



Chapter One

Scotland: 1564 – Balloch, Lac Lomond.

“Leave this place... or you will be next!”

Those words—her mother’s last—had never stopped haunting her.

I should have listened.



The ill-fated young woman now stood in the same place as her mother had done—three months’ earlier—trembling with fear. The small, make-shift courtroom—once a slaughter house—was crammed with eager spectators. She could still smell its lingering, foul stench of death; the irony of it sickened her. Her eyes darted about, as if looking for an escape. But it was a hopeless situation. She knew there was no way out; all the doors and windows were blocked.

Her heart pounded, as the sinking feeling in her stomach signalled what she had been dreading.

I’m going to die! she realised, as the rope prickled and burned against the skin of her bound wrists. *Oh God! I’m going to—*

Her train of thought was severed by an imperious voice rising above the maddened crowd, along with the pounding of wood on wood, demanding their silence. They hushed one another, straining to listen as he prepared to make his delivery. He then paused and raised his hand, to seize their full attention. He could sense, almost smell their impatience. A faint smirk appeared on the corner of his mouth as he relished in their anticipation, knowing each hungry eye was scrutinising him.

They can wait, he thought.

More was yet to come...

His black, judgemental eyes slid towards her, devoid of emotion. She looked away, repelled by his lecherous stare—the same look he had given her when he came to her cell, on more than one occasion, to “discuss her situation”. She felt nauseated, recalling the stink of his ageing body, his clammy hands, and his musty odour; it still lingered on her skin.

“I will see to it, you get your reprieve,” he had mumbled in her ear, while stroking her face. Reminded of it, made her skin crawl.

But she knew he had lied. No—there was never going to be a reprieve. And, with no jury, he had appointed the service of a *Witch-Pricker*: a man, who, by the positioning of a pin or needle over a naked body, was said to be capable of finding the *Witch-mark*. The mark, itself, was believed to be permanent, created by the Devil, to seal the loyalty of his initiates. A raked claw-like scar, it was, also, considered a way of exposing Satan’s follower.

She was fully aware of the Witch-Pricker’s presence; he was the quiet one, standing beside the judge’s pew, tapping the instrument, in question, on his thigh, while staring at her.

Following the magistrates’ prompt, the Witch-Pricker—his preference, to remain nameless—

stepped out into full view. He was an unassuming looking man with a kind, round face and soft features—unusual for someone with such a sinister occupation. Well-dressed, clean, and unshaven, his whole poise exuded youth. His fair hair was thick and lengthy, and neatly tied back. His eyes were piercing blue, and seemed to have a “sympathetic” look about

them. As he moved across the stone floor, his stride long and defined, he discreetly surveyed the impatient crowd as their voices dropped into complete silence, watching him. Some, he’d been told, had never witnessed this event, before. He smirked; he would give them a performance they would never forget.

He then turned his attention to the accused, aware of her eyes boring into him, her face pale and stiff with fear.

As he approached her, she imagined she saw the twitch of a smile directed at her. But when he looked her straight in the eye, his true demeanour came to light, as his dead-pan stare cast its shadow of doom over her. It was written all over his face. Gone were the soft features, now replaced by ugliness and dishonesty. As he looked her up and down, regarding her pathetic state, he shook his head, sneering at her, making her feel utterly worthless.

Aware of all eyes watching him, he then leaned towards her... then closer. He sighed in her ear, releasing a subtle moan, before muttering, ‘I’m simply doing “God’s work”.’ The feathery touch of his lips against her skin sickened her.

The crowd shuffled, maintaining their silence as the Witch-Pricker circled around her like a predator. She swallowed as her eyes tried to follow his movements. Then, when he paused behind her, she tensed.

Looking to the bench, where the magistrate sat, pride of place, the Witch-Pricker waited calmly

for the order to commence. With a wave of his hand, the magistrate gave it.

He tugged at the stained, putrid gown she had been forced to wear, frowning as he fumbled to remove it, her bound hands making it difficult. She jolted, then tried to recoil, in a desperate bid to keep her dignity. Frustrated, his face hardened, throwing her a warning look. Realising her struggle was useless against the strength of his determination, she yielded.

With one final tug, he removed what was left of her self-esteem.

Gasps echoed through the crowd as she stood naked, for all to see. Feeling violated, she promptly lowered her tied hands, covering her modesty, while eyeing the torn garment he had flung to the ground, beside her. An uncomfortable silence followed as she stood isolated and exposed, with nothing to cover her, but her shame. Feeling the assault of her spectators' eyes, as they leered at her vulnerability, she kept a fixed stare on the stone floor and shivered, aware of its coldness as it crept up into her bare feet.

With a subtle, disdainful nod from her condemner, the Witch-Pricker circled her again—this time, more closely and methodically; it was obvious what he was searching for.

When he stopped abruptly, subtle gasps could be heard from some of the crowd, as they anticipated his next move. His eyes travelled up and down, narrowing, as he examined her torso. Then, gripping her arm, he swung her round. She almost stumbled. In dramatic fashion, he raised his other hand as high as he could, brandishing the dagger-like implement for all to see, its silver, highly polished and gleaming—scrupulously cleaned, from his last victim.

‘Behold!’ he cried out, in a theatrical manner. The crowd gasped, their voices a cacophony of fear and excitement. One thing was clear: he was the “performer” and *she* their “entertainment”. Then, in the same melodramatic way, he pointed the needle to her lower back.

She arched forward, feeling the cold pinch of its fine point, against her skin.

Voices mumbled as the crowd pushed forward, straining to see the small crescent-shaped mole. A sneering curl appeared on the corner of the Witch-Pricker's mouth; he would now be paid more for discovering it—for discovering *any* mark, for that matter.

Struggling under his strong grip, the girl shook her head frantically. "'Tis only a birth—'

'Proceed!'

On the judge's second command, the Witch-Pricker went to work. Holding her firmly, he stabbed her with the needle. She screamed out in agony. His audience shuffled, almost feeling

her discomfort, then stopped, when the judge rose from his seat.

'Well?!' he bellowed, leaning forward, waiting.

The Witch-Pricker, running his fingers over the wound turned and, with a slight of hand, pressed his thumb hard, covering it, to stem the blood flow. He then held the girl's arm up, for all to witness.

'No blood has been drawn, my Lord!'

More shouts of disbelief rang out across the "courtroom" at the revelation.

The young woman struggled against the Witch-Pricker's grip, her wrists burning and raw from the constant friction of the ropes.

'No! He's lying!' she screamed.

'Quiet!' roared the magistrate, still unable to resist letting his eyes travel over her nakedness.

She drew back, humiliated, her quivering breath visible like puffs of mist.

He coughed, clearing his throat. 'Continue!' he called out, lowering himself back into his velvet, cushioned chair.

Having subtly, and successfully, stemmed the blood flow from the puncture wound, the process was repeated, followed by her constant, whimpering cries for mercy. But no one cared. The humiliation of being stripped before an audience of familiar faces, and prodded like an animal, had made no difference to her appeal, despite her cries with each incision; after all, she had been the daughter of another, accused.

‘Once more, my Lord... no blood!’

As the spectators made their own deliberations, the With-Pricker and judge shared a suspicious look. The young woman noticed it; it had been a mutual one of understanding. She drew a sharp breath when it registered:

They’re plotting against me!

The judge smirked, nodding; it had been a tidy arrangement between him and the Witch- Pricker. The girl *had* to go; she had threatened to reveal his sordid, secret little visits to her cell. And, with a few years to retirement, he was not about to risk his position of authority; not to mention the privileges that went with it.

No, he thought. Not over that little whore!

With a dismissive gesture of the judge’s hand, the Witch-Pricker knew his job was done. As he turned to walk away, he stopped and looked down, seeing the tattered piece of clothing on the ground. He snatched it up and turned, staring down at the young woman with contempt. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he threw her garment of “death” at her frail body, and walked away. She welcomed its return.

A deathly silence spilled out over the “courtroom” for several moments, as the crowd watched the young woman, her hands shaking as she tried to cover herself. And, as she stood, her head

lowered in submission, the crowd grew increasingly restless again. They turned their attention to the magistrate, feeding on his hesitation.

Despite their frustration, the judge maintained his derisive gaze on her, prolonging the inevitable, waiting for his moment. He raised his head slowly, biding his time, until she looked at him, his wanton desire—to see the fear of death in her eyes... and he *would* see it.

Forced to obey his silent command, the young woman lifted her head, her eyes wide with terror. Behind her, the whispers had now turned to murmurs, gradually growing louder, with expectation.

The wait was over.

‘In the name of our good Queen, Mary,’ he began, loud and clear, ‘and, in accordance with the *Saóirse Act* of 1563, you have, hereby, been accused of consorting with the Devil; and indulging in all forms of sorcery associated with him. ’Tis the law of the land—one, may I add,

punishable by death... yet to be determined.’

The court erupted, whipping his audience into a frenzy of approval.

‘I’m innocent!’ she cried out, exasperated, trying desperately to be heard over the rapturous crowd.

The magistrate looked down at her, his expression cold and heartless, as she struggled against the two, willing volunteers gripping her firmly, with their hardened grubby hands.

‘What a waste!’ the younger of the them mumbled in her ear, his breath stale from the remnants of strong, peated whisky, still lingering in his mouth.

She flinched, feeling the tip of his wet tongue slide against her.

‘I see myself as reasonable man,’ her condemner said, drawing her attention to him, again. ‘Therefore, I have taken it upon myself to give you a choice—’ He stopped, reminded of another.

‘—or, perhaps, you would like to follow in your mother’s path?’

‘Aye, let her burn!’ a voice cried out.

Her eyes darted to the crowd, thinking she had recognised it, and caught a middle-aged woman cowering away, avoiding recognition.

The judge raised his brow. ‘Well, it appears *they* have decided for you.’

The young woman, reminded of her mother’s harrowing death, shook her head wildly, recalling her agonising cries; the memory of the flames engulfing her; the stench of her burning flesh. They would be forever ingrained in her mind; she needed no reminding.

‘No!’ she screamed, lifting her voice, above them. ‘You’ll not do to me, what you did to *her*.’

The judge recoiled in his seat of council, taken back by her sudden backlash. ‘So, you wish to avoid the *stake*?’

‘You *know* I am—’

‘So be it!’ he promptly interrupted, fearing she would “talk”.

The crowd suddenly hushed, exchanging words of anger and confusion. Had he gone mad? Was he going to let her go, denying them more “entertainment”?

The young woman took a sharp breath and stared at him, with a flicker of hope in her eyes. *Am I to have my reprieve?* she thought. But then she saw it: the contemptuous smirk, appearing on his face.

Slowly he shook his head, as though he knew what she had been thinking. He had been toying with her all along.

I should have said something. I should have—

Again, the crowd cheered, severing her thoughts. Some even laughed, amused by his attempt to

humour them.

The outcome was now inevitable, regardless of her pleas.

‘You’re going to—’ She stopped short. ‘Oh my—’

‘Bring the prisoner closer!’

‘I have done nothing wrong!’ she yelled, fuelled by her rising, inner strength. ‘My only “crime” is one of mercy—for helping the sick of this’—she paused, gritting her teeth— ‘deceitful village. Yet in return, I am rewarded with lies and treachery. I’m innocent! Do you hear me, sir?! Innocent! I won’t let you—’

‘Enough!’ he interrupted, slamming down the gavel on the sound-block, silencing her. ‘Remove the Witch!’

She gasped, horrified. *Witch!* The demonic word echoed in her mind, making her blood run cold. She had been *branded*; her new title to be etched in their memory, for the rest of their lives. And, should she be worthy of a headstone, it would be carved for future generations to presume:

“Witch. Guilty! Damned for all eternity.”

Despite her continuous appeals, they went unheard. Now who would listen to the supplications of a condemned *Witch*? No-one. With her sentence finally handed down, her spectators turned their eager faces away, now interested in the fate of the next unfortunate victim: on-going accusations of alleged sorcery meant that, they, too, stood no chance against the irrational mind-set and ignorance of their neighbours—especially when death waited in the wings.

As she was hauled away to her tiny, dank cell, screaming her innocence, the younger of the two gaolers whispered taunts of salacious acts in her ear. Repulsed by the thought of his intimation,

she stopped and turned her head, and leaned towards him, her eyes stabbing him with hate, forcing him to recoil.

‘I will remember *you*, in death,’ she quietly vowed, through gritted teeth.

He backed away. ‘Stay away from me, Witch!’

His accomplice threw his head back and laughed, displaying his stained, rotting teeth—half of them missing.

‘She’s put a curse upon me!’ he retorted, glaring at his senior for mocking him.

‘Do ye not know, laddie?’ his colleague jeered, throwing open the cell door. ‘Ye should never scorn the condemned.’ He leaned towards him, lowering his voice in a foreboding tone. ‘For they’ll come back to haunt ye.’ He laughed out loud, then his face suddenly dropped, as he turned to the girl.

She winced as he removed the rope from her burning wrists.

‘Away with ye, lass!’ he said, shoving her into her tiny prison.

Stunned, she stood with her back to the door, then jolted as it was slammed behind her. She closed her eyes tightly on hearing the key being turned, its grinding sound marking the moment her fate had been sealed, without reprieve.

‘Ye called her *lass*!’ she heard the younger say, over the echo of their departing footsteps.

Their voices continued to reverberate throughout the gaol, as they made their way to the next hearing, their tone brightening.

‘Och! Sure, ’tis all the same to me, lad, “Lass” “Lassie” “Witch”, as long as I get paid me *Testoon*. Aye, ’tis all the same.’

‘Aye, too true,’ said the other.

‘Anyway, lad, just a couple more, then I’m off to have me a wee dram, or two. Will ye join me?’

‘Aye? I will, ta. Och! What say we...’

As their voices faded, leaving her behind in her torment, she slumped to the freezing stone floor. Hands grasping her legs, she stared at it, shivering and in pain, until a stream of sunlight distracted her, filtering through the bars of the small window, high above her. She looked up, its pale, yellow light enticing her. Slowly rising, she groaned, aching, then reached up—the tips of her long, thin fingers touching it, feeling its warmth, giving her some solace.

She then looked sharp and turned—the distant faint sounds finding their way to her cell: the hammering of the magistrate’s gavel calling for “order” as the hungry crowd cried out for the next poor unfortunate souls’ judgement. She listened, pitying them.

When the noise ceased, she turned again, looking up at the window. But the sun had dipped, taking with it its comforting light, plunging her into a grey, depressing mood as the tiny cell began to close in on her.

With nothing but time and her thoughts to keep her company, she took herself to the coarse, woollen blanket—the pathetic excuse for a bed—and lay down, its rough fabric irritating her sensitive skin. She tried to avoid scratching, but it persisted. As she attempted to ease the itch,

she looked down, noticing the new, dark stains on her tattered garment; the blood from the incisions had finally seeped through. *What does it matter, now?* she thought. She curled up, nestling her head on her hands, clasping them together as a make-shift pillow. She glanced over at the water bucket, too tired to contemplate dragging herself to it, to quench her thirst; besides, it was likely they had not changed it. Next to it, a dish had been left out with food—no doubt, unfit to eat. The mice were welcomed to it.

The tears began to flow, when her mother's cries returned to plague her. She recalled being forced to watch the excruciating pain being inflicted on the innocent woman. And her "crime"? Her occupation: Herb-wife.

Their natural remedies—*Trade Secrets*—had been passed down through their family and used to help the sick—simple yet effective formulas to cure common ailments.

Life had been good to them, until a sudden misadventure. Through no fault of her own, her mother became embroiled in an incident: accused of the death of a young child—eventually leading to her wrongful incarceration.

Before that, they had relied on one another, since her father's death, when she was a child. The guilt had never left her after he had given his life, trying to save her from the Loch—and now it seemed it would finally have its way with her. She shook her head at the irony of it.

If only you had survived, she thought, imagining he could hear her. *Then, perhaps, we would still be... if only...*

They had survived on her mother's skill of making ointments and healing lotions, extracted from the forest's wild plants and herbs. Her mother taught her all she knew and, it was clear from a young age, she, too, had inherited the "gift".

Many from the Burgh came seeking their help, and those who were treated welcomed a swift recovery. But rumours had begun to spread of the "gifted woman", leading to false accusations of sorcery; and accusations made by some of the "Godly folk", whom she had treated successfully.

From then on, the mere sight of her mother gradually sent fear into the local community: to be associated with a "Witch" would render them as her accomplices. They soon learned quickly;

by denying all association, their betrayal would assure their evasion of death.

The young woman now knew what awaited her. It was becoming a “popular method”, according to her condemner: tied to a wooden seat—at the end of a large wooden plank—she would be taunted at, while left suspended above the Loch’s icy waters. And should she survive, it would mean, the waters associated with baptism would have rejected the *Tool of Satan*.

A Monarch had once claimed: “Water is so pure an element, it repels the guilty.”

It was almost laughable. And, even if she did survive, there was the possibility they would *still* burn her. Regardless of it, both methods of torture were used for one thing—and one thing only: to elicit a hopeless confession.

“The proof of innocence is survival!” *they* had also proclaimed.

‘*Then I must try,*’ she whispered to herself, in the confines of her prison. ‘*I must survive!*’

Convincing herself she would be liberated from her retribution, she repeated her words, to the point of near madness. *I must survive! I must survive! I must...*

Soon, tiredness and hunger took their toll, taking her into a deep and troubled sleep.



Two long weeks of endurance dragged her to her day of reckoning.

When her gaolers returned, she shrank into a corner, hearing the approach of their eager footsteps. One of them was whistling an old, sprightly tune—the older one, no doubt. The door flew open. A momentary silence passed between them, as they regarded her pitiful state.

‘Not so appealing now,’ the younger remarked, running his hand under his nose, before

wiping it on his mud-stained breeches.

Her hazel eyes, once brimming with life, glared at him through their deadness. He stepped back, disturbed by her vacant stare.

The older one, rolling his eyes, shuffled towards her. He had something in his hand, and was smiling.

‘Right ye are, lass!’ he said, beckoning her with his deformed finger—the thick stump clearly visible where its tip use to be. He held out the item to her, ignoring her stare; he’d seen it all before: that deadpan look on their corpse-like features, before the execution. ‘Put that on!’ he said, still smiling. ‘His Lordship wants ye looking bonnie.’

For one sweet moment, fooled by his light-hearted tone, she eagerly snatched the clean, white smock, daring to believe in her absolution, and put it on—covering the stained, tattered piece of cloth she had worn, since her trial. Perhaps the judge had changed his mind, after all. But her hopes were quickly dashed, when the younger one stepped out from behind his senior, toying with an object in his hand. She stared at the thick rope, then slowly looked up at him, crushed and resentful.

He hesitated.

‘Step lively, lad! She won’t bite!’

But he was reluctant to touch her, recalling her sinister words as she glared at him:

“I will remember you, in death.”

‘Give it here!’ the other insisted, growing frustrated. His rough hands wrenched her forward as he tied the rope around her tiny wrists, aggravating the red marks, where they had almost healed.

It was only then she noticed how thin and pale she had become. Her long, dark hair fell limp about her face, its lustrous sheen, long gone. She swallowed hard, fighting back the tears.

I must be strong! she told herself, staring up at him, silently pleading innocence with her despairing eyes.

Her gaoler paused and looked at her, his face now emotionless, bringing with it the realisation of her imminent fate.

‘Time to die, Witch!’