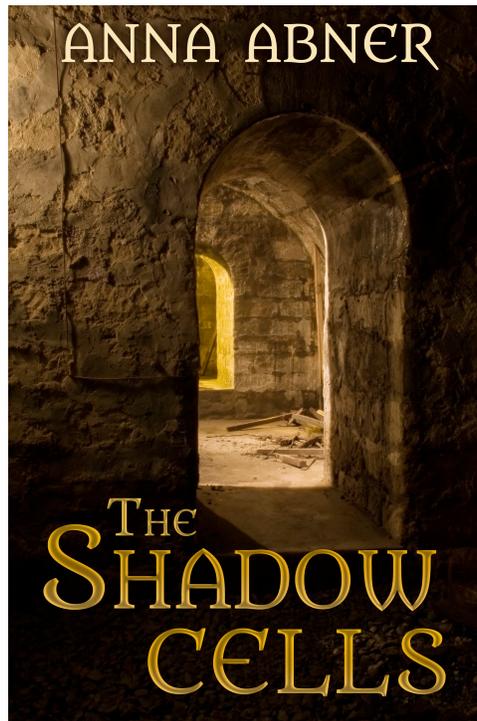


## The Shadow Cells

Written by Anna Abner  
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### I

“Foolish child.” Prince Tyson Tamb ducked the savage swing of a Brighton farmer’s axe, his mind on his sister and not fully on the battle at hand, which was the only reason the untrained plowman drew blood on his left shoulder. “Silly, impetuous, empty-headed *child*.” Ty pivoted and attacked the other man, his long sword cutting deep into his chest. Writhing, the farmer collapsed, choking on his own blood.

And his little sister Rainey was out there somewhere, as if a battlefield were a playground.

The bloody conflict had dragged on for days between his father's hired soldiers — who fought bravely for their Red King, Leonid of Tamb — and their neighbors, the witch queen Meredith of Brighton's farmers. Once allies, they had become fierce foes. Ty's father had accused the Brightons of stealing Tamb land; the Tambs were suspected of abducting a Brighton family royal. As if the Tamb family wanted anything to do with a cousin of the queen's.

Ty had planned to stay out of the fight. Until his little sister ran off into the thick of it.

On the field, each army fought like demons for the right to live in peace on their own lands. The Tambs wore red to match their hair. The Brightons looked like thunderclouds advancing, in ebony blouses and whipping black hair.

Rainey wasn't safe among them.

She was tall for her ten years on earth, flat-chested and long-limbed, but she would never blend in among the countless grubby-faced boys and men battling with swords and clubs. She was too pretty. Her hair too red. Worse, her weapon of choice was a knife with a ten-inch, polished blade given to her by their father, the king. Hardly a weapon at all.

Ty ran over dry, beaten grass and around the scattered bodies of the slain, avoiding swinging swords and booted heels. Never had he been so ferocious as his long sword slashed through the air. A fist glanced off his shoulder, irritating his wounded side, and he cursed loudly.

And then he spotted her. *Rainey.*

He would know her anywhere, even dressed in boys' clothing and waving her blade like a paintbrush.

But she didn't wave it needlessly.

A Brighton man advanced upon her.

Rainey's costume obviously didn't fool him. Even from a distance Ty recognized rage and lust in the man's expression.

Tyson ran, brittle summer grass crunching under his boots, praying he'd get there before that Brighton jackass laid a finger on his little sister.

But he wasn't fast enough.

The man body-slammed Rainey to the ground, his brutal intentions clear. Ty reached them a moment later and ripped the man off Rainey. His sister was covered in blood. Her victim flopped into the grass, a knife hilt protruding from his chest. He sucked in one, sickening death rattle and was gone.

"Are you hurt?" Ty roared, yanking Rainey to her feet so he could shake some sense into her. He'd been so scared. Bone rattling, blood curdling *scared*.

"No," she said, her teeth chattering. She was afraid, too. Good. Maybe she'd think before she put herself in danger again.

"Halt! Stay where you are!"

Six Brighton guards circled them. Ty whipped Rainey behind him and drew his long sword.

A Brighton woman pushed her way through the ring of larger men.

"Meredith?" The stunned question was barely out of Ty's mouth before the six men

plucked his sword away and held him by both arms.

It couldn't be her.

But it was. And the sight of Queen Meredith Brighton's delicate face shrouded in inky black hair did what it always did to him. Flooded his veins with adrenaline.

"Sean," Meredith wailed, dropping to her knees beside the dead Brighton. "You killed my brother." Her wild eyes met Ty's. "You killed Sean."

"Meredith..." He couldn't form coherent sentences.

It had been years since he'd seen her, but she was just as mesmerizing as he remembered. His skin flushed, tingling as her presence brought him fully to life. It was as if the past ten years he'd been asleep, waiting for this moment to rouse to consciousness.

Meredith, however, didn't seem affected in the same way.

"Prince Tyson of Tamb," she said in a grave tone, "you are charged with murder." To her guards, she said, "Bind him."

Rainey screamed.

The queen hardly spared her a look. "And the child as well."

"Meredith, be rational," he shouted. "Rainey isn't involved. I'll go with you. Leave her be."

But she was too engrossed in her brother's body to hear him. One tiny hand brushed a lock of hair from Sean's brow as the other gripped his bloody arm.

"Listen to me," he tried again. "This won't end well for you." To prove it, he wrestled free of her guards' hold and retrieved his sword. He didn't want to kill

anyone, but he would to protect Rainey.

Ty's sword swirled and thrust into the crowd as if it were alive and acting of its own will. He sliced one man's arm to the bone, and then turned to skewer a second when the fourth guard, a quick little bugger, struck him in the side of the head with a club.

Sparkling white light exploded into a billion tiny particles, and Ty collapsed onto his hands and knees, shaking blood droplets from his hair like a dog after a swim.

Rainey cried out, her voice a spur in his side.

If he didn't protect his sister, no one would.

Groaning, Ty struggled to get one leg under him when the guard hit him again.

## II

Cold stone under his cheek. A thundering ache inside his head. And soft whimpering.

It was the crying that finally woke Ty as he recognized his ten-year-old sister's voice, even in pain and half conscious.

"Rainey?" Both hands were bound tight behind his back, making him clumsy.

"Ty!" She half fell against him. Her hands were bound, too.

He ground his teeth. They didn't have to tie the child. She was no threat to a force of grown men.

"Turn around." He positioned them back-to-back and plucked at the knots on her birdlike wrists. As he did, he studied their gloomy new surroundings – rough, wet

walls of a subterranean dungeon marred further with strong, iron bars. On the other side of the cell was an assortment of torture devices, everything from spiked clubs and manacles to a whipping post.

Not the place he wanted his little sister spending time.

The knots were tight, but Rainey's hands were small, and after some untangling, she slipped free.

"Now me," he instructed.

Within minutes they were both loose. The next step was finding a way out of the cell and to his father, who led a unit of soldiers in the North.

The Red King was not a forgiving man. He would raze Meredith's home and holdings to the ground, probably with her in them.

He didn't want to see that happen.

Ty stood on wobbly legs and tested the strength of the floor-to-ceiling iron bars — they were quite sturdy — and Rainey had taken all of the terror with bravery, but she finally reached her ten-year-old limit and flung herself on her big brother's back, wailing into his shirt.

Furious, Ty grabbed her. "That was the most foolish thing you've ever done!" he barked, startling her out of her tears. "You could have been killed. We *both* could have been." She shrank away. "What would Mother and Father have done if you'd died? Did you consider that?"

Rainey shook her head.

"Of course not. You never *think*."

Her blue eyes clouded over, and she dropped her gaze to his mud-caked boots.

"I'm sorry."

"Because of your recklessness we're prisoners," he added.

"Prisoners of Meredith Blackheart, the Witch Queen," she blurted out. "She beds Satan each and every full moon."

"Nonsense," Ty said, his anger waning as he remembered Meredith as a beautiful, silken-haired child not much older than Rainey. "I'll tell you something very important. Love is stronger than any dark arts. And I love you very much, little bug, so you have nothing to fear."

"I want to go home."

"Me, too. But first you must swear to me you'll never admit you killed Sean Brighton." When she didn't immediately answer, Ty snapped, "Swear it."

"I swear. It wasn't me."

"Good girl."

The outer wooden door scraped open, and the queen herself swept into the room, followed by a single guard. She was just as fragile and beautiful as he remembered, and his entire body reacted. Though her dark hair was braided away from her face, he could still see its sheen and heft. He longed to run his fingers through it.

"Meredith," Ty breathed.

\* \* \*

He spoke so softly Meredith was forced to step closer to hear him. So close there were scant twelve inches between them. His nearness affected her more than she would like to admit. She fantasized – the way she used to when she was a teenager – about

what their lives would look like if they'd been married as they were supposed to.

Home.

Love.

Lots of redheaded children pulling at her skirts.

The Tambs were known for their fiery hair. Ty had the most beautiful shade of red. Not orange like his other sister Clara's. Not faded and streaked with silver like the king's. No. His was like a golden sunset.

Prince Tyson studied her as boldly as she studied him.

Meredith begrudgingly recognized genuine caring in Tyson Tamb's pale, blood-spattered face. A sliver of guilt found its way into her heart. Despite being called Satan's bride, she possessed a sympathetic soul. She glanced at the pitiful red-haired girl covered in blood and tears.

"Is she injured?" she asked. "Does she need a healer?"

"She is untouched," Ty answered.

The filthy, bruised child reminded Meredith of all she was on the verge of losing if the war didn't end soon. Her throne. Her people. Probably even her life.

Once word had spread that Meredith Brighton held two of the Red King's children, Tamb soldiers fought with renewed fury. Meredith's army was days – if she were lucky – from utter destruction. The whole of the Tamb army was camped outside the walls of her keep doing their best to smash their way inside. Soon, they would break down the walls and find her and probably destroy her as well as her home.

Meredith was more scared than she'd ever been, even more frightened than when

King Leonid declared her a witch and broke her engagement to his son and heir. Her people needed her to be their leader, but she was days from seeing her kingdom overthrown. Tyson and Rainey Tamb were the closest Meredith could get to their father.

She winced at the dark skin under Ty's eyes and the hollow places along his cheeks. Meredith tried very hard to keep up her icy exterior because the sight of Prince Tyson after so many years, beaten and suffering, was doing strange things to her resolve.

But it was time to focus on reality. This man, this massive warrior, had murdered her only brother. "Ty," she began, "I saw you standing over Sean's—"

Ty's hand shot out from between the bars so fast his fingers were a blur, and then he clamped onto the back of Meredith's neck and yanked her flush against the cell. Before she could scream, he covered her mouth, and Ty's breath was hot against her face.

She fought with all her strength, though it did no good. As her fear ratcheted higher, her skin came alive with perilous energy. The harder she struggled, the more dangerous their position became. For him.

"Meredith, what are you playing at? You knew my father's temper," Ty hissed directly into her ear. "Release us, or I will not be able to save you."

"You bastard," her guard roared, rushing the cell.

"Stay back," Ty warned. "This is between her and I." Facing her, he said, "Meredith, my father will kill you and anyone else in his way." His grip eased. "You're not black-hearted. I don't believe that."

She ceased struggling.

So, Ty had heard the cruel nickname her enemies called her behind her back.

*Meredith Blackheart. Queen of Hell.*

Shame and anger overwhelmed all other senses.

"I don't want to hurt you," he continued gently, oblivious to her rage. "I never did."

He released her, and Meredith stumbled out of reach to massage her bruised throat.

Her guard brushed past her and slammed into the bars, stretching to reach Ty, but the prince was too fast. When the guard fumbled for his keys, Meredith shouted,

"Leave us."

He looked on the verge of arguing, but finally he exited the room.

"You're a good person," Ty told her. "Don't do this."

"Silence," she snapped, as if they'd never known each other, never played as children, never been friends. More than friends. "Perhaps the king should fear *me*."

"Meredith?" He stared at her as if he didn't recognize her.

"You will address me as *Your Highness*," she answered coldly. "And you will answer my questions honestly."

"Of course, I will," he said. "We've always been honest with each other, haven't we?"

When she'd attacked the Red King's army, she knew it would start a war and enflame their unnamed, longstanding conflict.

But she'd been angry and scared and feeling outside pressure to *do something*.

Because the king was encroaching upon her lands and now her cousin, a silly-headed

girl who'd never caused trouble for anyone, was missing. If Meredith didn't fight back the king would overthrow her and steal her kingdom for himself.

"What do you want to know?" Ty asked.

Staring into the dark blue of his eyes, shadowed with bruises, she could almost forget why they were no longer friends. Her face and throat throbbed at the memory of his touch. But not in pain. No, in intense awareness.

"Where is my cousin, Lady Beatrice?"

"I don't know." His answer was quick, automatic. Suspicious.

"What does your father want with my cousin? She has no power and no value to him." She pressed, "Was it your idea to murder Sean. Or your father's?"

"Meredith, please see reason. Release us before my father comes after us."

"Like he came after my borderlands?" she asked, her voice rising. "Like he scared my tenants away and burned their farms? Like that?"

She was losing control. The corked bottle of evil inside her belly rattled. She tried to breathe, but it was getting more difficult to stay calm with Ty staring at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answered.

She wanted to believe him.

But she didn't.

"Will you bring food and drink?" he asked. "If not for me, at least for Rainey."

She couldn't afford to show mercy, not with King Leonid banging on her walls.

"Maybe another couple days in my shadow cell will convince you to talk." She turned her back on him and left.

### III

Meredith did not return before Ty surrendered to exhaustion, his sister's head on his shoulder. The queen had not returned by the time they woke at what must be dawn. But without windows, it was impossible to say what was morning and what was night. A shadow cell, indeed.

He eased Rainey onto her side so she could sleep longer, and then stood and stretched his aching muscles.

When the outer wooden door finally opened Ty's traitorous stomach rumbled. But Meredith brought only water and bread. She placed the meager meal in Rainey's side of the cell, a clear message the food was not for him.

He remembered both of the guards trailing her quite clearly. The taller of the two had tried to defend his queen the night before, and he was the same man who'd felled Ty on the battlefield.

"Good morning, Your Highness," Ty growled, but in anger as much as exhaustion. He didn't mind being a captive, not of Meredith's, but he grew weary of sleeping in a cage.

"Will you answer my questions now?" she asked.

"If they are the same questions," he said, "my answers must be the same." Losing even more of his patience, he added, "My father will ride here posthaste to seek vengeance. Release us so we may meet him on the road and perhaps convince him not to hurt you or your people in retribution."

He didn't add there would be almost zero chance of that happening. King Leonid

was not an understanding sort of monarch.

“He has burned my lands and stolen my cousin.” Her fists clenched at her sides. “I cannot let him get away with it. If I don’t fight back, he will trample all over me.”

“So you torture his children?” Ty returned, hoping she’d see reason. “He will retaliate. And then *you* must retaliate. And so on, and so on.”

“It is his way. I am only playing by his rules.”

Ty cared about her, even after so many years. He didn’t want to see her kingdom invaded and her home razed. Because there was no doubt which army would win this war.

“It wasn’t always that way,” he said quietly, approaching the bars. “Our two kingdoms used to be allies. Do you remember?”

Her cheeks flushed pink, but from anger or something else, he didn’t know.

“We were children when we were betrothed,” she said stiffly. “You cannot mean to reinstate it?”

“Why not? Let’s pretend you sent an escort to bring me here for a secret meeting. No one has to know you abducted us. Let’s become allies again, Meredith. You probably don’t believe me, but I only wish the best for you.” His fingers snaked through the bars and clasped her fisted hand.

Gasping, she stumbled out of reach. “You shouldn’t touch me!”

“I’m not afraid of you, Meredith.”

“You should be.”

“Why,” he asked, “because of the rumors?”

Meredith turned on her guard. "Leave us."

"But, Your Highness—"

"I wish to speak to the prisoner alone." Her eyes sparkled with royal annoyance.

"Do not question me again."

He bowed and then departed, closing the door behind him.

She closed more distance between her and Ty, glancing fleetingly at the little girl curled up in the corner of the cell, still asleep.

"You know me," she whispered. "You know it's not a rumor."

He nodded. "But you would never hurt anyone."

"Not on purpose, but I have no more control now than I did when we were children."

"You're not black-hearted," he said.

And she almost believed him, he was so sure of it.

"What does your father want with Beatrice?" she asked. "He must have known I would respond with force."

"I don't know anything about Beatrice," he said, approaching the bars and wrapping his long fingers around the two near her face. "He doesn't share his policies with me, let alone any kidnapping plots. He never has."

She grabbed the bars directly under his hands. "You should rule Tamb. You're a much better man than your father. He is rotting with anger and vengeance."

"I wish that as well."

He pressed his body against the bars, and, as if her muscles were not hers to

control, she did the same. Nothing separated them but a couple of inches of cold, hard iron.

“His men invaded my borderlands,” she told him. “They burned fields and homes. And now my cousin is missing.” She lifted her face to study his reaction. “If I don’t hold him back, he will run roughshod across my kingdom, destroying everything I have worked so hard to preserve. You must see that I have no choice but to fight back.”

“I didn’t know that,” he confessed. “He claims your farmers are encroaching on our land. He says he is defending his kingdom.”

She shook her head.

“I will speak with him,” Ty assured. “I will do everything I can to end this pointless war.”

“I didn’t intend to capture you or Rainey,” she said, wanting him to know that she hadn’t grown into a cruel or vengeful person in his absence. “But once you killed Sean, I had no choice. And I must admit, capturing the prince and princess of Tamb has given me more leverage than I ever expected. Now, Leonid will have to listen to me.”

“No, Meredith,” he said, “you have sealed your fate. He will stop at nothing until he punishes you for the insult. Because,” he added, “you took something that belongs to him. It’s the excuse he’s been waiting for to begin a full assault on Brighton Castle.” His lips thinned. “I’m sorry.”

He was right. Ty always had a good head for strategy. “Then I’ll just have to think of something else to do to make him back off.”

Ty reached through the bars and brushed a dark curl off her cheek. Meredith stood

very still, her nerve endings vibrating at his touch.

"I miss you," he whispered, his breath feather light against her lips. "I miss talking to you."

"So do I." Made brave by the kindness in his blue eyes, she covered his hand with hers.

The outer door scraped open. "Your Highness?"

Meredith reluctantly drew away from the bars and nodded at her guard. "Yes?"

"You are needed at the east tower, Your Highness."

"Of course." She hurried from the dark room.

Her guard remained behind.

\* \* \*

"You're not very cooperative, are you?" the guard jeered at Tyson. "Time to soften you up some."

"I am under the queen's protection," Ty reminded him. Though he wouldn't have minded teaching this one some manners. *Just unlock my cell. I will be happy to fight.*

"The queen's not here." The guard made a show of inspecting various weapons. "You remember those farms that burned? One was my father's. I think I'll take my revenge from the princess' back."

Ty flinched, glancing over his shoulder at Rainey. The child was just waking up. "I'll do anything you want, if you promise not to hurt her."

"Good boy." Grinning, the guard unlocked the cell and pointed at the whipping post. "Kneel."

Ty stepped from the cage, and the other man secured the door. "So long as I have

your word. Not a finger upon her head.”

“No,” Rainey protested, scrambling to the locked cell door and rattling it. “Don’t hurt him!”

“You have my word, *Your Highness*. Kneel.”

Ty removed his shirt and dropped to his knees upon the cold stone floor. “Rainey,” he said as the guard tied his wrists to the top of the post. “Don’t watch, little bug. Turn away.”

The first lash split the flesh of his back, and he bucked in pain, clenching his jaws tight to keep from crying out.

But by the ninth or tenth stroke, the pain was so intense he lost all sense of himself or his surroundings. He screamed.

\* \* \*

Meredith burst through the dungeon’s outer door. “King Leonid is at the gates. They won’t—” She stuttered to a stop, her entire body reacting to the sight before her.

Ty was slumped against the whipping post, his back a mess of blood and flayed flesh, and her guard stood over him with a braided whip covered in blood. Rainey sobbed into her hands in the corner of her cell.

“What have you done?” Meredith demanded, rushing to Ty. “I never told you to hurt him.”

“There’s no where left to run,” the guard replied. “King Leonid will have all our heads. We might as well make this Tamb dog pay for Sean’s murder while we still have blood in our veins.”

“Not Ty.” Meredith brushed the side of his face, hot to the touch, and came away

with blood on her fingers.

“The prisoners in the shadow cells have always been my responsibility,” the guard reminded her with no emotion registering whatsoever.

Shock devolved into fury. Meredith stuck out her hand for his weapon.

With only a shiver of reluctance, he passed her the whip.

Meredith held it for a moment, testing the weight, as her rage whirled out of control. The cork in the bottle popped open, and the evil inside her surfaced. She cracked the whip, only the very tip clipping his bare arm, but the tiny winged devils inside her passed through the braided cord and into him. The guard made a gurgling sound and collapsed, shaking and quivering in pain as the cut on his arm split wider, festered, and gushed pus and blood.

The heavy wooden door to the dungeon banged against the stone wall and what seemed like an army filled the room. The man who led them, with his fiery red hair and legendary long sword now drenched in Brighton blood, was impossible to mistake.

King Leonid had come for his children.

Meredith imagined the scene from his cold-eyed perspective. His daughter curled inside a cage, his son lashed into unconsciousness, and his rival, Queen Meredith holding the whip.

Sobbing, Rainey ran headlong into her father, her choked words incoherent. Lord Tamb passed her off to one of his men, who spirited her away.

“For God’s sake,” the king ordered in a raw voice, “cut him down.”

Meredith felt eyes upon her. She dropped the whip and stumbled away as three

Tamb soldiers gently laid Ty upon the ground. But Meredith's gaze remained on Ty's father. She could not mistake the look of pure hatred in his eyes when he returned her stare.

"You'll pay for this in blood," he swore. To his men, he said, "Tie her to the post."

## IV

Pain. Searing, rending pain with every breath. Lying face down upon a bed, the flesh on Ty's back felt ripped from his bones. Slowly he remembered the shadow cell, Meredith, and the whipping post.

"Rainey?" He struggled to roll over.

"Shh," came a familiar, feminine voice. "Lie still. Rainey's safe."

"Clara?" he guessed, wilting onto the mattress. "Where's Meredith?"

"Don't trouble yourself," she cooed, a cool cloth coming down upon his back. "You need to lie still."

"Are we in the capital?" he asked. "How long have we been here?"

"Father carried you home three days ago."

Ty groaned in frustration. "You gave me one of your sleeping potions."

"Trust me, you needed it, brother." She gently applied another strip of moistened cloth to his ravaged back. "You were in agony."

"I want to see Meredith." He was afraid his father had hurt her. Or worse.

"The witch queen isn't important right now," Clara said.

Ty had heard enough. Sucking in a breath against the pain, he sat up and shoved to

his feet.

“I will see her with my own eyes.”

“Of course you will,” Clara complained with a sigh. But she steadied him. “She occupies a cell downstairs.”

Horrible fantasies taunted him of Meredith tortured, Meredith beaten, Meredith strung up from the rafters. And he still wasn’t prepared for the actual sight of her.

Shuffling through the dungeon door and down a long hallway, Ty stood over her. She lay curled in a cage meant for a dog, her knees forced to her chest, her pretty gown torn and filthy. She’d been bound with heavy shackles, both hands and feet. Her face was bruised and bloody. Ty closed his eyes momentarily in dull shock.

“Meredith?” he called. He wanted to bend down and free her, but his wounds prevented him. “For God’s sake, answer me.” When no reply came, he rounded on his sister. “How could you allow this?”

“My God,” Clara spit, “you were practically in pieces when they brought you to me. I think she deserves *worse*.”

“Ty?” Meredith shifted in the cramped cage. “You’re alive?”

“Yes, my sweet.” Despite the pain in his back, he crouched down to free her from her bindings. “I know it hurts.” Ty’s voice cracked. “But I’ll make it better.”

Gritting his teeth, he lifted her into his arms and stood.

“You’ll injure yourself,” Clara complained from the doorway. “I worked hard to keep you alive.”

Ignoring his sister, he buried his nose in Meredith’s hair. “I’ve got you, my sweet.”

In his arms, she was a sack of straw, incredibly light.

“What will I tell Father when he finds out you’ve commuted her sentence?” Clara called after him, her tone cruel.

“Tell him the queen is my prisoner. Her crime is against me, and I will punish her as I see fit.”

Clara grumbled something under her breath, and then said, “If you’ll get back into bed, I’ll do it.”

Ty carried Meredith upstairs and laid her carefully in his bed. As he peeled off her clothing, he was weak with relief to have her near. Not that he wished her injured and in pain, but it was wonderful to see and touch her again.

“Clara, get me water and bandages,” he ordered his sister.

“Why are you showing her mercy?” Clara asked, lingering in the doorway.

Ty paused in examining the bruises on Meredith’s back. “Because I love her,” he said, giddy with the admission. “I never stopped. Not even after father broke our engagement.” He stared hard at his sister, forcing her to see the truth in his eyes. “I love her.”

Clara was silent for a moment, and then she straightened. “I’ll return shortly.”

As his sister hurried away, Meredith groaned. “Ty?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, stroking hair from her face. “I’m going to clean and dress your wounds. Were you whipped?”

“No.” She hid her face among his pillows. “I’m sorry,” she said, shiny tears escaping her closed eyes. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

"I know."

"Here." Clara returned with medical supplies and Rainey.

"I should go and let Clara tend you," Ty said.

"No." Meredith grabbed his sleeve. "My reputation cannot get any worse. Please, stay."

"Of course."

Clara was a skilled healer and quickly washed the dirt from Meredith's skin and then covered the two worst scrapes. "The rest are bruises and will fade with time," she explained.

"Thank you," Meredith said, catching the other woman's eye and smiling.

"It was nothing." Clara piled the used supplies on the floor. Before she rang for a servant to take it away, she added, "Your Highness."

Feeling every one of Meredith's injuries, Ty curled beside her on the bed. She scooted nearer, so they were face to face. Her knees bumped his, and he smiled.

"I'm so glad you're here," he whispered. "I'm not letting you get away again."

"I'm a prisoner of war," she reminded him quietly. "Your father wishes to hang me."

Ty wiggled even closer and cupped her face in his hands. Meredith reached for him, gripping his shirt in both fists.

"I won't let that happen," he said.

\* \* \*

But Meredith didn't believe him. She'd seen Tyson bend to his father's will before. "You were there when he broke our engagement. You heard him call me a witch. And

you didn't defend me." The betrayal still stung.

"That won't happen again," he assured, his thumb stroking her cheek. "I swear it. You belong to me as I belong to you."

Meredith dared to hope he was right. "I don't even care how Sean died. It matters not."

Ty gave her a little squeeze as he said, "I didn't kill your brother." She was quiet, so he added, "You saw Sean lying dead, and me standing over him. But I swear to you," he said, silently pleading with her to believe him, "I did not kill him."

"I believe you," she said. And then softly, "I thought of you every day we were separated."

"And I you." His eyes fluttered closed, as if too exhausted to continue their conversation. She took a closer look at his face and found him unnaturally pale.

Ignoring the females scrutinizing her, Meredith climbed to her knees, peeled Ty's shirt up past his shoulders, and removed the bandages.

What she found stole her breath away.

"His wound is festering." If it got worse the infection would kill him. Already the edges of his torn flesh were black and rotten.

"You could heal him," Rainey piped up, "because you're a witch."

Meredith didn't refute the truth. She *was* a witch. But not the kind who helped the sick. The kind who caused unending pain and misery and death.

"I've never healed anyone before," she said, smoothing the cloth strips back into place. "I could just as easily kill him."

“You healed me once,” Ty said, reaching for her.

Meredith clasped his hand and recalled the time, as children, they’d snuck away to ride Ty’s horse into the woods. But the horse had gotten spooked and threw them. Ty broke his leg. She’d mended the break, but it had been so long ago she didn’t remember how she’d managed it. Since then, nothing but evil had resided inside her.

“You can do it,” Ty said. “Please, Meredith. It hurts.”

She pictured him tall and strong and beautiful, the way she always remembered him. The bottle rattled, and out rushed her little demons. *This time will be different.* She would do good works, for once.

But demons only know chaos and pain.

Her evil power poured from her hand into Ty. Meredith tried to cork the bottle, but too late.

*No.*

His sores split and widened. Ty howled in pain. Blood and pus gushed from the wounds as he writhed.

“No, no,” she gasped, afraid to touch him again, afraid she’d killed him at the very moment she’d finally won him back.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. The sisters near the door both squeaked in surprise as their father stormed into the room.

King Leonid, enraged, backhanded Meredith so hard he knocked her off the bed.

“Get this damned witch out of my sight.”

## V

Meredith had given up pacing her cell in the Tamb Castle dungeons and sat hunched in the corner, cold and crying. She was a curse upon the Earth. A plague on humanity.

“Are you here?” came a tiny, girlish voice from the other end of the room. “Your Highness?”

Meredith fought a laugh. She was no queen. A demon, yes, but not worthy of titles and pleasantries. Not anymore.

“I am here.” She didn’t bother standing.

Rainey dashed to her cell and gripped the bars. “Your Highness, you must come with me.”

“Is he dead?” Meredith whispered back. “Please, tell me. Did I kill Tyson?”

“He’s alive, but not for long,” Rainey explained. “The healers have all gone. You must come with me, now.”

She wiped her tears and left grit on both grubby cheeks. “I’m full of evil, child. I’ve killed him.”

“You healed him once.”

“Did he tell you about that?”

“He said you were glorious.”

Meredith snorted. “He exaggerated.”

Rainey unlocked the cell door.

“Tell me one thing,” Meredith asked. “Did you kill my brother?” She didn’t pause

long enough to let her respond. Meredith already knew the answer, anyway. "You did, didn't you?" If she hadn't been so distraught at the sight of Tyson Tamb standing over Sean's lifeless body, she would've realized the truth immediately. "Ty was protecting you. Of course he was."

"I'm sorry," Rainey admitted. "I didn't mean to. He fell on me, and my knife went into him."

"It wasn't your fault." Sean knew the price of fighting a war. "He was a soldier, and soldiers die in battle."

"Please, Your Highness," Rainey said, beckoning her forward. "Please don't let my brother die."

Meredith hesitated, staring at the portal to her freedom. "What if I kill him? I couldn't live with myself."

"You already hurt him," Rainey said. "Now you have to help him."

"I don't know how to help," she said, turning her face away from the door. "I can't control it. If I touch him, I'll hurt him worse."

Rainey kicked the door in obvious frustration. "Then find a way to control it!" The girl continued wretchedly, "This is all my fault. If I hadn't run onto the battlefield then we wouldn't have been captured and Ty wouldn't have been whipped. *I did this.*"

"No, child," Meredith soothed.

As if she hadn't heard, Rainey said, "Ty told me I never think before I act. Well, I've been thinking a lot recently. And you are the only person in the world who can save my brother's life."

Meredith shook her head sadly. She wished it were true.

“You haven’t seen the land around the keep,” Rainey said. “After your spell, it exploded with life. Flowers, grass, butterflies, birds ... You wouldn’t believe it.” Her voice dropped. “Father said you fed Tyson’s soul to the earth.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Meredith pushed to her feet. “I don’t know how to do that.”

But Rainey plowed on, not listening. “If you can siphon his soul into the ground, then you must be able to borrow from the earth and heal him. All of nature is a balance, is it not? A give and take?”

Meredith was ashamed she’d never considered her power in such a way. She’d spent so many years trying to hide it, to reduce its impact, she’d never studied all of its facets.

But if there was any hope at all... If she could save her friend’s life... “Take me to Tyson.”

Several winding staircases, two darkened hallways, and a creep across a quiet gallery later, and they were standing in the prince’s bedroom.

Meredith knew it was bad when she found Ty lying, not on his bed, but on a high, long table. Face up. No one would lay a flayed man on his back unless there was no chance of his survival.

The table was too small for him. His heels hung off the end.

She rushed to his side and pressed her ear to his chest. “His heart is barely beating. His breath is but a wisp of air.”

“Come to see your handiwork, witch?” King Leonid stepped from the shadows

beside the balcony doors. But he wasn't angry. He must have resigned himself to the fact that his son and heir was dying.

"Father, she's going to help," Rainey blurted out. "Let her try. She's done it before."

Meredith grew more hesitant and anxious under the king's scrutiny. She may be a queen, but she'd been beaten and caged and left to rot for three days. She was scared.

"I don't think," she stuttered, a death grip on Ty's cold, limp hand. "I'm not..."

"He's been hurt enough by you," Leonid announced.

"She won't hurt him, Father," Rainey shouted. "She loves him."

Leonid's eyes narrowed. "What does a witch know of love?"

Meredith had loved Ty, once upon a time, when her kingdom and Leonid's had been allies. Before the Red King broke her and Ty's engagement, along with so many other promises.

"I love him," Meredith declared. "I would have married him years ago and avoided all this strife and violence. But you broke your word."

"It became known to me that you are a witch," he answered calmly. "Do you think I'd ever let a witch marry my son? Let alone rule a kingdom as my equal?"

"If she heals Ty," Rainey interrupted, "you have to leave her alone and let her marry him. Right, Father?"

"Can you save his life, or not?" Leonid asked bluntly.

Rainey opened her mouth, but the king shushed the little girl.

"Yes," Meredith said, picturing the balmy summer afternoon she'd mended Ty's broken leg. "I think I can."

“If you save my son’s life,” Leonid said, “I would do anything.” He cleared his throat, fading back into the shadows. “Anything you ask.”

Meredith laid her cheek upon Ty’s chest and focused on his faint heartbeat. “I can heal you,” she whispered, sensing the bottle within her rattling. *I am not evil.*

She trusted that Rainey was right. If Meredith had given Tyson’s energy to the earth, then she could transfer power from the ground into Ty.

“Control,” she whispered.

The cork popped, and Meredith realized her power wasn’t made of tiny winged demons after all. No, they were cherubs. Sighing, Meredith passed her power through her body and into Ty’s.

\* \* \*

Tyson rolled onto his side, feeling crispy and feverish as if he’d fallen asleep in the sun. Small, cool hands urged him to lie down, but he wanted to be on his feet. He had an underlying fear that something was wrong.

“Help me get him to the bed.”

Meredith’s voice.

“I thought I’d lost you again.” He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent.

“Never again,” she promised.

“You healed me,” he said softly. “I feel the same way I did after the horse threw us.”

“It was your influence,” she admitted. “You made me want to turn the darkest parts of myself into something beautiful.”

There was a commotion outside the open balcony doors, which only grew in volume. Fearing an attack, Ty stumbled for the perch, taking Meredith with him.

But no soldiers gathered on the ground below.

“Magic,” he breathed. As far as he could see the former grasslands surrounding the keep were scorched earth, nothing but ash and stone.

A footstep behind them, and Ty whirled on his father.

Leonid’s expression registered shock and awe. “I’ve never seen anything like this in my life.”

“Father,” Ty said, locking his fingers with Meredith’s. “We will be married immediately, and we will rule together.” He was ashamed of his behavior years earlier, and he could only excuse some of it on being young. The rest was his fear. But no more. “You will cease all attacks on Brighton borderlands, and you will release Lady Beatrice from whatever hovel you’ve hidden her in.” He stared at his father, daring him to argue.

But Leonid only nodded. Turning and rushing for the bedroom door, he shouted to whoever happened to be nearby, “Summon my lieutenants. This war ends today.”

With a relieved sigh, Meredith embraced Ty, leaning her weight against him. He held her up easily, cherishing the way they fit together.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, Tyson,” she said into his shirt.

He held her, overwhelmed at his good fortune. “You don’t have a black heart, Meredith Brighton,” he whispered. “Your heart is open and full of light.”

She tilted her head up, and it was such an easy thing to dip his chin and kiss her.

THE END

## About the Author

Anna Abner lived in a haunted house for three years and grew up talking to imaginary friends. In her professional life, she has been a Realtor, a childcare provider, and a teacher. Now, she writes edge-of-your-seat paranormal romances and blogs from her home in sunny southern California about ghosts and magic. Connect with Anna at [www.AnnaAbner.com](http://www.AnnaAbner.com).

## Short Stories By Anna Abner Writing As Sadie West

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“Odd-Man Out”

“Extreme Whiteout”

“I Only Have Two Hands” (fan fiction available at [ArchiveOfOurOwn.org](http://ArchiveOfOurOwn.org))

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