

THE
COFFIN
PATH

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1674
Spring

Chapter 1

I was born with blood on my hands.

I killed my mother on the 22nd of August, in the year 1642, the day the first King Charles turned traitor and chose a battlefield over a throne. She was not murdered by musket shot or slaughtered by steel blade, as were so many during those years of war. Hers was a woman's fate. She died in blood – the blood that bore me in on its tide.

At least, that's what I was told.

I've had blood on my hands ever since. I'm elbow-deep in a thick, viscous caul of it. Though I've never sweated and screamed in my own childbed, I know life and death better than most women. And now, as ever, I'm mindful of my mother. It happens every time I birth a lamb – the weighted pause before the newborn's first breath, like a clock's final turning before the hour's strike, and I always think the same thing: how the moment of birth, of new life, so often means the death of something else.

Such maudlin thoughts are natural in the cold, lonely months when days are icicle-bright and nights are heavy with peat smoke and shadows. But the February chill has lessened lately, the sky become cloud-laden, mist-thick, and the first lamb is a sure sign that spring will soon follow. It should be a moment of celebration, of gratitude and thanks, for the closing of one season and the

beginning of the next – we have survived another winter – but sight of the first suckling always reminds me of the mother I never knew, the father who was left to grieve, and the debt I owe to both. With every spring, and every lamb, I have a chance, once again, to make it right.

Up on the moor, the snow is still knee-deep and sheep huddle under peat hags. Down on the valley slopes, where this one has wandered alone, just the drifts are left. The ewe has found herself a bare hollow sheltered from the wind, against the wall of an abandoned fold, and is butting up against the stone, pawing the frozen earth.

Ignoring the familiar twist inside – my guts telling me I won't like what I find – I scramble down the steep fell towards her, scattering stones, my dog, Bracken, at my heels.

This place was someone's home once: a one-roomed cottage slowly crumbling to ruin, doors and shutters long since stolen for fuel, mist winding about the chimney in place of smoke, a dank tomb smell of lichened stone, the sheepfold now a stretch of tumbledown dry-wall. Ragged crows eye me from the naked branches of a wind-twisted willow.

Urging Bracken to keep her distance, I move slowly towards the ewe. She's unsteady, stumbling away from me, front legs buckling. I'd know her as one of my own even without the smudge of last summer's tar mark on her fleece. She's young, tupp'd for the first time last autumn. She should have at least two weeks until her time, but Nature has other ideas.

I call Bracken forward and she creeps into position, head low, clever, keen eyes fixed on the sheep. The ewe grumbles, panting hard as her flanks contract. She tries to move away but careers into the wall, off balance, and stands a moment, stunned, confused. I take my chance, hook her with my crook and pull her into the corner of the fold. She struggles and complains, but she's tired, lacking strength to fight.

Her hind legs are bloodied, already blackened and stiff. There's no sign of her water – it's long been broken – but her backside is red and badly swollen. One small hoof protrudes from a seeping, sore hole. The poor creature grumbles again, loins quivering as she pushes, but instead of the double legs I hope to see, the single hoof doesn't shift.

I send a curse to the clouds. I'm too far from home to go for help, and Ambrose will be indoors by now, waiting for his supper, while Dority stirs the pot and bounces the baby on her hip.

There's a sudden cacophony as the crows rise from their watch post in a flurry of jagged wings and midnight-black feathers. Bracken barks. High above, a lone merlin circles, silent, waiting. She can smell death on the wind; at this time of year, even bad meat is better than none.

The ewe rolls her amber eye to mine and makes a mournful whicker. She doesn't struggle as I hopple her front legs with a length of twine, tug her ankles and shoulder her onto one side. I run my hands over her belly. She kicks her tethered feet without conviction. The flock tends to lamb by noon, before their shadows grow short, but that hour is long gone: this lamb must be stuck, or maybe worse. I must get it out or lose them both.

Hurrying now, I strip off my heavy coat and hat, for I cannot work so encumbered. The air snatches my breath. The freezing deep of winter may be passing but it's still bitter cold. I did not wear my stays today, preferring the ease and practicality of men's clothes for my work, and the sudden chill bites beneath the rough kersey of my shirt.

I roll up my sleeves and kneel at the ewe's back end. Lifting her tail, I see it's worse than I first thought. Instead of a clean, wet opening, she's torn and bleeding. Though I see no sign, I wonder if she's birthed another before this one. Perhaps she's injured herself in the struggle to be rid of the thing inside. There's still only a single hoof in view, no sign of a second and no sign of a head.

I grip the lamb's hoof in one hand and slide the fingers of the other inside the ewe. She makes a strangled complaint. My heart tightens. 'There now, girl, let's get this out of you.'

I push my knuckles inside, then more. Hot, shuddering muscle grips my wrist as she takes me in.

I feel it at my fingertips – the hard little bud of a second hoof – and slide inward to find the joint. It slips away so I push deeper, feeling for the slime-covered fleece and bone of the lamb's leg. Then I have it in my grasp. I try to draw it gently forward but feel it pull back – a sign the lamb is alive. My hope awakens. But if it's to come, I must help it. Left alone it will die and poison the mother too.

A fierce determination surfaces in me – the same I feel whenever I'm faced with Nature's fickle ways. I know it's wrong and I should accept God's will in all things, but when it comes to my flock I'll fight like a wildcat to make sure His will marries with my own.

I push further inside, up to my elbow, encased by slick heat. It's careful work, taking all my strength and concentration as the ewe grumbles and pants. At last I have two legs within my grasp but I cannot feel the head; the lamb is lying back to front, turned away from birth rather than towards it. I have to work fast; a lamb stuck like this will suffocate before it has a chance of first breath.

I push deep and hook the second leg, trying to bring it forward to meet the first so I can start to pull. But it's too much for the ewe. She strains against me, desperate to escape the thing that pains her. With no one to hold her still and no means of gaining better purchase, my arm is squeezed out. I'm splashed and smeared with scarlet. There's something horrid about the vibrant hue – this is not the clotted, viscid stuff of birth but the fresh blood of a rupture. There's something very wrong. I'm running out of time.

I've been here before, and from the first time to this last it's always the same – the struggle only makes me stubborn. If I cannot

save the ewe, I'll save her lamb; a bargain I make time and again with God.

I push my hand inside to find the hind legs once more. Flesh slides between fingers like ribbons, the sheep's channel a mess of meat. I grope blindly, no longer sure what I'm feeling. I swallow down rising panic as I feel the heartbeat pulse of blood against my hand. My arm is slick to the shoulder, shirtsleeve brightly streaked. It's not right – there is too much blood.

I find one hoof, and soon, a second. A quick check – I have the hind legs. There's no time to try to turn the lamb, so I grip both hooves and pull, gently at first and then a little harder until I feel it begin to slide.

The ewe has stopped straining and gives me no aid. She's voiceless as she fades. But I feel a faint twitch from the lamb. I hold life in my fist, so I tug harder and bring the legs out. The mother groans. I struggle to my feet, levering all my weight now, and pull as hard as I can. And the lamb is born at last, slithering forth, yellow as butter, slippery as a trout.

The animal is formed well enough, as I knew this ewe would bring, but there's no sign of breath. I have no straw or grass to rub it down, to hurry the life into its lungs, so I tear off my waistcoat and use that, ignoring the pinch of icy air. I wipe away the gore from its nose and mouth and dangle it, head down, swinging it gently back and forth, urging it to draw that first crucial breath. But the pale little body stays limp and airless.

Most often, a healthy ewe will turn about to find her young, licking it to life. Quickly, I use my knife to slice the tethers from the sheep's ankles but she just lies there, flanks heaving, exhausted and blank-eyed, nothing left to give. Bracken comes sniffing, nose to nose, but there's no response – the ewe no longer has the strength even for fear. I take the lamb to her head, hoping the scent will rouse her. Steam rises from the slick little body. The mother's nostrils quiver but her eyes are clouding: she cannot help me.

I push the lamb against her fleece and rub hard. I wrap the tiny thing in my waistcoat once again and do the same, sending both prayers and curses up to a God who likes to give with one hand and take away with the other. And at last the lamb splutters and shudders, struggles to open its eyes.

The mother lasts long enough to hear the first fragile cry of her newborn. She fixes me with those amber eyes and I see the moment that she gives up. She lays her head upon the grave-cold ground, ready to breathe her last.

There's nothing more I can do for her, out here, alone, with the dark gathering. I hate to leave her to the mercy of foxes and wild dogs. I hate to lose her, to admit defeat, but there's a chance for the lamb, if I can get it to warmth and milk soon enough. I'm less than half an hour from Scarcross Hall, where a fire burns in the kitchen and Agnes will heat the milk. I make the painful choice, as I always do.

I pull on my coat and hat, tighten my waistcoat around the small, quivering creature and cradle it against my chest, ignoring the feeble panting of the ewe. I'll send Ambrose with the cart to collect whatever is left of her in the morning. Calling Bracken to my side, I start out across the fell, making for higher ground. I hold the lamb tight for warmth, feeling it shiver, pressing its timid heartbeat against my own. I do not look back.

There's a fog gathering, sitting heavy on the hills, sinking into the valley. I know the paths across these moors like I know every stone and slate of Scarcross Hall, but when the fog comes down it's fast and unforgiving, and even us hefted ones can lose our way.

I first feel it as I crest the hill and join the old coffin path towards the crossroads. I sense it like a rabbit sensing a fox: there are eyes on me.

I'm used to all weathers and I know the tricks that Nature can play. I've scared myself at times, imagining spirits in the mist or

glimpsing marsh lights dancing on the moor at midnight. But those are nothing more than half-remembered fantasies of a child with a head full of goblins and fairies, put there by a God-fearing father with a dread of the Devil's creatures. I'm not one for superstition and scaremongering and I've never before felt truly afraid.

This is different: there is a threat in it.

My hackles rise. I'm a field mouse sensing the hawk, my pursuer invisible to me but every instinct telling me to run.

Bracken slinks to my side, ears flattened, growling low.

'What is it, girl?' I ask. 'What can you see?'

She stops, glances backwards, teeth bared, then darts ahead, as if to hurry me. I quicken my pace to catch up with her, trying to shake the feeling, concentrating on the creature now in my care, telling myself I'm hurrying for him. The lamb has fallen silent, eyes closed, panting quick, shallow breaths. I pull my coat tighter and whisper to him, telling him to stay with me, that I'm taking him to a warm, safe place where I'll give him the milk he needs.

With the fog comes the quiet, the weird, echoing closeness that hushes the birds and has any sane person hurrying to their hearthside. Bracken leads me on, her small brown body disappearing and reappearing through the gloom, like a wraith. Damp air seems to press at me, walls of fog reducing the wide expanse of the fell to little more than a few strides of uneven track. I've walked the coffin path my whole life, but without landmarks it's impossible to tell exactly where I am. I feel disoriented, trapped. The muffled silence is uncanny. I fix my eyes ahead, denying my own wild thoughts. Something compels me to run, heart thumping, making a drum beat in my ears. I begin a quick, stumbling gait that has me tripping over stones I should know are underfoot. Still I feel it, like a cold hand sliding down my back: someone or something is out there. I cannot help but look behind. I see nothing save the stark black statue of a winter-stripped tree. A wild dog, perhaps,

desperate and skeleton-starved? Or a beggar lost his way on the packhorse trails? I open my mouth to call out a greeting but something stops me and I'm suddenly convinced: whatever it is, I don't want to meet it.

At last the gables and chimneys of Scarcross Hall appear through the murk, the lantern burning at the casement a welcome beacon.

I hurry across the yard to the kitchen door and lift the catch.

Bracken pushes past me, skittering across stone flags towards her makeshift bed by the fire.

'Agnes!'

I hear the soft shuffle of indoor shoes in the buttery next door.

'Agnes, come quickly. I need warm milk and blankets.'

As I turn to shut the door, I see a figure standing at the gatepost.

It's indistinct, a shadow-shape, swathed in a winding sheet of fog.

Silent.

Still.

Watching.

For a moment I'm transfixed. A sense of recognition, of deep and ancient dread, wells in me. Then a bank of fog moves across the yard and when it clears the figure is gone. Imagination, I tell myself, a trick of the fading light. But as I shut the door, I make sure to turn the key.