Prologue

Cumberland, England, 1398

Brithwin gazed at her father's grey, lifeless face as she crossed the room. Other than a pinprick to her conscience, there was no sorrow. She faltered. Was his chest rising and falling? A dull roar filled her ears, drowning out her pounding heart. She gasped. Nay. Nay! Hadn't the priest said his soul was at rest? Hadn't she watched as the icy fingers of death slowly robbed him of his last breath?

A shudder slithered through her body. Was it a sin to find relief in his death? He couldn't hurt her anymore. Surely God would not find fault with her. Perhaps her father's sudden passing was God's punishment for all the wrongs he had done her. The shuffling of feet brought her contemplations to a halt.

"It's all right to grieve, dear one—the tears will help you heal." Pater, a follower of John Wycliffe and branded a Lollard, laid his hand on her shoulder.

Brithwin pushed aside her conflicting feelings. "You know there is no sorrow in me for his death. Only relief that he is gone and anger for what he has done."

"Don't let bitterness consume you. It will do your father no harm, but it will slowly drain the joy from your life, my child."

Brithwin turned her head away from her father's still form and looked into the empathetic eyes of a man who had suffered far greater than she at her father's hand. She spoke the words anyway. "If anyone has a reason to be bitter, it is I. Isn't a woman's lot always bitterness?"

"Nay, Brithwin, you must forgive, just as our Lord forgave. Remember what you have learned. Reach down in your soul and let this hate go. No good can come of it."

Dropping her gaze, she let his words pervade her thoughts. Could she forgive her father for the suffering dealt her at his hand, as Pater had done? It was the right thing to do. Uneasiness fluttered inside her, and memories poured down on her like a driving rain—her father's cruel words, her head snapping back as his knuckles connected with her cheek, but worst of all, the darkness that surrounded her when he chose the dungeon as her punishment. She would not, could not, forgive him. It was too much to ask. Brithwin turned and walked to the doorway. She paused, knowing her words would not please her Lord. "We will bury him today. With no one to mourn his death, I see no reason to wait."

Hours later, dark, menacing clouds filled the sky, threatening to open up and pound rain into the open grave. A crash of thunder shook the ground and Brithwin flipped her hood over her head. The few people in attendance moved restlessly, glancing at the sky. She'd not required the servants' presence at the burial, but some had come anyway out of loyalty to her. And she was here only out of obligation. A biting northern wind whistled through the trees. It seemed a fitting day to bury her father.

The priest's sermon droned on like a persistent bee. She shifted her feet to get the blood flowing through her legs, and a chill slid down her back. She drew her cloak closer as numbness swept over her mind and body. Today she was free of her father's tyranny. She should feel joy. But closing her eyes, she only wished the day behind her.

Pater's cough broke through her thoughts. She lifted her gaze. The priest had said his final words and stood in attendance. The wind picked up, slicing through her

garments. Brithwin turned to shield herself and made her way back to the castle.

Before she reached the cover of her home, the rain began to fall along with an unexpected sadness as heavy as a millstone tied around her soul. Were these God's tears for a man no one loved?

Chapter 1

Two weeks later

Brithwin jerked out the weeds, noticing too late that half the stems she'd pulled were herbs. Too busy fussing to herself as she tucked the damaged plants back into the ground, she didn't see Thomas until he cleared his throat.

"Lady Brithwin, you wish to speak to me?"

Brithwin pushed herself off her knees to stand. When had she scooted from her stool and knelt in the dirt? She glanced up to see him frowning at her soiled gown. Raising her eyebrows, she wiped her muddy hands down her sides. "I have heard you sent a messenger to the king. Is this true?"

Thomas Godfrey, the captain of her guard, stood with his feet braced apart, arms folded, and face rigid. "It is as you say, for you need a strong husband." His firm voice gave her no hope of persuading him otherwise.

She narrowed her eyes. "You have wasted no time in searching for one."

His eyes softened under bushy dark brows. "I know you feel you can run this castle, Lady Brithwin, and you have done well, indeed, while your father lay abed ill. However, you know very well that King Richard will not allow you to hold these lands in your own right. What I did, I did for you."

Staring at her soiled hands, she shifted her feet. "You did for me? The last thing I want is another man to treat me like chattel."

With his arms still folded over his chest, he looked like a father firmly instructing a child. "And that is why I have intervened, and hopefully not allowed fate to decide."

She fisted her dirty hands and shoved them on her hips. "I would rather give up my position here and live with the villeins."

"You are too naive, milady." Thomas drew in a deep breath and let it slowly escape. "You are a lady, and though I have no doubt you could survive anything after what you have been through, you would never be happy—not when you'd never be able to make a difference in your people's lives."

He spoke the truth. She would not want to see another cruel lord come in and abuse the people she loved so much. But to be under a man's iron fist again was too much to ask of her

after enduring her father. Tears burned behind her eyes. She bit her bottom lip, refusing to let them fall lest Thomas should see them and think her weak. "You are a man. You could not understand how I feel." She swallowed a lump forming in her throat.

Tenderness softened the hard lines of his face, and the hard warrior who remained a constant in her life seemed almost vulnerable. "From the day your mother died and your father turned his back on you, I have looked after you. That is what I am doing now. You are like my own child."

Brithwin sighed. "I need no more men to look after me. You are enough. But I suppose it is out of my hands. We will wait to see what the king says." She knelt back down to tend her plants, dismissing him.

"Very well, milady." Thomas walked away grumbling.

She shook her head. Not even Thomas understood.

Brithwin sat on her stool and closed her eyes. What was she to do? When her father died, she had promised herself no man would own her again, yet who could defy an edict of the king?

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Royce Warwick and his men trudged down the muddy, rough-cut road. The rain had quit, but the men, along with their horses, were sodden and exhausted. Each step the animals took, their hooves sank into the sucking wet muck, draining more strength from them. They pulled their legs out only to sink down again, slogging along step by slow step.

The gates of Rosen Craig came into view, and they never had been so welcome. The past month away at his father's behest had not resulted in good news. Royce's dreams of settling the dispute peacefully and coming home to relieve his father's anxious mind of the rumored uprising—dashed. Yet he looked forward to discussing with his father the course of events that had taken place. Lord Rosen Craig's wise counsel would put his mind at ease or give him advice for future incidents.

Royce had still to dismount and shed his riding gear when his faithful servant met him, coming through the gate of Rosen Craig.

The servant doffed his hat, wringing it in his hands. "Master, I have distressing news."

"Surely, Fendrel, it can wait until I greet my father and mother." He swung off his destrier and handed the reins to the servant. "Take Shadowmere to the stables and see he gets a thorough rub down."

"B-but, s-sir." The man stood before him with reins and cap in trembling hands but not doing Royce's bidding.

Royce frowned. "What say you?"

Fendrel flinched. The man must have something weighing on him to be so anxious to speak. He waggled his head back and forth. "Tis not m-my place, sir."

"Out with it, man." What was wrong with the man? First he wishes to give him news then he changes his mind?

Fendrel stepped back. "Y-your f-father and m-mother are d-dead."

Royce's innards twisted. Surely he hadn't heard him right. They were both doing well when he left. "Dead?"

The color drained from the servant's already pale face. He nodded.

Royce staggered back from the blow that hit him. He couldn't breathe. It was as if painful bands tightened around his chest, sucking out all the air.

"Where is Bryce?" Royce forced the words out as he scanned the grounds. He needed to talk with his brother. Find out what happened while he was away.

Fendrel's eyes welled with tears. "I'm sorry, Lord Rosen Craig."

Royce swallowed back the bile that rose in his throat and swung on his heel, heading for the castle. He didn't want to be lord of Rosen Craig. That was his father's job and then Bryce's. Yet only one thing would cause the servant to call him Lord Rosen Craig.

Silence in the near-empty great room testified to the truth. Royce dropped into a chair on the dais. All eyes rested on him. His companions sat, anxiously awaiting his directive. Royce closed his eyes and rubbed his temple, willing away the tears that bit at the back of his eyes. Why them? 'Tis I that have sinned.

He drew in a deep breath. When he rode away a month ago to investigate the rumored border uprising between his people and the Scots who'd been coming down causing problems, he had planned to be gone only a fortnight. But the unrest had taken much longer to control.

He opened his eyes. Simon, an aged comrade, sat to his left and gazed on him with understanding. The man's friendship and wise guidance had meant much to him through the years, right below his father's.

Sitting on the dais to Royce's right was Jarren, his long-time friend and fellow knight, and beyond him, Royce's uncle, Lyndle, lounged back in the chair with arms crossed over his chest.

"All of them?" Royce choked out the words.

"Aye." Simon laid his hand on Royce's shoulder and squeezed. He seemed to search for what to say. "My words are inadequate, I know, for you have suffered a great loss today. A terrible evil has fallen upon us." He shook his head. "We all grieve the loss."

"How could this happen?" Royce tightened his fists, his nails digging into his palms. Had a sickness swept through the castle?

The word echoed in his mind as though rolling through a cave—*how*. Moments ticked by before he realized he had spoken his thoughts.

Simon's eyes filled with unshed tears and his voice grew thick with sorrow. "We know very li—"

Lyndle leaned forward and elbowed the old man aside. "I woke to the scream of your mother and hurried to your parents' room, but when I arrived, they were both dead. While your father slept, someone ran a sword through him. Your mother's neck was broken." His voice cracked. "She must have woken and seen her attacker. When I looked for your brother, Bryce, he, too, was found in his bed, soaked in his own blood."

Bile climbed in Royce's throat and he fought to keep it down. "Did you see any of the attackers?"

Lyndle looked down at his hands as he spoke. "I saw the men as they rode out of the gates. One of them wore the Hawkwood colors."

The words hit Royce like a joust stick at full tilt.

Jarren raised a single eyebrow and stared down the table at Royce's uncle. "'Tis a bold move when the king is calling for peace between his lords. And how did they breach a well-guarded castle?"

Lyndle pulled his shoulders back. "The gatekeeper was found dead, and the guard's food was laced heavily with wild poppy."

Simon snapped his head up and gaped.

Was this the first he had heard this? Royce's gaze darted to Lyndle. "Did you alert the guards in the hall?"

"I ran to make aware the guards outside." Lyndle shifted in his seat. "But when none answered my call, I came in to wake the men in the hall."

Royce slammed his fist down on the table. "Are you saying we have a traitor within our gates?"

Lyndle's gaze shifted to Jarren then back to Royce. "I-it would seem so."

Breath wouldn't come. Swirls of color descended over his vision, blurring all reason. My family—saints above! How could this happen?

Clenching his jaw, Royce sucked air into his searing lungs. He needed to keep a straight mind. He couldn't allow his grief to cloud his judgment. "How long since the search was mounted?"

"Search?" Lyndle looked around cautiously.

"We have a traitor among us and no one has sought him out?" Royce's voice rose with each word.

Jarren cocked his head. "Why would men of Hawkwood kill your family?"

Lyndle shrugged. "Perhaps they sought to increase their holdings."

Royce pushed away from the table. Putting his weight on his hands, he leaned forward and looked down the line of men. "Jarren asks a good question. As we rode out these gates to put down the skirmish with the Scots, the king's messenger met me with a missive. The king has given me Brithwin, the heiress of Hawkwood, to be my bride." As the words left his lips, a leaden weight sank to the pit of his stomach. If his betrothed had devised this, the scheming wench would pay for the blood spilt at Rosen Craig.