

PROLOGUE

England, 1245

“My lady, I beg of you. Let us turn back. There is an unnatural feel about this place.”

Lady Alyna of Montvue darted a glance at Charles, her loyal servant, then looked around uneasily. She felt apprehensive as well, but wasn't certain if the cause was their surroundings, their destination or perhaps fear that her father would discover their whereabouts.

The forest, thick with undergrowth, crowded the narrow path they followed. A low-lying fog laced through the trees and added dampness to the cold winter's day. The bare, dark branches of tall oaks stretched high overhead, their gnarled fingers providing a sinister canopy. The horses seemed to share her servant's nervousness, their ears twitching at every small sound.

“Aye, my lady,” her maid, Enid, agreed. “For once Charles has the truth of it. I've had a bad feeling since you received that message and it grows by the moment. Are you certain you don't want to return home?”

Her two servants were right. This place had a strange feel. But it would take more than that to make her turn back. Already she'd risked her father's wrath

to come here, not to mention venturing outside the protection of their small manor and village.

They'd ridden for miles now with no sight of Broughton, the village they sought. Quelling her doubts, Alyna pulled her woolen cloak tightly about her and sat up straight. "We're nearly there. My business with the healer will not take long."

Mistress Myranda, reputed to be a healer gifted with second sight, had sent a message that Alyna could not ignore. Myranda had something that belonged to Alyna's mother who'd died when Alyna was in her tenth year. The message had instructed Alyna to come midday of the full moon to collect it. Anything that belonged to her mother was worth the risk.

The path widened at the top of a small rise. Relief filled Alyna at the sight of the village nestled in the clearing below. Livestock grazed in the tofts. Smoke added to the fog and laid a ghostly quality to the mist surrounding the thatched-roof cottages. One stood far apart from the others.

"There!" Alyna pointed. "That is the place we seek."

A woman appeared in the doorway. She stepped out with a slow, awkward gait and stood with a hand on her lower back, looking up at them. Both nervous and curious, Alyna urged her steed down the ridge.

Behind her, Charles grumbled, as he had most of the journey. Enid muttered a response, her words too low to reach Alyna, but her tone clear enough. For once, Alyna found their bickering to be of comfort. She was grateful they'd insisted on accompanying her.

As they neared the cottage, she realized Mistress Myranda was heavy with child. Very heavy with child. Some said her second sight was a gift, and others called it a curse. To Alyna, she appeared to be just a

woman, and an attractive one at that. Her dark hair was thick and neatly plaited and framed a face with even features and troubled blue eyes.

Before Alyna could utter a greeting, the woman grimaced in pain. Alyna slid off the horse. "Mistress Myranda?"

"The babe is coming!" She grabbed Alyna's offered hand and squeezed until at last the pain passed. "I'm so very glad you're here."

Concerned, Alyna put her arm around the healer's shoulders. "Let us get you out of the cold. Is there someone who can help you? My servant can fetch her."

"Nay. I need no one but you."

Taken aback at both her words and the conviction with which she said them, Alyna sent a worried glance at Enid. "Once you're settled inside, you can tell me how I can help."

"I'll care for the horses, my lady," Charles said, his brow creased with concern. "Let me know if you have need of me."

Alyna nodded. Before going more than a step into the cottage, Myranda gasped and bent over in pain. Uneasy with the frequency of the contractions, Alyna supported her until the pain passed, then guided her the rest of the way inside.

The pleasant fragrance of dried herbs wrapped around her. A small fire on a raised stone hearth warmed the interior. In the flickering light, Alyna could see a narrow straw bed tucked against one wall. She and Enid settled Myranda on it and made her as comfortable as possible. Enid examined what Myranda had readied for the birthing.

"How long have you had the pains?" Alyna asked.

"Some time now, my lady. The babe will come soon. But 'tis most urgent that I speak with you."

"I, too, look forward to talking with you and seeing

what you have for me. But first, we have a babe to deliver.” She hoped her tone didn’t reflect her concern. Though she’d assisted in several births, those had been with a midwife or an experienced mother present. The thought of delivering a babe with only Enid to help was daunting. “Enid and I have some experience, but surely there’s someone we should send for.”

“Nay, my lady.” The woman shifted as though still uncomfortable. “I fear I was not honest in my message to you.”

Something about the look on Miranda’s face made Alyna’s worry increase threefold. “What do you mean?”

“In my visions, I have seen the outcome of this day. And I have seen you. Many times, I have seen you. Trouble comes your way, my lady. I will not be there to help you.” Miranda sucked in her breath as another contraction seized her. Several moments passed before the pain eased.

“What sort of trouble?” Alyna asked as Enid bathed Miranda’s face with a cool cloth.

“Your father is involved with those who will bring him harm. And he will make arrangements that bode ill for you.” Miranda clasped Alyna’s hand, her vivid blue eyes boring into Alyna’s. “You must not follow through with his plans.”

“I don’t understand,” Alyna said, confused by her words.

“I have two gifts to aid you.” She motioned Enid to a nearby table where a book lay. When Enid brought it, Miranda placed Alyna’s hand on it. “This journal was your mother’s. She entrusted it to me to give to you when the time was right.”

Touched, Alyna traced her hand over the smooth, brown leather book cover carved with the image of a

howling wolf. Alyna opened it, and her heart soared as she recognized her mother's handwriting. Enid had mentioned that Alyna's mother and Myranda had sometimes shared methods of uses and preparation of herbs. "I remember this. Mother wrote notes in it."

"Aye. She gave it to me when she felt her time was at end." She laid her hand on Alyna's. "I'm sorry I couldn't save her."

Her mother had fallen ill and despite her attempts to treat herself, had died within days. Alyna studied Myranda more closely as a hazy memory struck her. "You were there that day. The day she died."

Myranda nodded. "I've missed her, but I know my loss paled compared to yours." She looked back at the book. "My own notes are in there along with your mother's. It will aid you in the days to come. Study it so you'll be ready to assist those who need you."

Overwhelmed, Alyna set the book aside. She had little knowledge of healing but looked forward to reading her mother's words. Now more than ever she wished she knew more. "Myranda, is there a remedy we can make to ease your pain?"

The healer moaned as pain gripped her. "Nay. It matters not, my lady. I will not see the end of this day."

Alyna's stomach dropped. "Please do not speak so. You and your babe will be fine." She shared a frightened glance with Enid. Surely Myranda's statement came from nothing more than the fear most birthing women experienced.

Myranda's eyes glazed with pain. Her words came between pants. "You were meant to assist in the birth of my child. He – is your second gift. You must raise him and care for him."

Alyna froze, stunned at her words. "But, Myranda—"

“Nay. I know this. He’ll help you. He’ll have the sight as well.”

“My lady, surely you know you can’t do this,” Enid whispered in Alyna’s ear. “Your father would never allow it.”

Alyna nodded in acknowledgement. Her father barely tolerated her. Never would he allow her to raise an orphan, especially if the mother was reputed by some to be a witch. There had to be an alternative. “Who is the babe’s sire?”

That brought a weak smile to Myranda’s face. “Do you wish to know if I have lain with the devil as others believe?”

“Nay. I don’t believe that. Wouldn’t you like me to let the man know he has a son or daughter to care for?”

“This child is a strong, healthy boy, my lady. As for his father, he was a good man. Handsome and strong. But he was killed in battle months ago. The day he was struck down, I knew he would not return to us. My heart broke, for I realized our son would never know either of us.” Myranda cried out as another contraction ripped through her.

A lump stuck in Alyna’s throat. She could think of no response to the words Myranda had spoken with such sincerity. While it might be pleasant to know what life held, to foresee one’s own demise was not something Alyna wished to experience.

Myranda clutched Alyna’s arm, her grip noticeably weaker, her voice a mere whisper. “You must listen, for I have much to tell you and little time. When the trouble comes, go north. There you will find your answers.”

Alyna had no chance to ponder Myranda’s advice as the woman’s pains increased. Terror was a hard, hot ball in Alyna’s stomach, but things progressed so

quickly, she didn't have time to panic. Before long, Myranda began to push. Enid moved aside her gown to check her progress. To Alyna's surprise, they could see the baby's head. "The babe has dark hair just like you," Alyna whispered in awe.

"And like you, my lady." Myranda spoke between pains. "You must raise him. You've been chosen to be the mother of my child. I know I ask much—but he'll have powers as I do. Aid him with his gift. He'll help you find the one—with a crystal the color of the sky."

"Myranda, please," Alyna begged her. "Save your strength for the baby. Soon you'll be able to hold him." She closed her eyes briefly to say a prayer that it would be so.

Myranda appeared to take Alyna's words to heart. She rested when she could and pushed when the pains came. Time ceased to exist as they all focused on the birth.

"Push, Myranda," Alyna urged her. "You've almost done it."

With a cry, Myranda bore down again and brought the baby into the world.

"A boy, Myranda, just as you said!" Alyna laid the wet, crying babe on Myranda's stomach with shaking hands.

"Oh, my." Myranda's tears flowed down her cheeks. She touched his head, his hands, his legs and toes, as though she needed to see and feel all of him. She cuddled him tightly and looked at Alyna, her eyes full of pride and tears, her voice quivering. "Isn't he perfect? How beautiful he is!"

"He is indeed." Alyna wiped away her own tears.

Enid completed the birthing while Alyna cleaned the infant and swaddled him in a cloth. Alyna gave him back to Myranda, relieved beyond words that mother and babe had survived.

The exhausted healer held her son with great care. She pulled out a blue blanket from beside her on the bed. "I made this for him," she told Alyna as she placed it around him. With gentle fingers, Myranda lifted his tiny hand free of the blanket and held it against her cheek. Her tears flowed as she cuddled him. "Always remember, I love you." Then, she kissed him on the forehead and gave him to Alyna, simply saying, "His name is Nicholas."

"'Tis a fine name for him," Alyna said as she admired the beautiful baby. She ran a finger down his velvety cheek. His complexion held none of the ruddiness some newborns bore. Cloudy blue eyes looked up at her with innocence and trust and grabbed her heart. Surely all Myranda had said would not come to pass now. Everything seemed fine. She grasped Myranda's hand. "What can I do to help you regain your strength?"

Myranda merely shook her head, her tears falling. "The one with the crystal...will be your guardian knight. But you will have much to overcome before...true happiness can be yours. Always know you're stronger than you think." Her voice faded on the last words.

Panic skittered down Alyna's spine.

And then it started. Blood. So much blood. It flowed from Myranda and soaked the linens, changing the bedding to crimson. The sickening metallic odor scented the air.

"Oh, dear God." Alyna looked at Enid. "What do we do?"

"I know not, my lady." The maid checked Myranda. "I don't think the afterbirth came properly. We need more cloths."

Alyna refused to sit and watch life drain from the new mother. "Myranda, tell me how to help you," she

begged as a panicked Enid attempted to staunch the flow of blood. Myranda seemed oblivious to their fear.

“Your knight may seem unwilling...but he’ll help you. Nicholas will give you a sign. Let no one stop you,” she whispered in an ever weakening voice.

“Myranda, please,” Alyna begged as tears streamed down her face. “Tell me what to do!” She gripped Myranda’s hand tightly, trying to lend her some of her own vigor. “Your son needs you.”

Myranda’s eyes closed, then opened suddenly to capture Alyna’s. “Please, love my Nicholas.” She squeezed Alyna’s hand and closed her eyes, her face tranquil for the first time since Alyna’s arrival. Her hand slid from Alyna’s.

Numb, Alyna stared at the healer, unable to believe she was gone. But death was unmistakable. Alyna murmured a prayer, then rose with the quiet babe in her arms, unable to make out his face through her tears.

There was no way she could raise this baby as her own. Yet what else could she do with him?

“Mayhap there’s someone in the village who’d take him,” Alyna murmured.

“The babe of a witch?” The doubt in Enid’s tone made Alyna realize how impossible that would be. “They think his father’s the devil!”

“You know that’s not true, Enid,” Alyna admonished. “Look at this baby. He’s perfect.”

With slow, careful movements, she drew him closer and kissed his satin smooth cheek. She inhaled, breathing in his scent. Myranda had entrusted her with this child’s life. She had to find a way to keep him safe.

Her father be damned. Somehow, she’d do as Myranda had asked.

A warm glow filled her heart at the precious gift

she'd been given. "You're mine from this day forward, Nicholas," she whispered. "I will love you always."

Enid gasped in dismay. "My lady, what about your father?"

The question only deepened Alyna's determination. In the past hour, the course of her life had changed forever. She would not fail. Resolve filled her as never before.

Alyna stared into those blue eyes and made her vow once again. "Nicholas, I will love you and keep you safe. Always."

CHAPTER ONE

*“One large leaf of feverfew can be eaten to ward off a headache.”
Lady Catherine’s Herbal Journal*

Spring, Four Years Later

Sir Royce de Bremont’s stomach grumbled as he watched the comings and goings at Montvue from his well-hidden spot in the trees near the manor gate. The time for the evening meal had passed and darkness would soon fall, but he made no attempt to ease his hunger. The pieces of dried bread and cheese in his pouch had already served for two meals and had held little appeal even then.

After fortnights of planning, revenge was almost within reach. That knowledge was all the sustenance he needed.

As he’d been advised, the manor was not well guarded. Two men-at-arms stood at the gate discussing something with great enthusiasm, if their slaps on each other’s backs were any indication. They were the only soldiers in sight. Though the manor was relatively small, Royce thought the lack of guards reeked of laziness. To keep the things he had, a man had to hold on with both hands. And sometimes even that wasn’t enough.

A woman emerged from the manor gate and caught Royce's attention. She wore a fine cloak, her veil fluttered in the light breeze, and she carried a basket over her arm. From her bearing and attire, she appeared to be a lady. No maid accompanied her, but a small boy walked by her side, dragging a stick behind him. After a few words with the soldiers, she bent down to speak with the boy then turned and pointed.

Royce's breath halted when her finger aimed directly at him. How could she have spotted him?

He released the breath in a whoosh when she kissed the boy's cheek and left him standing guard with the men-at-arms, his stick raised and ready. She hastened down the path that skirted the forest and led to the small village nearby, taking her directly past him.

Royce remained concealed behind the thick trees as she hurried by. The brief description he'd been given left him little doubt that she was indeed the one he'd come for but had not prepared him for her loveliness. Her white veil framed an elegant face blessed with alabaster skin. Her full lips were a deep red that drew a man's eye and his thoughts toward more pleasurable pursuits. High cheekbones and dark brows emphasized large, amber-colored eyes, a color familiar to him.

He stilled as she glanced at the trees where he hid. Her brow creased and her steps slowed as if she could feel his gaze. She perused the area more closely then continued on her way.

Royce could see why his uncle, Lord Tegmont, was said to covet this woman. By the look of her father's holding, her dowry would be small, but the lady herself was a prize for certain. It would give him great pleasure to snatch her from his uncle's grasp and

prevent their marriage. The thought of his uncle's rage made Royce smile. If halting the wedding disappointed the lady, so be it. Her feelings were not his concern.

He needed to move farther from the guards before he took action so followed her at a distance, curious to see where she went in such a rush. Surely, she'd return home before nightfall, and that meant he wouldn't need to find a way into the manor to fetch his quarry after all, though he'd come prepared for a fight. This would be much easier than he'd hoped.



Alyna glanced over her shoulder as she hurried toward Sarah's cottage, unsure what caused her unease. She'd walked this path many times before and never had a worry. Nicholas was safely occupied on guard duty and out of Enid's way. The maid had enough to do with the packing.

Most likely her nervousness of what lay ahead this evening caused her concern. She needed to complete this one last errand and then all would be ready for their escape.

"Lady Alyna," called Sarah, the miller's wife, from the distant door of her cottage, waving madly as though Alyna might not see her. "Good evening to you."

Rather than holler across half the meadow, Alyna merely returned the wave until she drew closer. "And to you, Sarah. Beatrice told me your stomach is ailing you."

The sturdy woman sighed as she laid a hand on her middle. "Indeed, my lady. I hated to bother you, but I've been miserable all the day."

"I'm pleased to help." A sliver of guilt shot through