

PROTECTING ALEIDA



MARYSE DAWSON

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



THE YEAR OF OUR LORD, 1641

*I*t was a glorious day, the autumn colours giving a vibrant mixture of red, russet and gold to the surrounding trees.

Aleida Gray, seated on her horse, raised her small face to the sun and closed her eyes. The bright rays were still strong and she welcomed the warmth they brought. It would be winter soon and the mere thought made her shudder with distaste. She hated the cold—hated the snow even more.

Sighing, she dismounted and set about the task her mother had set her. Armed with a small basket, she bent down and began sifting through the grasses at the edge of the meadow, whilst her horse, Merlin, happily began to graze. He was used to her ways and quite content to remain nearby.

Aleida knew exactly which herbs her mother needed—yarrow, borage and horehound. Her mother had been taught the healing ways by her grandmother and the family tradition had been passed down to Aleida. Her curious nature made learning them all very easy. Most, she had discovered when out with her mother in the

surrounding countryside or, if the weather was inclement, she would be found avidly poring over her mother's journals, noting the names of each plant and root and identifying them all by the perfectly drawn pictures.

She walked along, every now and then stooping down to break off a stem or two of the correct plants that nestled amongst the long grass.

Her basket was nearly full when she heard the distinct sound of hoof beats approaching. She looked up to see who it was and immediately scowled. The man approaching noted her expression immediately and smiled in response. Reaching her side, he swiftly dismounted and walked towards her.

"Good morrow, fair Aleida." He bowed politely before fixing his hazel eyes on her.

"I am not talking to you," Aleida declared, putting her nose up in the air theatrically and turning her back on him. "If you have come to visit with my parents, then I suggest you do so."

She heard him chuckle and, annoyed, she pursed her lips. Rogue. Knave. Known to many as Favian the fierce, Favian de Berville irritated her beyond reason. He had a knack of seeing through her, and it irked her—so much so, that the last time they had met, she had ended up throwing her cup of wine over him. But it had not ended there. Oh no. He had dared to spank her. *Her!* She had never been so embarrassed in her whole life, and if he thought she would lower herself to even look at him, then he could think again!

"I gather you are still smarting, forgive the pun, from our last encounter?" He was grinning; she just knew it.

"Go away!" she snapped.

She felt his hand on her arm and he tried to turn her around, but she stood her ground.

"Surely, you are not still mad at me, Aleida? You cannot expect to throw wine over me and for me not to react."

At this, Aleida spun around and, putting her hands on her hips, huffed, "You did not have to spank me!"

"Aye, I did," he reasoned. "That sort of behaviour warrants nothing less, and for your information, I would do so again." He looked at her astutely. "But then, you won't do it again, will you?"

Aleida ignored him, and picking up her basket, she began to walk towards her horse.

Favian chose to walk next to her, leading his mount by the reins. "I see you have been gathering herbs," he noted.

"I am still not talking to you," Aleida declared.

"You just did." He chuckled.

Reaching her horse, Aleida put her basket in the saddle bag and quickly mounted. Before Favian had a chance to do the same, Aleida urged Merlin into a canter and took off towards Highthorpe, her home.

Favian de Berville was a handsome devil, if not an arrogant one. His father had been her father's best friend, and when he had died, her parents had taken Favian under their wing and raised him alongside their own children. He had been eight when Aleida was born and she had therefore known him all her life. Through the ups and the downs, he had helped her. When the king had paid a visit, he had been there to settle her nerves, just as he had been by her side when her brother had succumbed to smallpox and drawn his last breath. Her parents, lost in grief, had been too broken to offer the help she needed, so his was the shoulder she had cried on, the arms that had held her close as she came to terms with her loss.

He had joined the king's army a few years ago but still came to visit them when he had the opportunity. He had risen to a general, and she could see why. He had a strength about him and combined with his dominant nature, he made a good leader.

Aye, she admitted, he did also have a soft side, but he was domineering, and she was never going to forgive him for spanking her. She tilted her small chin in the air stubbornly, determined to ignore him.

She reached the main gate and, entering through the wide archway, cantered along the drive.

Tully, one of the guards, smiled at her and came forward to take possession of Merlin's reins.

"My thanks, Tully," she said, nimbly dismounting.

"Your mother was looking for you. She mentioned something about herbs?" he told her.

"Aye, I have just been gathering some. I shall make haste."

She retrieved her basket from the saddle bag, and leaving Merlin in Tully's safe hands, she quickly entered the house.

Her mother, Josselyn, was in the kitchen, her brow furrowed as she sifted through an array of herbs on the table. She looked up when Aleida entered.

"Ah, there you are, daughter. Did you manage to find all that we need?"

Aleida placed the basket down and showed her the contents. "There is only a little horehound but plenty of the other two. Will that do, or should I search for more?"

Josselyn placed a hand on her shoulder. "Nay, 'tis plenty." She lifted out some of the plants and, pulling off the leaves, placed them in a small wooden bowl.

"Will these help Papa recover?" Aleida asked, her voice laced with worry. Merek, her father, had come down with a nasty cough and a high temperature a few days ago, and nothing her mother seemed to do eased his chest.

"I can only hope so, my dear. Fetch me a little water, would you?"

Aleida did as she was bid and brought over a small jug. She watched as her mother poured a little water into the bowl and then began pounding the leaves with a pestle, adding more liquid as needed.

"It won't taste nice, but it should aid his recovery," she said, lifting the bowl and pouring the potion into a cup. "Take it to him and see that he drinks it all."

"Aye, Mama."

Her father was in bed, propped up by pillows and looking decidedly pale. His eyes were closed and Aleida could hear the raspy breathing coming from his throat. The mattress dipped as she sat on the edge, and her father opened his eyes slowly. He was so weak, it made her heart ache. She blinked back the tears and put on a bright smile.

"Papa, I am come to give you some medicine. Mama has prepared it especially for you."

He grimaced and said, hoarsely, "If I must." The concoctions never tasted nice, but they did usually help.

Tenderly, Aleida helped him drink the foul liquid until it was all gone. He closed his eyes and, within minutes, was fast asleep.

"Aye, Papa, 'tis the best remedy," she said softly, covering his hand with hers. As her mother always said, sleep was a good healer.

She stood up just as her mother entered the room. She placed a finger on her lips to indicate her father was asleep, so Josselyn asked in hushed tones if he had taken all the medicine.

Aleida nodded and showed her the empty cup.

"I shall sit with him a while. Favian has come to visit—he is in the drawing room. Go and keep him company, Aleida. I will join you anon."

The last thing she wanted to do was talk to that oaf, but politeness dictated that she would have to. She reached the doorway and, taking a deep breath, entered within.

Favian was sitting at the long table, with a drink in his hand. He raised his head as she entered and smiled warmly. Despite her desire to remain angry with him, the sight of his even white teeth and striking hazel eyes soon broke through her resolve. Putting aside their differences, she joined him at the table, seating herself opposite.

"Wine, my lady?" Favian raised the jug in front of her and lifted a quizzical eyebrow.

"Aye, if you please." She waited for him to pour her a cup and then, taking a deep draught, asked, "I thought you were in France?"

"Aye, I was, until recently. I returned back to Nottingham last month. King Charles has set up new military headquarters behind the battlements, and he asked me to help oversee everything." He covered her hand with his and squeezed it gently. "I have only just found out that your father is unwell. I would have come sooner if I had known."

Aleida shrugged her slim shoulders and sighed heavily. "He is not at all well, but perchance this potion my mother has made will see him well again."

"I will pray for him," he said solemnly.

"My thanks, Favian."

He studied her before asking, "You have dark circles beneath your eyes. I gather you have not been sleeping properly?"

Aleida shook her head. "Nay, how can I when Papa is so ill? I try to reassure myself that all is well, but then, when he remains abed in the same condition, I fear the worst." She looked down at his hand on hers, noting the way that it completely encompassed her own. Favian was a large man, well over six feet tall, and possessed a very muscular build. She always felt tiny in comparison.

"Fear not, Aleida," he consoled her. "I am certain, with your mother's help, he will be up and about before you know it."

She looked up and smiled softly. "We can only hope so."

She took another draught of her wine, letting the fiery liquid burn its way down her throat. "Are you staying here or must you return to Nottingham?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I have a week's leave, so, with your mother's permission, I will remain here a while. I would see your father improved before I depart."



THE NEXT DAY, Aleida's father took a turn for the worse. His whole

body shivered one minute and then, the next; he broke out in a sweat. Her mother was almost at a loss as to what to do next.

"His temperature is high, far too high," exclaimed Josselyn, her face etched with worry. "If he has any chance of surviving this, then we must bring it down."

A lukewarm bath was ordered, and with the help of the servants, Merek was lowered into the water. When Josselyn decided his body was cool enough, he was taken out, dried off and put back to bed.

The process had been repeated throughout the day, but there was no sign of improvement.

"If only the fever would break," Josselyn fretted. "I fear I will have to call the physician. None of my remedies have worked." She wrung her hands together in agitation.

Aleida looked at her in shock. "But, Mother, you know his views on your medicines. He made it plain he thinks it is sorcery!"

To be truthful, Tobias Alcroft scared the wits out of her. His beady black eyes seemed to stare right through her, and his healing methods were less than desirable. She reasoned her father must be very unwell for her mother to even mention his name.

"I have no choice, Aleida."

Josselyn called to one of the servants and instructed him to summon the physician to Highthorpe. "Make haste; tell him it is most urgent."

Tobias lived in the nearby village of Middleton, and he arrived within the hour. Dressed in sombre clothing, he sailed into the bedchamber, and hardly giving Josselyn a glance, he approached Merek. Leaning close, he lifted up Merek's eyelids and then felt behind his ears. "How long has he been like this?"

"Several days," Josselyn replied.

"What have you given him?" Tobias turned around and fixed Josselyn with a look of contempt.

She bristled but didn't let him intimidate her. "A few of my home remedies, but none of them have worked."

"Such as?"

Josselyn listed off the herbs she had given her husband, and at the end, Tobias shook his head. "Useless concoctions! You should have called me earlier instead of using your magic upon him."

"It is not magic!" Josselyn protested.

"If your husband dies, it will be upon your head, mistress," he spat.

"You cannot let him die!" Aleida said, shocked. "You are the physician. You have to heal him. You must!"

"I will do my best, but his pulse is weak; I fear he will not be with us much longer," Tobias proclaimed heartlessly.

"Do not say such things!" Josselyn cried. "I will not hear it!"

"Hear it or not, 'tis the truth. Now, stand aside, I need to attend my patient without hindrance." Tobias turned to Aleida. "See to your mother, girl!"

Aleida gritted her teeth and, despite his harsh address, quickly went to her mother. Josselyn looked weary to the bone and ready to collapse, herself. "Come with me, Mama. I will order you a hot beverage and something to eat. You have not eaten all day."

Almost in a daze, Josselyn allowed Aleida to lead her out of the room and down to the drawing room. Favian was pacing the floor and quickly rushed up to them. "Is all well?"

Aleida shook her head. "I know not. Tobias is tending to my father now."

Favian looked at Josselyn and immediately ushered her to a chair whilst Aleida told one of the servants to fetch her mother a hot drink and something to eat.

An hour later, Tobias entered the room. They all looked up expectantly, only to see him shake his head. "I have done all I can, but I fear he will not be long in this life. I advise you to call the priest."

"What have you done?" Josselyn cried, springing up from her chair. "You are meant to heal him!"

"I have simply let his blood. There was nothing else I could do."

His eyes hardened. "If you are looking to seek blame, you should look no further than yourself." He turned on his heel. "I will see myself out."

Aleida was in a state of shock and just stared at the empty doorway. He couldn't be serious. Her father was not going to die. He was wrong, surely? She turned around as her mother put her hand on her sleeve. "Come, we must go to your father."

She went silently, her chest too tight to speak. Favian followed behind them, his face solemn. "I will go and fetch the priest. My horse is fast; I can get there before anyone else," he declared.

Merek was as pale as the sheet he lay upon, and there was clear evidence that Tobias had let his blood.

Josselyn sat next to him on the bed and pushed his hair away from his eyes. "Merek, my love. 'Tis I, Josselyn."

Merek didn't stir. Neither did he stir when Aleida spoke to him.

The priest arrived and quietly gave him the last rites. Aleida numbly listened to his deep voice intoning the ritual, too shocked to believe her father was going to die.

Half an hour later, with his family by his side, he quietly left this earth.

Favian placed a comforting arm around Aleida's shoulders, and leaving Josselyn with the priest, he led her away back to the drawing room, where he sat her in front of the hearth and handed her a cup of strong wine.

"Drink it," he ordered.

"Favian, I..."

"Drink!"

She took a deep draught and blinked as her eyes stung, not only from the burning alcohol, but the harsh realisation that her father was gone. A few moments later, the flood gates opened and Favian held her tightly whilst she poured out her grief.

The priest, alone in the bedchamber with her mother, spoke words of comfort as best he could, but Josselyn was inconsolable.

Merek had been the love of her life, and without him, she was bereft.



THE NEXT TWO days were a blur. Well-wishers came and went, offering words of sympathy, but as nice as they were, those words could not bring back her father.

The third morning arrived, and Aleida awoke early. Her eyes still felt heavy and her spirit even more so. Her bottom lip trembled as she thought of her father, and a single tear slipped down her cheek. She brushed it away and sat up in bed, determined to be there for her mother. That was when she heard the noise. Puzzled, she slipped out of bed and padded to the leaded window.

Down below, in the drive, she could see several of the guards pushing against the main gate, as though they were stopping them from being opened.

What the devil was going on?

Wide awake now, she quickly called for her maid and began to get dressed.

"What is all that noise, Beatrix?" she asked, slipping into her shift and dress the maid held out for her.

"There is a mob outside the gates, my lady."

"A mob?"

"Aye, they are calling your mother a witch!"

Aleida spun around and stared at her in shock. "Why would they say that?"

The maid spoke quickly. "Tobias Alcroft leads them. I never liked him, my lady, but I am afeared of him."

Aleida clapped a hand over her mouth. "Where is Favian?"

"With your mother, in the drawing room."

"Quickly tie my laces; I must make haste."

Aleida practically flew down the staircase and, throwing open

the drawing room door, rushed up to her mother. "What is happening?"

"Tobias thinks to accuse me of witchcraft. Not only me, but you as well," her mother explained, her eyes wide with fear.

Aleida's heart nearly stopped as panic almost overwhelmed her. "Witchcraft? He cannot say such a thing!"

"He already has. The mob is fired up by his vitriol and baying for blood," Favian told her. "Your mother and I have decided the only thing we can do is take you to safety."

"Where will we go?" Aleida asked, her eyes wide.

"Not I, my dear, only you," Josselyn said.

"Me? Alone? But what about you, Mama?"

"There is no time for us both to flee. We can disguise you and get you through the gates with Favian whilst they are distracted with me. I would see you safe, Aleida."

Aleida went to say more, but her mother shook her head. "We have no time." She hugged her fiercely. "Flee, my love. We shall be reunited soon enough. Go with Favian. Tell no one your name; do you understand?" her mother implored her.

She tried to object, but Favian hustled her out of the room and down the back stairs. Even though she knew they were thinking only to save her, she felt sick to the stomach at what the mob would do to her mother.

Favian ushered her into the stables and gave her a pile of clothing. "Put these boy's clothes on. Your name, from this moment, is Edward." She didn't move for a moment, so he urged her to hurry.

"I cannot undo the laces at the back without help!" Aleida confessed.

"Turn around and I will assist you." She looked around furtively and he said hurriedly, "This is no time to worry about propriety, Aleida. We must make haste."

Quickly, with his help, she changed into the stable boy's clothing. Wearing the hose and tunic felt extremely odd, but it was the

perfect disguise. Her long dark plait was thrust up into a soft dark blue cap, and she slipped her feet into supple leather boots.

"When the gate is opened, the mob is going to surge forward, which is our moment to go past them. Hold your head to one side so they cannot see your face." Favian's voice was clipped and precise. It was as though she were one of the king's soldiers obeying his commands. She swallowed hard and tried to quell the terror that threatened to erupt within her for, she knew what the consequences would be if she were discovered.

"Be strong, Aleida," Favian encouraged her. Bending down, he ran his gloved hand over the stable floor, gathering dust, and lifting it up, lightly wiped it over her cheeks. "Now you look a little more authentic."

They mounted their separate horses and veered towards the exit. Favian nodded at the guards and they opened the gates. As Favian had predicted, the mob quickly surged forward, Tobias in the middle of them all.

"Josselyn Gray, present yourself!" Tobias boomed. The mob began to chant around him, "Witch! Witch! Witch!"

Aleida wanted to leap off her horse and deny all their charges, but fear kept her firmly seated on her horse. If she could get away, then mayhap she had a chance of helping her mother. Now was not the time to act impetuously.

The crowd was baying for blood and the urge to cover her ears was unbearable, but she managed to refrain from doing so. Her horse followed Favian's as he led them to one side.

Some of the people glanced at them suspiciously but realising there were no women present, they quickly turned their attention back to Tobias and his manic ranting. Just as they were about to exit the gates, Aleida heard the mob chant her mother's name. Unable to help herself, she looked back towards the house.

Her mother was standing at the main door, her maid by her side, her chin tilted up in defiance.

Tobias stood before her and raising his finger, pointed it at her fiercely.

"There she is! The witch! The she devil who forced her husband's life from this earth, aided by her daughter!"

The villagers responded to his words, their anger palpable, and cried out, "They are witches! The spawn of Satan!"

The crowd surged forward, and before her mother could run, they had captured her, roughly putting her hands behind her back and marching her towards the exit gates.

Aleida almost cried out but managed to stifle her distress and, turning in the saddle, followed Favian outside, tears slipping down her cheeks unheeded.

She vowed there and then to refute the charges against her mother and herself and to have her revenge on Tobias Alcroft. She knew not how, but she would find a way.