions had increased significantly when his uncles had died without male heirs, so if he wanted to endow his sons, well then, he would, no matter what men like Don Juan Manuel, Lord of Villena, of Escalona and Peñafiel, might think of this.

Don Juan Manuel was a powerful man, grandson of the great Fernando III, while Alfonso was . . . she counted in her head . . . the great-great-grandson of the same king. He was also an entitled man who’d never come to terms with losing his influence when Alfonso began ruling on his own.

Leonor had to smile; fourteen and headstrong, her Alfonso had declared himself an adult and dispensed with all those counsellors who’d used his minority to enrich themselves. When he’d started reclaiming lands and titles, Juan Manuel and some of his ilk had attempted to bring their young king under control by forming an alliance strong enough to threaten him. That particular plan had been foiled when the king had offered to wed Juan Manuel’s little daughter, Constanza, Don Juan leaping at the opportunity of seeing his daughter as the mother of a future king.

But when Alfonso had annulled his marriage with little Constanza—she was no longer of any use to him, having served as the distraction he needed while arranging the assassination of one of the rebels—he’d insulted Don Juan Manuel. Alfonso had shrugged and negotiated a marriage with María of Portugal instead.

Leonor gnawed her lip. Over the last few years, Alfonso had been obliged to take up arms against Juan Manuel and other disgruntled Castilian noblemen. So here they were, Alfonso obliged to fight his own nobles rather than the Marinids constantly threatening Castile’s southern shores.

She sighed, running a finger over Sancho’s embroidered cap. Her son, a mere four weeks old. Her second son. Alfonso’s third son, but María’s little Fernando was ailing, and to her own surprise, Leonor had taken to including the little infante in her prayers. While she might detest María of Portugal for having the right to call Alfonso her husband, she would never wish on

anyone the pain of losing a child. Besides, María may have given Alfonso the heir he so desired, but he was Leonor's—had been hers since the moment they first met, almost six years ago.

She closed her eyes, recalling that day with perfect clarity. She'd been seventeen, recently widowed. Not that she was overly distraught over Juan's death. He'd been an adequate husband, but there had never been anything beyond respect between them. Their marital bed had been one of duty, not lust, with her spreading her legs, him fiddling with himself before mounting her.

So it was not as a mourning widow she arrived at her sister's home that long gone September day, but rather as a woman who, for the first time in her life, had an element of freedom. She was rich and, as a widow, entitled to a say in her future.

She recalled dressing with care—it irked her that while her parents had arranged a good enough marriage for her, they'd negotiated an excellent marriage for Juana, her younger sister. Not for her a mere, if rich, *adelantado*. No, Juana had been wed to Enrique Enriquez, grandson of the great Infante Enrique the Senator, and a close relative to their young king. Where her Juan had been stiff and formal—and far too old—Enrique was charming and handsome, as comfortable leading his lady wife through the complex turns of an *estampida* or a carol on the dance floor as accompanying his royal cousin on a hunt.

"I was jealous," she murmured to her son. "So, so jealous." Sancho opened an eye at the sound of her voice before going back to the arduous task of nursing.

Enrique Enriquez always offered splendid entertainment. While his primary residence was elsewhere, he kept an elegant home in Sevilla, close enough to the *alcázar* to be on hand should the king require his services. That particular day, Leonor had been rowed up the Guadalquivir from her own residence, walking the last stretch accompanied by four of her guards and a maidservant. It had been uncomfortably warm for the season, and the dark red skirts she'd chosen to wear might have been magnificent but were far too hot, the fine wool dampening with the humidity.

It had been dusk when she arrived.

From inside came the sounds of voices, laughter and music, and no one noticed when she entered. On the gallery above, musicians played one lively tune after the other, while an entire troupe of acrobats entertained the guests with daredevil jumps and tumbles. People were standing in small groups, wine flowed freely and servants moved about, offering the guests all sorts of delicacies.

Leonor shook her head at the offered miniature skewers and found herself a corner. For the first time since Juan died, she felt his absence—not because she missed him, but because his presence would have commanded attention. Instead, here she was, invisible to everyone, even her own sister, who was hanging on to her husband's arm and laughing at whatever it was he was saying.

She chose to slip outside into the garden. It was testament to Enrique's wealth that his house not only had a large traditional patio, complete with a lion spouting water in the Moorish style, but also, beyond the building forming the fourth side round the patio, an extensive decorative garden. Leonor dismissed her maid with a wave of her hand. "I want to be alone."

The evening darkened, but small lanterns glowed here and there among the greenery, and over by the wall stood a huge peach tree, full with blushing golden fruit. Leonor sauntered over

and stood on her toes to pick one. She bit into it, and it was so perfectly ripe, sweet, sticky juice coating her fingers, running down her wrist.

"Ahhh." She closed her eyes and took another bite, licking her lips clean of all that sweetness. Delicious. One more bite, another. She finished the peach and was just about to lob the pit over the wall when she heard the swishing sound of approaching footsteps.

A man. He came closer, and the light from one of Enrique's many lanterns gilded him. Leonor froze. By every saint, was he lovely! He moved closer, and the angel converted into a man she'd seen before—but only at a distance.

"My king." She inclined her head.

"Leonor, is it not?" King Alfonso was close enough to touch. He was not a particularly tall man, but she was a short woman—short and round, her mother always said—so she had to tip her head back to see his face.

"It is, my lord."

"Alfonso," he said, flashing her a smile that made him look more like a boy than a man. Come to think of it, he was a boy, her age. He extended his hand. She stiffened, all too aware of how sticky her fingers were. Had he not come, she'd have lifted her skirts and wiped her hand clean on her linen shift, but that was impossible now.

"Was it a good peach?" he murmured, taking hold of her wrist. His thumb stroked her skin, and her pulse leapt.

"It was," she managed.

"It looked good," he said, his voice hoarse. "I think I must check how sweet it was."

"Do you want me to pick you one?" she asked, seeing as she was standing closest to the tree.

"No." He lifted her hand, and to her shock, he sucked one of her fingers into his mouth. "Mmm," he said, and heat coiled in Leonor's belly. He sucked the next finger, and the heat converted into a throbbing ache.

Holy Mother! She had to bite back a moan when he cleaned off her middle finger, his gaze never leaving hers. *This is how it is supposed to feel*, she thought, shivering despite burning up from within.

"Almost done," he said when he'd finished with her fingers. And then that soft, generous mouth came down on hers, and God help her, but she leaned into him, tasting him as thoroughly as he was tasting her. Her heart pounded against her ribs, her lungs burned, but she still mewled in protest when he released her.

"Shh." He nuzzled her. "Shush, *Tesoro*. We have time a plenty to explore this."

"We do?" She clung to him. He laughed softly and separated them.

"We do. And some things should not be hurried."

"Mistress?" Alma's voice jerked her out of her reminiscences. "He's asleep," Alma continued, and Leonor gazed down at her little son, tenderness swelling in her chest.

"Shall I take him?" Alma reached for Sancho.

"Not yet. Soon enough he will be gone." She smiled at the young girl. She was pretty enough, those golden eyes fringed by thick, sooty lashes, adding beauty to what would otherwise be a relatively ordinary face. Thick, dark hair, little wisps escaping the braid that hung down her back—in some years, little Alma would likely attract her fair share of male admirers.

"Do you miss him? His brother?" Alma asked.

Every day. Her little Pedro, raised by others than her, as would any son she gave birth to. But it would serve them well in the future, their *ayos* men they could count on.

Alma set down a platter beside the bed. Bread, olives, dried figs. Leonor picked up one of the figs and smiled. Not exactly a peach, but a fruit was a fruit, reminding her yet again of that distant golden evening.

They'd been so young, she and Alfonso. *Sí*, he'd bedded plenty of women before her, but in matters of the heart they were both utter innocents. He knew a lot about lust and desire. She did not. Neither of them knew about love, about the absolute joy and devastating pain it could bring.

Rarely did they meet over the coming months. When they did, they danced like moths around a flame. She did not think he set out to do more than seduce her, but during those first few months, something happened, and what had begun as a constant, aching desire had converted into something else, a sense of destiny, of fate.

Leonor grimaced. That sensation had faded quickly when he wed María, late in 1328. To this day, she could recall the pain, the desolation, that had her bedridden for days after he rode off to celebrate his nuptials. At the time, she'd been blind to his pain, angry with him for betraying her. Now, she knew he'd had no choice. He had to wed so as to strengthen the alliance with Portugal. Of course, one could question if that had been a wise decision; Alfonso made no secret of who had his heart, and the relationship with his father-in-law was a thorny, dangerous thing.

Leonor sighed. Loudly did King Afonso of Portugal complain about the treatment of his daughter—so enraged he openly supported Don Juan Manuel and his fellow rebels—just as loudly did some of the Castilian nobles grumble about the lack of a second legitimate son, especially given Infante Fernando's frailty. At some point . . . No, no, she did not want to think about it! She tightened her hold on her babe, causing him to utter an indignant wail.

"Mistress?" Alma lifted Sancho out of Leonor's arms and shushed him.

"It's nothing. Nothing." Nothing? Her soul howled in despair. *He is mine! Only mine!* But he wasn't—not entirely. Most would say he was María's. He would say she had his heart, but María had a right to demand he do his duty.

Sometimes, she wished she didn't love Alfonso. Sometimes, she wondered what her life would have been like if she'd never met him, this force of nature that so easily dominated whatever room he entered, who rode as well as he fought, who was loud and boisterous but also thoughtful and caring.

A man easily dismissed as volatile and headstrong, who excelled at keeping his own counsel and rarely revealed just what his intentions were before acting upon them.

A man ruthless enough to assassinate those he considered threats, but with endless patience and gentleness towards those he loved.

As if her thoughts had conjured him, Alfonso was suddenly at her door. He was bareheaded, his light brown hair ruffled and messy. He brought with him the scents of forest and sea, of water and sun. Tucked into his belt was his falconer's glove, and one of his favourite hounds came padding after him.

"A good day?"

"Very." He leaned against the doorjamb and smiled at her. "Even better now."

Six years on, and he could still make her blush just by the tone of his voice.

"Alma?" She did not look away from her man. "Take Sancho to his nurse."

“Sí, Doña Leonor.”

The young girl darted off, clutching her charge to her chest.

Leonor patted the bed. “Come here, my love.”

Chapter 3 – Sevilla, July 1333

On the first truly hot day of summer, Alma had been serving Doña Leonor for seven months. Months mostly spent packing and unpacking because her mistress accompanied their king wherever he went—with the exception of the battlefield, according to Blanca.

Today, they were back in Sevilla, but for some reason, this time they were not staying at the *alcázar*, but instead at Doña Leonor's house—a huge sprawling thing she'd inherited from her husband. From the house, well-tended orchards extended all the way to the shores of the Guadalquivir, the river a band of deep turquoise bordered by sandbanks in shades of gold and red.

The house itself was old—old enough to have started its days as a Moorish residence, the delicate stone latticework testament to the craftsmanship of those long-dead builders. Tiles in intricate patterns of blue and green adorned the walls, the floors gleamed of beeswax, and elegant arches opened upon several patios, the largest of them adorned with four large orange trees, one in each quarter. Roses clambered up to the second floor; in a shaded corner stood a fig tree dripping with ripening fruit. Water burbled in the narrow channels bordering the patio—cool water that offered refreshment from the building heat.

"Why here?" Alma knelt to dip her hands in the water. "Why not at the *alcázar*?"

"Because the king is elsewhere," Blanca replied, following suit. They shared a quick look. They both knew where the king was, had seen him ride off some weeks ago, looking haggard.

The little infante was dead, and Alma would never forget the king's reaction when the weeping messenger stormed into the hall with his sad news. He'd gone as still as a statue at first, and then he'd crumpled, nigh on falling into Doña Leonor's embrace. It had looked distinctly uncomfortable, what with their mistress already swelling with child again, but somehow, this small woman had held the weeping man, raising her voice to order them all to leave. After a day and a night closeted in the solar, the king and Doña Leonor had emerged, she with red-rimmed eyes.

Blanca dipped the ends of her veil, using them to dab at her face. "By God, it is hot!"

Not as hot as it would become. But Blanca was from somewhere up north, close to Burgos. Alma pulled a face; she'd not liked Burgos, a rainy, windy place constrained by high, forbidding walls. No, she much preferred Sevilla. It was as if the sky was wider here, endless, almost, while in Burgos it was only visible in patches, the streets dark and winding, the buildings rising upwards to block what daylight there was.

"When will the king be back?" Alma asked.

"God alone knows," Blanca said. "Once he has buried his son, he has other matters to handle. That Juan Nuñez de Lara needs a lesson—as does Don Juan Manuel."

Rebels. On top of the loss of his son, the king was plagued by rebellious nobles who took up arms against their king. Or so Alma understood from eavesdropping on the conversations of the *adelantados* who attended on the king. Even the guards spoke of it, but they all seemed remarkably unconcerned, their faith in the king as solid as the ground beneath Alma's feet.

"It is not only the rebels," Blanca continued. "Miguel—" She broke off, flushing a bright pink. Alma suppressed a giggle. Blanca made cow's eyes at the young *hidalgo* whenever she saw him. "He says it is the fall of Gibraltar that truly concerns the king." Blanca crossed herself. "God help the unfortunates that fell into infidel hands!"

Alma did not reply. She knew from Abuela that it had not been easy for the infidel when the Castilian king had conquered Sevilla all those years ago. Not that Abuela had been alive back then, but she'd heard from *her* grandmother just how difficult it became to remain true to their faith in a city taken over by crosses and priests. Abuela's ancestors had converted, but to this day there were a few Muslims living in Sevilla, albeit they did not proclaim their beliefs openly. It was increasingly dangerous to not be Christian—the Jews were despised and mocked, but they were tolerated due to their skills in everything from medicine to law—and most Muslims had left, either across the water to the vast kingdom of the Marinids or to Granada, the last remaining Moorish kingdom in what had once been Al-Andalus.

Doña Leonor retired to her solar, complaining of headaches. The room was dark, the shutters firmly closed against the sun and heat. While Blanca and Teresa—Doña Leonor's most trusted companion—covered her forehead, wrists and ankles with wet cloths, Alma was sent off to prepare a soothing herbal infusion.

"Chamomile and willow root," Alma recited. "Black nightshade if the pain is bad." But she did not dare to give Doña Leonor nightshade—or ginger—not when she was rounding with child. She racked her brain, trying to recall just how Mamá soothed headaches.

After some consideration, Alma added some dried peppermint. Everyone knew this fragrant herb helped against headaches.

She returned to the solar balancing a mug of aromatic infusion. Maybe she should have added some valerian, but she was uncertain about the dosage, and Mamá had been unspecific; a pinch could be quite a lot or very, very little.

Mamá—it was weeks and weeks since she'd seen her last. Now that they were back in Sevilla, surely she'd be allowed to visit, if nothing else to replenish her stores of herbs. Alma wasn't quite sure how she'd become responsible for Doña Leonor's infusions. *Sí*, she knew a lot about herbs—impossible not to do, growing up with Mamá and Abuela—but Teresa was competent and knowledgeable. Blanca . . . Alma suppressed a little sigh. She might be several years older than Alma, but Blanca was Blanca, with about as much common sense as a moth, drawn constantly to the flame that would kill it.

"Thank you." Doña Leonor handed Alma the empty mug. She reclined against the pillow, sighing when Blanca began rubbing her feet. "Yes," she murmured, "yes, sweet Blanca, just like that." She opened an eye and looked directly at Alma. "You are free to visit your mother, *niña*. But take Gonzalo with you."

Alma shuddered. She avoided Gonzalo as much as possible, hated how his gaze would linger on her—had done so from the day she joined Doña Leonor's household.

"*Sí*, mistress," she said, even if she had no intention of allowing Gonzalo to escort her. Besides, she could find her own way. This was her city, after all.

Pablo, their single male servant, was sitting at Mamá's gate. He brightened at the sight of her. "Little Alma, welcome home." Then he frowned. "Are you alone?"

"It is just a short walk," she protested. Except it wasn't. It had taken her much longer than expected, and on a couple of occasions, she'd broken into a run, made uncomfortable by the way some of the men she'd passed had looked at her.

Inside, Mamá welcomed her with wide open arms. "You've grown!" Mamá said. "And look at you, dressed like a lady of the court."

Alma looked down at her blue skirts. Compared to Doña Leonor's garments, hers were simple things, but compared to Mamá's serviceable brown, they were pretty.

For a couple of hours, Alma enjoyed the company of her family. Nuria drowned her in questions, Abuela set down one little dish after the other in front of her, and Mamá just sat beside her, holding her hand. Only Ramona held herself aloof, her dark eyes flitting repeatedly to Alma's skirts, to her new sandals, made of the softest leather and decorated with glass beads.

"Is she in good health?" Mamá asked as they took a seat in the shaded patio. Ramona and Nuria had been sent off to do their chores; Abuela had retired for a nap.

"I think so." Alma gnawed her lip.

"Unwise," Mamá muttered. "Her latest babe is seven months, and she is already carrying the next one. Mark my words, *hija*, it takes too much out of you. That is why you should breastfeed as long as possible."

Alma gave her a blank look.

"It is harder to conceive while you're nursing your babe."

Except that Doña Leonor wanted as many children as possible—or so Alma had concluded, listening to her talk to Teresa.

"I need more herbs," she said, "and I am not quite sure what to do when her breasts ache."

"They ache?"

"Sí." Alma ducked her head, uncomfortable with sharing so much detail about her mistress. "They leak. Should they do that so soon?"

"A consequence of conceiving so quickly. Cabbage leaves help. Or charcoal."

"Charcoal?" Just the thought of placing something so dirty on Doña Leonor's chest had Alma fidgeting.

"In a poultice," Mamá said with a laugh. "Silly goose." She hugged her close. "Are you happy?"

"She is a good mistress." Alma missed her home and family; she missed all those hours spent with Mamá and Abuela, listening as they talked about cures for everything from warts to an inability to conceive. But she didn't say that.

Far too soon, Alma had to leave. When Mamá realised she'd walked here alone, she frowned. "Foolish behaviour!"

She shifted from foot to foot. "It's just . . . that Gonzalo, he looks at me as if he'd like to eat me."

"Gonzalo?"

"One of Doña Leonor's guards."

"You must tell her," Mamá said with a frown. "Some men see the woman you will become rather than the child you are."

Alma did not understand. Mamá sighed. "Never mind. But promise me you will not walk about alone again. And talk to your mistress about that Gonzalo."

Alma nodded, even if she knew she wouldn't. Doña Leonor was fond of Gonzalo, who bowed and scraped before her as if she were the Virgin come to earth.

"Pablo will see you back," Mamá continued, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Visit us when you can."

They remained in Sevilla for weeks, and Alma took every opportunity to visit her family. From every such visit, she returned with yet another kernel of knowledge, Mamá and Abuela happy to answer her questions and offer advice. On three occasions, she accompanied Mamá into the birthing chambers of her clients, and she puffed up with pride when Mamá praised her. “You have good hands and a clear head.”

Doña Leonor spent most of her time in her solar or moving from one patch of shade to the other in the large patio, quite often with her sister and mother in attendance. Alma was intimidated by Doña Leonor’s mother, a short, thin woman who tended to order everyone around, including her daughter. When Alma had been introduced to Juana Ponce de León de Guzmán, the old woman’s lip had curled into a little sneer.

“One of Ramón’s daughters?” She turned to Doña Leonor. “What is this? Charity?”

“Alma is a valued member of my household,” Doña Leonor had replied, but her mother had scoffed. “Dirt poor, is what she is.”

Alma wanted nothing more than to hide, her skin crawling under the assessing gaze of the old woman.

“That’s enough, Mother,” Doña Leonor had said. “And let us not forget you’re here to ask for charity as well.”

“Pah! Not at all the same thing! I am asking you to think of your relatives, whisper their names into the king’s ear. Why shouldn’t your family benefit from your—”

“Whoring?” Leonor suggested, and Alma bit back a gasp. Doña Leonor sat back, enjoying her mother’s discomfiture. “That’s what you call it behind my back, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t only Doña Leonor’s family; every day, a long line of men came to request an audience—“A favour”, Blanca sniffed—and how her mistress could sit for hours listening to these fawning men was incomprehensible to Alma.

“That’s all she does: listen,” Teresa explained. “Rarely does our mistress ask the king for favours or appointments—she knows better than that.”

“The king doesn’t like it?”

“She offers him a home, a place where he can be Alfonso, not the king.”

“Ah,” Alma said, trying to sound as if she understood.

Despite all these visitors, time dragged for Doña Leonor. Every day, she would clamber the stairs to the mirador facing south, staring in the direction of Gibraltar. Every day, she would lead her household in prayers in the chapel, hours spent on their knees even after Father Rafael had concluded Mass.

On occasion, a messenger would arrive with news from the king. There was always a gift for Doña Leonor, sometimes something for baby Sancho as well, but what Doña Leonor set most value on were the missives, retiring to read them in private before emerging glowing like the sun.

And then, some days after the feast of Saint Michael and all the angels, the king returned. Gibraltar was truly lost, the king’s effort to retake what had been lost in June a failure, because of Don Juan Manuel—or so said the tired and grim Don Alfonso. “That man! One day I will skewer him,” raged the king before retiring to the private baths with Doña Leonor.

A few days later, Alma was busy sorting through Doña Leonor’s linen chests. In one pile went the garments that required bleaching and washing, in another those that had to be mended, and in

the third—substantially smaller—pile, those that were good enough to use as they were. She was sitting cross-legged in the large mirador just off the solar, open on three sides to the bright day outside.

The woman had an endless supply of garments and other linen. How could one woman possibly need . . . Alma counted . . . thirty-seven shifts? She sighed and moved to the next chest. This one was full of sheets, and each one she had to take out, unfold, check for mildew or tears before either refolding it or adding it to the pile of items requiring laundry and repair. She stood and braced her hands against the carved banister, wishing she was down in the small shaded patio below—or in the gardens that extended beyond it—doing nothing more strenuous than sitting in the shade.

She ducked behind a pillar when a man stepped out from one of the storage sheds that lined the opposite side of the patio. Gonzalo. The man was in only shirt and *bragas*, bare legs on display for the entire world to see. Eww! Alma pulled a face. The man was as hairy as a monkey. He raised his arms over his head and stretched before adjusting his groin—Alma knew full well what men hid under their linen *bragas* and was glad the guard chose not to dig out that slug of a member and relieve himself. He had the bad habit of doing so in Doña Leonor's planted pots.

Instead, he sauntered off, and Alma was just about to return to her task when the shed door opened again. One of the serving maids emerged. Even from here, Alma could see she was crying, scrubbing at her face with her hand. There was a tear down her dark linen skirts, her hair and veil were in utter disarray, and a bruise bloomed across her face. Alma was about to call out, but out of nowhere another of the serving wenches appeared, hurrying over to enfold the weeping girl in an embrace.

Alma returned to the linen chests, trying to make sense of what she'd seen. Gonzalo, emerging with a smile, the poor girl slipping out distraught. He'd done something to her, had hurt her. Alma debated whether to tell someone, but even after less than a year in this household, she knew her mistress held Gonzalo in the highest esteem—the man had once saved her life.

After yet another few hours, Alma sat back against the wall. Done! From the nearby holm oak came the murmuring of a dove, the sky beyond that deep hue of blue that only came with approaching autumn. To the north, the shadowy outline of the Sierra Morena was just about visible.

She closed her eyes. The warmth and sun made her sleepy, and it did not help that her pallet stood in the nursery, where little Sancho had spent most of the night afflicted by colic. Not that it was her place to say anything, but she feared the infant suffered from graver afflictions, his gaze surprisingly blank at times. Alma yawned. Nonsense, likely. After all, what did *she* know about babes?

She dozed, startling awake at the sound of raised voices.

"You know I have to do this!" King Alfonso sounded irate. "I have no choice."

"Am I supposed to commiserate?" Doña Leonor retorted. "Should I comfort you for having to bed with another woman?"

"Yes! It is not something I look forward to, but I need an heir; I need a son."

"You already have two sons, likely soon three!"

Alma stood. She should not be here, should not be hearing this. But the only way out would have her passing the open door to the solar. She crouched back down.

"Sons I love," the king replied. "Beautiful, healthy sons—but they are born out of wedlock."

“Bastards, you mean,” Doña Leonor said, sounding as if she’d bitten into a lemon. He sighed. “I didn’t call them that. But yes, they are bastards and can never inherit the crown.”

“Oh?” To judge from how close Doña Leonor’s voice was, she was at the window facing west. “And yet wasn’t your father a bastard?”

“That was different. My grandparents were wed—the stupid pope refused to recognise their union, but the Castilian nobles did.”

She didn’t reply. His boots scudded across the tiles, and now he was also at the window, close enough that Alma could hear him sigh.

“I need an heir. I need my wife to give me a son.”

“Your wife.” She laughed bitterly. “More fool me, for being your loyal concubine, mother to the sons you will just shove aside and—”

“I don’t shove them aside! How can you say that?”

“Go, then!” Her skirts swished, her voice fading as she moved away from him. “Go! Go and swive your precious wife—what do I care?” But from the way her voice broke, she did care.

“Don’t be like this, *Tesoro*. You know I find no pleasure in bedding her—nor does she.” He sighed again. “If only Fernando had lived! But he didn’t, and I must have a son—with her. I must mend my fences with her—and more specifically with her father. I need Portugal’s help to retake Gibraltar, that damned de Lara and Juan Manuel are in open rebellion, with that ungrateful bastard Juan Alfonso de Haro threatening to join them. I cannot have Afonso of Portugal breathing down my neck as well. You understand that, don’t you?”

Alma didn’t. It all sounded very confusing.

A long silence followed. “Yes,” Doña Leonor finally replied. “But that doesn’t mean this doesn’t hurt. It hurts like hell! Every time you go to her, it’s like having a nail hammered into my heart.”

“I feel nothing for her. Nothing! But you, I love. You are the light in my life, the guiding star in my firmament.”

Alma had to suppress a giggle. A guiding star? What sort of nonsense was that?

“You are what carries me through having to do this,” the king continued. “She is a duty, *Tesoro*, nothing more than a duty.”

“Poor woman,” Leonor muttered, and Alma could but agree.

“Yes.” He sounded tired. “Poor woman. She does not deserve this, is nothing but a pawn in all this mess.”

There was no response.

“Right. I am off,” he said.

Still no response.

“Leonor,” he cajoled, “do not let me leave like this.”

“Go,” she said. “Go, and pray that I am still here when you decide to come back. Maybe I should wed someone. Do my duty with him. How would you like that, Alfonso?”

The king actually growled. Heavy strides across the floor, a gasp. “You belong to me,” he said. “Remember that. You belong to me, and I will kill any man who as much as lays a finger on you!”

There were sounds Alma suspected were kisses. Soft moans, the rustling of clothes.

“I just can’t bear it,” Doña Leonor said some heartbeats later. “I hate being the woman in the shadows, while she is your lawful wife, your queen.”

"No, my sweet, you have it wrong. You may think you live in the shadows, but I only have one true queen. One, Leonor, and that is you."

"Queen of the shadows," she said with a bitter laugh.

"Queen of my heart," he replied.

"Oh, Alfonso." Doña Leonor began to weep, and Alma covered her ears with her hands and wished she was anywhere but here.

Doña Leonor took to her bed. Over the coming days, the house was sunk in gloom, Doña Leonor refusing to see anyone but Teresa.

"So sad," Blanca said to Alma.

"Sí." Sad for all three of them. While Alma had never met Queen María, her mother had, saying she was a fine lady, soft-spoken and kind.

"Ah, well. The heart wants what the heart wants." Blanca gave Alma a patronising smile. "You don't understand yet, but one day you will." She went back to her sewing. "She was devastated when he wed *her*." Blanca spat out the pronoun. "But back then, theirs was nothing but a game of stolen kisses and caresses. It was worse when he felt pressured to lay with his wife, our lady recently delivered of their first son, little Pedro."

Blanca stabbed the needle through the material. "Doña Leonor was utterly distraught, so pale, so silent. It was as if all life had drained out of her, and she walked these passages like a veritable ghost." Blanca crossed herself. "Not that I believe in such."

Alma did.

"And then, from somewhere came this anger, this strength, and she told her servants to never let the king over her threshold. She did not want to see him ever again."

Alma gaped. "She did?"

"Oh yes." Blanca chuckled. "She was so angry, screeching that he should stay with his wife and reconcile himself to a loveless marriage."

"Is it truly loveless?"

"Rumour has it they disliked each other on sight."

"Ah."

"The king, however, wasn't having it. When our lady, just to taunt him, made it known she would consider proposals of marriage, he alighted from the marital bed and stormed over." Blanca shook her head. "Like an avenging angel he was, threatening the guards with death unless they let him—their king—through. And then he slammed open the door to her solar. 'What is this?' he yelled. 'Are you considering wedding someone else?' 'Why not?' she replied. 'You have.' 'I had no choice,' he roared." Blanca shuddered. "He truly did roar. And then . . ." She waggled her brows.

"Yes?"

"They reconciled. And the next morning, it was as if all those heavy clouds hanging over our lady's head had dispersed, and she was back to being happy and in love. It was beautiful, so beautiful." Blanca set a hand to her heart. "Verily like one of those romances, where the gallant knight wins the heart of his damsel."

Except this gallant knight was wed elsewhere, and that, Alma knew, was a grievous, grievous sin.