

Prologue

But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward.

Jeremiah 7:24

England, Near the Southern Coast, Rockbridge Castle, June 1199

The hard clunk of a stone against the castle wall just below Rose's window signaled the time had come. Finally. Freedom. She threw a cloak around her shoulders and gazed about her childhood room one more time. This had been her sanctuary, and now her prison. No woman should live under a man's control for seventeen summers, but her father couldn't let her go. She should have been wed years ago, so now she would take matters into her own hands.

Another stone hit the sill and bounced into the middle of her room. She took a deep breath. A warm breeze swirled around her face when she poked her head out of the window. There below she could see Conrad's golden head glistening like a bright star in the moonlight. Her savior had come.

"Let's go," he said, flashing a bright smile. "We must hurry. We have to make it to the coast within the hour."

"One moment, Conrad."

She cast one more glance around her room and at her tattered rag bunny sitting on her pallet. Her father had made Bit the day after her mother had died. The worn rabbit had been her companion through most of the trials and storms of her life, but that was the past. Conrad would

laugh at her if she brought the ragtag animal. Besides, she was a woman now, and women didn't need toys to soothe their woes. They had their husbands' strong and muscular arms to keep away the night terrors. She gave up a simple prayer. *Heavenly Father, Bless my dear Conrad and make our journey swift and safe.* She then tossed the long rope out the window.

Conrad's calm and confident words coached her down the castle wall and into his arms. He pressed a hard kiss to her lips that tripled the speed of her heart. Soon. Oh, so very soon she would be Lady Rose de Laval. Conrad's wife. He grabbed the satchel from her hands and secured it to the back of his mount before he lifted her to a grey mare.

"We must make haste. The ship will not wait for us, and I fear your father suspects something is amiss. His eyes were ever on me at dinner." Conrad hoisted himself onto the large destrier and glanced back at the dark castle.

"Nay, that is not the case. He had quite a bit to drink this eve. I am sure he suspects nothing and is fast asleep." Rose flashed a warm smile at her beloved.

But the wary look on Conrad's face spoke his doubt. He kicked his mount in the sides and took off toward the sea. She did the same, for freedom was but an hour away.

They rode in silence, and only the hard pounding of the horses' hooves on the rigid earth could be heard. The sharp salt air teased her nostrils and warmed her blood. A crash of waves against the shoreline told her they were close. She tossed a glance at her love, but he did not send a reassuring look her way; his eyes were fixed on the single lantern that swayed on the distant ship's bow.

At the rocky cliff, Conrad jumped from his horse and lifted her off the mare's back. "Not long now, my love," Conrad cooed. "Soon we will be together forever."

They grabbed their few belongings before heading down the stony path to the waiting rowboat below. They were almost there. Rose closed her eyes and sent up another prayer. *Thank you, Lord. Thank you for answering my prayer by giving me my beloved.*

She opened her eyes too late and stubbed her toe on a protruding rock. Rose stumbled down the treacherous path, yet Conrad wouldn't pause. "Careful," he warned. "Or all this will be for naught."

She tried to adjust her steps to the steep path as it switched back and forth until, by the grace of God, they made it to the beach. They ran to the rowboat, the soft sand seeping into her slippers.

"Where ya been?" a gruff sailor asked Conrad before flipping a blurry eye her way.

"My lady was a bit timid. But all is well now."

A pang of hurt skipped over her heart at Conrad's terse and degrading comment, but the hurt disappeared when he flashed her another breathtaking smile. She took his offered hand and stepped into the rowboat before the sailor and Conrad pushed it into the sea. As they moved closer to the larger ship, the warm summer air turned cool and brisk. Rose shifted her gaze back to the shoreline, back to her home. Someday she would return when her father's anger had subsided. When he would finally accept Conrad as his son-in-law. Her father couldn't stay angry at her forever. He never could.

The rowboat bumped against the hull of the ship, and Rose was guided to a rope ladder where she made her way onto the English cog. Soon she and Conrad would be in Normandy, far from her father's grasp. The moment her feet hit the deck, she wondered if she had made the right decision. A foul stench drifted up from the hold, making her gag. In the moonlight, Rose

could feel the sailors' hungry gazes upon her. She clutched the front of her cloak and edged back toward the rail.

From behind, Conrad placed his hands on her shoulders and whispered in her ear, "We've made it, Rose. Is that not wonderful?"

Wonderful? Aye, it should be. She had dreamed of this moment for so long, but now that it was here, no joy infused her body. Instead, twinges of regret began to seep into every crevice, every organ, and every bone. What would her father do when he found out she had left? Conrad believed her father would forgive her as he always had when she would stretch her boundaries. But standing on this swaying deck amidst a group of unsavory sailors, Rose began to doubt her rash decision. She turned her head away when Conrad tried to kiss her cheek.

He slowly turned her around. 'Twas then she saw a fleeting hardness in his gaze. A shiver went through her body, and his features softened. He raised a hand and let his fingers trail gently down her cheek. "You're frightened, aren't you? Don't worry. I won't let anything happen to you." He placed a protective arm around her shoulders. "Come. I have arranged for us to have the captain's quarters on this journey. It isn't as nice as your chamber at Rockbridge Castle"—he gave her shoulder a squeeze—"but we will have each other to keep away the drafty sea air."

His lewd remark sent a chill cascading down her spine. Surely he didn't think they would . . . before they were wed? But before she could give word to her thoughts, he led her to the captain's door.

Conrad gave a swift knock before lifting the latch. "We made it, Augustus."

But Augustus was not sitting in the captain's chair, no, not at all. There sat the man she had known all her life. The man she had loved and at times hated.

“Hello, Rosemond. Did you enjoy your little excursion?” A wide grin split his lips. “Sir Conrad should have paid Augustus a few more coins to keep his loyalty. The man and I go way back. Besides, my purse is larger.”

Her throat became as dry as a rotting fish on a bleached beach. How could he humiliate Conrad so? Tears of anger welled up in her eyes and spilled over her cheeks, yet her words wouldn't come.

“Lord de Payne, your daughter and I—”

In a flash, her father flew out of the chair and held his sword to Conrad's throat. “Speak not to me, boy. For I know what plan you whittled in that wooden head of yours. We shall discuss this later, at the castle.” Her father motioned with his chin to his guards. “Take my daughter home.”

The stiffness in her throat fled, and her screams filled the air. “Conrad . . . Conrad . . .” Not once did he even look her way, his hard gaze remained on the devil. Her father.

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The edge of the sun peeked out over the horizon, and the birds chirped loudly in yonder trees; however, the beauty of the early day was lost on Rose as she sat on her pallet hugging Bit close to her. Two guards stood outside her door. Now, in truth, she was a prisoner. She thought to escape through the window again, but the long rope had disappeared and a few knights stood below her window. Indeed, her father had taken every precaution to ensure she would stay put.

All night long voices rang out in the hall below, yet she could not make out a single word. Surely Conrad would not leave until he had gained her father's approval. Finally, the door

scraped open, and Rose flew through the entry before the guards could draw another breath. She flew down the stairs and raced into the hall only to come to an abrupt halt when she saw her father and Conrad standing by the hearth.

“Ah, there she is. Come, come, my dear. Take a seat.” Her father motioned to a stiff-back chair near the hearth where a few embers glowed.

Rose turned an askance eye toward her beloved, but Conrad quickly looked away. With slow cautious steps, she walked to the offered chair.

“Why do you look so glum, Rosemond? Sir Conrad and I have come to an agreement.”

Rose’s pulse quickened and heart began to blossom with hope. She looked to Conrad, but he kept his gaze fixed on the wall over her head. Could he not give her a hint as to what was decided?

With a clearing of the throat, her father drew her attention. A small curl of his lips sent Rose’s heart to the dungeons. Nay, Conrad would fight for her. He loved her. A glance in his direction did not give Rose the assurance she desired. He still held his gaze on the blasted wall.

Her father clasped his hands behind his back and shifted his gaze back and forth like a preying beast deciding if she or Conrad would be the next to be devoured. “Sir Conrad, don’t you have something to say to my daughter?”

In that moment, Conrad turned white and his jaw clenched. His golden gaze finally rested on her. However, it did not hold the warmth and desire that had captured her heart last fall. These topaz eyes were filled with anger, disgust, and, worst of all, defeat. “Lady Rosemond, I withdraw any claims I have made to you. They were foolishly spoken.” He dipped his head. “Forgive me.”

“Nay.” She shot to her feet. “Do not let him do this to us.” She waved a hand to her father.

But Conrad did naught but shake his head.

She rushed over and grabbed his hands in hers. “Conrad, I love you. I will always love you. Do not listen to him. I will go anywhere with you. I do not care if he disowns me.”

Conrad patted her hand and then gently pulled his hand away. “Forgive me for hurting you so, but I have no desire to wed you.” With that, Conrad threw back his shoulders, gave her his back, and strode from the hall, ignoring her anguishing pleas and cries.

The slam of the large wooden door reverberated through her chest and shattered her heart. Nothing. There was nothing left. All that she was, and all that she would ever be, went with Conrad.

“Rosemond,” her father said softly. “I am very sorry. In time, you will see God has been merciful to you.”

Dazed, Rose turned to her father. His features wobbled, and she struggled to maintain focus. He gave her a tender smile as if that would fix all. A heat burned through the darkness in her chest and infused the shards that used to be her heart. White-hot anger coursed through her veins and exploded from her body in a violent shake.

She gritted her teeth and raised a fist to her father. “Don’t you dare talk to me about God’s mercy. For neither you nor He cares what happens to me or cared what happened to Mother. As far as I am concerned, you both can go to the devil!”