

THOSE MERRICK WOMEN



MARIELLA STARR



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2020
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Mariella Starr
Those Merrick Women

EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-311-2

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-340-2

Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-341-9

v1

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



October 1892, St. Etheldreda's Academy for Women, located deep in the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland

Destiny Rose buckled the straps on her valise and looked around the room where she'd spent the last nine years of her life. It was as bare as the cell of a Postulant, although she hadn't committed to the religious Order. She had hung many things on her walls over the years. They had all disappeared; the only ornament allowed was a crucifix. She was about to bring a millstone of grief upon herself, but she wasn't going to surrender.

There was a knock on her door, and she called out, "Enter."

It was Julianne, her longtime roommate, and friend at the academy. She had been removed from Destiny's room at the end of their third year together. Destiny was considered a risk to the conversion of Julianne, and soon afterward, her friend was renamed, Mary Francis. The indoctrination had begun for her friend to believe she belonged in the convent.

"Mother Superior would like to see you in her office before you take leave of us," Mary Francis said softly.

"Come with me, Jewels," Destiny pleaded. "Leave this prison."

“No,” Mary Francis whispered, shaking her head. “You are so much stronger than I, Destiny Rose. I have chosen my path.”

“Your path was chosen for you, and you have been forced into it,” Destiny protested.

Mary Francis bowed her head and broke eye contact. “I want to wish you a happy life.”

Destiny grasped her friend’s hand. “I’ll write to you and send the letters by Mr. Castelleto.”

“You must not,” Mary Francis whispered.

“They wouldn’t violate your privacy and read your letters; if they weren’t afraid, you would want to break away,” Destiny implored. “I’ll write. Please read my letters and respond if you can. Give them to Mr. Castelleto; he has never broken our trust.”

Destiny lifted her almost empty valise, and with one last contemptuous look at the room. She followed her dear friend through the cold, empty halls. Not quite as severe as the convent next door, the boarding school dormitories were stark. Fewer and fewer girls were being sent there for schooling. A training school for nuns, her brother, Donal had called it, and he was right. He’d come to her, and wanted her to leave school and travel with him. She had turned down his offer. In hindsight, she wished she had gone with him.

Destiny knew if Donal’s father, Otis MacGregor, had known of her half-brother’s plans, he would have disowned him. Donal would have been cast aside too, as she had been nine years earlier. No one stood in the way of her stepfather’s wishes.

She had thought she could tolerate living at the academy for a few more months. She had worked too hard for her college certificates to walk away from them. She had been working so hard to graduate. Once she had those diplomas in her possession, and she turned twenty-one years old, she could make her bid for freedom.

Twenty-one was the magical age of majority for women. She would be considered an adult, and no one could stop her from

making decisions and living as she chose. She had without fanfare or celebration turned twenty-one, the previous day.

She had spent nine years in this hellhole! At last, she was an adult, and she could do as she pleased. She had always known of the small inheritance from her namesake maternal grandmother, Destiny Rose Garrison. Not even the powerful Otis MacGregor had been able to touch it. She had built her dreams on her inheritance. Destiny knew it wasn't a fortune, but she had known it would sustain her until she was able to find a job to support herself.

Destiny hadn't expected to be alone in her quest. The unexpected deaths of Otis MacGregor, and then her half-brother, Donal, had left her singularly alone.

Otis MacGregor's demise hadn't affected Destiny. He wasn't her birth father, but her stepfather. He had been a deliberately cruel man, to her and her mother. He had coerced her widowed mother into marriage, with one purpose in mind. Otis wanted sons. He had no use for a girl—especially a stepdaughter who wasn't of his blood. Destiny's mother had died giving birth to Donal when she was three-years-old. Her stepfather hadn't cared that his wife had died, or her daughter was grieving.

All that mattered to MacGregor was she had fulfilled her duty and given him a son. He'd flaunted convention and remarried within three months of her mother's death. MacGregor wanted more sons, although neither, his second, nor his third wife gave him children. He'd divorced both women—cast them aside claiming they were infertile. He had married two more times, with the same results.

He had given Destiny over to the Order of sisters of St. Etheldreda's when she was twelve years old. He expected her to enter a life of seclusion and sacrifice because it was a solution to a problem. He didn't want his stepdaughter around.

Otis MacGregor had died suddenly of what a doctor believed to be heart failure. Donal was still six months from his eighteenth birthday when he had inherited his wealth. His youth hadn't

seemed to matter because he was male. He had wanted Destiny to share in his good fortune and to travel with him. He had wanted to go into the frontier of the west.

She had planned to join Donal later, but those plans weren't meant to be. A letter from a ranch foreman in Sheridan, Wyoming, had informed Donal's attorney of his demise. Her brother had died within days of contracting a high fever.

Now, due to her stepbrother's will, she and she alone had inherited the massive MacGregor fortune, made two generations before in the shipping industry. Destiny had already snuck away several times from the cloistered walls. Letters and telegrams had been secretly sent between her and Donal's attorney, with Mr. Castelleto's help.

Mother Superior Mary Bernard stood when Destiny entered her office.

"We are very disappointed that you have decided against joining our Order, Mary Jerome," was the opening gambit.

"I have refused from day one, to respond to your chosen name for me. My name is and always has been Destiny Rose. I have never, in any manner or speech, indicated any interest in joining the Order," Destiny replied stiffly. She decided quickly that she was going on the offensive.

"Perhaps not," Mother Superior said with a nod of her head. "You have remained in our sanctuary and participated in our education."

"It wasn't my decision," Destiny said. "My stepfather placed me here and made his intentions clear. No one bothered to ask me what I wanted then, or since."

"You have availed yourself to our educating you."

"Otis MacGregor paid handsomely for my education," Destiny said.

"He did make certain contributions," Mother Superior conceded.

Destiny took a deep breath. "I am leaving St. Etheldreda's. I have

not received my diploma, nor have I received my certificate of teaching. I would like those before I leave these walls.”

“That’s not possible,” Mother Superior said, her expression changing to one of stoic determination. “You have received your education at St. Etheldreda’s College under the premise that you would join the Order. Your father made promises to our mission. If you don’t join our Order, those credentials become the property of the church.”

“Don’t try it,” Destiny said. “Whatever promises made by my stepfather are invalid. He could speak for me as a minor child. I am not a child any longer, and I will not tolerate any more of his manipulations or yours. My education was paid for by Otis MacGregor. His beliefs were his, not mine.”

“Those are our rules.”

“I suggest you rethink your position,” Destiny said bluntly. “If not, I’m still walking out that door.” She tossed several sheets of paper on the desk. She’d written an article, and painstakingly copied it many times. “Either I walk out of this *prison* with my diplomas or that article will appear in eight regional newspapers in their next printing. Make those documents out in my surname of Merrick. It was my father’s name and mine. My mother remarried, but I was not adopted by Otis MacGregor.”

“You would deny your father?” Mother Superior demanded.

“Otis MacGregor was not my father,” Destiny said.

“You have always been disrespectful!” Mother Superior exclaimed, and then she gasped in shock as she read the first paragraph from the paper. “You wouldn’t print this! You dare to write these lies to discredit your faith?” She ripped the pages into pieces.

“It’s your faith, not mine, and what goes on within these walls has very little to do with religion,” Destiny said bluntly. She dropped another copy of the article onto the desk. “I wrote the truth. There are so many hidden truths about St. Etheldreda’s. If you cross me, I will expose all of them.”

She smiled when Mother Mary Bernard ripped the pages again and tossed them in the trash basket beside her desk.

“You can tear them all up. There is a copy on the editor’s desk of every newspaper I have contacted. I have already purchased half-page space in each of them. What they print in that space, I will leave to you. It will be either an advertisement or my written opinion of this so-called institution of higher learning. Every newspaper I have contacted will be waiting for a telegram after I leave here, giving them permission to publish it. I will no longer allow myself to be groomed into a life that is not of my choosing.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Try me,” Destiny’s voice was cold and deliberate. She felt her stomach clench in fear and tamped down the urge to vomit. She dearly hoped her nervousness didn’t show in her demeanor because she was bluffing. She glanced at a clock on the fireplace mantle. “You have approximately thirty minutes. A carriage is due to arrive at the gate. If I don’t receive my diploma and teaching certificates, that article will be published. I will also file a lawsuit against St. Etheldreda’s for misrepresentation and unlawful imprisonment.”

The office was silent as Mother Mary Bernard read the third paragraph, and then she jumped to her feet. “Remain here,” she ordered.

“You have until my carriage arrives,” Destiny warned. “You have held me here long enough against my will.”



ST. ETHELDREDA’S Academy and College for Women was hidden away in the northeastern part of the Catoctin Mountains. The closest town was Emmitsburg, Maryland. The nearest town with a railroad was Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, twenty miles further north.

When a hired carriage arrived at the outside gate, Destiny had run to it and urged the driver to go quickly. She had been terrified

during the entire carriage ride that someone would stop her from reaching the train station. When she finally reached her first destination of Gettysburg, she had to go into the station facilities where she emptied her stomach. She was running on pure nerve and determination. She was pretending to be brave when she was scared witless.

The train trip from Gettysburg to Washington, D.C., was uneventful, if somewhat more uncomfortable than what she'd expected after reading glowing reviews in newspapers, promoting train travel. It had taken a full hour for Destiny to stop shaking. Then a serene calm had settled over her as she realized she was at last, free.

A room in a women's boarding house had been arranged previously, by her dear friend, Mr. Castelleto. His widowed sister boarded women in her home for supplementary income.

Her host was a nice woman, who had a great many rules, but the rooms were clean, and the meals delicious compared to the plain fare she had been served for years.

Destiny was spending most of her daytime hours closeted in an office with Donal's attorney, Penrod Pennington. Usually, they were alone, although the door was left conspicuously open. Occasionally her stepfather's previous legal representatives were present. Regardless of their claims, and protestations, Destiny was unwavering. She was breaking all ties with Otis MacGregor's former business associates. She was selling all his assets.

Mr. Penrod Pennington was making a name for himself in the Nation's Capital. His career had been determined by his family, four generations of attorneys, and politicians. Luckily, he enjoyed practicing law and was an excellent attorney. He specialized in probate, and dissolving, and selling companies and distributing assets. The MacGregor estate had landed in his lap by chance, and he intended to make the most of it.

His client's wishes, although uncommon, would be accomplished promptly. The result would be that she would be an

extremely wealthy woman. He was following her instructions. He was also upsetting very powerful men, who would have liked nothing better than to silence her demands.

Destiny collapsed into a chair in Mrs. Musgrove's boarding house after a very long day. Sometimes she thought of simply walking away from her inheritance. She wouldn't be penniless. She did have her legacy from her mother's side of the family.

Mr. Pennington wouldn't hear of it, and he called her wishful thinking, ridiculous nonsense. He promised he would follow through with her orders.

He didn't understand why she wouldn't live in the MacGregor mansion, rather than staying in a boarding house in Georgetown. His orders were to sell the estate, along with a residence in New York City and another in Boston. He was to liquidate all of Otis MacGregor's financial holdings.

As she sat on the outside balcony trying to make sense of legal paperwork, Destiny saw a carriage pull to the edge of the sidewalk. She watched as another fortune hunter exited the vehicle, straightened his top hat, and tidied his appearance. At least she recognized this one, although she had no interest in Dillard Hardgrave. He was just another young man who thought his false charms were enough to gain entrance into the MacGregor fortunes. He should have been named Dullard, she thought, as the name suited the preening peacock of a man.

Mrs. Musgrove, her landlady, would send him packing soon enough.

Destiny had been in Washington for months. She was tired of the annoying suitors knocking on her door. Did they really believe she was stupid enough to fall for their sudden attention and invitations to a woman they'd never met? It was her perceived last name and growing bank accounts that had brought her to their attention. Most men still believed women weren't smart enough to manage their financial affairs. Money should be managed by a solicitor or a husband. Destiny had already warned the bank president that

because of the lack of privacy about her financial affairs, she would be removing her assets from his bank.

She had no interest in meeting people who had never heard of her before the news of her inheritance had been leaked. Destiny searched the pile of numerous letters and invitations that arrived each day in the post, ignoring the gratuitous solicitations. The mail she desperately awaited was a letter from Julianne. She hadn't abandoned hope that her dear friend would change her mind.

It took time to sever most of the ties to her stepfather's businesses. Destiny decided it was time to begin making plans for a new life.

Penrod Pennington's proposal of marriage to her was the catalyst for her decision. He had prepared a written list, and he read from it as if it were a list of dry goods. He explained in great length, in what she thought of as his patronizing tone, the advantages of a marriage between them. She had politely refused and was surprised when he was insulted by her refusal.

It was time to devise another plan.