

## Scotland, 1634

If there was one thing Mercedes Gutierrez feared it was fire. Most of her nights – so many, unending nights – were spent twisting and turning in her bed, while one nightmare after the other rode her, nightmares in which she saw her father’s face melt away in the heat of the fire, his mouth opened in an agonised howl as he struggled in vain with the fetters that tied him to the stake. This was why she started awake in the early hours of dawn when she inhaled the bitter stench of burning damp straw, going from deep sleep to absolute panic in less than a heart-beat.

She had no idea where she was. Last she remembered, she’d been fleeing for her life along the waterfront of Marseille. Hector. Mercedes bit down to stop her teeth from chattering. This time it had been close, a mere matters of minutes and he would have trapped her, to do God knows what to her in revenge for all these years of continuous time-hopping.

Smoke came drifting her way, thick grey smoke that made her cough and retch. Out, she had to get out, but she had no idea where the exit might be, and the smoke was making her eyes tear up. She crawled along the floor, a hand dragging along the wall. There. *Gracias a Dios*, a door! With a heave, she flung it open and toppled outside, lying in a gasping heap as she drew in cold, crisp air into her smoke-filled lungs.

“What have we here?” The voice came from somewhere above her, and Mercedes groped for a stone, a stick – anything to defend herself with. English, her brain processed, the man spoke English – but with an unfamiliar accent. By now, she was quite the polyglot, even if she could never rid herself of her Spanish accent. Her fingers scraped at a stone just as a hand took hold of her arm and yanked her to her feet. Mercedes coughed.

“A wench,” another voice said. “Comely, too.”

Mercedes regarded this last speaker with caution. A big man with greasy hair and dirty clothes, he was standing far too close, an avid look in his dark eyes. A third man popped up behind him, giving Mercedes a toothy grin.

“Mine,” the first voice said.

His? Mercedes attempted to wrest free of his hold, a futile effort which only ended with him laughing and pulling her close. In difference to his companion, this man smelled as if he had the occasional contact with soap and water, and the rough broadcloth of his coat was moderately clean. He was of a size with her, with wide, light-blue eyes that studied her with interest.

“Where did you come from?” he asked.

“From there,” Mercedes replied, gesturing at the small byre, by now crackling with fire.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “You’re no Clydesdale lass.”

“I am...” Mercedes swallowed back on the rest, trying frantically to invent a background for herself.

“You are...” he prompted, eyes wandering up and down her body. With a start, Mercedes realised she was far too un-dressed. The men before her wore breeches and boots, wide linen collars atop short coats. They carried swords and pistols, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see three horses. She was in a thin cotton dress, belted round the waist and with the skirt ending at mid-calf. She shrank together, far too aware of their eyes on her bare shins and arms.

“I’ve been robbed,” she said. “My clothes, my horse...”

“Robbed,” the large man repeated. “And you were riding here all on your own?”

“No.” Mercedes scowled at him. “It was my hired men who robbed me.”

“Did they now?” The man holding her increased his pressure on her arm. “And they were fools enough to not take you along?” His companions snickered.

“Take me along where?”

“To a bawdy house.” He grinned at her. “A foreign woman with black hair and comely features – she’d be quite the attraction.”

“They knew me better than to try,” she said haughtily. “I would have killed myself before allowing them to do something like that to me.”

“Ah.” He nodded, a smile tugging at his mouth. “Well, we can’t have that, can we?” He bowed. “James Williamson, at your service.” He was quite good-looking, this young man. Eyes the colour of a summer sky, and she was partial to men with blue eyes. She shivered, recalling another set of blue eyes, eyes as cold and hard as aquamarines. But Hector’s eyes were nowhere close, she’d managed to evade him this time as well. Except, of course, that she knew it was but a matter of time before he found her – again.

“Mercedes,” she replied, curtsying.

“Just Mercedes?”

“For now.”

She wasn’t given much choice. James insisted she come with them and helped her up on his horse, settling himself uncomfortably close to her. Come evening, and they were still in the midst of a moor, a vast empty space that offered no opportunity for her to flee her captor.

“Why did you set the house on fire?” she asked – mainly to make conversation.

“Best you don’t know,” he replied. “If you did, I might have to kill you too – and burn your body in an abandoned byre.” There was an edge in his voice that made her shiver, and she decided to leave him as soon as she could.

They made camp, she was fed and James offered her his cloak to keep her warm. There was a low but bitter argument among the men, and she couldn’t quite follow what they were saying, their accents broadening into near unintelligible speech. But she caught their looks in her direction, and very carefully she edged further and further away from the fire. Finally, she rose to her feet and ran, having no idea where she was going, knowing only that she had to get away.

It didn’t help. If anything, it made James angry that she should attempt to run, and he dragged her back to camp by her hair, telling her she was his and damned if he intended to have a woman who tried to escape. That night he took her roughly, and come morning he told her she was now to all purposes his wife, and should she run away, he would catch up with her and punish her – or sell her to a brothel. He also relieved her of her heavy golden necklace, of her earrings, her bracelet and her rings, a gleam in his eyes when he weighed all this gold in his hand.

The coming weeks were spent drifting back and forth across the moor. Mercedes hated this empty expanse, even more so as it effectively made it impossible for her to escape. They’d ride her down in a matter of seconds if she tried, and by now she’d realised James was not a man to stay his hand when angered. By the time they rode into Glasgow, Mercedes was resigned to her new role as James’ wife – at least for now.

He was a strange man, this James, capable of cruel violence one moment, showering her with flowers and songs the other. As long as she was adequately adoring, he was warm and affectionate, but on those few occasions when her temper flared, he used hands and feet to bring her to heel, and Mercedes quickly learnt to never rile him. But she was tired of always being alone, so tired of constantly being on her guard, and whatever his faults, James was a possessive man who was quick to protect his own.

The first few months with him were mostly good. He had an endless supply of coin, and those bright blue eyes of his glittered more often with merriment than with anger. Now and then, he'd ask her about how she'd come to be in the abandoned byre, making it quite clear he didn't believe her hastily cobbled together story. Mercedes had no idea what to tell him, and she didn't like the calculating look in his eyes as she repeated her tale of hired men and stolen goods.

Now and then, he'd be gone for weeks, and he'd come back stinking of sour beer and other women. On one such occasion, she decided to leave, packing up her few belongings and setting off due east.

He caught up with her in Lanark. She had no idea how he could have found her, nor did she understand why he was so angry – after all, he seemed content enough to spend his nights with other women. But when she told him so, standing defiantly some yards away from him he lunged, took hold of her shoulders and shook her so hard the teeth rattled in her mouth.

"You're mine," he snarled. "You've no right to leave me, you hear?"

"I don't belong to you!" Mercedes pulled free, staggered back when he struck her in the mouth.

"Mine. And once I'm tired of you, I'll sell you elsewhere."

"I am not—" She broke off, holding a hand to her bleeding mouth.

"Hold your tongue!" He handed her a handkerchief. "I'll not have another word out of you. We are going home."

That same night, he tenderly washed her bruised mouth. He stroked back her dark hair from her face and sighed. "You're a hard woman to tame, aren't you? All that fiery Spanish blood, I reckon." His hand caressed her neck, her breasts, and she had to force herself to lie still, not flinch. "But tame you I will," he murmured, and there was a gleam in his eyes as he rolled her over on her front.

After that, he kept a close eye on her, and when he went away, he ensured one of his companions remained at home, to watch her. Mercedes hated him for doing so, even more when the man he set to guard her was Duncan, the large man who'd been with him the first day they'd met.

"If I'm to guard her for you, I should at least get to have her," he muttered to James, and James just laughed and told Duncan that once he'd tired of her, he would make sure Duncan got his share.

"Until then, you don't touch her," he warned, and Duncan spat to the side but promised he wouldn't.

If it hadn't been for the baby, she would have left him the first opportunity she got. She wheedled paints and brushes out of him with the express purpose of painting herself elsewhere, but once Margarita was born, she was trapped, her little baby girl far too precious to leave behind. Margarita, with eyes the colour of the summer sun – just like her father – and hair as dark as Mercedes' own.

"Margaret," James would tell her. "She's Margaret, not Margarita." If he was in a foul mood, this comment would be accompanied by a slap or a kick. If he had been successful in his recent business endeavours, he would just smile and shake his head. Business endeavours – ha! James made his living on the wrong side of the law, his unthreatening exterior allowing him to get very close to his intended victims – too close, as suddenly the victim would have a blade at the throat while James relieved them of anything of worth. Now and then he'd steal a horse or two, disappearing for a couple of weeks to dispose of the beasts far from Glasgow itself.

Lately, his business no longer thrived. It made him testy and dangerous, and he would kick and yell, telling her it was time she did something to bring some money in. She did what she could, buying almonds and expensive sugar that she converted into almond paste – *mazapán* – recalling

with a twinge of nostalgia long ago afternoons in her childhood's Seville, when she and her mother would shape the paste into flowers and animals that were sold in the market.

The ladies of Glasgow liked her almond paste creations, but James was not impressed, telling her she'd earn far more on her back.

"On my back?"

"You know what I mean." He squeezed her breast.

"I'm your wife," she protested. James shrugged, saying that he had no issues with his wife contributing to their upkeep – besides, he was getting tired of her. Mercedes threw a bottle at him and regretted it when he punished her for it, this time standing Margarita on the table so that she could see what happened to disobedient women.

The years passed. Margarita was three, going on four, and for the last six months James had been in a jovial mood, having earned a lot of money through a scam involving baled wool. But a week ago, the constables had caught one of James' companions, and the man had been summarily hanged. Since then, Mercedes lived her life on egg shells, and it was only after ascertaining James was neither drunk nor angry, that she had dared leave Margarita with him while she hurried across the city to make a large delivery of her almond paste subtleties, this time for a wedding.

Mercedes turned into their little close and darted through the door to the closest tenement building, near on leaping up the stairs. She could hear them well before she reached their little garret room, Margarita's high voice mixing with James' tenor. Mercedes came to a halt and stood for some moments in the darkened stairwell, listening to the voices of her man and her daughter blend in song. Whatever his other faults, James was a good father – when he chose to be. No sooner did Mercedes enter the room, but Margarita was in her arms.

"*Hola Margarita,*" Mercedes murmured, setting her daughter back down.

"Margaret," James corrected. "She is no Spanish papist, she is a good Scottish lass, named after my mother." He eyed her over the rim of his earthenware mug, and Mercedes felt a little jolt of fear. She'd been gone less than an hour, but now he was drunk, which invariably made him violent and demanding.

"And what's this?" he asked, kicking at her carefully stacked canvases.

"My paintings," she said, kneeling to reorder them. He kicked her in the ribs, sending her sprawling atop the canvases. "Margaret, lassie, go out and leave us alone." James tossed Margaret a coin. "Go on, lassie, go and buy yourself a pasty."

"Mama?" Margaret said, eyes as blue as her father's staring at Mercedes. She smiled at her daughter, in everything else so like herself.

"*Vete, hija,*" she said, still lying on the floor. She knew better than to attempt to rise, could see how James' leg tensed in expectation. "Go, daughter. I will be fine."

No sooner was Margaret out of the door but James turned towards her.

"You waste my money on this?" Yet another kick at the canvases. "I risk my life to keep us in clothes and food, and you paint?" His voice rose. "Get up," he snarled. Mercedes shook her head, he lunged and grabbed her hair through her cap. "Up!" He yanked, she bit back on a moan and tried to rise. He kicked her, he kicked her again, and again. "It's about time you start bringing in your keep," he said between breaths, "why should I do all the hard work?"

"I do," Mercedes said, "I sell my almond paste, and—" She gasped when he slapped her.

"Almond paste," he mimicked, "and how much does that bring in? Nothing!" The toe of his boot nudged at her. "But as of tonight, that will change. Tonight, you will start earning your living on your back."

"I am not a whore!"

"All women are whores. All you have to do is train them." He dragged her towards the bed. She didn't put up any resistance, it was futile to do so. He might be slight, but he was strong, and mean and quick. He grunted as he took her from behind, the rough tweed of his breeches burning against the tender skin of her inside thighs.

"So, tonight," he said, once he was finished. Mercedes shook her head. No, this she would not do. James laughed.

"I'm your wife," she tried.

"My wife? Not really. Some words spoken between us, no more."

"But Margarita—" She snapped her mouth shut at the look in his eyes.

"Ah, yes, your precious Margaret," he said. "Well, her you won't see, not until you've shown yourself meek and obedient." Mercedes threw herself towards the door, but he was too fast – or she was too slow. He grappled her to the floor, secured her hands behind her back, and dragged her over the floor towards the bed. A noose round her neck, the other end secured to the bed post. "Best not strain too much. It might kill you." He crouched down beside her. "I'll take wee Maggie over to my mother, and once I get back, we start our new business." He stroked her face, almost gently. "Men will pay a lot to bed a Spanish whore."

"No!" Mercedes tried to get up, but the noose made it impossible. "My daughter, don't take my daughter!"

"My daughter as well," he said. "If you're good, I'll bring her to visit."

He came back with a light in his eyes and four male friends, one of them the very eager Duncan. Mercedes stood no chance, and come morning, James and his friends agreed that by now she was ready to start whoring for real. Mercedes didn't protest. What was the point?

Her existence shrank to a bed and an endless line of men. Hands on her thighs, on her breasts and her buttocks, fingers inspecting her, pinching her. After the first few times, she did as she was told, having learnt the hard way just how much pain a man could inflict when she didn't comply quickly enough. The noose was replaced by a thin iron ring around her ankle and a length of chain that tethered her to the wall whenever she wasn't working, and effectively she was a slave, living her life at James' beck and call.

Now and then, James would bring her a small pot of paint, telling her it was her reward for being such a good earner. Occasionally, he'd buy her a new shift, but as to other clothes, he refused, saying there was no point, as she wasn't going anywhere, was she? All she did was lie in bed and spread her legs, so what use did she have for skirts and bodices? He, however, came home with new breeches and coats, with shirts of finest linen, with stocking in silk.

"A proper gentleman," he laughed, twirling before her. "See? And all because of you." He blew her a kiss, settled himself by the door and welcomed her first customer for the day.

Twice a month, he brought Margarita to see her, all blue eyes and black hair. Her daughter stood at a distance, thumb stuck in her mouth, and when Mercedes held out her arms, Margarita shook her head, pressing herself to her father's leg.

"It's because she knows what you are," James told Mercedes on the sixth such visit. "My mother has told her that her mother is a Spanish whore, and that Margaret best beware unless she ends up the same way."

"She's three," Mercedes moaned. "Why tell her?"

"Why not?" James shrugged. "But at least it's better than telling her you're a witch."

"I'm not a witch!"

"No? And how did you end up on that moor, all those years ago? The byre was empty when we set it alight – that I know for sure. Besides, your nosy neighbour Jeannie tells everyone you're a foreign witch – although these days she is more concerned about your whoring than your hexing." He laughed. "Come along, Maggie, we must not keep your Mam from her work, hey?" He jerked his head towards the doorway, where already there was a line of men forming. And Mercedes' last glimpse of her daughter was those blue eyes, wide and innocent, regarding her as she was shoved on her back by yet another eager customer.

She would have gone insane if it hadn't been for her painting. Magic flowed from her fingers, and she knew without daring to look too closely at them, that the last few canvases contained the power to propel her elsewhere, but how could she even consider doing so, when her Margarita was here, and even worse, in the tender care of James? So she amused herself by painting other things, like James's mother, afflicted by warts, or James himself, his cock a lank and dispirited thing. It was a foolish thing to do.

James used his hands and his feet when his member refused to stiffen, and Mercedes was a patchwork of bruises that sunny morning in March when James kicked at her paintings for the first time in weeks. One little canvas bounced off the wall and came skidding across the floor to stop just at his feet. James raised his foot to kick it, froze halfway through the movement and instead bent down, staring at the depiction of himself, naked and un-erected.

"Did you paint this?" His voice was low, far too low. There was no point in denying, so Mercedes nodded. "When?"

"Some weeks ago."

"Ah." He retreated, looking at her with a speculative look in his eyes. "And if I were to look, would I find a depiction of my mother, covered in warts?" She didn't reply. "Answer me!" He took hold of her neck and banged her head against the wall. "Answer me, you witch!"

All the pent up rage of four months surged through her. "Yes! I painted her, and I hope she dies of them! And you, you will never have a cock-stand for the rest of your life, not until you give me back my daughter!"

"Or I burn it," he said, making as if to throw the painting of himself into the hearth. He stopped halfway through the throw. "Or we burn you," he grinned, "you and all your accursed paintings. Now that would make for quite the bonfire, hey?"

"No," Mercedes rose to her knees. "Please, James, no. I can repaint the picture, I will never—"

"Shut up!" His booted foot struck her in her stomach, she collapsed, trying to suck in air. Vaguely, she heard him rooting about among her paintings, and moments later she heard him rushing for the door. "I'll be back. Me and the constables. And when I show them this..." He shook the two canvases he was holding at her. "... then you will burn."

If there was one thing Mercedes Gutierrez feared, it was fire. So much did she fear it that when she heard the clamouring mob in the street below, when she heard the sounds of heavy footsteps coming up the stairwell, she had no choice. She pulled one of her painted time portals towards her, commended her daughter into the hands of God, and let herself be sucked into the whirlwinds of time. But on the wall she left a parting gift for James; a crude depiction of him, hanging from a noose.