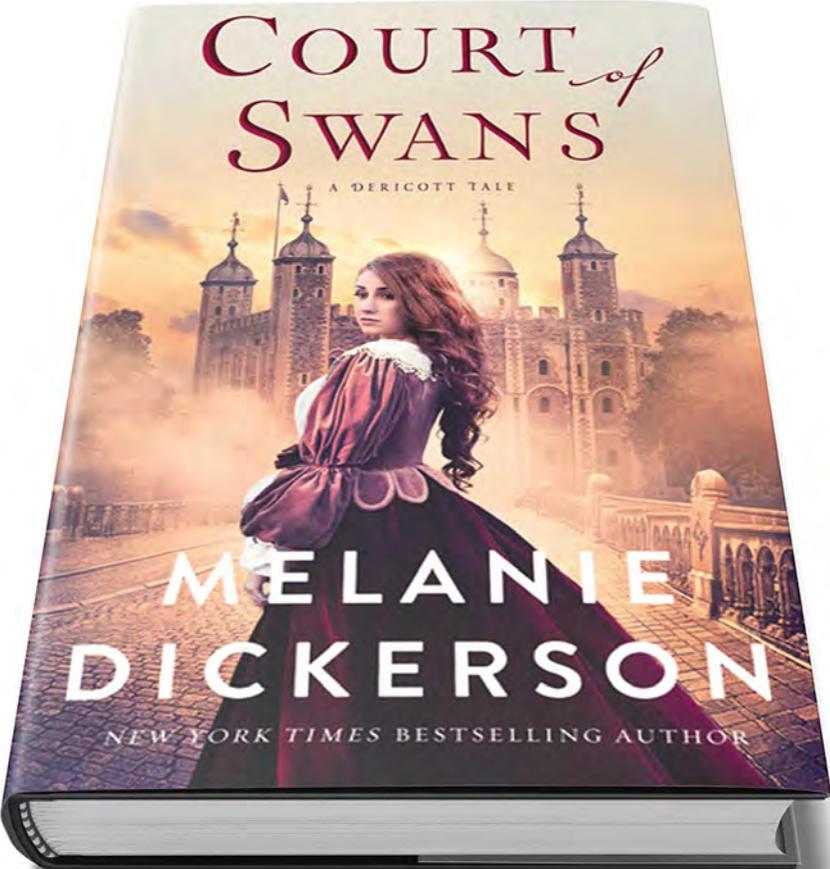


COURT *of* SWANS

A DERICOTT TALE



MELANIE
DICKERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COURT *of* SWANS



THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798
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**BORN TO ALFRED RAYNSFORD, SECOND EARL OF
DERICOTT, AND LADY MILLICENT FAIRCHILD**

- Edwin—February 3, 1359
- Gerard—January 21, 1361
- Berenger—March 15, 1362
- Delia—April 4, 1363
- Merek—January 10, 1365
- Charles—April 29, 1367
- David—March 19, 1369
- Roland—February 4, 1371



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Since 1798

ONE

SUMMER 1378

DELIA'S STOMACH FELT SICK AS SHE WATCHED HER FATHER marry Parnella. The lady who would be the new Lady Dericott was much closer to Delia's age of fifteen than to her father's.

Someone tapped Delia's arm. She turned and shook her head at her brother Berenger. He smiled and winked.

One good thing was that her brothers had all been allowed to come home for the wedding. Her older brothers, Edwin, Gerard, and Berenger, stood around her like a bulwark—although a temporary one, as they'd soon be returning to their training—while her younger brothers, Merek, Charles, David, and little Roland, gathered nearby in a rare show of quiet solemnity.

When the wedding was over, they all walked through the village from the church back to Dericott Castle. Parnella held her new husband's arm with one hand and her skirt with the other

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to keep it above the dust of the road. Her head was so high Delia wondered if she could see anything besides the sky overhead.

Mother had died seven years earlier, and though Delia missed her, she had enjoyed the attention of the servants, and she was very close to her brothers. Or at least she had been until a year ago, when Roland was sent away to train as a knight at the age of six, like all her other brothers. Now Delia would have a stepmother in the house and no siblings with whom to commiserate.

By the time they reached the castle, her brothers were restless and had begun teasing each other. Her new stepmother had glanced back at them once, her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed together. Delia tried to get her brothers' attention and held her finger to her lips to remind them to behave, at least until they reached home.

In front of the castle, villagers were singing and waving ribbons tied to sticks and carrying cakes as gifts to the newly wedded couple. Parnella barely glanced at the villagers as they offered wedding cakes. They were poor farmers or villeins belonging to Dericott land, and the cakes were gifts they baked themselves. Delia thanked each one, letting them give her the cakes, stacking one on top of the other. The servants took them as she entered Dericott Castle.

Delia and her brothers waited for Father and Parnella to begin the wedding feast in the Great Hall. Her brothers started a mock sword fight using sticks.

Parnella entered and stood near Delia but refused to meet her gaze. Father leaned toward Parnella and said something, then left.

As he strode away, Parnella's attention turned to Delia's

brothers. None of them seemed to have noticed she was even in the room. They were yelling and laughing and bragging about who was the better swordsman as they parried and thrust with their sticks. Parnella's face twisted into a scowl.

Parnella said not a word, only stared straight ahead. But when Father came back, she pointed toward the brothers, who were still fighting, and cried out, "Look at how they are trying to intimidate me with their violence!"

Father's eyes went wide. "Stop that fighting this moment! Can you not see you are frightening Lady Dericott?"

"They knew they were upsetting me, yet they persisted." Parnella took hold of Father's arm, cowering behind him. "This is supposed to be a happy day for me. Please, won't you send them away?"

Father's mouth fell open. Delia and her brothers exchanged wondering glances.

"And the girl too. All she does is stare at me. I know she is thinking malicious thoughts toward me."

She could only be referring to Delia. Her father's expression was a mix of perplexity and irritation.

"They will be gone soon, back to the households where they're being trained as knights."

"I don't care! It is my wedding day. May I not have some joy and peace on my wedding day?"

"I am sure my brothers and I meant no harm," Delia said as Roland and David moved closer to her.

Parnella glared at Delia and made a contemptuous sound in her throat.

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“Do not worry,” Father said to his new wife. “They shall cease. Let us all go to the Great Hall for the feast.”

In the Great Hall, Delia and her brothers began talking quietly among themselves. They were quite subdued after their new stepmother’s outburst. Indeed, Delia felt sick to her stomach every time she thought about Parnella’s words. How could they show the woman they meant her no harm?

But as the servants brought out more and more elaborate foods, and as their new stepmother paid them no attention, Delia’s brothers began to talk in louder and livelier tones. Delia thought to warn them not to get too boisterous, but Gerard was in the middle of telling a story and she did not want to interrupt him.

“Then the horse stumbled and Sir Bollivet fell forward, right into the muddy stream.”

Her brothers all burst out laughing, Charles laughing the loudest and slapping his knee in merriment.

“What are you boys talking about?” Father demanded in a loud voice.

“Telling stories about our training,” Edwin said.

Father looked so angry, Delia spoke up. “They aren’t doing anything wrong, Father. Only telling funny stories.”

“They were laughing at me!” Parnella’s face was cold, her eyes intense and dark.

Her father talked in hushed tones, leaning his head toward his new wife, but she interrupted him. “So you will let them ridicule and intimidate me?”

“Of course not. I—”

“Then send them to their rooms. How can you allow it? Insulted and ridiculed . . .”

“Go to your rooms, all of you.” Father’s face was flushed, and not from the wine. “I am ashamed of you for treating your new mother thusly.”

Delia and her brothers stood up and slowly walked toward the doorway of the Great Hall.

“No one was laughing at you,” Merek said, looking directly at Parnella, his voice clear and confident.

“Oh!” Parnella drew back as if he’d struck her. Father glared at Merek.

When they were all out in the corridor and heading for the stairs, Berenger said, “I cannot believe that woman could be so audacious.”

“It makes me worry for you, Delia,” Edwin said, his eyes soft but intent on her.

“No, don’t worry.” Delia tried to look confident and reassuring. “I will win her over. She will understand that we have no grudge against her and do not intend to harm her. I’ll just have to be sensitive to her feeling like an outsider.”

“Sensitive? Even if you kissed her feet you could not please that woman,” Gerard said.

Merek snorted. “If she bothers you, Delia, I’ll come back and stand up for you. I’ll tell Father he can’t let that woman treat you poorly.”

“She certainly doesn’t seem very sensible,” Berenger added. Her younger brothers looked confused and sad.

“Don’t worry.” Delia bent to hug Roland. “All will be well.”

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Gerard and Berenger went to the kitchen while the rest of them gathered in Edwin's room. Gerard and Berenger came back with roast pheasant and sweet fruit pasties. They all ate and talked and laughed—though quietly.

"I am worried about leaving you here with that woman," Edwin said.

"I am sure I will be well." But as soon as she said the words, she realized she was not truly sure at all.

Delia hugged all her brothers that night, surprised that none of them protested or groaned in reluctance at her show of affection.

"Write to us, or send a servant, if you need us," Gerard said.

"Yes, we will take care of you," Berenger said.

"Write often about how you are faring," Edwin added.

If only they could stay home longer. But perhaps with them gone it would be easier to convince Parnella that any evil intention toward her from Delia or her brothers was completely imagined. And then all would be harmonious between them.



ALMOST THREE YEARS LATER, SPRING 1381

Delia listened through the crack in her stepmother's bedchamber door.

"You must do something," Parnella was saying. "As it is now, our son will inherit nothing. Those selfish sons of your first wife will treat him badly when we are both dead and cold in the ground. His life will not be worth living. They'll throw him out to starve."

Delia strained to hear how her father responded, but his voice was too low.

“You must! You are the Earl of Dericott. You can change it.”

“I cannot change the laws of England. The king . . .”

Delia could not hear the rest.

Surely Father wouldn't listen to that woman's evil counsel. But he had been different since he'd married Parnella. He'd never been a particularly attentive or affectionate father. But now he was constantly accusing her and her brothers of some ill will or wrongdoing toward Parnella, ideas Delia was certain her stepmother was putting into his head.

And there was the matter of her half brother, Cedric. It was strange how Parnella guarded her baby. He was four months old, yet Delia rarely saw him. Parnella kept Cedric in her own bedchamber, with a nursemaid to watch over him. Delia longed to help take care of the child, to hold him and see him smile up at her. But when Edwin had come to visit and picked up the baby, Parnella actually screamed, as if Edwin were trying to harm the baby or steal him away. She snatched Cedric out of his hands and cried, “You are not to touch him! Not ever!”

Delia did her best to keep out of their way.

When she heard movement on the other side of the door, Delia hurried away before she was caught eavesdropping.

Lately Delia had been having a strange feeling of foreboding. She had tried very hard in the beginning to reassure her stepmother that no one wished her ill. In spite of that, her stepmother had treated her with contempt and criticism, to the point that Delia gave up trying to win her over.

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These past few weeks her icy stares seemed bolder, and she often ceased speaking when Delia came near.

The priest would probably tell her to pray against any evil that might try to come against her family. He might tell her to love her stepmother more, for love covers a multitude of sins. And Delia had tried to do both those things, but she could not rid herself of this uneasy feeling.



SIX MONTHS LATER, LATE AUTUMN 1381

Delia hadn't been able to get the sight of her father's lifeless body out of her mind. He'd been dead for two weeks now.

She often thought of the conversation she'd overheard between her father and stepmother and the premonition of danger it had given her. When Wat Tyler's Rebellion began not long after, she'd assumed that was the reason for her unease. But after her father's fatal fall from his horse . . . the uneasy feeling was a constant current crashing over her.

At least her brothers had all been allowed to return home to mourn their father's death. She had seen them only occasionally, mostly on holy feast days, though she wrote to them often while they were away. Edwin and Gerard had already been knighted and were serving as guards at one of the king's castles. But Edwin would not return to his knighthood duties, now that he was the new Earl of Dericott.

Delia ran down the stairs of Dericott Castle, out the door, and the short way to the stable. In the distance she saw Gerard helping

twelve-year-old David practice his archery skills. She smiled at how patient Gerard looked, showing David how to draw the string.

Although Delia was still mourning her father, she was glad to have all her brothers home, and Edwin would be staying.

Delia had been meaning to speak to Edwin about their stepmother's fears that her brothers would not care for their half brother. Of course, Edwin would never mistreat the child, but she wanted to tell him to be sensitive of his stepmother's feelings. Even though her stepmother had not had a good relationship with Delia or her brothers, she hoped Parnella would eventually learn she could trust them. Perhaps now that she had a child of her own she would be kinder to them.

Delia pushed away thoughts of her stepmother and drew in a long, contented breath at how good it felt to be with her brothers again.

The tiny, high-pitched sound of puppies drew her attention, and she headed toward the stable and Flora, her father's favorite hunting dog.

Flora lay in the corner of the stable in the bed Delia had made for her of old rags and blankets. Her puppies were piled around her, most of them asleep. Delia knelt on the ground beside ten-year-old Roland, who was holding a puppy in his lap. One of them was mewling and crawling around, so she picked it up.

Delia cuddled the pup to her cheek. Its fur was soft and warm in the cool autumn air.

Roland cradled the light-colored puppy against his chest. "This one is the sweetest. Look. She doesn't mind me holding her on her back, like a baby."

“She can sense that you are gentle and wouldn’t hurt her.” Delia smiled. Mother had died soon after Roland was born, but Delia liked to think she was carrying on for her, at least with her younger brothers. Thankfully, none of her brothers were brutish or unkind. They’d all inherited Mother’s qualities of gentleness and strength, and the younger ones allowed her to tell them to put on an extra cloak or hood to keep warm and even welcomed her hugs and kisses—as long as their older brothers weren’t watching.

Edwin came walking up behind them. Hearing people address him as Lord Dericott was strange, but Delia was so happy he would be home with her now. Edwin would enjoy his new duties and would have more time for reading and learning languages, which he enjoyed almost as much as he enjoyed training to be a knight. He was quiet but could be outspoken against injustice. She’d known him to get furious about unfair treatment he’d witnessed and take action to make it right.

He was only twenty-two years old, but he would be a good landlord for those living in Dericott.

“A healthy litter. All seven still thriving?”

“Yes, and this one is mine, Edwin. I want to name her.” Roland held up the puppy he had been cradling.

“Very well.” Edwin picked up the black one with a gray ear who had just started crawling over his littermates and waking them up. Edwin held the puppy in one hand and stroked its fur with the other. “This is a lively one.”

“There are only seven puppies,” Roland said, snuggling his puppy to his chest again. “But there are eight of us, if you include Delia.”

“Thanks for including me.” Delia winked to soften her sarcastic tone.

“Not enough to go around,” Roland continued. “So someone will not get to name a puppy.”

“I don’t mind giving up my rights to one,” Edwin said.

Roland glanced up at Edwin. “Perhaps Merek won’t mind not getting to name a puppy. I don’t recall seeing him out here petting them.”

Roland, ever the peacemaker. Merek was, Roland seemed to think, the least likely of his brothers to care about naming a puppy. And he was probably right. Merek was two years younger than Delia’s eighteen years, but he was commanding and hated when she tried to take care of him.

Edwin suddenly lifted his head, staring in the direction of the road that ran past Dericott Castle. He put the puppy beside its mother and stood to his full height.

“What is it?” Roland asked.

“Sounds like horses.”

A lot of horses. She and Roland also replaced their puppies, laying them against their mother’s belly, and hurried up the slight incline toward their home.

Delia glanced down at her dress. Normally, if they were expecting guests, Delia would be wearing one of her fine gowns, the brightly colored silk ones with embroidery of gold and silver thread. But today, as on most days, she wore one of her older, plainer frocks for taking walks in the woods and playing with puppies and running footraces with her brothers. Her hair was uncovered, not even plaited or bound, hanging in loose curls

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down her back and over her shoulders, “like a common serving wench,” her stepmother had once said with a scornful twisting of her lips.

Perhaps Delia should not show herself until she knew what manner of guests she would encounter. The horses’ hooves were headed toward them, having turned onto the lane that led to the castle instead of continuing down the road.

Edwin reached the front of the three-story castle made of light-colored stone, its towers stretching up another level or two. He stood in front of the door as Delia watched from around the corner.

A whole company of soldiers galloped into view, emerging from the tree-crowded lane. Edwin narrowed his eyes and stood with his shoulders tensed.

Where were the guards? There was always at least one or two of them around. And why did Edwin have that angry look on his face? Did he know why these men were here?

The soldiers were all wearing gambesons and their swords were strapped to their bodies in ready reach. They galloped right up to Edwin before slowing their horses to a halt.

Several of the soldiers got down off their mounts while the one in the lead, who appeared to be the captain, spoke down to Edwin from atop his horse.

“We are here by the authority of Richard of Bordeaux, King of England, to arrest the seven sons of the recently deceased Earl of Dericott for treason against the king and against England.”

Before he finished speaking, the soldiers seized Edwin and began tying his wrists together in front of him.

Delia's heart pounded as she ran forward.

"Stop! He has done nothing wrong!"

"Go and find the others." The captain motioned outward with his hand.

Soldiers brushed past her and charged into the house.

Edwin would stop this. He was the Earl of Dericott now.

She turned to the dark-haired captain, who was dismounting from his horse. "What do you think you are doing? He has not committed treason!"

"I have orders to arrest the seven sons of the late Earl of Dericott. Who are you?"

"The youngest is but ten years old. You would imprison a ten-year-old boy for treason?"

The captain's expression faltered. He was quite young to be a captain, hardly any older than Delia. His eyes were bright blue, and were he not trying to take away her brothers, she might have said his features were handsome.

Not answering, he glanced around. She followed his gaze and saw several soldiers coming up from the stable with David, Gerard, and Roland. The soldiers pointed their swords at her brothers' backs.

Her breath left her in a gasp. She turned to the odious man. "Stop them!" She took a few steps closer to the captain. "Surely you would not allow your men to arrest children!"

"My orders are to arrest all seven sons." He didn't look at her, but his jaw appeared hard and a muscle twitched as he watched the king's guards force her brothers up the grassy slope toward them.

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“But they haven’t done anything wrong!”

He suddenly turned to her. “You must step away. Better yet, go in the house. This is not a matter for women.”

“How dare you?” He must mistake her for a serving wench, as her stepmother had said.

He ignored her and strode toward her brothers. He went to little Roland and began tying his hands together.

She wanted to hurl herself at him, snatch her brother’s hands out of his grasp, and fight him off. But he could easily clout her in the head and knock her to the ground. After all, if he believed she was only a servant, he likely would not hesitate to retaliate . . . But if he knew she was the boys’ sister, might he not seize her too?

Just then two soldiers came out of the house with Berenger, her nineteen-year-old brother who had been sick in bed with a head cold. That left only Merek and Charles, who were out hunting pheasants.

Some of the soldiers had gone inside the castle, so Delia ran to see what they were doing. She could feel the soldiers watching her, but she ignored them. As she entered she saw guards questioning the servants.

“Where are the rest of the master’s sons?” they demanded. The servants’ eyes were wide and frightened.

“Stop scaring them!” Delia glared at the guards.

“And who are you?”

“Tell us where the other two sons are,” another guard said as they moved menacingly toward her.

“Why are you seizing innocent boys?”

The first guard suddenly reached out and grabbed her arm,

squeezing it so hard she cried out. Every one of his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her upper arm.

“Unhand that woman!”

The guard turned and let go of her arm. The young captain stood behind him in the corridor.

“Sir Geoffrey, we were only trying to get information from her,” the soldier replied.

The captain looked at her. “Are you hurt?”

“You should be worried about yourself. Arresting innocent boys, lords and sons of an earl. Who are you? What is your name?”

“I am Sir Geoffrey Grenefeld, captain of this guard.”

Sir Geoffrey. How she hated him.

“And who are you?”

“I am their sister, Lady Delia Raynsford.”

His eyelids flickered. He was obviously surprised.

“Forgive us, Lady Delia, for our lack of decorum, but we have our orders and will do our duty.”

Delia gave him what she hoped was a look of utter disgust. She pushed past him, brushing him aside with her shoulder, then lifted her skirts and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor of the castle.

She ran to her stepmother’s bedchamber and pounded on the door.

She waited, hearing nothing on the other side. “Parnella!” Finally, the door opened and her stepmother and the nursemaid stood staring at her.

“Why are the king’s men taking Edwin and the others—even Roland? What is happening?”

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Her stepmother wore a cold, emotionless look on her face.

Delia's stomach sank. Her stepmother knew what was happening and she wasn't going to do anything to stop it.

"Keep calm, Delia. You always were too flighty and foolish for your own good."

Parnella was a tiny woman, and Delia easily could have knocked her to the ground, and she suddenly wanted to, very much.

"Why are they arresting my brothers?" She asked the question through gritted teeth. Tears stung her eyes, but she would not show any weakness, not in front of her stepmother.

"Your brothers," her stepmother said in her haughtiest voice, "are guilty of murder and treason. Someone has reported it to the king and he has sent his men to seize them and take them to prison, as he should, as any monarch should do in this situation."

For a moment Delia couldn't speak. Murder and treason? Preposterous. And why did Parnella seem to have prior knowledge of these accusations?

"You know my brothers are not guilty of murder or treason."

"You will not speak thusly to me. Go to your bedchamber and stay there until the soldiers have left."

Delia turned away from the heartless woman and hurried down the corridor without speaking another word. But instead of going to her bedchamber, she went down the stairs and out the front door, only to see four soldiers escorting Charles and Merek out of the woods, their hands tied in front of them. Though they were younger than she was—Merek was sixteen and Charles fourteen—she normally thought of them as men. They were

training to be knights, after all. But with the menacing soldiers surrounding them, they looked much younger.

Her heart trembled inside her as the soldiers forced each of her brothers onto one of the extra horses they had brought with them.

This was wrong. Unjust. How could they take her brothers away?

Roland's face crumpled as he sat atop his horse, his bound hands clutching the pommel of the saddle. Tears ran down his face. Her heart constricted, her arms aching to hold him and protect him from these awful men.

The rest of her brothers were stoic, but she knew they were afraid. Taken away to prison! They would be held in a dungeon somewhere, probably in the Tower of London. But these false charges would never be upheld. They would be cleared of any wrongdoing, of such ridiculous accusations.

Edwin's eyes met hers intently, then he said to Sir Geoffrey, "May I speak to my sister before we go?"

Sir Geoffrey did not break eye contact with Edwin as he answered, "No. I have a charge to take you straightway to the king."

"Heartless man!" she yelled at him.

His expression faltered as before. But then he looked away from her and raised his arm. "Let us be off."

And the soldiers obeyed this Sir Geoffrey, turning their horses' heads toward the road, drawing her brothers' horses by their lead ropes.

She wanted to call out to her brothers not to worry, that all would be well. These charges would never be proven or upheld.

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They were innocent and would be released very soon. But her brothers would not have heard her over the pounding of the horses' hooves.

God, may you punish that Sir Geoffrey for his cruelty.

Delia's rage turned to pain as her heart seemed to break, a sharp pain building inside her chest. Who could possibly have accused her brothers? Who would have done such a thing?

But she knew.

Parnella.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

TWO

DELIA WAS PILING CLOTHING ONTO A SQUARE OF CLOTH when her bedchamber door opened. She spun around.

“Mistress Wattlesbrook.” Delia pressed a hand over her heart. “You startled me.”

The older woman had been a servant in her household since before Delia was born.

“What will you do, my child?” She stretched a hand toward Delia’s bed where she was gathering things to take with her.

“I am going to London.” Truly, Delia did not know what she would do. She only knew she couldn’t stay there and she had to do something to set her brothers free.

“I see.” Mistress Wattlesbrook stared at her with a serious look on her wrinkled face. “You will need assistance. You have few relatives, as your father was an only child, but you have an aunt, your mother’s sister.”

“Is she a nun?”

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“She is the abbess at Rosings Abbey. Did you not know?”

“I had forgotten.” Delia rarely heard her aunt mentioned.

“She would help you, I believe. Go to her. As an abbess, she is not without power. Perhaps she would even speak to the king.”

Delia’s heart lifted. This was hope indeed.

“It is also possible that she won’t help at all.” Mistress Wattlesbrook stared at the floor. “She seemed a hard woman and appeared not to be close to your mother the one time I remember her visiting.”

At this discouraging information Delia’s heart fell further than it had lifted.

“But you must try.” The older woman came closer and pressed a roll of bandages and a few small pouches of dried herbs into Delia’s hand. “This one is for restful sleep, and here is some feverfew. Remember that it is good for fever, headaches, cough, and putridity of the lungs.”

“You knew I was leaving?” Delia was reminded of other times when the old woman seemed to know things without anyone telling her.

Mistress Wattlesbrook did not answer but took hold of Delia’s wrist and looked into her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was a raspy whisper.

“You must take care. There was a man, a stranger, here on the morning your father died. I saw him with my own eyes coming out of the stable. I have been suspicious that your father’s death was not an accident.”

“What? You think Father was murdered?” The blood seemed to drain from Delia’s head.

She sank down on a cushioned stool nearby. The idea that someone might have killed her father was a shock that swept through her in relentless waves. He had never paid her much attention and was rather impatient with her when she tried to talk to him. But the thought of him being murdered . . . Her stomach felt sick, her head light.

Her thoughts went to the day Edwin returned after their father died. Edwin had been the first of her brothers to get home. Delia had seen him coming and met him in the stable. After embracing her longer than she ever remembered him doing before, he asked the head groom how their father had fallen off his horse. The groom replied that the girth on his saddle broke, but when Edwin asked to see the saddle, the groom could not find it or the girth. Edwin and Delia searched as well, but they were indeed gone.

“There is evil afoot,” Mistress Wattlesbrook continued. “It is not uncommon among great folk like your father for someone to try to take his power and wealth. And your stepmother is the daughter of a baron. Where there is wealth and power, there is someone willing to do anything to take it.” The old woman winked and laid her finger against the side of her nose, one of her habits.

What could Delia do? She knew nothing of fighting against people who wished her ill.

But that was not entirely true, was it? She had been fighting her stepmother’s attempts to undermine her father’s regard for her and her brothers for the past three years.

“You must be brave,” Mistress Wattlesbrook said quietly, as

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if she'd read her thoughts. "No matter what happens, be strong and courageous."

Mistress Wattlesbrook turned away and shuffled to the door.

"What do you mean, 'no matter what happens'?"

Mistress Wattlesbrook looked thoughtfully past Delia, not meeting her gaze. "We ask for thorns to be taken from us, trials to end, but sometimes God does not take them away. He walks us through them. So stay hopeful and believe for the best, but don't lose faith if the worst happens."

Delia's stomach twisted.

"Fare well, my dear. I shall be praying for you."

"Thank you," Delia said, her voice barely above a whisper.

But she would be strong. She had to be. Her brothers needed her, and she could not let them down.

Delia waited until she was sure the household was asleep and the darkness was deep enough to conceal her departure. Then she tossed her bundle of clothing out the window.

She could climb any tree her brothers climbed, and often did. She had climbed up the trellis outside her bedchamber window when she used to play with her brothers. But tonight would mark the first time she had ever climbed down the trellis.

The three-quarter moon glowing above was her only light as Delia stuck her head out of her window. She felt a little dizzy looking down, trying to see the ground below. Vines darkened the trellis, but she had no choice. She had to get away, and without

her stepmother knowing. She would do whatever she had to do to save her brothers. After all, the penalty for both murder and treason was death, and the king's court had tried and executed many men since Wat Tyler's Rebellion had been quashed.

But her brothers had had nothing to do with the violent uprising, and they had been all together only once, for a few days over the summer, though it had been around the time of the uprising.

Delia still did not know much about what had caused so many men, and even a few women, to rebel against the government and murder some of the wealthiest men and the most influential leaders in England. It was said that the villeins had risen against their masters. But many of the instances of violence—burning down homes and beating and murdering foreign merchants—had been perpetrated by artisans and free men, people who didn't toil under an unfree serfdom. But certainly it had something to do with men feeling they'd been treated unjustly. In one county they'd killed the king's tax collector.

Delia remembered Edwin saying, "*If poor men are taxed beyond their means to pay, then the tax is unfair.*"

Had Edwin repeated those sentiments in front of someone he shouldn't have? Or was their stepmother behind these accusations of murder and treason? If her stepmother was responsible for these charges against her brothers, then Delia would need to get away tonight.

She grabbed her tapestry bag with the rest of her things. Could she hold on to it while climbing down? Better to drop it and hope it didn't make too much noise when it hit the ground.

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She sat on the windowsill and tied the back of her skirt to the front of her belt, making breeches of a sort. Then she threw one leg out to dangle from the window ledge.

She looked down at the blackness below her, her stomach dropping as she tried in vain to see the ground. No doubt the first step would be the hardest. She took a deep breath and let it out. "My brothers need me," she whispered.

She drew her other leg up and over the ledge, then held on with both hands as she supported her weight on her stomach and used her feet to search the trellis for a toehold. When she finally found one for each foot, she scooted her stomach off the ledge and searched for another toehold, one at a time, farther down until she was holding on to the window ledge with one hand and the trellis with the other.

As she climbed down, she kept her body pressed against the trellis to prevent it from unlatching from the stone wall. She imagined herself falling and hitting the ground on her back. The image made her lose her breath, and she squeezed her eyes closed.

"Think of something else," she whispered to herself.

Her favorite place at the stream near her home came to mind. She imagined the joyful sound of the water dribbling over the rocks in the streambed, the wildflowers growing amid the green grass and ferns, sunlight dappling everything with its cheerful light.

But then she wondered when—or if—she'd ever see it again.

She wouldn't think about that either. All that mattered was that she would go to her brothers and find a way to secure their release. She would not let them suffer if she could help it.

She wondered again what role her stepmother had played in her brothers' arrest. Her stepmother did have the most to gain from her brothers' death—for they would be executed if found guilty of treason. With Father gone, Edwin had inherited the title, the land, and the castle. Parnella and Cedric were dependent upon him now. But if all of Delia's brothers were dead, Cedric would become the heir.

If Father's death was not an accident, did Parnella have something to do with that too? She had nothing to gain from Father dying, did she?

Her foot slipped. She held on tight and searched frantically for another place to step. She moved one hand down, then the other, before finally finding another toehold. Slowly, her heart pounding, she glanced down. She wasn't even halfway.

It was much harder going down than up, and harder still in the dark. But she kept going. The leaves weren't as thick on the trellis closer to the ground, and she was able to go faster. Finally, she jumped the last two feet.

She took a deep breath and grabbed up her bags, tucking them under her arm, then walked, bent over and looking from side to side, toward the stables.

There was a guard in charge of the stables at night, but she hoped he was asleep. After all, no one had ever attempted to steal a horse from their stable. There was rarely any talk of robbers in their forests or on their roads. Even during the recent rebellion, everything was relatively calm and uneventful in this corner of England.

Delia crept closer to the stable, still not seeing any of the

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guards. She kept in the shadow of the nearby trees. Would she be so fortunate as to get away with no one seeing her?

Her foot crunched on a dry twig, making a loud cracking sound. She stopped and listened, holding her breath. A frog croaked down by the stream, but there were no other sounds, so she continued on.

She rounded the corner of the wooden stable. Only a few more feet to the door.

A tall figure emerged from the doorway.

Delia froze.

The man strode a few feet and stopped.

Her heart beat so hard she could barely breathe. Would he see her if she turned around and ran? Should she speak and try to pretend she was going on a nighttime walk?

The guard was Hugh, one of the less chivalrous of Father's guards. He'd once grabbed one of their kitchen servants right in front of Delia and tried to kiss her. When the servant screamed, he laughed and roughly pushed her away.

Delia's stomach twisted at the sight of him. But he wouldn't dare lay a hand on her. Or would he? She no longer had her father or brothers around to defend her.

Hugh held a mug in his hand, no doubt filled with ale or something stronger. He took a long drink, then sauntered forward, continuing to move away from the stable.

Delia watched until she could no longer see him, then walked quickly but carefully through the door.

The stable was dark, so Delia used her hands to feel her way to her favorite horse's stall. The mare snuffled, no doubt surprised

to find someone opening her stall door in the middle of the night. But thankfully, neither she nor the other horses created much noise, and Delia was able to light a lamp and saddle her horse with ease, as if God's own hand were guiding her.

When she finished she blew out the lamp and hung it in its place. Then, just as she took hold of her horse's reins, footsteps sounded on the hard ground at the doorway of the stable.

“. . . some ale hidden in the stable.”

Another voice answered, but the words were unintelligible.

Delia shrank against her horse's side, her heart thudding so loudly she could barely hear. Would they see that the mare had been moved? Perhaps Delia could hide behind her in the stall.

She thought she heard them tapping a barrel, then the sound of liquid pouring out. How furious her father would have been had he known the guards were drinking his best ale in the night.

Laughter came from outside the stable. The men seemed to have moved away from the door, but how close were they? Could she leave now without being seen?

She waited and listened. Nothing. She moved toward the open doorway, pulling her mare by her bridle. Figures were moving in the distance. Her heart seemed to stop beating as she led her horse out of the stable, listening hard, then she moved a little faster and made her way through the trees on a shortcut to the road. She crossed a little stream, stepping on stones to avoid getting her feet wet. Her left foot slipped, forcing her to step quickly with her right, ending with both feet submerged to her ankles in the cold trickling water. She held back a groan.

Delia finally made it to the road and mounted. Leaning

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forward, she managed to take off both shoes and tied them to the saddle horn before setting out down the road at a gentle pace that wouldn't make much noise. Finally. She was on her way to the abbey to see her aunt and that much closer to rescuing her brothers.



Delia's teeth were chattering long before she reached Rosings Abbey. The sun was just coming up when the group of gray stone buildings came into view.

Her shoes still weren't completely dry, but she put them on anyway, the cold leather molding to her equally cold feet. She must have been riding about six hours, and her arms were shaky and she felt sick to her stomach.

Two guards were standing near the entrance, and they acknowledged her with a nod. A servant, a young man who dragged one foot behind him, met her and offered to take her horse.

Delia had been riding astride, and when she dismounted, she suddenly found herself sitting in the dirt. She scrambled to her feet, clutching the saddle to steady herself.

"Are you well?" The young man stood holding her horse's bridle, his gaze on her face.

"I've been riding a long way, but I am well."

"Go in that door there and they will attend you."

"Thank you." Delia concentrated on walking in a straight line.

While riding for all those hours in the dark, she had fixed her mind on staying awake and keeping her horse on the shadowy

road. Now she suddenly felt just how exhausted she was from being awake all night, weary and afraid she would not be equal to the huge task of saving her brothers.

A convent sister, who was wearing an enormous wimple, met her just inside the door and waved at her to follow. Delia walked behind the tiny woman as they wound their way down a narrow corridor.

“Please, pardon me, but I would like to speak with the abbess.”

The woman stopped abruptly and turned toward Delia. Her eyes were drawn together, her lips pursed. But she did not speak.

“I am Delia, daughter of the Earl of Dericott. Abbess Beatrice is my mother’s sister.”

The woman stared at her another moment, glancing down at her dress, before nodding and continuing down the corridor.

Delia was exhausted, but the sooner she spoke to her aunt, the sooner her mind would be at ease. After all, Aunt Beatrice was family.

Perhaps she would not help her. Perhaps Delia was taking a risk even coming here to ask her aunt for help. No doubt, as an abbess, she was politically connected, and she would need to protect her relationship with powerful entities such as the king.

The nun led her through another corridor, turning two more times before coming to a door and knocking.

“You may enter,” was the muffled reply from the other side of the door.

The nun turned to Delia and held up her hand, palm out, pushing down twice.

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“You wish me to stay here?”

The nun nodded, then turned and went inside, closing the door behind her.

Delia waited, her heart starting to jump around inside her. In spite of her lack of sleep, she was wide awake.

The door opened and the small woman emerged. She looked at Delia, then held the door open for her, nodding and waving her inside.

Delia walked in slowly, blinking, as the room was lined with glass windows that let in the early morning light.

A woman stood at the far end of the room, her hands folded in front of her. She wore a flatter, less obtrusive wimple that wrapped around her neck up to her chin and hid every trace of her hair. Her face was wrinkled and her expression showed no sign of a smile.

When Delia reached the abbess, she bent her head and knelt on the floor before her.

“Stand up, child. Delia, is it?”

Delia arose quickly, which made her vision spin. A reminder that it had been many hours since she’d eaten.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Did someone send you here?”

“No.”

“Well, speak. Tell me why you are here.”

Tears stung Delia’s eyes. This cool, unfriendly greeting was not what she’d hoped for. Delia was her niece, but she may as well have been a poor farmer’s daughter from the countryside begging for the abbess’s favor. But the memory of her brothers being hauled

away, of Roland as he sat atop the horse, his hands tied, tears streaming down his cheeks, quickly drove her own tears away.

“My brothers have been wrongly accused of murder and treason against the king and were taken to prison by the king’s guard.”

The hard defiance of her own voice surprised her.

Her aunt, however, betrayed no emotion whatsoever. She only stared, as if studying Delia’s face.

“The last time I saw you,” she said finally, “you were a baby. You cried for my entire visit.”

Did she expect Delia to apologize?

“And who do you believe has accused your brothers of treason?”

“I don’t know. But I think my stepmother may be involved.”

Again, the abbess did not immediately speak or show any change of expression as she stared at Delia.

“My stepmother wishes her own child to be Father’s heir, and with Father’s death two weeks ago . . .” Her heart ached at the mention of his death, still so fresh and painful.

“Stop.”

Delia leaned back, an involuntary reaction to the unexpected command.

“You should know that it is unwise to voice your opinions, at least until you are aware of the opinions of the person to whom you are speaking.”

Delia’s mind was racing. Would her aunt tell her stepmother that she had come here asking for her help? Would she end up in prison with her brothers?

“You are here to gain my help for your brothers, are you not?”

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Delia's heart pounded in her throat, her thoughts whirling around in her head. But she focused on her brothers.

"Yes."

"Well, you are safe with me. I have no great love for your stepmother—I know a little of her—and your father was foolish to marry her."

Delia's heart ceased pounding so hard. Perhaps her aunt would help her.

"If she has done what you suspect and falsely accused her own stepsons for the sake of her child, then . . . it is a very cruel thing indeed for you and your brothers."

The tears pricked her eyes again.

"Now tell me what your plan is and how you wish for me to help."

"I am going to London to plead with the king for my brothers' release. I will tell him the truth about these accusations and beg him to let them go."

"And why do you believe this scheme will work?" Before Delia had time to answer, Beatrice narrowed her eyes and asked, "How old are you?"

"I am eighteen years old. But—"

"Do you know the king? Have you ever spoken with him?"

"No. I haven't."

"Then your plan is not a good one. You, a slip of a girl and so young. You know nothing of court politics. The king is but a boy himself, younger even than you. One day he is compromising with the leaders of this revolt and promising to enact the reforms they want; the next he is having them executed."

Delia was silent. Finally, as her aunt said nothing further, she said, “You are correct that I don’t know anything about court politics. But I am going to London to see what I can do to save my brothers, even if it gets me beheaded.” She set her jaw and met her aunt’s stare.

The abbess frowned. “At least you have some gumption. But take my advice and don’t try to speak to the king. If there is no real evidence against them, the king—or his councilors—are likely to postpone the trial, and therefore you will have several months to bide your time and hope that your brothers can find a way to prove they are innocent.” She paused, still staring hard at Delia. “Tell me. Do you have any skill in embroidery and sewing?”

“I can sew and embroider. My tapestries—”

“Good. I know the mistress of linens for the king’s palace in London, and I will give you a letter recommending you for a position sewing for the king’s household.”

What good would that do?

“You may not have heard, but the negotiations have been completed and our young king will soon take a wife—Anne of Bohemia. Go and work. Bide your time. When the king marries, she will need some ladies, noblewomen, as companions and to wait on her. I will send you letters, one for the king and one for his queen, recommending you to be the queen’s lady-in-waiting. The queen will converse with the king in French, no doubt, as it is as familiar to the king as English, and more so for the queen. Do you know French?”

“Yes.”

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“Latin?”

“Not as well, but yes.”

“Can you humble yourself? Can you take direction and do another’s bidding?”

“Of course.” She might be an earl’s daughter, but her mother had been dead for ten years and her father had neither pampered nor humored her in any way.

“You will need to make sure your brothers have food—the meals the prison provides are meager. But otherwise you will need to keep quiet and not tell anyone you have seven brothers in prison for treason against the king. Can you do that?”

“I can.”

“You cannot be one of those women who talks incessantly, who thinks she must confide her secrets in someone. You are not one of those women, are you?”

She shook her head, but honestly, she didn’t know. She had never had any secrets except the feelings she had about her step-mother, and she had confided those only to her brothers and a few of the servants whom she trusted the most. She trusted her brothers with her very life. They were all good and honest. They listened to the priest, prayed to God, and loved each other. She could not have asked for better brothers. And now that she was their only hope of escape and freedom, she did not imagine she would jeopardize their chances by wagging her tongue to some stranger in London.

“See that you live meekly and quietly and do not attract attention to yourself, except as a dutiful and loyal subject of the king. And I will give you those letters.”

“Thank you.”

“And now, you need to sleep and rest. If your stepmother sends people here seeking you, I will not tell them you are here, nor that you ever were.” She took a step closer to Delia, lifting a wrinkled hand to grip her shoulder. “I admire your determination to save your brothers. I can see the courage in your eyes. You needn’t fear I would betray you. I know something of this new wife of your father’s, of her character, and neither your stepmother nor her child could ever gain my loyalty.”

“Thank you, Aunt Beatrice.” She took a chance addressing her in the less formal manner.

Her aunt raised one brow. “I will be in prayer for you. Only God can help you with this king. He is a boy of fourteen, and it is most unfortunate that his father died so soon and left his young son with such shrewd and ruthless councilors, for a boy-king is only as powerful as his most loyal supporters. But if you are clever and courageous, perhaps God will give you favor.”

Delia nodded, suddenly feeling the weight of her undertaking. But better to be exiled or beheaded with her brothers than to be dependent on the stepmother who had condemned them.

T H R E E

SIR GEOFFREY, THE KNIGHTED SON OF THE DUKE OF Strachleigh, watched closely as his prisoners—a few of them children—were forced to mount their horses and set out after a night of rest. Geoffrey saw the youngest one struggling, so he went forward and gave him a boost. The boy did not thank him, only stared straight down at the horse's neck.

“How old are you?” Geoffrey asked in a low voice.

The boy turned and looked at him. “Ten.”

Geoffrey felt the now-familiar stab through his stomach. Could there be any honor in arresting children? Surely no ten-year-old boy could be guilty of treason, of collusion in Wat Tyler's Rebellion, or murder. The very idea was ridiculous.

But what could he do? He had to follow the orders he'd been given. But it angered him. Something was very wrong here.

He moved away from the boy and his brothers and strode toward his own horse.

Geoffrey wished he could at least tell the boy he was sorry, but he could not risk it. His men, nearly all of whom were years older than he was and much more experienced, though lower in rank and familial status, would think him weak and soft and would not respect him if he expressed any remorse or compassion for their prisoners' predicament.

"You'll surely get commended for bravery on this assignment, eh, Geoffrey?" This latest gibe came from a baron's son, Sir Tristan.

The fellow beside him guffawed.

Geoffrey refused to react. "Mount up," he said in his gruffest voice. "Let us be off."

The look on the sister's face still haunted him. How she must loathe him for his dishonorable act of taking her young brothers to prison, no doubt for some equally dishonorable reason. Someone must want the brothers out of the way so that they could seize their land or other inheritance. Geoffrey was well-acquainted with such treachery. Or perhaps it was for vengeance and someone was using the king and his power, his fear of losing control again, to get what they wanted. Wat Tyler's Rebellion had shaken the king and all the wealthiest men in England and put fear into their hearts. Before the events of the past several months, they never would have thought the poor serfs and farmers had the power to murder some of the most powerful men in England, or actually breach the Tower of London.

Geoffrey had been away visiting his sister, Amicia, when the uprising happened, so he had not witnessed the chaos, but he had

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been told the guards at the Tower had seen the mob coming and had not resisted them, but had let them through the gate.

Geoffrey had experienced the greed of the wealthy nobles and what they would do to gain what they wanted by immoral and cruel means, and he clenched his teeth at the thought of being used for ignoble purposes. For surely someone was imprisoning these brothers for their own gain.

He spurred his horse forward, taking the lead as he and his men rode toward London.



Delia had made her way to London, escorted by two of the abbey guards, who left her at the palace entrance. And now she stood before the mistress of linens and watched her read the letter her aunt had written.

She wore the dress her aunt had given her, the type of clothing she'd be expected to wear as an embroiderer in the king's household—a fine linen dress that was somewhere between a house servant's dress and a lady's. The abbess promised to soon send the fine clothing Delia would need to be a lady-in-waiting to the queen.

Mistress Maud looked up from the letter. "So Abbess Beatrice is your aunt. And you do not mind working—sewing and embroidering? The wages are not very generous."

"I do not mind. That is, I am eager to do the work. I enjoy embroidery." Sewing, not so much.

"You will be expected to work as hard as anyone else."

“Of course. I understand.” Delia had heard that the women who worked as seamstresses and embroiderers were oftentimes illegitimate daughters of the royal advisors, courtiers, and other noblemen, or even paramours of said royal advisors. But her favorite housemaid, Julianna, who had once been Delia’s nurse, had taught her never to judge others. “‘Judge not that you be not judged.’ You have lived a privileged life, but others have not. They have struggles and face things you will never have to face,” she had said. What would Julianna say if she could see her now? Surely neither of them ever could have imagined Delia being forced to work as a seamstress, desperate to save her brothers from execution.

No, Delia could never judge anyone. She’d already imagined what could happen to her if she could not secure her brothers’ release and she was left alone. Either she’d have to live in the convent, dependent on the graciousness of her aunt, or she’d have to make her own way. And most women she had heard about who were alone ended up in very bad situations.

Mistress Maud stood. “Come. I’ll show you to your room. You can put away your things and begin working.”

Delia followed her new mistress. Where were her brothers at this moment? Certainly they were not being treated as well as she was. Did they have anything to eat? Thankfully, her aunt had given her a little money to buy food. Were they warm? Did they even have a proper bed? She knew little of prisons, but she was aware they were hard, harsh, cold places with little food and no comfort. Just thinking of her brothers in a place like that made her stomach sink as an ache gripped her chest.

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They made their way up so many flights of steps that Delia was breathing hard by the time they reached the top. The mistress opened a door and led her to the end of a narrow corridor, where a small window let in light, to the last door on the left. She stood aside to let Delia enter.

“You will sleep here with the other embroidery maidens. Choose an unmade bed and I will have someone bring you linens before the day is done.”

Delia put her bags beside a bed in the corner. The mattress looked lumpy and thin, but she was reminded of where her brothers were sleeping. She could hardly complain about a lumpy mattress.

But perhaps her brothers' living conditions were not as bad as she imagined. They were the sons of an earl, after all. Perhaps they were being treated well.

She hurried back out the door where Mistress Maud was waiting for her, then followed her back down to her new life of embroidering for the king.



Geoffrey's men were released from their watch at daybreak. Geoffrey had been training the new guards, so he'd stayed with them through the last hours of their watch. Tired, his eyes burning, he made his way down from the tower and headed toward the kitchen to break his fast.

Had the seven sons of the Earl of Dericott even been fed the day before?

He clenched his teeth every time he remembered the moment

he reached Dericott Castle and saw whom he'd been sent to capture and bring back to London.

He told himself he wasn't to blame, that he was only doing as he was ordered. But he couldn't stop thinking about them. He wanted to ask questions to discover who had accused them and why, as it seemed unlikely that they were guilty of the charges. But no matter how careful and discreet he was, his queries could make their way to the wrong person, and depending on how powerful the brothers' accuser was, he could lose his head, literally, as many men had recently. Still, the prisoners held at the Tower were rich and powerful noblemen. Perhaps someone was taking care of their needs.

Although they were not his problem or responsibility, Geoffrey was angry that he had been used to arrest them, that he had anything to do with their imprisonment.

He saw himself in the brothers' faces. They'd seemed as innocent and ignorant as he had once been to the politics of England and its rulers. And he had also been the son of a man with a title. But one sudden accusation, one well-connected bitter rival, and Geoffrey had found himself without his birthright, stripped of the title he'd been destined for, and doing the bidding of cruel men who held more power than they deserved or could handle.

He was still chewing the last bite of his breakfast when he took a hemp bag and began filling it with pasties and bread rolls and small cheeses—whatever he could grab. If the guards were allowed to eat the king's food, why not his falsely accused prisoners? He twisted the bag closed and strode out of the kitchen toward the prison tower inside the Tower of London.

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As he neared the door, someone else headed in the same direction, to the same door—a young woman. A moment later, her eyes met his.

She flinched, almost as if someone had struck her. She even stopped midstride and glared at him. That was when he realized who she was—the sister of the seven brothers.

What was she doing here? She must have traveled practically on their heels to get here so quickly.

Before he could think of what to say—or whether he should say anything at all—she set her jaw in a hard line and spun around, heading back the way she had come.

Were his eyes and mind playing a trick on him? Perhaps he was only imagining, because of his guilt, that the young woman was the Dericott sister. But her reaction to seeing him made him think she was indeed who he thought she was. She'd had the same expression on her face when he rode away with her brothers.

No wonder she had looked at him with hatred. He hated himself in that moment.

His heart again heavy, he headed for the stairs that would take him to the prison cells.

With the help of one of the guards, he found the brothers. They were housed together, all seven in one large cell—large for a prison cell, but it could hardly be considered large enough to be a suitable dwelling for seven people. He had the guard unlock the door.

He stood in the doorway and saw that the brothers were lying on the floor, sleeping—not surprising since the sun was barely up, and even if it was overhead, the window high above

their heads let in only a bit of light. Then he noticed one of them—the oldest one—sitting with his back against the wall, his eyes open, watching Geoffrey.

The oldest brother stood to his feet, his gaze unwavering. “What do you want?”

“Just to know how you are faring.”

“We are your prisoners. We are faring as prisoners normally fare.”

“Edwin, is it?”

The other brothers were beginning to get up from their places on the bare floor, and he saw they had no blankets or even adequate clothing for the chill and damp. The night had been rather cold.

“Edwin Raynsford, the Earl of Dericott, and therein lies the reason I’m here. So why don’t you tell your king to execute me and let my brothers go. There’s no need to behead us all.” He said the words sardonically.

“I am only a lowly guard captain. I have no power except to do as I’m told. I came to ask if you needed anything.”

Edwin simply stared at him out of narrowed eyes. No doubt he didn’t trust Geoffrey.

“And to bring you this food.” Geoffrey held out the bag to him.

Edwin accepted it from his hand and said nothing.

As the rest of the brothers recognized Geoffrey, their expressions changed. The younger ones’ eyes widened, while the older ones’ narrowed.

He could hardly blame them for hating him. They saw him as the enemy, but they should have no fear of him. Their real

enemy was someone powerful, and that did not characterize Geoffrey.

But what if the accusations were true and these brothers—the older ones at least—were guilty of treason? Geoffrey's position was not so secure that he couldn't be accused by association. But that was a cowardly, ignoble thought.

Geoffrey had nothing else for them, so he turned to go, then hesitated, his chest heavy at the thought of them sleeping on the cold floor with no blankets.

"We are innocent of these accusations," Edwin said quietly. "We never thought about treason for a moment in our lives, and we don't even know who it is we supposedly murdered." His expression seemed sincere.

Geoffrey nodded. But what could he do? He found himself saying, "If I can help, I will." He almost mentioned he thought he'd seen their sister on the grounds below but thought better of raising their hopes.

Geoffrey left the prison cell, let the guard lock the door back, and went down the stairs to the ground below. As he walked back to the barracks, he looked for the girl he'd seen. She'd been dressed like one of the sewing maids. Was she still lingering about?

She surely was not their sister. Their sister was a wealthy earl's daughter who lived in the country, away from society and city life. She'd probably rarely, if ever, been in London, and she certainly could not be a sewing maid in the household of the king. The job was beneath her.

And then he saw her, standing in the doorway to the White

Tower. When she noticed him looking at her, she stepped back and closed the door, hiding herself from his view.

Should he run and find her? Chase her down and demand to know who she was? No, he didn't want to attract that kind of attention to himself.

He rubbed his face, feeling weary to his bones. Time to go to bed. He did not have the energy to chase some maiden who, if he were able to catch her, would think he had lost his mind.



Delia watched Sir Geoffrey, that hateful man who took her brothers to prison, walk off toward the soldiers' barracks. When she was sure he was out of sight, she hurried toward Wardroab Tower, where she hoped she would find her brothers. She had very little time before she had to begin her day's work with the other sewing and embroidery maids, and because of the soldier, she'd just lost several minutes that she could have spent with her brothers.

She pushed open the heavy door. A guard just inside stepped toward her.

"No one is allowed in here. Prisoners and guards only."

"I wish to visit . . . someone who is imprisoned here." Abbess Beatrice's words came back to her, warning her not to tell anyone who she was or what she was doing there. But how else would she get to see her brothers? She had been sure they would allow family members to visit the prisoners, as they were the ones expected to bring food and other provisions.

“Your name?” The guard’s expression never changed. “And the prisoner’s name?”

“Delia.” Would she have to tell him she was the daughter of the deceased Earl of Dericott? That the prisoners were her brothers? “I wish to see Edwin Raynsford, the Earl of Dericott.”

The guard stared unblinking at her face. “Very well. Come with me.” He led her down a damp corridor. The stone floor was covered in slime in places, and the ceiling dripped on her bare head.

Then they went up several levels of narrow stairs. She saw no one in the dark halls or on the stairs, which were dimly lit with candles on wall sconces, other than the guard who was leading her. She did hear a moan, loud and long, almost inhuman, but it faded away as they continued up a narrow staircase.

At the top, the guard turned down a corridor and stopped at the nearest door. He unlocked it, let her inside, then closed and locked it behind her. Her heart thumped hard at the sound of the metal lock clicking and shutting her in.

“Delia!”

Roland’s voice pierced her heart as her littlest brother leapt at her and threw his arms around her. Delia hugged him close as her other brothers drew near.

“Delia.” Edwin’s voice vibrated with concern.

Roland let her go and wiped his cheeks with his hand.

“Are you all right?”

Roland just nodded and kept wiping his face. Her other brothers hugged and kissed her as well.

“What are you doing here?” Edwin said. “Were you arrested?”

“No, no. I came—” She stopped, glancing around. “Can anyone else hear me?”

“I don’t know.”

She kept her voice low. “I went to Aunt Beatrice and she provided a letter so I could get work at the Palace of Westminster as a seamstress. I wanted to see what I could do to help you escape.”

“Delia.” There was a gentle tone of rebuke in Edwin’s voice. “You shouldn’t have come. Escape?” He shook his head. “You need to go home.”

Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back.

“I’m sorry,” Edwin said, his expression as sober as she had ever seen it, “but I don’t want anything to happen to you, and it isn’t possible to escape from the Tower.”

“Better to be here than at home, do you not think?”

A muscle twitched in Edwin’s cheek as he clenched his teeth. “I cannot argue.” Then he hugged her, kissing the top of her head.

“You’re safer here with us,” Merek said with a glare. “We all know Parnella did this.”

“I’m glad to see you,” Berenger added.

“Are you safe, then? Where are you staying?” Edwin asked.

“I am staying at the palace. What could be safer than that?” She smiled up at her oldest brother.

He shook his head. “The king’s court is not a safe place at all. You can’t let anyone know who you are. You don’t know who might be our enemy.”

“But I’m not part of his court. I’m a lowly seamstress. And no one knows. The mistress of linens is the only person who knows

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I'm the niece of Beatrice, the Abbess of Rosings Abbey, and she doesn't know I'm the sister of an earl."

She looked around the empty room.

"This is not where you sleep, surely?"

"It is." Gerard glared at the wall behind her head. "Falsely accused and wrongly imprisoned. Whoever accused us should have just killed us outright." Her twenty-year-old brother could be very passionate in his opinions sometimes.

"Do they feed you at all? Are you hungry?" Delia would find them food if she had to steal it from the kitchen.

"Just pottage and dry bread," Charles said.

Little David held up a bread roll. "Sir Geoffrey brought us food."

"Sir Geoffrey?" She recoiled as she said the name.

"Yes, he brought us some bread and cheese." Berenger looked surprised even as he said the words.

"He just left." Charles's voice was muffled, as he spoke with a mouthful of food.

"So guard captains bring you your food?" What a strange duty for a captain.

"I don't know why he brought us food," Edwin said.

"Probably felt guilty," Berenger said.

"He should die of guilt," Merek growled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"He is not our enemy," Edwin said. "He was only following orders, what any soldier must do. And bringing us food was a kindness. He had nothing to gain from it."

They all fell silent.

“Do you have no blankets?” A lump formed in Delia’s throat. It was quite cold, and they’d not been allowed to take any extra clothing with them when they were seized. That certainly was not kind of this captain, Sir Geoffrey.

“No blankets and no pillows.” Roland put his arms around himself.

“I’ll bring you something just as soon as I’m able.” Surely there was a storage room somewhere in the palace where such things were kept. She couldn’t let her brothers shiver in their sleep on this cold stone floor.

“Don’t do anything that will bring suspicion upon you,” Edwin said.

Roland said, “We can sleep like the puppies to keep warm—on top of each other.” He smiled as if it were a clever jest.

“We will manage.” Gerard patted Delia’s shoulder reassuringly. “Just keep yourself safe.”

“Yes. We can stand anything as long as we know you’re well, Delia.” Berenger was closest in age to her, but he acted like a man twice as old.

When had her brothers become so mature and strong? A week ago they’d all seemed like boys. Now they were men who ignored their own terrible circumstances and seemed only to think of protecting her. But she’d prove that she could take care of herself and help them too. She had to.

Somehow she would. Whatever it took.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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MELANIE DICKERSON IS A *NEW York Times* bestselling author and two-time Christy Award winner. Melanie spends her time daydreaming, researching the most fascinating historical time periods, and writing and editing her happily-ever-afters.



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