

ENGLISH • CHAPTER 1 LEAD MAGNET

A Knight to Remember

A Medieval Time Travel Romance

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Through Lightning and Blood

The transition came not with sound, but with an excruciating tearing sensation behind Clara's retinas, followed instantly by the violent slap of wet earth against her palms. A fraction of a second earlier, she had been stepping through the service corridor of Northwestern Memorial Hospital while thunder vibrated through the reinforced glass of the fourth floor; now, the sterile scent of isopropyl alcohol and heated circuitry was obliterated by the stench of scorched peat, ancient loam, and ozone. She gasped, her throat burning as rain sheeted across her neck. Overhead, a colossal split oak smoldered against an iron-colored sky, its splintered heart smoking from a direct lightning strike. Surrounding the perimeter, massive granite monoliths stood like silent sentinels among the tangled briars, their damp faces carved with geometric grooves that seemed to hum beneath the downpour.

Clara pushed herself upright on shaking knees, fighting the sudden nausea of disorientation. She was wearing her jade-green scrub tunic and matching drawstring trousers, the thin cotton-polyester fabric instantly soaking through in the autumn gale. Raising her left forearm, she tapped the cracked crystal face of her black resin digital watch. The screen flickered, displaying an active battery gauge resting at ninety-eight percent, yet the time display blinked erratically, unable to locate a signal. This was no Chicago park, nor was it any storm she had ever charted. The trees were unnaturally colossal, their boughs heavy with moss that hung like damp shroud-cloth over the forest verge. Before panic could unseat her training, a low, wet gurgle cut through the steady drumming of the rain, coming from the shadowed brush scarcely twenty paces away.

Adrenaline sharpened her senses, instantly suppressing the vertigo. Clara moved forward on instinct, navigating slick roots and jagged limestone outcroppings until she broke through a thicket of hazel brush into a trampled clearing. Two men lay motionless in the mud, their bodies clad in stained leather jerkins and coarse wool, their limbs twisted at unnatural angles beside notched iron axes. Outlaws, felled only moments prior. But between the roots of a sprawling elder tree sat a third figure: a boy of no more than seventeen, his woolen tunic soaked in a terrifying expanse of bright arterial scarlet. A jagged iron spearhead lay discarded in the grass beside him, and with every ragged heave of his chest, blood pulsed in rhythmic, mortal jets from a deep laceration high on his inner right thigh.

Hypovolemic shock was already settling into the youth's features; his skin possessed the waxy, grey pallor Clara had seen in a hundred trauma bays, his pupils wide and searching beneath wet bangs of straw-colored hair. His femoral artery was severed or deeply nicked. Without intervention, he had perhaps two minutes before cardiac arrest took him. Dropping hard onto her knees in the mud, Clara shoved back the sleeves of her damp tunic. From the right thigh pocket of her scrubs, she drew her utility shears, the seven-inch fluoride-coated stainless-steel blades gleaming dull black against the grey sky. She did not possess a modern sterile drape, irrigation saline, or an electrosurgical unit, but she possessed anatomical certainty and two hands trained to steady themselves amid chaos.

"Keep your eyes on the branches, kid," Clara said, her voice dropping into the low, unflinching cadence of the operating theater. She used the blunt tip of the shears to slice cleanly through his stiff, wool breeches, stripping the drenched fabric away from the groin in two rapid motions. The wound was jagged, three inches deep, weeping bright blood into the slurry of rainwater and soil. Working with practiced economy, she stripped the clean cotton drawstring from the inner hem of her scrub top, wrapping it four inches proximal to the wound over a rolled section of clean inner hem to form an impromptu combat-style tourniquet. She twisted the binding with the rigid handle of her shears, cinching down until the arterial fountain sputtered, slowed, and finally arrested into a sluggish venous ooze.

The boy let out a choked cry, his fingernails clawing into the mossy earth as pain broke through his stupor. Clara leaned her entire upper body weight into the junction, planting the heel of her palm directly over the femoral triangle to maintain firm mechanical hemostasis. The surgical scar on her right wrist pulled taut under the strain. She felt the boy's thready pulse beneath her fingers, erratic but present. "Breathe through your nose," she commanded softly, watching his chest rise and fall. "The bleeding has stopped. You are not dying today."

The crash of heavy timber shattered the forest silence before her words could settle. From the northern path, a massive warhorse burst through the canopy at a controlled gallop, iron-shod hooves throwing divots of wet turf. The stallion was a colossal Friesian, coal-black and broad-chested, its flared nostrils steaming in the chilled woodland air. Atop the beast sat a warrior clad in iron mail and dark boiled leather, rain running in rivets down the fluted steel of his vambraces. His broad shoulders were squared in lethal readiness, and as he hauled back on the leather reins, the steel blade of a long broadsword cleared its scabbard with a sharp, metallic rasp. The pommel of the weapon bore the sculpted visage of a snarling silver wolf.

The knight dismounted in a single, fluid descent, his heavy boots sinking into the peat without a stumble. He was imposing, standing fully six feet and two inches tall, his dark sable hair plastered by rain against his temple, curling at the nape of his neck. His slate-grey eyes took in the scene with icy appraisal: the dead brigands, the fallen boy, and Clara, an incomprehensible woman in green garments knelt over his squire with a strange, dark instrument clenched in her mud-spattered hand. The point of his broadsword leveled instantly at Clara's throat, hovering bare inches from her collarbone.

"Stand away from him," the knight ordered, his voice deep, gravelly, and rigid with cold authority. The cadence was archaic, thick with northern Anglo-Norman vowels, yet entirely unmistakable in its deadly intent. "Release the lad or you lose the hand that holds him."

Clara did not flinch, nor did she shift her weight an inch from the boy's groin. She tilted her chin upward, her hazel eyes locking directly onto his stormy gaze, refusing to yield the ground beneath her palms. "If I lift my hands, this boy's femoral artery reopens, and he bleeds out into this dirt in sixty seconds. Lower the sword and help me hold this pressure, or your squire dies while you threaten the only person keeping him alive."

A flicker of astonishment passed across the knight's stern features, quickly shuttered behind a mask of martial vigilance. He lowered the blade slightly, his gaze dropping to the youth's face, then to the tourniquet binding the boy's thigh. The bleeding had indeed ceased; the horrific tide that usually claimed men within minutes on the field was held back by the woman's strange, deliberate posture. The knight knelt beside her, his mail links whispering against his brigandine. Even kneeling, his broad chest and iron frame cast a long, protective shadow over the damp ground. He placed a calloused, leather-gloved hand near Clara's wrists, his fingers rigid with restraint.

"He was ambushed while riding vanguard," the knight said quietly, his tone formal and measured, though his jaw muscles worked beneath his close-trimmed dark beard. "You have stayed the wound. By what craft does a woman halt the blood of an open vein?"

"Basic trauma surgery," Clara replied crisply, her breath misting between them as the cold began to penetrate her damp scrubs. "Direct arterial occlusion and mechanical pressure. He has lost at least two pints, his core temperature is dropping, and if we leave him in this rain, sepsis or exposure will finish what the spear started. Does he have a name?"

“Perrin,” the knight answered, his slate eyes searching Clara’s face with intense, guarded scrutiny. He noted the fine, inexplicable weave of her green tunic, the unadorned strength of her jaw, and the strange black artifact strapped to her left wrist. There was no terror in her demeanor, only the stern, uncompromising authority of a seasoned field commander. “He is pledged to my house. I am Sir Nicholas, Lord Protector of Ashwood. And you, mistress, are far from any known road in a dress no Christian maid has ever worn.”

“I am Dr. Clara Vance,” she stated firmly, keeping her hands locked over Perrin’s leg while Nicholas reached down to carefully relieve her pressure with his own gloved palm, mimicking her technique with soldierly precision. When his fingers replaced hers, their skin brushed briefly, a shock of human warmth against the biting October dampness. Clara exhaled, rotating her cramped shoulders as she took in the towering trees, the ancient standing stones brooding on the distant ridge, and the undeniable reality that Chicago was nowhere within reach of this century.

Nicholas looked up toward the darkening verge, where the mist was rising off the fern-choked hollows like white smoke. The outlaws were dead, but their kin might still be prowling the borders, and the sight of an otherworldly woman working apparent miracles over a dying squire would ignite a firestorm of superstitious fury within his own garrison. His gaze shifted back to Clara, solemn and inscrutable, weighted with unspoken questions that the gathering storm would not permit him to ask.

“We cannot remain within these woods, Dr. Vance,” Nicholas said, the strange title foreign on his tongue as he stood, his broad frame cutting off the biting north wind. He unclasped the heavy, coarse wool traveling mantle from his own saddle horn and turned toward her with measured purpose. “My keep lies three miles south across the valley. If Perrin is to live, we ride now, and your strange attire must not be seen by superstitious eyes.”

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