



©2008 Jeanne Treat

About the author.....	3
A Hanging to Remember.....	4
Visions at the Dale.....	15
Recollections of a Spirit.....	19
Dark Birthright, the Prologue.....	23
Author's Note.....	29

## About the author...

Jeanne Treat was born and raised in Western New York, near the shores of the mighty Niagara. The great-granddaughter of a Native American medicine woman, she also has ancestry from Scotland, England, and France. To research her writings, she traveled to Scotland to visit castles, seaports, and stone circles, and talk to historians. To make it authentic, she investigated ancient earth-based spiritual traditions and healing arts.

She is the author of *Dark Birthright*, a historical fantasy that takes place in 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. It is the first book in a trilogy, to be followed soon by the sequel *Dark Lord*.

Visit her online at [www.darkbirthright.com](http://www.darkbirthright.com)

## A Hanging to Remember

Aberdeen Township, Northeast Scotland, July 1625

In the grassy hollow between Aberdeen's Castle Hill and neighboring Heading Hill, a gallows tree stood. The grief tree was as stately as any, its mighty branches and green leaves stretching in all directions.

The grim figure of the executioner rested the tall aerial ladder against the branch and climbed the ladder to the third rung. He threw the end of the rope over the gibbet limb, pulling it taut and testing it with his weight. He was concerned about the rope. It was new and unstretched, not the best for a hanging.

The dreadful apparatus of death threw a long shadow over the hollow, foretelling the agonizing drama that was to unfold.

It was a sultry afternoon, hot and oppressive. An immense crowd had gathered to watch, some complaining that the witch was only to get half her due. She should have been hanged until near dead and burned alive. A fair amount of whiskey flowed, and women grew silent as men joked about the reputation of the stunning young woman who was about to hang.

They looked forward to the gruesome event, which would be a welcome change in their dull life, even though many of them liked the woman well enough. The crowd tittered with nervous excitement, eager to see the witch hang.

A masked crier dressed in a black robe stood in front of the crowd and entertained them. With a flourish, he waved his hand and pointed at the kneeling figure of the condemned woman.

*“She has not long to meditate upon her fast approaching fate.*

*Such boldness, ah! No tongue can tell. She shows no fear of death or hell.*

*Soon enough her life will end and on a rope her body bend.*

*Her earthly life will be in vain; as she is doomed to fire and pain.*

*All wicked ones I now do tell to shun this road that leads to hell.*

*Or doomed ye are to hanged be upon a fatal gallows tree.”*

The crier bowed and the crowd cheered. Several young boys ran past the gallows tree, swearing and spitting upon the condemned woman.

\*\*\*

Elspeth tried to ignore the mob and the icy feeling that gripped her heart. Her life would end soon; they would hang her. It would be a mercy for they could torture her no more. She touched a painful wound on her cheek. Early that morning they branded her with a hot iron, reading scriptures to drown out her screams.

*Oh husband, she thought. Mother was right. I couldn't change their hearts. What will become of our little girl? She hung her head in despair. Tell me that ye wait for me beyond the veil.*

An old woman in the crowd brought forth a dark-haired child, barefoot and clothed in a dirty dress. She roughly set her before Elspeth.

“Say farewell to yer mother, child. Heed that ye dinna take her path, for ye will surely share her fate.”

The little girl trembled. She closed her eyes and hung her head, unwilling to look at her mother.

Elspeth felt a sharp pain in her chest. *How could they let my daughter see this?* she thought. *Damn them all for their cruelty!* Her mind raced as she struggled to stay focused on her daughter. She reached out and gently tipped the child's chin up.

"Look at me child."

Fiona MacPhee, not yet six years old, looked at her mother's face and smiled through tears of sorrow. Wordlessly, she reached out and covered the wound on Elspeth's cheek with the palm of her hand. Her fingers rested on her mother's temple.

Elspeth gasped as she felt the healing energy close the wound and lessen the pain. She grasped her daughter's hand and pressed it to her lips. "Not here, little one." she whispered. "There is great danger."

Fiona placed her hand on her mother's chest, blazing a path to Elspeth's mind. Her eyes grew wide as she sensed the ordeal that her mother had endured. She drew her breath in sharply.

Elspeth felt her daughter's pain. "Little one," she whispered, "I didn't want ye to know. Not all men are so cruel."

Tears rolled down the small girl's face.

Elspeth wiped a tear from her cheek. "I love ye child. May ye have a daughter as good and true as ye. Remember well what I taught ye."

"Get on with it," a man shouted. He stared at Elspeth as he held a rag to his bleeding lip. "Hang the damned hussy witch. It's a rotten shame that God-fearing people

are bothered with witches. Hang the witch and there will be less scrapping amongst us. Get on with it!"

The crowd grumbled in agreement. Some snickered as a young man threw a rotten turnip at the witch and her child.

\*\*\*

Fiona looked up at the gallows tree. The executioner was high on the ladder, tying the noose. He stared at her, raking his fingers across his throat. The child looked at her mother and felt her heart constrict. She wanted to touch Elspeth, to run her hands over her broken body and make it well again. "Momma?" she cried. "Ye won't let them?"

Elspeth rested her hands on her daughter's shoulders and looked into her golden eyes. "Hush, child. They must not hear us." She brushed her lips against the girl's forehead. "I regret that ye must see this," she whispered. "Dinna watch it, child. Ye canna change it. When my body drops, *shift* and run to the forest. *Shift*."

The executioner climbed down the ladder and walked over to Elspeth. He stood behind her, touching her shoulder. "It's time, lass. I can't hold them any longer."

Elspeth stiffened and held the child close. "I will always be with ye daughter, look for the signs." she whispered, her eyes glistening with tears. "Return to the forest where ye belong."

\*\*\*

The executioner pulled mother and child apart. Elspeth felt his firm hand under her arm lifting her; then leading her toward the tall aerial ladder. The sun was in her

eyes, sparing her the sight until the last moment. She nearly fainted as she saw the noose swinging.

He caught her as she stumbled. “Don’t go soft on me, lass. It will be over soon.”

Elsbeth straightened her back and walked alone to the ladder. He prodded her up to the third rung. The crowd jeered as the rope was set around her neck.

She gasped as the coils of the noose dropped onto her chest and tightened like the tentacles of a giant squid. She cried out as they tied her hands with a length of hemp, burning wrists that were swollen and abraded from torture. Elspeth looked down at her tied hands and shuddered as her body rebelled against its bindings. A bitter taste rose in her mouth, the taste of fear and impending death. She was weary from her long painful interrogation. Her body ached as she tried to force the memory of it from her mind.

They had not allowed her to sleep for three days while they questioned her. Binding her wrists, they suspended her and flogged her, demanding that she confess. Alone with her, a man ran his rough hands up her skirt and fondled her as a lover would. Standing before her, he grasped her hair with both hands and forced his tongue between her lips. Repulsed, she bit his lip nearly in two. He struck her face with the back of his hand and flogged her until she was senseless.

At night, they kept her awake in a witch’s bridle that pierced her mouth and tongue. She could barely swallow. On the third day, the Witch-Pricker was called. He applied the long needles searching for the spot that would condemn her as a witch. She pleaded for mercy but told them nothing, accused no one.

She felt the roughness of the noose around her neck. *I am so afraid*, she thought. *Help me that I might die quickly.*

Elspeth held her head up high and took a deep breath, staring directly at her accusers.

An old woman in the crowd gasped. “Look. She gives us the evil eye.”

The minister held up a bible. “The witch mocks us! Scriptures say that ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’... Must we burn her alive?”

“Nae, Reuben,” the old woman said, prodding the earth with a stick. “The witch’s fate has been decided. She’ll not be so bold when she drops.”

A farmer raised his staff in anger. “Aye, she’ll not look so bonny then. Since she came, my cattle have been cursed with fever. Hang the damned witch. She’ll no longer work her woe in this place.”

A young woman, heavy with child, stepped forward. Wringing her hands, she stood in front of the condemned woman, addressing the crowd. Fear was etched in her face. “Good people, I beseech ye. Elspeth has been our healer for many months. Last week, she attended the birth of Janet’s twins and set Tom Murray’s broken leg. If ye kill this woman, who will attend to the sick and deliver my child? This woman has hurt no one. I beg ye to consider what ye are doing.”

“Are ye not a God-fearing woman?” the minister cried. “When yer child is born, God will decide if it lives or dies; not this witch. Elspeth ye call her. Perhaps ye are a consort of hers. Shall we question ye too? Shall we hang ye upon the gallows tree when yer child is born?”

The young woman stepped back in fear. She instinctively grasped her belly, feeling the child kick. “Nay. I fear that the sun has affected me in my delicate condition.” She glanced at Elspeth, her eyes heavy with apology. She picked up her hat

from the ground and walked to the edge of the crowd, standing close to Fiona. “Forgive me, Elspeth.” she whispered, as tears filled her eyes. “I’ve not yer strength.” She glanced at the frightened child beside her. She wanted to comfort her, but didn’t dare touch her. “I am such a coward.”

The old woman spoke. “A healer she may be, but as she heals, she harms. She healed Mary Moore’s child with a tea made from a strange powder. Mary said that she burned a candle and said magical words. The child still lives, but Mary took ill with fits and died. Let justice be done for her sake.”

\*\*\*

Fiona looked at her mother. Never before had she seen her so broken. Her heart pounded in her ears. *Mother will not allow this to happen, she thought. Or it is a dream and I will wake in her arms?*

She watched her mother’s face for a sign that she would free herself, but found none. Their eyes met for a moment, and a single word formed on Elspeth’s lips “*Shift.*” Fiona covered her mouth with her hand and fought the urge to sob.

\*\*\*

The executioner stood on the ladder behind the condemned woman. The town constable stood by to make sure that the sentence was carried out. He scanned the crowd for any evidence of trouble, but found none. He lifted a finger, signaling to the executioner to begin.

The executioner pronounced the sentence. “Elspeth MacPhee, being accused of the detestable practice of witchcraft and sorcery, ye are condemned as a witch to die this day upon the gallows tree. This is according to the laws of the God-fearing people of

Aberdeen and the Crown of Scotland. As ye remain unrepentant before God and man, may God have mercy on yer soul.”

Elspeth felt his hand against her back and shuddered.

“I’m sorry, lass.” he whispered.

“Peace be with ye, brother,” she said.

He pushed Elspeth from the ladder, launching her body into the air. The branch dipped and the rope stretched so that her toes scraped lightly on the ground. Her neck did not break.

Elspeth felt the rope tighten against her throat, and struggled to get her hands free. The bindings held fast, and she thrashed in vain, kicking and twisting. She could feel her chest bursting as the air tried to explode from her lungs. Her tongue swelled up, and the blood pooled in her face. In desperation, she gasped for air, finding none. After a few minutes, her vision clouded with red and she felt herself slipping. She bit her lip, forcing her mind to focus.

She prayed. “Goddess, protect my daughter.”

A familiar voice, filled with love, answered her. “I will.”

Her body convulsed and the noose tightened. In her last moment of consciousness, blessed darkness surrounded her. As she floated towards a comforting light, she felt warmth as her bowels released for the last time.

\*\*\*

The struggling stopped. The crowd was silent as they noticed a slight quivering of the body’s hands, and a straightening of the lower limbs.

The pregnant woman pressed a hand to her heart and looked away from the gallows, feeling the loss of her friend. She glanced at the orphaned child at her side and wondered. “Where is God?” she whispered in desperation. “Where is God now?”

Elsbeth’s head was bent, almost touching her right shoulder. The rope creaked as her body swayed and turned, like a stone on a string.

The executioner held two fingers under her chin to feel for a pulse, and pronounced the word. “Dead. The sentence has been carried out.”

The crowd was restless. The cruelty of the moment excited great horror among them. A pitiful wail pierced the air.

\*\*\*

Fiona ran to the body and kneeled. “Momma ! It can’t be. Oh please, cut her down. Momma!”

A man in the crowd turned on her. “What of the witch’s bastard child? She’s the seed of the devil himself!” He picked up a length of rope and faced the crowd. “Finish the job. Dunk her in the pool to see if she floats!” This was met with a roar of agreement.

Fiona looked around in confusion at the hostile faces. She remembered what her mother said and drew up the earth’s energy, focusing her grief until her body trembled. Fiona took a deep breath, stamping her foot on the parched ground, and set her intention to *shift*.

Her blood bubbled in hot flashes, rushing in her ears, causing her heart to pound like a great drum. She felt her flesh and bones melting, reforming, becoming something else, as the fragility of her humanity fell away.

Her mouth and nose and jaw stretched forward. Her eyes moved apart and back in her skull. Ears pointed and flattened, her nose wrinkled, and her lips curled back in a snarl. Fiona looked down. Her hands were paws, her skin a silver gray pelt. She was losing control and she didn't care. Her clothing split, and she dropped to the ground on four furred legs.

Grief no longer overpowered her, although it remained as a distant thought. Her thinking became instinctual, wary, and protective.

The air around her filled with the acrid scent of musk, and the transformation was complete. Where the child had been, a gray wolf with golden eyes stood snarling, poised for an attack.

The old woman screamed. "The witch's child is a shape shifter! We are doomed." She hurriedly made the sign of the cross and fled.

Mothers covered their children's eyes as they hurried them away from the gallows tree. The rest were struck dumb with fear. They stared in disbelief.

The wolf's heightened senses served her well. She tracked each movement in the crowd, no matter how slight; and traced the scents of stale tobacco, body odor, fear, and death. In the forest, the faintest hints of deer and rabbit and mouse tempted her. Some distance away, three ravens chattered, reminding her of the danger she faced.

The executioner raised a club to her head. "Be gone, witch's child!"

The wolf sniffed. This man was wrapped in the scent of the dead woman's final struggle. Instinctively, she charged him, biting his free hand. Two severed fingers dropped to the earth in a bloody mess.

The man clutched his mangled hand. “God help us. We have awakened the wrath of a shape shifter.”

The coppery taste of blood reminded the wolf of her intense hunger. She no longer felt grief or feared death. Her instincts told her that she desperately needed to hunt, chase, and kill.

As the crowd backed off, the wolf sniffed the body of the dead woman, memorized her scent, and lumbered off into the forest.

## Visions at the Dale

### Based on a True Story

It was the summer of 2004, an unusually hot and dry season in Western New York. I had been working hard on a project at work and it was time for a retreat at one of my favorite places, Lily Dale Assembly, a Spiritualist community situated on the banks of Lake Cassadaiga that was known for its psychic readers and happenings.

My friend Heather and her husband Mike joined me. He had recently lost his father to cancer and was hoping to contact him. We rented rooms in one of the quaint private guest homes and found ourselves among a group of spiritual insight training students led by a trained medium and Spiritualist minister named Candy.

The grounds of Lily Dale were breathtaking. There was lush vegetation, an old growth forest, the beauty of the lake, and charming 1940's style houses and cottages. Readings were available at the Forest Temple and Inspiration Stump, as well as a service in the Healing Temple. As we walked the grounds and took supper in the outdoor pagoda, we felt the energy of the place and wondered where this day would take us.

Night fell and we returned to our lodging. As the evening wore on, we talked with Candy's students Felicia and Lester and established a rapport. Soon, midnight was approaching and we were invited to join them for a trip to Leolyn Woods to visit Inspiration Stump in the dark.

What was the significance of the Stump, we wondered? Candy explained that it was the site of some of the most profound spiritual energy in all of Lily Dale. It was not

unusual for visitors to the Stump to experience a strong sense of heightened awareness, profound peace, and receive messages from the beyond. Were we interested? Of course!

Armed with a few flashlights, we headed towards Leolyn Woods. There were six of us; Candy, Felicia, Lester, Heather, Mike, and myself. We entered the forest with a sense of excitement, passed a spooky old pet cemetery, and found the Stump in a grove surrounded by magnificent old trees. Candy explained that in this place, mediums had been passing messages from Spirit to others since 1898. The Stump at one time had been a tree around which children had gathered and levitated. She led the group in some energy work and encouraged us to stand on the stump. One by one, we felt the pull towards the middle and the feeling of being in some kind of vortex.

Heather came down from the Stump and claimed that she felt a persistent tugging on her right sleeve, like someone was trying to get her attention. She was pretty freaked out by it, especially when she started to experience shifting in her peripheral vision on the left side.

Lester snapped Polaroid pictures off and on using a flash, even though it was dark.

Heather panicked and begged us to return to the guest house. On the way back, she was ice cold, even though it was a hot night. The number nine kept coming at her, and she told everyone so. Leaving Leolyn Woods, the shifting in her vision reoccurred and she turned to see a dark-haired boy who she thought to be nine, bare-chested and barefooted, wearing old fashioned dark brown and green checkered shorts, rather worn. She felt a dull aching pain in his left temple, and realized that he had a hurting wound there. Instinctively she knew that he woke up on the shore with that wound, only to see a

canoe flopping in the water. As we neared the guest house, she had a vision of him sitting in a canoe watching the back of another boy's head in front of him. He looked over his shoulder at the shoreline. At that point, she said that it was 'like his eyes were her eyes'. He scanned the shore and saw an old house with a shed attached and a three wheel tricycle, rather old fashioned looking. She experienced his panic as he heard choking behind him. The canoe was wooden, dark reddish-brown, and small, for two people only.

We went into the guest house and tried to get her to settle down. She turned and screamed, saying that she saw the child at the top of the stairs. He was speaking to her but his lips were not moving. Only his expressions were changing. He was repeating that the year is 48, and saying Ryan, Ryan, Ryan with a deep sadness. She couldn't tell if it was a last or first name or the name of the victim or friend. The last part of it came as a vision of a boy floating face down in the water, his red shirt like a bubble on top of the water. Her impression was that the boy was telling her that his friend drowned and relayed sadness and remorse. He was sorry for his part in it. Then he left her alone.

So, what can we make of this? Heather is not a trained medium or student, just a visitor to Lilydale who tagged along with this group. She did not invite this communication and wishes that it never happened. She says that John Edward can keep his job. Other people who went with her that night got impressions of the color red, deep sadness, and saw a point of light on her right sleeve at the Stump when she said that her sleeve was being tugged. The camera also captured this. They recorded her experience on paper as she was relaying it. We visited the museum the next morning and described her vision to the curators. We learned that over the years there had been many drownings on that lake, although this specific one wasn't recorded.

Years later, we still wonder what it was all about. Why would that spirit want to contact us and relay that heart wrenching confession? Could it be that a man who recently died needed to return to the scene and tell the real story? We checked with local newspapers and historical societies, but we never found an answer.

The spirit appears to be at rest.

## Recollections of a Spirit

### Scotland, 1746, the Battle of Culloden

It was a cold morning on April 16th, 1746. The sun had just risen. Duncan and I had traveled for days on horseback, to join the army of the Prince. We trusted that he could defeat the red soldiers as he had at Prestonpans.

Near Inverness, a French courier demanded our intentions and asked us to carry letters to Culloden House. Duncan took the letters, stored them in his plaid, and we continued on our way. His brothers met us at Inverness, telling us to fight with the Glengarry regiment, camped near Drumossie Moor. I took the letters and told him to join his brothers; that I would follow after I delivered them.

That was the last time that I saw him as a free man. I was taken at Inverness by the English and jailed. When it was determined that I carried letters in French, they beat me mercilessly, asking who they were for, and what their meaning was. I could not tell them. They kept me in irons in a cold cellar, without food or water. The beatings were relentless.

Word came that day that the Prince's army had been soundly defeated. Other prisoners joined me, many with mortal wounds, dying shortly thereafter. Men arrived with limbs hacked or bowels pierced. The stench of rotting flesh was overpowering. There was no word of my friend or his brothers. They kept us in a cellar, bound, with no food or water for that day and the next. No one tended our wounds or administered last words. Men cried piteously for water or death. Still, I held out hope.

On the morning of the third day, I learned that I was to be executed as a rebel. After sunrise, I would be flogged to death at the tree outside the jail. They'd sent for a lowlander from a nearby encampment, known for his brutality. Before sunrise, I was brought outside and made to sit on the cold ground to await my fate. I smelled wood fires and heard dogs barking, as red soldiers guarded me. Able-bodied prisoners were brought out to watch, but they wouldn't look at me. I knew it was my last day.

As a young man, I was no stranger to whippings. I did as I liked and risked the consequences. Father whipped me soundly with a strap many times. I played a game that I would not flinch or cry out, so he beat me until he was no longer angry. These were my thoughts as I waited, that it would not be worse than that.

The red soldiers allowed a man of the cloth to approach me to say the last words. It was cold and he wore a hood that obscured his face. As he knelt beside me and pushed back his hood, I saw that it was Duncan. By God's grace he had survived the battle. He touched my forehead and made the sign of the cross, saying the words we'd heard so many times. With tears in his eyes, he whispered that he couldn't save me, but would avenge my death with his last breath. I begged him not to watch it, but he would not leave me.

At sunrise the Lowlander arrived, a muscular man with eyes of steel. Soldiers pounded stakes into either side of an oak, removed my irons and shirt, and tied me to the tree with rope. It was cold but I was sweating, and my heart pounded like a drum. As blood rushed in my ears, I heard the sentence being read. A soldier gagged me, but the man removed it, saying that he needed to hear me. He took the 'cat' out of his bag and showed it to me. It was a whip of nine knotted strands, ending in sharp bits of metal.

In a voice that was cold and deliberate, he taunted me, calling me a rebel, a traitor, and an animal. I burned with humiliation and anger. All I wanted was to bear my punishment in silence and die like a man; but it wasn't to be. I held staunch for twenty strokes and faltered, my pride crumbling. I grunted, cursed, and gasped for breath as the leather tails blistered my back. May God forgive me, I cried like a child, and rubbed my wrists raw against the ropes.

He stopped after one-hundred strokes to drink. I was nearly unconscious, so they roused me with water. Before he began again, he taunted me. He'd wagered that I wouldn't last another fifty, and intended to finish me now. The man ran his rough fingers across the marks in my flesh, thrust his hand down the front of my kilt, and touched me as a lover would. In spite of my predicament, I was furious and spit into his face.

His eyes narrowed in anger. He began again, whipping me with a vengeance. Blood soaked my kilt, ran down my legs, and pooled in my boots. I could barely stand, and the cries that I made were not even human. I heard them call out one-forty.

Silently, I begged God to take my soul. I was cold and trembling, too weak to cry out. My body was dying but my mind was a raging storm. I held on to anger and refused to die. My inner voice cried, "I won't let go, I won't let go!"

Duncan's anguished thoughts broke through my inner turmoil. Eavan let go! Let go! Eavan let go! For God's sake let go! May God forgive me for not taking your place!

My mind calmed and my breathing slowed. A brilliant bubble formed before my eyes, translucent and full of light. I saw Mother looking out to sea for my brother, Grandfather whittling a walking stick, and young John struggling on his deathbed. The bubble enfolded me, and softly popped. I was pleasantly confused, convinced that they'd

stopped the execution. I stood among them in my best riding breeks, shirt, and plaid. It was lightly snowing but I was as warm as fresh bread. I flexed my shoulder muscles and gazed at my hands. My backside was whole and my wrists were healed.

The big man cleaned and oiled his whip and put it in his bag. He joked with the soldiers about the rebel bastard, and collected his wagers. Still I did not understand.

Duncan mounted his horse and rode towards me. I waved my hands. "Duncan. Over here! They let me go."

My friend stared through me to a place beyond, his face lined with grief. What did he see? I turned my head and saw the bloody shell of a body that was mine, and knew I was dead.

A young soldier thrust his bayonet into the body. "The rebel is gone! Let this be a lesson to all who oppose the King of England."

Duncan made the sign of the cross and rode off on his chestnut mare. I followed him out of town, where he dismounted and concealed his horse behind some trees. He sat on a log and waited, running his thumb along the blade of his dirk. Before long a rider appeared; the lowlander with eyes of steel. Dressed as a man of the cloth, my friend concealed his knife and bid him stop. As the man dismounted, Duncan seized him and cut his throat from ear to ear.

I watched this without emotion. It didn't matter. Mine was a world without pain and hunger, or domination by the English. Duncan would be along soon enough.

# Dark Birthright

## The Prologue

Northeast Sea Coast, Whinnyfold, Scotland, October 31, 1619



The midwife wrapped the child tightly, opened the door, and walked a path to the stone cottage where Jessie Hay lived. It was the last day of October and the wind from the sea was bitter cold.

Maggie had been a midwife for forty years, and never witnessed such brutality. No one knew the young woman who came on horseback, showing signs of labor. Her body was dark with bruises and rope burns marred her wrists. She gave birth, held her son tenderly, and whispered something in his ear. Then she bled to death.

Maggie's heart ached as she walked the stony path. How could a man beat his pregnant wife? A fierce wind blew the skirt about her legs, chilling her to the marrow. The small boy snuggled against her bosom, lifting her spirits. He was seeking a nipple, a good sign.

“Poor laddie,” she crooned. “What will I do with ye?” Maggie’s head throbbed as she considered the possibilities. The stranger never spoke her name, so it would be impossible to find her husband. Even if she could, would she want to? The man had beaten the lass nearly to death. He might blame her for the woman’s demise or accuse her of sorcery. Her inner voice insisted that the child live. She prayed for divine guidance. “Goddess, help me. Am I doing the right thing?”

The blanket was thick with the smells of birth, blood and mucous and the rose-like scent of newborn skin. It spoke of life. Her first idea seemed right. Close by, a fishwife named Jessie Hay nursed a newborn son. Perhaps she would have enough milk for this wee orphan.

She arrived at the woman’s door and hesitated. What would she say? Jessie was a good friend and fellow healer. For years she’d been childless, even called barren. It might please her to have two sons. Maggie knocked.

Jessie opened the door and the midwife entered. The cottage was dark, but for the glow of the hearth and a single candle. Jessie held baby Ian in her arms, stroking his red hair. She laid him in the cradle. “What have ye got there, friend?”

Maggie shifted her bundle and uncovered the lad’s face. “Poor child, he’s shivering.”

Jessie’s eyes widened. “Let me feed the fire.” She stoked the fire with a bundle of peat. “Whose child is this?”

Maggie took off her shawl and sat at the table, holding the precious bundle. She was weary to the bone. “Sit with me, lass.”

Jessie left the hearth and joined her.

The midwife stroked the child’s face. “His mother came on horseback, showing signs of labor. She was a lady.”

Jessie’s brow knotted. “How did ye know?”

“Her clothes and shoes were well made, of silks and fine leather.”

“Who was she?”

“I asked her name, but got no answer. The lass removed her ring and pressed it into my hand. Payment, I suppose. I put her to bed and made ready for the birth.”

Jessie leaned forward to get a glimpse of the baby. “The child looks good. What happened?”

Maggie’s throat tightened. “Her arms were dark with bruises where a man’s hands grabbed her. He’d taken a belt to her legs, leaving great welts. I wondered how she rode that horse.”

Jessie’s eyes widened. “What kind of devil would beat a woman with child?”

“That’s not all! I saw rope burns on her wrists; she must have struggled.”

“Poor lass. Did she say who did this?”

Maggie frowned. “Nay. She wouldn’t tell and she didn’t cry out, though the birth was hard. I would have thought her dumb if she hadn’t spoken to the child.”

“What did she say?”

“She held him so tenderly and whispered in his ear.” Her voice cracked with emotion. “Oh dear.”

“Please friend. What did she say?”

“Poor little one, yer father must never find ye.”

Jessie shuddered. “Mercy! What happened to her?”

Maggie glanced at the blood under her fingernails. “She’s dead. The afterbirth came and the bleedin’ wouldn’t stop. There was nothing I could do.”

They were silent for a moment.

Maggie searched her eyes. “Take this child. I’ll swear he’s yer own.”

Jessie bit her lower lip gently. “Let me see him.”

They placed the infant on the table and uncovered him. The wee lad shivered as they counted fingers and toes and admired his black curls. He was perfect but for a birthmark on his shoulder that looked like the head of a stag. He fussed as they wrapped him, sucking his lower lip fiercely. Jessie picked him up and responded to his search for a nipple, nursing him until he fell asleep. When she put him in the cradle, the children stirred and touched each other.

Jessie smiled. "Two sons. My husband will be pleased." She touched the lad's cheek. "Wee stranger. We'll name ye Dughall, after my own dear father."

The midwife was relieved. "Bless ye, lass." "Maggie, can ye tell the child's fortune?"

"Born on the day of the dead. This child will have the Sight."

"You said that about my son Ian."

"Aye."

Jessie frowned. "I must know the truth, and don't tell my husband. You know how he feels about the old religion."

The old midwife hesitated. Did she dare tell a fortune? Her body was weary, and her emotions were raw.

"Please, friend. I must know if we're to keep him."

Maggie took a breath. She touched the lad gently between the eyes, until her mind filled with a vision of another time. Two men rode horses along a dry riverbed. She reached out with her other hand and touched Ian between the eyes. "This is not the first time these two souls have been together."

"Tell me, Maggie."

"Wait, lass." She closed her eyes. "They were brothers during a time of death and destruction. I feel love and admiration, and something else." Maggie saw a vision of what

had been, and touched Ian's crown. *Will ye stand by him this time, or let him die?* Pain and regret flooded her senses, and she pulled her hand back suddenly.

Jessie was startled. "What do ye see friend? What shall this child bring?"

The midwife hid her true feelings. "Sweet lass, he will bring ye luck." Maggie pulled on her wrap and left the cottage, tears falling on her cheeks. She would tell no one. Her mother had been hanged a witch for less.

Author's note:

Dark Birthright was first released as this short story. It was later developed into an illustrated novel of the same name. For more information on the book, visit [www.darkbirthright.com](http://www.darkbirthright.com)