



LISA JACKSON

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KISS OF THE MOON

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LISA
JACKSON

Kiss of the Moon



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Prologue

*Castle Prydd
November 1280*

his night the gods were angry. The wind howled and the sea raged with a fury that tore at the cliffs on which Castle Prydd had stood for over a hundred years.

Shivering, Isolde held her precious basket close. A midwife whom some believed to be a witch, slipped and caught her bony fingers in the cowl of her cloak and hurried toward the great hall. Rain, as cold as the soul of the very devil himself, lashed from a sky where black clouds roiled and blocked the moon. Whistling eerily, the wind raced from the sea, dancing in death-light footsteps up the back of Isolde's wrinkled old neck. Strong gusts tore at the thatch on the roofs of the stables and sheds in the outer bailey. Lightning split the sky in sizzling forks, and the low rumble of thunder could be heard over the steady pounding of the surf.

Isolde cast a fearful look to the stormy heavens and whispered a quick prayer, for she knew God was furious with her for practicing the pagan ways of the old people.

"Think not of what I do, Lord. Just be with the lady," she begged, clutching the damp handle of her basket more tightly. As if God would turn His deaf ear her way!

Through the portcullis and across the inner bailey she dashed, her leather shoes sinking deep in the muddy trail caused by the horses and men who had trampled the grass on their way to the great hall. A few knights lingering on the steps wore grim countenances, for Lady Cleva, beloved wife of the baron, was losing blood, perhaps losing her life, in the birthing of her long-awaited second child.

Unless Isolde could help and change the course of destiny.

Cleva's firstborn, a boy named Tadd, was barely seven, but was already spoiled and stubborn, with a cruel streak that Isolde had witnessed too often. He was quick with a whip to his pony's back and quicker yet to kick at the hounds and send them yelping in pain. Tadd had wounded some of his playmates as well, scratching, kicking, biting, and punching, and knowing always that he would be the victor in any match, for he was the baron's eldest child: the chosen heir to Prydd.

Aye, he was a bad seed, that one. Yet there were no other children to Baron Eaton and his wife. Three times since Tadd had been delivered screaming into the world, Cleva had been with child. Two had miscarried early, but the last infant had been in Cleva's womb the full time, only to be born blue-lipped and weak. The newborn had died within hours of his birth, and the Lady Cleva, who had lost much blood, had been so distraught with her grief, the baron had put her under guard for fear she might take her own life.

And now the lady was in a difficult labor yet again. Isolde crossed herself quickly. She was no fool. The baron would only have called for her in the most dire of circumstances, for Father William, the chaplain of Prydd, disdained her use of herbs and spells.

" 'Tis the magic of the devil. Witchcraft," he'd said on more than one occasion. Lifting a lofty brow, he'd added, "And it will be in hell you'll be dwellin', Isolde, for all eternity."

William was quick to preach the wages of sin to those who lived in Prydd, but Isolde suspected the

he, too, was guilty of a few vices himself. Too often William's eyes wandered to the wenches during meals, and several times Isolde had watched as he'd stumbled near the altar and slurred the mass, as he'd tasted frequently of the baron's wine.

Yea, William would have put up a fight at the thought of having Isolde birth this new baby. But the baron loved his wife more than he loved his God, and he would do anything to save Cleva—even call upon Isolde's sorcery, if needs be.

"This way, woman," the guard said as he shoved open the thick oaken door of the great hall. Inside the sounds of the castle were muted. Four soldiers rolled dice near the staircase, maids spread clean rushes near the hearth, the smith stacked firewood in the corner, and the steward with his nasal voice barked orders to the cook in the kitchen.

A fire crackled and hissed, giving off a red glow, but the castle felt cold with the presence of death. Two yellow-eyed hounds growled at Isolde's approach, as if they, too, knew she wasn't a true believer in all that was holy.

"Isolde! Come quickly!" Baron Eaton hurried down the stairs. He grabbed her arms and half dragged her up the slick stone steps. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a cap of thick red hair that framed a fair, freckled face. His eyes were as blue as the skies over Wales, and his features were sharply whittled to steep, aristocratic angles. Rumored to be the bastard son of the king, he was a handsome and strong man. Yet his worry was deep; his usually clear eyes clouded with concern.

"Thank the saints you've come." Rowena hurried toward them, causing the light from the sconces to flicker in her wake. A rotund woman with fine white hair and a red complexion, she, too, was a midwife. But she was a Christian woman of uncommon faith. No one would doubt her devotion to God, not even Father William. Rowena grabbed Isolde's hands in her plump fingers. "Lady Cleva calls for you. The labor ..." Her words were choked off, and she bit her lip. "Well, come, come ... there's no time to waste. The baby's turned, I fear, and ... Oh, please, just hurry."

Low, pain-racked moans echoed through the upper hallway. The lady was in agony, to be sure. Isolde's footsteps quickened until she spied Father William standing guard at the door to Cleva's room. Isolde crossed herself, but William's fleshy fingers curled around her bent elbow, and he stopped her short before she could enter.

"This is a Christian house, midwife," he cautioned, his voice booming through the castle.

"Aye, Father."

"I know of your ways. There will be no devil magic here. No chanting. No witch's charms."

Isolde stared long into his red-veined eyes. "I am here to help with the birthing, Father. That is all."

The priest's lips thinned and he reached quickly into her basket, his thick fingers digging under the towels to the knife, herbs, and candles within. "Witch's tools?" he whispered, clucking his sanctimonious tongue.

"Nay, Father, only the tools of a good midwife." She tore her arm from his.

"Is this true?" Father William asked Rowena.

Rowena swallowed back the truth and avoided the priest's heavy gaze. "Isolde is here but to help in God's work of bringing the baron a son. M'lady needs assistance that only Isolde with all her practice can bring."

"But—"

"Remember, Father," Rowena added, "Isolde was not at the birthing of the still babe. Aye, and she was not here when the lady lost those poor little souls who had no chance to grow in her womb. I think 'tis God's will that the baron and his wife have many more sons and daughters."

From the chamber, Lady Cleva cried out, "Help me, please. Oh, God, help me!"

The priest opened his mouth, caught a glance from Baron Eaton, and snapped his teeth together. His face was a mask of his own iron will. ~~“There will be no witchcraft in the house of Prydd, Isolde.”~~ ‘Tis the law of God and country.”

Isolde straightened her old spine and stared directly into the priest’s righteous eyes. “I have work to do, Father. Mayhaps you can help by going to the chapel and praying for the soul of this unborn babe.” She glanced at the baron. “’Twould help you as well.”

“Aye.” Without another word, Eaton led Father William down the stairs, and Isolde, offering a prayer of thanks to whatever god was listening, hastened to Lady Cleva’s bedside.

The room was large, with fresh rushes spread upon the floor, clean tapestries draped over the whitewashed walls, and a fire glowing warmly in the hearth. Yet wafting over the scents of smoke and lavender came the acrid odors of sweat, urine, and blood.

Lady Cleva lay on her bed, her face flushed and damp, her eyes bright with pain. “Help me,” she whispered, twisting her fingers in the wrinkled linen sheets. “Please, Isolde ... you must ...” She clamped her lips together and tears filled her eyes.

“Shh ...” Isolde said softly as she touched Cleva’s sweat-soaked hair. She ran bony, experienced hands along Cleva’s body and didn’t stop until she’d felt the baby, twisted in the birthing channel.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Rowena hastily cross her heavy bosom.

“’Twill be all right,” Isolde assured the lady, though she doubted her own words. There was more here than a simple birth, and would the baby not turn, it would strangle itself.

“God is punishing me,” Cleva murmured, her pretty face twisting in agony as her body convulsed.

“Hush, m’lady! God punishes no one with a child.”

Again Cleva cried out. Her skin, so perfect and white, was now mottled, flushed where the veins in her face had burst. “But this child ... ’tis not Eaton’s ...”

Isolde turned her stern eyes on Rowena, cutting off further confession. “You, midwife. Get clean sheets from the laundress, fresh, hot water from the kitchen, and see that no one disturbs us.”

“But I could be of assistance—”

Isolde wouldn’t budge. “The lady is rambling; she knows not what she says.”

Rowena swallowed. “You think that the child is a bas—”

“I think we need to save this babe and heed not the words of a woman in pain. All that is said here will remain in this chamber.”

“But—”

“Should I hear one word of what goes on tonight gossiped in the kitchen or stables, believe me, Rowena, by all that is holy and all that is not, I will work my magic against you, for I will know that it is you who have spoken. Now, get the towels.”

Cleva screamed, and Rowena, biting her fat lip, hurried into the hallway. Isolde wasted no time. She reached into her basket. Withdrawing herbs, she poured a combination of ground mistletoe, fern, and rosemary onto the candle holders before placing long tapers therein. Only then did she light each candle, murmuring a quiet spell of protection for the mother and infant. She cared not if the babe be Eaton’s or that of a stableboy; Isolde loved the lady and would do whatever necessary to protect her.

Cleva sucked in a breath, and Isolde took a red cord, knotted it nine times, then threaded the cord around Lady Cleva’s sweaty neck. “Now, m’lady, we must work fast, the babe’s almost here.” With deft fingers she took off her silver ring, in the shape of a serpent, and pressed it into Cleva’s palm. “Hold tight to this and feel its healing power,” she said, folding Cleva’s sweaty fingers over the ring. “Now, the child ...”

Carefully spreading Cleva’s legs further, Isolde reached into the birthing channel, feeling with skill

fingers, praying that the child would turn as she eased the baby's slick head forward.

Rain pounded the thick walls, and the wind gave up a shriek as loud as Cleva's cries. "Merciful God, please. Ohhh—" Her fingers curled over the ring until the metal cut into her palm.

"Come, Cleva, 'tis only a short time yet ..."

Lightning split the night, casting the room in an eerie flash of brilliance.

Cleva moaned loudly, and with one last push, the infant slithered into Isolde's waiting hands.

"Oh, God, oh, God," Cleva whimpered, blood flowing from her in a warm rush.

"'Tis a girl, m'lady," Isolde said as the child gave out a first, lusty cry, "and a beauty, she is ..."

Cleva tried to rise up, but Isolde, still holding the baby, shoved her gently back on the sheets.

"Wait ... 'tis not finished," she said, as the baby was still attached to the afterbirth. She tied the cord with strong thread, then severed it with her knife.

Skillfully Isolde washed the infant, her bony fingers touching each joint as she watched eyes as blue as the sky blink up at her. Dark curls surrounded a perfect little face, and Isolde's heart nearly stopped.

Wind shrieked over the battlements, and the prophecy she'd heard since childhood, the prediction of the old ones, swam in a wild current in Isolde's mind.

She mouthed the words and could not help opening the towel.

Born during a tempest, with hair the color of a raven's wing, eyes the blue of midnight, and the kiss of the moon upon skin like alabaster ...

She let her gaze wander over the pale folds of newborn flesh until she spied it, the birthing mark at the base of the babe's neck, a perfect crescent ... the kiss of the moon. "By all the saints," Isolde whispered, rewrapping the girl-child.

Her throat constricted in awe, for she knew she was looking upon the chosen one, the savior who would sacrifice herself for peace between her countrymen. She held the baby close, felt the infant's warmth, and closed her eyes. Aye, she saw in her mind's eye the future, filled with bloodshed and deceit, and somehow she knew this little one's destiny was wrapped in the words of the old people.

Isolde had heard of the visions—aye, she'd had more than her share of the sight herself—but never had she expected to help bring into the lady's house the chosen one who would become the savior of Prydd.

"A girl?" Cleva asked faintly, her voice filled with disappointment.

"Aye, and a fine one she is, m'lady. As beautiful as her mother." She handed the swaddled baby to Cleva and worked to catch the blood still flowing from the lady's womb.

"What I said," Cleva whispered, guilt shadowing her eyes, "about the child—"

"What a woman says in the pain of birthing is between her and her God. No one else's ears hear that thing."

"But—"

"Shh." She placed a hand on Cleva's shoulder. "'Tis a glorious babe you've got, m'lady, a daughter who will someday make you proud." She took the ring from Cleva's hand and slid it back on her finger.

The door creaked open as Rowena, her eyes averted, her lips turned down in disapproval, returned. She said nothing as she helped the babe suckle at Cleva's breast and washed the blood from her body.

With a thunder of boots, Baron Eaton burst into the room. His face was flushed, his smile stretched wide. "'Tis a son?" he asked, dropping on his knees at his wife's bedside, kissing her sweat-soaked curls and gazing in awe at the newborn.

Cleva licked her lips nervously. Tears again filled her eyes. "A daughter."

The baron tried to hide his disappointment, and his wife laid a thin hand over his. "We have Tadd," she reminded him, her chin wobbling slightly as she cradled the baby. "You have your firstborn son."

“Aye, and now I have a daughter.”

~~Cleva swallowed hard, started to say something, but glanced over her shoulder to Isolde and held her~~
tongue.

“And a beauty she is. Like her mother.” Eaton placed a huge hand on the back of the baby’s head, but his smile disappeared. The tiny girl nursed hungrily, and he shook his great head. “I had hoped for another son,” he admitted, and thin lines appeared at the corners of Cleva’s mouth.

“One may yet come,” the priest interposed. He glanced at the chamber and frowned at the tapers burning slowly and giving off their herbed scent. He noticed the knotted cord around Cleva’s neck, and his gaze sharpened on Isolde. “I warned you, midwife—”

“This child is a gift,” Isolde said quickly.

The baron lifted a brow, encouraging her to speak. “A gift?”

“To you. To all of Prydd.” She held her chin defiantly, aware of the priest’s eyes burning in rage. “Born during a tempest, with hair as black as a raven’s wing, eyes the blue of midnight, and the kiss of the moon—”

“ ’Tis nonsense!” Father William interrupted quickly. “Heresy.”

Isolde dared not move as the angry servant of God walked with measured tread in her direction. His thick finger wagged beneath her nose. “I’m warning ye, woman, there is never to be any word of that old prophecy or I will see to it that the bishop hears of your pagan ways! He will not be as tolerant as I. There are tests that will prove whether ye be sinner or saint.”

Isolde quivered inside; she’d heard of the tests to prove one’s piety. Either by burning or drowning she would be proclaimed a witch. “But the prophecy, Father ...”

“Aye, I’ve heard it myself. I hear much when dying men confess their sins of heresy on the deathbeds.” He offered Isolde what he considered a patient smile for the unenlightened. “And of course the prophecy is false,” he said, reaching into his deep pockets for his prayer book, “for what fool would think that this babe would be the savior of the house of Prydd?” He glanced pointedly at everyone in the room. “A man-child, mayhap, but a woman?” He chuckled and shook his head, as if he alone had the knowledge of the future.

Baron Eaton turned his back on his wife and the new little one. “We will have more sons,” he said firmly, and Cleva paled on the bed.

But Father William wasn’t finished. He stripped the cord from Cleva’s neck, tossed it into the fire, and said, “Mark my words, no woman will ever change the course of destiny. ’Tis sacrilege to say so. Now, if we could all pray for this tiny new soul ...”

Leah, *please*, take my place,” Sorcha begged of her younger sister as they passed by the dovecote and scattered seeds for the birds. In a flutter of feathers, the doves picked through the frozen gravel of a path running through the bedraggled garden.

“I know not,” Leah said, shaking her head as she threw another handful of seeds onto the ground.

Sorcha’s cloak billowed in the icy wind blowing across the sea, and she felt more than a twinge of guilt, for it was her turn to sit through one of Father William’s long masses and pass out alms to the poor. “I promise next week I’ll do the same for you.”

Leah rubbed her tiny chin thoughtfully. Her eyes, green as the forest, were unreadable. “And what will Tadd say?”

Sorcha’s lips turned down at the thought of her brother. “I care not.”

“If he catches us?”

“I shall take all the blame,” Sorcha replied, anxious to be off. Leah could be so stubborn sometimes. “Asides, we won’t be caught. You’ll wear my cloak and ride my mare. Only the soldier who guards you will know the truth, and Sir Henry is easily bribed.”

“I like this not. Tadd—”

“Curse Tadd.” Sorcha couldn’t hide her disgust for her older brother. He’d tormented her for as long as she could remember, tricking her into making a fool of herself, laughing at her expense, treating her as if she were somehow no better than the manure in the stables. For years she’d endured his torture. He was seven years older and had convinced her at the age of five to try and suckle milk from the mother cat’s teats, then, in the company of the other young boys, laughed at her. When she was seven he’d shorn her head under the guise of letting her become one of the boys, then made fun of her ugly scalp. Just after she’d turned twelve, he’d sold her to a sixteen-year-old stableboy whom she’d had to kick in the groin to escape.

But things had changed. Sorcha had realized that to protect herself from Tadd’s cruelty, she had to become more devious than he. By befriending several of the knights in her father’s service, she’d learned how to ride a war-horse, how to shoot arrows as straight and true as any archer in the castle, and how to use a knife to defend herself. Still she hadn’t been convinced that these skills alone would keep her safe from her brother’s treachery, so she’d taught herself how to use a whip and a mace and even the heavy military flail. However, it was her wits upon which she relied. Though Tadd was stronger and swifter, he wasn’t as smart as she, thank the good Mother Mary.

Leah, as if reading her mind, bit down on her lip. “While Father’s away, Tadd’s the lord of the castle.”

“Remind me not,” Sorcha replied, unable to hide her disgust for her older brother. Ever since the father had ridden off to fight the bloody Scots, leaving his eldest in charge of the castle, life in Prydd had changed. Some of the knights neglected their duties, preferring to roll dice, drink wine, and seduce the

kitchen wenches. Surly and often drunk, they seemed to have forgotten Baron Eaton and his strict moral code. ~~Only a few of those who remained could be trusted. "If Mother were alive, Tadd would dare not~~ to put the castle in such jeopardy."

"But she's not." Leah threw the rest of the seeds to the wind, brushed the dust from her gloved hands and turned back to the great hall.

"I'd not ask if it were not important."

Leah smiled and tucked a strand of hair beneath the cowl of her cape. "'Tis Sir Keane you're meeting."

Sorcha's heart nearly stopped. She'd been so careful, and yet Leah had guessed the truth.

"It is, isn't it?"

"Aye," Sorcha admitted with a shrug, as if her secret romance were of no great concern. Truth to tell, she cared for Keane, but knew that she didn't love him. "Is there gossip?"

"Not yet. But I've seen him watching you. You needs be careful or Tadd will get wind that you fancy Sir Keane."

She didn't have to say more. Tadd was sure to make life miserable for anyone interested in his sister. Why Tadd despised her, she knew not, but only guessed his hatred was because of her cursed birthmark. His feelings for Leah were not as bitter. But then Leah had always been the kind one, the pious one, the saint in the family, and Sorcha had been a thorn in her father's side from the day of her birth.

"Will you help me with the accounts?" Leah asked.

So simple. "Aye."

Leah scowled darkly. "I know not why Father insists we learn the duties of the steward. All those numbers ... Ah, well, if you will do the work."

Sorcha couldn't help but smile. The accounts were easy for her, no task at all. "'Tis done," she said.

Within the hour, Leah had explained that she, too, wanted to attend mass, and Tadd, interested in his new dark-haired kitchen maid, waved her aside. With Sir Henry for protection and Leah's maid Gwendolyn, as companion, they rode through the forest on the main road. Once Castle Prydd was out of sight, the two sisters exchanged cloaks and horses.

"You'll not be doing this," Henry insisted as he began to understand that he'd been played for a fool in part of a girlish scheme.

"M'lady, please, 'tis not a good idea," Gwendolyn agreed. A tiny woman with light hair, she worried far too much.

"'Tis all right." Sorcha slipped the hood of Leah's purple cloak over her head.

Henry reined in his horse. "No good will come of it. I forbid you—"

"'Tis not for you to forbid," Sorcha cut in, and Leah stifled a giggle as she adjusted the folds of Sorcha's crimson mantle around her slender body. "Asides, I'll see that you get some of the baron's best wine on our return."

Henry's heavy face folded upon itself. "'Tis not drink that I need. 'Tis assurance that you'll be safe. With Castle Erbyn left in Sir Darton's hands while Lord Hagan is off fighting the war, no one is safe."

"Erbyn is far away," Leah said, though she seemed a little anxious.

Both Hagan and Darton, the twin brothers, were harsh men who ruled with cruel hands, but Hagan, the baron, was the more levelheaded of the two, and he had once traveled to Prydd to make peace with Sorcha's father. Sorcha had not been allowed to meet Hagan, as he was considered the enemy, but she'd hidden herself in the minstrel's loft and gazed down upon him as he'd walked arrogantly into the great hall. A big man with dark hair the color of a falcon's wing and eyes that were set well back in his head, he strode into the great hall and nodded curtly to her father. Hagan's nose was not straight, but he

features were bold and chiseled, and he had an air about him that caused most of the guards to keep their distance. His shoulders were wider than her father's, and he towered above the older man. For the first time in her young life, Sorcha doubted her father's ability to command an army against so formidable an opponent.

Commanding. Assured. As if he were ruler of Prydd, he warmed himself by the fire and spoke in low tones that Sorcha, try as she might, could not overhear. He came in the company of soldiers, all wearing the green and gold of his colors, and there was another man with him, at his right hand, who looked much like the baron, though slightly smaller in stature and not quite as handsome. His twin, no doubt. Though she was but ten at the time, she knew, as she gazed at Hagan of Erbyn, she would never see a more powerful man.

Danger seemed to radiate from him, and when he glanced up, she gasped, giving herself away. His green-gold eyes focused on her, and the lips tightened a bit as his gaze caught hers for but an instant. At that moment Sorcha gleaned what it was to be a rabbit caught in the archer's sights.

Her little heart pounded, but rather than hide, she stood defiantly, tossing her hair off her shoulder and met his arrogant glare with her own prideful stare.

"Who is the waif?" he asked her father, and Baron Eaton glanced upward, grunting as he recognized his daughter.

"Sorcha—get down from there!" Eaton ordered.

The twin brother eyed her with interest, but it was Hagan who said, "Sorcha? Ahh ... so she does exist. I have heard of you, little one." His eyes glinted in a kind mockery. "Some of the peasants—the people who believe in the old ways—have told me that you are to be the savior of this castle."

Sorcha lifted a brow and shrugged, trying not to notice how handsome a man he was. "'Tis true," she replied, not knowing where her courage came from, but squaring her shoulders a bit.

"'Tis a lie, the mutterings of a crazy old midwife who thinks she be a witch," Tadd interjected as he hurried down the stairs, his face flushed in the seething rage that seemed to be constantly with him. Always spoiling for a fight, he eyed Hagan and the soldiers from Erbyn with obvious loathing.

Hagan ignored him and continued to stare at Sorcha. "Will you strike me dead?" he asked. Again the gentle ridicule in his voice.

"If you ever try to capture Prydd. Yes, Lord Hagan, I will cut out your black heart myself."

He laughed then, and the harsh lines of his face disappeared. "Well, little waif, I quiver in my boots as does the entire castle, just knowing that mayhaps your wrath will be cast in the direction of Erbyn."

"Hush this nonsense!" her father bellowed. "Go see to your lessons, Sorcha. Lord Hagan and I have a truce to discuss. Tadd come along with us. 'Tis time you learned how to bring peace to the land ..."

Sorcha had never seen the baron again. Now, as her breath steamed in the cold winter air of the forecourt outside of Prydd and Sir Henry looked as if he were ready to strangle her for her impudence, she wondered if Lord Hagan or his brother or their men really did consort with outlaws and thieves as was rumored.

"Worry not about Sorcha, Sir Henry. She'll be in good company," Leah said, her nose wrinkling as she chuckled. "Safe in the arms of—"

"Rest assured, Sir Henry, that I'll be fine, and breathe not a word of this to a soul." Sorcha climbed into the saddle of Leah's bay jennet as Leah tried in vain to scramble onto Sorcha's feisty black mare.

"This horse will be the very end of me," Leah said as she finally settled into the saddle.

"She'll be your savior," Sorcha predicted as she dug her heels into the little bay's flanks and tugged on the reins. The mare whirled and broke into an easy gallop, heading north, away from the village and toward the meadow where Keane had promised to meet her.

“God be with you,” Henry shouted over the cold wind that rushed at Sorcha’s face and chilled her bones. ~~It screamed past her ears and shoved the hood off her head to tangle in the long waves of her hair.~~ Sorcha felt free, her spirit riding with her on the wind. She urged Leah’s jennet ever faster, but the bay was not as swift as her own mare, and the little horse labored up the forested hill until the road broke free to a frost-covered meadow of dry weeds and bent, bleached grass.

Keane, as promised, was waiting, standing beside his gray destrier as the big horse tried to graze. Sorcha’s heart still soared at the sight of the tall knight. No more than twenty, he was broad-shouldered and trim, his skill in tournaments already established. His blond hair ruffled in the breeze, and his eyes deep brown, flickered in recognition as she pulled on the reins and hopped to the ground.

“So you did come,” he said, his breath making clouds in the crisp winter air.

“Did you doubt me?”

“Doubt you? Nay, but trust you ...” His teasing smile stretched wide. “That is a different matter.”

“ ’Tis I who shouldn’t trust you,” she quipped, wondering why she could not agree to marry him.

“Come here.”

She threw herself into his waiting arms and felt the warmth of his mouth close over hers. Her heart, already racing, beat even a little more quickly, but she knew that she’d made the right choice to tell him that she could no longer meet him this way. Lying to Tadd, trading chores with Leah, deceiving everyone in the castle, and putting Sir Henry’s pride on the line were worth a few stolen moments with Keane to tell him how she felt.

His arms clasped more firmly around her, and she pulled away. “Keane, there is something I must tell you.”

“I’ve missed you, Sorcha,” he said quickly, as if he knew her thoughts, gently shoving the hair off her neck and kissing her behind the ear. He traced her birthmark with his finger.

“No, Keane, please listen to me. I cannot—”

“Hush, little one. Each night I dream of you and—”

THWACK!

Keane’s body flexed in her arms. “Holy Christ!” He sucked in his breath. “Sorcha, run!”

HISS! THUNK! Again his body jolted, and this time Sorcha saw the arrow buried deep in his shoulder. Another had hit his thigh, and blood stained his breeches.

“No!” she screamed, trying to hold him upright.

“*RUN!*” He fell to the ground, his fingers scrabbling for the hilt of his sword, but Sorcha stood as if rooted to the spot. Her head swung around and she stared into the trees, the dark undergrowth where their attacker lay hidden somewhere to the south, cutting off the road back to Prydd. As if he’d been following her.

“Come with me,” she pleaded, pulling Keane to his feet and helping him to his destrier.

“I’ll stand and fight.”

“And die!” she half screamed. Her heart was thudding with fear that they would both be killed. “ ’Twill serve no purpose. Come! Now!”

“But—”

Desperate, she clung to him. “There is no honor in giving up your life like this. Come! I need you!”

Keane, his face white, took her lead. With a scream of agony, he yanked the shaft of the arrow from his thigh and threw it onto the ground. “Take the other one.”

Swallowing hard, she stared at the arrow buried in his shoulder. “ ’Tis not safe to—”

“Do it!”

He leaned down, and Sorcha placed her fingers over the shaft. She tugged, but the arrowhead caught

on flesh and wouldn't budge.

"Hurry!"

Fingers slick with blood, she pulled again, and the shaft of the arrow splintered in her hands. Blood smeared on the red folds of Leah's mantle.

Keane moaned, writhing away from her.

"Oh, God, I knew—"

Another arrow screamed through the air, passing near Sorcha's ear.

"It matters not," Keane said raggedly, stains of scarlet discoloring his tunic. With an effort he whistled to his destrier. The war-horse was nervous, prancing anxiously, nose to the wind, his great ears flicking toward the woods. Keane hauled himself into the saddle as Sorcha climbed on Leah's little mare, yanking hard on the bridle, causing the jennet to rear as they turned.

"Run, you bloody nag," she yelled at the jennet. Her horse jumped forward, and Sorcha leaned low in the saddle, digging her heels into the mare's flanks, urging the tired bay to keep up with the longer, steady strides of Keane's charger.

The frozen ground whirled past and wind tore at Sorcha's face, bringing tears to her eyes. She could barely breathe, and fear grasped her heart in its terrible, clawlike grip. They couldn't die; not like this. *Please, God, not like this!*

Another arrow whizzed past Sorcha's shoulder and she glanced backward for just a second, long enough to see a band of outlaws moving out of the shadows. Filthy and ragged, five men she'd never seen in her life rode rangy horses, without using their hands. Bowstrings held taut, arrows in place, they took aim. "Oh, God, save us," she murmured, her throat constricting in terror.

"This way!" Keane shouted, turning into the woods again. The road they took was little more than a deer trail that wound through the dense undergrowth, and at the base of an ancient oak, split in several directions.

"We'll never lose them if they live here in the woods," she said as the horses slowed to a trot and picked their way through the gloomy undergrowth.

"We'll lose them," Keane vowed, though he had to hold on to the pommel of the saddle to keep himself astride.

As often as Sorcha had ridden in the woods, she'd never ventured this far from the castle. The dark forest felt hostile. Tall firs kept the ground in shadow while bare, black-barked oaks reached skyward and thorny, leafless briars rattled in a wind that was as cold as death.

"They'll expect us to double-back," Keane told her as they took a fork in the path leading farther north, away from Prydd.

She bit her lip anxiously. "Should you not rest?" she asked, eyeing the pained set of his mouth.

"Not yet."

She watched as even more blood stained his tunic, but she said nothing. Keane was a proud man, and this time, Sorcha feared, his pride would become his undoing. "Please, let us stop. We can hide—"

"Nay!" His skin was taut and white around his mouth. With determination, he clucked his horse forward. "We must return to Prydd by nightfall, but 'twill be a long ride as we needs make our circle wide so as not to run into the outlaws again."

She thought of the horrid creatures who had tried to kill them. "Who were those men?"

Keane shrugged.

"But why would they attack us?"

"For money," he said with effort.

"I have no coin—"

“Ransom, then. You’re the baron’s daughter, are you not?”

“The baron is away.”

“Tadd is at Prydd.”

“Tadd wouldn’t pay a single gold piece for my release,” she muttered as they finally turned southeast, beginning to double-back.

“It matters not. Now, hush, lest they hear us.” His gaze held hers for just a second, and she saw death in his kind eyes. “Ride silently, and should I ... be unable to stay astride, leave me and take my horse.”

“Keane, no—”

“Do not thwart me on this, woman. ’Tis our only chance!”

He kicked his mount onward. She saw him wobble in the saddle, and her heart leapt to her throat. He held on, but she knew he would not stay conscious much longer.

Hours later, they arrived at the gates of Prydd. Sorcha’s body was numb from the cold, her fingers rigid in the frozen leather reins. Keane slumped forward, falling off his destrier as his wounded body finally gave out.

“Help! Guards! Please, help!” Sorcha screamed as she jumped from her own mount. The little horse sprinted into the outer bailey, and Sorcha fell to the ground, where she cradled Keane’s head upon her lap. “Do not die,” she whispered, tears hot against her eyelids. “Keane, please, you must not die!”

“**He’s dead,**” Isolde whispered, and Brother Ignatius murmured last rites over Keane’s body.

“Noooo!” Sorcha wailed, her cries of grief resounding to the rafters of the solar. Her heart felt as if it had been ripped from her chest, and tears burned behind her eyes. “Use your magic, do whatever you must, but do not let him die!”

Keane lay upon the bed, his wounds bound, his face a gray mask.

Isolde touched his neck, feeling for signs of life, a pulse, then leaned down, her ear to his chest, as she listened for the smallest breath. “I’m sorry, m’lady—”

“Nay! He cannot be dead. He cannot!” Sorcha wailed. She approached Isolde and grabbed the servant woman by the cloak. “Some say you are a witch. Have you no potion to cure this—”

“I cannot save the dead.”

“But you must!” Sorcha cried, refusing to accept that Keane’s life was over. Had he not planned to meet her, he might still be alive. Guilt gnawed at her. She threw herself against his unmoving body, holding on to him, knowing she would never love another. “Keane, Keane ... please ... merciful God—”

“Had there been more life force within him, mayhaps, but—”

“’Tis in God’s hands now, my child,” Brother Ignatius whispered, gently pulling Sorcha off Keane’s lifeless form.

“No!”

Tadd’s voice rumbled through the hallway. “Bloody Christ, is there no end to her schemes?” he growled, kicking open the door. It banged against the stone wall. Sorcha jumped, blinking back tears. Her brother strode into the room. He loomed above her, his shoulders as broad as an axe handle, his face twisted with a powerful rage. “You disobeyed me.”

“I—”

“Do not bother to lie to me again, for I will not believe you. Did you not bargain with Leah to go to the mass in your stead?”

“Yea, but—”

“With only Sir Henry as her guard?”

“Aye ... and Gwendolyn,” she answered more carefully.

“Even though she is not as quick with a knife as you be.”

~~“I understand not why you care. Sir Keane is dead!”~~ she said, finally accepting the terrible truth, her bones seeming to turn to water.

“Aye, and he’s not the only one.”

Tadd’s words cut to her very soul. Sorcha’s throat tightened and her pulse pounded with dread. Beyond the anger in Tadd’s eyes there were vile accusations. “News of Father in the war?” she whispered, dread pulsing through her.

“Nay.”

Suddenly Sorcha understood her brother’s ire. Their sister. Where was Leah? In her worry for Keane’s life, Sorcha had forgotten Leah. Now her stomach wrenched painfully and her tongue was thick with fear. “Not Leah.”

Tadd didn’t reply, and a new, horrid fear gripped Sorcha’s heart. “Tell me,” she demanded.

“Tell you,” Tadd repeated, his rage retreating a little. Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. He liked nothing better than to keep a secret from Sorcha, who deemed herself a princess, who was born with that damned birthmark, who, he suspected, might be his equal in everything but strength.

“Where is she?”

“Ask Sir Robert,” he said, enjoying this game immensely.

“Sir Robert?” Sorcha repeated, stunned. Robert was one of Tadd’s most trusted knights.

“The traitor in the dungeon. He has news from Castle Erbyn.”

Sorcha felt as if a ghost had walked across her soul. Years ago, Hagan’s father, Richard, had unsuccessfully tried to wrest control of Prydd from her father’s hands. A black-heart himself, Richard had been known to consort with thieves and outlaws. His ambitions were boundless and were passed on to his sons, though for the past few years there had been no war, the peace the result of Hagan’s fragile truce. No one at Prydd trusted him, and she remembered him well—how powerful and determined and cruel he’d seemed. Handsome, too, but the kind of man who made others tremble in fear. She swallowed back her apprehension. “What news?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“Henry and Gwendolyn were killed by a band of outlaw knights—all sworn to serve Hagan.”

“No!” Sorcha’s knees threatened to buckle. “They were fine when I left them.” Guilt swallowed her soul.

“ ’Twas after.”

Surely there was some mistake. Numb, she whispered, “But Robert; you say he was part of this band?”

Tadd’s lips tightened angrily. “Aye.”

“What of Leah?” she hardly dared ask.

“Our sister has been stolen away. To Erbyn. And why is that, Sorcha?” Tadd demanded, his face mottling scarlet in the firelight. Dark red-brown locks fell over his eyes, and his fists opened and closed in his rage.

Sorcha could hardly believe her ears. First she and Keane ambushed by outlaws, and now this horrible news of Leah. Sir Henry’s flushed face swam before her eyes, and Gwendolyn’s soft voice filled her ears. No more laughter ... Oh, God, and Keane, noble Keane. Tears burned in her eyes. She bit her lip and prayed she was dreaming, that she would wake up and Keane would still be alive and strong, and Leah would be within the safe walls of Prydd, stitching her embroidery, or walking in the garden, or trying to make sense of the bloody castle accounts.

Tadd’s nostrils quivered with fury and his lips were white and flat over his teeth.

“God preserve us,” Isolde whispered.

Fear clutched at Sorcha’s heart. Blind, numbing fear. Tadd was playing with her. For all his anger, he

was toying with her, and he only did so when he was certain of winning, or humiliating her. Perhaps this was one of his tricks. "I believe not—"

Tadd grabbed her arm in a grip that bruised, yanking her off her feet before dropping her on the floor again. "Believe, sister. Your disloyalty has led to death this time. Henry was a brave and trustworthy knight. He gave up his life so that you could meet your lover." He shoved her away as if her very touch disgusted him, and she fell back against the bed where Keane lay unmoving.

She felt like whimpering, but held back her cries, refusing to back down. "How is it that Sir Robert, he be a traitor, has confided in you?"

Tadd's smile turned cruel. "Sir Henry managed to wound Robert in the attack. Robert's band of thugs left him to die, but a farmer found him and brought him, barely alive, back to Prydd. He's in the dungeon, and with a little encouragement, he told us that he was hired by the lord of Erbyn."

Sorcha felt sick. She had brought this horror to Leah. "Then you must gather all of your best knights and ride to Erbyn to free Leah at once," she said aloud.

"Nay, Sorcha. I'll not undo the mess you caused. You with your damned birthmark," he sneered, the malice in his eyes gleaming bright as the yellow eyes of the hounds. "The savior of Prydd, isn't that what the old woman says?" He cast a disdainful look at Isolde. "'Tis the mark of the devil, methinks, and I am not the only one. Father William, too, sees the sign as blasphemy against the only true God."

As if Tadd were a Christian! However, Sorcha had no time for arguments. If what Tadd said was true, then Leah was in grave danger. Her virtue and her very life were at stake. Sorcha marched up to Tadd. "I will go with you."

"Go with me? Where?"

"To Erbyn."

His laugh was harsh. "You did not hear me, sister."

"But we must free Leah!"

"By fighting Hagan or that brother of his, Darton?"

"Aye."

"Ah, Sorcha, so foolish," he said on a sigh that spoke of her naïveté. "I'll not risk the lives of any more good knights. No doubt Leah will be ransomed."

Kean's words haunted her. Had he not suspected that the outlaws planned to ransom her? A shiver slithered down her spine.

"Then you will do nothing?" she asked, inching her chin up defiantly. Then she saw it: the cowardice in her brother's features.

"I'll not battle Hagan of Erbyn for Leah, for that is what he wants."

"Hagan has upheld his truce in the past few years," Sorcha said, though she didn't trust that the black-heart would not break his word. The unsteady peace between the two castles had lasted several years, but was always in jeopardy.

"Which is why, sister, 'tis best to wait. Hagan is rumored to be off fighting the Scots."

"Then his brother, Darton, is behind this treachery."

"Or Hagan has returned." Tadd rubbed his chin thoughtfully, obviously unhappy with this turn of his thoughts. "Hagan is a liar, but a powerful warrior. His people fear him. 'Twould be best not to anger him when so many of our knights are with our father."

"Even if he has taken Leah?" Sorcha asked, astounded at the depth of her brother's cowardice. Leah had to be freed!

Tadd's eyes swept up Sorcha's stained mantle. "I'll deal with Hagan my own way. As for you, sister, you will be punished for your lies and treachery. 'Tis your fault that two of my best knights needs

buried. Your fault that Gwendolyn was savagely murdered. You shall carry that burden on your soul and your penance is that you, oh bearer of the 'kiss of the moon,' shall be locked in your chamber until the moon is next full."

Isolde lifted her old hands in supplication. "M'lord, 'twill be nearly a full cycle ... twenty-eight days—"

"Hush, old woman, or I shall punish you as well." He drew his sword swiftly.

Isolde stood firm, and Tadd merely admired the blade, pointed it into the oak floor, and leaned insolently on the hilt. He had to bend a bit, so that his nose was within inches of Sorcha's face. "You'll pray in your room, sister, and pray alone. Even Father William will abandon you during your penance. The old woman will bring you meals, but that is all." Standing quickly, he motioned with his sword. Two guards came into the room and grabbed her by the arms.

"I'll not be held prisoner in my own castle!" Sorcha cried.

" 'Tis for your safety."

"In a pig's eye!"

He clucked his tongue as she was dragged out of the solar. Brother Ignatius prayed over Keane's stiff body, and Tadd grinned, as if he was glad for an excuse to lock her away.

Though Sorcha fought with all the strength of her young body, she was no match for the two burly knights, who flung her into her chamber and dropped the heavy oaken bar across her door.

Wretched and cold, she huddled on the floor. Henry lay dead. Dear Keane's soul, too, had departed. Gwendolyn had given up her life. Leah was a prisoner in the bowels of Castle Erbyn. Tadd held her as his prisoner.

Her life, so carefree this morn, had become wretched. Tadd, curse his soul to the devil, was correct, however. All the death and disaster that had been wreaked upon the castle was her fault and hers alone. Some savior of Prydd was she—more like the plague of Prydd. Her insides felt as if they'd been torn apart by wolves, and it took all of her courage not to fall down and weep. But she couldn't. For, by the gods, she would have to find a way to avenge the deaths and save her sister.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself upright. She'd kneel to no man. Especially not to someone as dull and wicked as Tadd. Guilt drummed in her brain as she walked to the open window and stared at the night. Clouds drifted across the face of the full moon.

What tortures was Leah enduring in the dungeons of Erbyn? Sorcha's throat clogged with hot, unshed tears. Oh, if she could only trade places with her sister.

"By all that we hold dear, sister Leah," Sorcha whispered onto the breeze, "I vow to save you." She shivered as the breath of wind blew against her hair and she thought of Baron Hagan, Lord of Erbyn. Since childhood, she'd heard of him, knew him to be a rogue, a treacherous man who would stop at nothing to gain his ends. For years he had wanted Prydd and the surrounding lands, but he'd bided his time, agreed to the truce, and now, while their father was off fighting the Scots, he had decided to make war, not with an army, mayhaps, but to the same end. "Hold on, Leah," she whispered over the rising wind. The castle walls seemed to mock her, for she was prisoner in her own beloved Prydd, but Sorcha was a woman who believed that no enemy was invincible, no dungeon without a means of escape, no plot complicated enough that it couldn't be thwarted.

She kicked off her boots and started planning her escape. 'Twould be easy to sneak out of this room if she only needed Isolde's help. The difficult part would come later.

Nay, freeing Leah would not be an easy matter, but she had no choice. For all of her sixteen years she had been selfish, only interested in her own needs, but as of this night, her destiny had changed.

She would avenge Henry's death.

She would see that Gwendolyn's murderer be held responsible.

~~She would seek vengeance, dark and brutal, for the killing of Keane.~~

She would free her sister.

No matter what the cost.

No force, not even the power of Baron Hagan of Erbyn, would stop her.



Sorcha's heart was in her throat as she stepped over the dozing guard.

"He will not sleep long," Isolde warned her as the man snored and Sorcha barred the door.

"It does not matter. He will never know I've gone." They sped along the hallway quietly and outside the great hall to the gate of the dungeon, which was unguarded. Together they hurried down the damp stone steps.

"You must hear me. The potion is made of ..." Isolde's voice whispered through the dark hallways and Sorcha only half listened.

The dungeon smelled of rotting hay and urine. Rats scurried beneath thin layers of musty straw, and Sorcha's heart hammered so loudly, she was certain the prisoner could hear it. If Tadd discovered that Isolde had placed a potion in the guards' mead during the meal and that now they both slept at the posts while the old woman helped Sorcha escape, he would surely flail them both.

Tadd was an angry man, a strong man, a man who hated being beaten, but he was also easily tricked. Sorcha loved fooling him almost as much as she loved defying him. He hated her. That much was certain. Ever since he'd heard the old wives' tale about the "kiss of the moon" and had seen the birthmark on her neck, he'd been resentful and malicious, though sometimes Sorcha was certain she saw fear in his eyes ... as if he sometimes believed in the witchcraft and visions of the old ones.

Sorcha enjoyed this little bit of power, though she believed not in Isolde's old fable. As Father William had pointed out time after time, should she be the true savior of Prydd, she would have been born a man, though why Father William even bothered to give her this information was a mystery. As a true man of the cloth, he didn't believe in folk tales.

No doubt Tadd would whip her within an inch of her life if he thought she would be so bold as to talk to the traitor, Sir Robert. She had no choice. Since her father was off fighting the no-good Scots with King Edward, and Tadd would do nothing to free Leah, Sorcha would. The first step was to talk to the prisoner and find out what he knew.

Sorcha held her torch high, allowing the flickering light to fall into the cell. With a clanking of rusted metal, she unlocked the gate and shoved the filthy barrier open. The flames cast orange shadows over the prisoner, a man whom Tadd had foolishly once trusted with his very life. Now Sir Robert was barely alive. His lips were cracked, and blood trailed from one nostril. Both eyes were swollen to mere slits, and his breath rattled deep in his lungs as he breathed. Naked to the waist, he shuddered at the light. Purple welts on his back still oozed blood, and the wound where Sir Henry's arrow had pierced his shoulder was deep and raw.

"Please ... no more ..." he whispered, tears running from his puffed and blackened eyes at the thought of another beating. "I've told you all I know."

"Aye, Sir Robert, but you spoke to Lord Tadd," Sorcha said as Isolde brought in a bucket of water, towels, broth from the kitchen, and her oils and herbs for healing. "Now you must tell me of my sister. Tadd told me little, but 'tis rumored that you know what happened to her."

Isolde offered the man a cup of water. He drank too quickly and retched the cool liquid back up. "Slowly," Isolde said, refilling the cup from her pail.

Robert sipped carefully, licking his lips and groaning. When at last he'd had his fill, he leaned back

against the cold, damp stones. "Aye," he said, his voice filled with remorse, "I know of the Lady Leah."

"Tell me."

Isolde motioned him to bend forward, then touched his back with a clean, wet towel. He sucked his breath in a horrid hiss. "'Twill help," Isolde whispered as she cleaned his wounds and added her balms and herbs. She offered him the broth of salmon she'd begged from the cook. Sir Robert drank long, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Leah was on her way back from mass and giving alms in town—"

"This much I know," Sorcha said, guilt riddling her soul.

Robert closed his bruised eyes. "The lady was stopped on the road by a band of outlaws. Her guard in trying to defend her, was slain. And her maid ..." He hesitated, drawing in a shaking breath. Then, with a curse, he added, "Gwendolyn was beaten, raped, and left for dead as well. Christ, Jesus, I'm sorry ... so sorry..."

Sorcha felt as if a dagger had been twisted in her heart all over again. Gwendolyn had been with the castle for all her fifteen years, and she'd hoped to marry the baker's son. Sir Henry had taught Sorcha to ride and aim an arrow with precision. Henry, like Keane, had been a good man, a kind-hearted man, and he deserved not to die. "Tadd told me of Sir Henry's loyalty," she said, her voice filled with a need for vengeance. "And that Leah was taken to Erbyn."

"Aye."

Again Sorcha's soul turned to ice. She had hoped that Tadd had lied to her. "Why would Hagan want Leah?"

Robert spat blood through a hole in his teeth. "I know not." Sorcha knew he was lying. She leaned closer to the man she had once respected.

"You know more, and if you want me to see that you are a free man again, you will tell me the truth, Robert of Ainsley. And I want to know all. More than you told my brother."

In the smoky light from the torch, Sir Robert grimaced in pain. He gazed through the bloody slits that were his eyes. "'Twas not Hagan who did the kidnapping," he admitted. "The baron is off fighting the Scots with your father."

"Darton, then," Sorcha said, thinking of the younger scheming brother, even more vile than his twin.

"Aye, and 'twas not Leah he wanted."

Sorcha's heart stood still. "Then why?"

"'Twas you, m'lady."

"Nay!" she cried, though she knew he wasn't lying.

Isolde turned tortured eyes upon her. "He speaks the truth. My dreams have forewarned me."

"What dreams?" Sorcha asked, though she did not wish to hear them.

"Of you and Castle Erbyn." Isolde crossed herself deftly and dropped to the straw.

"Your visions mean naught," Sorcha whispered, but a cold drip of truth settled into her heart. She forgot about the stench of the cell and the rats rustling beneath the straw. "But why? I've never met the cur from Erbyn."

"But he has seen you," Robert said, "and he paid the outlaws to bring you to him. He knew you would never come to him on your own. The feud between Erbyn and Prydd may not cause war just yet, but 'tis just as strong as it was before Hagan demanded a truce."

Sorcha felt her insides turned to jelly and she licked suddenly dry lips. "And what were Sir Darton's plans for me?"

Robert's eyes closed in shame and he hesitated before whispering, "He intended to force you to marry him."

“But how? I would never—”

“He planned to get you with child.”

As if she'd been struck, Sorcha stepped quickly backward, nearly stumbling over the water pail in her efforts to get away from the horrid words. “I would never lie with that dog!”

“Not willingly ... but Darton cared not.”

“And you ... you were a part of this ... this treachery?” Sorcha's lips curled in disgust.

“Forgive me, Lady Sorcha. I thought he meant but to ransom you, and for that I was offered gold and a small castle of my own, but ... when I found out his true intentions, I tried to return.”

“Too late,” Sorcha said.

“Aye.”

“Know you why Sir Keane was killed?”

“Keane? But he was not with Leah—”

“He was with me. We, too, were attacked by outlaws.”

“God in heaven,” Robert said in a rattling whisper. “I swear I knew nothing of it. I believed you would be riding with Henry to the village ...”

She believed him, and yet she could not forget that were it not for his treachery, Leah would be in the castle, and Gwendolyn, Henry, and Keane would still be alive. “I will never offer you my forgiveness, Sir Robert,” she said, “for your disloyalty has caused too much grief, but I will ask my brother to spare your miserable life when I return safely with my sister.”

“You cannot think of going to Erbyn!” Isolde shook her head side to side. “Oh, child, no ...”

Sorcha ignored her. “Now, Sir Robert, you must tell me everything of Erbyn; how the keep is built and how Darton spends his days. And ... I need to know about Baron Hagan. When he is expected to return and what he will do when he discovers Leah within the castle walls.”

Robert grunted. “I will tell you everything, my lady.”

“If you lie to me, Robert, you will die.”

The moon rode high in the night-black sky, casting a silver glow over the frozen ground of the inner bailey. The castle was asleep; even the sentries nodded at their posts as Sorcha led her favorite mount, her brother's war-horse, McBannon, from the stables.

Only Isolde knew of her hastily conceived plan. “'Tis tempting the fates, ye are,” Isolde said, her wrinkled features drawn into a frown of worry as the nervous horse sidestepped and snorted. “This is this plot of yours ... 'tis a fool's journey! As the saints are my witness, if Baron Hagan finds out that you've entered his castle as an enemy—”

“The black-heart will discover me not. You heard Sir Robert last night; Hagan's off warring with the Scots,” Sorcha assured the superstitious old woman. “Hagan, that beast, I won't have to fear.” She took the cloak and old burnet tunic from Isolde's hands and stuffed both pieces of clothing into her pack.

“Then what of Hagan's brother?” Isolde persisted as she gave Sorcha the basket she would use as part of her deception. “Sir Darton ... he's a mean one, he is. Ye'd best not be tryin' to outfox him.”

“He won't be expecting me.”

Isolde wrung her hands. “Holy Mother, you're a stub-born one. Yer own brother will skin ye alive when he finds ye missin' on the morrow.”

“He'll not know I'm gone.”

“But takin' his favorite horse—the one only a few can ride.” Isolde clucked her tongue with worry. “Satan himself would not be so foolish.”

“'Twill be good for Tadd to be angry. He should have gone after Leah himself, and he knows n

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