



ONE

*A Broken Dream*

“The arrow knows the way. Just let it free.”

Burnt into my memory by endless repetition, the words came to my mind unbidden, with the soothing rhythm of a familiar song. But somehow this time, they were not just words: A tingling feeling ran through my fingers, and the bow became an extension of myself. I could feel the trembling of the string and the cold of the metal at the tip of the arrow as I felt the tension in my muscles and the pounding of my heart.

Then the arrow took flight. Like a falcon aiming at its prey, it went straight to the target drawn on the trunk of the distant oak. In the complete silence of the wait, I heard the vibration in the air and the thump of the tree hurting as it was hit in the center of the bull’s eye.

All over the field, the roar of the multitude exploded like sudden thunder, breaking my concentration. Still holding the bow I no longer felt, I tore my eyes from the arrow trembling in the tree and walked back to my companions.

Don Gonzalo, our instructor, moved forward as I approached them. “Bravo, Princess Andrea!” he shouted. “A perfect shot!” His red hair a mane of fire in the midday sun, he

crossed his right arm briefly over his chest before extending it toward me, his open hand facing the sky. The salute to an equal. I blushed with pleasure at his words and returned his salute while the pages surrounded me, screaming my name in victory.

I laughed with them and answered their calls. And for a moment, lost in the exhilarating feeling of belonging, I almost forgot the empty seat on the High Stand by the king's side. The empty seat that meant Tío Ramiro had not come to the Games. The empty seat that meant, despite my perfect shot, I had already lost.

"Andrea, I will try to be there," Tío had told me months ago before leaving for his manor. "But you know it doesn't depend only on me. I have other obligations."

It was not exactly a promise, but I had taken it as such because he was my only hope. Tío Ramiro, my mother's brother, was the only one who had shown any interest in my desire to be a knight. I knew that without his help, the king, my father, would not allow me to become a squire. He would send me to Mother instead to be made into a lady as he had promised her he would on my fourteenth birthday. And my fourteenth birthday was only months away.

A lady! I shook my head. As a lady, I would not be allowed to play in the courtyard or hunt in the woods. As a lady, I would have to stay inside the castle and do a lot of curtsying and smiling.

I shook my head again to get rid of the dreary thought, and closing my fingers around my lucky charm—a flat round pebble with four perfect holes I had found once in my uncle's room—I watched as the herald, magnificently attired in the blue and white colors of our kingdom, rode into the center of the field and in a clear voice announced the winners.

"Winner at the wrestling contest, Don Luis de Can. Winner at the sword competition: Don Enrique de Hul. Winner at archery: Princess Andrea de Montemaior."

The world around me disappeared in a cacophony of sounds, and I knew I was shouting, although I could not hear my voice. Moments later, and without any recollection of how I had gotten there, I found myself in front of the High Stand where my father was now standing. His eyes, bright and proud under his bushy eyebrows, met mine briefly as he offered me the prize: a golden arrow. One knee on the ground, my head bent in respect, I took it from his hand and went back to my comrades.

I could not stay long, though. After all, I was a princess and was expected to be with my family in the Great Hall. I would join the pages later and wait with them while the knights met to choose their squires. *While the knights fought to choose me as their squire*, I thought and smiled. Fate was smiling at me today. I had won first place. Father would have to realize at last that I, Andrea, his fourth and youngest daughter, could be as good as the male heir he had always wanted—even without my uncle's prompting.

My feet barely touching the ground, I rushed to the castle.

Back in my room, I gave myself over to Ama Bernarda, my old nurse, to be dressed for dinner. For the first time ever, I did not argue when she slipped my fanciest dress over my underdress and combed my hair again and again in a useless attempt to make me look like a lady. I did not even complain when she scrubbed my nails with a sharp brush until my fingertips were red and sore.

Once I was ready, I looked in the mirror. A tall lanky girl with dark green eyes and short brown curls returned my stare. I couldn't recognize in her the mighty warrior I really was.